

Why the Ukraine Invasion Should Stir Jews to Finally Make Aliyah

As Russia stands on the verge of invading Ukraine, my feelings are mixed and contradictory to many others.

For me, and many Jews, anything regarding Ukraine brings with it thought of our history and persecution there. In modern times, we recall Babi Yar (Babyn Yar in Ukrainian) where 34,000 Jews were murdered in Kiev over three days in September 1941. The Nazis orchestrated, and many Ukrainians were enthusiastic partners. Ukraine was part of the Pale of Settlement, the area in which Jews were permitted to live, meaning that we were prevented from living in the rest of the Russian empire. Even if Jews had the ability to leave, they were prevented from going anywhere. In a society as antisemitic as it was. Concentrating Jews there made us easy prey for countless pogroms going back centuries.

It's disturbing that Ukraine has crowned Bogdan Chmielnicki as one of its national heroes. Chmielnicki is synonymous with massacres and responsible for the murder of some 100,000 Jews and the purging of entire Jewish communities.

The persecution of Jews in Ukraine was awful and it's hard for Jews, especially those like me whose families eked out and survived a hard life over centuries of our being in diaspora in these lands.

I experienced it during my second trip to the USSR in 1987. While the Soviets had already initiated their glasnost, or openness, in other parts of the Soviet Union, Jews in the Ukraine continued to feel threatened under the heel of the KGB. Of course I visited Babi Yar, whose memorial did not mention that the 34,000 victims were Jews. I also visited

Jewish activists and Hebrew teachers who were still threatened daily. While all the Jews in the Soviet Union knew that the KGB was listening and tracking them, or could be, it was only in Ukraine that I felt their fear overtly.

I will never forget the day I spent with two young men in the Jewish community. It was the only time I felt direct fear after learning that we got on the Kiev metro going several stops in the wrong direction deliberately in order to get back on the train in the right direction just to see who was following us.

So I understand the feelings of many who have written that the threatened invasion by Russia could not happen to a more deserving people. I especially understand these feelings coming from contemporaries whose parents are Holocaust survivors from Ukraine, knowing everything that they suffered and how for them, Ukraine is like Poland for my grandmother, who told me never to go there because their ground is soaked in our blood.

Yet I am also aware that more recently, the Ukrainians elected both a Jewish president and prime minister. There are countries today, which have no Jews and no Jewish history like that of Ukraine, where antisemitism is a pillar of many political campaigns. There are more "liberal" and "enlightened" countries, where electing a Jew to national office like this is unthinkable. So the fact that somehow two Jewish men were elected, including the current president, suggests at least that not all Ukrainians see life through a prism of hating Jews. That doesn't change our history, but it is a refreshing change in reality.

When I read people dismissing the possible invasion and potential tremendous loss of life because of our history there, I am bothered on two levels. First, I don't believe that we should be indifferent to the risk of such massive potential war and its implications. Second, I don't like the

dismissal of a completely illegitimate military threat by one country against another just because our history in Ukraine is as tarnished as it is. There are legitimate reasons for war as a last resort in various circumstances, but it seems that the threatened invasion by Russia on Ukraine, or for that matter any other country, is establishing a dangerous precedent that cannot be dismissed because of hundreds of years of antisemitism, persecution and pogroms. I do not subscribe to the notion that Ukrainians deserve it, and I do not think that Russia has any business threatening to do so.

If that position is unpopular, buckle up because you're not going to like this one. I love the fact that over the last 150 years, the Jewish people have been coming home in droves. No number of Jews returning to Israel is too great, and I believe that we should do whatever possible to encourage and facilitate that; it is the historic fulfillment of prophecy. That's big. However, the Jewish population of Ukraine today is a small fraction of the entire population. Jews are no more or less at risk per capita. I don't believe that if Russia has renewed imperial designs, it necessarily comes on the back of the remaining Jews specifically.

I am all for efforts to bring them home to Israel, but I am troubled by the notion that Israel should be actively engaging in plans to airlift an entire community. In the past three decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, not only is there every possibility for Jews who wish to leave to do so, unlike in the 1980s when I visited and for generations before that, but renewed life has been breathed into Jewish communities throughout Ukraine where people feel not only at home but comfortable living there as Jews.

Would I make a phone call from Jerusalem to every Jewish Ukrainian and let them know that we are here to help bring them home on a one-way ticket? Absolutely. But conversations of airlifting an entire segment of the Ukrainian population, while leaving everyone else behind to suffer the consequences

of a potential invasion, seem ill-advised and possibly arrogant. War or no war, the Jews know that they can come home to Israel anytime. I pray they will, even if “just” to flee for their safety. But I don’t believe that we should be organizing any massive airlift or other rescue. Yes, I know that is unsettling for some to read.

I pray that there will be no invasion or war for many reasons. And I pray that Jewish Ukrainians will choose to come home either way. But I’m not for mixing the two issues. And despite our history there, I’m not a fan of some saying that the Ukrainians somehow deserve it. {eoa}

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