On Exploding Pagers & Jewish Sovereignty
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One of my rabbi friends sent a text to our group the other day: "How are you going to deal with the exploding-pagers story this Shabbat?"

I imagine that right about now, in congregations all over the world, rabbis are giving their own particular take on it. Here's mine.

The pinpoint detonation of thousands of Hezbollah terrorists' pagers and walkie-talkies over two days last week caused a major disruption in Hezbollah's communication system.

But, while this act of spy-craft might have been unprecedented in its complexity, this kind of attack on an enemy's rudimentary messaging infrastructure is not new in Jewish history.

There's actually a story about it in the Talmud, believe it or not. But in that case, we, the Jews, were the flummoxed victims. (Beitzah 4b)

Back in the day, before there was Microsoft or Google, the Jewish community relied on the ancient rabbinic court (the Sanhedrin) to set the calendar. Since they followed a lunar calendar, the court determined when a new month started by taking testimony from witnesses who saw the new moon in the sky.

Once the court declared that the new month had begun, the announcement would be made in Jerusalem for all to hear, and they would flip their calendars and mark down when the next holiday would fall.

Now, this system worked fine when pretty much everyone lived in the Land of Israel, which, as you know, is so geographically small that the announcement could spread quickly.

But, later on, when the Jewish people were scattered throughout the wider region, the Sanhedrin had to come up with a new system to get word to the farther reaches of the Jewish community that the new month had arrived.

And pagers wouldn't work because they hadn't been invented yet. So, what did they come up with?

They figured out that a guy in Jerusalem could stand on the highest hill and wave a burning torch, and that would signal to people in surrounding communities that the new month had begun. Then people in those outskirts communities would go stand on hilltops and wave torches, and the Jews who lived even further out would see them, and then they'd do the same, and so on. And pretty quickly, the whole Jewish world would know it was time.

And that system worked well. That is, until the Samaritans came along.

Have you heard of the Samaritans? Maybe the best-known Samaritan is the "Good Samaritan" from the New Testament.

But did you ever wonder why he's called the "good" Samaritan? Well, because most of the Samaritans were up to no-good—so if you came across one who was nice, well, that was worth pointing out.

Anyway, the reason these Samaritans were up to no-good was because, although they were Israelites, they followed their own distinct religion—Samaritanism—and they disliked us, and we disliked them.

So, as part of this family feud, the Samaritans decided to mess with the Jews' communications system. They started lighting torches and waving them from hilltops at odd times, which, of course, caused all kinds of chaos and confusion for the Jewish community. No one knew what month it was anymore, and they had no idea when the holidays were. It was an untenable situation.

The Jews were forced to shift to a new, lower-tech way of spreading the word about the calendar. They started using a messenger system, like an ancient pony express.

But, of course, the messengers were slower than the torch system, so it took longer for people in the boonies to get word of the new month. Maybe days, or even weeks, would go by. Maybe the messenger would get attacked by bandits and never even get there. This was a problem, and the community could come up with only one solution.

For some astronomical reason I don't understand, a lunar month can be either 29 or 30 days; and, at least in pre-calendar times, people didn't know from month to month which it would be. Some months might be 29 days, some might be 30—meaning that the new month would begin either on the 30th day in the sequence (following a 29-day month) or on the 31st day of the sequence (following a 30-day month).

Knowing the correct start of the month was important because that's how you knew when to celebrate the holidays. For example, the Torah says Passover is the 15th of Nissan, but you can't know when the 15th is unless you know when the first is, right?

So, here's what they did: They decided that Jews in the diaspora would observe two days of the holiday instead of one, just to play it safe. That way, if the 30th day in the sequence was actually the first day of the new month, they would celebrate Passover 15 days later. But just in case the first day of the new month was in fact the *31st* day in the sequence, they would treat 15 days after *that* as Passover, too.

This is why Orthodox and Conservative Jews celebrate two days of *chag*, even to this day.

But wait; something's not adding up, you say? Don't we have precise, scientifically calculated calendars in the 21st century that tell us exactly when the holidays are? Yes, of course, we do.

(In fact, that's why we Reform Jews don't observe the second day of festivals. We do observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, but that's a different story for another day.)

So, why do so many Jews still keep the practice of two-day holidays? It's a great question.

Already in Talmudic times, the calendar was scientifically determined, and the Jewish people had long stopped using the pony-express method to announce the new month. So, the sages ask, can't we stop doing this second-day-of-the-festival thing, since we really don't need it anymore?

But the Talmud says: No, keep doing it. Why? Because you never know; an antisemitic government could come into power where you live and cause confusion about the calendar, and you'd find yourself once again in a position of not knowing the proper time.

(Now, if you think it's rabbinic paranoia to imagine that some wicked government would come in and change the calendar, you should read about what Ayatollah Khomeini did to the Iranian calendar after the Islamic Revolution, and what Gaddafi did to the calendar in Libya. Seriously, look it up.)

But here's the point: The sages understood that, in the diaspora, Jewish life would never be fully secure because we would always be at the mercy of non-Jewish rulers. Only when we are sovereign in Eretz Yisrael do we control our own destiny.

Though the sages of the Talmud longed for restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the Land, it remained for them an unattainable aspiration. But today, with the State of Israel a reality, we are showing the world what the sages only dreamed of: a world in which the Jewish people are not at the mercy of anyone.

In this week's Haftarah, God says through the prophet Isaiah: "*Lo yishama od hamas b'artzekha*—'Hamas' shall no longer be heard in your land." (*Isaiah* 60:18)

"*Hamas*" here doesn't mean the terrorist group, although the verse is kind of perfect in that way. "*Hamas*" is a Hebrew word that means "chaos" and "violence."

Isaiah's prophecy is that the Jewish people, restored to our ancient homeland, will finally escape the *hamas*—the chaos and violence—that plagues us whenever Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael is gone from the world.

We find this in the biblical book of *Isaiah* because Judaism understands that self-determination and freedom from existential *hamas* are not only political aspirations; they are spiritual ones, too.

Now, it's true that Isaiah's vision has not been fully realized. The State of Israel is no messianic society. It lives with plenty of chaos and violence, both external and internal. October 7 is proof that we are still far off from the fulfillment of God's promise.

And yet, the Jewish people today are sovereign in our own Land.

Israel has suffered a lot of pain recently, but the pager and walkie-talkie explosions—like other incredibly sophisticated intelligence operations Israel has carried out in recent weeks—send a powerful message to its enemies and to the world at large:

We are here to stay. We decide our destiny, not you. And we're not going back.