

Shoftim 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, August 30, 2014

Reasons to Be Optimistic About Israel

A family had twin boys whose only resemblance to each other was their looks. If one felt it was too hot, the other thought it was too cold. If one said the TV was too loud, the other claimed the volume needed to be turned up. Opposite in every way, one was an eternal optimist, the other a doom and gloom pessimist. Just to see what would happen, on the twins' birthday their father loaded the pessimist's room with every imaginable toy and game. In the optimist's room he put a wading pool filled with horse manure. That night the father passed by the pessimist's room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly. "Why are you crying?" the father asked. "Because now my friends will be jealous of all my toys, I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with this stuff, I'll constantly need batteries, and my toys will eventually get broken." Passing the optimist twin's room, the father found him dancing for joy around the pile of manure. "What are you so happy about?" he asked. To which his optimist twin replied, "There's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

Some of you may have seen Deborah Lipstadt's article in the NY Times a week and a half ago entitled, "Why Jews Are Worried - Rising Anti-Semitism in Europe" It starts with this: "An old Jewish joke goes like this: "What's the definition of a Jewish telegram? 'Start worrying. Details to follow.'" And while Anti-Semitism is truly a problem in Europe, and the war/conflict in Gaza is sad and frustrating and far from fully being resolved, there are reasons to be optimistic about Israel in the aftermath of the Gaza War. It is true that Israel has lost 70+ citizens and that world opinion sometimes seems stacked against us, but pessimism and despair only serve to add insult to injury. I believe that we owe it to Israel, to our fellow Jews and to ourselves to find reasons to be hopeful while at the same time concerned. And so it is those reasons for optimism and hope that I'd like to share with you this morning.

Seeing the glass half full is not as hard as you might think. For one thing, Hamas suffered a massive blow that has debilitated it. And it is sad, heartbreaking that innocent lives were lost in spite of Israel's continued attempts to minimize collateral damage. But it is important to remember that Hamas was dealt a heavy blow because Israel had the power to do so. As a Jewish People we have tried powerlessness and even passivity for most of our history and that did not work out so well. We've known power and powerlessness, and believe me, between the two, power is much, much better. You always want to be able to negotiate from a position of strength. And Hamas can spin it any way they want, but the Israeli army is feared and respected around the world. Your grandparents and great grandparents sixty years ago could never have imagined such a thing! A powerful Jewish State?!

Peace and quiet have been restored to the South of Israel and a million people there are returning to normal life knowing that they literally dodged a bullet before the tunnels could really be put into use. In addition, Iron Dome proved remarkably successful, and that Israeli innovation has proven to be a huge strategic asset.

The operation was called "Tzook Eytan" - "Protective Edge", but it was the home front's resilience that provided the true "protective edge" to the Jewish State. There is a palpable sense of unity in Israel. In addition, Egypt (with whom Israel has a peace treaty) has regained its position as a significant regional power, and a moderate alliance has been formed between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority. Mahmoud Abbas has once again become relevant, giving Israel a second chance at negotiations with the PA, which I think are inevitable. (You don't make peace with your friends, as the late Yitzhak Rabin once said.)

Working with Egypt is a huge strategic win for Israel. Throughout the fighting in Gaza, Hamas attempted to ensure that Qatar and Turkey would be the ones to head the cease-fire talks. For a moment, it seemed as if the United States was seriously considering it, given its diplomatic relations with Doha and Ankara, but Israel stood its ground and demanded that Egypt lead the negotiations. Netanyahu's insistence on the matter proved to be correct. Hamas had to agree to Egypt's serving as the sole mediator in its indirect negotiations with Israel, and with that a good part of the Arab world breathed a sigh of relief. Radical Islam is distanced from the negotiating table and the world can now turn its attention toward this enemy which is far more lethal than Hamas, to Israel, and to the rest of the world.

There is reason to be optimistic, but most people, especially Jewish people, don't see it. Why not? I suspect that many Jews in the world, both in Israel and around the globe, are suffering from "Siege Fatigue", which is the existential exhaustion that comes from thinking that the entire world is against you. And while Israel may have some real challenges in the PR world, it's not true that the whole world is against us. Israel does have friends in the non-Jewish world, but they don't get the coverage of the flag burning rallies. But all you need to do is read the papers and you'll see that many, many of the people who are speaking up and out in support of Israel are not Jewish. They see the wisdom of standing by an ally of the U.S. and they see the justice in standing up for democracy in the Middle East. And as far as "global anti-Semitism" goes, take note of the fact that the governments and police forces of the countries where protests turn violent risk their own non-Jewish citizens to protect Jews. With the possible exception of Hungary, none of this anti-Semitism is state sponsored.

So don't believe that we are alone in this world. We are not alone in this world, and the whole world is not against us. Furthermore, we do our own cause a grave disservice by thinking this way. That kind of pessimistic thinking leads to despair and withdrawal the two things we can least afford right now. We need to keep speaking out, and to know that people do listen. Maybe someone will hear who hasn't heard before; maybe we can make our case a little better...But none of that can happen so long as the cause seems hopeless. That's why concentrated optimism is so important. We must remain a hopeful and hope filled people. Don't despair; don't believe that everyone is against us. Now is the time to start rebuilding. This is an exciting time in Jewish history, a unique opportunity for Israel and the Jewish world to move forward and grow. In the spirit of this month of Elul, as we prepare for the Holidays, let us focus on building a better Jewish world for all of us.