

## Letter to an Israeli Friend

Shalom, *achi*, my brother. How are you? I know you Israelis hate how we Americans say “how are you?” without really meaning it. But this time I really mean it. I’m afraid for Israel’s uncertain future -- for your future.

I just heard an old joke<sup>1</sup> about two Israelis sitting in a bunker near Tel Aviv in 1948, during the precarious days of the War of Independence. After a long time of sitting in nervous silence, one said to the other,

“I only see one way out.”

“What’s that?” said his friend.

“Israel must declare war on the United States.”

“What are you talking about?! How could that possibly help us?!?”

“Well,” he replied, “Think about it: we’d lose at once and the Americans would send an occupying force. They would form an alliance with a new pro-American government, guarantee our borders, flood us with American capital, establish our industries, and make us prosperous.”

“Ah, I see your point!” said the other. “But it’ll never work.”

“Why not?” said the first, deflated.

“Because with Jewish luck,” he replied, “we’d win the war and spoil everything.”

I know, *chaver*, I know, this isn’t a time to joke. But that’s what we Jews do, isn’t it? Laughter through tears, and all that? Maybe this isn’t a time for laughter. More like a time to speak out. But I need your help: I don’t know how to speak to my community about Israel right now.

Last week, I listened in on a conference call with the Shalom Hartman Institute on the relationship between North American and Israeli Jews in the 21st century. Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli author and journalist, spoke about his dream for American rabbis’ sermons at these High Holidays. I wonder what you think of this...

Halevi predicts that most Orthodox rabbis will speak about how American Jews haven’t fought hard enough to protect Israel’s security. They’ll criticize those who criticize Israel rather than stand up and defend her. And they’ll warn us against trusting or attempting to appease the Palestinians, who ultimately want only the destruction of the Jewish state.

As for liberal rabbis, he predicts they’ll speak about how we’ve given Israel a blank check, how we’ve let Netanyahu drag his feet on negotiating a two-state solution. They’ll criticize the ongoing occupation and its moral, economic, and military drain on Israel. They’ll warn us against continuing settlement activity that makes a two-state solution less viable with every new house.

Here’s where it got interesting. You and I, *achi*, we know what the *chagim*<sup>2</sup> are all about: *cheshbon hanefesh*, a spiritual accounting of oneself. Halevi said that rabbis who speak as he predicts are not doing *cheshbon hanefesh*. What they’re doing is *chesbon nefesh acher*, an accounting of the other side’s soul. And that’s when he shared his dream for 5772: that

---

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from Asimov, p. 231, joke #334.

<sup>2</sup> (High) Holidays

Orthodox rabbis will give sermons about our need to end the occupation; and that liberal rabbis will give sermons about our need to circle the wagons and defend Israel's existence.

You've spoken to me before, *chaver*, so you know I have my own opinions. But you also know I'm not one for one-sided political stump speeches. So is it possible, *chaver*, to fulfill both sides of Halevi's vision? Someone once said that a preacher's job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. But both at the same time...is that wise? I'm torn, my friend, so I turn to you for help.

\* \* \*

I'm not blind, you know. I see the growing threats to Israel around the world. Old alliances have "blossomed" into new dangers in the so-called "Arab Spring." The Egyptian uprising initially ignored Israel in its list of grievances, but violent anti-Semitism has now reared its ugly head there. Even Turkey seems bent on raising its profile in the Arab world by antagonizing Israel. Abbas' speech at the UN contained dangerous and incendiary language, harking back not to 1967 as the root of the problem, but to 1948.<sup>3</sup> One wonders if the applause by so many UN representatives for Abbas last week was motivated as much by support for Palestinian statehood as by resentment for Israel.

But you know all this better than I do. We both worry, but you live with it on your doorstep.

That joke about the two Jews in 1948 makes me wonder something else: do you see the irony of the Palestinian appeal to the UN? Imagine telling your grandparents -- who sat glued to their radios in 1947 to hear the result of the UN vote on the Palestine Partition plan; whose victory dances quickly turned into military exercises as the Arabs rejected the UN Plan and invaded -- imagine telling them that 64 years later the Palestinians would be seeking recognition from that very same UN! I wonder, *achi*, how you feel about the Palestinians' going to the UN instead of sitting down with you to negotiate. I imagine it's frustrating, to say the least.

But I also wonder if there's an opportunity here. Some in Israel and the US are saying that a UN affirmation of Palestinian statehood, *within certain borders*, implicitly affirms *Israel's* legitimacy within those borders. Of course, having borders imposed on you is intolerable, especially indefensible ones. But, as one Israeli observer noted, some Palestinians themselves are concerned that their move at the UN "will undermine the Palestinian national struggle by turning the conflict into an ordinary territorial dispute."<sup>4</sup> Could there be a way for Israel to salvage something from this distressing moment? With Jewish brains, and maybe a bit of that Jewish luck, can this situation can be turned at all to Israel's advantage?

\* \* \*

I heard another joke recently about a zoology professor who was leading an expedition into the wilds of the upper Nile. One day a graduate student ran to him in a state of great distress.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/full-transcript-of-abbas-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.386385?trailingPath=2.169%2C2.216%2C2.217%2C>

<sup>4</sup> Gidi Grinstein, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/force-and-anti-force-in-the-united-nations-1.374998>

“Professor!” he screamed, “something terrible has happened! Your wife is being eaten by an alligator!”

A look of deep concern came over the professor’s face. “Surely,” he said, “you mean a crocodile.”<sup>5</sup>

I know, dark humor again. Something we Jews are too familiar with. This joke reminds me of how some American Jews view the situation: Israel is in the grip of a homicidal alligator, and her critics are like the irresponsible professor who would rather nit-pick the nomenclature than stop the attacker.

True as it is regarding external threats, that metaphor only goes so far. I worry that there is a corrosive poison eating away at Israel -- one that demands a proper diagnosis if we’re going to find the right antidote.

You see, *chaver*, I’m not just concerned about external threats to Israel, but *internal* ones as well. We are right to praise and protect Israel as the lone light of democracy and freedom in the neighborhood. But here’s why I’m so worried: I fear that light is getting dimmer.

As one Israeli journalist put it, “There’s a limit to how long a fragile democracy can maintain an undemocratic regime next door, in occupied territory, before democracy at home is corrupted.”<sup>6</sup> Harsh words, I know. But you’ve told me how you and your friends feel about serving in the West Bank, how some of the settlers you’re defending there don’t serve in the army or support the economy. I can’t imagine your internal tension. It must have been something like what the IDF soldiers felt when forcibly removing their fellow Israelis from homes in Gaza. And how did you feel when fringe settler groups like the “Price Tag” protestors, who’ve been vandalizing Palestinian mosques, turned their violence against an IDF base?

I saw pictures of the tent city in Tel Aviv, and the massive demonstration. Are you, my friend, a part of this newly vocal population of discontents? I read that one of their leaders said: “Our lives have become a financial war of survival... [But] we are not here just to survive, we are here in order to live.”<sup>7</sup> Did you know that among developed countries, Israel ranks among the worst in wealth polarization? What does that mean for Israel’s future?

Your historian Benny Morris said that, in Israel’s early days, it “was an under-developed country filled with ideologically motivated Zionists willing to sacrifice for the collective good. Today’s Israel has a burgeoning economy, driven by sophisticated and internationally competitive high-tech industries, and a population driven mainly by individuals who want the good life.”<sup>8</sup> Morris goes on to speak of a “brain drain” of Israeli university graduates, academics, and creative types seeking better opportunities elsewhere. Have Israelis lost their common sense of purpose?

Here is my fear, *achi*: that Israel will become too internally divided to stand against its external threats. That the withering of Israel’s democracy is a threat to her Jewishness as well, and to her very survival.

---

<sup>5</sup> Asimov, 183, joke #268.

<sup>6</sup> Gershom Gorenberg, “The Vengeance of the Occupation,” [LINK](#).

<sup>7</sup> Daphne Leef and Dror Feuer, at Kikar HaMedina, Tel Aviv; September 3, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Benny Morris, “Is Israel Over?” on The Daily Beast, 09/11/2011. [LINK](#).

\* \* \*

Well, my friend, I've talked myself into quite a pessimistic mood. So what can I do about all this? How can *I* help?

I know what you're thinking, but you're too polite to say it: *make aliyah*. Yes, I know, if only more Jews moved there, we could solve the demographic dilemma. And yes, I know you believe you can only be fully Jewish in the Land of Israel.

I hope you can understand, aliyah is a delicate topic for American Jews. We've achieved unprecedented safety, comfort, and success here. It's hard to leave that behind.

Still, you raise a good point. On some level I agree with you -- that the single most powerful way to act on our concern for Israel is to move there. Contribute to society, serve in the military, be fruitful and multiply, participate in the political process.

But if I decide not to cast my lot there with you, then how does my choice to stay here affect my connection to Israel? I suppose it's different for each American Jew. Some of us feel guilt and give to Jewish causes to assuage it. Some of us make our opinions on Israel the deciding factor in how we vote here, trying to influence American policy toward Israel.

Here's something I think all of us American Jews should consider, and I wonder what you think of it, *achi*. I believe our choice not to live in Israel should cast an air of humility over how we speak and act regarding Israel. I look at you, fighting Israel's wars, sending your children to the front lines, losing friends to terror. And it occurs to me, there are Israeli doves and Israeli hawks making the ultimate sacrifice, Israeli conservatives and Israeli liberals who suffer the loss of children... So it gives me pause.

Don't get me wrong, I think I'm entitled to an opinion about Israel's policies, since what you do as the Jewish nation implicates me, too. But thinking of you makes me take a step back. I wish more American Jews took a page from *your* book. You told me about how you, a Likudnik, argue non-stop with your Labor-voting brother. But you still love each other as brothers; you still break bread together at the Shabbat table. We American Jews have mastered the non-stop arguing part, but we're still working on breaking bread together.

Maybe I'm just mourning what we miss by not making aliyah: a visceral sense of connection to other Jews that transcends political debates. I guess when you've gone to war with someone and held your lives in each other's hands, you forge a bond that can tolerate a great deal of disagreement.

It's possible I'm romanticizing Israeli society. I know I can count on you to speak truth, so I trust you'll disavow me of my fantasies.

In the end, I find myself wondering what you expect from us American Jews, and what we owe each other across the ocean that divides us. I think the Jewish future depends on both of us. So

consider this my new year's resolution to be more connected to you, my Israeli brother. Who knows, we may have a lot to teach each other.

And how's this for my new year's wish for my fellow American Jews: (1) may we seriously consider aliyah as the primary way to support Israel's future; (2) if we choose to stay, as the vast majority of us do, may we remember that the opinions we voice on Israel -- wherever they lie on the political spectrum -- are secondary to the broad diversity of Israeli opinion; and (3) may we better cultivate our bond with fellow Jews that transcends politics.

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading this far, *achi*. Being a Jew is a complicated project, isn't it? Sometimes I think we ask too many questions. But you know, sharing these thoughts with you makes me think of the two Jews in that joke, sitting in the bunker in 1948, debating an uncertain future. How many Jews before and after them have looked out on the world and argued about how to ensure a better future?

The Hebrew Bible never promised that we'd have a smooth ride through history -- ups and downs were pretty much guaranteed. But think of the miracle of it all: the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Ottomans live only a paper existence in our history books. We're still here, flesh and blood.

I don't know if the next chapter in Jewish history will be a peak or a valley. Prophecy isn't what it used to be. But I think it will be a far more interesting, enriching chapter -- and worthy of a sequel -- if we write it together. Don't you think, *achi*?

*Shana tova u'metukah*: wishing sweetness and peace for us all in this new year.

Please keep in touch. I can't wait to hear from you.

*L'hitra'ot*,  
Your American brother

### Some of What I've Been Reading

Abbas, Mahmoud. Speech to UN General Assembly, 9/23/2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/full-transcript-of-abbas-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.386385?trailingPath=2.169%2C2.216%2C2.217%2C>

Asimov, Isaac. *Treasury of Humor*. Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Avishai, Bernard. "Independent and Interdependent." <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/independent-and-interdependent-1.283818>

Ben-Ami, Jeremy. *A New Voice for Israel: Fighting for the Survival of the Jewish Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Burston, Bradley. "Ten reasons Palestine is right to bring its case to the UN." <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/a-special-place-in-hell/ten-reasons-palestine-is-right-to-bring-its-case-to-the-un-1.384256>

Committee for Israel, full-page ad in *New York Times*, . <http://www.committeeforIsrael.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ECI-NYT-ad.jpg>

de Soto, Alvaro. "Palestine's UN Cliffhanger, Then and Now." <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68289/alvaro-de-soto/palestines-un-cliffhanger-then-and-now>

Ellison, Keith. "Support the Palestinian Bid for Statehood." <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/22/opinion/support-the-palestinian-bid-for-statehood.html>

Gordis, Daniel. Commentary Controversy: writers responding to Gordis. <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/an-exchange-on-are-young-rabbis-turning-on-israel/>

\_\_\_\_\_. *Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War that May Never End*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

Gorenberg, Gershom. "Dear Mr. Obama... Please be clever at the UN." [http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=dear\\_mr\\_obama](http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=dear_mr_obama)

\_\_\_\_\_. "Letter from Jerusalem I: Much Ado About Nothing?" <http://www.hadassahmagazine.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=twI6LmN7IzF&b=5698175&ct=11195659>

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Vengeance of the Occupation." [http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the\\_vengeance\\_of\\_the\\_occupation](http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_vengeance_of_the_occupation)

Gringras, Robbie and Yonatan Ariel. "Moving from confrontation to conversation." *Jerusalem Post*, 9/19/2011. <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=238627>

Grinstein, Gidi. "Force and anti-force in the United Nations." <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/force-and-anti-force-in-the-united-nations-1.374998>.

Halevi, Yossi Klein. "No Apologies: Israel Isn't to Blame for Its Growing Isolation." <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/95020/un-palestine-israel-security-council-statehood>

Harris, David. "Hineni! Here I Am!" <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=6178309&ct=11216251&notoc=1>

Herzog, Isaac. "Why Israel Should Vote for Palestinian Independence." <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68271/isaac-herzog/why-israel-should-vote-for-palestinian-independence>

Leef, Daphne. Speech to Demonstration at Kikar HaMedina, 9/3/2011.

Morris, Benny. "Is Israel Over?" The Daily Beast, 9/11/2011. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/09/11/first-report.html>

Netanyahu, Benjamin. Speech to UN General Assembly, 9/24/2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-s-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly-1.7254>

Obama, Barack. Speech to UN General Assembly, 9/21/2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/full-transcript-of-obama-s-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.385820>

Olmert, Ehud. "Peace Now, or Never." <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/22/opinion/Olmert-peace-now-or-never.html>

Peretz, Martin. "Obama's Middle East is in Tatters, Utter Tatters." <http://www.tnr.com/article/tel-aviv-journal/95112/obama-turkey-erdogan-palestine-vote>

Rivkin, David and Lee Casey. "The Legal Case Against Palestinian Statehood." <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904106704576578423114178378.html>

Room for Debate: Can Israel Survive Without a Palestinian State? <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/09/14/can-israel-survive-without-a-palestine>

Stephens, Bret. "Israel's Predicament." <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904265504576566431045060822.html>

Wall Street Journal Editorial Board. "The Palestinian Statehood Gambit." [http://www.standwithus.com/app/inews/view\\_n.asp?ID=2017](http://www.standwithus.com/app/inews/view_n.asp?ID=2017)

Walzer, Michael. Address at Global Jewish Forum, a Makom seminar. <http://makom.haaretz.com/blog.asp?rId=279>