

## Let My People Go: Ukraine on the Brink

### *Shabbat HaChodesh 5784*

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*Yad Vashem*, Israel's national Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, tells essentially the same story as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Still, while I come away from *Yad Vashem* with overwhelming sadness, I leave the U.S. Holocaust Museum angry. Newspapers lining the walls make clear: Americans knew, or at least would have known if they had paid attention, that Europe's Jews were at peril. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain earned the contempt laid at his feet for credulously claiming that Hitler's expansionist desires could be held in check, winning "peace in our time," if the free world would only sacrifice parts of Czechoslovakia. One comes away wondering whether the fate of Europe's Jews could have been different if America had acted more quickly and decisively.

One example is an exhibit about U.S. participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the perfidy of Avery Brundage, who headed the U.S. Olympic Committee. The Museum reminds us that Brundage "fought to send a U.S. team to the 1936 Olympics, claiming: 'The Olympic Games belong to the athletes and not to the politicians.' He wrote ... that American athletes should not become involved in 'the present Jew-Nazi altercation.' ... Brundage alleged the existence of a 'Jewish-Communist conspiracy' to keep the United States out of the Games."<sup>i</sup> Despite the great achievements and stunning victories of Jesse Owens and of the now-famed *Boys in the Boat*, the United States helped to hand Nazi Germany an enormous propaganda victory and legitimacy on the world stage at those 1936 Olympics, even as our people was suffering deprivation, degradation, and discrimination that would lead to mass murder.

Avery Brundage was far from the only treacherous American leader of the day. The broadest American movement of Nazi sympathizers and appeasers called itself "America First," a name with frightening resonance today. The National World War II Museum in New Orleans reminds us, "The America First Committee, whose spokesperson was [the renowned flyer] Charles Lindbergh, was founded in 1940 to support American isolation and Nazi appeasement. Lindbergh crossed the country to hold rallies that blamed [President] Roosevelt and American Jews for pushing the country closer to war."<sup>ii</sup> This was 1940, after the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, with Britain and France declaring war on Hitler's Germany. *Krystallnacht*, the horrific pogrom, destroying synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses throughout Germany, had taken place in 1938. Rylee's great-great-grandmother would soon put her children on a train, headed east to relative safety in the Soviet Union, never to see them again. The children survived; the mother, as she likely suspected, did not.

Imperial Japan's military expansionism was also ignored and appeased until the bombing of Pearl Harbor. We know how these stories ended. Some ten million, including six million Jews, perished in the Holocaust, among an estimated eight-five million killed worldwide in war and resulting disease and famine.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, the Soviet Union, having allied with the British and Americans to defeat the Nazis, came away from World War II with a vast empire from Central Europe to the Pacific—crushing the spirits and often the bodies of anybody even perceived to get in the way of Joseph Stalin.

American Jews learned the lesson. “Never again” became our mantra. We understood our obligation to our people—כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, “All Jews are responsible for one another,” in the words of the Talmud.<sup>iv</sup> In the aftermath of World War II, American Jews advocated for increased immigration to the United States—even while, understanding that America could not be home for all the world’s Jews, they worked for the establishment of the State of Israel. As Israel has been threatened across its seventy-five-year history, we have stood by the Jewish State in time of trouble—this year, more than ever.

In February and July 2023, as I participated with tens of thousands of Israelis in pro-democracy demonstrations, I was reminded of an earlier mass gathering of Jewish people in protest, this one in the United States, decades earlier. A quarter of a million of us descended on Washington in December 1987, demanding freedom for Soviet Jewry, not the only time we mustered large numbers to call the world’s attention to our people’s continued oppression.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, we imagined the plight of Jews there and throughout Eastern Europe was, at long last, ending. Millions of Jews immigrated—to Israel, to the United States and Canada, and to Western Europe. Others who stayed behind found new freedom and new access to Jewish life, previously prohibited since the Russian Revolution.

Totalitarian societies, though, do not easily transform into democracies, and people in power do not relinquish it quietly. Since Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, came to power in Russia at the turn of this century, he has relentlessly pursued reimposition of Russian control over republics that gained their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed. When Putin’s Russia conquered Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, the world essentially stood idly by, as if Prime Minister Chamberlain had been right that peace could be bought with appeasement.

Nobody should have been surprised when Putin got the message. Two years ago, he ruthlessly invaded Ukraine, bombarding Kyiv among cities and towns throughout Ukraine, a humanitarian disaster. This time, though, Putin was surprised. The Ukrainian people did not take the disaster lying down. Their president—Jewish, as it happens—became an international hero, supported with armaments and aid from a determined American president and Congress.

And then, election year came. “America First” raised its ugly head again. Absent foreign assistance, even the valiant Ukrainians cannot defeat a global power. Russia is gaining ground. How long can Ukraine last? And after Ukraine? Putin’s appetite will not be satisfied. The only question is who will be first: the Baltics—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—or Poland. Maybe even Finland, and not for the first time.

Today, we observe *Shabbat HaChodesh*, the Shabbat that immediately precedes the beginning of the month of Nisan. The Haftarah, which Eli read, is a reminder to the ancient Israelite monarch, to begin preparing for Passover sacrifices. Even with the Temple no longer standing, the Haftarah serves as a reminder: We need to get ready for Passover! Yes, that means preparing to host or attend a Seder, and you will see information about our Congregational Seder in tonight’s service booklet. Those of us who rid our homes of *chametz*, leavened grains prohibited during Passover, have additional work to do.

Passover isn’t supposed to be easy—not for that prince in ancient Israel, and not for us. Our most important preparation, though, is not about leavened foods or any ritual, not even the

Seder. Instead, we are enjoined, in words of the Mishnah, written nearly two thousand years ago: “Every person must see themselves as though they, personally, went forth from Egypt.”<sup>v</sup>

Tonight, I ask us to remind ourselves that our people has faced centuries of oppression at the hands of tyrants not unlike Vladimir Putin, who threatens the lives and the freedom of Ukrainians today—and, if he is permitted to succeed, of countless others to come. We, though, are blessed to be Americans, citizens of the one nation on Earth that can lead a global coalition to support Ukraine and President Zelenskyy, who is asking for arms and aid, not American or NATO boots on the ground. The time has come for Congress to act.

Instead of “America First,” let us demand, “Freedom First.” For us. For our people. For all people. Everywhere. Only then, can we truly celebrate the freedom that Passover promises.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “In Favor of Participation,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/olympics/?content=favor\\_participation&lang=en#:~:text=Avery%20Brundage%20C%20president%20of%20the,become%20involved%20in%20%22the%20present](https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/olympics/?content=favor_participation&lang=en#:~:text=Avery%20Brundage%20C%20president%20of%20the,become%20involved%20in%20%22the%20present).

<sup>ii</sup> “American Nazism and Madison Square Garden,” National World War II Museum,” April 14, 2021, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/american-nazism-and-madison-square-garden>.

<sup>iii</sup> Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II, National World War II Museum, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>

<sup>iv</sup> *Sotah* 37a, *inter alia*.

<sup>v</sup> Mishnah Pesachim 10:5.