Seven lessons about the Jewish people

I’ve learned since my Bar Mitzvah

By HERZL MELMED

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I n 1943, when I was six years old in South Africa, the Jews of Pon- teval, Lithuania, were murdered in just three days. I and my family were among the many escaping Lithuania about 40 years ear- lier. The significance of this tragedy became evident at a later age and profoundly affected me and my awareness of the vulnerability of the Jewish people. With Jewish vulnerability as my focus, allow me to share seven lessons I have learned from the time of my first Bar Mitzvah 70 years ago — 70 years passionately focused on Israel’s struggles and my awareness of a world often dangerous for Jews.

1. Beware of projecting our humanity, kindness and generosity onto our enemies.

I believe them when they threaten- us to kill us. Do not be fooled by their denials of love of their children and families. Maybe even their love of music and culture as we saw among many Nazis who com- mitted the most heinous acts.

It is hard to hold two conflicting thoughts in our minds, that those who seem to be as human as we are, are in fact capable of inhuman acts. This truth would be indelibly imprinted in Jewish psychology.

2. Our political attitudes and beliefs say more about us than the actual issues themselves.

That is why those at both ends of the political spectrum can have the same utterances. They could be in forceful favor of birth control or they could be against it. They could be in favor of the Palestinian Arab rights, look to destroy our nation or treat them as equals.

I challenge myself to acknowledge that those I disagree with on most issues may be as passionate about their support for Israel and the US as I am.

3. Countries do not have friend- ships. They have common inter- ests.

Luckily for us living in America, the interests of our country and Israel are essentially aligned. How- ever it was not until after the Six Day War in 1967 that the US became a strong supporter of Israel. Before that it was the French on whom we relied. Israel’s Mirage jet fighters sold Israel the technology to make a prototype of a plane. Peace in Dimona? Where is France now?

In 1947, the British were our ene- mies, today strong friends.

It is a mistake to compare our norm- al concept of friendship in our dai- ly lives with that of friendship between countries. The expression of these two types of friendship are very different. One can share “interests,” then the actions of coun- tries to pursue these interests are predictable and under- standable.

4. Do not expect the non-Jew- ish world to love the Jewish people.

It doesn’t matter how many Nobel prize winners are Jewish, or the fact that the USA is our closest ally. We cannot assume that non-Jews will run on Israeli technology or that the news contributes so much to mak- ing every society they live in better or that the essential morality of Jewish people in the Spanish Inquisition, for thousands of years is based on the teachings from the Hebrew Bible.

We say it every time we pray, “Hashem ve’am be-shalom, G-d will give his people strength. He will bless them with peace.” First sprin- kles it on our scrolls to purify them. Peace.

There is nothing Israel can offer the Palestinian Arabs that will induce them to recognize our pas- sionate connection to our Holy Land for thousands of years or will stop their attempts to disencumber us. Only Israel’s strength will bring peace, as her enemies realize they can’t destroy her.

Islam takes account of this situa- tion teaching: “Make peace with a stronger enemy you can’t defeat now. When strong enough at a later time, destroy them.”

Therefore Israel will always have to stay strong in a Middle East that devours the weak and defense- less. Treaties that could be abrogated are not enough.

There can be no compromise or hand- mark if Israel is at all strong.

That is why I believe the Golan Heights and the Jordan River valley will have to remain under Israeli control. I am grateful to the present US administration for recognizing these facts for the realists.

There is no guarantee that future American administrations will be as understanding of Israel’s existen- tial threats. With the younger vot- ers coming off many anti-Israel college campuses, the anti-Israel drumbeat has yet to fully play out as these students become our lead- ers. The challenge for Americans, who reject the style of our President and also possibly his leadership, is to be able to hold these two con- flicting views simultaneously.

6. No matter how much we may des- ired peace the realization of peace depends on our enemies.

They have said for ending hos- tilities is not the length of the bow of the ship, but the length of the string. Now they abandoned their intent to destroy us and our way of life. Freedom will now have to be defended in every generation and there can be no time limit on our resolve.

7. Israel’s international stand- ing and support flows from her military and economic strength, brilliance, no other country.

Support for Israel will not come from altruism on the part of oth- ers, no matter how morally correct it is. Nor will it come from the US, the most powerful country in the world.

Israel’s unique relationship with the US also draws international respect. So long as US support is unwavering, Israel’s enemies see a strong country and therefore the possibility of peace increases.

The support of the US is also enhanced by what the US gets in return for her support: leadership in the United Nations, advanced field-tested weapons, intel- ligence, cooperative medical research,

I have witnessed the rise of the Jewish people from the newly dis- patched 2,000 years, from the ashes of the Holo- caust, an event that wiped out so many very recently’ natural resources, sur- rounded by ruthless Israel, and the ability to rise from a failedUDENT side, to fulfill that ancient call to “fulfill my destiny.”

We have seen a rising tide that makes us more aware of the vulnerabil- ity of the Jewish people.

I am immensely proud and grate- ful to live in what is a Golden Age for the Jewish people.

Dr. Herzl Melmed is chairman of ActionIsrael.

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