

**My Israel – No Silver Platter for Us**  
Rosh Hashanah Morning Day 2 – Makom NY  
Friday, October 4, 2024 at 11:00am  
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Friends, yesterday I reflected on how we have been feeling, our uncomfortableness in the world in which we find ourselves living. And many of us just heard the intellectual, factual perspective from Israel Nitzan, so we can better understand the current situation in Israel.

If you are like me, there are still so many more questions than answers – the emotional ones. What is it about the Jewish people that we are so hated? Why, as a minority of the population of the world, are there so many people who don't want us to exist? What did we ever do to them? We are less than 1% of the world's population, we are literally a sliver on a graph, and yet, our influence, our controversy, our voice is so much more.

And Israel? This tiny sliver of a piece of land, surrounded by Arab countries, that has literally turned deserts into agricultural communities, pulled water from the air, and created more start-ups and inventions than most countries could ever dream of. Why is there such hatred, such animosity, such resentment toward this tiny little state, that is merely the size of New Jersey?

Let us begin with the Jewish people. Mark Twain had it figured out way back in September of 1897, long before the Holocaust or the establishment of the State of Israel. Twain wrote this now famous quote called 'On the Jews'.

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities, of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality? "

What did Twain see back in 1897 that helped him to answer the age-old question: why the Jews?

- He understood our tenacity – as a people – we have always held tightly to our faith, our culture, our beliefs, our rituals – even under the worst of circumstances.
- He understood our determination – to merely exist, to live, to thrive, to be the best we could possibly be.
- He understood our motivation – always motivated by the positive of Judaism – the Torah, our teachings, our faith, not only by the antisemites who get in our way.
- He understood our willingness, no our desire to function as a people, a culture, a religion – not just one, but all three. Tied together, we cannot dilute what it means to be Am Yisrael – the people of Israel.

So if Mark Twain could understand it in 1897, why are we so misunderstood today? Our challenges within the context of the greater world began long before the establishment of the modern State of Israel, but alas, the creation of the State of Israel only added to the resentment felt toward the Jewish people.

Let's go back for a moment to November, 1947. Then called Palestine had been under the rule of Britain, and they were tired of holding on to this controversial piece of land. The United Nations set up a committee to study the situation and they made a recommendation: the region should be further divided into two nations. One part should become yet another independent Arab country. A tiny sliver of land along the Mediterranean, which was home to 660,000 Jews and had a Jewish majority, should become an independent Jewish homeland, the first independent Jewish state in 1,877 years.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted. Country after country cast their ballots. The results soon became clear. By a vote of 33 to 13 (with 10 abstentions), the nations of the world had voted to create a Jewish state.

When Chaim Weitzman was asked for his assessment of the UN's partition vote, he explained that the vote was simply the first step in establishing a Jewish state, proving that the global consensus supported a Jewish homeland in the ancient Land of Israel. But like anything worth having, it would have to be fought for: Weitzman declared: "The state will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter." The state of Israel would have to be dearly bought, with Jewish a tremendous amount of Jewish blood.

And of course, while much of the world was celebrating, maybe some of you remember that moment in time, Israel's Arab neighbors made it clear that they would not tolerate the existence of a Jewish state, no matter what the circumstances. Britain's mandate in the region was set to expire on May 14, 1948.

If Israel dared declare its independence on that day, it faced not just one invading force but many: Israel's borders with Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan all were vulnerable to attack, and the brand-new Jewish state was vastly outnumbered by the combined forces of the much larger and more militarily advanced grouping of nations known as the Arab Legion, which was committed to preventing the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Of course, we all know what happened. There is no short story to the number of casualties and wars Israel has had to withstand in order so simple survive. The amount of physical, psychological and emotional damage is beyond measure.

But let us go back for a moment to the response by the world to the UN partition vote on November 29, 1947. There was one Israeli who was celebrating this vote named Natan Altermann. Altermann was born in Poland in 1910, and he moved as a child with his family to the bustling city of Tel Aviv. Altermann joined a joyous crowd at Tel Aviv's Cafe Kassit, a popular cafe with the city's literary figures. As the story goes, as Alterman and his friends drank toasts to the UN's vote, he overheard two of his acquaintances whispering together.

Yosef Avidar was a senior commander with the Haganah, the Jewish defense group. He was talking with Yitzhak Sadeh, the founder of the Palmach, the Hagana's elite strike unit. How many Jews would die defending a new Jewish state they wondered?

They estimated that perhaps 10,000 Jews would be killed by Arab armies if they dared make the UN's vote a reality and establish a Jewish homeland. *If only that had been the number.* Alterman stopped celebrating. One of his friends later recalled that suddenly his face was "filled with anxiety and pain". He, like many Jews, had heard Weitzmann's warnings that a Jewish state would not be simply handed to its inhabitants on a silver platter. He realized that they'd have to fight and suffer for the creation of a land to call their own.

That night, Alterman went home and started working on the poem that would become his best-known work, entitled *Magash Hakesef*, "The Silver Platter". It envisioned the toll that creating a Jewish state would take. He described a war-torn land, a homeland of "smoky frontiers" still burning from battle. He wrote of a Jewish homeland that was "torn at heart but existing", one experiencing both "terror and joy" together.

Here is what he wrote:

### **A Silver Platter – by Natan Alterman**

Written December, 1947

...And the land will grow still  
Crimson skies dimming, misting  
Slowly paling again  
Over smoking frontiers  
As the nation stands up  
Torn at heart but existing  
To receive its first wonder  
In two thousand years  
As the moment draws near  
It will rise, darkness facing  
Stand straight in the moonlight

In terror and joy  
...When across from it step out  
Towards it slowly pacing  
In plain sight of all  
A young girl and a boy  
Dressed in battle gear, dirty  
Shoes heavy with grime  
On the path they will climb up  
While their lips remain sealed  
To change garb, to wipe brow  
They have not yet found time  
Still bone weary from days  
And from nights in the field  
Full of endless fatigue  
And all drained of emotion  
Yet the dew of their youth  
Is still seen on their head  
Thus like statues they stand  
Stiff and still with no motion  
And no sign that will show  
If they live or are dead  
Then a nation in tears  
And amazed at this matter  
Will ask: who are you? And the two will then say  
With soft voice: We—  
Are the silver platter  
On which the Jews' state  
Was presented today  
Then they fall back in darkness  
As the dazed nation looks  
And the rest can be found  
In the history books.

In the poem's final, haunting passages, Alterman conjured up the image of two young Jewish soldiers, a boy and a girl, who are battle-weary and fatigued, covered with the dirt and grime of the long, hard war they have been fighting. As the poem continues, it becomes clear that these two young Jews are no longer among the living. As they stagger into view, an entire nation gazes on them, wondering just who these exhausted, injured soldiers at the front lines defending the first Jewish country in nearly two thousand years might be. Finally, with weary gazes, the two young soldiers reply softly: "We are the silver platter on which you were handed the State of Israel."

Friends, it was known from the beginning of time that we Jews have something special, something unique about us. And our homeland is no less beautiful and unique. Mark Twain saw it and named it. Others have seen it, felt it, been threatened by it and embraced it. No other people have a history like ours. We have fought hard, and tirelessly to be where we are today. We have withstood insurmountable bloodshed and we still live.

We have survived the Hamans and the Hitlers, the Persians and the Babylonians, and now we will survive the evil of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. And we will make sure that the world understands what is so special and unique and good about the Jewish people.

What is our slogan, always and forever – Am Yisrael Chai – not the land of Israel lives, but the people of Israel lives! And how do we live – we always have hope – hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

And that is the reason that our heart breaks now – because we Jews have something special and unique in our beautiful Israel – and if you have never been to understand this, to taste it, to see it, to feel it, then as soon as this war is done, you will join us on our next journey – because Israel belongs to all of us, and we must know what we are mourning over, and what we are fighting for, and what makes our heart full.

Our hope is not lost, our hope that is 2,000 years old. To be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion, O Jerusalem.

Hatikvah. The Hope.

Amen...