Thoughts for Yom Ha'Atsmaut

View PDF



Alon Goshen-Gottstein is the founder and director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute. He is acknowledged as one of the world's leading figures in interreligious dialogue, specializing in bridging the theological and academic dimension with a variety of practical initiatives, especially involving world religious leadership. This article originally appeared in the Times of Israel.

Yom HaAtzmaut is, like any birthday, a time of moral reckoning and of revisiting our collective story. The trauma and the sense of hopelessness we experience demand an effort to reframe our story and reorient our attitude to life in Israel and, given how events in Israel have impacted Jewry worldwide, to Jewish life itself.

Two narratives, interwoven with one another, have provided the basic conceptual framework within which the vast majority of Israelis have understood Israel and the present moment. It is time for a new vision, based on humility and lovingkindness, to shape a new narrative.

The first common narrative is the narrative of disempowerment and regaining of power. Following years of exile, culminating in the events of the Holocaust, Israel was founded as a safe haven for Jews and as a promise for the flourishing of Jewish life. This also provided a means for the deep seated Jewish vision of being a light unto the nations to find concrete

expression. Human activism and taking history into our hands characterize this narrative, which is understood as distinct from the alternative approach, characterized by greater historical passivity, in anticipation of divine action and a supernatural messianic redemption. The sense of empowerment unfolded progressively in Israel's life as successive military victories showed Israel's strength, as agricultural and technological capacities made it a wonder to the world and a startup nation and as a miraculous reality was experienced as part of the day to day life of the nation-state. Admiration for Israel characterizes the better part of its history and forms part of the narrative itself. While Israel did not have a particular teaching or example to offer the world, its very existence was a source of wonder and inspiration.

The second narrative is internal. It is a narrative of unity, or the quest for unity, within Israel and the claim that Israel as a state unites and serves the entire Jewish people. Deep fissures within Israeli society have existed throughout the State's history, but for the most part have been held at bay. A sense of unity has kept society together, especially in times of crisis and war.

The events that have unfolded prior to and since October 7th call into question both narratives. That day was a day of defeat and profound humiliation. By all accounts, despite an enormous show of power following that day, we have yet to emerge victorious from this war. Something has been broken in the national spirit. In parallel, the view of Israel, on the global stage, has sunk to a nadir we could have never imagined.

Almost universally, the second narrative ties to the first, as an explanation for our failure. Accordingly, the reason put forth for everything going wrong is our lack of unity. Internal weakening led to an external attack, from which we have yet to recover.

Both narratives reference the nation and its power and both put forth human/social reasons as the sole means of understanding our historical situation. As a consequence, there is a remarkable dearth of attempts to account for Israel's condition in other terms, especially theological terms. For the most part, God is kept out of the picture. A history of Jewish introspection and attempting to account for the present moment by examination of the past is cast aside, as these narratives are accepted almost blindly.

There are many reasons why I consider these narratives inadequate to the task of accounting for the present moment and why, I believe, we must discover new narratives by means of which to make sense of this time. The magnitude of our fall from grace cannot be accounted for simply in light of divisive leadership or government policies. Too many factors came together to bring about October 7th, including the failure of intelligence and the particular state of lack of preparedness, for us to ignore the possibility that what happened was not simply a consequence of a set of bad political choices. Theologically speaking, God allowed October 7th to happen. We could have been protected as we were during the recent massive attack from Iran. We were not. This gives pause for reflection.

Similarly, the narrative of unity also falls short in its explanatory power. Divisions in Israel have always been there, nor has any real unity been achieved since October 7th. The notion of unity has itself been used with political convenience and no serious, let alone successful, work of healing national divisions is within sight. Again, theologically – why would God allow lack of unity to lead to these results, if no successful reversal of that reality emerges from events?

So, one wonders, surely one must *learn* something from this period. What are lessons we should draw from it? Amazingly, no significant insight or message for the moment comes forth from Jewish leadership in response to this question. Political leaders have no new insight to offer. Events simply affirm their previous political views. Religious leaders have been universally dumb in their response, at best echoing the unity trope, or calling for

teshuva in the broadest terms. No chief rabbi, Hassidic leader, rosh yeshiva, leader of a particular denomination, or the like, has come forth with a message powerful and convincing enough to constitute the kind of lesson that would make sense of the events of October 7th and beyond.

In this situation, it is impossible to *learn* anything from the events of the past 7 months. How can one learn if the question is not posed and an answer is not put forth? Moreover, any attempt to *learn* will, of necessity, echo divisions within the people. Each group will learn lessons that affirm its position and invalidate the views of the other. We need to consider the present moment in terms other than learning historical or moral lessons.

If, as I believe, God has purposes in allowing events to unfold, these should be achieved regardless of our learning capacity and in spite of our collective limitations and fractures. Therefore, we must ask whether there is another way of approaching these events that is not *learning* from them. Perhaps our collective experience is more important than the lessons we draw. Perhaps our humiliation and the crushing of our ego are the purpose of events as they have unfolded. Perhaps our suffering has a purifying value, in and of itself. Perhaps it is time to own again elements of thought that we have cast aside, in the process of our empowerment. Perhaps the lesson of the purifying power of suffering in exile remains relevant and plays out in our history in ways other than empowering us to take history into our hands. Perhaps the relationship of human and divine action, and the sense of power that we take for granted must be recalibrated. Might all these not be summed up under one word – humility? Is our global humiliation not a moment for collective humility? What kind of Israel might come forth, at 76, if humility, rather than power, were the subjective goal to which we strive? How might the purpose of serving as light unto the nations, largely forgotten in past decades, be rediscovered in this light?

As I contemplated these issues, between Yom Hashoah and Yom Atzmaut , I went to pray, at the tomb of the Prophet Samuel. He was, after all, the great seer (that is what he is called in the Bible) who struggled with the balance between divine and human governance and the

limits of human power, as expressed in the institution of Israel's kingdom. As I prayed, a word came to me – lovingkindness. It was not what I had expected, and yet I think it offers a message that is crucial to the creation of a new narrative, and flows directly from the recognition of how central humility must be to our going forward.

Rather than saying we know what it is all about or that we have the power to draw lessons from events, we can acknowledge that we are overpowered by events and at a loss to comprehend them. We are also at a loss to heal our divisions. More fundamentally, we are at a loss to account for what the purpose of Israel – the State and the People – is at the present moment. And we all share in this existential situation. It applies to each and every sector in society. Each sector requires transformation. Each sector seems incapable of drawing lessons of relevance from the events of October 7th, though indicators for such lessons are present. We are, collectively, at a loss.

Once we recognize this, there is a different way of approaching our society and the world. The surety of truth and the conviction of ideology must give way to another, more humble approach. To me, the most moving testimonies of the Holocaust, and how meaning was found in suffering, are the stories of caring for one another. Showing lovingkindness in the midst of suffering was a form of maintaining human dignity, without any presumption of understanding. The moments that have moved Israeli society most since October 7th have, indeed, been moments in which lovingkindness was manifested.

If our narratives have failed, if our ego has been crushed, if we lack vision, if we are all in a state of collective darkness and despair – there is still a fundamental way of being that can provide hope and keep us open to new understandings and realization. If we could only inculcate lovingkindness under all situations, both within and without, despite all divisions, recognizing our limitations and collective failure, if *chesed* rather than *emet* became our governing ethos, new horizons could open up. With these a new narrative could emerge. It is the narrative of human efforts reaching their limit, and the acceptance of our frailty and limitation, as we await new revelations and new beginnings. The road along which we

travel in this journey is paved by humility and lovingkindness.