

Hurtling Toward the Abyss

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

This will be the most painful sermon of my career.

I have tried to avoid this moment, hoping that what the Israeli president described as an unfolding “disaster and nightmare” would have ended by now. I would have wanted to reassure you that, in retrospect, the common sense and sensibilities of Israel’s leaders took over in time to avoid cascading calamities. After all, this is the country whose governments — liberal and conservative, left and right — did amazing things, successfully navigating the birth, defense and development of a tiny, impoverished country surrounded by cutthroat enemies, into an economic, cultural, scientific and military powerhouse within a historical blink of an eye. Israel’s GDP is now higher than the European Union’s. Zionism, a marginal political movement at the close of the 19th century, became the world’s most successful liberation movement of the 20th century.

I am still hopeful that the immediate crisis will ease soon: that domestic and international pressure will force the government to slow its legislative blitz, cool passions and ease the national distress. And then, Israelis can get down to the real business of social reform that I hope will transform Israel into a stronger, more cohesive and united society.

Israelis now understand that something fundamental is at stake. It is not only the role of the courts and the proper balance of power between the three branches of government. The current debate has long surpassed this one issue. What this struggle is really about is: what do we mean when we proclaim Israel to be both Jewish and democratic? What do we mean by democracy? What do we mean by Jewish? And how do we resolve the friction between the two?

For understandable reasons, Israel never fully resolved its founding tensions. She was born three years after the Holocaust. It was a difficult and dangerous birth. Her neighbors were determined to strangle the baby in its crib. Those were desperate times when the future of the remnants of our people was weighed in the balance. In the years after barely winning independence, Israel brought in millions of persecuted Jews from every corner of the world (most from non-democratic countries), absorbed them with difficulty and unevenly, and developed the state piecemeal — as best it could — all the while, successfully defending itself from daily existential threats. There was not enough time to articulate and legislate fundamental constitutional principles that had broad and popular support. The demands of daily survival took precedence.

I hope that the silver lining of this crisis will be the opportunity to finally address the foundational principles of Israeli society. While it is for Israel’s citizens to determine these principles, world Jewry has an important role to play. Jews are bound to each other by the bonds of history and destiny. “*Kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba’zeh*” — “all Jews are responsible one for the other.” We, too, must be active in influencing the character of the Jewish state, mindful that it is Israelis who have the final say. We have been involved in this way since the first hour of Jewish statehood — and even before. What transpires in Israel directly affects the future of the American Jewish community. If there is anyone who thinks that we can go on our merry way, turning our backs on Israel, and living in splendid American isolation, never having to think of all the messiness of Jewish statehood — you are deluded. The nature, character and well-being of Israel will, in large part, determine the future of American Jewry.

The breadth and intensity of the escalating protests encourage and invigorate me. Israeli democracy is alive and kicking. Those marching weekly on the streets are amazing people. They are patriotic and filled with good Jewish and humane values.

It is deeply concerning to me that what requires slow, thoughtful and careful deliberation is being rammed through the legislative process at breakneck speed. Even if you support every measure proposed by the Israeli government — and if you do you are in the minority — still, the daily intensifying damage to Israel should concern you deeply.

The Israeli government is tearing Israeli society apart and bringing world Jewry along for the dangerous ride. Israel's enemies can hardly contain their glee and Zionism's opponents in the West cluck day and night, "See, we told you so." And there should be no confusion: Even if you oppose the rhetoric and methods of the opposition, it is the government's responsibility to calm the waters. The government is empowered. The opposition is responding to the government. Only the government can slow the process. Instead, it took 17 minutes for the government to reject President Herzog's bridging framework. Seventeen minutes! They were preparing their rejection before the president even finished speaking.

It is legitimate, even necessary, to debate the proper balance of power between the unelected judiciary and the elected legislature. Democracies engage this debate every day. Americans, too, have intense disagreements on this precise issue. But are you prepared to put at risk so much of what we have accomplished together in the past 75 years — all of which was achieved under the current judicial system? It is not the idea of judicial reform. It is this legislative package that the majority of Israelis, world Jewry and Western governments oppose. Is it worth the risk of ramming this legislation through, without even a pretense of trying to reach broad consensus?

Is it worth the economic, political, diplomatic, and security harm compounding daily: Is it worth dividing world Jewry, degrading the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship, undermining Israel's reputation and standing in the world, destabilizing Israel's miraculous high-tech industry and modern economy; and depressing the motivation of Israel's military and security personnel to volunteer for military service? They are among the elite of the elite soldiers. Is it worth it? The crew that freed the Entebbe hostages who served under Yoni Netanyahu of blessed memory — the prime minister's brother — protested the legislative blitz this week. Even if you agree with every element of the proposed judicial reform, is it worth it? Is this the way to implement central structural change in a democratic society — especially one as polarized and complicated as Israel?

I am flabbergasted that it has come this far. Every day causes deepening and darkening damage. No matter who speaks out — and irrespective of whatever harm they warn against — the legislative machine marches on. In a sense, this proves the point of those who are so fearful: That in a parliamentary system, especially a young democracy like Israel's that lacks a written constitution and centuries of common law, the government can speed headlong toward the abyss and if determined enough — or unhinged enough — very little can stop it.

Just consider the scope of warnings from patriots and Israel's friends:

Hundreds of thousands of Israelis marching every week in Israeli cities and towns, the proportional equivalent of 12 million Americans; the president of Israel; the vast majority of Israel's economic, business, academic, cultural, science and medical communities; its banking industry, the chairman of the Bank of Israel; its former Attorney General; Israel's main labor union; CEOs and top researchers of Israel's public health system; six Israeli Nobel prize winners; a substantial part of its military, including the current and former heads of the IDF; U.S. Congressional representatives, Democrats and Republicans, Jewish and non-Jewish — longtime friends of Israel; constitutional scholars in the West; the former chair of the Federal Reserve; and practically the entire American Jewish establishment, including

the Federated system and most of the largest donors to Israel for decades — and most American rabbis, including most mainstream Orthodox rabbis. Trust me; I have spoken with many.

Nothing has moved this government off its single-minded focus to pass what they call “judicial reform” — and what the opposition considers judicial castration.

To be clear: This government was lawfully, legitimately and democratically elected. It has a mandate to govern. Still, even democratically elected governments are obligated to uphold democratic principles — not only the will of the majority, but the preservation and protection of minority rights — as determined by adequately empowered and independent courts. Even if you are entirely supportive of the government’s initiatives, can you at least understand the concerns of those who are worried? And do you not have an obligation to take that into account in governing?

And I take this opportunity to state in no uncertain terms: elements of the current Israeli government appall me. I will not sanitize supremacists, extremists, and religious fundamentalists. They distort Judaism and are an embarrassment to the Jewish people.

I don’t even want to repeat what these parties believe and what their spokespeople have said — first, because I don’t have the time, but second, I am embarrassed that Jewish leaders representing the state of Israel can even speak this way, let alone believe these things. Go online yourselves and read to your heart’s distress. These are not our values. Whatever your political inclinations may be — and we have a full spectrum in our congregation and within the American Jewish community, ranging from right to left and everything in between — these are not our values.

Rabbi Stephen Wise was born 149 years ago today. He was the primary spokesperson of American Jews on many issues, especially Zionism. He opposed with every fiber of his prodigious energies, the anti-Zionists in our midst. He was one of the key leaders who helped bring about the birth of the state of Israel.

We have worked hard together to honor and perpetuate that legacy. We will never retreat from our Zionist commitments or our willingness to defend Israel from her many enemies. Our critics have cast doubt recently on the commitment to Israel of Reform synagogues. We, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, are at the center of Diaspora Jewry. We are not Israel’s opponents. We are lovers of Israel. We wish it only strength and success. Every few weeks an Israeli delegation of political leaders, educators, military and security personnel come and visit our congregation to learn about American Jewry. They know they are among family here. They know they will be embraced here. They know that we represent the vast majority of American Jews — including liberal Jews.

And so, in your name and on your behalf, I want to address Prime Minister Netanyahu directly:

Mr. Prime Minister:

Our closest friends in the West cannot believe the huge damage we are inflicting on ourselves. Many of them think we have lost our minds. Stop this runaway out-of-control car before it hurtles off the abyss. It is your responsibility.

You are causing severe damage to the relationship between Israel and world Jewry. As if we didn’t have enough challenges here, you are imposing on us severe obstacles in keeping keep our younger Jews connected to the Jewish state.

It is Israel’s self-proclaimed role to protect the Jews of the world. You voice that principle on every visit here, but you are contributing to the distressing increase of anti-Zionism in America. You are losing the

American Jewish community. And once you have lost them it will be exceedingly difficult to get them back. And if you believe that you can replace American Jews with evangelical Christians, you are wrong — wrong on Jewish values and, with all due respect to your greater political experience and skills (which I readily concede), you are wrong on the politics.

You were elected fair and square, but how can you ignore the massive waves of protest in Israel and throughout the world, expressing the pain and worry of millions of our people? Social cohesion and Jewish unity are among your highest obligations. You have a moral and political responsibility to reduce tension and increase dialogue. Your government has caused devastating ruptures in almost every sphere of Jewish communal life, in Israel and the Diaspora.

Are you sure that both your hands are firmly on the steering wheel, as you so confidently assured us? Or are you being driven off the cliff? Stop the runaway, out-of-control car before you drive it over the precipice. Take the off-ramp that the president has offered and the majority of people want. Start negotiating on the basis of the president's framework. Take back those seventeen minutes. Stand up to the back-seat drivers in your car who have tied you down, grab back the steering wheel, and put your two hands firmly upon it. It is your responsibility.

A final word to American Jews:

Israel is the Jewish people's supreme creation in our age. What we have learned in the past 75 years, is that it is hard to build and sustain a state. It is hard to reconcile the morality of powerlessness, developed by rabbinic Judaism in the diaspora, with the moral exercise of collective power. It is hard to transition from a perpetually oppressed minority into a just and democratic majority. But we have also learned that the complexities of self-governance and the moral challenges of exercising power are by far preferable for our people than to be powerless and at the mercy of the dark lords.

As long as I am here, this synagogue will not abandon Israel, especially in its hours of greatest need. We will double-down. Our Amplify Israel program is more important than ever. Give us your time. Give us your energy. Give us your financial resources. We will do everything we can think of to steer the American Jewish community through these stormy waters. We will organize more missions to Israel — come with us on our March 2024 mission. We will intensify Israel education in youngsters, young adults and older members. We will continue to remind our movement that there can be no contemporary Jewish life absent an unbreakable bond with the Jewish people and the Jewish state. We will support in every way possible those in Israel who are working for a more tolerant, more peaceful and more unified society.

We are blessed to live in times of Jewish self-determination. It took us 2,000 years to get back.

We do not intend to forfeit the legacy of ages past:

To be a free people, in our own land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.