

Israel's Defense Is Not a Right

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

Whenever there is conflict or skirmish in Israel, and the state acts to protect her Jews, one can expect to hear the usual slogans about Israel's right to defend herself.

Across the spectrum world leaders pay lip-service to this mantra—usually following it with a “but” that drastically qualifies and limits the initial statement of supposed backing of Israeli action.

One is sure to hear politicians and statesmen the world over proclaim: “Israel has a right to defend itself *but* it should practice restraint.” Or, alternatively: “Israel has a right to defend itself, but this current situation seems to be caused by Israel incitement.”

So while the nations seem to support Israel, they severely curtail the measure in which they actually deem that Israel is permitted to this self-defense. More often than not, these statements about Israel's right to self-defense are self-serving so that the politician can then stab Israel in the back and not be accused of being anti-Semitic.

On this bandwagon of the right to defend one's self, jump Israeli politicians as well. They defend any act of Israeli force by saying that “Israel has the right to defend itself against those that seek to destroy her.”

Over and over, Israeli leaders declare that now—after thousands of years of being the victim—that the Jewish People have their own sovereign state, they will never again be defenseless against that that hate her and seek to destroy her.

They therefore declare that as a sovereign state, they have a *right* to defend their citizens and need not tolerate vicious attacks.

I would like to suggest that the motto of “never-again” that was perhaps important in 1948 is not only mistaken today, but is somewhat dangerous. While the State of Israel must indeed do everything in its power to ensure that their never be another holocaust, its primary focus needs to be the flourishing of life not the negation of death.

It is time for Israelis to mature beyond the point of “never-again” or the “right to defend themselves” and reach the step beyond it. Israel must take possession of its own story and control its own narrative—not in relation to the past or other nations, but of because of its destiny today.

A step into maturity

The story of the modern State of Israel is akin to an awkward teenager going through puberty. The teenager often struggles, trying to make sense of his or her personal identity, all the while being bullied by the class buffoon while others seek to define him or her.

Indeed, learning to become comfortable in one's skin and actualizing one's personal identity instead constantly seeking approval from one's peers, is the basic journey that most teens partake of.

Just as in the case of the bullied teen, while perhaps the *first step* of healing is the affirmation of finding the inner strength to confront one's oppressor, in order for a person to become truly healthy, they must graduate to a next step and attain a reality where they cease defining themselves in their struggle, but define themselves for themselves.

For, a healthy person does not obsess over their right to defend themselves—only a victim does.

If an individual is emotionally healthy, they instinctively protect themselves and their family as a matter of course, and leave their obsessing to being who they are and wish to be as an individual.

When a person constantly declares their right to exist and their right to defend themselves, it is a clear red-flag that they have suffered unmentionable abuse that has hardly been resolved.

The same can be said of Israel and the Jewish People.

Israel's obsession with her right to defend herself and its constant need for the approval of the nations is reminiscent of the joke about the individual who declares that he is normal because he has a document to prove it. A person who needs a document to prove that they are sane—clearly isn't.

So too, the need to constantly seek the affirmation, endorsement and approval of the U.N or other nation states, is indicative of deep insecurity in the national consciousness of the Jewish people. It is only because they themselves are wary of their own nationhood that they continually seek the sanctions of the nations.

The Jewish People living in the land of Israel need to cease their unhealthy mindset. Instead of repeatedly affirming their right to exist, they most *just* exist.

Only when the Jewish People are comfortable in their own skin, and cease to repeatedly define themselves in the manner that others see them, will they truly flourish in the Land of Israel.

Changing the Narrative

In order to act as a healthy nation, the general identity of the Jewish People living in the Land of Israel must go through a general narrative therapy to re-adjust their sense of self that has been bruised and battered in our long exile. Only through changing the way we see our story will stop our Stockholm syndrome of seeking to please our abusers.

Only when we view our story, our nationhood, our culture, our identity and Jewishness through healthy eyes can we begin to heal as a people and make healthy choices in regards to our future.

A nation that believes that it was created in the halls of the U.N and believes that it was the body of nations that gave her legitimacy is ever sensitive of the statements made about it in the same body.

Only when the Jewish People remember that the Land of Israel is the eternal land of the Jewish people as a gift from the Almighty, G-d, irrespective of any secular body can the begin to have a healthy attitude towards themselves—and as a result be comfortable in acting properly with the nations that surround it.

Israel must mature past the Zionism of Herzl that budded from the insecurities of Jewish Identity and nationhood of a people “without” a state and mature to defining ourselves in relation to ourselves. For, only when a person has a healthy relationship with themselves can they treat others as they should be treated.¹

We do not exist as a nation because a body of nations graciously lets us have a country, but because we are intrinsically a nation created by G-d and His People. Israel does not belong to the Jewish people because a group of gentiles *gave* it to us, but because G-d Almighty Himself did so, thousands of years ago.

Only when we are comfortable with this narrative, will we confidently able to make the declaration that we, and no other people, are the only indigenous people to the Land of Israel. It is only because we cling to a narrative that began in 1948 that the nations have the audacity to claim that other peoples have right to our land.

However, we were so drunk with pride that “we were a nation like all nations,” allowed to sit in the U.N, that we overlooked that letting the Non-Jewish nations define our peoplehood gave control over our identity and nationhood in the hands of others.

Ironically, the Jewish People tried to leave the shackles of their galut (exile) mentality, through the greatest expression of the exile—that other nations control our destiny.

We must reclaim our identity: we must consciously, as a nation, affirm that we are a people because G-d took us out of Egypt and made us a people. We are a sovereign nation because G-d gave us the Land of Israel as His eternal gift. Our story begins with at the foot of Mt. Sinai not groveling at the U.N or any other body.

When we make this narrative our own, we will begin to act like a true sovereign nation does and should and not be the subject the bullying of the nations. In fact this new found confidence will surely be so powerful that no nation would consider questioning our resolve.

Beyond the Right of Defense

¹ It is for this reason that the commandment (Vayikra 18:19) to love others, is like one loves oneself. For a relationship with others is intrinsically connected with one’s relationship with themselves.

When disaster strikes in Israel and Israel responds to her enemy's provocations one can be sure to hear statements such as "Great Britain did not tolerate missiles raining on her cities in World War 2," or "were Texas to be attacked by Mexico, surely the U.S would respond." These statements are always followed with a statement that "so too, Israel as well has a right to defend herself."

But in this game of similes and metaphors Israel is forgetting an important point: the U.S, Great Britain, Russia or any other sovereign state that is comfortable in its own skin would not seek to justify itself in the eyes of other countries, but would act as it sees fit it must to protect its interests without seeing the need to justify itself at every turn.

The fact that we constantly feel the need to justify ourselves is expressive of our greatest weakness that our enemies capitalize on.

Which brings us back to the point of the "right to defend one's-self." Besides for the fact that playing into the narrative of a right to defense creates a counterargument how in *this* situation, the nations inevitably declare that Israel does not have this "right" for whatever imaginative reason they conjure up—discussing the "right of defense" is indicative of a general weakness of a false sovereignty.

Maimonides in his Laws of Kings (Ch. 5:1) classifies two types of wars that a king may fight:

"A king should not wage other wars before a war that is a Mitzvah (obligatory). What is considered as an obligatory war? The war against the seven nations who occupied the land of Israel, the war against Amalek, and a war fought to assist Israel from an enemy which attacks them. Afterwards, he may wage a war of choice, i.e. A war fought with other nations in order to expand the borders of Israel or magnify its greatness and reputation."

In this succinct law Maimonides expresses the rights of a sovereign state that we all intuitively know. Defending the citizens of one's state—is not a right—it's a duty and obligation. This is the essential task of any custodian of a People—to ensure and protect their security and safekeeping.²

A true sovereign state knows that it need not be timid in its identity, but it can expand its borders if that is in its best interest—it's a "right." Just as the individual has the right to maximize its potential and aggressively pursue the actualization of its identity—even at the expense of others—so too the sovereign state. Defense is a duty, serving its interests and prosperity—a right.

Only when Israel is clear on its rights and its duties will the nations truly respect it. When Israel declares that it's her duty to do all in her power to protect her citizens, the nations will have no response to this self-evident truth.

² Even according to those opinions that express that the laws of war do not apply to a non-Jewish state agree that a war of self-defense is basic duty derived from the law (Talmud Sanhedrin 72a) that "if someone attempts to kill you, kill them first." See as well Bamidbar 25:17 and Bamidbar Rabba, 21:4.

When Israel will finally declare that not only does she have a *responsibility* to defend herself, but she has the *right* to act in her self-interest—no matter what they may be—including annexing land that it conquers will she be given the respect she deserves.

The Jewish People living in the Land of Israel, not only have survived history, exist, and now have the ability to defend themselves against would be attackers, but they have the *right* to flourish and choose their own destiny—irrespective of what any nation may or may not say.

The Jewish People must be true their own sense of morality and cease answering the attacks of the hypocritical morality of the nations. They do not accept us, it is time to move on, enough with our Jewish neurosis of seeking recognition.

It is time for us to be ourselves, for ourselves—to define ourselves the way G-d and Torah define us, and live up to the morals and ethics that Torah and G-d demand from us—enough caring about what other nations—that hate us overtly or covertly—think of us and our choices.

Only then, when our psyches have crawled out of the galut mentality will we consciously ready for redemption—may it happen speeding in our time, Now!