The Peace of Fields

by Juliana Geran Pilon (February 2024)

Somerset Place, Bath, John Piper, 1942

The virulence and ubiquity of leftwing antizionism and antisemitism after the October 7 attacks on Israel stunned American Jews. Campuses, most spectacularly the Ivies, let loose mobs of Islamist sympathizers cheering for the thugs who had just gunned down hundreds of dancing young people and butchered whole families in their beds. They blamed the "occupiers" as colonialist imperialists, demanded the end of Israel, and denounced America's complicity. The establishment press meanwhile referred to the terrorists as "militants," even as video footage of the slaughter went viral through social media around the globe. The satanic butchers heard laughing in the background were being applauded by cheerleaders across the United States, which jihadists

contemptuously called “Big Satan.” Nazi-style graffiti, threats against synagogues, attacks on yeshiva students, all contributed to an unprecedented sense of insecurity among Jews throughout the country. Months later, it continues.

Not that most ordinary people didn’t immediately sympathize with the Israelis. But Jews could not go on ignoring mainstream progressive ideology that had politicized victimhood by demonizing white racist oppressors. Jews had originally signed on to the leftist narrative that claimed to favor underprivileged victims of the wealthy and powerful because compassion is central to the Jewish tradition. Besides, having won first prize in the lottery of persecution, they felt they had a duty to sympathize with the less fortunate. But forgetting their own precarious status as a tiny ethno-religious minority whose outsized economic and social success had become politically inconvenient, it shocked them to realize that they had been relegated to enemy status. Used to fearing only “the Right,” hardly any remembered, or wanted to know, the role of Karl Marx’s declaration that “the God of the Jew is money,” rendering capitalism and Judaism basically interchangeable. On the Left, antisemitism had always been a feature, not a bug.

Most American Jews have traditionally placed their bets on the educated elites, read the *New York Times*, and sent their kids to the “best” schools. They supported Israel knowing it to be by far the freest country in the entire Middle East and America’s most steadfast ally. And now what were they to do? Where to look for guidance? The relevant facts are all widely available, for anyone willing to look. The moral picture is clear to anyone with an unclouded conscience. But who’s paying attention?

Many of us non-leftist scribblers have been wondering what each of us can do to help our fellow American Jews right now? For years I have been writing about ideas, notably anti-liberalism, utopianism, and strategic communication, as have

others wiser and more eloquent than me. But rational discourse is hardly ever successful in matters of ideology and emotion. Then it occurred to me that on occasions when I had to stave off some abyss or other, I would turn to poetry for insight and solace. Which is how I discovered Yehuda Amichai.

Though Amichai died in 2000, British-born Harvard professor James Wood, literary critic for *The New Yorker*, declared in 2015 that he "is still Israel's most celebrated poet." Seeking to make his poetry "useful" and accessible to ordinary people, he is loved far and wide. With their copious references to biblical passages, "[h]is poems have been called the nation's "secular prayers," writes Wood. "He is quoted at funerals and weddings, in political speeches and ceremonies, in rabbinical sermons and in a Jewish American prayer book." He became a sort of secular cantor.

Born in Würzburg, Germany, in 1924, in an Orthodox Jewish family, he had been raised speaking both Hebrew and German. Lucky to escape from Nazism in 1935, he immigrated along with his family to Mandate Palestine and moved to Jerusalem in 1936. He volunteered and fought in World War II as a soldier in the British Army, the 1947-48 Arab-Israeli war, the 1956 Sinai War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. When he wasn't defending his country, he somehow found time to study Hebrew literature and the Torah at Hebrew University.

He also managed to write eleven volumes of poetry in Hebrew, two novels, and a book of short stories. His work has been translated into thirty-seven languages. In 1982, Amichai received the Israel Prize for Poetry, and in 1986 he became a foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1986, and a poet in residence at New York University in 1987. By the time he died of cancer at age 76, his work was internationally renowned.

For his Orthodox upbringing notwithstanding, Amichai was highly ecumenical. Always a maverick, he liked to rebel

against all authority, be it religious or secular. Well, at least a little. For “Amichai is a man who, as he once playfully put it, rebelled only a little, because he did, after all, observe the laws and the Commandments—the laws, he quickly adds, of gravity and equilibrium, and the horror of the vacuum,” writes Wood. Which is to say, he belongs not only to Israel and to the Hebrew language but to all of us.” As does Israel itself belong to all of us.

And there it was, a poem that Amichai had penned exactly three decades ago, in December 1994, tailor-made for today, especially in the aftermath of October 7th. Its theme is universal and timeless: the never-ending yearning for peace.

Wildpeace

Not the peace of a cease-fire
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,
but rather
as in the heart when the excitement is over
and you can talk only about a great weariness.
I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult.
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.
A peace
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,
without words, without
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be
light, floating, like lazy white foam.
A little rest for the wounds—who speaks of healing?
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation
to the next, as in a relay race:
the baton never falls.)

Let it come
like wildflowers,
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.

Not the peace of a cease-fire, for that only gives the killers a chance to rearm. *Not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb*, soothing as it may seem. For we cannot realistically hope for *peace without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares*: swords are still necessary. The allegory appears in *Isaiah* 11:6: "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, And the leopard shall lie down with the kid; And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together." It describes an earthly paradise to arrive at the end of days, upon the restoration of Israel after one more destruction in a series of wars. But surely at this time this is only a vision, an illusion. Israel was indeed restored in 1947 after an apocalyptic event—the near-annihilation of its people—and yet today, the world is no paradise. Like other versions of millenarian utopias, it can lead not to peace but to disaster.

What the poet has in mind is rather a kind of peace that can best be described as a feeling *in the heart when the excitement is over and you can talk only about a great weariness.* Not pleasure really but the sort of relief that comes from the weariness of trying to survive, after the awful excitement of fighting herculean odds. The weariness of almost losing hope, of almost giving up. But giving up is never an option. So it is written, and so it must be. *L'chaim.* You always have to be prepared to defend life—your own and that of your loved ones.

I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult. That terrible knowledge is merely necessary; it can never be sufficient. A psychopath who knows how to kill is no adult—he is not even human in the true, rather than merely biological,

sense of the word. To be an adult you also have to know that killing is wrong except when you are obliged to protect yourself and those you love. The raw mechanics of knowing how to use a gun is child's play; even *my son plays with a toy gun that knows how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.* To be an adult I must be prepared to lose my own life to protect my son.

If only it were possible never to have to kill anyone. How would it feel to not be afraid again? To "learn war no more," as the flower children used to sing in the sixties? *A peace without words* would sound like an exquisite violin concerto, played perhaps by Yehudi Menuhin. Music that can lubricate terminal sorrow is the voice of love. The Vietnam-era antiwar activists declared: Make Peace Not War. So how could they lionize Soviet-armed Viet Cong guerillas, mass murderer Mao and the hardcore criminal Che Guevarra? They obviously failed to appreciate that the abolition of difference, the canceling of strife, cannot be imposed. It must emerge from within the soul, *without the thud of the heavy rubber stamp*. The consensus of state-enforced groupthink, with dissent crushed beneath the policeman's boot, is a death in life, an insult to man and God.

Peace should be like a candle's blessing: *let it be light, floating, like lazy white foam*, imagines the poet. Someday military action will succeed in Gaza, and even the Iranian octopus with its deadly terror-tentacles may eventually be defeated, assuming the cancer has not already spread too far worldwide. But at least we can hope for *a little rest for the wounds – who speaks of healing?*

Healing might never be possible. The raw pain of loss experienced on October 7th cannot go away; anyhow, we will not let it disappear. As so often throughout history, *the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation to the next, as in a relay race: the baton never falls*. Now and forever, Jews will

carry the baton. Israelis' resolve has been immeasurably strengthened; illusions unmasked, they are recalibrating strategies. Will Diaspora Jews come to the realization that it's their baton too?

The poet ends on a note of hope: we must believe that peace will come, eventually. *Let it come like wildflowers, suddenly.* It will come, he tells us: *because the field must have it*. What a lovely name: *wildpeace. Shlom bar*: the peace of fields. It is the peace of God-given life.

This is no naïve pie-in-the-sky romanticism. Having fled from Nazi hell, arriving in the British-controlled Mandate Palestine, a mostly arid land, only to face Arab hostility and violence, Amichai is no wild-eyed pacifist. He fought in four wars against formidable, exponentially more numerous opponents. But all along he had faith that peace **will** come, for a simple reason: *because the field must have it*. Along with his tenacious countrymen, he cultivated the desert, and they saw that wildflowers did bloom. Hardly a terminal Eden, the precarious peace on his tiny corner of the earth has not come passively. And when it breaks down the national family is shocked to the core. Yet it always rebounds. Israel remains a remarkably hopeful and optimistic nation infused with a tacit trust that creation is ultimately good. Such is the message of Genesis at its heart.

As Amchai's poem necessarily reflects the Torah, it helps to be familiar with its wisdom. I must confess that, having been born in communist atheist Romania, where Hebrew was outlawed, I had a lot of learning to do after emigrating to the U.S. Luckily, I had recently joined a small group of mostly self-religiously-educated, mostly University of Chicago alumni, eager to apply old wisdom to the present by sharing personal interpretations of *Exodus*. And as it happened, October 7th came just after we had talked about Amalek. It helped us greatly to process the enormity of what had just happened.

The nomadic tribe of Amalek symbolizes the arch-rival of ancient Israel. In *Exodus*, the Amalekites were said to have attacked the Israelites, unprovoked, as they escaped from slavery in Egypt to return to the land of their ancestors. Though Israel was able to defeat them, their descendants were cursed to go on living in the Negev area. And while the Amalekite nation itself no longer exists, its symbol as Israel's devious, evil enemy has persisted.

Amalek's jihadist brood will not be easily defeated, as the dead and wounded IDF soldiers, and indeed the defenseless Palestinians whom terrorists keep as shield and cannon fodder, testify for all the world to see—should it choose to do so. Until Amalek's latest incarnation is slain again, the world is in grave danger and the field-flowers cannot bloom. It will be slain because it must. But we cannot allow ourselves to become complacent again.

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Juliana Geran Pilon is Senior Fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization. Her eight books include *The Utopian Conceit and the War on Freedom* and *The Art of Peace: Engaging a Complex World;* her latest, *An Idea Betrayed: Jews, Liberalism, and the American Left,* has just been published. The author of over two hundred fifty articles and reviews on international affairs, human rights, literature, and philosophy, she has made frequent appearances on radio and television, and is a lecturer for the Common Sense Society. Pilon has taught at the National Defense University, George Washington University, American University, and the Institute of World Politics. She served also in several nongovernmental organizations, notably the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), where

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