

Nasu Et Rosh: Taking an Accounting After the Ceasefire
Who Will Define Us Going Forward?

Imagine this scene.

A slave people, who lived for hundreds of years under the whip and tyranny of Egypt. Stripped of a sense of self, these slaves inhabited a world where they were defined by the Egyptian overlords as something subhuman, abhorrent, no different than a pack animal.

Now, miraculously freed from slavery, these same people are in the *midbar*, in the wilderness, standing on the edge of the land that God promised was the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah. In this moment, a census was being taken not of slaves but free people, who were not only being counted as fully human but as individuals filled with the potential for holiness.

Naso et Rosh: raise up your head, the Torah commands. The term used here for counting is not the normal verb but one that connotes the action of lifting up. In this case, the idea is to lift up one's head so that each individual might be counted by their face, and by their essence. The census in the opening chapters is much more than a head count: it is a lesson on what it means to return a people's humanity back to them. Its timeless message transcends the Israelites in the time of Moses and speak to us in our time.

- God, not the Egyptians, will define who we are
- Our identity has always been tied to the land
- The struggle for Israel is for all time

In this way, this landless, persecuted, slave people, were raised up to become a landed nation.

Like many stories in the in Torah, this one repeats itself again and again throughout Jewish history.

- How many times in history have Jews been stripped of their land?
- How many times have Jews defined by the host culture in negative and ugly ways?
- How many times have Jews been deprived of their face, their humanity over the course of history?

Whether it was under Greeks, Romans, Christians, or Muslims, the story was virtually the same.

Think of the derisive names that Jews have been called in history:

- Christ killer
- Shylock
- Dhimmi
- Money grubber
- Sheeny
- Hymie
- Zhid in Eastern Europe and Russia
- Juden in Germany
- And in concentration camps... they were just a number.

Each of these ugly words, in their own way, are the Jewish equivalent of the N-word. Each one of these terms takes our people back to Egypt where we were seen as subhuman.

That was, until modern Zionism arose in the 19th century.

One of the stated tasks of the Zionist enterprise was to redefine the Jew; was to raise the head of our people and create our own unique

identity. What Max Nordau once called Muscular Judaism, envisioning Jews who could farm the land and fight for themselves.

The writings of the early Zionists stated flatly that the world would no longer define us but rather, the Jewish people would define itself as it saw fit, for the first time in nearly 2,000 years. Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries were reenacting that which took place in the time of Moses: Jews were counting themselves into their own nation as they prepared to return to their own land. They modeled themselves after the Maccabees: people with such courage and bravery that they were able to defeat armies much larger than their own.

It was that spirit created in the early days of Zionism that gave the Jewish people the wherewithal to build a state against all odds. As a result, for the first time since the destruction of the second Temple, Jews were in charge of their own external destiny. Not only did Zionism help to redefine the Jews of Israel, its outlook impacted Jews around the world.

And the world took notice.

In the early days of the state, much of the world attached a certain romanticism to Israel and began to see the Jew through a different lens.

- The ones who could make the desert bloom
- The ones who could stand up to multiple armies and be victorious
- The 6 Day War showed Jewish ingenuity, confidence and bravery – the New Jew was a force to be reckoned with.
- In Entebbe, Israel showed itself to be the protector of the Jewish world
- And its doors were open to Jews from the 4 corners of the world.

In Israel, in our own land, the Jewish people redefined what it meant to be a Jew. Our people had come home with their heads raised up high and their proud faces visible, whether they were white, brown, or black. Israel was a place which every Jew could call home. A place where every Jew counted, just as in the time of Moses.

But the reality of Israel is different than the dream of Israel.

Of the many challenges Israel has faced over the years, perhaps the most intractable is that of the Palestinians. The people living on the land to which they were returning.

This latest battle with Hamas has exposed all of the issues that have made finding a solution to the Palestinian issue so very difficult:

- Mahmoud Abbas, their corrupt and ineffective leader, canceling an election and left the Palestinians in the West Bank hopeless of having strong leadership.
- The non-functioning government of Israel, which has been in nearly suspended animation after 4 elections in 2 years, allowing, amongst other things the excesses of a police force to go unchecked.
- A Prime Minister who has been charged with corruption being so desperate to stay in power that he will allow the most extreme nationalists in Israel to be part of his coalition: the same group which decided that the time was right to evict 4 families in East Jerusalem
- Israeli Arabs, who have not received the goods and services of the government that they deserved, feeling like second-class citizens in Israel for far too long.
- An Israeli population who has become far too complacent with a devolving situation in the west Bank, without seeking

out ways to do more to relieve the suffering and the humiliation before a solution could be found.

- Gaza being fully under the control of Hamas, openly calling for the destruction of Israel; digging tunnels and storing thousands of rockets provided by Iran.
- A world that seems to be willing to make demands only of Israel and not of the Palestinians.

Despite it all, there was a moment of hope in Israel with the Abrahamic Accords. The dynamics of the region were clearly changing, opening the door to new approaches to the Palestinian question. Then, just a few weeks ago, it appeared that a new coalition with an Arab party was about to take control of the government. Both represented real breakthroughs.

It was then that Hamas chose to strike and fire more than 3,000 rockets into Israel. Despite those who argued that Hamas was protecting Jerusalem, Ishmael Haniyah, the leader of Hamas, put that lie to rest. Amidst the devastation that they provoked in Gaza, which Hamas labeled a victory rally the day after the ceasefire went into effect, Haniyah began his speech by thanking Iran for their support and help and then saying, *This battle has destroyed the project of coexistence with the Israeli occupation, of the project, normalization with Israel.* The goal of the release of more than 3,000 rockets over Israel was not to protest what was happening in Jerusalem, but to scuttle any effort at reconciliation.

Now I ask you: has anyone in the media noted this, criticized this, or held Hamas responsible for the devastation that they have knowingly brought down on its own people by embedding their military equipment in heavily populated areas; by placing its tunnels under apartment buildings; by using its own children as human shields? **No, Israel is the only aggressor, the villain, in this modern morality tale.**

Haniyah and his lot are more interested in ensuring that pictures of devastation, death, and destruction will be part of every news broadcast around the world than the safety and welfare of their own people. And the world media plays right along.

This is not to say that ceasefire was not welcome. It is good to know that Israelis will be sleeping in their beds and not in bomb shelters and that those in Gaza do not need to fear the skies. We can all be thankful for the wizardry of the Iron Dome which destroyed more than 90% of Hamas' rockets. The ceasefire may stop the rockets for a period of time, but the war against Israel in the media, in governmental bodies, in classrooms, and in the streets of Europe and America is just beginning. We are looking at one of the most challenging periods that Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora have faced since its creation.

You see, the world is once again redefining Israel and those who hold it dear. Israelis are:

- “Baby killers” as Israel attempts to respond to the more than 3,000 rockets launched.
- “Military bullies” who use disproportionate force against a weaker enemy.
- “Masters of an apartheid state”, which equates Israel to South Africa, an illegitimate state.
- “Citizens of a colonial power”, which by definition is the embodiment of moral evil.
- “A rogue state”, even worse than Syria, North Korea, or China's genocide of the uighurs

This is the messaging on social media, that has spilled over from the members of the United States Congress to talk show hosts.

The effectiveness of the messaging can be measured by the spike in anti-Semitic activity in Europe and in America. Israelis and any Jews who openly support Israel are faceless aggressors who need to be attacked or ostracized. If you need to see just how bad things are, ask any Jewish teenager what they are seeing online. It is a relentless, well-funded campaign that openly compresses the plight of all oppressed people without any thought of nuance or difference. The powerful are evil, the powerless are virtuous. In the intersectionality of the moment, every Palestinian is the equivalent of George Floyd and every Israeli soldier an aggressor. As one young adult told his mother recently, *I had only heard about anti-Semitism but now I am seeing it.*

I shudder to think of what will be waiting for Jewish students on college campuses in the fall.

We are at an inflection point in Israel. Israelis are going to need to use of all their ingenuity to raise up the face of those living in Israel proper and the West Bank and move the needle while guarding their own security. They are in a race, with Hamas and their overlords and those who seek the destruction of Israel, for their hearts and minds. For the first time in the history of modern Zionism, Israelis are losing the battle for the right of self-definition.

We are at an inflection point in America as well.

The choice that is increasingly offered to the Jewish community is that you are welcome as long as you leave your Zionism at the door. For many in the Jewish community, to be a lover of Zion will come at a cost. It may mean losing friends or even no longer being accepted in organizations or social circles. For a growing number of Jews, the price is too high and the images on social media and television are too compelling.

If we are expecting Jews in America to pick up their heads and define themselves as Jews and Zionists, or advocates for Israel, then we are going to have to renew our efforts at education on all levels. An education of Israel that includes the Palestinians, an education that is nuanced and thoughtful. One that sugar coats nothing but creates a strong synergy between the Jews of America and those of Israel as one family that feels each other's pain. If we are expecting American Jews to take part in this effort, then Israel will also need to better appreciate how their words and actions play across the world. **In other words, if Israel expects us to stand with them, then they must stand with us.**

It is time for a renewed effort at talking about Zionism and Jewish peoplehood by giving our people the tools that they need to enter into hard conversations with those with whom we can speak. Teaching people to speak with three voices, as Yossi Klein Halevi teaches. With a:

- Moral voice: Unafraid to speak about what Israel is doing right and the moral choices that Israel has made even in war.
- Contrite voice: A willingness to acknowledge when we are wrong.
- Confident voice: The courage to stand up and call a lie a lie, or to call anti-Semitism by its name: whether it is a meme, a teacher standing before a classroom, a classmate, a public official or even a popular talk show host.

Make no mistake: Congregations are on the front lines of this effort.

To that end, Anshe Emet has scheduled a series of talks for our youth, their parents, and the entire congregation in the coming weeks. Serious conversations, thoughtful conversations, and hard conversations. I hope that you will take part. We are looking at a challenging future and we will only succeed if we stand together.

A few thousand years ago, a slave people, whose identity had been defined by Egyptians for hundreds of years, were asked to raise their heads, walk tall, and be counted in the destiny of the land of Israel. That same choice is offered to us and our children. The battle for Israel is far from over but the question of Moses' time remains: How will you count yourself as a member of the Jewish people? Will we define ourselves or will we let the world do it for us?

May we have the faith, wisdom, and courage to do so: to define ourselves anew as we march forth into a new and ever-challenging future.

May we respond as the Israelites once did to the words *Nasu et Rosh*: Raise up your heads and stand tall.