

Rosh Hashanah Evening  
October 2, 2024, 1 Tishrei 5785

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“Finding Hope in Familiar Places Since October 7<sup>th</sup>”

Shanah Tovah. Thanks again to Susan Feigin Harris for welcoming us home with such warm greetings. Tonight, the news continues to change the shape of the world we know, but, together in the sanctuary and on livestream, we’re a community in worship who share hope for the future.

To prepare ourselves, we need to begin again where we left off. Last year, Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, was Simchat Torah, a day of joy to renew the Torah reading cycle. I woke up early in the morning and checked my phone for messages and texts. No texts. Just news --- horrifying news --- about Israel.

On my drive to Temple to prepare for the morning’s bar mitzvah, my mind was racing with what needed to be said and done. Along the way, I drove past orthodox men walking to their synagogue. Surely they hadn’t checked their phones or been aware of the news. I thought to myself, should I stop the car and tell them what I already knew? It occurred to me that if I stopped my car in front of them and announced the horror that was taking place in Israel, I would sound like a raving lunatic to them --- and to me.

So I concluded that once they entered their synagogue someone would have known or would have known soon enough. I kept driving to Beth Israel. The Lerner family was assembling in the sanctuary for their son’s bar mitzvah. My thoughts were focused on their simcha, on their joy. It became clear to me that while Israel fought and suffered, we had no choice but to take our places on the bimah at Beth Israel. Far from the battle fields in the kibbutzes and the Nova music festival, we had to persist in being Jewish, on Shabbat, on Simchat Torah, for them and for us. It was the right thing to do even as we clung to hope that it wasn’t as bad as it first appeared to be.

Of course we were terribly wrong. It was much worse. The worst was revealed to us on news channels, social media, and WhatsApp. Almost nothing was held back from the world to see and narrate. I won’t retell the events of the last 11 months. But this evening, we can’t escape everything that has changed around us.

On this Rosh Hashanah, even the Shofar will sound differently. It will awaken in us echoes of its distinctive calls heard by generations of Jews and their hopes for our ancient, modern, middle eastern, and western people. And this Rosh Hashanah, its sounds will command us to ask **what have we learned about ourselves as Jews? What have we become as a Jewish people? And how will we encounter October 7<sup>th</sup>, next week, and the days that follow it in this New Year?**

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**What have we learned about ourselves as Jews?** First, it can happen to us, too. Even in America, the Golden Land for our immigrant ancestors, antisemitism can be resurrected. Today we call it Jew-hatred. Second, our lack of immunity deprives us of the protective armor we thought that assimilation and acculturation would afford us. Third, we are not enough. To

be Jewish twice-a-year, to be Jewish in name but not in participation, and to be Jewish in the west but not in the Middle East doesn't work. Not anymore.

If these three claims were made in the 1930s, they would have been prophetic. But I'm saying them now and this is not 1930. We're better equipped than our European ancestors about whom it was said that "the pessimists left for New York and the optimists went to Auschwitz." In America, the disastrous college campus protests by Jew-haters and terrorist-lovers finally led to congressional hearings and then to major shifts in college rules and obligations towards Jewish students. Though the harm was done and the scars are obvious, law and order prevailed, for now.

What we learned about ourselves as Jews is that we don't know enough about ourselves as Jews. But we can fix the problem. In the Jewish community, organizations like ADL, AJC, AIPAC, and URJ can advocate for us in the highest branches of government. The people who serve there identify themselves strongly as Jews who know their history, their culture, and their role in fashioning our people's future. And if you asked any of them where their passion to serve Jewish life began, they would likely tell you about an experience that began in their synagogue. Why? Because synagogues make Jews.

Worship, education, and community service are the bedrocks of synagogue life. Here we serve as partners with young families to provide facts, understandings, and skills about how to be Jewish in their hearts and homes. Later they're equipped to do Judaism when they leave home for college and then choose to enter Jewish communal life. Every Jewish leader, including me, has a story to tell about their rabbi, cantor, educator, Jewish summer camp experience, or Jewish family member whose leadership in the synagogue fashioned their identity.

At some point, their rabbi or synagogue leader reminded them that they are a link in a chain of tradition that they have the obligation to protect, but not the privilege to break. It's not enough to say, *L'dor Vador* --- from generation to generation; we have to bear the weight of that obligation in every step we take, in every hand we touch, and in every word we speak.

Our best examples are joyful ones and the memories they created. We've always learned from joy and expressed gratitude for it. But, we've learned from pain, too. In Jewish memory, we've learned from lots of pain. In the past, we either succumbed to our pain, or we rose up from it.

This past year, in the midst of staggering pain in Israel, I went with a small group of Houstonians to Israel in February 2024. The Houston Jewish Federation trip brought us face-to-face with excruciating pain on the ground and in the hearts of Israelis.

In the south, in Kfar Aza, we arrived to meet one of its longtime residents. Her name is Chen. It means grace and goodness. I've met her before on previous trips, though she didn't remember me now. She had no reason to. But as before, she welcomed us to the porch outside her home. This time was different, because she was different. You see, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, Chen was in Portugal visiting family. As soon as she learned about the attack on her home, she rushed back as soon as she could get a plane to Israel. What she found left her dazed and changed, forever. After she told us about the kibbutz's amazing people and history, she guided us past burned-out homes and bombed buildings. She showed us bullet holes in the doors and walls, and showed us the aftermath of the attacks and the rescues.

Finally, she paused for questions. When she was asked, "How did the terrorists know where to go when they stormed the kibbutz?" She took a deep breath and held back her tears.

It seemed that her presentation was well-prepared; it served as a reliable text to lean on. But new questions required her to look at her home and her life there in new ways. She looked up and said, "Google Earth." You see, her life in Israel and our life in Houston are visible to the whole world. Nothing is far away and nothing is off-limits, anymore. It was overwhelming to her. Before we left Chen at Kfar Aza, we asked her where she'll find hope again? She paused. She looked up but not directly at us, and said, "We'll find hope in kindness."

### **What have we become as a Jewish people?**

From Chen and others we met who also struggled, we discovered more about ourselves as Jews who came from America. We felt many emotions, but guilt for living in America was not an option. Much more important was our sense of responsibility to our people to make a difference.

We began to make a difference by educating ourselves about Jewish and Israel history. At Beth Israel, our mission includes education in a robust lifelong learning program. So we doubled down on education. We poured all of our energy and many resources into educating children and adults about Israel's history and Jewish identity. With speakers and experts we flew in from Israel, learned from on Zoom, and found close to home, there was no end to ways to satisfy our thirst for knowledge, facts, and understanding.

Many of you were stunned by what you learned. You told me that you didn't know how many times peace was pursued and later denied. You told me that your experiences in Israel on congregational trips led you to believe in Israel's dreams and in its permanence.

I learned something, too. In times of crisis, knowledge is power. Daniel Gordis, one of our profound visitors to Beth Israel, last spring, wrote in his book, "Impossible Takes Longer," that we are no longer a passive Jewish people. We are not the Jews of the ghettos, the pogroms, or the Holocaust. Israelis are New Jews who are passionate Zionists, who fight to survive, and who will always call Israel home. It isn't a costume or a mask they wear. For Israelis, there is no former land to return to, and there is no other place they would call home.

Education is a start, but it's not the end. What follows is advocacy. Jewish and Israel education is at the heart of knowing how to engage in advocacy for Jews everywhere. Without a nearly comprehensive understanding of this complex region and history our generation is disabled from participating in the critical roles that Jewish survival demands, today. It's our principal contribution to Israel's strength.

Advocacy means showing up and standing up. At Beth Israel, we have engaged in every way that we can. We participated in the march in Washington. Some of you traveled to Washington with Cantor Feibush and David Scott. Many of you have given financial support. But if all you've done is liked or shared a post on Facebook, Instagram, or Tik Tok, it isn't enough. Not by a mile.

Likewise, college campuses were the hotbeds of advocacy last year, and in many cases, they continue to be this year. In an article in JNS, called, "Hillel Across America needs to rally its student troops," Mitchell Bard wrote, "Convincing Jewish students to show up for food is one thing; mobilizing them to stand up for Israel's survival is quite another."

This year, advocacy means making hard choices. Our college-bound students might forego campuses that don't meet their expectations after years of hard work to win admittance to the best schools. But what's best, anymore? An undergraduate education for

many of these students is just the beginning. Where should they begin to grow and learn? Surely not on a campus that can't protect them or preserve their rights as American Jews. Pass on the Ivy League and save your money for graduate school and for institutions and organizations that also advocate for you.

In quick fashion, Hillel International created resources that are helping college-bound students choose campuses that support their rights and protect their safety. Hillel International's website announced, "Just in time for the fall." It was a College Decision Hub. They call it a one-stop-shop for Jewish high school students and their families to find the ideal campus for their students. There are questions for Jewish students to ask, financial scholarship resources, and ways to feel safe. Meanwhile university officials are learning to navigate their campuses filled with pro-terrorists and antisemites, in the quad and among the faculty.

But, I have a pressing request for Jewish college students. By now you've found your place on campus, unpacked your belongings, and learned your schedule. Now save some time to take a class on Jewish history, or a Hebrew language class, or go to Hillel programs and their worship services. Why? Because you'll always be at risk if you're defenseless; not because you don't know how to fight if you have to. You're defenseless because too many of you can't adequately explain why you're assaulted by Jew-haters, or why fellow Jews are protesting about a river and a sea they can't identify correctly. Even if you didn't attend religious school often enough, or you spent little time focused on your Jewish heritage, it doesn't make you a bad Jew. It just makes you a Jew who doesn't know enough and there's always time for Jewish learning. And, yes, the time has come.

All of these expectations depend on our ability to be honest about events in the Middle East and close to home. The war has wrought havoc on more than Israel. The Palestinian people have suffered under Hamas leadership. From the first day that Hamas took power in 2007, their aim was not the prosperity of the Palestinian people it ruled; it was the destruction of Israel it hated. We can be pro-Palestinian, but not by being pro-terrorist. Young Jews and older Jews, alike, can advocate for a two-state solution all they want, and we were close on many occasions. But what happened on October 7<sup>th</sup>, without any justification that could explain its horrors and savagery, is a risk Israel should never have to imagine, again. Never again.

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Finally, how will we encounter October 7<sup>th</sup>, next week, and the days that follow it in this New Year? We should encounter the day with resolve, with faith, and with pride. We built fences around Beth Israel and Shlenker School to secure our lives and you helped us pay for them --- I can't thank you enough; and we routed out antisemites from campus leadership for the sake of our children and the purpose of higher education. Now we need to fortify our heads and hearts to identify much more than geography between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. We need to fortify the people whose lives, whose faith, and whose destiny depend on that geography, in Israel, and one day, in a free and prosperous Palestine.

Like my Palestinian neighbor and me, we remain friendly in Bellaire. When we saw each other last, he was driving to the corner where I was standing with my dog on our daily walk. He rolled down the window, we nodded to each other, and then we shrugged our shoulders at

the same time. Without words, we summed up the whole experience in the most honest expression we could muster. In the unknown, unspoken, and unfilled space of a shoulder shrug there is an answer that is yet to be found between two peoples. He drove on. I continued my walk.

Tomorrow, we'll fulfill the mitzvah to hear the Shofar. Its unique sound will be more profound this year. Tekiah will awaken us from the slumber that hides us from engaging in Jewish life; Teruah will shake us out of our stupor and focus us on Jewish communal work; Shevarim will highlight the many ways we can make a difference; and Tekiah Gedolah will echo in our souls for an entire New Year so that we never forget what we and our people have been called to do and to be in the New Year 5785.

And please remember Chen from Kfar Aza. She believes that hope will be found in kindness. Let's learn, advocate, and make a difference for her sake. Let's find hope in the New year through generous acts of kindness. Amen.