

## Letter Nr. 30

The month of February ended with Purim and with the outbreak of a new war with Iran (formerly, Persia.) During the first few weeks of the war—fought by the US and Israel—a New York Times opinion piece was titled, “This is all happening way too fast.”

If we go back to a few days before the war, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to Israel for an official visit and addressed the Knesset. The Speaker of the Knesset did not invite Justice Yitzhak Amit, head of Israel’s Supreme Court, to this event. This is because he is at loggerheads with Amit over judicial reform and other issues. Because of that insult, the entire opposition boycotted the event. A hall half- empty would have been embarrassing, so the coalition filled the seats with former members of the Knesset, some of whom hadn’t been there for years. The titular head of the opposition, Yair Lapid, spoke briefly and explained that the boycott had nothing to do with Modi himself.

Saturday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, US and Israeli aircraft attacked Iran, and “The Lion’s Roar” –or, as it is called by the US, “Epic Fury,” –began. The attack was deemed to be a pre-emptive strike. Israelis began to spend more and more time in their shelters, private or public. It was noted that approximately one-third of Israeli residents, including most of the Israeli Palestinians and foreign workers , but also including Israeli Jews, both in the periphery and in the two or three largest cities, do not have access to proper shelters. It became apparent that the many recent visits and conversations between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu must have been focused on plans for this attack.

The resourcefulness and resilience of many Israelis were evidenced by the make-shift Purim celebrations in shelters. But because school was canceled, the children couldn’t really display their costumes to their friends, and teenagers and young adults were deprived of their parties, as well. As time went on, schools began to revert to Zoom for lessons, but these have not proven to be very effective. For the last six years, since COVID, school children have not had the opportunity for continuous, uninterrupted school terms. All of this pales, of course, in comparison with the human costs.

The first casualty in Israel of the present war was a Filipina caregiver. Only 32 years old herself, she was caring for an elderly person, making sure the woman received shelter, but she herself came too late and was killed by a missile. It took many days before her remains could be transported to the Philippines because air space was closed.

In another tragedy, nine people were killed in Bet Shemesh, with dozens more wounded. In the ensuing weeks, communities were targeted throughout Israel. There were casualties in Dimona and Arad, the latter being defined as a “mass casualty incident.” At the same time, Israeli and American bombers attacked Tehran and Isfahan, inflicting much damage on the Iranian military infrastructure. They also killed many of Iran’s political/religious/military leadership.

The war is quite unpopular in the US, especially among those who in general do not support President Trump. The international left is particularly against the war, even among those who admit their dislike of the Iranian regime of the Ayatollahs. For Israelis, this lack of support has served to deepen our sense of isolation from much of the world.

But, in early March, the Israel Defense Forces announced to people living in south Lebanon that they should evacuate their homes. The fighting now includes the northern front in Israel, in a war against Hizballah, one of the “proxies” of Iran.

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, two IDF soldiers fell in an incident with Hizballah in southern Lebanon. One of them was the first Golan Druze to fall in battle for Israel. Two days later, President *Trump declared that US participation in that war had ended or, at least, was complete. But the military operation did not end. The end is not in sight.*

Israelis are living in what has been called “routine emergency.” Many families throughout the country have been awakened multiple times during the night by alerts of missiles coming in, either from Iran or from Lebanon. Even the Jerusalem area has been affected. People go to their shelters not only to escape the actual bombs and missiles, but also the debris of intercepted missiles, which can be dangerous.

All of this is going on while Jews, Christians and Muslims, and many Iranians, are all involved with their own calendars, celebrations, and holy ceremonies. Jews are a little more than a week away from Pesach (Passover), one of the most important festivals of the Jewish year. Christians are in Lent, leading up to Holy Week and Easter. Muslims have just finished the holy month of Ramadan and the festival which concludes it, Eid El-Fitr. Many Iranians and others are celebrating Nowruz, the ancient lunar New Year. Rather than a sense of renewal and sanctity, people are experiencing depression and fear, throughout the region.

Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman and his friend and partner writer-journalist Yossi Klein Halevi have continued their helpful podcast, “For Heaven’s Sake,” coming out of the Shalom Hartman Institute. Recently, they made the point that Iran and Iraq have hated Israel for many years, though we do not share a common border. Can history going back 2,500 years account for this hatred? From the Israeli perspective, it seems to be less hatred and more apathy.

There are some Israeli Jews on the far left, as well as most Israeli Arabs, who oppose the fighting, in Iran and Lebanon.

But there have not been massive demonstrations against the war, which has been perceived by most Israelis as a necessary response in self-defense. I have already noted in this series over the past almost two and a half years, that our moral response to the suffering of children and other innocents “on the other side” has become dulled.

I will conclude with something I heard many years ago, as a reaction to the statement, “My country, right or wrong:” When right, to be kept right. When wrong, to be put right. But it’s my country, right or wrong.”

We must all try our best to put and keep our countries in the right.