Responding to Ourselves and to God after October 7th
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There is a beautiful midrash, an ancient homily, about Adam and Eve, the first human beings. They go to sleep for the first time with terrible fear, seeing the sun set and the world get dark. Then in the morning, their first great shock was to see the sun rise again.

It's natural to be pessimistic. Maybe it's a defense mechanism, to keep our guard up. But it is also particularly Jewish. Noah Feldman, in his recent book *To Be a Jew Today,* writes that "the old adage remains true: the one thing that each generation of Jews has in common with every other is the complete confidence that it is the last" (p. 337). Elliot Cosgrove, my rabbinical school classmate and rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue, in his book, *For Such a Time as This,* makes the same point and teaches us that this "old adage" was in fact articulated by the Jewish scholar Simon Rawidowicz, whose 1948 essay is called: "Israel: The Ever-Dying People." He argues that that one "who studies Jewish history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation…which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain. Each always saw before it the abyss ready to swallow it up. There was scarcely a generation which, while toiling, falling and rising, again being uprooted and striking new roots, was not filled with the deepest anxiety less it be fated to stand at the grave of the nation, to be buried in it. Each generation grieved not only for itself but also for the great past which was going to disappear forever, as well as for the future of unborn generations who would never see the light of day" (Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought,* p. 211). If every generation sees itself as the last, then we can take some solace in knowing that if every generation before us was wrong, hopefully we too will be wrong in our dire predictions. But that does not mean that our concerns, our anxieties and our fears, are not real.

These existential anxieties and fears have exploded since last October 7th. If Noah Feldman, Elliot Cosgrove and Joshua Liefer, the authors of the three books I talked about on Rosh Hashanah on American Jewry post-October 7th, are correct that our identity is fundamentally rooted in our relationship with Israel, then we must figure out how to navigate that, how to have something meaningful to transmit so that we will not be the last Jewish generation.

As we know, and as I discussed on Rosh Hashanah, there is no way to discuss Israel without raising blood pressure. Rabbi Cosgrove laments that Israel has become "a kind of secular religion for American Jews, sometimes supplanting Judaism itself" (p. 39). He cites an observation of the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, who served as rabbi of Emanu-El when it was still in Englewood and who became a mentor to me. An observation from Rabbi Hertzberg always had a bite, as did this one: "The lack of support for Israel [is] the only offense for which Jews can be 'excommunicated'" (p. 40). While recognizing that "for the coming generation of Jewry, the loyalties of yesteryear no longer suffice"(p. 42), Rabbi Cosgrove goes on to assert that "supporting Israel is, in my mind"—that is, his mind—"fundamental to what it means to be a Jew today" (p. 181).

Joshua Leifer, the young journalist and author of *Tablets Shattered,* approaches the question from the opposite angle. "For reasons of moral integrity and political strategy," he writes in reflecting on the immediate aftermath to October 7th, "we would need to find a way to oppose the killing of innocent Israeli civilians, to mourn with our Jewish families—and, at the same time, remain resolute in our opposition to Israel's occupation and prepare to protest what was all but guaranteed to be the Israeli army's disproportionate and devastating response" (p. 337). The Jewish left, he explains, (well, what he calls the Jewish "left" I call the "radical left"), failed that test as it was unable to break with other American leftists who could not bring themselves to grieve for Israeli losses on that terrible day a year ago. But, he continues, "if the U.S. left failed morally on October 7, against this backdrop of mounting horror, the organized American Jewish community has failed even more spectacularly," in

his opinion, for its indifference to Palestinian suffering (p. 341). I think we neared that precarious balance in Ridgewood, as I discussed on Rosh Hashanah, but it is so complicated and fraught with emotion. As Amoz Oz, "the late Israeli author and champion of Israel's political left" once quipped, also cited by Rabbi Cosgrove: "One cannot approach Hamas and say, 'Maybe we meet halfway, and Israel exists only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays'" (p. 91).

The debate dividing American Jews is about more than Israel/Palestine, although that is where it starts. It goes deeper to the tensions between particularism and universalism. Are we a tribe, caring only for our own, or do our Jewish values command us to care for all humanity? It should not have to be either/or, of course, but there is a spectrum. Emblematic of these questions was the decision of HIAS, formerly an acronym for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, to change its name in the last decade simply to HIAS. The hundred-year-old charity that worked to bring so many Jewish immigrants to this country, including my own wife and sister-in-law sitting in this room, it now focuses on mostly non-Jewish immigrant work. Its president explained the change in a 2015 interview: "Now we welcome refugees not because they're Jewish, but because we're Jewish."

Stepping back from the details of the debate and looking at Israel engagement as central to American Jewish identity, from whatever perspective, Noah Feldman, the Harvard Law professor, gives us the following astute and moving analysis in *To Be a Jew Today*:

> In the wake of the complicated, troubled, troubling entwinement, the old Jewish question has been transformed into the Israel question of today. Neither question was destined to be discussed by Jews only. Yet it is also true that Jews who somehow participate in the Israel or Israel-Palestine conversation today—which means, approximately, all Jews—are doing something slightly different than non-Jews who participate in it. By their words, and by their actions, those Jews are performing their own Jewishness. They are struggling with and alongside God, asking what God has to do with the fate of the Jewish

> people. That is true of Religious Zionists who insist that God has given them the land. It is equally true of Jewish non-Zionists and anti-Zionists, whether they are Traditionalist, Progressive or Godless Jews. The fact that Jews debate Israel as Jews does not tell us which Jews are right in that debate. Nor does it follow from the existence of this debate that all sides are somehow correct. The Jewish tradition is rarely relativist. Jews who are arguing about Israel believe their own positions to be the best. They are, whether directly or indirectly, arguing about what is right. In the broader sense, they are arguing about what God wants (pp. 349-350).

How we understand Israel, Noah Feldman suggests, is reflective of how we understand ourselves as Jews, and what, ultimately, we believe, or hear, God to be asking of us.

Because what we are really talking about, then, is ourselves, it is instructive that each of these three authors I am highlighting chooses a different biblical model as their chief inspiration. Joshua Leifer looks to Moses at the moment that he breaks the tablets upon seeing the people's devotion devolve into a cult around a golden calf. Moses, according to Liefer, understood that sometimes we need to deny the core of what was handed down, even if it was thought to be so sacrosanct as given by the hand of God. Good leadership, according to Liefer, will know what to keep and what to throw away. Tablets shattered—the title of his book—are not a sign of anger or loss but of renewal. Rabbi Cosgrove looks to Esther at the moment when she realizes, given a good pep-talk by her uncle Mordecai, that perhaps it was specifically "for such a time as this"—the title of his book—that she was where she was, with the ability to make a difference in the very lives of her people. She could pass as a Persian, but instead she answers the moment and stands up as a Jew, in the face of adversity and danger. And Professor Feldman looks to the patriarch Jacob at the moment when he struggles with the mysterious night-time assailant. Wrestling, whether with God or ourselves, is fundamental to being Jewish. It's not the answers as much as the struggle that makes us who we are. In Professor Feldman's words: "There are some types of people who find it meaningful to struggle

with God and embrace God; to struggle with one another and embrace one another in that same struggle-embrace. We have a name for those people: those people are Jews" (p. 351).

I have wrestled, in the wake of October 7th, in how to lead this congregation as a rabbi during this difficult time, in such a time as this. I am acutely aware that we have different views, in this room, on how to approach and think about Israel. I asked on Rosh Hashanah that we give ear to different opinions, that we learn how to listen to each other. When we yell and scream we only hear our own voices. The most important step is to make room for other opinions. The World Zionist Congress will be holding its international election this spring, a process that happens every five years. That is a political forum where the Jewish people across the globe come together, ideally to hear each other, but often to yell at each other. But I want our voices to be included. Manny Haber, our Israel chair, will say some brief words about that tomorrow and more as we approach the election. But I want to focus this evening on what we do in sacred space, in what we say when we gather together to pray, in such a congregation as this.

Noah Feldman is correct when he said that the way we think about Israel is connected to how we think about ourselves and about God. Here, we come together, week after week, and talk to God as a community. There have been various responses that different rabbis and congregations have found meaningful since October 7th. Some have draped a tallit over an empty chair on the bimah to signify the missing hostages. Many have added a psalm to every service to invoke God's protection, especially for those still held in captivity. Some congregations have added the singing of Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem. And some of my colleagues have added a prayer for God to alleviate the suffering on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, and a quick resolution to the conflict and restoration of peace. I have wrestled with and rejected all of these approaches commonly found in other congregations, while choosing other expressions of prayer. Allow me a moment to share my thinking, taking you "behind the scenes" if you will.

An empty chair draped with a tallit is powerfully evocative of the missing hostages. Like the images of the empty Shabbat tables that appeared in city squares in Israel and elsewhere after October 7th. But I felt that was too visual of an acknowledgement of the suffering of the hostages without any acknowledgement of the many many other innocents who have lost their lives, and if not, their homes and security, in the midst of the conflict. It also reminded me too much of the Soviet-twinning project we did back in the 80s, when we would have an empty tallit-draped bimah chair at bnei mitzvah for a Soviet Jew who could not celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah. I do not in any way mean to diminish the oppression and hardship that Jews experienced in the Soviet Union. Thank God that Alla and Olga's parents were able to emigrate with their families, or my own family would not exist today. But nothing that was experienced in the USSR can compare to the nightmare that our dear hostages have faced in Gaza. Torture, starvation and murder. I pray fervently that any that remain alive be brought home immediately. So while I understand and appreciate the empty chair symbol, I wrestled with it and decided against it.

Adding a psalm is a traditional response to trouble. But I knew that the language and ritual of psalms, *Tehillim,* are a traditional expression that is not immediately recognizable to a non-Orthodox congregation. And I felt that the troubles of these times were not normal troubles, and that we needed a more dramatic expression of prayer and outcry that would be more impactful upon us in this congregation, and toward the One to Whom prayer is addressed. So I wrestled with this but decided to look for other changes to our regular worship.

I thought of and decided not to add Hatikvah to our service, even in the immediate aftermath of October 7th, even though I have been asked at numerous times to do so. I was even asked on the spot to add Hatikvah to follow the Hanukkah blessings at the Ridgewood menorah lighting last December. I did not and do not add Hatikvah to religious services. While I respond very emotionally to Hatikvah, I believe that it is, ultimately, a function of "civic religion" to sing a national anthem, and

as such does not belong in a religious context. It is not that I am not a Zionist, although I recognize that some in our congregation are not. From my perspective, if we were to sing the Hatikvah then we would need to also sing the Star Spangled Banner. It is against American protocol to sing a foreign national anthem without the Star Spangled Banner, and while I do see myself as a patriotic American, I do not think the Star Spanged Banner belongs in a religious service either. But I wrestled with this, and it pained me to say no whenever I was asked about Hatikvah. And so, for much of the year we have sung Adon Olam, the closing hymn, to the melody of Hatikvah. Not every time, but most of the time. As I see it, Israel is at war, and so the melody of its national anthem is an appropriate means to touch our heartstrings as we worry and fret about the country we care about on the other side of the world. But when it was suggested to me that I have us stand for Adon Olam when sung to Hatikvah, I said no. We are just singing the melody, a beautiful melody that in fact was taken from a sixteenth century Italian song. I wrestle with how to keep the right balance.

Some of my colleagues, as I mentioned, make specific references to the sufferings of the Palestinians in Gaza in every service. I gave strong expression to those concerns in the service at Emanual Baptist Church in town that I described on Rosh Hashanah. But I have not given regular vocal expression to those concerns liturgically here from Shabbat to Shabbat, even while I continue to wrestle with that. Of course we don't want any innocent people to suffer. The desolation in Gaza, and now bombings in Lebanon, should be heartbreaking to anyone who cares about humanity. But there is a war going on, and while wars are terrible, they are sometimes, tragically, necessary. Let's think about World War II. Many many innocent Germans suffered terribly from Allied bombing, from starvation and other ills. I know, I have a degree in German history. Berliners ate their zoo animals because there was absolutely no food as the war closed in. (Maybe that's what President Trump was thinking of?) Cities were flattened from aerial bombardment. But did synagogues offer prayers for German suffering during that war? I have spoken here about the need to accept German atonement

today for the sins of their country's past. But I don't think I could have given that kind of a sermon in the first half of the 1940s. October 7th was a year ago but I am still numbed in grief over the horrors of that day, a grief I will be speaking more about tomorrow. I do not deny that there is terrible suffering on the other side—it breaks my heart—but I need Jewish space to name my suffering and my pain. So this too I have wrestled with. It pains me, and I admire my colleagues who offer such prayers of human concern. I do not know if my solution is adequate, but I will share the few changes to our worship service that I, and we, have been doing here at Temple Israel for the past year.

After the prayer of healing for the ill, the Mi Sheberakh, that we recite every Shabbat during the Torah reading, I have been adding a prayer for the hostages, the version distributed by the Masorti/Conservative movement in Israel. I read it in Hebrew, because Hebrew is the language of prayer, and also the language of most of the hostages, and I am praying for them. But I also avoid translating it for the reason of balance, to not draw too much attention to the Jewish suffering in this conflict while not saying anything, or not enough, about the massive suffering on the other side. I will share with you now what the prayer says in English:

> God of Israel, our Rock and our Redeemer, God of Mercy, of Compassion, we pray, we plead that Your return these precious and beloved people, the captured and the missing, who have cruelly and heartlessly been torn from their homes and carried off to enemy territory.
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> We are terrified, contemplating their fate, horrified at the thought of the sufferings of the missing and captured, who are not yet within our power to reach. And so we plead before You: Source of Mercy, be at their side, support them, protect them, and quickly bring them back to the embrace of their families and all who love them as You have declared: "Behold I will restore the captives of Jacob's tents, and have mercy on their dwelling places."

> We beseech you, Adonai, quickly fulfill Your word: "Here I am with you, I will watch over you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, indeed I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Later, after the haftarah, is the prayer for the congregation followed by the prayers for the United States and State of Israel. We say the prayer for the United States in English, and as many of you have noticed, we replace the words "our country" with "the United States of America." I believe our prayer books keep the generic "our country" so as not to have to print a different edition for Canada, but I feel, as a patriotic American, that we should name our country. That has been our practice here for many years, followed by the Prayer for the State of Israel, that we usually say only in Hebrew. Now, in the year before October 7th, some of my colleagues were adding a word that appears in our mahzor and prayerbooks in brackets, *shetehei,* before the phrase *reishit tzimahat ge'ulateinu*. The phrase refers to Israel as the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. The option of preceding with *shetehei* means "may it be" which serves to qualify the phrase, that Israel is not yet but we aspire it to be the beginning of the dawn or our redemption. After trying that one Shabbat, as I seethed with anger over the Netanyahu government's attempts to push through the contentious judiciary reforms, the word *shetehei* stuck in my throat, and I have never added that qualifier again. Zionism is a form of nationalism and nationalism can be dangerous, but it can also be inspiring when kept in moderation (like so much else in life). The language of the Prayer for the State of Israel, calling the state the beginning of the flowering of redemption, is already consciously hesitant in its theological claims. That hesitancy, that yet-to-be-achieved aspiration, is exactly how I feel, I decided.

These two items were settled before October 7th. But after the 7th of October more people in synagogues—other synagogues—wanted to stand for the Prayer for the State of Israel. Like the anthems, I would never be okay with standing for the Prayer for the State of Israel without standing of the Prayer for the United States, that is, while we are in this country. But I also felt that the instinct to

stand for the prayer for Israel, which is the tradition in Israeli synagogues, does not conform to our moderated expression of patriotism. I learned recently that the American custom of sitting for the prayer for the country, that is, for the United States, began at the first American congregation, Shearith Israel, now the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, in Manhattan. Worshippers always stood for the prayer for the King and the royal family, but after independence was declared and a new prayer was composed for the republic, the worshippers of Shearith Israel decided to sit to indicate that, while patriotic, they were not rising in allegiance to a monarch but were, rather, free citizens. That is an important American tradition.

But I did, after October 7th, add to our liturgy here, after the Prayer for the State of Israel, the prayer for the Israeli Defense Forces. It does not appear in our prayerbooks, although I believe it is planned to appear in the forthcoming *Siddur Lev Shalem for Weekdays* as many Conservative congregations do add it. I say it in Hebrew and, like the prayer for the hostages, only in Hebrew. I will share with you now the English translation:

> May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leiah, bless the soldiers of the armed forces and security forces of the army of Israel who on the ground, in the air and at sea protect the country. May God grant that they defeat the enemies who rise up against us. May God protect our soldiers from all injury and illness, and may God afford blessing and success to all their missions. Regarding them, may the words of the Torah prove true: "For Adonai your God, who goes before You, shall join you to battle your foes and aid you to be victorious." And let us say: Amen.

This is a bit trickier. While it is written as a Mi Sheberakh that technically should go in the Torah reading, I feel better about adding it after the prayer for Israel, as an addendum to it, and I introduce it each week as "the prayer for the soldiers of Israel who stand in harm's way." I think that phrase summarizes the meaning of the prayer. I avoid translating it as I recognize that it is more militaristic

than some might be comfortable with. The text, though, is the standard text used throughout Israel. Our Masorti/Conservative version varies from the standard only in that we add the matriarchs after the patriarchs so it is more gender-egalitarian. So why have I inserted it into our liturgy? Israel is at war, and its soldiers are in harm's way. To pray for their safety should not be understood as a political statement. In the same way that President Biden concludes every speech I have heard him give with "God bless America and may God protect our troops" it seems right to me to follow the prayer for Israel with a prayer to protect its troops. Yes, there is a line in the prayer for Israel that includes those who serve in its defense, but it seems to me that, at least in wartime, a special prayer is appropriate. I recognize and admit that I am partial to the Israeli army. My uncle served in that force and was wounded in battle in the Sinai. Two of my first cousins served in relative peacetime. And my nephew serves now. I know that every time my mother hears this prayer she recognizes it as a prayer for her grandson. It is very personal. Israel has mandatory military service where most citizens, men and women, serve immediately after high school before they move on to college or careers. We send our kids to college. Israelis send their kids to the army. We are praying for their kids, to keep them safe, just as we here worry about our kids at college. But Israelis pray to keep their kids safe as those kids keep the country safe.

And yet I am acutely and painfully aware of how many people throughout the world have a very different reaction to the initials IDF. I prefer the Hebrew acronym *Tzahal,* which sounds more friendly to me. So, wrestling with what different prayers mean to different people and what we all need to express, I follow the Hebrew-only prayer for Israel's soldiers with the prayer for peace, in English. I also believe that that transition balances a prayer for an armed force, and includes within it our hopes for peace for everyone, no matter what side of the conflict they may be.

Finally, I made one more change to our standard liturgy this past year. I added Avinu Malkeinu every Shabbat. I read the week after October 7th that Rabbi Hershel Schachter, a prominent Orthodox

rabbinic authority at Yeshiva University, ruled that we should say Avinu Malkeinu for the hostages every day including Shabbat. You have to understand that Avinu Malkeinu, the litany of petitions we say before the open ark on the High Holidays that culminates in the well-known final haunting melody, is never said on Shabbat, (at least according to Ashkenazic custom). Because it involves petitions—God grant us this, grant us that—it is omitted on Shabbat when we are taught not to dwell on things we do not have. I was so moved by the idea of saying Avinu Malkeinu on Shabbat for the hostages that I immediately started doing that here at Temple Israel. While Avinu Malkeinu, when it is said, is a part of the "Tahanun" or penitential prayers that are inserted after the Amidah at Shaharit and Minchah, I inserted it here after Maariv on Friday night and after Musaf on Shabbat mornings, so that it would have the most dramatic impact. I figured if I was already breaking a halakhah by doing this on Shabbat, what's one more violation of liturgical protocol? Also, we have only been singing the final line, the one we know by heart, because Avinu Malkeinu does not appear anywhere in our Shabbat prayerbook because, again, it is never said on Shabbat. Even tonight, the mahzor says "not recited on Shabbat" and yet we will say it tonight. I never imagined last October that I would still be adding Avinu Malkeinu every Shabbat a year later. And yet every week when we open the ark at the end of services, I feel a kick in my gut. Are they still alive? Will they still come home?

The words and meaning of Avinu Malkeinu are so powerful for this moment. Especially the last verse that we sing: "Avinu Malkeinu, have mercy on us, answer us, for our deeds are insufficient; deal with us charitably and lovingly and redeem us." What more can we say at such a time as this? I will keep opening the ark and adding Avinu Malkeinu until the remaining one hundred and one individuals are released from captivity, praying that many are still alive.

Simon Rawidowicz concluded his essay on "Israel: The Ever-Dying People" with the positive note that "a nation dying for thousands of years is a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew" (p. 223). As we wrestle with October 7th

and how to respond to it, as we wrestle with what it means to be Jewish at such a difficult time as this, we pray for renewal, for strength and for life. Tomorrow morning may we see the sun rise again.