

Maasei 5775: Brit Ye'ud and Fighting the Idolatry of Hamas

Golda Meir famously said the following to the National Press Club in Washington in 1957: "Peace will come when the Arabs will love their children more than they hate us."

Consumption by hate and rage, to the detriment of one's children, is a form of idolatry -- and a body blow to religious values of any credibility. Make no mistake, Israelis today are fighting for their lives, and also for their values.

In his book, From Defender to Critic, Rabbi David Hartman invokes Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik and his argument that there are two covenantal goals enveloping the Jewish people in the State of Israel. One is *Berit Goral*, the covenant of shared history and of political sovereignty -- in short, Jewish life. The other is *Berit Ye'ud*, literally "the covenant of witness" -- the aspiration to shared spiritual goals, normative Jewish values and covenantal purpose as one people in a Jewish State. In short, Jewish values.

According to Hartman, the 2nd covenant is elusive, because there is little consensus in Israel concerning what Judaism stands for and what it requires of Jewish Israelis. He writes, "There is no consensus on how the Jewish people should give expression to berit ye'ud.... We may understandably question how any community of meaning is possible between Jews who subscribe to the normative structure of halakha, however understood, and those who do not feel bound to organize their pattern of living by those norms." So rife with their own divisions, religious Israelis, Hartman argues, have yet to establish a community of meaning even amongst themselves.

Constant war and crisis certainly also stands in the way, and has since the beginning of the State, of doing the hard work of concretizing a brit ye'ud, this shared set of Jewish aspirations for the diverse Jewish communities of Israel. Creating this brit is urgent. The more Israel proceeds forward without a shared spiritual mission amongst its people, the weaker it becomes as it faces its enemies. Israel is not like France. Israelis, and the Jewish people as a whole, need a sense of shared mission for Israeli society beyond mere physical survival to maintain the energy and resolve to live in a region of enemies. That being said, establishing a berit ye'ud is not quite as urgent as the terms of berit goral, which include ensuring physical safety and survival.

Fortuitously, this parasha, Masei, brings these two covenants together, and helps illustrate for Israel its berit ye'ud in the midst of defending its berit goral. The covenant of history, conquest, settlement, exile and return, together with the covenant of aspirations.

Part of becoming a people, with a shared history, together in one land, means driving out the forces which are inimical to our value aspirations.

Let's now look at a section from the parashah.

דברים לג: נ-נה, D'varim 33:50-55

נ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב עַל-יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ לֵאמֹר: נא דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי אַתֶּם עֲבָרִים אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: נב וְהוֹרֵשְׁתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְאַבְדַתֶּם אֶת כָּל-מִשְׁכֵּיתֶם וְאֵת כָּל-צִלְמֵי מִסְכַּתֶּם תֵּאַבְדוּ וְאֵת כָּל-בְּמוֹתֶם תִּשְׁמִידוּ: נג וְהוֹרֵשְׁתֶּם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּיְשַׁבְתֶּם-בָּהּ כִּי לָכֶם נָתַתִּי אֶת-הָאָרֶץ לְרֵשֶׁת אֹתָהּ: נד וְהִתְנַחֲלֶתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ בְּגוֹרָל לְמִשְׁפַּחְתֵיכֶם לְרַב תְּרַבּוּ אֶת-נַחֲלָתוֹ וְלִמְעַט תִּמְעֵיט אֶת-נַחֲלָתוֹ אֶל אֲשֶׁר-יֵצֵא לוֹ שָׁמָּה הַגּוֹרָל לוֹ יִהְיֶה לְמִטּוֹת אֲבֹתֵיכֶם תִּתְנַחֲלוּ: נה וְאִם-לֹא תוֹרִישׁוּ אֶת-יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְהָיָה אֲשֶׁר תּוֹתִירוּ מֵהֶם לְשָׁכִים בְּעֵינֵיכֶם וּלְצַנִּינִם

בְּצַדִּיכֶם וְצָרְרוּ אֶתְכֶם עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ: נֹו וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דָּמִיתִי
לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם אֲעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם:

50. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan near Jericho, saying,

51. Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When you have passed over the Jordan into the land of Canaan;

52. Then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured pavements, and destroy all their molten images, and devastate all their high places;

53. And you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land, and live in it; for I have given you the land to possess it.

54. And you shall divide the land by lot for an inheritance among your families; and to the more you shall give more inheritance, and to the fewer you shall give less inheritance; every mans inheritance shall be in the place where his lot falls; according to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit.

55. But if you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those whom you allow to remain of

them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall harass you in the land where you live.

56. Moreover it shall come to pass, that I shall do to you, as I thought to do to them.

Why are we commanded in the Bible to drive out, וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם, the other nations of the land? Because their values are inimical to the development of our value system, to our ability to וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּתְּכֶם-בָּהָאָרֶץ, to live in the land. Their "figured pavements, molten images, and high places," represent the lure of idolatry, which Hartman calls "the fundamental enemy of Jewish history."

Hartman goes on to describe contemporary examples of idolatry: "total and uncritical allegiance to a political state" and its ideology, "ugliness of character" where rage blazes without self-control, and "saving the Torah" for a few of the "faithful" at the expense of the rest of the Jewish community.

Warring with Hamas, friends, is not just a battle for physical survival. It is quite clear, now more than ever, that Israel's battles with Hamas in the South, Hezbollah in the north, and other threats from the East are also battles of values. Israel needs to destroy the tunnels because they repre-

sent a lethal threat to Israeli civilians. But they also represent people whose values are abhorrent to Jewish life. Diverting resources needed to improve the lives of civilians -- in ugly, mindless rage -- for the purposes of terrorizing other civilians. Diminishing human life so gallingly that they purposely put civilians in harm's way in countless ways -- storing rocket launchers in civilian installations, encouraging civilians to ignore warning of bombings, etc. Grotesquely pledging allegiance to the idol of "martyrdom" and the "promises" of heaven. Radicalizing their religion's messages for themselves and those over whom they rule, for the purposes of violent extremism.

Tragically and ironically, Hamas' war against Israelis and Jews reminds us of what exactly we are in the Israel endeavor for -- not just mere physical survival, but physical survival *for*. For a shared set of religious values and spiritual aspirations, some easily defined, some more much difficult to define and a great challenge for Israel's future.

Nachmanides, perhaps the greatest Zionist amongst all the darshanim, argues vehemently that living in Israel is a mitzvah, equal to all the other mitzvot of the torah together. Why? Because God commands it, because

of the other mitzvot it facilitates and because it is the pedestal on which we best stand as a people to combat idolatry.

In a sermon prior to Rosh Hashana sometime in the 13th century, having moved from Spain to Acco in Israel, the Ramban said the following,

"What's all this business about God's country? Is not the whole world God's country? He created and formed all things and all is His! -- But the land of Israel is the nub of the world, the Almighty's very personal and private estate, that He manages directly. He appointed over it no heavenly custodian, no officer nor governor when He did bequeath to the people who proclaim the unity of His Name, His darling seed. This is the force of the texts (Exodus 19:8): "You shall be to me the pick of all the peoples, for all the land is Mine; You shall be My people and I shall be your God" -- you shall not be subject to any other gods at all."

As Aryeh Newman writes, in article in the journal Tradition, entitled, "The Centrality of Eretz Yisrael in Nachmanides," "the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael constituted a unique spiritual frontier" for the Jewish people in the mind of Nachmanides. Creating this spiritual frontier, a berit ye'ud, is a work in long progress, but make no mistake about it, a seminal part of its creation involves combating idolatrous values, both outside and within the Jewish community. May the current war - though

uninvited and undesired -- with the value contrasts it represents, speed our way to a brit yeu'd that unites all of Am Yisrael, and which respects the multiplicity of avenues toward that brit.