

There's No Comfort in Gotcha Games

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Imagine for a moment that we are not in this comfortable, beautiful chapel with the air-conditioning blowing. I want you to close your eyes and picture yourself in the Middle East—in Jerusalem—at the end of July on the ninth of Av.

It's scorching hot and made all the hotter due to the fact that all around us the city is on fire. The Temple is burning, and the streets are ablaze. It's a day of great tragedy.

Now, open your eyes. Thankfully we are not there. Yet at home and abroad, it seems like the world is on fire. Indictments of the former President are flying in at an accelerated pace, and it seems more are on the way. Depending on your views, be they personal or political, you may be inclined to say that it's a good thing—that a week in which there are indictments is good. You may say: "Aha!" and "Finally, gotcha!"

I confess that I, too, found myself taking a bit of delight in this news for a moment. They caught him red-handed; there's video and obvious obstruction of justice. Isn't it all so delicious? But it's not a good thing. When you stop and think about it, it's sad and depressing, and terrible that any of it is happening at all.

One might say the same thing—"Aha! Gotcha!"—about another thing that happened this week. The son of the current President was also in the news. He had made a plea deal, and it has fallen through. Now, he's had to plead guilty. If even just for the moment, another "Gotcha!"

But no matter where you fall on the political spectrum, or your personal point of view, if you are saying "Gotcha," then you missed the larger point: that we are now a people set against ourselves. Saying "Aha" only serves to highlight just how divided we are and how divisive our discourse has become.

In politics, another event occurred domestically in the last 24 hours. Senator Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, the Senate Minority Leader, was giving a press conference when, suddenly, he froze mid-sentence for 19 seconds. He stood looking like a deer in headlights.

McConnell, who is 81, was walked away from the podium by aides, in silence and confusion. Later when he returned, he seemed to be fine. But in that moment, one might be tempted to say, "Aha. Gotcha. Just desserts."

But I didn't see Mitch McConnell that way at that moment. Even though I view him as someone whose political moves have stymied the policies and legislation I believe in personally, I didn't see him as an enemy of progress or some kind of villain at this moment. I saw him as a confused old man, having a personal crisis in front of the entire world. In that moment, I didn't pity him, but I did empathize with him, because there but for the grace of *Adonai* go any of us.

This week was Tisha B'Av, the ninth of Av, a day when the Jewish people commemorate and express shared pain in the face of historic loss and devastation. It's the day when both Temples in Jerusalem burned.

Though the flames were lit by external enemies, they were fanned by internal divisions among our people. Rival camps within our midst fought amongst themselves, sometimes literally. At times, they created deprivation by burning food stores while the city was under siege. There was baseless hatred of one another, known in Hebrew as *sinat chinam*, which according to our sages was the true cause of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

As the temples burned and Jerusalem fell, our people were dispersed to the four corners of the earth. And to this day, some take the ninth of Av as an opportunity to fast and to mourn those ancient tragedies and the demise of Jewish civilization.

The pain of that day is sometimes hard for us as modern Jews, as Reform Jews, some would even say secular Jews, to grasp. It's hard for us to relate to that experience. We really have to close our eyes and imagine the scorching heat, right? Because we are here, in the air conditioning, in this beautiful chapel. But this week, our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel are experiencing the ninth of Av in a palpable way.

You see, if you haven't been following the news, millions of Israelis are protesting radical judiciary changes being made in the State of Israel. The legislation will limit the independence of the Supreme Court, essentially removing its power to check the Knesset.

In America, we call it the balance of powers. Now, it's a little different in Israel, but we can relate. The legislation is concerning because the government currently in power does not have a mandate. That is, that they don't have more than 50 percent, and they're taking this as the first of many steps to introduce legislation that many fear will further limit personal freedom.

The emboldened extremism of the coalition formed to govern is dangerous on its own, but also because the so-called reforms they wish to introduce to the judiciary would allow political corruption at the highest levels to go unchecked.

This might start to sound a little familiar. This is despite the objection of the majority of Israelis, including, by the way, a majority of those belonging to the party sponsoring these unpopular moves. More than two thirds of Israelis object to this, and that's to say nothing of world Jewry, right? Or even Israel's most important ally, the United States.

Even the promises that Prime Minister Netanyahu gave to our President, that he would compromise, have been tossed aside—just to push through these laws.

This all happened leading up to erev Tisha B'Av on Wednesday. All the leading Israeli newspapers ran their front page completely black. And they all said the same thing: *Yom Shachor L'Democratzia b'Yisrael*. A black day for democracy in Israel.

For 30 weeks, Israelis have protested these steps by the hundreds of thousands. Now millions of Israelis have taken to the streets, more and more every day. They've shut down the Ayalon Highway in the middle of Tel Aviv. Imagine the Long Island Expressway, Grand Central Parkway, West Side Highway and the FDR Drive all shut down. With time, the objections have grown louder, and their ranks have swelled. As of this week, doctors all over Israel have gone on strike.

Worse, members of the security establishment are at once managing social disorder and disobedience in their ranks. Tens of thousands of reservists are refusing to report for duty, including four hundred Israeli Air Force pilots who say they won't show up either, creating a major crisis for the safety and security of the Jewish state.

The politicization of army is itself a symptom of the lack of trust and brokenness in Israel. While some of these steps may eventually cause cooler heads to prevail, they create fractures in the foundations of a society. The cure to the disease weakens, and may even kill, the patient.

On Tisha B'Av, when we read from the *Book of Lamentations* called *Eichah*, we read of horrible things that happened to our people in the streets of Jerusalem so long ago. I'm not going to recap them now, because it's Shabbat and some of us were here on Wednesday to help commemorate that sad day in history.

As I said before, it may seem unfathomable, unrelatable to us, living a thousand years later and thousands of miles away. But we, as Americans, can still relate to sinister attempts to undermine democracy and the rules of the law,

and the justice system itself. We see people taking to the streets to protest, as well as the phenomenon of a people divided amongst themselves, because we, too, are experiencing that right now.

We may not have millions of people in the streets right now, and we may not have legislation that is tearing down the rules of the law and the power of the Supreme Court, but there are terrible things underway that make many of us tremble in fear for the sake of our democracy.

Watching it happen overseas to our cousins in Israel is terrible—on a day of sadness and solemnity, no less. Seeing it here in America makes us even more ill at ease, doesn't it?

Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, once wrote, "*Im tirtzu ein zo agadah*," that a modern democratic State of Israel is not a dream if we will it into being. The fight for that dream of living in peace both with its external neighbors and within its population is still alive.

Despite those fanning the flames of extremism and hatred, be it in the Knesset or Congress, those who love truth and justice will not back down in the face of attempts at the sort of tyranny that rears its head around the world now and endangered democracy a century ago.

The Israeli people are in the streets precisely to express their will that a democratic way of life remains in Israel. Yet, it's still sad because we see a people, our brothers and sisters, fighting with one another once more. It's equally hard to revel in moves toward justice here at home when we know what follows.

Built out of the ruins, on the week of Tisha B'Av—and every week—we pray that the rebuilding continues. We say, "Rebuild the temple," and we're not talking about the actual Temple. We're talking about our people. As long as people, here or in Israel, insist that democracy prevail, it's not a dream, *ein zo agadah*.

A friend of mine who lives in Jerusalem recently changed his Facebook cover picture to a banner mounted on his children's school. It said three simple words: "*Anashim achim anachnu*," which roughly translates to "People—we are brothers."

We can laugh at people's stumbles and falls. We can point and say "Gotcha" at indictments or plea bargains, but it's not going to heal us. It's not going to rebuild us after all the fires go out.

We have to view one another as brothers and sisters. We have to see each other less as rivals and enemies with whom to combat but as fellow human beings, as citizens of this country and of this planet.

Today begins what's called Shabbat *Nachamu*, which means comfort. It comes from this week's haftarah portion: *Nachamu ami, yomar aleichem, dabru al lev Yerushalayim, vekaru eleiha*. Comfort my people, say unto them; speak to the heart of Jerusalem, proclaim comfort unto her. May we, and all our people everywhere, come to experience comfort, consolation and peace.