

## **Fake News, Fake Peace, Fake Home**

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A recent Pew Research survey of 24 countries found that in 20 of them, a majority of those surveyed held an unfavorable view of Israel. Those countries include the U.S., Canada, England, Germany, and France, among others. In some places, such as Australia, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey, over 75 percent of respondents did not view Israel favorably.

Simply put, they don't like us out there. Israel has become a code word for Jews. When they say they don't like Israel, what they really mean is that they don't like Jews, just in a more socially acceptable way.

New York City voters recently selected an anti-Semitic socialist Muslim as their candidate for mayor, essentially making him the leading contender to run the country's largest city, home to one million Jews.

The very city that millions of Jews emigrated to over a century ago in search of refuge from persecution and famine, the city that has felt like home ever since, has just hung up a large sign proclaiming: "You Are No Longer Welcome."

This country has afforded us freedoms and opportunities our ancestors could only dream of. For generations, our people saw America as the goldeneh medinah, the golden land, a haven from the storms of exile. And indeed, it has been. We are fortunate to live in the freest, most generous nation in the history of the world.

But perhaps, in that blessing, we forgot something essential: We are still in golus. And golus, no matter how gilded, is still golus.

We made ourselves at home here. We built communities, opened schools and shuls, bought homes, and ran businesses. We became part of the American story and, in many ways, believed that it would never turn on us. We thought America was different. We thought that if we kept our neighborhoods clean, paid our taxes, contributed to society, and followed the law, we'd be accepted, maybe even loved.

But we're learning now that the smiles weren't as deep as we thought, and the warmth we felt may have cooled. The neighbors we wave to are not always the neighbors our parents once trusted. The people we pass on the street – the ones we assumed were indifferent or friendly – sometimes harbor a quiet resentment we chose not to see.

And as the fences go up, both physical and emotional, it's time for a collective moment of soul-searching. Not out of panic, but out of purpose. Because the more we believe we are at home here, the more we risk forgetting where home really is.

This Sunday is Shivah Assar B'Tammuz, the gateway to the Three Weeks, a season etched with sorrow and longing. On this day, we begin to trace the footsteps of our nation's pain—breaches,

burnings, and exiles that echo through time. In the heart of summer, as the sun glows and life feels full, we pull back. We dim the joy just enough to remember that we are still far from home, not only in miles, but in spirit. These weeks ask us to pause, to look past the comfort and calm we've grown accustomed to, and whisper softly to ourselves and to Heaven: As comfortable as we have become, we haven't forgotten where we belong. We want to go back.

Our people have been accused of many things throughout the years and have suffered terribly at the hands of tyrants and bloodthirsty mobs, unleashed time and again on the perennial scapegoat blamed for whatever was going wrong. Often, these pogroms were orchestrated by the very governments meant to protect their citizens.

During one such tense period, a meeting was convened between Russian government ministers and rabbinic leaders in an attempt to cool tensions and set the record straight. At a high-level meeting in St. Petersburg, one of the ministers stood up and unleashed a hate-filled diatribe. He told the assembly that Jews were of no value to the empire and were nothing more than a burden.

As his tirade intensified, he questioned why Jews even existed, claiming that they brought no benefit to the world and were entirely superfluous. All they do, he said, is cause harm and make trouble. His fury grew, and it became clear that he was preparing to call for a pogrom, inciting the illiterate peasants of the Russian republic against the Jews.

The Jewish delegation trembled in fear as the minister neared the conclusion of his speech. But Rav Yitzchok of Volozhin, known as Rav Itzele Volozhiner, began to smile. The minister noticed and became even more enraged. "There is nothing that I said that would give you reason to smile," he thundered. "Tell me what's so funny," he demanded.

The great gaon responded that it was precisely the minister's speech that made him smile.

"For years, we have been waiting to hear such talk from your lips, and now that I finally heard you say it, I can smile. The Torah foretells that in the times of Moshiach, the nations will say as you say now, 'What did G-d do? Why did He create the Jewish people? Who needs them? Of what use are they?' And when that happens, the Torah says, 'The nation will rise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion. It will not lie down until it consumes its prey and drinks the blood of the slain.'"

As the minister heard Rav Itzele quote the posuk from this week's parsha, "Hen am k'lavi yokum v'cha'ari yisnasa," he fell silent. Another massacre was averted.

These words were uttered by Bilam, the two-faced, hypocritical fraud whom Chazal describe as the antithesis of Avrohom Avinu, a man of few words who was kind, merciful, and the embodiment of all that is good. Bilam was his polar opposite. He spoke eloquently in poetic verse, but was a scheming backstabber and the embodiment of evil.

He has many students and followers.

With slick tongues, they feed opiates to the masses. With swagger and bravado, they present themselves as polished and all-knowing. But beneath the surface, they are as hollow and vapid as the empty promises they peddle.

Today, thanks to modern technology, every person who so desires has a platform to purvey these thoughts. Foolish people who spend their time unproductively troll about, seeking podcasts and posts with which to occupy their time. They read and hear silliness, perfidy, and ideas that cause them to think and act in an imprudent and thoughtless fashion. The ideas sound nice, the concepts convincing. Just as Bilam attempted to use his conniving tongue to cause destruction and calamity to our nation, too many people who are clever wordsmiths use their talent to mislead and harm the innocent. When that fails, they devise evil plots to cause damage. Such people, just like Bilam, may achieve fame, fortune and adulation, but it doesn't last.

A person with no real experience, who never held down a real job, presents himself as a forward thinker and a positive force for good, and people buy into it. They ignore that he is a socialist, if they even know what that means, and are happy to hear him bash Jews and Israel. They think that by electing him, they'll get everything for free, and before you know it, the young man is elected.

A donkey blocked Bilam's path and detoured him from his plan. We pray that those in this world who seek our demise will similarly be blocked from carrying through on their intentions.

It's tempting to place blame externally, and much of it may be justified, but if we truly want to rise like the lion Bilam described, we must look inward. Are we fulfilling our role as a mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh? Are we acting with the dignity and unity that befits a people preparing for Moshiach?

As we begin the Three Weeks, marked by sorrow and national reflection, we remember that this is not just a time of mourning. It's a time of yearning. We are not simply lamenting what we've lost. We are reminding ourselves that we are not yet home and that we do not belong in darkness. We belong in light.

The signs of golus are all around us. The hatred is masked as policy. The indifference is disguised as progress. The voices that once whispered their disdain now speak it openly. And yet, amid this painful clarity, we are reminded that Hashem is orchestrating events in preparation for something far greater.

We've witnessed miraculous deliverance in recent weeks—military miracles, intelligence breakthroughs, and moments of Divine restraint that defy logic. These are Hashem's ways of reminding us that He hasn't abandoned us, that even amidst hester ponim, He remains present.

When the nations put us down, when it becomes accepted to publicly bash Jews, when we are treated differently than others, we respond the way Jews have been responding since the churban. The nations ask, "What purpose do they serve?" And we answer not with words, but with our lives. We rise in tefillah, in Torah, in chesed, in emunah, in the quiet strength that has defied the centuries.

Walk into any Jewish home and you'll notice the blank space opposite the front door. That space is there to remind us that there is a blank spot in our hearts and souls. As much as we feel at home

here, as good as we have it, something is still missing. There is a hole, a wound. We will never be whole until the Bais Hamikdosh returns.

At every chupah, at the peak of the celebration, as the new couple is about to begin life together, the baalei simcha stand surrounded by family and friends, the chosson and kallah enveloped by a cloud of euphoria and good wishes. And then there is a pause. It is quiet and the sound of the chosson breaking a glass is heard. For no matter how good things seem, no matter how happy and safe we appear to be, we must never forget that at any time, the tranquility can be squashed.

Let us use this season of mourning to reignite our mission. Let us walk with dignity, speak with kindness, and live with purpose. Let us hold ourselves to a higher standard, not to appease the nations, but to honor our calling.

The term “fake news” has become familiar to all, but in a sense, what we have now is a fake existence in a fake world built on fake assumptions. When things don’t go our way, when the nations of the world hate us for reasons they don’t even understand, when young and old across the globe march against us, when there was essentially only one country that stood at our side during the recent war, and as we seek to end the war in Gaza and secure some semblance of peace in our beleaguered land, it serves as a stark reminder that we are in golus, living in a Potemkin village. It is nice and cozy here—warm at home in the winter and cool in the summer—but it is fake. It is but a dream, and we are dozing.

May we all be present at the great awakening, when the great shofar will be blown—uva’u l’Tzion b’rinah—and we will all greet Moshiach in Yerushalayim very soon.