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Calling for a new ethos

Prof. Haviva Pedaya says the coronavirus is an 'apocalypse' requiring a novel code of ethics



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ERIC SULTAN

10 Calling for a new ethos

Haviva Pedaya says the coronavirus is an 'apocalypse' requiring a novel code of ethics

by Peggy Cidor



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14 Good morning, Lebanon!

Twenty years after Israel's retreat, the analogy to America's Vietnamese trauma still stands

by Amotz Asa-El

18 Jerusalem & Washington DC

How will the US-Israel relationship play out in this pandemic year?

by Eric R. Mandel



REUTERS

VIEWPOINTS

8 Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel: A new look at corona conspiracies

by Elkana Pressler

9 A key to physical and emotional immunity

by Gina Ross

24 Coping with social isolation

by Wendy Blumfield

MIDDLE EAST

16 Tehran's true aims

What the Iranian regime really wants – and what the West refuses to see

by Neville Teller

ISRAEL

20 Life in quarantine: From the UK to a Dead Sea hotel

by Paul Calvert

22 How it really was! A time to love, a time to serve

by Avraham Avi-hai

25 Chinese Christians donate masks to Israel

By Linda Gradstein

26 Carlos Benaim: Narrowing social gaps

by Steve Linde

32 Remembering the Ramons: Israeli Space Week brings NASA astronauts to Israel

by Yafit Ovadia

JEWISH WORLD

28 Rabbi Victor H. Weissberg: A legacy of Jewish life

by Bradley Martin

30 Merkel's party and the Middle East

by Marc Neugröschel

36 Chana Cromer: The makings of a fabric artist

by Mordechai Beck

MARKETPLACE

38 Creativity vs. corona

by Shlomo Maital

BOOKS

38 Reading George Eliot in the time of COVID-19

by Jacob Sivak

40 A handy but deficient handbook on Jordan

by Moshe Dann

41 Memoirs of a Sephardic Jew from Morocco

by Harriett Kirsh Pozen

42 Triggered: Donald Trump Jr.'s bestseller is firmly pro-Israel

by Joseph Scutts

43 Defending Zionism: Arming allies and countering critics

by Brandon Marlon

PEOPLE & THE BOOK

44 Shavuot in American history

by David Geffen

DEPARTMENTS

4 From the Editor

5 Inbox

6 Opening Shot

46 On the Front Lines

Cover photograph of Prof. Haviva Pedaya by Eric Sultan

Rabbi Victor H. Weissberg: A legacy of Jewish life

By Bradley Martin

"ISRAEL IS more than a spiritual entity," reflected Rabbi Victor H. Weissberg. "Its welfare is a spiritual quest. We are talking about a people long-oppressed, who have achieved great success, now free and sovereign. That success must be maintained and protected by every serious Jew. Every chapter in Pirkei Avot begins with this statement: 'All Israel have a share in the World to Come.' If you are a Jew... for some it means we have a share in heaven. For others, it means we have a share in the future."

Born on June 26, 1927 in Highland Park, Michigan, the life of Weissberg is one that interlaces with the foundation of the State of Israel itself. Since he was young, the rabbi recounts how his *bubbe* (grandma) had a picture of the Kotel and was involved in Jewish life while the men were all in military service.

"I asked my father, what are we doing about it?" the rabbi asked referring to World War II, while his father himself had left two brothers in Poland and France. The rabbi felt compelled to enlist in the US Navy and was stationed in the Atlantic. While in the navy, he made contact with Reform rabbi and military chaplain Rabbi Jacob Schankman, who helped inspire him to consider a career in the clergy.

Upon completion of his military service, Weissberg attended the University of Chicago. While there, he further developed his deep passion for Jewish causes such as involving himself with Hillel while teaching at a Hebrew school. Upon graduation in May 1948, the rabbi went to Israel to fight for the nascent Jewish state's independence and survival. It was during the summer, while brushing up on his Hebrew, that he decided to become a rabbi.

Mentored and given a scholarship by Zionist leader and American Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, Weissberg was sent to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was there he studied with some of the most prominent Jewish thinkers of that era, including Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Isaiah Tishby and Yehezkel Kaufmann. The rabbi also served as Silver's assistant during the First Zionist Congress in Jerusalem.

"Because the Hebrew University was on



TPOH Co-Chair Peggy Shapiro presents Rabbi Weissberg an award at its 2019 Gala

Mount Scopus and there was no way to get to the eastern part of the city from the west," said Weissberg, "we studied in their [the professors'] homes. It was very personal at that time, we were always helping each other. Everybody was sharing everything."

"I'll give you an example," shared the rabbi. "I lived with a family in the cellar. I got off the boat and a stranger took me into his house and made a place for me at Kibbutz Ma'ale Ha'Hamisha. These people were infinitely kind."

"They became my family, and even later introduced me to this girl that I later married" the rabbi smiled as he referred lovingly to his wife. Tamar Libovsky, a fiery young Sabra and member of the Jerusalem Police Force, whom he married in February 1952. "I met her father, who came to Palestine in 1910. He ran away from Odessa and stowed away on a ship to Turkey and then to Jaffa."

"He was 16 years old and one of the founders of Kibbutz Kinneret and the youngest of the Kvutzat Hashomer. During World War I, he was a spy for the British against the Turks as a founder of NILI [a Jewish espionage network which helped the United Kingdom to fight against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine between 1915 and 1917]. The lady who nursed him back to health became his wife."

"So, you could say... I was surrounded by romance. From Cleveland, the thrill of Israel was so manifest. I came to Israel and was working at the kibbutz in the orchards. This

was where Colonel Mickey Marcus died."

The rabbi recounted the profound effect it had on him to see rescued Jewish children from North Africa integrated into Israeli society through the work of Henrietta Szold and the Eddie Cantor Youth Village. Noting the difficulties faced by wave after wave of Jewish refugees, Weissberg described the process of integration as "building a dream into a reality."

Weissberg's life is a testament to his passion for learning Torah. After graduating from the University of Chicago in philosophy, he earned a bachelor's degree at Hebrew Union College in 1950, where he would go on to get a Master of Hebrew Literature in 1954 and a doctorate in Hebrew Letters in 1970. In 1978, Weissberg was awarded a doctorate in Divinity. He also completed his studies for a master's degree in education at the University of Cincinnati in 1951.

"I am sometimes asked if I will ever learn enough," said Weissberg. "Well, my question is, what exactly is enough? I cannot envision any point in my life where I am not continuing to learn Torah. This is the obligation of every Jew." The rabbi is also a prolific writer, having written articles and essays to numerous periodicals, and is the author of several books including: *Jewish Life in 17th Century Turkey*, *Jerusalem in the End of Days*, and *The Psalms and Psychotherapy*.

Weissberg and Tamar would settle in the south side of Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park, later going north to Palmer Square in

1954. Previously, the rabbi had served as the assistant rabbi and youth and educational director of Temple Isaiah Israel (Chicago's second oldest synagogue after Kehilath Anshe Maarav, both of which would merge in 1971 to form KAM Isaiah Israel).

Carrying with him a deep love of the Jewish state, one of Weissberg's first official acts when assigned to Temple Beth-El in Northbrook was to plant Israel's flag on the bima right next to the American flag.

"I'm the admiral of this ship," explained Weissberg to his non-Zionist congregation as he pointed to the Israeli flag. "This is my flag. When I leave, I will take it with me." Disappointed with what he viewed as the anti-Israel positions taken by the Reform Jewish Movement over the years, the rabbi expressed his heartfelt belief that "a religious movement has to ask more of its adherents." With the blue and white flag still standing, the rabbi gradually began winning the hearts and minds of his new congregation.

"In 1982, a congregant wanted me to go with him to Washington, because the [US] government was going to sell AWACS to the Saudis," said Rabbi Weissberg. "At that time, the AIPAC Policy Conference had about 300 people in attendance at the Washington Hilton hotel." During the conference, the rabbi would find himself sitting next to vice president and senior director of research at Motorola, Dr. Jona Cohn.

"Why don't we form a political action committee?" proposed Weissberg. "I know ten people who I think can contribute a thousand dollars a piece. Do you know ten people who can do the same?" to which Cohn answered affirmatively. The two men would meet with National President of AIPAC Robert Asher, who volunteered to help them form To Protect Our Heritage PAC (TPOH).

Unlike AIPAC, which is not a political action committee and prohibited from raising funds for political candidates under Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulations. By contrast, TPOH is permitted raise funds and direct them to the campaigns of pro-Israel candidates.

"The first two candidates we supported were Sen. Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio and Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware," said Weissberg. "Mr. Asher knew these men, their interests in Israel and made the contact. So, we were more than excited. That was really the beginning." Building friendships and support would become a major function of Weissberg's tenure, with then-sen. Biden and others visiting his

congregation to bring their pro-Israel positions to light.

From that point onwards, TPOH would grow into the largest and oldest pro-Israel political action committee of the American Midwest. Apart from financially supporting and endorsing political candidates, TPOH has provided a venue for political incumbents and challengers to present their case to voters. One of the major ways in which this takes place is through the Congressional Breakfast Club, created by TPOH Chairman Marc Sommer. Since its inception in 2014, the club has held 35 breakfasts with 34 Democratic and Republican candidates, including 14 US Senators, fourteen US House Representatives and one non-political breakfast with former Israeli defense minister and IDF chief-of-staff Moshe Ya'alon.

"Rabbi Weissberg is a spiritual leader for our times," said Peggy Shapiro, co-chairman of TPOH and the Midwest executive director of StandWithUs. "He never misses an opportunity to educate us about our peoplehood and obligation to each other, our past and our futures. He courageously speaks truth to power and I have witnessed him telling our Representatives and Senators clearly what we ask on behalf of Israel, the US and humanity. Most of all, Rabbi Weissberg inspires us to uphold the sacred mission of protecting our heritage, our identity, our destiny, and Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people."

Such heartfelt inspiration is also shared with policymakers whom the rabbi has supported over the years, including former Illinois Sen. Mark Kirk. Weissberg highlighted the senator's strong leadership and support for Israel throughout the entirety of his political career, beginning with his election to the US House of Representatives in 2001. The rabbi was very happy that TPOH honored the former senator in 2017 during its annual gala. "Because of his devotion to freedom and democracy in America and in Israel," Kirk said fondly of the rabbi, "Winston Churchill would have called a patriot like Victor 'twice a citizen.'"

TPOH membership includes Democrats, Republicans and Independents. Since its inception in 1982, it is estimated that hundreds of candidates have been supported. All of whom must share a common goal: ensure Israel's security as a Jewish state by promoting unwavering bipartisan congressional support for the US-Israel relationship.

"We are religiously bipartisan," remarked Weissberg. "We want to separate the [Rep. Ilhan] Omars, the AOCs [Rep. Alexandria



Rabbi Weissberg and his wife, Tamar

Ocasio-Cortez] and the [Rep. Rashida] Tlaib from the mainstream Democratic Party. Democrats were the biggest supporters of Israel, until the pendulum swung with John Hagee." The rabbi was actually one of the first American Jewish leaders to proudly partner with evangelical Christian supporters of Israel.

"These are people who have taken the words of the Prophet Ezekiel to heart," said the rabbi. "You have Christians speaking Hebrew, companies who invest in Israel like Noble Energy and dear friends like Mitch McConnell who share a deep love for the Jewish State." For Weissberg, the PAC he created presents an entrance for all people who recognize Israel as a sacred cause.

"You asked me at the beginning of our conversation, what is it I want to communicate to people outside my congregation," Weissberg said in his characteristically thoughtful tone. "Our responsibility as Jews is to 'make Torah great and mighty.' It is our responsibility, whether as a parent, a teacher with students, or as a rabbi. I want you to know that I consider myself extremely fortunate because of my relationships with loving parents and grandparents. My teachers on every step of my path, they really shared my life and my dreams. This also goes for my father-in-law and my wife."

"That's it, buddy," Weissberg endearingly closed with a smile. "This is worth a life. This has made me feel rich. Not in terms of my bank account. But what we hoped to achieve in the renaissance of the Jewish people. What we call Zionism is the task of every Jew. So, we hope that others pick up the cudgel." ■

The writer is a senior fellow with the news and public policy group Haym Salomon Center and deputy editor for the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research