

Catch 67: Can Justice Be Incremental?
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Tonight we read revered words of Torah: *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*. “Justice, justice shall you pursue.”

Repetition denotes emphasis, of course. For the sages, though, each utterance of the word must have an independent meaning. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra taught that the first is justice we seek for ourselves; the second, for justice we must pursue even for an opposing party.

That’s a tall order, and it brings to mind a talk I was privileged to hear this summer in Jerusalem, at the Shalom Hartman institute, by Micah Goodman, author of a hotly-debated book entitled *Catch 67*, a play on Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*, with “67” referring to the Six-Day War, fifty years ago this summer.

Goodman begins with a lesson in Zionism.

Theodor Herzl, observing modern Europe, concluded that anti-Semitism results from being dispersed among the nations, always a minority. For Herzl, separate sovereignty would lead to Jews’ acceptance among the nations of the world. If a Jewish State would arise, anti-Semitism would end.

Orthodox Jews opposed early Zionism. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was a minority voice, promoting what was called “Religious Zionism.” For Kook, Jews’ unhealthy predicament resulted from our disconnection from the land of Israel. With a return to the land, Kook envisioned body reunited to soul, a return of prophesy, and ultimately messianic redemption.

In May, 1948, Micah Goodman says, Herzl’s dream came true and it died. The State was born, but anti-Semitism continued.

In 1948, Rabbi Kook’s Zionist vision came true but was killed: Israel was established right next to the Holy Land. Jerusalem’s Old City was outside the Jewish State, as was the bulk of the historical territory of the ancient Israelite tribes.

The Six-Day War changed everything. Now, Israel possessed expanded borders, offering enhanced security as well as access to cities and shrines toward which our people had turned in longing and prayer for two millennia. That new

territory, though, meant different things to Herzl's spiritual descendants and to Rabbi Kook's.

Mainstream Zionists were ecstatic: Now, Israel had territorial assets with diplomatic value. Herzl's Zionist dream could finally be realized: The Jewish State could finally bring an end to anti-Semitism.

Orthodox Zionists were equally euphoric, their Zionist dream realized: the Jewish people could settle the Land Promised to our ancestors.

In the five decades that have followed the Six-Day War, Political and Religious Zionism have become increasingly irreconcilable. Goodman articulates the one question around which the conflict has revolved: Does Israel trade land for peace or settle the land to fulfill Jewish destiny?

The problem was complicated by the other side of the negotiating table. For years, nobody was there. Arab states refused to recognize Israel or to accept any possibility of living peacefully alongside a Jewish State. New hope arose as the dream of land for peace became reality, at least on one border, with the 1978 Camp David Accords and the return of the Sinai to Egypt.

Tragically, Camp David led Palestinians to feel increasingly abandoned by the Arab nations in whom they had always placed their hope for liberation. Palestinians took matters into their own hands, first with international terror; and then, in the late 1980s, with the First Intifada, drawing Israeli soldiers into armed conflict with West Bank rock-throwers.

In Micah Goodman's mind, that First Intifada could have led to a peaceful resolution. Increasing numbers of Israelis were disenchanted with the historic Land of Israel. Better, they thought, to live at peace than to worship at Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem or settle the hilltops of Samaria. They elected a government that would negotiate for peace. The trouble again was on the other side of the table.

Back at Camp David, this time in 2000, deal was made, and Arafat walked, ultimately sparking a brutal Second Intifada that brought gruesome, crippling terror to Israel. If the First Intifada led Israelis to disenchantment with the historic land, Goodman says, the Second inspired disenchantment with peace. He goes further: The First Intifada taught Israelis that they couldn't control the Palestinians; the Second, that they couldn't trust the Palestinians.

Still, an imperative to action persisted. Ariel Sharon did not leave Gaza because he was a great peacenik. Instead, he left Gaza because he understood Israel's demographic problem. One day, a majority of the people living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean will be Arabs. Israel will either cease to be Jewish State or give up its claim to being a democracy.

Micah Goodman describes the problem as *Catch 67*: If Israel stays on the West Bank, the Jewish State loses the ability to define itself. Leaving the West Bank, Israel loses the ability to protect itself. Most Israelis agree with both of these statements.

Today, in Israel, nobody speaks of a Zionist dream. The Israeli left articulates the catastrophe of the Occupation, but offers no hope of peace. The Israeli right foresees catastrophe in leaving the West Bank, but their solutions to the demographic problem range from impractical to immoral. Either they embrace a messianic solution, believing that God will save us; they propose continuing the present, unhealthy situation; or they yearn for what we would call ethnic cleansing.

Goodman suggests that the only appropriate step is to give up the romantic notions of both Herzl and Kook. Zionism will not harmonize the Jewish people with the world, neither will the Jewish people find redemption by possessing holy land.

And yet, Goodman observes, the fact that one has an incurable disease doesn't mean that there can't be medical intervention. After all, he points out, Magic Johnson is still alive, decades after revealing his HIV status.

Goodman suggests turning a fatal problem into a chronic one. Goodman offers several incremental steps to reduce the conflict, absent any realistic hope of ending it. Like Ibn Ezra, Goodman suggests that the Jewish people must pursue peace, not only for Israel's good, but also for the welfare of the Palestinian people. Enhanced justice for Palestinians will increase justice for Israelis. "Justice, justice shall you pursue."

Goodman offers four suggestions, all of which amount to decreasing the Occupation.

1. Dramatically increase the portion of the West Bank under Palestinian control, particularly enhancing the contiguity of that Palestinian land.

2. Turn over some Jerusalem neighborhoods to the Palestinian Authority. Parts of the current Jerusalem municipality were never historically part of Jerusalem. Among those, the areas where Palestinians reside should belong to them.
3. Ease connections between the West Bank and Jordan, so that Palestinians can more simply enjoy personal and trade relationships with their people across the narrow river.
4. Completely freeze settlement outside of large, recognized Israeli settlement blocs.

If “justice” is repeated in our Torah portion merely for emphasis, to insist on an absolute, then Goodman’s suggestions don’t fulfill the command. Under his proposal, the Palestinians won’t have their state and Israelis won’t live at peace any more than they do now. If, on the other hand, “justice” is repeated to indicate that we must seek fairness for others, as well as for ourselves, Goodman’s plan fits the bill. Goodman quotes the Talmudⁱ, “The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world.” Note that the verb is “increase,” building more peace than exists today. Even an incremental step toward justice is a step in the right direction.

We may apply the same principle to our own individual journeys. As the High Holy Days approach, we look inward, each of us finding more flaws than we would like. We examine our relationships, identifying those that need repair. Work lies ahead, as hard as it may be meaningful. Just as we cannot solve all the world’s problems, we are likely to find that we are unable to blot out all our faults or build perfect peace where a rupture has taken place. And yet, to paraphrase Goodman, the fact that we can’t completely solve our problems must not paralyze us. If we are wise students of our faith and tradition, we will seek out the ways in which we can increase peace in our souls and build harmony in our communities. Elul and the Holy Days that follow are an opportunity to intervene in our own imperfect worlds. Even if we are not satisfied with incremental improvement, and perhaps we should not be, let us pursue justice, on step at a time.

Amen.

ⁱ *Berachot 64a.*