



Learning to Live Underwater

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There's an old joke that has been updated for this era. The world's top scientists send out a press release stating that the climate change calamity they've been warning about for years is coming to pass. They announce it will be catastrophic, wiping out the majority of the world's population, and it will happen in only four days. To comfort the people of the world, the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and the Chief Rabbi of Israel all appear on television.

The pope says, "My children, you have four days to accept our Lord and savior into your heart and find comfort by his side in Heaven."

The Dalai Lama says, "My friends, I ask all of you to embrace Buddhist teachings so that you may find inner peace in the midst of disaster. We have four days to find nirvana."

The Chief Rabbi says, "My people, we have four days to learn how to live underwater."

Since my return this week from a sobering journey to Israel with 20 other American rabbis on the AIPAC Progressive Rabbis mission, I have been thinking a lot about this joke.

We went, concerned about the growing rift between American Jews and Israel, concerned about the Kotel and conversion. We found ourselves in the midst of a powder keg of explosive tension about the Temple Mount.

For most of us, that conflict between the Palestinian narrative and our own Jewish narrative of who rightfully belongs in the Land, whose home is the Temple Mount, has been the core conflict of Israel, a conflict that is dangerously boiling at this moment.

Then, last Monday morning, we stood at the Syrian border. We've all read and heard about the catastrophic war in Syria and its profound human cost. We've experienced the toll even here in Newton as members of our congregation have taken in a refugee family at our synagogue. How many of us have considered, though, exactly how close Israel is to that chaos?

I have to admit that in all my deep emotional involvement in the effects of that war, I had actually mostly seen it as a Middle Eastern conflict that for once, does not revolve around Israel.

On Monday, I stood inside a ruin of a hospital building on the Israeli side of the border with Syria, and from our position right next to the armistice fence, we could not just hear but feel the rumble of bombs and mortars exploding in the distance.

Our tour guide took us to the blown-out window and said to us, "See that building right over there?" We could see it clearly. "The people looking at you right now from inside that building," she said, "are Al Qaeda in Syria."

Then she pointed again, further away but still walking distance. "See those buildings between the trees? That's an ISIS stronghold."

A bit further in the distance but still clearly visible: "And that town? Assad's. Hezbollah holds it today."

Right now they are fighting each other. But if Assad wins, she explained, it's seriously bad news for Israel. Given the partnerships Assad made to stay in power, it will give Iran – who is dedicated to the destruction of Israel – a clear shot at the entirety of Israel's northern borders.

And, of course, if Al Qaeda and ISIS win, while they are more concerned about imposing their own Islamic vision on their compatriots now, it's only a matter of time until that blows back on Israel too.

Standing in that building, feeling the explosions echo across the valley, a powerful foreboding inched up my spine.

This being Israel, even the graffiti on the walls of the ruin around us was Jewish. As we walked in sober silence down the halls, there was the voice of the ancient prophet Isaiah in black spray paint: “Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered! Listen, all you distant lands. Prepare for battle, and be shattered! Prepare for battle and be shattered!”

Face to face with the magnitude of threat Israel faces, it is easy to become distraught. And that is part of what I want to share with you today.

Israel is at serious risk today, not only because of internal conflicts between what Israel is and what it should be, not only in relation to the wedge between Jews there and Jews here, not only because of the deeply painful and profoundly complex Palestinian-Israeli conflict or global BDS, but because even if all of those could be solved, Israel’s tough neighborhood has gotten tougher in unimaginable and uncontrollable ways.

And yet, what struck me most, as I tried to take that all in, was the way that Israel is actually living the punchline of that old joke, “We have four days to learn to live underwater.”

Everything we heard and saw, every government official we spoke with and General we learned from, spoke about adapting technology and finding innovative solutions to deal with new threats. A missile defense expert who briefed us explained that what used to take 10-15 years has been put on warp speed, the best minds working around the clock. A retired statesman shared the ways Israel is investing in new alliances, as complicated as they are, with Jordan, Egypt, and even Saudi Arabia. The director of the hospital we visited in Nahariya showed us their new underground hospital and talked about steps they have taken to be prepared for when the next war happens, not if.

Israel is, in so many ways, on a very short time-line, learning to live underwater, as it has done since its inception. To see that was incredible, even inspiring. It reminded me that no matter what our politics or our disappointments with Israel, Israel needs us today every bit as much as in the past, if not more so, to support innovation and defense, to keep our people safe. And...that is also only part of the story.

Standing at the border with Syria, I glimpsed the untenable, intractable nature of the challenge Israel faces, so much of which, no matter what Israel does or does not do, is out of their hands – like the spill-over of a simmering Sunni-Shiite war to which Israel is in direct proximity. Even with all we can and must do to support Israel's defense, I felt a sense of broader powerlessness. Indeed, we heard from many we spoke with that the Israeli military views itself as unable to shape or shift at this point what will happen in that larger battle.

What does a nation do when it cannot change the landscape but has to learn to live underwater?

For me, the most profound answer is a living reflection of this morning's haftarah that I saw with my own eyes in Israel this week.

The whole thrust of Isaiah's words in our haftarah is that in the midst of threat and destruction what can we do? "*Limdu Heitev...*" "Learn to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, perform justice for the orphan, defend the widow."

I saw that teaching come to life in the modern miracle of the Galilee Medical Center in Naharia where Dr. Masad Barhoum, the hospital's general director, explained to us that even while the staff prepares for the casualties of an expected war, even among deep divisions in Israeli society between Jews and Muslims, religious and secular, right and left – on every door of the hospital he has plastered the words, "*Adam L'Adam Adam.*" Literally, "A man to a man is a man," which he explained to mean, "Treat every person as a person." In other words, do not look at race, or religion, or beliefs. Even if they are your enemy outside these walls, be toward every person a person by treating everyone in the full measure of their humanity.

These are more than just words for Dr. Barhoum and all the staff of the hospital. Since 2013, the Galilee Medical Center has taken in and treated 1,600 Syrians. Our group of rabbis had the profound privilege of visiting with three of those patients.

Before we entered the underground hospital, we were told that one question is never asked of these men: Whose side are you on? No matter who they support in Syria, no matter what their opinion of Jews, here in Israel they are treated as people in need.

In the early days of Israel's medical care for injured Syrians, everything was kept secret. We were told about one child who came when he was about four years old. Because of the risk to his family if anyone at home found out he had received care in Israel, for the entire time of his treatment he never heard a word of Hebrew. All the signs were changed to Arabic. The only doctors or nurses he encountered spoke to him in Arabic. The labels on every medicine bottle, the tags on his hospital gowns, and the clothing he was sent back with were all changed. He never knew he was in Israel.

Today, each of the three men we spoke with said that, when faced with the option of treatment in Syria or Jordan, they had requested to be treated in Israel. It is an open secret. Indeed, there is a whole community in Southern Syria who wants to come. Why? *Adam L'Adam Adam.*

One of the three men we met is expected to return to Syria within a month. The other two had more catastrophic injuries. One has been there for ten months, the other nearly a year and a half for 17 surgeries. 17 surgeries. Imagine what that means for a nation to provide that kind of care to the wounded of another country's war, let alone to many who have been taught from their earliest youth that Israel is the enemy. *Adam L'Adam Adam.*

The men shared their experience of treatment in Israel with us. We asked what they hope to do when they return. "I hope to go back to driving to provide for my family," the first replied. The second answered with a sad resolve, "I was a nurse in Syria. I hope I will be well enough to

return to the work of healing.” The third quietly wiped tears from his eyes. As our group left the room, I turned around to see an Israeli nurse embrace him. *Adam L’Adam Adam.*

In response to a world we cannot control, in a world where we must learn to live underwater, Israel shows us every day what we can do. *Limdu Heitev* – learn to do good. Do right by the person before us.