Vaera | A Start-Over Nation

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We had been enslaved for the better part of two centuries by an oppressive nation ruled by an arrogant tyrant. To humble the Egyptians and their conceited king, Hashem launched a fusillade of 10 plagues. The first volley struck the waters of Egypt, transforming fresh water into blood, creating a severe water shortage, while also destabilizing the agrarian economy. The Egyptian psyche was roiling, and its economy was battered. Death was in the air, as the landscape was drenched in red.

Beyond depleting the water supply, this supernatural calamity also possessed profound symbolism. This outbreak of bloody water was centered upon the Nile, the national symbol of Egyptian pride. Egypt is situated in an arid continent which perennially suffers water shortages, due to its limited rainfall and its inadequate rivers and lakes.

In this dry climate, the Nile-river has always afforded Egypt an agricultural and economic advantage over its neighbors. As irrigational techniques improved, Egypt became a fertile oasis within a parched desert.

Sefer Bereishit documents Egypt's rise to international supremacy during the ancient famine which hammered the ancient Middle East. Through advanced planning, Egypt leveraged the potential of the Nile River, transforming itself into the bread-basket of the entire region. The Nile eventually became a cultural and religious symbol, occupied Pharo's dreams and was the first place the monarch visited for his daily religious rites.

Hashem's bloody attack on their national symbol of achievement demoralized Egyptian spirit and debased Egyptian pride. Their legendary river, which had previously provided water and food, was now reduced to a reeking swamp of crawling frogs. Hashem carefully selected the iconic Nile River to begin His humiliation of Egyptian vanity.

The Modern Nile

Similarly, the terrorist attack of September 11th was carefully calibrated to inflict maximum casualties, as well as to destroy icons of Western culture. The attack on the Pentagon targeted the symbol of the American military establishment, viewed by Islamic fundamentalists as the arm of Western Imperialism. More significantly, the attack on Wall Street targeted the iconic center of Capitalism, the perceived source of Western supremacy. As Wall Street is the modern equivalent of the Nile, the collapse of the towers was just as traumatic as the bloodying of the Nile. Every successful nation establishes national icons to symbolize their source of strength. The fall of these icons is a national trauma.

Towers of Technology

On Simchat Torah we suffered a horrific tragedy, which will ripple with long-lasting effects upon our national identity. On that awful day, the initial massacre was launched by the bombing of our surveillance and communication outposts, which blinded us and severely crippled our ability to coordinate a response. Watching the explosions of these towers was painfully symbolic of our having become too reliant upon technology in our defense of this country. We assembled an army light on metal but heavy on security cameras, drones, and radar. We assumed that advanced technology could adequately protect us. We assumed wrong.

Our Story

Our military overdependence upon technology reflects something larger about our country and our culture of technology. Our state was founded by pioneers who struggled to establish a Jewish homeland in a hostile region. They fought several rounds of wars and absorbed millions of Jewish immigrants, while straining to construct a viable economy under duress. They were pioneers of spirit and carpenters of history.

Over the past twenty years our national agenda shifted. During the past two exhilarating decades we rode the euphoric wave of a technological revolution to become a military and economic superpower. Through technological innovation we penetrated Western markets, even establishing a Silicon Wadi to rival Silicon Valley. Our lead role in the technological revolution generated a massive cash inflow which drove this technological development.

Our techno-economy both improved our quality of life and strengthened national security. Additionally, these developments improved our international standing, as we became darlings of a modern world ever more dependent upon technology. Our financial and technological prosperity triggered many of the peace treaties which have partially eased tensions in our region. Riding a techno-wave provides numerous benefits.

History was repeating itself. The ancient tribe of Zevulun inhabited the coastal plain of Israel, and, as seafaring merchants, they attracted visiting tradesmen. While here for trade, the merchants visited Yerushalayim to admire our religion. Economy and trade are always portals for cultural exchange.

A New Story

However, our recent national prosperity also shifted our cultural narrative. Once pioneers, we became capitalists and entrepreneurs. Once historical heroes settling a land of legacy, we were now daring capitalists raising venture funds to fuel our spectacular economic growth. Our story changed.

When our story changed our unity began to fray. Some narratives unite us, whereas others tend to divide us. The historical narrative of our people amassing from across the globe to restore Jewish sovereignty is a unifier. It unites Jews from different backgrounds, religious outlooks, and economic levels. We all share one common past and one common destiny. We all suffered centuries of persecution and discrimination, and all dreamed of one city and one utopia. As long as we saw ourselves as reconstructors of Jewish history, we shared one common unifying story.

Changing the story unraveled our unity. Technological progress and economic prosperity are never unifying forces but sources of division. Some people and some sectors enjoy greater prosperity and advantage whereas others do not. Historically, every technological revolution created massive disparities in the distribution of wealth which ultimately foment social pressures and disharmony. The situation in Israel is no different. In hindsight, the "social equality" protests of the early 2010s foreshadowed the more rancorous social divide of the past year. Rapid financial revolutions don’t often strengthen social solidarity.

Additionally, it is difficult for a start-up nation to also be a unified nation. "Starting up" is generally accomplished by imaginative personalities who break with common convention while envisioning a different and better future. This bold expression of human spirit is, typically, an "individual" moment, rather than a collective one. Unlike history-making, money-making is a personal and individualistic agenda.

Hopefully, one of the silver linings of this war is the restoration of our unifying historical narrative. Our soldiers stand shoulder-to-shoulder, battling evil without regard for political, ethnic, or religious differences. The war has revived our one common story: to protect our homeland from those who seek to overrun us, exterminate us and annihilate Jews. The one-day Holocaust we suffered on Oct 7th reminded us of the 5-year holocaust which capped off two thousand years of Jewish suffering. Suffering a pogrom on the very sovereign Jewish state meant to protect us from these medieval like atrocities reminded us how vulnerable we continue to be. Our common historical story has been resuscitated.

One question continues to haunt every Jew: how can we lock in the current atmosphere of unity? War can jumpstart unity, but we need the *right* story to preserve it. The story that unifies all our people is the one in which we gather from across the world and from across the spectrum, to jointly rebuild Jewish history in our historic homeland. This is our collective back story. Hopefully, we will continue to read this story even while we add new ones.

We are not a "start-up" nation. We are a "start-over" nation.