

Unending Challenges, Unbending Faith

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Eretz Yisroel is a nation fraught with disagreements, tragedies, and profound challenges. Since its inception, Israel has faced large and small problems, oscillating between moments of hope and periods of despair. Recently, the situation seems to have deteriorated further. Many of the issues currently confounding the country lack simple solutions, leaving many to search for the root causes of the discord, pain, internal and external conflicts, and the inability to find lasting resolutions.

Years ago, during a visit from Binyomin Netanyahu, I asked him for his perspective on the complex issues Israel faces and the possible solutions. His response was candid: Not all problems have immediate solutions. Sometimes, change requires waiting—for shifts in leadership, changes in the facts on the ground, evolving public opinion, or technological advancements that render current issues obsolete. Some challenges may take a few years to resolve, while others may require a generation or more.

Israel, founded in 1948, was immediately attacked by Arab armies, marking the beginning of its first war. With Hashem's help, the enemies were repelled, and the state began to take root. The war of terror and fedayeen attacks were persistent, and major wars erupted in 1956, 1967, 1973, and there were a couple with Lebanon and Gaza. The most recent flare-up began with a brutal and unexpected attack by Hamas, which quickly expanded to involve Hezbollah in the north, the Houthis in the south, and, of course, Iran to the east.

While Israel was caught off guard by the surprise attack—something they should have anticipated—the country responded with vigor and bravado. Sadly, the conflict did not unfold as anticipated. The current war in Gaza dragged on far longer than Israeli leaders expected, and its objectives remained unmet. The army was not able to free the hostages, Hamas remains a powerful force, and Israeli soldiers continued to sacrifice their lives until a ceasefire was declared.

International fatigue, not only among Israel's enemies, but also figures such as President Trump and others in the global community, grew, and Israel's public relations campaign has been poor and ineffective. Wars are perilous, and strong rhetoric alone cannot win them. If you do not prevail in a war, the consequences can be grave. It was under these circumstances that the hostage deal came to fruition.

Now, the questions loom: What can be done? How do we move forward?

In addition to these external conflicts, Israel faces significant internal challenges, particularly concerning military service. The issue of *giyus* (conscription) remains a delicate and contentious matter. Since its founding by secular Jews, Israel has been divided on matters of religion. The early Zionists sought to replace religion with the state, viewing the ancient traditions of Judaism

as irrelevant in a modern, secular society. The founders were familiar with Jewish life from their former homes, but believed that religious observance would naturally fade over time. They hoped to focus on national growth without being encumbered by what they viewed as an ancient albatross with no functional place in their modern society. They were comfortable with maintaining outward and superficial manifestations of Yiddishkeit, and recognized them as necessary components of a Jewish state.

An agreement was reached—the “status quo”—whereby religious communities could continue their practices. One such provision was the exemption from the army draft of religious students who were studying Torah. At the time, Ben Gurion and those of his time believed that religion would eventually disappear, making these issues inconsequential in the long run.

As the older generation that was familiar with authentic Yiddishkeit died out and a new generation assumed the country’s leadership, the relationship became more tenuous. The liberal secularists hate religion altogether, while those on the right are more traditional and tolerant of the religious communities.

As time passed and the religious community grew, tensions between secular and religious Jews heightened. While the left-wing secularists view religion with disdain, those on the right tend to be more accommodating. As the chareidi community expanded, the left began to leverage the issue of giyus to divide the governing coalition led by Prime Minister Netanyahu. They would drive such a wedge between Netanyahu and his partners that the chareidi Knesset members would leave the government and it would fall, bringing new elections, which they believed they could win. They believed that by inflaming public opinion on this matter, they could undermine the right-wing government and regain power.

The Israeli Supreme Court, influenced by cases brought by the Reform movement, is now pressing the government to pass legislation that would mandate conscription for Torah students. The situation has reached a critical point, where even compromise proposals acceptable to the chareidi parties are being rejected by the court, and certain Likud members are threatening to buck party discipline and vote against legislation that chareidim could support, meaning that there may not be a Knesset majority for a bill chareidim could agree to.

At present, a solution remains elusive, and negotiations continue behind closed doors.

So you see, my dear friends, that there are serious issues facing our brethren in the Holy Land, but having just returned from there Monday morning, I can tell you that, by and large, life goes on as usual, with trust that Hashem will provide solutions to these problems and will continue to guide them as He has in the past.

I went to visit my dear friend, Rav Zvi Shvartz, in Rechovot. A veritable powerhouse, he is a revered tzaddik who leads a kollel and a Lev L’Achim kiruv center, spreading Torah and kedusha far and near. His center has touched many lives, and some of those he was mekareiv are now kollel yungeleit who dedicate their free time to running various kiruv initiatives in nearby

towns and villages. They bring Torah to people who had no previous idea of what being Jewish is about.

Stories of *siyata diShmaya* that he has witnessed in his work flow from his mouth as fast as he can speak. One such story involves a young boy from a family he was *mekareiv*. Rav Shvartz recounted with great emotion how, with *siyata diShmaya*, he succeeded in enrolling the boy in a cheder, where he is currently a budding *ben Torah*.

Rav Shvartz shared that his experience with that boy led him to a newfound understanding of a *posuk*, “*Ki simachtani Hashem befa’alecha bema’asei yodecha aranein*,” which translates as, “You have gladdened me, Hashem, with what You accomplish, with Your handiwork I celebrate.” He explained that when people work hard to accomplish something and then perceive that it was the Hand of Hashem that guided their efforts, they realize that their accomplishments could never have happened without Divine assistance. Even when they celebrate what they have accomplished, they know that it was from Hashem.

Rav Shvartz introduced me to five of his *talmidim*, and each gave a brief description of where he goes, what he does, and the changes he brought about. They work hard, are dedicated, and take great pride in what they do, but without Hashem’s help, it wouldn’t be happening.

The visit was fascinating and breathed hope, as it painted an optimistic glare over the negative headlines and pessimistic narratives.

Another fascinating facet of the trip was a visit to three outposts of a relatively new method of bringing back teenagers who have become lost. My dear friends, Rabbis Nechemia Malinowitz and Yehuda Soloveitchik, introduced me to the concept.

In Hebrew, it’s called a “*chavah*,” which translates as a ranch. In these ranch settings, boys who didn’t make it in *yeshiva*, school, or life are given new perceptions of their self-worth and their ability to accomplish tough tasks and play leadership roles. They are helped and guided in putting their lives back together and setting them up to be successful and wholesome.

The boys are rehabilitated through hands-on activities with animals, which help to rebuild their sense of self as they learn responsibility and much else.

The *chavah*, known as *Chavat Lechatchila*, also contains a *yeshiva*, *Ohel Yaakov*, where the boys learn with *yungeleit* one *seider* a day. They are located in the area known as “*The Bikah*,” not far from the Jordan border. The area was largely desolate of Jewish settlement, so their being there also serves the purpose of having Jews present, acting as a warning system should there ever be any attacks, *chas veshalom*.

In the mornings, the boys serve as shepherds and engage in other activities that teach them responsibility and help their self-worth and confidence grow.

Therapy via animals is a growing field, and at Chavat Lechatchila, you can see it in action, as directed by Rabbi Yechezkel Friedman, a Yid of mesirus nefesh.

After the boys are rehabilitated, they return to their yeshivos, homes, or wherever they want to go to make use of their newfound talents.

I asked for an example of what the boys learn from their interactions with animals. Rabbi Friedman spoke of a remarkable lesson shared by the program's leaders involving border collies, which assist shepherds in guiding sheep. The dogs are trained to respond to gentle, slow commands, teaching an important lesson: Patience and calmness lead to success, while anger and harshness only create obstacles.

While they primarily work with sheep and goats, there are also horses, snakes, lizards, turtles, and many other animals to care for. There is also a small techeiles factory and a life-size model of the mizbei'ach, where kohanim come to study the avodah they will soon be performing on the mizbei'ach in the Bais Hamikdosh in Yerushalayim.

These programs have already had a profound impact on many young lives. However, due to limited funding, they can only serve a fraction of those in need. If supported, these initiatives could help many more young people reach their full potential and reintegrate into society. There are currently thirty boys in Rabbi Friedman's program, and he can accommodate up to 100 with proper funding.

Despite the tumultuous challenges Israel faces, there is hope. When we recognize that everything is under the control of Hashem, we can see that even in difficult times, His goodness is present, though sometimes hidden. There is so much good. All you have to do is look for it, and you will find it.

I visited my rebbi, Rav Dovid Cohen, and discussed various topics with him, such as the giyus matter and the deal for the return of the hostages. I asked him what I could tell the people back home who worry about the matzav in Eretz Yisroel and want to know how they should understand what is happening.

He said that there is no doubt that we are living in ikvesa deMeshicha, the period leading up to the arrival of Moshiach, who will redeem us and bring the world to its tachlis.

The Vilna Gaon taught that as we are in ikvesa deMeshicha and approaching the final geulah, we experience the birth pangs of Moshiach, and the closer we get to the coming of Moshiach, the sharper and more painful the pangs become.

The severe crises and problems we are experiencing and dealing with now are indications that Moshiach's arrival is rapidly approaching.

“What we must do now is tzu shtarken,” he said. We must strengthen ourselves, our limud haTorah and hachzokas haTorah, dikduk b’mitzvos and teshuvah, for the Rambam says that teshuvah is what will bring about the redemption.

The rosh yeshiva quoted the Chazal that the Chofetz Chaim would repeat: “Mah yaaseh odom veyinotzel m’chevlei Moshiach, yaasok b’Torah ub’gemillus chassodim.” To be spared from the chevlei Moshiach, a person should busy himself studying Torah and performing acts of kindness.

There are many problems now in many different areas of Jewish life, but with faith, perseverance, and trust in Hashem, we can face these trials with strength and optimism. We must not become broken and should never despair, regardless of what is going on in the Jewish world or in our personal lives.

No article on a trip to Eretz Yisroel is complete without a taxi driver story. This one is a little different. I flagged down a taxi in Geulah to take me somewhere. The driver was not an old bitter Likudnik, like so many others. Rather, he happened to be an Arab. I was discussing with him various experiences of his job and the patience required to navigate slowly moving traffic on packed, narrow streets. Suddenly, he says to me that he loves driving in religious areas, for “the customers are unfailingly polite and honest, boruch Hashem!”

“I try to stay away from secular areas. They don’t treat me as well as the religious people.”

Every one of our interactions with people makes a mark and a difference. How much better off we all would be, and the world would be, if more people would speak of us the way that taxi driver does.

Each time we interact with someone, whether it is a fellow Yid, someone we know, or someone we don’t know, it is an opportunity to make a kiddush Hashem and help bring Moshiach closer. If only people would see how we speak and behave financially and socially, and would walk away saying, “Mah no’eh maaseiheim,” how nice and special these people are, much of the hatred against us could be mitigated.

Despite the situation, Hashem provides for us avenues of escape, of improvement, and of ways to provide zechuyos for ourselves and for Am Yisroel. Let us be wise and grab those opportunities so that we can quickly merit the realization of Hashem’s kindness and the revelation of Moshiach speedily and in our day.