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Israel: Two Solitudes

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Most people don't know that in the late 1970s, after Shabbat was over in Jerusalem, on the corner of Balfour Street in Rechavia, a select group of scholars and politicians, philosophers and activists would gather together to study Torah with Prime Minister Menachem Begin at his official residence.

In his book, *The Prime Ministers*, Yehuda Avner describes how in the midst of tensions with President Carter and other American leaders over how to bolster Israel's security in its tough Middle Eastern neighborhood, Begin chose as the text for the very first study session he hosted the haunting words uttered by Bila'am, a prophet hired by King Balak of Moab to curse Israel but whose mouth miraculously would only offer blessings. Bil'am said of Israel:

“Am levadad yishkon uva-goyim lo yitchashav” “Behold, Israel is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be counted among the nations.”

Golda Meir once lamented about Israel's place at the United Nations, “We have no family there. Israel is entirely alone there.” Echoing her, Begin turned to his invited guests and asked, “Why does the Jewish State so frequently face solitude in the family of nations?”

The participants offered their thoughts. Scholar Ephraim Auerbach quoted classic commentators who suggested the aloneness was a voluntary state Israel took upon itself, distinguishing itself from others through its beliefs and ethics and sense of mission in the world.

Another, the popular Bible teacher Nechama Leibowitz, reinforced that idea by focusing on the word “*Yitchashav*” and noting its unique reflexive form, translated it not as “Israel shall not be counted among the nations” but that “Israel shall not count itself among the nations.”

Someone else reminded the group that whether you called it a blessing or a curse, Bil’am’s words consigned us to a destiny of remaining apart from the family of nations even though the goal of classic Zionism and possessing a land of our own was to achieve parity with the nations of the world by becoming one ourselves. Surely that would mean the end of anti-Semitism and isolation. But the establishment of the State did exactly the opposite. Israel was then, and is now, a nation that dwells alone.

Bringing the discussion to a close, Begin quoted Dr. Yaakov Herzog, a diplomat and a scholar, from his book on the Jews entitled, *A People That Dwells Alone*:

“The theory of classic Zionism was national normalization. What was wrong with the theory? It was the belief that the idea of ‘a people that dwells alone’ is an abnormal concept, when actually ‘a people that dwells alone’ is the natural concept of the Jewish people. That is why this one phrase still describes the totality of the extraordinary phenomenon of Israel’s revival. If one asks how the ingathering of the exiles, which no one could have imagined in his wildest dreams, came about, or how the State of Israel could endure such severe security challenges, or how it has built up such a flourishing economy, or how the unity of the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora has been preserved, one must come back to the primary idea that this is ‘a people that dwells alone.’”

Begin looked up: “So there you have it”, he said. “Cease dwelling alone and we cease to exist. What a conundrum.”

This scene could just as easily have been taken from this summer’s playbook. Israel survived nearly two months of rockets falling throughout the land, terrorizing the civilian population, especially in the south. Jews throughout the world suffered the scathing critique of a world obsessed with the strength of Israel’s response as it fired back at Hamas rocket launchers embedded in schools, hospitals, mosques and other civilian enclaves, but not before warning residents to evacuate.

“Disproportionate” is a word better used to describe the world’s judgment in its rush to accuse Israel of war crimes while turning a blind eye to Hamas’ risking and losing the lives of innocent men, women and children in Gaza.

Heinous anti-Semitic outbursts across the world – verbal and physical – thinly masquerading as anti-Israelism, even in places like Toronto, New York and Berlin, furthered our sense of aloneness. In Europe, Jews locked in synagogues with violent crowds massing outside, posters in stores saying “Dogs welcome. Zionists never”, and doctors refusing to treat Jewish patients, brought back terrifying memories of a time about which we and so many others promised, Never Again.

Am levadad yishkon/ a nation that shall dwell alone: singled out for relentless reproach from other peoples and countries, none of which would have hesitated one second before responding if attacked in the same way, *without* the IDF’s moral checks and balances.

Am levadad yishkon/ a nation that shall dwell alone: a solitary people struggling to live up to its noblest ideals while fighting daily for its basic survival.

Many of us, regardless of our politics or opinions about Israel, experienced this loneliness over the summer, and the frustration of feeling misunderstood.

Feeling isolated and alone, some cloaked themselves in self-righteousness, finding security in an intensified bond with God or with the truth as they saw it. What does it say about other people when they display an irrepressible urge to scorn and revile us whenever the opportunity arises, they wondered, placing the burden *outside* themselves? Others, feeling abandoned and lacking validation, asked themselves, “What’s the point of our endless fight for recognition?” and surrendered the struggle completely.

These reactions are understandable, but are deeply problematic for one crucial reason: they don’t promote self-reflection, the *cheshbon hanefesh* demanded of us by our Jewish tradition, especially this season. They don’t motivate growth. They are neither healing nor redemptive. They’re self-indulgent at best, and highly dangerous, at worst.

Can we respond to injustice and delegitimization without relinquishing our obligation to undertake an inner reckoning: Have we contributed to our isolation? Are there opportunities for collaboration we haven’t taken? Are there solutions to our conflicts we haven’t explored?

Are there ways to understand the words “*Am levadad yishkon/* a nation that shall dwell alone” that prompt us to *grow into* instead of *shrink from* our Jewish destiny to be a light unto the nations?

In fact, there are several. And they speak not just to our collective experience of alienation on Rosh Hashanah this year as a people, but also to the real existential

loneliness that beckons so many of us to this day in search of connection and renewal as individual human beings.

Simon Rawidowicz was a professor at Brandeis in the 1950s whose views on Israel and the Jewish people were provocative and far-reaching in terms of his sense of the moral responsibilities of a sovereign Jewish State. Though little known, his work eerily resonates in our current climate. One especially relevant essay of his is called, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People”. In it he described how if you review the millennia of Jewish history following the destruction of the Temples, the sense of doom and fear of the end of Judaism was prevalent in every corner of the Jewish world and in every era, intensifying as we experienced cycles of great renewal and devastating tragedy, followed by efforts to begin once again. Those who study Jewish history, he wrote, “... will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in Israel’s chain”. And more, he said, “Each generation grieved for itself but also for the great past which was going to disappear forever, as well as for the future of unborn generations who would never see the light of day.”

This doom and gloom is not unfamiliar to us, both regarding our physical vulnerability in the Middle East to increasingly militant terrorists and our spiritual vulnerability here to increasingly alluring assimilation.

And yet, Rawidowicz ironically claimed that it has precisely been our mental and spiritual preparation for the end that has enabled us to rise above every existential threat we’ve confronted. Our constant fears of our demise have inspired our endless courage to continuously begin again, here, around the world, and in the State of Israel.

In his words, “A nation dying for thousands of years means a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew.”

To apply Rawidowicz’s thinking, maybe it’s precisely our long-held concern about being isolated and alone in the family of nations that, instead of becoming fatalistic, can propel us to relentlessly seek partnerships and collaborations with countries and leaders across the globe.

A closer look at the letter *shin* in the word ‘*yishkon*’ in our verse, meaning “shall dwell” reveals seven tagim, or crowns, traditionally calligraphed on top by a sofer/scribe. The Ba’al Haturim, a medieval scholar, suggested the crowns symbolize the seven nations who dwelled in Canaan before we arrived from Egypt. The dissonance between the verses’ foreshadowing of our aloneness in the land and this artistic remembrance of the others who also called it home might serve as a scriptural catalyst to courageously and carefully harmonize our independence in the land of our ancestors with the yearnings of those whose destiny today converges on the same land.

My colleague Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Shalom Hartman Institute teaches us to acknowledge when the force of the words “*Am levadad yishkon*/ a nation that shall dwell alone” is diminished by allies great and small who stand with and for us. Witness the pro-Israel rallies in Japan, Calcutta, Johannesburg and elsewhere, the leaders across Europe who decried the viciousness of their own people, and the steadfast, if sometimes rattled, bond between Israel and the United States. We know that Israelis, and many of our own families, would have suffered devastating losses without the protection of the Iron Dome. Though we feel alone much of the time, we are never without friends and we ought to remember that – for their sake and for our own.

Perhaps most profound is the distinction Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes between “alone” and “apart”. In his comments on the verse “*Am levadad yishkon*”, he warns us not to use it as a self-fulfilling prophecy. “If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be,” wrote Rabbi Sacks.

And besides, he reminds us that in the Torah, being alone is hardly a virtue. In the Creation story we read that God felt, “*lo tov heyot Adam levado*/it’s not good for Adam to be alone” prompting the creation of Eve. Taking in the destruction of ancient Jerusalem, Jeremiah mourned, “*Eichah yashvah badad ha’ir rabati am*/ How could it be that this city, once filled with people, dwells alone?”

Too often the phrase is used as a spiritual balm to comfort us in the face of the endless tragedies and anti-Semitism that have plagued us throughout history. What can we expect, people ask? We are destined to be reviled, to be alone. When Sha’ar travelled to Germany last spring we had a Jewish guide there who epitomized that feeling.

But Sacks clarifies that that’s not how the great medieval commentators interpreted “*Am levadad yishkon*”. To Rashi it meant that we were indestructible. Ibn Ezra read it as our refusal to assimilate. It signaled our integrity to Ramban. It was never taken as a sign that our destiny is to be separated and divided from the human family. To be a Jew does not mean to be hated.

On the contrary, having been charged with the mission to be an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations, and an *am kadosh*, a holy people, our destiny is to build deep and enriching relationships with other peoples. *Kadosh* literally means set apart, but, as Sacks explains, “being apart is very different from being alone.”

People who set themselves apart do so to prepare for and fulfill their unique aspirations and purposes. Leaders set themselves apart from those they lead; teachers from those they teach, parents from those they parent, doctors from those they treat, not to willfully isolate themselves but to focus and actualize themselves and the good they can do.

The purpose of Jewish distinctiveness is neither to express superiority nor to be isolationist. It is to attempt to model the virtues and values that can contribute to the overall wellbeing of our people, of all humanity and of the planet itself.

Sacks quotes the English historian and journalist Paul Johnson as saying: “Jews are ‘... exemplars and epitomizers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form... It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatize these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral.”

As we face the next waves of struggle, both inner and with those around us, to establish Israel and the Jewish people as models of moral, political and spiritual achievement in the world, we mustn't discourage ourselves with the refrain that we are doomed to be alone and isolated, without friends or allies who understand and support us. If we tell ourselves that we will fail, Sacks warns, we most likely will.

And he concludes his commentary with this: “To be different is not necessarily to be alone. Indeed, *it is only by being what we uniquely are that we contribute to humankind what we alone can give.* Singular, distinctive, countercultural – yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse.”

Consider this from an even deeper perspective. The mystical tradition speaks of *kedushah*, of holy separateness, in its own paradoxical way. ***Kedushah is a singular***

expression of the common ground of all reality. As another colleague Rabbi Eben Leader explains, the more we emphasize and express the connections between all facets of existence, the more we partake in holiness.

Shabbat is a singular expression of the potential for personal, communal and natural renewal that we are capable of inculcating in every day of our existence. As the early Rabbis envisioned, in the time to come every day of the week will be like Shabbat, *yom shekulo shabbat*. Therein lies its holiness: a single expression of what exists, of what is possible, within the whole.

Today launches another year of Shmitta in Israel, the biblical tradition of letting the land lie fallow and of forgiving debts every 7th year in order to reset both the agriculture potential of every field and the economic potential of every citizen. Like Shabbat, the holiness of the Shmitta year is conditioned by its purpose, which is to inspire humility and equality in the agrarian, financial and social transactions of each and every year of a society's existence. Shmitta: one expression of what exists, of what is possible, within the whole.

“*Am levadad yishkon*/ a nation that shall dwell alone”: the purpose of setting apart the Jewish people was only ever to inspire others to join us in living mindfully of our inextricable bond with the Source of Life, with all of humanity, and with the earth. To willfully seclude ourselves or even to resign ourselves to a life cut off from the world is to fail in our mission of what Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-State Palestine called, *harchavat gvul hakedusha* – expanding the boundaries of *kedushah*, of sacred separateness – until none exist and the world is filled with an indivisible holiness.

In many ways Israel can be seen as metaphor for the human condition: feeling alone, misunderstood and estranged at various times in our lives. This is different from the

self-imposed aloneness that we sometimes crave in order to get some peace and quiet amidst our chaotic lives. All of us, at some point or another, have felt the aching loneliness that often accompanies our efforts to find ourselves, to connect with others, to grow into our potential. We've spoken about overcoming these painful emotions when we experience them as a community, as a people. What can we learn from these insights on a personal, individual level in this High Holy Day season of introspection and renewal?

Being aware of the risk of rejection and abandonment that life and love entail, and knowing the sting of them as we all do in our own way, can awaken within us compassion for ourselves and for one another. We can offer ourselves in fellowship to one who is alone, and we can also learn to absorb those lonely moments within the larger narratives of our lives.

Though they inevitably come, phases of loneliness do not predict a lifetime of aloneness. These phases can awaken within us a deeper drive to seek relationships with those who do understand us, who can help us bridge our gulfs and reach beyond our isolation. In the way that this season's confrontation with our mortality is often the best goad towards more thoughtful and joyful living, confronting and accepting life's inevitable periods of detachment can inspire us towards more and deeper social and emotional integration.

There's risk too when we forget that being alone is as essential to the world's balance as is being in relationship. There are those who look to lose themselves in others in order to avoid confronting their own truth. That impulse contributes no more to social wellbeing than retreating into social hibernation. A healthy relationship is made of two grounded partners. *Hitbodedut*, as the Hasidim call it, taking time regularly to be alone with your thoughts, fears, feelings and hopes, whether by choice or as a result of going through a period of loneliness, is an

essential process of self-discovery and self-affirmation, and a key ingredient of successful relationships. We can love no one until we learn to love ourselves.

We are taught that each of us, in our uniqueness, has the capacity to make a contribution to human life that only we can make. No one else is you. No one else can do what you can do; say what you can say; feel what you can feel. No one else can dream what you can dream; accomplish what you can accomplish; give what you can give; receive what you can receive. Moments of feeling separate and apart from those around us, painful as they are, can be moments of profound clarification for us about the uniqueness with which we've been graced and the role we are called to play in the world, a role which can change from time to time, but will only ever be ours to play.

Feeling alone and forsaken sometimes blinds us to the presence of true love and friendship. Reminding ourselves of the fellowship that does indeed fill our lives, in its various guises of family, friends, peers, colleagues, teammates, neighbors, and others is an important practice – for ourselves as well as for those who truly stand with us.

So what's the takeaway for us today?

1. Step back and appreciate how one simple line in the Torah has become central to understanding the experience of the Jewish people throughout millennia, and our own experience as individuals over the course of human development. So many reject Torah study as irrelevant or outdated, having nothing to say to the urgent issues of our time and our lives. To them I say, don't stand apart from the Torah. Study it – alone, with others, with me, with commentators ancient and modern, and allow it to expand your sense of who you are and who you can become.

2. To help mitigate the aloneness from which Israel and the Jewish people suffers, find ways to build partnerships with the world around us – social, charitable, political, cultural – and reinforce the value that Jews bring to the human family. I’m not pleading for assimilation, for Jews to lose themselves in the non-Jewish world, but for conscious interaction and participation as proud and identifiable Jews, making explicit our presence and our purpose in partnership with others.
3. On the personal level, to mitigate the existential loneliness from which we all suffer, let’s find the courage to reach beyond ourselves, allowing the clarity that can emerge from aloneness to motivate us towards greater participation at work, school, religious or spiritual communities, fitness classes, team sports, recreational clubs, cultural outings, volunteerism, or any other integrated setting. Seek out points of connection and make the contribution you have been put here make. Understand that **your** involvement in the efforts to have nations and individuals live in partnership with one another is key to their success, both for the Jewish people, and for the human family.

“Am levadad yishkon/ a nation that shall dwell alone”: *“So there you have it”,* Begin said. *“Cease dwelling alone and we cease to exist. What a conundrum.”*

It should be clear that I respectfully disagree. Jewish peoplehood and Jewish personhood are bound up in some way with the experience of standing apart, but not perpetually. The conundrum begins when we fail to see the responsibilities and possibilities that are embedded within our solitude, and the collaborative future that can be borne of it.

If we confront our inevitable periods of loneliness as realities foisted upon us by an unfriendly and unmerciful world, alienation that is empty of meaning and direction,

then “*Am levadad yishkon/ a nation that shall dwell alone*” will indeed become an indicator of our fate.

But if we *embrace* the inescapable moments of isolation that we will encounter, as individuals and as a nation, and we accept them as opportunities to seek out, clarify and pursue our dreams and sense of purpose, then “*Am levadad yishkon/ a nation that shall dwell alone*” shall truly become a signal of our destiny.

Today is Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, z”l, spiritual father of the Jewish Renewal movement who passed away in June, taught us the connection between remembrance and membership. To re-member means to make yourself a member again. It means to reconnect with yourself, your family, your community, your people, with all people, with nature, and with the universe itself.

Though we may stand apart at times, today, Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance, is the day we come home. Today is the day we re-member.