

Blessing Israel

by [Ehud Neor](#) (April 2024)



If This Be Not I – by Philip Guston, 1945

All Jewish writing about Israel, about Jews, is traumatized. It has been that way since the earliest Hebrew sources. The Jewish people have not sailed smoothly through history. Barely a paragraph is written in the context of this mega-trauma, barely a single word is scratched out on parchment when appears a new chapter, a new blooming of Jew-hatred. It registers upon its subject, and it has an effect. The Writing Jew moves along with a limp. Occasionally the limp acts up, the Writing Jew sits, and rubs the limb that ails him, then

continues to write. The Writing Jew wanders in time and space, relating his love of life and of the good, sharing his story of light with all who can sense its value, even in the darkest of times.

Enough I say! Enough of Israel bashing. It is high time to try the opposite approach. This eternal and twisted demand—this desire—to demonstrate that Jews bleed and must continue to bleed, and that Jews suffer and must continue to suffer, returns afresh with every generation, and it is getting old and tiresome. This is not an original thought. Even in the worst of times for the Jews, here and there, oddly enough, a voice is sometimes heard that questions the value of harming the Jews, a voice that urges nations to bless Israel instead of blasting Israel. A voice such as this does not emanate from the Void. It is based in Scripture. In the same verses in which the first Jew was “chosen,” Abraham’s blessedness was wedded to that of all the nations of the world. Properly understood, God’s choosing of the Jews to be his holy nation, was choosing the Jews to witness and safeguard God’s choosing of all humanity. Sometimes individuals or more rarely, entire nations reach this understanding. Here are the verses:

*I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you shall be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you
And curse the one who curses you;
And all the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you. (Gen. 12:2-3)*

This story begins with a simple declaration: “I love Israel!” It was unexpected, unwarranted, and shook me to my core. A

man, non-Jewish, middle-age, on a vacation with his daughter, walks into my house, stops in the living room, raises his arms dramatically so that all present look at him, and declares: "I love Israel!" My daughter whispered into my ear the exact words that were running through my mind: "He will be rewarded from Above for that." This was the sort of thing that we spoke about around the Shabbat dinner table. Things that we encounter in the weekly Torah portion that jump out at us as being relevant to the present. This specific incident, however, went above and beyond that. This was a pure utterance, something that came from deep within the man, or even from without him, a deep soulful sound being channelled through him from some reservoir of purity, and beyond that, if seen until fulfillment, it was a pure expression of a basic tenet of Judaism: "Those that bless you shall be blessed." That man who made this declaration was my brother.

My brother liked to visit with us in Israel. Whenever he visited, he was happy when he arrived and sad when he left. We naturally thought that it was because he liked being with us, and it never occurred to us that he had developed a connection over the years with the idea of Israel. The idea of a good people living in a good land. Something in the make-up of the country—Israel's "vibe"—caused him to instinctively applaud. My daughter's reaction to his declaration of love for Israel was no less instinctive. For her (and for me), the question now was how my brother was to be blessed. I told him about what had transpired between my daughter and myself. This Jewish, religious thought did not translate well for my non-Jewish, somewhat secular brother. He took it all in though, I could see. Who would not be willing to accept a freely given blessing? A few days after he returned to the US he called me.

"Guess what," he said. "Your Jewish voodoo worked."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"I won."

“Won what?”

“The lottery. I won the lottery. Four-and-a-half million dollars. Before taxes.”

And though I believed then and believe now, that those that bless Israel shall be blessed, still, this was quite the rambunctious reply from heaven. I could hear him chuckling on the line.

“Heh, it is what it is. I have no problem seeing this as the fulfillment of a biblical promise.”

The question was: did I? I had held a vision that this overall “blessing” would be one of peace and good health, brotherly love and yes, some sort of general prosperity. But non-Jews lining up and winning the lottery to the tune of millions, one after the other? That never crossed my mind.

Maybe it should have. For this story does not end here.

A year and a half later, I was walking towards the gate for my flight to Boston in the terminal at Ben-Gurion airport. I was upbeat, looking forward to the flight that left at midnight, to a good night’s sleep along the way, and finally to seeing my mother and brother and sister, and maybe some childhood friends. It was going to be a good flight I thought, and as soon as that thought surfaced, I became wary. Lately there had been an upsurge in terrorist violence which leads to an increased diligence, and an overall wariness. Things being not so good for the Jews of Israel at that time, one as an individual Jew had no right to complacency, let alone comfort. I arrived at the waiting area with this change of inner weather and found a seat. I looked around for the cloud that I knew would be there. I found it quickly. Off to the side was an odd sight. A group of young yeshiva students, normally subdued in my experience when in “mixed company,” were talking amongst themselves loudly in English, jostling each other and, in general, acting up. In other words, acting like a normal

group of teenagers on a field trip, something I wasn't expecting to see in such a group in their uniforms of black pants and white shirts. I thought to myself: "Why am I disturbed by such a jolly group?" There being no obvious answer to that, I let the question slide. I had the thought that I was being overly gloomy.

Sitting, waiting for boarding, reading from my Kindle, I was not able to block out that merry group of yeshiva students. Something felt forced in their cheeriness. Over the span of the twenty minutes that I sat there before boarding started, slowly, but insistently, like a muffled beat of a tympani, the youths, now in my mind some kind of kosher chorus in a Greek tragedy, repeated a name. "Ezra," they said. It didn't register with me at first—why should it have? —but then, about five minutes before boarding I had a moment of clarity, and my heart sank straight down to the tarmac below. I knew this Ezra. His full name was Ezra Schwartz. In that moment I knew that my unspoken wish (unspoken even to myself)—that upon boarding the plane I would enjoy a temporary pause from the rough reality of living in Israel—was to be put on hold at least for the duration of the flight.

This is why hearing this young man's name resonated so strongly with me. In the summer of 2014, three Israeli teenagers disappeared while returning to their homes from high school. The entire country became caught up in their plight. One of the teens had managed to get a cell phone call off when he realized that they were being kidnapped by terrorists. For three weeks thousands of soldiers and volunteers searched for the boys. Hope was never lost, until sadly they were found buried in a shallow grave. As one, the nation of the Jews was broken-hearted. It turned out that Israeli Jews were not alone. A year passed and Ezra, a sports loving Jew from Sharon, Massachusetts, was spending a gap year between high school and college studying in a yeshiva in Israel. The yeshiva had an extra-curricular activity in which Ezra

invested his heart. As a memorial for the "Three Youths" (as they had come to be known), and as a Zionist answer to the terrorists, volunteers had decided to reclaim a trash-ridden hilltop overlooking the intersection where the boys had been kidnapped and to turn it into a public park, now known as Oz v'Gaon nature preserve. Ezra's yeshiva had taken it upon itself to help with the project. At the end of one of these work excursions, the yeshiva's transport had picked up the boys, and as they entered the intersection where the Three Youths had been kidnapped and murdered, they too were attacked, and Ezra was killed. His soul had yearned for those of the Three Youths, and his soul had now joined with theirs.

Here it was a day or two later and I was boarding the plane that would take Ezra's body back to his family. There is a commandment to accompany a funeral procession (minimum three steps with the procession if you happen upon one), and I was thinking this dear boy was granting a plane full of Jews an effortless mitzva (commandment). We would be accompanying him for ten hours, sitting in our seats. Normally, Jewish burials are quickly done, but sometimes they can be delayed. If someone dies on the Sabbath, for example, they will be buried after the end of the day, or the next morning. The burial of important people such as a prime minister are delayed so that foreign dignitaries can arrive and pay their respects. In this case, Ezra's family wanted him to be buried close to home, so his burial was suspended until his body could be transferred back to Sharon and, here we were—suspended with him in the air between Earth and Heaven.

Beyond being preoccupied with Ezra during the flight, there was a secondary point of contact for me to ponder. I had a connection with Sharon. When my girls had been teenagers, they sometimes spent time in the summer with their grandmother on Martha's Vineyard. My mother had a gift shop on Main Street in Edgartown, called "The Gift Shop," and the girls worked there. They were able to make some money and improve their English,

all while spending quality time with my mother. The problem—and it was a major one—was the lack of Yiddishkeit on Martha's Vineyard. My girls had been in religious schools all their lives, praying every day, and meticulously observing the Jewish Sabbath. We raised them in Gush Katif, the religious-Zionist settlements in the Gaza Strip. On the Vineyard they would be passing by churches of all denominations and interact with customers who had crosses on their necklaces. There were three difficulties: they would be without a supporting community of Orthodox Jews, they would not be able to keep the Sabbath in a Jewish atmosphere, and they would not be able to easily obtain—and cook and eat—kosher food. We looked for solutions. We found some with the help of my mother's business connections. She put the girls in contact with a family in Sharon, who were modern orthodox Jews, as we were. Every few Sabbaths they would go to Sharon and would enjoy a proper Sabbath, proper kosher food, prayers at an orthodox synagogue, all in the company of a warm, friendly Jewish family. Staring at the back of the seat in front of me, I did some figuring and realized that Ezra was probably a young boy at the time my daughters were spending their Sabbaths in Sharon. They could have babysat for him. They may have seen him sitting with his father during prayers (or running around with his buddies outside).

I had been planning this trip to visit my mother long before Ezra was murdered. It was to be a short visit of about ten days. It included, courtesy of my brother, tickets to a New England Patriots home game, to be played on Monday night. I had never been to a pro football game and was looking forward to it. With the help of the internet, I developed a plan. The Patriots play in Foxborough, and my brother had booked a motel room within walking distance of the stadium. Sharon was right up the road from Foxborough, so we planned to travel there early the morning after the game so that I could get a prayer in at an orthodox synagogue. I wanted to go to the Young Israel synagogue so that I could finally meet and thank the

father of the family that had been so kind to my daughters. After prayers, we would go to the local kosher market, and I would stock up on food for my visit. I checked up on the time for morning prayers on the synagogue's website.

It seemed like a solid plan. The bus trip from Logan to the Island, looking out the window at the passing scenery and the watery approach to Woods Hole served as a soft landing for me. By the time I boarded the ferry and heard the locals talking their island talk about island things, I was in the States. When I walked off the ferry in Vineyard Haven the transition was complete. To my right was the small utility pier where we would launch ourselves and swim out to arriving ferries to coin dive as children. "How 'bout a coin!" we would call up to the tourists, later using the coins thrown at us to buy hamburgers and frappes for lunch at the Harborlight. In front of me was the intersection of Union and Water streets, through which the ferry traffic had to pass. I directed that traffic one year as a summer cop. I remember standing in the intersection in my uniform, looking at the pedestrian traffic walking off the boat as I was doing now. The memories served as a shimmering reflection beginning to surround me, and as I turned up Main Street towards my mother's apartment, past the store where as a child I spent my allowance on bubble gum and baseball cards, the last vestiges of my Israeli persona were subdued. I greeted my mother as the son who had left her and Martha's Vineyard long ago.

The next morning my brother picked me up and we travelled to Foxborough. We checked into our motel and took a short nap before the game. We walked to the stadium. The sidewalk was lined with booths, and they were selling everything. Any imaginable keepsake of the New England Patriots, hoodies, wool hats, gloves, as well as hot dogs, soda, and corn on the cob were on sale. This was strange and other-worldly for me. It was obviously an integral part of the football game experience, but not one that I had ever been aware of. People

were buying and selling and eating and having a great time together two hours before the game was to start.

Once in the stadium I was overwhelmed. Just the light and sound justified the price of the ticket. Technology had advanced to the point where even in this open-air hippodrome everyone enjoyed surround-sound audio quality and a high-definition video experience on a screen that was the size of a house. It was very cold, and it was too loud for my taste, and the pre-game light show made me thankful that I wasn't an epileptic. The effect on the senses was all-engulfing. The actual players warming up on the field were a side show. It was all topsy-turvy. We had good seats, on the forty-yard line, close to the field but not too close, so that we could follow the game even when it was near the far goal line. But after a lifetime of watching the game on broadcast TV, the actual game as it played out on the field was a relic of times past. Hearing the actual sounds from the playing field, when they managed to break through the artificial soundtrack of the stadium, or seeing a runner break through the line, or a receiver catch a long pass, were the only remnants of the game as it used to be.

I remember friends who like me, had never been to a professional football game, saying "Why would I want to pay so much for a ticket, when I get a better view on the TV in the comfort of my home?" This was a major challenge for NFL teams, especially those that played in the cold, such as Buffalo, Green Bay, Minnesota, and...New England. These giant stadiums needed to be full. So, some had retractable roofs put in over the stadium to keep out the weather, and all had state-of-the-art multi-media systems installed, including the biggest screen you've ever seen at one or both ends of the stadium. Problem solved. Fans now had the opportunity to be present at the real event, while enjoying the two major draws of televised events: close-ups of the action and instant replays. In fact, though most of us paid attention to the field before

each play, as soon as the play was over we all looked to the big screen to see what had happened, and though this was intended as a bonus for the fans, the players themselves soon discovered that there was value in the replayed action on the giant screen, and they could be found looking up at the screen if the momentum of the game allowed it, especially when there were disputed calls by the referees.

In addition to the big screen, there were continuous belt-like screens along the length of the field on both sides separating different levels of seating. These things were flashing in our faces the whole time. Intermingled with "Go Patriots," and "Defense," the screens flashed advertisements. Beer, tacos, insurance, rental cars and all the rest. We were a captive audience. Under this assault of the senses my life in Israel faded even farther into the background. I felt a stress of which I had had been unaware depart me, and the feeling was wonderful. But only just for a moment, for as soon as felt that I could let my guard down, and maybe even relax a little and enjoy a football game with my brother, this happened:

Before the national anthem, a picture of Ezra appeared on the screen. The announcer explained that he had been murdered and asked for a moment of silence. And he got it. That entire madhouse went silent.

Yes, it was a watered down script, and there is no mention of Ezra being murdered because he was a Jew, but still it was quite the gesture from Robert Kraft, the owner of the Patriots. For me, it changed everything. There would be no escaping from Israeli reality. I did enjoy the game, but that engulfing experience faded to the background, its importance diminished. I was still accompanying Ezra—or maybe by now he was accompanying me—and even if it were possible, I had no desire to escape from that.

The next morning we kept to the plan. My brother drove me to the synagogue. He left me in the parking lot and went to get

some coffee, intending to return in forty-five minutes to pick me up after prayers. I walked towards the synagogue and to my surprise when I entered, the men were removing their phylacteries, meaning that the prayers were over. I asked the nearest person what was happening, that their website said that prayers should be starting now. He laughed and said that they never update the website. Hoping to salvage something from the situation, I asked if the man who had entertained my daughters for Shabbat those years ago was present. He told me that he had just left for work. Seeing that I was crestfallen, he tried to help.

“You can still make the prayers at the Schwartz’s. They are sitting shiva. They live right around the corner. It’s a short walk.”

He explained to me how to get there, but by then, I had the feeling that if I had just started walking on my own, my feet would have taken me to their house. By then, thick-headed though I was, I understood that there was a purpose to all this. I had absolutely no idea what that purpose was, so I focused on what I did know, that this was an opportunity to keep another commandment, that of comforting the bereaved. On top of that I would be praying in a quorum after all. I turned the corner onto the road where the Schwartz family lived, and I said out loud: “Thank you Ezra.”

Precisely at that moment I was again transported. This time to the surroundings of my childhood in New England. I was breathing the same sharp cold air of winter, walking alone on a side street past weathered wood-shingled houses and leafless trees. In my mind, there was absolutely nothing Jewish about these surroundings, until I reached the house with a large front window, through which I could see men donning their phylacteries. True, it was towards this house that I had been walking, and I was expecting to find men praying, but even so, I stopped and looked back to see from where I had come, to see if there was some sort of existential turnstile through which

I had passed, or through which I had been passing through since boarding the plane in Tel Aviv. Nothing stood out on that cold New England morning, and I turned and approached the house, switching my phone off so that it wouldn't interfere with the prayers.

Once inside I took off my coat and donned my prayer shawl and phylacteries. I felt at home. It was strange feeling so uplifted when those around me were mourning their son, grandson, brother, friend. But I think that my attitude was infectious, and here and there someone would glance at me, the only stranger present. I was still trying to understand what the purpose of my being there was. Could this be it? Was I to be some kind of uplifter? Before that notion had time to settle in my mind I had shunted it away. Thank God. There is one rule when visiting the bereaved: speak when spoken to and keep it short.

That is what I intended to do when I sat with the family after prayers. But because I was from Israel, and had been to the game the night before and seen the tribute to Ezra, and because I had been on the plane with him, and, as I let them know, I knew the intersection where he was killed having lived in the area for a year, in addition to doing my basic training at a base less than a mile from it, the conversation extended far beyond protocol. When they asked about my place of residence in Israel, they soon realized that my family had been expelled from Gush Katif, the Jewish bloc of settlements in the Gaza Strip, and that led to another extension to my stay as they voiced their concern about our present circumstances. I, of course, had been waiting for the first sign that it was time to take my leave, but the sign didn't come when expected. We spoke more about Ezra, and by the time the sign to leave did come, I felt that this was a young man I would liked to have had as a friend when I was his age. A good man, a good Jew; a man with a future.

As I walked out the front door, I did not feel that I had

brought anything of significance with me to the shiva. I was over that. A shiva is a shiva. I felt fulfilled in that this opportunity to keep a special commandment had fallen to me, and I thought that I had kept it to the best of my ability. As I walked away from the house I reached in my pocket and pulled out my phone to check messages only to find that the phone was off. I turned the phone back on while remembering that my brother was to have picked me up over an hour previously. As soon as the screen came up the messages started pinging in. I scrolled back to the first few.

“Where are you?”

“What’s going on? I’ve been here 15 minutes already.”

I scrolled down to the latest message.

“The police have been called.”

My mind was in a flurry. The police? That could only mean one thing. My dear brother had become worried sick about me. He must have pictured me waiting outside in my yarmulka and what with all the recent terror in Israel, something must have happened to me. That I had told him the story of Ezra must have affected him more than I knew. My heart filled with love for him at that moment as I called him.

“Where are you,” he asked.

I gave him directions and continued walking towards him. I looked up towards the entrance to the road where I expected him to appear and was surprised to see him careen around the corner burning rubber, screeching to a halt beside me.

“Where the hell have you been!” he said.

I was wondering why he seemed so angry since it was clear that I was fine.

“I missed the prayer in the synagogue. I should have texted

you about the change. I forgot. Sorry," I said. "Don't you think you went a little overboard calling the cops?"

For some reason, that took him by surprise. "Me call the cops? What are you talking about? I had the cops called on me and they almost took me into the station."

I was stunned, and flabbergasted, and in a single moment of brain-flop I could see it all. As I had approached the synagogue in the morning, I noticed that it was part of a building complex that included a Jewish grade school. In my mind's eye I saw my brother in his truck, sipping his coffee, innocently waiting for me. That was not what would have been in the mind's eye of a school administrator, and, as my brother related to me, someone had been sent out to check on him.

"May I help you?" the person asked him.

"No. I'm fine. I'm just waiting for my brother. He's praying in your synagogue."

Picture it. My decidedly non-Jewish-looking brother, possibly finishing a bite of a cheese and bacon sandwich calmly saying that he was waiting on his brother who was supposedly praying in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue. If ever there was one, this whole scenario was a red-light warning for anyone entrusted with Jewish children's welfare. You can see that administrator slowly backing away, saying "okaaaay," entering the school office and barking out "call 911!"

Which is how it happened. My brother, taking another bite of his sandwich, heard the zip of a cut-off siren—a little wake-me-upper of a siren—and looked in his rear-view mirror to see a police cruiser.

All of these details and more my brother related to me excitedly later on our long drive to New Hampshire to pick up our sister who was to come with us back to our mother's place.

At the time of our meeting on the road, the only thing I knew was that the reality that had occupied my mind was the opposite of the reality that had occurred in the real world, and that my brother had every right to run me over where I stood. Justifiable anger-side.

I panicked. He saw that I was as confused as he had been a moment before, and he cocked his head, and I immediately jumped at what I correctly perceived as an opening and said:

“There is an explanation.”

And with a singular expression of brotherly love that I cherish to this day, my dear brother withheld judgement and said:

“Get in. Let’s hear it.”

Of course I had no way to explain, or so I thought. What I did have were the few seconds it took me to round the front of the truck and get seated on the passenger side. For him to understand me I would have to give him a primer on the importance of keeping the commandments for an Orthodox Jew and observing the commandment of comforting the bereaved in particular. How could I do that?

I did it by doing it. My brother was used to hearing me talk, and talk, and talk. This time he listened with patience. When I finished, he looked at me and said:

“Okay. Explanation accepted.”

I was too fired-up to let it go at that and tried to continue. He cut me short:

“Ehud. Explanation accepted.”

We sat there on the side of the road, truck idling, the two of us silently looking out at the New England winter morning. I thought to myself what a wonderful world. I looked over

towards the house in which I had prayed. I thought, what a wonderful world, that can be so sad sometimes.

We made a short stop at what turned out to be the only kosher market around and I filled up on non-perishables. Once we were on the road to New Hampshire, my brother started nagging me.

“Listen, you’ve got to call the cops.”

I wasn’t looking to mix it up with the authorities.

“Why do you think? They let you go, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, they let me go, after taking all my information. I don’t want to end up on some watch list. It couldn’t be worse, a suspected pedophile, antisemitic at that.”

I was sure he was exaggerating. I put him off, but he did not let up until we reached my sister’s. Once she was in the car Mark explained the situation to her. My sister was a lifetime educator and when my brother finished, she did not hesitate and said:

“He’s right. Schools take these things very seriously.”

There we sat together on the long easy ride to Woods Hole. My brother driving under the cloud of being on some nefarious list, my sister in the back seat of the truck certifying the seriousness of the affair, and me sitting up front on the passenger side, trying to figure out how to use my Israeli phone locally. I finally reached the school and explained the entire situation. My brother and sister could hear what was being said on the other end. The person was speaking excitedly, and I held the phone at a distance, not on speaker. My sister was smiling and shaking her head, mumbling “I told you so.” From what the person on the other end of the call said, it was clear that the subject of my brother’s parking that morning was still a major issue at the school. The administrator speaking with me repeatedly thanked me for

calling and explaining what happened. I was shamed and could not look at my brother, who drove on in silence. Finally, I had the good sense to request that they relay what had been said to the police and was told that they would be doing that as soon as we hung up.

I looked out of my side of the car and tried to free myself from the thoughts that were running through my head. After a while it seemed that we had all calmed down and a question popped into my head.

“When was the last time that the three of us were together here in the States?”

Silence.

The three of us were soon trying to scrape memories together memories of long ago. It had been about forty years. Once again, I was in the spotlight, for if I had not relocated my life halfway around the world, in body and in spirit, we would have been more of a normal family. And once again I reached into my empty bag of tricks and said to my brother:

“You know, the fact that you helped me observe such an important commandment...”

My brother, as if on the same wavelength, cut me off and said:

“You mean it’s ‘I love Israel’ all over again?” and we all laughed at the thought.

“It kind of is,” I said meekly, not believing that I had stooped so low.

Thus, the three of us came to our mother. If the “A-Team” famously loved a plan that came together, our Z-Team, weathered and weary, having overcome a self-inflicted crisis, was content with having made the ferry on time. Our mother, though wanting more for her offspring, still could be comforted as we sat down in her living room, the tenuous bonds

of filial love still intact, holding fast in this crazy world.

The next morning my mother, sister and I were drinking coffee and tea. My brother walked in and stood before us and said calmly:

“I won the lottery again.”

Over our mugs held aloft and frozen in space at his pronouncement, I saw, contrary to what one would expect, that the attention of all three was on me, as if waiting for an explanation of some sort.

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