

Israel's Survival

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

These are worrying times for Israel. When wasn't? The peace treaties were never popular in the Arab world. There was always rabid anti-Semitism throughout the Middle Eastern media. Alliances in the Middle East are unraveling.

When Turkey was a secular state, it established close military and economic ties, but then Erdogan decided that if Europe wasn't going to welcome Turkey, his future lay with Muslim autocracies where there is a long tradition of having Israel as a convenient scapegoat. The vituperation against Israel did not begin with the flotilla. It erupted when Erdogan abused Peres in Davos in 2009. His whole approach has been consistent with his new more Islam-centered Turkey.

The Muslim Brotherhood, now in the ascendency, in all the Sunni states, has been pro-Nazi and virulently anti-Semitic from its inception, nothing to do with Israel (just read the texts of its founder Hassan al-Banna or Sayyid Qutb). It has instigated massacres against Jewish communities across North Africa, notably Tunisia and Libya, throughout its existence.

Israel's allies have always been fickle. John Foster Dulles was no friend. France in the 60s was an ally, then an enemy. Britain has always sat on the fence and spoken with forked tongue, to mix my metaphors. The Soviet Union was once an implacable enemy and now goes wherever Putin sees his interests. Greece was once antagonistic. Now it is supportive. Armenia, Romania, and Bulgaria, with their experience of Ottoman cruelty, will go some way towards redressing the balance. Things have always been in a state of flux and Israel has had to look for alliances wherever it could find them—not always very savory, I regret, but survival often trumps niceties. Despite America's other alliances and interests, its special relationship with Israel has in recent years been its greatest support. Indeed, only American help extracted Israeli personnel from the besieged embassy in Cairo.

Regardless of Israeli mistakes (and Lord knows here have been plenty) it has always fallen foul of the majority of people on this earth. But now, at this time of the year there is a mood, darker than before, full of anxiety. Is it the introspection that is in air before Rosh Hashanah? If only! Is it the annual hate fest that is the United Nations General Assembly each September? Could be. I do not believe that a UN recognized Palestinian state would be the disaster it appears. On the contrary, I actually welcome it both morally and politically. Statehood works both ways. It imposes obligations as well as benefits. Two can play the same games. But neither do I believe that solving the Palestinian issue will solve Israel's.

There are those who believe Israel is still around because the Almighty has kept a protective eye on its affairs. To believe that, you'd have to believe one of two things: either Israel as a state is so moral and spiritual that it

deserves Divine protection, or that a minority of its religious followers merit sufficient regard that they, like the old Talmudic concept of the 36 saints in every generation, are responsible for Jewish survival. You might argue it's the Almighty's love for "His people". But that hasn't stopped disasters in the past. The Almighty did not intervene while the Jewish settlers of Gaza were evacuated. As the Talmud says, "We do not rely on miracles." Anyway, there is pocket of renegade Chasidim who believe Israel as a Jewish state ought to perish for preempting the Messiah.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, we are bound to ask ourselves where we stand, what we hope for, and what we can do for the best. Particularly since as individuals we feel so helpless, regardless of which side of the political or religious debate we are on. Physical survival requires mental and physical preparation, good allies, and wise policies. But survival by itself, in my opinion, is not enough. Moral survival requires moral rectitude and that can only be tackled on a personal level.

Ecclesiastes/Kohelet 4:12 says, "If one is attacked, two will come to his defense and a rope of three strands cannot easily be broken." This has always been used as a metaphor for the Jewish people, linked to its land and its constitution and its God. If one extends the metaphor, I suggest it can imply that each strand contributes to the strength of the rope even if each one remains distinct. Some people support the Jewish people for religious reasons, national reasons, or simply civil ones. They will disagree on so many issues. But so long as there is a unifying feature of wanting that rope to hold, to survive, then it matters less whether they can agree on everything or not. In the same way that religiously, the denominational divisions between us are wide, divisive and often bitter, if there is a shared agenda of survival then isolation can be ameliorated. To take another line from Kohelet, "two people can keep each other warm."

The purpose of Rosh Hashanah is not to get us to agree or be the same. But rather for each of us to ask ourselves what we are doing, in our own specific ways, to ensure that we survive.