

Social justice Passover – yeah, right



TERRA INCOGNITA
• By SETH J. FRANTZMAN

Where you find gated communities, cars being given as bat mitzva presents, hundreds of thousands of dollars being spent on weddings, people with “summer houses,” that is where you find talk about “social justice.” In other words, wherever you find the highest support for social justice, you’ll have the hardest time actually finding any.

Standing out amid all the hypocrisy, though, is a unique Jewish tradition that has taken hold over the past few decades: “social justice Passover.” It would be worthwhile this year, both for those who do and do not celebrate this tradition, to keep in mind that the notion of social justice can be reinvented, but only if we focus on tangible results and see the faults in the rhetoric.

On the face of it the social justice Passover idea is a good one. The Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism has a special Haggada that emphasizes these themes. It focuses on themes like “Let all those who are now hungry join our Passover tables,” and describes how we should “help the poor year round.” We should help “immigrants” and “refugees” and fight homelessness. It reminds us there is “slavery throughout the world.”

The Haggada interpretations it suggests include one that argues for “complete equality and social and political rights” in Israel. It asks us to consider the source of our privilege. It speaks of “caring for the most vulnerable” and “supporting Jewish education.” The four questions are reinterpreted as “Why are some people enslaved today” and “Why on this night do we invite the hungry and lonely to share our meal?”

Many of these are good notions. But they’re

superficial. Rather than asking “why we invite the hungry,” why not ask “why is there no hungry and lonely person here tonight?” Instead of talking about “slavery today” we should ask, “what did you do to prevent slavery today this year?”

Unfortunately, part of the premise of these “social justice” Passovers is lack of commitment to social justice, because they reward talking about social justice over actually doing anything.

Let’s talk about social justice. *The Forward* has done excellent reporting on the Jewish charity industry and non-profits. The 2013 salary survey had many interesting insights. Outgoing Anti-Defamation League leader Abraham Foxman took home \$660,000, and the head of the JNF in North America got \$344,000. The head of Peace Now “only” made \$220,000. A separate report noted that the network of 3,600 Jewish charities in the US have \$26 billion in assets. Of \$3.7b. in donations, some 38 percent goes to Israel-focused groups.

THIS SOUNDS well and good. But we have seen, time and again, that this money is seemingly squandered, not for the socially disadvantaged, but merely to fill the pockets of the wealthy, the connected, the “Jewish professionals” who were able to get closest to the trough.

In one scandal the employees of Jerusalem’s Hadassah Medical Organization, which is in financial distress, were told their CEO’s salary. According to *Haaretz* the CEO was making NIS 99,000 a month. One report noted a worker saying, “It’s like getting a letter from Marie Antoinette with a cake recipe attached.” Instead of getting into whether this salary is too high, let’s express it in terms of the monthly salary of a cleaner. In February, the salary of contract workers who work in cleaning was raised to NIS 4,640 a month.

So the CEO of Hadassah was “only” making 20 times the salary of the people who cleaned the toilets.

I won’t hazard a guess as to how many of the “Jewish professionals” – the armies of academics, film critics, NGO workers, kibbutzniks and all the rest of the good-hearted Israelis who preach social justice – are making 10 or 20 times what a cleaner makes. Because the answer might make us sick. Do we really want to find out that the billions of dollars plowed into Israel by US donors doesn’t go to the cleaners, but to making a tiny elite even wealthier?

There are many other groups consigned to the gutter so the fast lane of social justice can be paved over them. Let’s look at the conscript soldiers. They earn an average of NIS 400 a month for three years of compulsory service. Let’s compare that to the head of Americans for Peace Now. Their CEO was reported to make \$200,000 a year, or \$16,000 a month. Her annual income is 133 times that of an Israeli soldier. That’s extraordinary, if you stop to think about it.

An IDF soldier can often not even afford her cellphone bill on her army “salary.” If you took a mere \$1b. out of the charity US Jewish organizations disburse to Israel, you could pay each IDF soldier \$10,000 a year, so they could have a life of dignity – which would be especially helpful to soldiers from poor families. Of course, that would mean less BMWs for others.

On Passover let’s not forget the IDF prisoners, either. Yes, 14,000 IDF soldiers a year, part of the “people’s army,” are sent to prison; about 10% of all soldiers in the army. Among those is the infamous tragedy that 50% of male Ethiopian Jewish soldiers are sent to IDF prison during their service – for such major infractions as working part-time during their service. They work at night and soldier by day.



PEOPLE ENJOY a Passover seder. (Reuters)

When people gather around the Passover table, whether or not they talk social justice, how about considering those soldiers, sent to guard the state but sitting in a dirty cell in Prison 4 near Ramla; 90% of them for minor infractions such as being late to base.

The social justice Haggadot ask us to talk about poverty and slavery. The State Comptroller’s report for this year tells us 360,000 children go hungry at some point during the year in Israel due to poverty. One wonders if some of the \$1,000,000,000 donated to a few CEOs of “non-profits” can have fat salaries might possibly be siphoned off to give those kids a meal once in a while. Could a CEO of a “non-profit” donate just one month’s \$20,000 salary to give those children something? How about donating all the first-class tickets that the CEOs of these “Jewish charities” receive during one year? Would that be

too much to ask for “social justice”?

On the face of it, social justice is a good principle. But if you’re preaching about it from behind the desk of an acceptance committee in an Israeli gated community, you’re a hypocrite. When salaries for the poor stand at NIS 5,000 a month and the cost of a home is NIS 1,000,000 – which means home ownership and dignity are out of the hands of the majority of Israelis – we are not a free people. When 14,000 soldiers are in and out of prison, and even when out of prison receive monthly salaries that amount to the cost of a pair of jeans; while the heads of the “non-profits” make 133 times more than they do, there is something fundamentally wrong. We are a free people in the land, but we are being financially strangled, and true social justice demands recognizing that and taking action, not just talk.

The evil of banality - when blaming Israel becomes commonplace



CENTER FIELD
• BY GIL TROY

John Kerry’s peace process crusade has triggered moral vertigo in a region where false moral equivalence enables Palestinian extremism. Desperate to scare Israel into compromise, convinced that democratic Israel can be bullied more easily than the fractured, autocratic Palestinians, Kerry and company have targeted Israeli wariness more than Palestinian intransigence.

In that spirit, last week, *The New York Times* ran a cloying, overly-sentimentalized article about a freed Palestinian murderer trying to rebuild his life. This week, its foreign policy columnist Thomas Friedman outrageously compared Sheldon Adelson, a Republican billionaire who happens to disagree with Friedman, with Ali Khamenei, the Iranian ayatollah who would happily kill Friedman. A half-century ago Hannah Arendt said Adolf Eichmann’s plodding, fill-in-the-dots bureaucratic amorality reflected the “banality of evil.” Today we are seeing the evil of banality. Genuine bad follows when otherwise good people join the conventional pile-on that overly faults Israel while excusing Palestinians.

The *Times* profile “Remaking a Life, After Years in an Israeli Prison,” was terror porn. Using relativistic comparisons and focusing on every life’s banal, meaning mundane, aspects, the article humanized a freed terrorist and implicitly excused his crime – although in fairness it also introduced readers to his victim, Israel Tenenbaum, a 72-year-old Holocaust survivor. Still, “Muqdad Salah is a man in a hurry,”

we learned, eager to compensate for his lost years. This murderer is “one of 78 long-serving Palestinian prisoners freed from Israeli jails,” who are “Demonized as terrorists by Israelis and lionized as freedom fighters by Palestinians” – there being no objective standards.

These nice “middle-aged men” now work hard at “earning their first driver’s licenses, leveraging \$50,000 grants from the Palestinian Authority to build apartments or start businesses, searching for wives and struggling to start families.”

Predictably, the *Times* found an accidental terrorist. Despite being treated as a Palestinian “hero,” poor “Mr. Salah” reported of his crime: “I wasn’t planning it... I didn’t intend to kill him.”

Did the *New York Times* call Osama bin-Laden and his al-Qaida thugs people “demonized as terrorists by Americans and lionized as freedom fighters by Muslims?” Did any features follow poor “Mr.” bin-Laden on the lam, unable even to patronize his favorite hummus place? Similarly, I saw no articles disrespecting the Boston Marathon victims by wondering how comfortable the younger bomber, Dzhokar Tsarnaev, is in his jail cell. What kind of Internet access does he have? Have his feelings been hurt by all the anger against him?

The article notes that “Mr. Salah was welcomed... by a cacophonous crowd in this village of 4,000 near the Palestinian financial hub of Nablus.” That proves that the PA celebrates killers. And if Palestinians have a “financial hub,” maybe there is more autonomy and better Palestinian quality of life under Israeli rule than the propagandists admit.

While this *Times* article was morally obtuse, Thomas Friedman’s column was obscene. Called “Sheldon:

Iran’s Best Friend,” its tagline was “How Sheldon Adelson and Iran are both trying to destroy Israel.” Really? Adelson is “trying” to destroy Israel? Adelson, an American patriot exercising his right of free speech, is an “ally” of the Tehran terrorists who squelch free speech?

I understand. Sometimes as a columnist, your own shtick shackles you. Friedman thought he found a clever way to show that Israel’s most ardent supporters unknowingly aid Israel’s enemies by perpetuating a status quo Friedman abhors. But what might have worked as a rant over drinks seemed mean and amoral in print. In 1940, Franklin Roosevelt’s supporters did not compare Wendell Willkie to Adolf Hitler even though Willkie, a wealthy corporate executive, opposed FDR. Today, Friedman (and I) would object if someone called Barack Obama a Hamasnik because both the president and those Islamist hooligans oppose Israeli settlements.

Politics is not mathematics. The transitive property “a = a” cannot equate genocidal theocrats like Hamas and Khamenei with democrats playing politics like Obama and Adelson. (Yes, that sentence may mark the first time Obama and Adelson are compared favorably or that Adelson is called a democrat!) Friedman’s diatribe also incorrectly called Israel’s settlements “colonialism.” Colonialism involves settling foreign areas, as England did with India. Israel’s legal, historical and ideological ties to the West Bank should force even Israel’s critics to use different words.

Friedman echoed Kerry’s camp in boosting the boycott movement as a threat to Israel, suggesting BDS is “gaining adherents.” These are vague weasel words. The movement for conservative “red” states to secede from the US is also “gaining adherents” – one at a time

in a nation of 300 million-plus – does that convince Friedman America should separate?

I want Kerry to succeed. I wish Israel was leading the peace process, tapping its collective genius to solve this problem whereby the intractability of continued Palestinian intransigence nevertheless does not negate the impracticality of perpetual Israeli control over millions of unwilling subjects.

Similarly, I distinguish between the Boycott Israel crowd’s anti-Israel intent and the Blame Israel First crowd’s anti-Israel effects. The Boycotters diabolically mask harsh animus against the Jewish people with human rights rhetoric. Most Blame Israel Firsters are simply sloppily following a Western trend that excuses Palestinian sins.

Nevertheless, treating Israel as the problem is convenient albeit false, as PA President Mahmoud Abbas’s actions in sabotaging the peace process this week confirmed. But with his people cast as the innocent Jesus to the dastardly collective Jew, Abbas knows he can appear blameless.

If this peace process fails, expect more articles comparing Abbas and Netanyahu or Abbas and Adelson. After all, Abbas and Netanyahu each have two “a”s in their last names, while Abbas and Adelson have names starting with an “a.”

But even as blaming Israel becomes banal, it will still have harmful, even evil, consequences, making peace more elusive than ever.

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Watch the new Moynihan’s Moment video! www.giltroy.com

Recognizing a Palestinian state – Israel should move first

• By ODED ERAN and ROBBIE SABEL

As the current negotiations with Israel show signs of a crisis, the Palestinian leader and negotiators repeatedly threaten to renew their bid for membership in the UN and other international agencies, notably the International Criminal Court (ICC). At the UN such a move could be blocked in the Security Council by one of the five permanent members but elsewhere Palestinians can count on a majority which will grant “Palestine” membership.

The instinctive Israeli reaction is negative, claiming that such a Palestinian move will amount to violation of the Oslo Accords commitment not to unilaterally change the situation, and that such a step undermines the negotiations aimed at reaching a permanent and comprehensive solution to the conflict.

Notwithstanding its concerns it might be worthwhile for Israel, and maybe the US, too, to consider taking the initiative and supporting the State of Palestine’s accession to the UN. True, it will be a state with no permanent borders and a self-declared capital, with major issues such as the refugees still unresolved. It will not, however, be much different from its neighbor Israel in this respect. Israel’s borders with the Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank, and with Lebanon and Syria are still to be permanently fixed, and its capital, Jerusalem, is not formally rec-

ognized by the international community.

Beyond exposing the hollow Palestinian threat, such a move will turn the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into just one of close to 200 international disputes on territories and borders. Jerusalem, security, refugees and mutual recogni-

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tion of their national status will still have to be negotiated, but that will be carried out by two legally equal entities.

A major apprehension in Israel is that UN membership is a prerequisite to ICC membership. The Palestinians do not hide their intention to use this body to try and indict Israeli leaders, army officers and settlers for “war crimes” committed, mostly by the building settlements in the West Bank. That is a real risk, but it is not clear whether the International Criminal Court will wish to immerse itself in endless complaints, political in nature, submitted by the Palestinians. These

are not the crimes of mass murders, mutilations and rapes that are set out in the ICC constitution and, according to the preamble of that constitution, the world recognizes as “grave war crimes” and “unimaginable atrocities that deeply shock the conscience of humanity.”

Furthermore, as a member of the ICC, all Palestinian citizens would themselves be subject to its jurisdiction if accused of grave war crimes, presumably including those perpetrated from Gaza by either Hamas or other terrorist groups against Israeli citizens. This should give the Palestine state officials pause for thought before they flood the ICC, or other international agencies, with their complaints. And just as an observation – with the exception of Jordan, none of Israel’s Arab neighbors acceded to the jurisdiction of the court.

Clearly there are risks for Israel in adopting such a preemptive move. It might, however, be better to seize the initiative, force the Palestinians to concentrate on negotiations rather than on alternatives and give the US-led diplomatic effort another chance.

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The audacity of redemption

• By SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

Natan Sharansky, famed refusenik and former MK who today heads the Jewish Agency, spent nine years in prison and labor camps in the former Soviet Union. His crime? A desire to live in his ancestral homeland. When asked in an interview how he survived the terrible conditions of the Russian Gulag, including 400 days in punishment cells, he answered that his faith, his Book of Psalms, and his feeling of “inner freedom,” gave him the strength and courage to carry on. Behind the steel bars, he said, he felt freer than the prison guards who held him captive.

Freedom is a state of mind. And real freedom requires a little chutzpah.

It has been said, “It is easier to take the Jew out of the Exile, than to take the Exile out of the Jew.” While in Egypt, the Jewish People could not even hear God’s promise of redemption because of their “shortness of spirit” (Exodus 6:9). Even the Hebrew name for Egypt, “*mitzrayim*,” implies restriction and limitation, from the Hebrew “*meitzar*.” The bondage in Egypt wasn’t merely a physical bondage, but a mental one. And so, while still in Egypt, God began the process of taking the Jew out of the psychology of Exile; ridding him of his slave mentality.

A slave’s time is not his own, it belongs to his master. The first commandment that God gave the Jewish People was to proclaim the New Month (Exodus 12:2), empowering them to create a calendar and proclaim festivals, making them masters of their own time and the masters of their destiny.

And in the greatest act of chutzpah, God commands the nascent Jewish nation to slaughter a lamb or goat, the Egyptian god, and roast it over fire. Our Bible is not a recipe

book, but requires that the Passover offering be roasted. Why? Because when you are having a barbecue in your backyard, the whole neighborhood knows! Just imagine what it must have smelled like in Egypt that night, as Jews prepared to leave. They were leaving as free men – physically, spiritually and psychologically.

A little chutzpah is also necessary in our service of God, as individuals.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th C. Poland) writes at the beginning of his commentary to the *Code of Jewish Law*, “One should not be ashamed in front of another who mocks him in his service of God.” If you are always looking over your shoulder, you’re not free. As Jews, we take pride in eating our unleavened bread and bitter herbs, along with all of the other mitzvot we observe, without wondering what the neighbors will say.

Audacity, or brazenness, got us out of Egypt. That attitude kept us going for 2,000 years without a homeland, and it’s that same attitude that founded the State of Israel against all odds. No longer are we the “shtetl Jew.” Since the founding of the State of Israel, the Jew is finally free to live and practice his Judaism without looking over his shoulder.

But today, the State of Israel is in desperate need of leaders with some chutzpah. Leaders who don’t cower to international pressure or capitulate to the demands of the White House or State Department. Leaders who will do what is in the best interest of this country’s safety and security – at all costs. Leaders with some backbone. Chutzpah is what got us out of Egypt, and it’s what we need to confront today’s challenges.

The next time you hear someone repeating the old stereotype that Jews are pushy, just remember that Jewish survival has always required a little chutzpah.

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