

In the Blink of an Eye

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B'herif Ayin is an ancient phrase that goes all the way back to time of the Bible. It means in the blink of an eye. The Rabbis use it to describe how quickly things can change. In an instant everything is different...in the blink of an eye.

While many of us did not know the Hebrew term *b'herif ayin* when you came in this morning, after this past week, all of us have a deeper appreciation for just how quickly the world can change...in the blink of an eye.

When I woke up last Shabbat morning the biggest problems on my mind were how late services would get out after Yizkor and how the synagogue would handle Simchat Torah during the Chicago Marathon. But then the news came of what was happening in Israel. Thousands of rockets were being fired: Ashkelon, Jerusalem, and even Tel Aviv were under attack by Hamas.

Then we began to hear of the inhuman terrorist attacks, the stories being reported of Kibbutzim under siege, of people hiding in their saferooms as the terrorists searched for them. Searing images of death, destruction, unthinkable acts of brutality and elderly being taken hostage. In addition, there were reports of remarkable acts of bravery in attempts to save friends and family. In the end, 1300 Israelis were murdered, more than 150 were taken hostage and thousands were injured. On this, the following Shabbat, the IDF is poised to invade Gaza as it fights to destroy Hamas. In what feels like the blink of an eye, *b'herif ayin*, the world has changed.

Amidst the horror of the pogrom that was visited upon the people of Israel , amidst the shock of just how unprepared Israel was, amidst the sense of unreality of the present moment, countries around the world have responded. One of the most stirring images for me was a picture of the Brandenburg Gate lit up in blue and white with the flag of Israel shining on it as a statement of solidarity with Israel. The Brandenburg Gate has a long history in Berlin and served as the backdrop of some of the huge rallies for Hitler and the 3rd Reich. So, to see this place transformed as a place to stand with Israel brought a tear to my eye.

And then there were the words of President Biden who made the most pro-Zionist speech by any President ever.

*This attack has brought to the surface painful memories and the scars left by a millennia of antisemitism and genocide of the Jewish people. *

So, in this moment, we must be crystal clear: We stand with Israel. We stand with Israel. And we will make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens, defend itself, and respond to this attack. There is no justification for terrorism. There is no excuse.

Hamas does not stand for the Palestinian people's right to dignity and self-determination. Its stated purpose is the annihilation of the State of Israel and the murder of Jewish people.

We had thousands of people here and online on Thursday night as we gathered to pray, sing and stand in solidarity with Israel.

Yet, *B'herif Ayin*, in the blink of an eye, another story was being told. While the blood was fresh in the houses of those massacred, even before the bodies were buried in Israel, there were marches held by the thousands in London, in Paris, in Sydney, Australia against Israel and in support of Palestinians. They portray Israel as an evil, apartheid, rogue State. Rallies that can only be interpreted as standing in solidarity with Hamas, whose very purpose is to destroy Israel and kill Jews. In Sydney, a thousand people stood outside the Opera House and chanted "Gas the Jews."

We saw the Chief Rabbi of England, Sir Ephraim Mirvis, demand that BBC reporters use the word "terrorist" in terms of Hamas. "I noticed that the BBC has a reluctance to use the term 'terrorist,'" he said during an interview with the network. "If one doesn't use the term 'terrorist,' it is as if one is providing a window of opportunity for justification, and nothing can justify this."

And college campuses have erupted. Jewish students on campuses around the country who support Israel, are castigated, harassed and threatened. At Stanford, a professor teaching a class on colonialism used Israel as the example. He asked the students how many Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. When a student replied 6 million, the professor then said more people have been killed by colonizers and said, "Israel is a colonizer." The instructor then illustrated his point by asking some students to physically go to the back of class. "That's what Israel does to Palestinians," the teacher said. The professor has been suspended.

And closer to home, a resolution in support of Israel, put forth by Debra Silverstein, our only Jewish Alderman, was passed in our City Council yesterday. It ends with these words: *BE IT RESOLVED, that we, the Members of the City Council of the City of Chicago, assembled this eleventh day of October 2023, condemn this heinous terrorist attack by Hamas, stand in support of Israel's right to defend itself, express our deepest sorrow for the innocent Israelis murdered, and pray for the safe release of all the hostages taken into Gaza.*

The people who gathered to protest this resolution wrapped in Palestinian flags were so raucous, their shouts so inflammatory against even condemning a terror attack against Israelis, that the Mayor had to stop the session and have them escorted out of the chamber.

What is the source of this animus, this abject hatred? What we are seeing erupting here in Chicago and around the world did not come about *b'herif ayin* and it has a much longer history.

This morning we began reading the book of Genesis which opens with the creation. Traditionally, Jews study the Torah with the aid of commentaries to help explain the challenges inherent in the text. The most beloved and popular is Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhaki, who lived in France in the 11th century. He opens his commentary in a very Jewish way, with a question. Why should the Torah begin with the creation if it is a book of law. Should it not start with the first laws promulgated in the Book of Exodus? Why do we need to know about the creation at all? Now listen to Rashi's answer. "For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, 'You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan,' Israel may reply to them, 'All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed it He gave it to them, and when He willed it He took it from them and gave it to us.'"

Rashi's answer is stunning. The reason that the Torah begins with the creation was to legitimize the right of the Jewish people to live in the land of Israel, because there will come a day when people come forward and claim that we, the Jewish people, stole that land. That we are robbers.

In Rashi's day, the Church was getting ready for the First Crusade, and they were whipping the people into a frenzy to inspire them to march against the Muslims in Jerusalem. In the churches, Priests were preaching a message that holy land was the heritage of the Church.

The Jewish right to the land was being denied. We were being erased from history. In his commentary Rashi offered the Jewish people of his day a powerful response. This is our land, let no one tell you otherwise. It was given to us by the Creator of all.

800 hundred years later, the story of Rashi repeated itself. In 1937 when Ben Gurion, who would become the 1st Prime Minister of Israel, was summoned to give testimony to the Peel Commission, whose task it was to decide what to do about the conflict between Jews and Arabs at the time. Here, too, the question was about the legitimate right of Jews to live on that land.

At one point, Lord Peel asked Ben Gurion where he was born. He replied in Plonsk, Poland. A large period of silence came after the reply. Finally, Lord Peel said in the barest whisper, “Very strange indeed. All of the Arab leaders who have appeared before me were born in Palestine. Most of the Jewish leaders who have appeared before me were born in Eastern Europe.”

Lord Peel then spoke up, saying “Mr. Ben Gurion, the Arab people have a Kushan entitling them to this land. A Kushan was an Ottoman land deed. Do you have a document saying that Palestine belongs to you?”

At that point, Ben Gurion became aware of the Tanach (Hebrew Bible) in his hand that he swore upon whilst taking the oath to be witness to the commission, and he held it up triumphantly exclaiming, “Here is your Kushan, here is your document. It is the world’s most highly respected book, and I believe that you British regard it with much respect, too. We must have this land.”

Nearly 90 years later, after a pogrom which took more Jewish lives in any day since the Holocaust, protest groups are questioning our people’s right to live on that land! I ask you: what other country has to be given permission to defend its own citizens? Did anyone question the right of the United States to respond against after 9/11? What country on earth after 75 years needs to be legitimized? There are too many in this world who believe Israel is a Colonial power, a rogue state, an apartheid state that must be destroyed.

It may feel like things have changed *b’herif ayin*, in the blink of an eye, but the challenge that we face today has a much longer history. Rashi’s words have a resonance today in a way that I wish they did not.

Today we stand in the place of Ben Gurion. We stand in solidarity with Israel. We need to be willing to do what Rashi and later Ben Gurion said: This is our Kurshan, this is our deed.

We have an ancient history on that land, and the artifacts to prove it. There has never been a time when Jews were not living in Israel. There was never a time when Jews were not praying to come home. Our right to live on the land promised to Abraham and Sarah is beyond question.

Moreover, the world body voted in 1947 to recognize Israel as a sovereign nation. The land that Hamas attacked was not on disputed territory. It lies in the original borders of Israel for the past 75 years. Hamas made it clear to the Jewish people in its very covenant: you don't belong here. And there are too many around the world that agree.

To stand with Israel today, is to attest to the right of the Jewish people to live on the land promised to Abraham's descendants, conquered by Joshua and David. The land on which our people built a remarkable civilization. The land that we never stopped dreaming of. The land that we returned to in the modern age and built a country that is the envy of many around the world. It is our right to live on that land. It is our responsibility to do everything we can to live with other people on that land in peace and security, as well. Despite what you hear from Hamas, from its supporters around the world, the connection of the Jewish people to the land is as old as the Bible and the legitimacy of Medinat Yisrael is beyond question,

May those who perpetrated these crimes be brought to justice. May there be peace on the land for all its inhabitants. If not *b'herif ayin*, then soon. Amen.

Am Yisrael Chai!