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Simchat Torah and the Jewish Love of Life

Hamas started its war on the holiday that commemorates the ‘Joy of the Law.’

By Meir Soloveichik

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Fifty years after the Yom Kippur War, Israelis face an attack launched on another holiday—Simchat Torah, which brings the festival season to a close. As in 1973, Israel’s enemies took advantage of Israeli soldiers celebrating with their families at home. As in 1973, the war shattered a feeling of complacency in the Jewish state—five decades ago because of the stunning success of the Six Day War; today because of the nation’s remarkable missile-defense system, the Iron Dome.

Amid the striking similarities, there is an important difference. In 1973, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat launched his war to strengthen his negotiating hand as he pursued an elaborate geopolitical strategy that entailed an alliance with the U.S., detachment from the Soviets, and eventually peace with Israel.

Hamas seeks the death of every Jew, a goal stated explicitly in its charter, which asserts as a religious obligation: “The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews . . . , when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say, ‘Oh Muslims, Oh Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.’ ” That sentiment drove Hamas’s terrorists as they hunted down, tortured and murdered soldiers and civilians, elderly and children.

The juxtaposition of Jewish celebration and war underlines the conflict’s civilizational import. Simchat Torah, the “Joy of the Law,” marks the year’s

completion of the Torah, the five books of Moses, which is read aloud weekly in synagogue. Near the end of Deuteronomy, in a passage read late in the cycle, is one of Moses' last exhortations: "Therefore choose life, so that thou and thy children may live."

The verse captures Jewish history, including the story of modern Israel. Among the horrific images of massacres and abductions, I was struck by a video of an Israeli reservist, called up to army service, watching via Zoom the circumcision of his 8-day-old son. He pronounced the traditional liturgy over his phone, concluding with one of the most poignant blessings in Jewish life: "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, . . . who has kept us alive, allowed us to endure, and allowed us to reach this moment."

The video epitomizes what is at stake. Israel's culture cherishes life, while Hamas and its allies worship death. Years ago Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed: "We have discovered how to hit the Jews where they are the most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win, because they love life and we love death." Hamas official Ali Baraka sounded this same note this week, adding: "We consider our dead to be martyrs. The thing any Palestinian desires the most is to be martyred for the sake of Allah, defending his land."

Jews do love life, especially because of the fragility of our history. We celebrate on Simchat Torah the completion of the Torah and the opportunity to begin it again, seeing in the continuing cycle a symbol of our people's eternity. The Jew, Tolstoy reflected, "has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire and has illuminated with it the entire world. . . . He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither sword nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, . . . he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, and who transmitted it to the rest of the world—such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as is eternity itself."

Anti-Semites, from those murdering children on the streets of Israel to those celebrating Hamas on the streets of New York, are driven by jealousy and hatred of a people that doesn't die. They are convinced they will finally succeed in destroying the Jews.

They will fail, thanks to the fortitude of the Jewish state and the providential nature of Jewish history.

For many years after Yom Kippur in 1973, Jews in Israel marking Judaism's holiest day remembered where they were when the siren sounded, the reserves were called up, and loved ones bid goodbye to soldiers, some of whom they never saw again. Countless Jews will now mark every year the completion of the Law of Moses and remember the Simchat Torah of 2023. The celebration will be rendered more profound in the knowledge that the story of the Jewish people continues, that its enemies have failed again, that the cycle of the Torah will begin once more, and that there will be many Jewish babies' births celebrated in the year to come.

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Rockets from Gaza head toward Israel, Oct. 10. PHOTO: MAHMUD HAMS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

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