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A few minutes ago I alluded to the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the dangerous odds that a still young State of Israel faced as enemy forces attacked it from all sides. The new movie *Golda*, starring the inimitable Helen Mirren as Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, examines the events of October 6-25 of that year, as Israel scrambled to respond to a massive attack while hampered by uncertain and even conflicting intelligence, warnings from the United States which didn't want to take any steps that might threaten its access to oil from the Arabian peninsula, and a certain degree of hubris born of Israel's enormous success six years earlier in the Six Day War. The movie portrays the horror and shock of the mounting Israeli losses in the early days of the war, as well as the anguish of its leaders in the face of an attack that posed an existential threat to the very survival of this fragile, young country.

In one pivotal scene Israel tries to send a rescue mission to extract 400 Israeli soldiers whose position in the Sinai had been overrun by Egyptian forces. The rescue mission is a catastrophe – Egypt had anticipated the move and lured the Israeli soldiers into an ambush which led to even more devastating losses. In the movie, Meir gathers with Israel's military leaders and advisors, one of whom suggests responding by launching a second rescue mission. Meir shakes her head dismissively, remarking the only thing they'd be trying to rescue if they made another attempt was the reputations of the people in the room, and she was not willing to risk more lives for that. It's a gutsy portrayal of a leader putting her people first, ahead of her own personal and political interests and willing to make sacrifices and even take the fall for the good of her country, as she emphatically does once again before the close of the film when she refuses to disclose massive intelligence failures and operational errors by a senior advisor and decides to accept the blame for the war's losses entirely on herself.

There's a reason we find films like *Golda* inspiring – we want to believe the best of our leaders, that even when they don't have all the answers and don't make the right decisions they are acting out of a genuine desire to ensure their country's well being – especially when the very survival of the country is at stake. During the time of the Yom Kippur War, a key part of Israel's success in the face of existential danger was not just the leadership but how united the country was, allowing them to stand strong in the face of overwhelming odds to overcome those who sought to destroy them. Today, as many of you know, Israel is anything but united and its most pressing threats largely aren't coming from the outside. Rather, deep internal divisions that have been brewing for a

long time – whether it be the ultra-Orthodox Jews pitted against secular ones, the settlers pitted against those seeking a two-state solution, or Jews from Mizrachi heritage who for generations have been demeaned by the Ashkenazi elites – are coming to a head. These deep divisions are tearing the country apart. And there is a clear sense that rather than working to heal these divisions, rather than trying to find a way to bring the country together for the common good as Golda Meir did, the current leadership is deliberately and cynically pursuing policies that are actively contributing to that fracturing of common purpose and shared Israeli identity that has kept Israel so unified and resolute since its founding. And so many who love Israel are gravely concerned that the current challenges tearing the country apart pose as great a threat to Israel as any other it has faced in its 75-year existence, as entire segments of Israeli society turn against each other with deep bitterness and even viciousness.

For those of you who aren't as familiar with what has been taking place in Israel over the past months, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – or Bibi, as he is universally known in Israel – was reelected in December in a very tight race, having been ousted from power eighteen months earlier as his coalition fell apart due to corruption charges he was facing. Netanyahu, as anyone will tell you, is a survivor, and so was determined to put together a more stable coalition this time to keep him in power. Why a coalition? Israel's system of government, unlike the US, is a parliamentary democracy where there are many political parties and any prime minister needs to assemble a coalition of parties who agree to support his or her administration. In practice this means that with a closely divided population like what exists in Israel right now, the government needs to bring in a number of smaller parties to reach the majority of the 120 seats in the Knesset. So, while these smaller – and often more niche and extreme parties – don't represent a very large portion of the population, they can end up having an outsize influence on the prime minister who is beholden to them for his position at the head of the government.

And so Netanyahu reached out to parties headed by people whose positions represent an extreme edge of Israeli society. People like Betzalel Smotrich, a conspiracy theorist who has said that the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin was an inside job, advocated the forced transfer of Palestinians out of Israel, and declared that gay pride parades are worse than bestiality; and like Itamar Ben Gvir, a disciple of Meir Kahane who long kept a portrait in his home of Baruch Goldstein, an Israeli who gunned down 29 Palestinians while they prayed in a mosque, who has led provocative marches to the Dome of the Rock, and recently declared that a particular Palestinian village should be wiped off the map as retribution after two of its residents were involved in an attack on Israelis. Due to the strange mathematics of Israel's parliamentary system, these two have been brought into the government and given the powerful portfolios of Minister of Finance and National Security respectively.

These politicians and others like them had already put great strain on the relationship between Israel and Jews living in the Diaspora – not only because of their

extreme positions and statements about Palestinians but also because they have moved to delegitimize the non-Orthodox who, after all, make up the vast majority of American Jews, making derogatory remarks about Reform and Conservative Jews and looking to restrict the religious rights of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel.

Things really came to a head in March as Netanyahu tried to move ahead with a plan to restrict the Supreme Court through a number of judicial reforms designed to neutralize its ability to stand up to legislation that violates Israel's Basic Laws – its equivalent to a constitution. The proposed reforms led to the mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Israelis taking to the streets to oppose the one curb on the power of the religious right and ultra-nationalists to push through whatever draconian measures they please. Israeli Army reservists also protested in large numbers by refusing to show up for their reserve duty; they are concerned that without a legitimate Israeli Supreme Court they would be subject to prosecution by the International Criminal Court for carrying out their orders. The pressure at that time was so intense that Netanyahu put his plans on hold for a few months, but then in July started moving ahead with portions of them, including pushing through a law that would significantly restrict the Court's power to rule on the government's action – I say 'would restrict' because the Court actually held the first hearing into this law last Tuesday... heard a challenge to a law limiting its ability to hear challenges: it's easy to see that no matter how the Court rules the country is on the brink of a constitutional crisis that will be extremely challenging to survive given the deep divisions and levels of mistrust right now.

For those who love Israel – and I unequivocally count myself in that number – watching these recent developments has been heartbreaking. The vast majority of the Israeli public opposes these steps, but due to the parliamentary system Netanyahu has the power to ram them through – as long as he keeps his coalition together by continuing to make more and more concessions to its most extreme elements to keep them in the fold, which he has done. The inspiring peaceful protests of hundreds of thousands of Israelis – in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Beersheva, so many cities around the country – have been met with vicious rhetoric by opposing politicians, including calls for armed counter-protestors to attack those peacefully gathering. One Netanyahu loyalist and Likkud party official playing off the perception that most of those opposed to the reforms are from Ashkenazi background, horrifyingly declared at a demonstration that he was glad six million Ashkenazi Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and he hopes for six million more. I shudder even to repeat these words: from the vilest of anti-Semites it would be repugnant and despicable... but what can you even say when these unimaginable sentiments are proudly trumpeted by a Jew?

This is the extent of the deep divisions being fomented and exploited by the current government to gain a political advantage – the diametric opposite of the self-sacrifice for the sake of unity and the greater good embodied by Golda Meir. There is a struggle for the heart and soul of Israel currently underway and everyone knows it. The religious right

and the settler movement sees this as their opportunity to fundamentally change the character of Israel, while the broader public sees this as their last chance to save Israel as a democratic and pluralistic state.

These are not just theoretical or hypothetical terms I'm throwing around. One founding tenet of Israel, for example, that we're all familiar with is the Law of Return. It's the principle that anyone Jewish has an absolute right to immigrate to Israel and become a citizen. How is 'Jewish' defined? Anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent. This is the standard that was chosen because it was the definition that Adolf Hitler employed when deciding who was subject to extermination in his Final Solution. And since so many countries closed their borders to Jewish refugees desperately trying to get out of Europe at the start of World War II, Israel established itself as a safe haven for anyone who would have been considered Jewish at that tragic time. The Law of Return was passed unanimously in July 1950 by Israel's first Knesset and has been a bedrock principle ever since: Israel is a home for all Jews. But Ben Gvir and the religious parties that support him have proposed radically restricting the Law of Return to anyone who can prove that they have a Jewish mother – a halachic definition of Jewishness that is completely at odds with the history and *raison d'être* of the State of Israel, and a definition that clearly articulates the idea that some kinds of Jews count, some kinds of Jews are 'legitimate,' and others – many others – are not.

This sort of abdication of Israel's core values, of being a homeland for all Jews is devastating for those who love Israel. As is the inclusion in prominent positions of figures so extreme that it has led the ADL – the ADL! – to denounce Jewish racism in the government. And the way that the current government is looking to rein in democratic institutions and protections and to install a more authoritarian system that restricts minority rights is anathema to those who see those impulses at work around the world, and even in parts of this country.

I know there are those who think that Jews outside of Israel don't have the right to comment or weigh in on what happens in Israel. I profoundly disagree, and believe we have a deep stake in and connection to whatever happens in Israel. In an open letter published in the Times of Israel several months ago, leading centrist Israeli thinkers and life-long Zionists Matti Friedman, Daniel Gordis, and Yossi Klein Helevy called for American Jews to engage and make their voices heard because the proposed steps will so radically alter the fundamental character of the State of Israel and its relationship with the Diaspora that they argue Jews outside of Israel cannot afford to stay silent. And when our Distinguished Speaker last spring, Ruth Calderon – an Israeli thinker and writer and former member of the Knesset – spoke to us in March near the height of the street protests which forced the initial pause to the judicial reforms and which have continued unabated since then, she made the same appeal, calling on all Diaspora Jews who care deeply about Israel to get involved and take a stand. Because what is going on is both scary and distressing – with tens of thousands of Israelis peacefully protesting to try to

save the soul of their beloved country while extremist politicians call on their followers to turn out in force and with weapons; when democratic institutions are being attacked and the core values of the country are being undermined; when promoters of hateful positions hold government posts; when the American Jewish community – Israel’s strongest and most important source of support – is being consistently antagonized and denigrated; and when those in power aren’t even making a pretense of looking for peace and a lasting resolution to the Palestinian conflict – when these things are all taking place at one time, we need to engage. Israelis are turning out in the streets by the tens of thousands to try to make their voices heard and they are looking for, *asking* for Diaspora Jews to get involved because they love their country and deeply fear for its future. And if we love Israel as well, we need to say what happens in Israel matters to us, matters to us deeply, and that we have a vital stake and role to play.

This can of course include donating to organizations that support efforts to block the proposed reforms or to organizations promoting a more democratic, pluralistic, and equitable society. But it can also involve attending rallies organized by Israelis living in the US, such as the ones held every Sunday in Washington Square Park put together by UnXeptable, an organization founded by Israelis currently living in the US that supports the protests within Israel; or the one I attended outside the UN this past Friday where more than 2000 Israeli and Americans who love Israel came together to protest Netanyahu’s speech to the General Assembly and which featured speakers like Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue and Israeli Nobel prize winner Dani’el Kahneman, where the plaza was filled with Israeli flags, chants for democracy, and the strains of Hatikvah. It can include sharing your perspectives with American elected officials, and it should definitely include staying up to date on what is happening in Israel from a variety of sources, and not just American ones; seeing what Israelis themselves have to say about what is going on in their own country through Israeli media and podcasts. And to be clear, the people who are organizing the rallies and the protests aren’t people who oppose Israel, who are trying to tear it down or make it look bad; these are people who love Israel and want to see it survive and thrive as a welcoming home to all Jews, who uphold the vision of Israel’s founders to create a Jewish and democratic state which is under such dangerous and divisive attacks that even the Jewish Federations of North America has registered their concerns with the Israeli government, noting in a public letter that “such a dramatic change to the Israeli system of governance will have far-reaching consequences in North America, both within the Jewish community and in the broader society.”

Connected to the idea that we all have a vital role to play, that each of us matters, one recurring motif from the movie *Golda* that I found deeply moving – although I confess I don’t know if it has a basis in historical fact – is that every time Meir learns about the death of more Israeli soldiers she writes down the number of fresh losses in a small notebook she carries with her in her breast pocket, next to her heart. Recording those

losses is a demonstration of how much she cares for the young men who are being sent into harm's way to fight the invading armies, and how personally she takes the burden of each and every death. In that way it's a very powerful image for this Day of Atonement, where our liturgy envisions God surveying all humanity and writing down our fates for the coming year. Here Golda Meir's pocket notebook stands in for the Book of Life; and we hope that God would feel as much sorrow for all of our losses and pain as Meir demonstrates in Helen Mirren's powerful depiction.

Recording all the deaths in a notebook illustrates not only Golda Meir's concern about the people she is charged with leading, but also her connection to them. And this is the piece that feels so tragically absent today in Israel, where the leadership seems committed to exacerbating divisions as a political tool rather than seeking to bridge or overcome them. For so much of its young history, Israel was united and that unity gave it its strength – a lesson that has been true for the Jewish people throughout our long and tortured history. In the Yom Kippur War, begun 50 years ago today, it was that unity that engendered a sense of a shared stake in the outcome of the war and a resolve to fight and succeed in the face of overwhelming odds.

And it is that unity that is so tragically absent today as Israel seems to face this new wave of challenges – one whose main threats at this pivotal moment come not from without but from within. It is hard to see a society that is so deeply divided against itself, for a country that is stuck in an intractable debate about how to deal with a Palestinian population that has many fewer rights and freedoms than Israelis and no obvious solution, for a political system that is so dysfunctional it has led to five elections in less than four years, for a land I deeply love and where I have lived many years, where I got engaged and danced and celebrated and brought our family to live, which has the most amazing people and history and landscape and culture and is so small and vital, and is poised at such a precarious moment in its history.

It was in the wake of the Yom Kippur War that Naomi Shemer wrote her iconic song "Al Kol Eleh," literally 'For All of These.' That war dramatically changed Israel's sense of itself, ushering in a *new* sense of vulnerability and awareness of its own fragility. From the heady euphoria of its founding and initial improbable successes, the Yom Kippur War catapulted Israel into a more complicated and mature stage of its development, and the country today is in many ways still living in the shadow of that war and the doubts and divisions it first raised. On Yom Kippur, when we yearn toward a sense of wholeness and repair in the face of the brokenness and alienation of this world, we must extend our prayers to include Israel as well: to a country that is trying to figure out how to live up to the lofty ideals of its founding, whose divisions are bare and raw and painful, whose people are fighting so fiercely for its soul that tens of thousands have been rallying every Saturday night for more than nine months. We must remember that Yom Kippur is about choosing connection and hope over alienation and resignation in our relationships with each other and with God, and we must do the same when it comes to the State of Israel,

opening ourselves up to fear and pain of disappointment to give us the impetus to become a part of the solution. Not expecting Israel to be perfect any more than we can expect ourselves to be since, as we are keenly aware on this Day of Atonement, perfection is unattainable; but rather for Israel to be the best possible version of its complicated, challenging, contradictory, vibrant, and precious self.