



"The Villa in the Jungle: Israel's Struggle for Identity and Security"

RH Day 1 5785 - 2024

Rabbi Idan Irelander

In a 1996 speech, the then-Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak described Israel as a “villa in the middle of the jungle.” This metaphor became a staple in Israeli discourse and was later echoed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who, during a tour of the Jordan-Israel border, remarked that he would surround all of the State of Israel with fences and barriers. He said, "In the area that we live in, we must defend ourselves against the beasts of prey." The metaphor portrayed Israel as a Western—enlightened country surrounded by non-Western neighbors, highlighting the contrasts in geography, education, ideology, and way of life.

And though, not all of Israel is a mansion, and not all of the Middle East fits the “jungle” description, the metaphor still provides valuable insight into Israel's unique political, social, and geographic situation. Since last October 7th, the following questions have been on most everyone's mind: What must Israel do to destroy Hamas and win this war? How do we free the hostages? And, of course, what comes next—the day after? And then there is dealing with the terrorists of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen. Israel has been doing a remarkable job eliminating Hezbollah terrorists with near pinpoint accuracy, and intercepting Houthis projectiles. Imagine all that Israelis could accomplish if they could free their minds from focusing on survival that others in the West take for granted, and maybe naively so.

Best-selling author and a leading Israeli intellectual, Dr. Micah Goodman, posed a philosophical question during a recent talk: **Who** does Israel need to be to win this war?

A growing number of Israelis believe that to win in the Middle East, we must become like the Middle East. They argue that in order to win this war, Israel must abandon Western values, which they see as making their country weak. They claim that to survive, Israel must adopt the "language of the jungle."

Let’s unpack this metaphor. What does it mean to be a "villa?" Dr. Goodman suggests that the success of Western civilization, and by extension, Israel, lies in its ability to bridge the gap between individualism and collectivism. The West has mastered the art of balancing personal freedoms with collective responsibility. In



Western societies, individuals are encouraged to pursue their own dreams and ambitions, and in doing so, they, whether deliberately or inadvertently, contribute to the collective good. This dynamic has led to the tremendous success and strength of Western nations, including Israel.

Israel, often referred to as the "startup nation," thrives on individual aspirations. Israelis are ambitious, liberal, and fiercely protective of their rights and liberties. This freedom drives innovation, leading to new ideas, knowledge, and startups that benefit not only the entire nation, but also the global community; think Israel's foreign ministry, MASHAV and how they work with the people of Africa to stave food insecurity with cutting edge agricultural technology. It is this collective success that has enabled Israel to build a powerful military and a strong, resilient country.

However, Goodman argues, this "Western alchemy" of transforming individual ambition into collective strength isn't conducive during times of war, as war demands self-sacrifice rather than self-fulfillment. My generation grew up hearing stories of heroism and sacrifice from the War of Independence, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War—all defensive wars, the latter fought by my father and Einat's father. Although I was just a toddler during the Yom Kippur War, I remember my father putting on his military uniform and leaving. I know that my wife, Einat, and I suspect our congregation's recent guests from Kibbutz Magen, along with our musicians Amir, Ron, and Yael, and others, have similar memories. These acts of service laid the foundation for "our villa," modern Israel, enabling Jews to survive, to immigrate and to live in peace.

Today's generation—raised on television screens and video games—might seem different, but despite their modern habits, they stand among the greatest generations in Israel's history. This is evident in, among other things, the story told by Roe, the son of our talented flutist, Amir. Roe previously talked to members of our congregation about how he left his high-tech career to fight in Gaza for months. After Hamas murdered more than 1000 Israelis in a single day, and abducted hundreds and injured thousands more, about 300,000 Israelis, like Roe, were compelled to put their careers, families, and dreams on hold, as the military reserves was activated. These are successful individuals—CEOs, doctors, lawyers, business owners, etc.—who sacrificed their personal ambitions for the collective good of the nation. Since the start of this war, hundreds of Israelis have



been killed and thousands have been injured. Heart wrenching statistics that don't quite make it to the headlines.

War demands that self-sacrifice take precedence over personal fulfillment. The Western focus on individualism makes it more difficult for society to cope with loss, as every life lost is a personal tragedy with a unique story. In Israel, a tiny country that is actually smaller, in geographical size, than our state of Massachusetts, there is always someone who knows someone who has lost their life to war inflicted on our people. We see this in the United States as well, that when a soldier gets killed, we honor them by sharing their picture and telling the story of their life, accomplishments, family, and career. In contrast, the societies of Israel's mortal enemies often view casualties in more abstract terms, focusing on numbers rather than individual identities. And, deviously, the enemies of Israel often welcome (and deliberately make unavoidable) the deaths of innocents, as such tragedies serve their propaganda machines.

Another challenge Israelis face in war is the expectation of quick results. Western civilization is about shortening the gap between effort and reward. However, in the Middle East, time is perceived differently. After my military service, I visited Sinai, which was then under Egyptian control after Israel returned it from winning it in a defensive war. One morning, we ordered breakfast at our hotel. The waitress genuinely said that the meal would be served shortly. But, two and a half hours later, the first egg arrived. This was my first experience with the difference in time perception between the West and the non-West. Our immediate expectation for rewards for our efforts, also influences our expectations for quick resolutions in wartime, a wartime, often, the result of our enemies' patient, drawn out planning.

This is further exacerbated by a belief system, adhered to by most Islamic terrorists, that values the concept of an afterlife more so than the here and now. Such cultural differences play a significant role, as patience is a virtue in the Middle East, and immediate results are not always expected. This brings us to a fundamental dilemma, says Goodman: The very habits that make us strong in peacetime can make us weak in war. Who are Israelis during peacetime? Well, anthropologist and Harvard professor, Joseph Henrich, refers to those of us in the United States, Europe, and Israel as "WEIRD," an acronym that stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. WEIRD. Israelis and



Americans strive to be WEIRD. And as such, if we abandon our Western values, we risk losing the unique strengths that have made Israel a formidable, a WEIRD, nation. But if we cling to these values, we may struggle to endure the long, exhausting realities of war.

So, we return to the question. “Who does Israel need to be to win this war?”

Israel needs to be both a society with the power and the will to strike, and the resilience to withstand blows. Western society gives us the power to hit, but it doesn't always provide the resilience to endure. Middle Eastern societies, on the other hand, often have the resilience to withstand hardship, but may lack the power to strike effectively. For as much damage and hardship they inflict on their victims, it is a lot less than their stated intentions.

“Who does Israel need to be to win this war?” is a significant question. And the answer does matter to us, not only as Jews, but as Americans, as people who benefit from having a noble stronghold in the Middle East that our country can rely on, with their ingenuity and intelligence, to help shield us from further onslaught of Islamic terror, as we have already suffered much here: the San Bernardino shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, the Florida Pulse nightclub shooting, etc. While just a couple weeks ago, we observed the 23rd anniversary of the September 11 attacks, we are still fighting against those attackers' ideological kin, who threaten to repeat such atrocities as much as they can.

Dr. Goodman suggests that Israelis need to restore Israelis' trust in Israel, and for Israel's surrounding enemies, the fear of Israel. The current challenge is that restoring fear in the Middle East might come at the cost of losing Western sympathy, a sympathy that doesn't come easily, as there is too much propaganda stacked against the good guys here.

Israelis shouldn't have to choose between being supported by the West or being feared by the Middle East—both emotions necessary for survival. How maddening that during the Israelis' struggle just to survive against a destructive enemy, they need to entertain others' emotions resulting from this tension.

May they and we balance our drive for innovation with the unity needed to face our challenges. As we uphold our core values, may we forge a path that ensures both the security of Israel, and the respect of the international community.



On this Rosh Hashanah, I wish you Ketivah v'Chatimah Tovah, may we be written and sealed for another year of good health, success, safety, and happiness, and may we find inspiration and strength in the coming year. May Israel continue to harness its unique strengths while navigating the complexities of our time with wisdom and resilience.

Let us hope and pray for a future marked by peace and fulfillment, guided by our shared aspirations and collective purpose. And let us say: Amen.