THUMBS UP FOR ISRAEL
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A Roman gladiator steps into the area. He stands in front of a hundred thousand screaming citizens under a hot sun, standing in the sand of the arena at that moment in those barbaric times, he waits to do battle to entertain the bloodthirsty mob and their emperor. In that moment, as the lions roar from their cages, as the crowd roars with amusement at his predicament, his life is reduced to only three possibilities:

- He can lose now and die.

- He can win the battle and live to fight again another day, with the grim certainty that he will have to fight again, and again, until he finally loses and dies.

- Or in that rarest of moments, perhaps he fights so wonderfully well that the mob in the stands and even the emperor turns **thumbs up** *(show it)* and the gladiator is given the one thing that everyone else in the arena already takes for granted; not riches, not a villa or any material thing. The gladiator is given a small wooden staff, the emblem of Roman citizenship and he is allowed to walk out of the stadium as the equal of everyone else. Citizenship, a status taken for granted **except by those who were denied it.**

Baruch attah adonai – thank you God for **not** making me a gladiator. Aren't we glad that we live in **MODERN** times when the people of the 21st century don't torture individuals with life and death struggles in the arena in front of a bloodthirsty mob? Yes we're much more sophisticated nowadays than those bloodthirsty barbarians back THEN.

TODAY they don't put a person in the arena,

TODAY the world is much more sophisticated.

TODAY it's done with nations.....

TODAY, a lonely gladiator stands in the arena of nations, his name is ISRAEL. He has been caught in the net of his opponents, hemmed in on all sides. The sand of this arena is the desert of the Middle East, where Israel stands alone, surrounded by the crowd of unfriendly nations as the sun seems to grow hotter and hotter.

Israel's future is seen by many to be reduced to the same three possibilities as the gladiator of long ago:

- Israel MIGHT lose now and just… die. Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran; choose your

sworn enemy. Any or all could finally succeed and push Israel into the sea. Its cities and sanctuaries laid to ruin, a second… holocaust. Will the world care? Will it make a difference if once again 6 million Jews are reduced to dust and ashes?

- Israel MIGHT WIN for now and living to fight again another day (like in 1948, and again and again… in six more wars and two Intifadas since then), and again in the future, until at last the string runs out and the nation is no more.

- Or in that rarest of moments, perhaps Israel at last performs so wonderfully well in the World arena that it MIGHT WIN OVER the mob of angry nations that surround it.

Even the United Nations, cast as it is in the role of Caesar, turns thumbs up *(show it)*. Israel is at last given what all the other 200 nations on this planet take for granted: EQUAL STATUS AS A FREE, PEACEFUL INDEPENDENT NATION, *Lihyot Am Chofshi B'artzenu* to be a free people in our own land, a citizen among the nations at long last.

PAUSE

It must be said from the beginning that losing is not an option. Shelby Steel writes:

"There is a real war of civilizations happening in the world today, and the front lines of that battlefield run right through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. We must never forget that Israel no matter its flaws and failings is on the right side in the battle against Islamic extremism and terror. The belief that the democratic world can sacrifice Israel in order to placate extremism is profoundly wrong and dangerous."[i]

We, as Jews, on this High Holy Day, must recognize Israel's faults, but we must, we have to, we are compelled to be her friend and advocate. The prophet declares, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem may my right hand lose its strength." We must not abandon Israel to world opinion. **We must, we have to be the voice in her corner that says no matter what we support you and defend you.**

This is not easy to do today. Some are shocked by the images they see on TV. Others are just tired of the conflict all together- they want normalcy no matter the cost. Some might feel it is hopeless – see the struggle as a stalemate, a fight that could go on forever.

But Israel cannot fight forever. Indeed the "fight forever scenario" is tearing the nation and the Jewish people apart. Israel is increasingly caricatured as a militarized theocracy epitomized by the IDF's olive green uniforms; the ultra-

Orthodox Haredim's black garb, and by the red faced settlers who defiantly proclaim to Israeli police, "we shall not move from one inch of this land."

Against this background, the Shas and the ultra religious parties pit Jew against Jew, looking to strengthen their political positions while they cast doubt on the Jewish roots of any who don't subscribe to their practice of Judaism. It is a toxic mix.

As Israel fights this war without end more and more young Israelis are getting exemptions from the Army, or simply fleeing the country altogether. Did you ever wonder why Los Angeles has the largest concentration of Israelis anywhere outside the land of Israel? It's not our football team.

Likewise more and more American Jews are finding it increasingly difficult to support an Israel they feel acts in conflict with their Jewish values. It should be clear to all of us that this cannot go on, because even as we win… we lose. **I worry that as we fight to save the Jewish state we are losing our Jewish soul.**

Like the gladiator, Israel cannot fight forever. Yet it cannot afford to lose. It has really only one option, one hope – to convince the world – that it is worthy.

And Israel will never convince the world if it cannot convince you.
We obviously share that hope, but it will remain a mere hope if we as Jews don't also share the responsibility to make it a reality.

Israel's very presence, its miraculous existence would seem reason enough to support her, but it is not for most of us.

From some of us Israel receives a thumbs up, and from others a thumbs down, but from many, far too many it gets only the shrug of indifference *(do shrug here)*. And if Israel can't win the full support of a room full of Jews, how can it possibly hope to win the support it needs in the arena of nations?

That great voice of Jewish morality, Elie Wiesel, observed that the world is divided into three kinds of people:

10% who are BAD: abusive, cruel, and evil to others. .
10% who are genuinely GOOD, seeking to make the world a better place.

AND the remaining

80% who **WANT** to be GOOD -- but are silent

They commit what he and our tradition call the greatest sin of all, the sin of indifference.

What is most shocking to me, and might also be to you is that much of that indifference is amongst American Jews! A recent study asked American Jews whether the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy for them. Among American Jews 65 and older 20% said that Israel's destruction would not be a personal tragedy in their lives. And among those 35 and younger – the number grows to 50%.[ii]

Yes you heard me right, *20%* of older Jews and *50%* of younger Jews are indifferent about Israel. The most charitable thing I can say is that **they take Israel survival for granted**.

Peter Beinart wrote about this indifference in his assumption-shattering essay this spring in the New York Review of Books. He cites a recent study of what Jewish students thought about Israel.

> "Six times we have brought Jewish youth together as a group to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel," he reported. "Six times the topic of Israel **did not come up** until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish youth used the word 'them' rather than 'us' to describe the situation."[iii]
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> Asked to name the first thing that they associate with the word, "Israel", many American Jews conjure up images and words such as, "Palestinians", "War", "Conflict", "Apartheid", "Occupation", "Checkpoints", "Refugees", "Intifada", "Bombings" and "Danger"[iv].

These words do not define Israel, they cannot define it – not for us and not for the world. The word **ISRAEL** is holy, it is the name God gave Jacob, and it is the name Moses gave our people. The name Moses gave to **US**, B'nai Yisrael – the Children of Israel, that is you and me. Whisper it to yourself….**ISRAEL**! So rich with meaning, so rich with promise, with hope. The hope of 2,000 years.

The prophet declares, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem may my right hand lose its strength." Have we forgotten, have we grown indifferent?
Beinart continues that the root cause of this indifference is a Jewish obsession with victimhood. And I think he is right, for far too long and far too often we have relied on the horrific images of the holocaust to be the beginning, middle and end of the argument for why we and the world should care about Israel.

Seeing Israel only through the lens of victimhood lies at the heart of why Zionism is dying among Young American Jews – particularly Reform Jews.

Beinart goes on to frame the current situation:

> "It simply bears no relationship to their lived experience, or what they have seen of Israel. Yes, Israel faces threats from Hezbollah and Hamas. Yes, Israelis understandably worry

> about a nuclear Iran. But the dilemmas you face when you possess dozens or hundreds of nuclear weapons, and your adversary, however despicable, may acquire one, are not the dilemmas of the Warsaw Ghetto. The year 2010 is not, as Benjamin Netanyahu has claimed, 1938. The drama of Jewish victimhood—a drama that feels natural to many Jews who lived through 1938, 1948, or even 1967—strikes most of today's young American Jews as [a] farce."[v]

Young American Jews have a point. Israel is *not* weak, it is extremely powerful. Indeed it is the exertion of that power that causes Israel's enemies to re-cast the Jewish State in a new light, proclaiming Israel as a villain and bully. The Gaza Flotilla incident is a recent example of this.

These enemies want to de-legitimize Israel – to turn it into a pariah state, to equate Israel's security situation with apartheid, its settlements and cities with colonialism. Musicians cancel concerts in Israel, universities argue for divestment, and Israeli products are taken off store shelves. Where is the voice of reason that calls out the hypocrisy of this dynamic? Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, and yet somehow Israel is the bad guy and the totalitarian regimes that surround it are the good guys? Given that, it's easy to understand why a gladiator seeks safety behind weapons and armor.

Israel can't win and it can't lose. It can't afford to keep on fighting and winning and it can't afford to lose even once. It cannot rely on victimhood to pull the world's heart strings in its defense and it cannot afford to alienate young American Jews as it tries to maintain the status quo.

Israel has really only one choice – to convince the world – to convince us that it is worthy. What will it take? What must it do to wake us from our silence and indifference – for if those of us sitting in this room, in this arena will not vote thumbs up for Israel – **then why should the world?**

- **Thumbs up for Israel** *because* it stands in the arena, because it fights with courage and integrity. Founded on Jewish values and ideals – it lives those values every day as best it can in the toughest neighborhood in the world.

- **Thumbs up for Israel** because it is a leader in science and medicine, because it is building an electric car that will free the world of its dependence on fossil fuel and green technologies that are saving our planet.

- **Thumbs up for Israel** because its doctors treat hundreds of children with heart conditions from the poorest countries around the world. Because those same doctors regularly perform life saving operations without

discrimination on Jews and Arabs alike.

- **Thumbs up for Israel** because it supports women's rights, gay rights and human rights.

- **Thumbs up for Israel** because it is a nation like every other with flaws and shortcomings and yet unlike the nations that seek its destruction it addresses those problems through democratic principles and a free and open press.

- **Thumbs up for Israel**, because of a Haitian baby born in an Israel field hospital on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince Haiti. Twenty-hours after the earthquake devastated the tiny impoverished country half a world away Israel was the first on the ground with direct aid. Israel sent an entire mobile surgical hospital, tents, doctors, nurses and rescue workers. And when a 20 year Haitian mother, whose father and siblings were missing in the rubble gave birth to her new baby boy, she looked around saw the Blue and White Star of David, saw the Jewish doctors and nurses tending to her care, she saw hope in the midst of despair. And she named her baby boy…? *You know the story, what did she name him? She named him Israel!*

Two thousand years ago, decisions like this were left to a mob of barbarians influenced mostly by a lust for blood. Today we're not watching one individual try to survive, but an entire nation, the most special nation that ever was or ever will be. The mob decided a gladiator's fate by this *(thumb down)* or THIS *(thumb up).* Don't let Israel's fate be decided by this *(shrug).* By your indifference

"If I forget thee O Jerusalem may my right hand lose its strength."

Does your right hand still work?

Is it strong?

Can you raise it up?

Then raise it up, raise it high for all to see, for every Jew to see, for the world to see.

Pledge with me now on this Holiest of Holy days that you will not be indifferent to Israel; that you will not forget Jerusalem. That you will use your hand, your head, your heart, your voice to convince your friends, your children, your co-workers, indeed through the internet and email you will try to convince the world not to be indifferent to Israel.

Israel stands in the arena, it has earned its place among the nations of the world; it looks to you, the American Jewish community, your voice in the area will decide its fate. You cannot remain indifferent; how do you vote? *(thumbs up)*

[i] Shelby Steele

[ii] Daniel Gordis

[iii] Frank Luntz

[iv] Daniel Gordis

[v] Peter Beinart