

THE MASADA COMPLEX

(Do we have to agree with Prime Minister Begin?)

Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5742, 1981
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The picturesque mountain of Masada has become one of the great symbols in modern Israel. The mountain on which the fortress was built stands dramatically overlooking lesser hills and the Dead Sea. Israeli soldiers are taken to this mountain top on the day of their induction into the army and together with their fellow recruits, they take the oath, "Masada will never fall again."

The Jews of Europe had no army with which to oppose Hitler's mechanized forces. After a number of spectacular Israeli victories over the combined Arab nations, Jews no longer have to prove that when they have the means, they are able to fight back must successfully. Indeed, there are some commentators on the international scene who claim that the Israelis are suffering from an inclination to overkill. These commentators point to the bombing of the nuclear reactor in Iraq and to the killing this July of over a hundred civilians by Israeli bombs dropped on the PLO headquarters in Beirut. Israel, its critics say, is now much too cocky about its military power.

These same critics single out Prime Minister Begin as the leader of the hawkish forces that seem to justify any kind of military strike by reference to the Holocaust. Indeed, Begin's remarks after Israeli planes had violated the territory of Jordan and Saudi Arabia to strike at Iraq was, "We have just saved the Jewish people from another Holocaust."

There are those who say that Begin operates with a "Masada Complex;" that is to say, he sees Israel at every moment surrounded by threatening forces, and he feels justified in taking violent means to strike deep at the heart of those forces, even if there is some question about the validity of the strike under international law. In a September article about Begin, a writer in Time Magazine invited us to pronounce the Prime Minister's name as rhyming with Fagin. Fagin is the villainous character created by Dickens for the story of Oliver Twist. Newsday Magazine recently had a picture of Begin on its front page encased in a Star of David formed by rifles.

There are also American Jews who operate with a Masada complex. While I was in New York recently, the New York Post ran a big spread on the Jewish Defense League. The JDL claims to have eighteen thousand members and, according to the article, trains its members regularly in the use of firearms and violent techniques. In Miami, the JDL once released a pack of mice in the audience at the Center for the Performing Arts in order to prevent the singing of a Russian opera star. "Never again," said the local leader of the JDL, as his mice caused a panic in the predominately Jewish audience.

As one who has spent some little time with Begin on a conference basis, I would not classify him as the wild, irresponsible leader that some critics make him out to be. On the other hand, it is obvious that this bright and determined prime minister is cut from a different cloth than his predecessors like Ben-Gurion.

In the formative days of modern Israel, Ben-Gurion and his political party (Mapai) found it necessary to repudiate the violent acts performed by Begin's Irgun party, which is now part of the ruling Likud party. Certainly Begin is far different from Golda Meir who once said, "I can with great effort forgive the Arabs for killing our boys, but I can never forgive them for making us kill their boys." Golda Meir and Ben-Gurion were also interested in defending the Jewish state, but their technique of doing so was different from the technique employed by Begin.

Begin's style, the militant stance that he takes, troubles a great many good friends of the State of Israel. Those who are steeped in Jewish history know that the Jews have never been a militaristic people in the classic sense. The ancient Rabbis tell us that Jacob became the leader of early Israel, over and against his older brother Esau, precisely because Esau was a violent man who was militaristically inclined, while Jacob was more interested in the welfare of the tribe and in the personal needs of the people. The early Jews were not pacifists, but their primary heroes were not warriors, as is true of most other peoples. Moses left the fighting to Joshua, while Moses concerned himself with developing the Ten Commandments and the moral law. Our greatest Biblical heroes are the prophets, who were ethical geniuses, and not the Israelite kings and their generals.

The recent T.V. movie about Masada would have us believe that the great Jewish heroes of 2,000 years ago were the military zealots who positioned themselves on top of Masada and held off the Romans for two years after the fall of Jerusalem around 70 C.E. On the contrary, the Jewish heroes of 2,000 years ago were the Pharisees who opposed military action because they knew that the Romans were capable of massacring an entire people. Pay your taxes, the Pharisees taught, but stay firm in your allegiance to Jewish law, and do not hold office in the Roman caretaker government. The Pharisees believed that a tightly knit Jewish people could outlast the Romans just as they had outlasted the Persians and the Greeks.

But the Zealots had other ideas. Some 60 years after Masada's fall, in the year 135 of this era, a large Jewish army led by Bar Kochba challenged the Romans once again. As might have been expected, the mighty Roman legions decimated the Jewish army, but they didn't stop there. The Romans slaughtered a hundred thousand innocent Jewish civilians and forbade Jews ever again to enter the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The net result of continuous Zealot uprising was the death of the Jewish community. Jews were forced to leave Judea and did not return until 1,700 years later.

The Pharisees and their intellectual heirs managed to save the religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people. They codified this heritage in great books like the Talmud and the Midrash. These laws formed the foundation of Jewish life in the exile. No matter what happened to the Jews in their wandering, whether they were in North Africa or Spain or Poland, they were true to their distinctive laws, and they survived as a vital people with its own character and culture. The name of the greatest Zealot, Bar Kochba, is not one of the most famous names in Jewish history. We remember, instead, people like Rabbi Hillel whose wisdom is preserved in the Talmud. Rabbi Hillel taught, "Be amongst the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it...."

Now while Hillel and not Bar Kochba is my hero, I don't claim to be a saintly pacifist. I am not one of those who will not fight under any circumstances. I must confess that amongst my cherished momentos at home are Israeli shotgun shells which I found at the Israeli-Syrian border shortly after the Six-Day War. I am proud indeed of the Jewish teen-agers in that war who captured the Syrian guns that poured death upon the Israeli Kibbutznicks in the valley below.

I am also not one of those who second-guess the Israelis in their military decisions. I don't pretend to know whether the Israeli bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor was right or wrong for Israel. Such decisions are for Israelis alone to make, for it is their lives which are at stake and not my life or yours. Nonetheless, I feel impelled to say that Begin does not seem to me to be in the style of great Jewish leaders, and I do not feel that American Jews must support or defend every decision that such a leader makes. We do not support every decision that an American President makes, and we don't have to feel guilty about disagreeing with some of the steps taken by an Israeli Prime Minister.

As American Jews, we don't have to defend every act taken by Israel, but we must be careful as to where and how we express our differences of opinion. There are some Jews who attack Begin in the pages of the Miami Herald or in the New York Times. I think this kind of public attack is in error. Jews should discuss their differences amongst themselves. We should express our concerns to Israel through our national organizations. Fortunately, we do have channels to communicate with Israel. Just a few weeks ago, in New York city, it was my privilege, along with several other Jewish leaders, to attend a small meeting with Begin. During his New York trip, Begin heard some hard questions from Dr. Alexander Schindler, who is the head of our National reform movement, and Begin heard from people like myself in the Synagogue Council of America. It is our duty to channel our thoughts to Israeli leaders, but we Jews must not appear to the non-Jewish community to be seriously divided. World Jewry is such a tiny community, and if we do not present a united front to those who are in a position to help or harm us, we will encourage our enemies and dilute the ardor of our friends.

In this connection, let me describe to you a meeting I held several years ago with Senator Chiles in Washington. The Congress at that time was considering a new arms agreement with Israel, but there was considerable anti-Begin feeling in the Congress. We had been advised that Senator Chiles was not certain as to how he was to vote, and I wanted to talk to the Senator *tete a tete*, as one Southern boy to another. I had never met Senator Chiles before, but I used a magical word to get my interview. The word was the name of a mutual friend of the Senator and myself, the belated and beloved Richard Pallot. The Senator's secretary advised me that the Senator really didn't have time to see me, but he would give me five minutes. I tried to leave three different times during our meeting, but the Senator kept me for half an hour. He was pleased to hear a Rabbi say that he didn't think the Prime Minister of Israel was beyond reproach. "On the other hand," I told the Senator, "I don't think Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter are beyond reproach either, yet my loyalties are with the United States 100% as against its enemies." I said to the Senator, "we must not let our dislike for a certain leader's style blind us to the important facts. Israel is the only democracy in the Near East, and Soviet

arms are supporting its enemies. In the crisis, we must make our decision based on the fact that Israel and America have common goals and like orientation." I felt that when the meeting ended, two Southern boys were of one mind, and I like to think that my openness with the Senator had something to do with the way he voted.

While American Jews have the right to be critical of the Israeli government at times, we should understand the actions of that government in the context of what their enemies are doing. The Israelis watched as the PLO started a war, first in Jordan, and then in Lebanon. King Hussein's army ruthlessly slaughtered the PLO forces, the remnants of which moved into Lebanon. The aggressive policies of the PLO soon threatened the delicate balance of Lebanese policy, and Lebanese Christians saw the threat in military terms. The war in Lebanon between the Lebanese Christians and the PLO resulted in fifty thousand killed and a quarter of a million wounded. All of this just a few years ago. Syria moved into Lebanon on the pretext of serving as supervisor of the truce. But Israel suspects that Syria intends to make Lebanon a vassal state. Sadat was of the same opinion. Israel, for its part, did not bomb the PLO office in Beirut this summer until the PLO had repeatedly bombed the city of Kiryat Sh'moneh, killing and wounding a number of Israelis. There can be no doubt that Israel is still at war and that it is justified in attacking the PLO headquarters. Unfortunately, the bombs Israel dropped on those Beirut headquarters also hit some apartment buildings nearby. The New York Times reported on July 22nd that two of the bombs had malfunctioned and wandered off target. Is Begin to blame for this, or is the PLO which first bombed Kiryat Sh'moneh to blame? We American Jews would like Israel to behave with restraint, and we would like all of its bombs to work precisely, but this may be asking too much of human beings or of bombs. It is possible that if the lives of our children were at stake that we would be less restrained than Begin or the Israeli Air Force.

When we hear about these attacks by the Israeli Air Force, we begin to think of Israel merely in violent terms. The truth is that Israel is much more than an excellent fighting machine. Israel is the center of medical and scientific research in the Mid East. Its Kibbutzim are still one of the most noble and successful democratic experiments in the history of human government. Contrast the recent Israeli election when the vote was evenly split between the major parties with the recent election in Egypt when Sadat won with over 99% of the votes, after he had shut down opposition newspapers and jailed his opponents. It is easy for a dictatorial Sadat to be a peace-maker when he is getting the huge Sinai area with its oil reserves and modern air fields, while he gives up nothing. Begin wishes that he, too, could be a peace-maker and get as much land and resources in return.

For so many centuries after the Bar Kochba rebellion, Jews have been anti-violent. Now, newspaper headlines frequently carry news of Jews on the attack. When Israel is not merely defensive, we American Jews tend to worry. Jews killing other people. How could that be? It's not nice! It's not our way. It's not-Jewish.

When we read these headlines in the future, let us take a moment to think. Certainly, the Israelis don't want this anymore than we do. Certainly, the Israelis dream of

that time when their children will not have to sleep in bomb shelters and when they won't have to monitor the skies at every moment for possible enemies. The Israelis know Jewish history and the Bible as well as we do - perhaps better. Certainly, they long to be of the disciples of Aaron--loving peace and pursuing peace. May God grant that they will have this luxury soon.