

Commentary

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A Jewish Moment Without Parallel

Jewish Commentary

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‘WE LIVE IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES.” IT IS A PHRASE THAT IS ubiquitous in geopolitical discussions, and it is almost always incorrect. In 1988, Justice Antonin Scalia served as the commencement speaker for his son’s high school graduation, and he emphasized that the common insistence on the uniqueness of the contemporary moment was a preposterous platitude. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “you should not leave Langley High School thinking that you face challenges that are at all, in any important sense, unprecedented....The challenges faced by different societies at different times take different forms....But in substance they are the same, the forces of nature and the forces of man.”

To those who might suggest that the threat of nuclear war posed an unprecedented challenge, the justice had a ready reply:



If you were a teenager graduating from the Priam Memorial High School, in Troy, about 1500 B.C., with an army of warlike Greeks encamped all around the city walls, and if you knew that losing the war would mean, as it did, that the city would be utterly destroyed, its men killed, its women and children sold into slavery, I doubt that that prospect was any less terrible to you than the prospect of the destruction of the world. It was all of the world you ever used anyway. Your country, your family, your friends, your entire society. The thought that other societies, at least, would go on was of no more comfort to the Trojans—or later, to the Carthaginians, who were also utterly destroyed, or the MacDonald Clan, which was massacred at Glencoe—than it is of comfort to you that if this world is incinerated, well, it's good to know there may be other ones.

Scalia was, of course, correct. And yet: To study Benjamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Washington is to realize that the Jewish state, and therefore the Jewish people, finds itself in a moment unprecedented in its millennia-long history. For parallels, we must search not standard historical records, but the stories of sacred scripture; and even these striking similarities ultimately reveal the unique nature of our age.

Consider: As Netanyahu arrived in Washington, even his mode of travel, the *Wings of Zion* plane that is now the Air Force One of the Jewish state, reflected the fact that, while Israel may be a country of a mere 9 million people, it is, militarily and technologically, a major power. Israel's prime minister was the first world leader invited to the White House by the most powerful person on earth upon his ascension to the presidency. At the White House, the president of the United States held forth in a press conference that—however else one interprets it—made clear that the administration was rejecting the pious platitudes regarding the “two-state solution” that has dominated discussions about the Middle East. The war of the past 15 months has been filled with sacrifice and heartbreak. But it has also resulted in the shattering of the Iranian axis, leaving Israel in a position that makes it the unqualifiedly strongest actor in the region. When was the last time in history that a Jewish polity found itself in such a position?

The answer: around 3,000 years ago.

There have been two sovereign Jewish commonwealths before this one. The second, founded by the Hasmonean family commonly known as the Maccabees, was constantly buffeted and threatened by powers greater than it, and several generations after it was created, it lost its independence to Rome. In a certain sense, that independent Jewish state of the second century B.C.E. could be compared to Israel in the 1950s, when it faced a hostile Soviet Union and engaged an America that still did not sell it arms, and whose connection to the Jewish state was nothing like it is today.

To what, then, can the Israel of our moment be compared? Not to Solomon's kingdom, the most secure and powerful moment in Jewish history, when the Temple crowned Jerusalem and "Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba." But it is, perhaps, most similar to the age of David.

Like the current Israel, the Israel of David's age faced many wars and challenges and trials; indeed, prior to David's becoming king, his own family was taken captive by Amalekites.

Like the current Israel, Jerusalem was a united capital, but lacking the Temple of David's dreams. And like the current Israel, the Davidic state created powerful alliances with others, including Phoenicia. In the midst of all the current harrowing news, it may seem strange to suggest that Jewish rule in Jerusalem is the strongest it has been since David. But that does not mean it is not true.

Here, however, is where the parallels end. Hiram, the Phoenician king of Tyre, may indeed have been a good friend of David's, but we know of no affection that Hiram's subjects held for the people Israel. Similarly, Cyrus of Persia, at the dawn of the Second Temple era, assisted in the restoration of Jerusalem, but the book of Esther reminds us that this affection was not necessarily shared by other Persians.

In contrast, perhaps the most striking feature of Netanyahu's trip to Washington is that it featured a meeting with major evangelical leaders, but not with Jewish ones, reflecting the fact that it is millions of non-Jewish Americans who make

up the heart of the America-Israel alliance. And this, in turn, reveals a fact about our moment that has no parallel in the biblical past: For the first time since the emergence of Abraham's covenant nation, there are, numerically, more Gentiles who care about the well-being of the Jewish people than there are Jewish people on this earth. We live, one might say, in unprecedented times.

Here, then, is where our moment becomes mysterious. Various aspects of Jewish existence at present seem less like the biblical *description* of what once was, and more like the biblical *prediction* of what will be. The Bible speaks of a city of Jerusalem that expands far beyond its walls, that will attract the admiration of nations. None of this is an excuse for Israel to rest on its laurels or ignore its daunting challenges. Scripture also stresses that other redemptive moments in the prophetic past have been squandered by mistakes made by Israel's leaders, or its people, just as it predicts that Israel's miraculous story will attract the ire of nations that will ally themselves against it. But it does mean that there may not be other examples of statesmanship in the past that speak precisely to our moment, and that much of our age is paralleled not in history, but in prophecy.

In his address to his son's high school, Scalia described why the American Founders sought to learn from history, and he utilized the Bible in his explanation.



They knew they were facing great challenges in seeking to establish at one and the same time a federation and a democracy. But they did not think for a moment it was an unprecedented challenge. If you read the *Federalist Papers*, you will find they are full of examples to support particular dispositions in the Constitution—from Greece, from Rome, from medieval Italy, France, and Spain. So if you want to think yourselves educated, do not believe that you face unprecedented challenges. Much closer to the truth is a different platitude: There is nothing new under the sun.

The Bible does indeed say this, but it also predicts that radically new moments in the Jewish future are yet to come. We seem to be, in some respect, in such a time. Thus Jewish statesmen and leaders, in Israel and the Diaspora, will need, increasingly, to turn not to the tales of Greece and Rome, but to the Bible in

order to search for instruction—to not only its description of past events, but also its vision for the Jewish future. This vision was presented thousands of years ago, but it seems increasingly relevant today. And this surely means that, especially in this trying period, we may hope for more surprises and wonders yet to come.

Illustration: Getty Images

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