

Strengthening the Heart of Israel

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I wish that this *yontif* was truly sweet. I wish that this day, as it usually does, held greater joy for us all.

This Tuesday's missile attack and terrorist violence in Jaffa shook us all. Sunday evening, we will mark the first *yahrzeit* of the attacks of October 7th. We will recall the brutal, barbaric, vicious attacks that took the lives of 1,200 innocent men, women, and children – the attacks during which over 250 people were taken captive, the youngest of whom is an infant and the oldest of whom is a grandfather – the attacks which set off a multi-front war whose violence continues to this day.

According to Jewish tradition, there is a lesser known name for Rosh Hashanah – a name that especially speaks to us this year. In the earliest translation of the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is known as *Yom Y'va'va* – “The Day of Crying Out.” The Day of Tears.

The name emerges from a couple of sources, including a rabbinic legend about the matriarch Sarah during the binding of Isaac. According to this midrash, while Abraham and Isaac are away on Mount Moriah, a stranger comes to Sarah. This stranger informs her that her son will not be returning home; that he is dead. Upon hearing the news, the legend says that Sarah began to weep aloud like the sounds that are made by the shofar. And so we are taught that on Rosh Hashanah, when we hear the sound of the shofar, we are hearing the cries of a bereaved mother.

As Rabbi Elyse recalled last night, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, may his memory be for a blessing, was one of the six hostages recently found murdered by Hamas in the tunnels of Gaza. For many, during this past year, Hersh had become the face of the October 7th victims and of the hostages. Perhaps it is because Hersh's family, originally from the United States, is so deeply rooted in both the American and Israeli Jewish communities. Perhaps it is because his family is so beloved that it seems as if everyone either knows them or knows-someone-who-knows-them. Or perhaps it is because Hersh, who was only 23 years old, was like so many of our own children or grandchildren or friends: warm, kind, and fun-loving – a young man who loved soccer and music and who had dreams of traveling all over the world.

Soon after Hersh had been taken, his mother, Rachel Goldberg stood at the United Nations to advocate on behalf of all of the hostages and their families. To the assembled world leaders she said:

“...So here I live in a different universe than all of you. We seem to live in the same place, but I, like all of the mothers and fathers and wives and husbands and children and brothers and sisters and loved ones of the stolen, we actually live on a different planet. This (is) a planet of

beyond-pain; our planet of no sleep; our planet of despair; our planet of tears.”

For the Goldberg-Polin family, for the hostages – over 100 of whom remain in Gaza, and for their families: our hearts are torn on this day. For the Israelis – men, women, and children - who have died by terror and in war – as well as for their families: we are filled with sorrow. And for the thousands who have been violently displaced from their homes and for all those who are forced to rush to shelters at-a-moment’s notice, living every day in fear of an attack: they are in our hearts.

As well, most certainly, in both heart and mind, is how this war’s violence has shattered innumerable lives beyond Israel’s borders. As Jon Polin, Hersh’s father, solemnly reminded us: “There is a surplus of agony on all sides of (this) tragic conflict.” And so, on this Day of Crying Out, we also hear the weeping of the many innocent Palestinians and Arabs who have been caught up in this war. In the shofar’s sound on this day, their voices call out to us as well.

Throughout Jewish history, our people’s response to trauma has always been action. Judaism teaches that during the darkest of times, our task is to marshal the strength necessary to light a candle; to do what is necessary to rebuild and to move forward. As Aviva Klompas, author of the recently published book, *Stand Up Nation*, has written:

“Amidst anguish and anger, we have long understood that we are the author of our own story and ours is a story of human contribution. We are not meant to live in despair. And so we turn outward, determined to build a more connected, prosperous, and compassionate world.”

A few months ago, members of our Temple Beth Shalom community witnessed this resilience firsthand during our TBS Service Mission to Israel. While there, we met a young leader named Adir Schwartz.

Adir is a thirty-year-old resident of Jerusalem. Since he was sixteen, Adir has been involved in civic activities as a political and social activist. As he introduced himself to us he said: “with the exception of three years when I was in the paratroopers, I have devoted my life to Jerusalem, my city.”

On October 7th, Adir - in partnership with other local leaders - co-founded an all-volunteer citizen support agency called the “Jerusalem Operations Center.”

As we sat with Adir in the main hall of the Operations Center, he told us his story:

“On the morning of October 7th,” he began, “I woke up to the sound of sirens. Like most Jerusalemites, I did nothing. I didn’t get out of bed. I was sure that it was a false alarm. I thought that, for sure, someone had just pushed the wrong button. When the second and third siren came in, I started reading the news. I started following the detailed threads that people in the south were writing on Twitter from their safe rooms. It was horrible.

My friends and I were in shock. But we recognized that we could either sit at home and cry, or we could do something. So, we organized.

In Israel, everything starts and ends with a WhatsApp group. Immediately, through all of our individual networks, we were in touch with thousands of people. And because of this we were able to kick-start this very quickly.

We found space in the building that we are sitting in now. In very Israeli fashion, we asked if it would be okay to bring one table upstairs and put a few laptops on it. 'It will be nothing,' we said. And then, in very Israeli fashion, we eventually took over the entire building. From the minus-one floor to the sixth floor, we used every corridor, every table, every room.

At 10:00 am we started a Google Form and spread the word that if the people needed anything, they should tell us. By noon, the first laptop was set up. And by 12:30 pm, the first requests started coming in.

In the south, over 5,000 people were evacuated. We were matching families-in-need with donors. In the theater upstairs, we ran "the best show in town." During the first weeks, we were open 24/7 because people just kept bringing things: dry goods, thousands of packages, toiletries. We started with a 600 item inventory. We were like Amazon. If you needed something, we got it for you.

Eventually we grew to over 6,000 volunteers. They were young, old, secular, religious, Christian, Arab. Everything that Jerusalem has to offer. And, they were all in this building cooperating, working together. It was amazing to see! There were students telling professors what to do. There were CEO's of companies working in the warehouse with 12 year olds. Everyone wanted to do something.

Our guiding principle was always "*K'vod Adam*" – "Human Dignity." We always remained sensitive to the needs of people and to how they would feel about receiving all that we offered."

At the end of Adir's presentation, he said to us: "At a time such as this, the feeling of powerlessness is a bad feeling. But what we learned early-on is that we are not powerless. We have agency."

As has been widely reported, there were many Israeli individuals and groups who stepped forward in extraordinary ways to provide support in the aftermath of October 7th. These heroic efforts were inspirational for many reasons. Included amongst them, certainly, is the fact that the combination of applied-Jewish-values; of entrepreneurial ingenuity; of hard work and selfless giving represents the very best of Israeli society. It is reflective of a society that honors life and that rises up in support of those in need. In fact, one might say that it is reflective of the heart of Israel.

Time and again, in our reading of the Torah and of the Hebrew Bible, we return to the central premise of what the Promised Land is called upon to be. In the book of Genesis, God commands Abraham and Sarah to become a family of blessing – a family through whom the peoples of the earth shall be blessed – in a land where this promise will be made real. 2,800 years ago, the Prophet Isaiah is said to have issued to the Jewish people an ethical imperative. Speaking on behalf of God, Isaiah said: “I, the Eternal have called you in righteousness and taken you by the hand. I have appointed you a covenant people. A light to the nations.” Many centuries later, it was David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, who firmly declared that: “The State of Israel will be tested not by its wealth, not by its army, and not by its technique, but rather by its moral identity and its humanitarian values.”

In 1948, these core covenantal principles were canonized in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. Its preamble draws from the full historic arc of Israel’s moral mandate. It says: “Israel will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants.”

In short, Israel’s mission is to create a state that is Jewish, democratic, pluralistic, and secure. Israel has much, much to be proud of. And, at the very same time, Israel continues to work to most closely align its ethos and its actions. As we know, and as Israelis know, Israeli society is confronted by critical challenges.

Today in Israel, for example, it is a significant problem that the governing coalition is comprised of and guided by parties that represent the far-right settler movement and those who actively promote agendas that are ultra-nationalist, ultra-Orthodox, and messianic in nature.

Today in Israel, it is a significant problem that a majority of Israelis hold profound mistrust for the current government.

And, in Israel today, it is a significant problem when Israeli leaders like Ronen Bar, the head of Israel’s Shin Bet security service, openly sounds an alarm by declaring that future actions by the government could “change the state’s face unrecognizably.”

For us, Israel’s societal crisis, as well as Israel’s security crisis, calls for our action. Indeed, an essential aspect of supporting Israel at this time is working to ensure that our state reflects the best of Israeli society. Indeed, seeing Israel as a ‘work-in-progress’ and as a ‘participatory endeavor’ has always central to Zionism.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “The State of Israel is a spiritual revolution. Not a one-time event, but an ongoing revolution.” Israeli legal scholar Tal Becker has taught: “We have to remember that we have the state in order to build the society that we want.” And, most recently, it was Adir Schwartz – the impressive political and social activist in Jerusalem with whom our TBS group met - who remarked to us that “Israelis and Jews-living-in-the-

diaspora need each other. We need each other,” he said, “to support each other. And we need each other,” he said, “to create the Israel we deserve.”

Throughout this past year, our TBS community has been participating in a monthly, open conversation, via Zoom, with members of our sister congregation in Jerusalem, Congregation Mevasseret Tzion. Many of the members of the Mevasseret community are actively working on Israel’s ‘front lines’ – helping to ensure that Israel remains a Jewish, democratic, and secure state. These individuals are part of an Israeli network of progressive congregations and organizations that make up the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism or the IMPJ.

The IMPJ’s mission is to work in Israeli communities, in the Knesset, in the courts, and, as necessary, in the streets to promote its pluralistic agenda of internal and external strength. These Israelis are advocating for a viable two-state solution. They are working on efforts to help ensure greater prosperity throughout the Middle East. They reject the zealotry of Israel’s far-right ultra-nationalists. They work to protect the rights of Israeli Arabs and of Palestinian living in the West Bank and Gaza. They are pursuing paths that help ensure full rights for women and the LGBTQ+ community in Israel. They are strengthening progressive Judaism in Israeli society. And they are working to ensure that Israel remains militarily strong so that it will stand securely against all external threats.

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, a leader of the IMPJ and a Member of Knesset, has told us that participation by Jewish communities outside of Israel is essential for this work. As he has written: “The sweetest dream of the right in Israel is that the American liberal Jewish community turns away.”

During this time of critical need in Israel, we shall not turn away. Instead, we will continue to join with our Israeli partners and will lean into the hard, ongoing work of creating the Israel that Israelis and Jews around the world need.

This year, we will deepen our close relationship with the Mevasseret community by continuing our monthly “*Panim el Panim*” – “Face to Face” discussion program. Our conversations have been outstanding! All are welcome. As well, we will continue to support those organizations and agencies whose values of promoting a Jewish, democratic, and secure state align with our own.

We will continue to strongly advocate for the return of the hostages by supporting the critical work of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

We will even-more-actively support the work of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism; Maram – Israel’s Progressive rabbinic network; and the Israel Religious Action Center – the legal arm of the Israeli Reform Movement.

We will promote widespread TBS congregational participation in the upcoming 2025 World Zionist Congress. The World Zionist Congress, also known as the “Parliament of the Jewish People” around the world, makes decisions that impact over \$5 billion dollars in spending regarding policy decisions in Israel. Many thanks in advance to Jamie Fleckner and Marsha Moller who will be serving as our TBS Co-Captains in this important effort. Stay tuned for more information.

During the coming year, we will develop a new partnership with Project Rozana - an international multi-faith-based health care organization that works in Israel and the territories to build bridges between Israelis and Palestinians. In Israel, one of the few areas of civil society where Israelis and Palestinians meet on a large scale is in the healthcare sector. Since its founding in 2013, Project Rozana has positively impacted the lives of tens of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians by providing essential medical training and resources for Palestinian physicians and nurses.

When I spoke recently with Ken Bob, the Board Chairperson of Project Rozana, USA, I asked him how he was able to operate effectively in the Palestinian territories. He replied that the Project Rozana Team in Israel has a very good working relationship with the COGAT, the government agency that coordinates activities in the territories. He then emphasized the depth of the partnership that has been created between Israelis and Palestinians by quoting one Palestinian medical worker who said: “We have different narratives, but a joint vision.”

Many thanks to Soni and Jim Masur for introducing Project Rozana to us.

I began my words this morning by recalling the tears of the matriarch, Sarah. In the traditional Haftarah portion that is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read of another matriarch’s tears. And that is Rachel.

In the book of Jeremiah, we read: *“Kol b’Rama nishma, n’hi b’chi tam’ru’reem...”*

“A cry is heard in Ramah. Wailing, bitter wailing. Rachel weeps for her children. She is unable to be comforted, for her children are gone.

It is said that Rachel cries because she foresees how future generations of her family, her people, will suffer.

On this Rosh Hashanah morning, in the Biblical Rachel’s cries, we also hear the sorrow of Rachel Goldberg and of the countless other bereaved parents, families, and friends who suffer during this most difficult time.

Tellingly, however, our Haftarah portion does not end in tears. The prophet tells us that, in response to Rachel's sadness, God personally reaches out to her; directly offering her comfort.

God says: "Still your tears. For your efforts shall yield goodness. For your future, "*Yeish tikvah*" – "There shall be hope!"

On this Day of Crying Out, may we find strength in one another.

May we be inspired by those in Israel who selflessly support those confronted by crisis.

And may we, during the coming year, continue to live our values. May we step forward in support of our Israeli partners, so that, together, we might foster the best of Israel: an Israel that is just, compassionate, and strong – a homeland that serves as a shining example for all.

Amen.