

It's Time to Come Home

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This week, we enter the Three Weeks, a period unlike any other on the Jewish calendar, a time of mourning for events that took place centuries ago. It is a time to remember what we have endured as a people, to miss what we no longer have, and to recognize that the absence we have grown accustomed to was never meant to be normal.

The Bais Hamikdosh was the place where Heaven and earth met. It was where the Shechinah rested openly among Klal Yisroel, where every korban expressed our yearning to draw closer to Hashem. The Bais Hamikdosh was where tefillos ascended with a clarity we can scarcely imagine. It was the beating heart of the Jewish people, the place from which holiness radiated to the entire world.

Its destruction marked the beginning of a long exile in which Hashem's presence became hidden and our nation was scattered across the globe. We have built communities, yeshivos, and homes of Torah that are sources of great pride. Yet, every simcha remains incomplete, every home bears a zeicher l'churban, and the center of Jewish life remains in ruins.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of golus is not merely that we have lived so long without the Bais Hamikdosh, but that we have become accustomed to living without it. We have learned how to navigate golus. We have learned how to flourish in foreign lands. We have become comfortable in a world that our ancestors never mistook for home.

The Three Weeks insist on awakening us from that complacency. They remind us that no matter how secure we feel, no matter how prosperous our communities become, no matter how much Torah is learned and how many beautiful shuls are built, something essential is still missing. We are a people waiting to come home.

Lately, we have received several reminders of this reality. We became comfortable in our golus in Western Europe, in the United States, and, dare we say, even in Eretz Yisroel. Each of these places has recently reminded us of the true nature of golus, leaving us shaken and concerned.

There was a time, not very long ago, when support for Israel was one of the few issues that united Democrats and Republicans. From President Harry Truman's recognition of the Jewish state in 1948 through decades of bipartisan congressional support, standing with Israel was viewed as both a moral obligation and an American strategic interest. Republicans and Democrats disagreed on taxes, spending, foreign policy, and countless domestic issues, but support for Israel remained a bipartisan constant.

For decades, New York stood at the center of that consensus. It was home to some of America's strongest pro-Israel Democrats. Men such as Senators Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jacob Javits defended Israel unapologetically on the world stage. The city's large Jewish population helped create a political culture in which support for Israel was considered both morally right and politically prudent.

Those days are changing. Last week's Democratic primary elections in New York may ultimately be remembered as a turning point. A slate of socialist candidates defeated established Democrats while campaigning on democratic socialism, class warfare, and promises of dramatically expanding government.

More importantly, woven through nearly every successful campaign was a common thread of hostility toward Israel.

These candidates were not merely critical of Israel. They attacked their opponents for supporting Israel. Progressives have created a political environment in which, to survive Democratic primaries, candidates increasingly feel compelled to distance themselves from support for Israel.

That is an extraordinary political reversal.

Ultra-liberal Congressman Dan Goldman was condemned for being too close to Israel and for his relationship with AIPAC. His victorious challenger, Brad Lander, repeatedly attacked those ties, making opposition to AIPAC a defining issue of his campaign.

Lander accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, pledged to oppose American arms sales to Israel, and declared after his victory that he intends to become "one of the Jewish members of Congress most willing to stand up for Palestinian human rights," while insisting that American taxpayers should no longer finance "Netanyahu's wars."

Elsewhere, Darializa Avila Chevalier defeated veteran Congressman Adriano Espaillat after campaigning on ending military aid to Israel. Her political résumé includes organizing Columbia University's pro-Palestinian encampments and participating in anti-Israel activism dating back to her years as part of Students for Justice in Palestine.

Her victory celebration was punctuated by chants of "Free Palestine" as she proudly repeated her promise to block military assistance to Israel.

These were not isolated races.

They were victories by candidates backed and promoted by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, whose political rise has become emblematic of a movement that increasingly views opposition to Israel not as a liability but as a badge of ideological purity.

Only a few years ago, rhetoric of the type these people employ would have ended a mainstream political career. Today, it helps build one.

But something deeper is taking place.

When these people talk about Israel, they do not merely mean Israel. They mean us. They mean the Jews – the rich Jews, the greedy Jews, the Jews who throughout history have been made the scapegoats for society's ills. Yet, they cloak their antisemitism in language that denies the Jewish

people's right, after centuries of persecution, exile, expulsions, pogroms, and the Holocaust, to live safely in their ancestral homeland.

We do not need to agree with every decision of the Israeli government – and we don't – to recognize that relentlessly portraying the world's only Jewish state as uniquely evil both feeds, and is fed by, antisemitism.

The line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism becomes increasingly blurred when Jewish students are harassed, Jewish businesses are targeted, and elected officials are ostracized simply because they support Israel's existence.

Moreover, politicians, as well as podcasters and media talking heads, have discovered that attacking Israel energizes activists, excites donors, dominates headlines, and increasingly wins elections in urban districts.

As hostility toward Israel becomes a reliable path to clicks, ratings, and higher office, more politicians and media figures will adopt similar rhetoric. It is noteworthy that virtually none of the Democratic Party's leaders or elected officials has condemned the statements and beliefs of these progressive candidates. You can count on the fingers of one hand those who have declared that such individuals do not belong in the Democratic Party, in Congress, in the Senate, or in any position of public responsibility.

As America celebrates its 250th anniversary as the bastion of liberty, this trend should concern not only Jews, but all freedom-loving people, both in the United States and around the world.

History has repeatedly shown that societies that normalize hostility toward Jews rarely stop there. Antisemitism has often served as an early warning sign of broader civic and moral decline.

The issue facing America is larger than foreign policy.

It is whether we remain capable of distinguishing between a democratic ally defending itself against terrorists and organizations that openly celebrate the murder of civilians.

It is whether ideological purity will replace moral clarity.

These elections, together with the recent primaries that have produced similar candidates in Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, and elsewhere around the country, should serve as a warning.

Ideas once confined to the political fringe have steadily entered the mainstream.

Language once universally condemned is now increasingly accepted and applauded.

Hostility toward Israel is no longer merely tolerated in parts of American politics. It is rewarded.

Chazal tell us, "Halacha hee b'yodua she'Eisov sonei l'Yaakov." Throughout history, that hatred has worn many disguises. Sometimes it came draped in the robes of religion. Sometimes it marched

beneath the banners of nationalism. Today, it often presents itself clothed in the language of human rights, anti-colonialism, and social justice.

The vocabulary changes. The animosity remains the same.

History teaches another lesson. Every empire, every ideology, and every movement that sought to marginalize or erase the Jewish people eventually passed into history.

Klal Yisroel endured.

We do not place our trust in political parties or election returns. We appreciate our friends, recognize dangers when they arise, and speak honestly about the challenges confronting our community. But ultimately, our confidence rests where it always has – in the Ribbono Shel Olam, Who has sustained His people through every generation.

During this period of the Three Weeks, we think of the churban of the Botei Mikdosh and of the many Jewish communities that existed for centuries, only to vanish almost overnight.

If you travel today to Vilna, you will find weathered gravestones whose inscriptions are slowly disappearing beneath layers of moss. You will see a vast, historic cemetery with a sports complex at its center, and you will read about plans to further develop the resting place of thousands of our ancestors. It is not enough that they did their best to destroy Jewish lives, torturing and tormenting them beyond imagination. They now feel compelled to disturb them even in death, denying them the most basic human dignity of resting in peace.

And in Vilna, and all across Europe, on streets where every Friday afternoon women once hurried home carrying fish, where fathers returned from the market and children ran to greet them, today there is only silence. Where there were once shtieblach, shuls, and botei medrash pulsating with life, filled with the sounds of Torah and tefillah that sustained the world, today there is emptiness and desolation, as many locals have done their best to ensure that those places are – and remain – Judenrein.

The Nazis, their collaborators, and all those who sought to erase Jewish existence succeeded in destroying bodies and buildings. They succeeded in emptying streets and silencing communities. But they did not succeed in silencing the Torah.

Auschwitz, Birkenau, and the forests of Ponary and Kelm, as well as Bialystok and Babi Yar, where the voices of Jews were cut short, still stand as haunting reminders of that destruction. But in cities and towns throughout the world, those voices are once again heard, loudly, proudly, and unmistakably.

Today, young people sit in botei medrash, struggling over the very same difficult line of Gemara that a child in Tashkent, Brody, or Warsaw struggled with a hundred years ago. Mothers light Shabbos candles, covering their eyes and swaying with emotion as they recite the same tefillah their grandmothers whispered in small wooden homes across Eastern Europe. Jews everywhere are opening seforim and continuing conversations that tyrants tried to bring to an end.

There is a profound thought from Chazal (Taanis 5b) that offers a powerful response to the tragedies of our history: "Rabi Yitzchok said in the name of Rabi Yochanon, Yaakov Avinu lo meis – Yaakov Avinu did not die." The Gemara explains that just as Yaakov's children are alive, he, too, is alive. The continuity of his descendants, their loyalty to Yiddishkeit, and their commitment to Torah and mitzvos are themselves a form of eternity.

Nowhere is that more evident than when we reflect on the Jewish communities of the Diaspora that have been lost since the churban.

Think of the men who sat in little shtieblach in Kishinev and Galicia, worrying whether their grandsons would know a Tosafos. Think of the mothers in Germany, Spain, and Portugal who recited Tehillim, praying that their children remain faithful Jews. Think of the millions of simple Yidden who owned little, endured much, and measured success not by wealth or honor, but by whether their children would continue the chain that stretched back to Har Sinai.

Their worlds were consumed by fire. Their homes were burned. Their botei medrash were emptied. Entire towns, cities, and even countries were emptied of Jews. And yet the chain was never broken.

The bochur wrestling with a difficult Rambam. The father walking to shul on a Shabbos morning with his little son. The family gathered around the table singing zemiros. The child in cheder reciting, "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha kehillas Yaakov." These are not merely echoes of the past. They are the answer to those who believed they could erase us.

Our president is fighting with his opponents over the construction of a giant arch at Arlington National Cemetery. Civilizations build their monuments out of stone and marble. Ours are built of children, Torah, and memory.

The great cities of Europe once contained magnificent shuls whose walls seemed to touch the heavens. Many are now museums, ruins, or empty shells.

The enormous botei medrash in Lakewood, the crowded shtieblach in Boro Park, and the yeshivos in Eretz Yisroel, filled with thousands of people learning Torah, are our memorials to the generations that came before us.

The signs of the churban are everywhere. You can walk through Yerushalayim and still see walls scorched by the Romans as they destroyed the Bais Hamikdosh. You can see the massive stones they hurled from the walls surrounding the Bais Hamikdosh. You can walk along the very paths trod by millions of olei regel. And, of course, you can daven at the only remnant we have of the Bais Hamikdosh, the Kosel, from which the Shechinah has never departed. It still stands, beckoning us to come home, to return to what we once were and what we can once again become.

We have lost so much. We are a wandering people, and now we enter three weeks of mourning, three weeks of aveilus, to reflect upon what we have lost and what we continue to lack.

The headlines change. Political parties rise and fall. Empires come and go, just as they always have. But the Jewish story has never truly been about them. It has always been about a people carrying the memory of their true home, refusing to mistake golus for geulah.

As the Three Weeks begin once again, we remember what was destroyed and what still must be rebuilt. We remember that we are a people waiting to come home, and that we can never be comfortable until we do.

I remember as a young child, we would be playing outside by a neighbor and my mother would call for us and say, "It's time to come home. It's time to have supper and do homework."

The Three Weeks is like that call, reminding us that we have work to do and we have to come home.

Every day, we await the arrival of Moshiach. Every day, we daven for him and hope that this will be our final day in golus. May these be the last Three Weeks we observe in mourning, and may we soon merit to witness the fulfillment of the tefillah we recite three times each day: "Vesechezenah eineinu beshuvcha l'Tzion berachamim." Amein.