



# **"Will the sword devour forever?"**

**Yes, it will. And no one but we will stop it from devouring us.**

Daniel Gordis February 28, 2022



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Image via Twitter)

Years ago, after I'd finished giving a talk some place in the States, someone in the audience asked me a question that, if I recall correctly, had very little to do with what I'd just spoken about. "If you knew that some enemy was likely about to follow through on its threats to destroy Israel, would you leave?"

I'm not a huge fan of such hypotheticals, but it was an earnest question and deserved an honest answer. "No," I said. "I'd stay put."

I could tell people were dubious, uncertain as to whether I was serious. The questioner followed up: "Knowing you might well be killed?"

“Yes, I’d stay.”

“Why?”

“Because if Israel didn’t exist, I wouldn’t want to be alive. I’m not saying no Jew or no Israeli should want to be alive. I’m just staying that I wouldn’t want to wake up. Wake up to see that once again, Jewish rebirth and flourishing had been wiped out? See the cultural, linguistic, religious and intellectual flourishing that colors almost every corner of this place destroyed with virtually no chance of ever returning? Not for me. I’d truly much rather be dead.”

I meant it then, and nothing has changed about my position. I imagine that quite a few people feel differently, and I don’t judge them in the least. But I’m not at all ambivalent. A world without Israel is a world I have no interest in inhabiting.

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We had promised a column on Menachem Begin this week, as his thirtieth *yahrzeit* just passed. Though world events conspired to make a different topic more urgent, that column will follow soon.

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I hadn’t thought of that exchange in a very long time. But on Friday night, we were at dinner at the home of good friends. Just the four of us. We did all the preliminaries, and then poured wine for *kiddush*. I said something about how it felt particularly painful to be pouring good wine in the comfort and security of Jerusalem when tens of thousands of innocent people (now it seems it’s closer to half a million) were fleeing their homes, many likely never to return to the lives that they’d had.<sup>1</sup>

It was quiet, and then one of our hosts said, “That will never happen to us.” I knew what she meant, but I let her say it. “Because we’d never leave.” She meant precisely what I’d said years ago. We’d stick it out. Like some of the Ukrainians we now see on the news, we’d fight it out to the end.

Why? It's what people do when there's no boundary between their country, their land, their homes and their souls.

It's what they do when history is a stark reminder that all the other alternatives are much worse.

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Part of the reason we wouldn't flee, of course, is that there would be nowhere for most of us to go. Who's going to take in millions of Jews if it comes to that? But much more important than that, to where would we even *want* to flee? In which hotbed of tepid-at-best Jewish identity, not-so-gradual Jewish evaporation or seething antisemitism (the ones where antisemitism has long blossomed, or the ones where it's now making a comeback) would we wish or hope to find safe harbor? In which Western society gripped by anger and hatred do we imagine that we'd ever again flourish as a tiny minority the way that we do here?

There are more people here than one might imagine who would never leave. Most of us have no illusion as to what life would be like after we decided to stay. And if by some small chance we'd forgotten, this week offered a chilling reminder.

We will be just as alone as is Ukraine. We will be as abandoned as they are.

It could play out in almost limitless ways, but here's one scenario for you. Imagine that some next round of fighting between Israel and Hamas breaks out again. It starts out like all the others, but this time, Iran joins the fray. It warns Israel that unless it immediately ceases its war with Hamas, Iran will give the signal to Hezbollah in the north and many thousands of rockets, a number of them quite precise, will come raining down on Israel. And lest Israel has in its mind to preemptively strike Hezbollah, it warns, Iran has long since crossed the nuclear threshold. "If you strike Lebanon, it's over for you." Yes, Israel has second strike capability. And yes, Israel could make sure that that would also be the end of Iran. But of what comfort would that be when it comes to the future of the Jewish people?

You don't have to work hard to try to imagine what those days or weeks of threats and saber-rattling look like, or what the West would (not) do. You just saw that precise scenario play out.

And then, let's assume Iran carries out its threat, as did Vladimir. Israel does bomb Gaza in response to the shelling of Tel Aviv by Hamas (which also happened this past May, don't forget). What, Israel just sits tight while missiles fly at Tel Aviv? That's not quite what Jewish sovereignty was designed to foster. So Iran does give Hezbollah the green light. The Ben-Gurion airport, hit numerous times, is now out of commission (which makes the question of leaving quite a bit less relevant). Israeli hospitals are being hit (there's a reason that some Israeli hospitals have their surgical theaters below ground). The power grid is fractured. Bridges are destroyed by the dozens. With food imports essentially impossible, the country quickly runs out of supplies. Thousands are dead, and even more are wounded. The survival of the Jewish state hangs in abeyance.

And as we were getting bombed to smithereens, what should we expect from the West? If we'd forgotten, all we need to do is look at Ukraine. The US would do what? I assume it would try to send some weapons and medication. The rest of the West would do what? Banish Hezbollah from SWIFT? Suspend Iran's access to the system? Send us some RPG's, as Germany is now doing for Ukraine? (Of course, you don't really need RPG's when the enemy has no tanks and is trying to destroy you, not invade you.)

There would be deeply moving vigils aplenty, I'm sure. Israel Emergency Funds would be revived. Solemn parades down Fifth Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard. Moving sermons would follow from pulpit after pulpit (though not as many as you might think—young rabbis would be busy explaining that we had it coming all along).

Israelis watch Ukraine, and we see ourselves. We see this week, and we see one possible future. We know with no uncertainty—we would be alone. We would be abandoned. If we or you ever thought otherwise, it's time to stop the delusion.

*To see our possible future, all we have to do is look north at the present.*

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*Or, if we prefer, to see our future, all we have to do is look right here at the past.*

Those who watched Israel's leaders closely this week saw a delicate, carefully choreographed dance by Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett. Lapid strongly lambasted Putin for the invasion of Ukraine, while Bennett deftly avoided mentioning Russia or Putin even as he expressed support for the Ukrainians. This was no example of the two getting their signals crossed. It was an attempt to handle an almost impossible situation.

"On the one hand, Israel is an ally of the United States and a part of the West, and there can be no doubt about it," former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert [explained](#) to *The New York Times*. "On the other hand, the Russians are present in Syria, we have delicate military and security problems in Syria – and that requires a certain freedom for the Israeli military to act in Syria."

As Iran seeks to get its arms into Syria (and from there, at times, to Lebanon), Israel bombs Syria and destroys those it can, almost at will. Israel has bombed Syria hundreds of times in the past few years—and there's nothing that Syria can do to stop it. Still, though, there are limits on what Israel can do there, not because of Syria, but because of Russia, which also occupies that airspace. If Israel crosses Russia, Russia puts an end to Israel's actions there. And the arms then flow to Syria and Lebanon, essentially positioning Iran right on Israel's border, which brings us back to the scenario above.

How does this delicate dance, seeking to appease both sides of a now bitter and hostile duo, play out? Not terribly well, if you recall our past, right here.

Many centuries ago, it wasn't modern Israel caught in the crossfire between the West and Russia (and China), but the ancient Jewish kingdom of Judah, caught between the Babylonians to the north and the Egyptians to the South. It was a complicated affair, but we'll summarize it very briefly.

When Jehoahaz became king of (the southern Jewish kingdom) Judah (in around 609 BCE), Necho II, who was King of Egypt, invaded Judah and deposed him, turning Judah into a tribute state of Egypt. But then Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC, so Judah became a tribute state to Babylon. But when the Babylonians were defeated in

601 BCE, Jehoiakim, who had since become king of Judah, defected to the Egyptians. So the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, put together an expedition to punish Judah in 597 BC.

The new king of Judah then handed the city of Jerusalem over to Nebuchadnezzar, who deported around 10,000 Jews to his capital in Babylon—the first stages of the exile had begun. Never again would most of the world's Jews live in the Land of Israel (though in about a decade, demographers believe, that will be reversed for the first time in 2600 years, and the majority of the world's Jews will be in Israel).

Even in a world in which military matters unfolded much more slowly, it took barely more than a decade of being caught between two rivals to bring Jewish sovereignty to a crushing end.

"We've seen this movie before," as the commonly Israeli phrase puts it.

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*If we've seen this movie before, there's also a question we've asked before.*

Thousands of years ago, the commander of the biblical King Saul's forces, Abner, [asked](#) Yoav, the captain of David's men, "Must the sword devour forever?"

To that question, we know the answer. The illusion that our world has advanced beyond land wars between countries has been shattered. The illusion that World War II or the collapse of the Soviet Union changed much is gone. Human history does not morph nearly as much as we might like to think.

Yes, the sword devours forever. It always has, it always will.

That became painfully clear this past week, as did one other lesson of history: if we are to survive here, we have no one on whom to rely but ourselves. All the protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, when the rubber meets the road, no one else will do very much. For no one else will really care.

We can probably survive here, but only as long as we're honest about what it will take.  
For as we gaze north, just beyond the Black Sea, the world is reminding us once again:

Our future here depends on us. Only on us.