Rosh Hashanah Temple Israel 2024

It Was Just a Year Ago:

Responding to Each Other (Oct. 7th and Politics)

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It was just a year ago. Three weeks from now on the Jewish calendar because this awful year was extended with a leap month, as time finds its path through history. I was squinting at my phone after grabbing it from my night table. While it was a festive day, Shmini Atzeret, my phone is still my alarm clock, and I needed to arise early to prepare for services. Shimini Atzeret, one of the least recognizable of the seemingly innumerable Jewish holy days that mark this time of year, is a solemn day of assembly, a time to gather and pray, remember those we miss when we say Yizkor, and bid farewell to the holiday season, with one last day to eat in the sukkah, that temporary dwelling where we sit at the mercy of wind and rain. I tried to open my eyes—the fall holidays can be demanding on a rabbi—knowing that even after that day there was still Simhat Torah that night and the next day, a time to dance with the Torah, to sing, to share joy with dear friends and community before the everyday of the year that would start the day after tomorrow. But as I squinted at my phone I saw the news alerts and as I read them I started to wake up to the terrible reality that marked the Jewish year 5784. When I saw a photo of a terrorist-packed jeep breaking through a fence, breaching the border, my eyes teared up and I could no longer decipher the words on the screen. "Something terrible happened," I said to Alla, trying to wake her gently with ungentle news. "Something terrible happened—and is happening—in Israel."

For us it was a Yizkor day. In Israel, it was also Simhat Torah. Holidays are fewer in Israel than here, one day instead of two, eight days instead of nine, seven days instead of eight. Or ours are nine days instead of eight, depending on your perspective. The shorter holiday in Israel was

interrupted. We still gathered in synagogue, we said Yizkor with foreboding. That night we went through the motions of dancing with the Torah, but our hearts were in the east.

The Torah reading for Simhat Torah that we read the next morning, that Israelis had read ahead of us, tells of the ordered world that God created. Before that, Genesis tells us, there was darkness over the surface of the Deep. The Israeli poet Tzur Gueta composed the following words after the seventh of October:

חשך על פני תהום
Darkness over the Surface of the Abyss

My teacher Michal once asked us:
“Who can tell me the meaning of the verse,
‘The earth was chaos and confusion,
With darkness over the surface of the abyss’”?

All these years, from then to this very day,
That question has echoed within me, the teacher’s eyes
As she was looking for a raised hand, echoed in me,
That all-encompassing silence echoed in me.

On October 7th the ringing telephone echoed,
In the silent home of my teacher Michal,
“It’s me,” I said, “Here’s your chaos and confusion.
Here’s your darkness. Here’s your abyss. Goodbye.”

And in the original Hebrew:

המורה מיכל שאלה אותנו:
"מי כאן לומר לי מה פרוש הפסוק,
'והארץ היתה תהו ובהו
וחשך על פני תהום'?"

כל השנים האלה, מאז ועד היום
הדהדה אותה שאלה בתוכי, הדהדו בי
עיני המורה המחפשות אצבע מונפת,
הדהדה בי אותה השתיקה הגורפת

בשבעה באוקטובר הדהד צלצול הטלפון
בביתה הדומם של המורה מיכל.
"זה אני" אמרתי, "הנה התהו ובהו.
הנה החשך, הנה התהום, שלום."

Sometimes poetry can convey the emotion of feeling that we cannot express in mere prose. The title of this volume, *Shiva: Poems of October 7th,* is itself quite powerful, because *shiva* refers to the traditional week of intensive mourning after the loss of loved ones, but it also means "seventh" as in the seventh of October. Here, the poet shares the echo of his second-grade voice (because Israelis learn the book of Genesis in second grade) with his mature and post-October 7th voice today. He remembers his teacher trying to teach words and concepts that are far beyond a second grader's ability to comprehend. Or far beyond what we could have understood before October 7th. Now, the imaginary telephone echoes in the silent home of his teacher, as if we could connect to the innocence of our youth, where he wants to say: now I understand what those words mean. While the closing word of the poem is *shalom,* the translator rightly indicates that the meaning is an abrupt goodbye, while "peace" remains elusive.

The horrors, the crimes, the tortures, the rapes, the murder, the mutilations, that were committed that day continue to spread a haunting darkness over the abyss of our world. And that was only the beginning of our difficult 5784. International solidarity for Israel soon turned to criticism as Israel began, after first regaining control of the areas Hamas invaded, its counterattack against and later into Gaza. College campuses erupted in anti-Israel protests that led to cancellation of commencement celebrations at leading universities. Former political allies of leftist Jewish activists celebrated the terrorists, beautified rapists as freedom fighters, and aimed their anger at American Jews in general as guilty by association with the supposed Zionist aggressor. Jews argued against Jews, as Israel was accused of genocide in the International Court of Justice. Meanwhile, the military tensions seem to be escalating by the hour as we gather here a year later. Most painful of all has been the ongoing imprisonment of hostages in Gaza, as we pray that those still alive be brought home, and the suffering, hunger and deaths of so many civilians caught in the middle of a terrible

conflict with nowhere to go, as we pray for a peace that seems to hover too far above the waters of the deep.

October 7th challenges us to redefine our place as Jews, both in this country and in relation to what is happening on the other side of the world. As dramatic developments echo around the globe, we take pause today, to mark the passage of time, to look back on 5784, and to try to imagine who we might be in 5785.

I usually spend a good portion of my summers thinking about what I want to speak about on the holidays. But I think every rabbi in the world knew what they would be speaking about today by October 8th of last year. But how to find the words to express the unspeakable sorrow over what has occurred, and angst over what is to come? So I picked up three books that I've read over the past month, all recently published, from three very thoughtful American Jews, about how their Judaism, and American Judaism in general, looks today, a year after October 7th. Three views: a journalist, a lawyer and a rabbi. It would be nice to sit in a bar with them together. The journalist is Joshua Leifer, whose book, *Tablets Shattered: The End of an American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life,* was featured on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* last Sunday. The lawyer is Noah Feldman, a professor at Harvard Law School, whose new book is: *To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel and the Jewish People*. And the rabbi is my classmate Elliot Cosgrove, senior rabbi at Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, whose volume, *For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today,* was just released last week. When you read a book about difficult issues, it forces you to slow down and think more broadly than we would when reading the rapid-fire headlines that pop across our screens. That is my intention, today and on Yom Kippur, to share some thoughts on where we are after October 7th.

Joshua Leifer, the journalist, grew up not far from here in northern New Jersey, and attended elementary school at the Gerard Berman Day School in Oakland. (Bob Smolen met him last week

and is working on finding a date for him to speak at Temple Israel.) Noah Feldman, the Harvard Law professor, grew up as a modern Orthodox Jew in Boston, while Rabbi Cosgrove is from southern California and then attended rabbinical school with me at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. All three of them, from three very different perspectives, argue that one cannot be an American Jew without acknowledging the central role that Israel now plays in forming our identity. Joshua Leifer, whose book is part family memoir, part history and part journalistic expose of certain groups of American Jewish Generation Z'ers, describes how he finds the allegiance of the American Jewish establishment to the Israeli government to be "morally bankrupt," and imagines how his generation will form a new Jewish identity from the broken pieces that we older folks are leaving behind. Professor Feldman asks us to understand Joshua Liefer's views as rooted in an authentically Jewish perspective that is very much centered on Israel, even if through criticism. "This is why many young Progressive Jews are at the forefront of the pro-Palestinian movement on college campuses," Feldman writes. "Difficult as it is for older generations to accept, the cause is not self-hatred....It is, rather, that criticism of Israel and support for the Palestinian cause is the very essence of their Progressive Jewish self-expression" (p. 182). And Rabbi Cosgrove writes a moving confession of how he wished he had engaged with his college-age daughter's friend who challenged him at a dinner once why Judaism needs to be Zionist, imagining that he had said to her: "Not only do you have a place in the Zionist conversation, but also that conversation depends on you. We might not always agree, but make no mistake, now more than ever we need you, the larger Jewish community needs you, and Israel needs you" (p. 185). I will have more to say about these three books and their approaches to Jewish identity, to how we see ourselves after October 7th, at Kol Nidrei. Today I want to focus on how we see each other after October 7th.

A child of a congregant here, older than Generation Z, has been sending me emails over the past year urging me to speak out against Israel. (Understand that I also regularly get pushed to speak

out more forcefully in support of Israel. For myself I continue to be a passionate centrist.) This congregant's child has been tirelessly trying to convince me that Israel is committing a genocide, a viewpoint that I find not only false but painful to hear. Just a few days ago he wrote that he will stop pestering me with emails. But having read and learned from my classmate Rabbi Cosgrove's confession of failing to engage with his daughter's friend, I wrote to the individual that no, he is not pestering me, and that while we don't agree on everything, I am honored to learn from him about his perspective. And for the same reason I encouraged Bob Smolen to invite Joshua Liefer (the author of *Tablets Shattered*) to speak at Temple Israel. Not because I agree with him. Because I want to include him in the dialogue.

Noah Feldman explains that arguments about Israel seem to eclipse all other disagreements. His words are particularly instructive coming from a law professor whose job it is to teach people how to argue and debate with each other. He writes:

> [Discussions about Israel] are constantly oppositional, binary, argumentative, dialectic, and psycho-emotionally generative. For everything you can say about Israel, you can say the opposite. For every argument that Israel is good, there is an opposite argument that Israel is bad. For every argument that Israel is bad, there is a corresponding argument that it is good. None of these arguments has any ending place. The result is that the very idea of Israel conjures up a field of ongoing argument that extends in all directions, as far as the eye can see. The word "Israel" conjures *energy*—mostly the energy to argue. You can get exhausted by talking about Israel, but that somehow doesn't seem to make the conversation stop. It keeps going. Not everyone wants or needs to be in conversation all the time. But the people who keep talking about it seem to care infinitely, whether they are for Israel or against it, whether violent conflict is active or not (p. 141).

Last year "violent conflict was not active" to use Feldman's terminology. I spoke about Israel, nevertheless, on Yom Kippur. When I was a younger rabbi I would always devote one of my High Holidays sermons to talking about Israel. If it was a time when "violent conflict was active" it would be one of the lead sermons. If not, then it was on Second Day Rosh Hashanah. I veered away from

that practice over time, as many non-Orthodox rabbis found it more and more difficult to talk about an Israel that has been veering more or less to the right over the past quarter century. Last year, I decided that I needed to speak strongly against the Netanyahu government's plans for judicial reform. My love for Israel as a Jewish state and liberal democracy convinced me that I needed to speak out in support of the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who were protesting week after week against an effort that they—and I—believed was an assault on the independent judiciary and its defense of individual rights against an intolerant majority. I reflected that it was fifty years since the Yom Kippur War. Then, Israel faced an existential threat from the outside, and now it faced an existential threat from within.

But less than two weeks later, the external threats breached the border, and "violent conflict was active." Now, we watch with anxiety as the theatre of conflict has extended from Gaza to include the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Yemen and Iran. My heart remains in the east, with my brother and his family who huddled in their basement shelter last Tuesday as the walls shook with boom after boom of exploding Iranian ballistic missiles in the air overhead. As the twelfth century Spanish-Jewish poet Judah Halevi wrote: לבי במזרח ואנכי בסוף מערב, "My heart is in the east, while I stand at the western end of the world." But even here the conflict stirs. Sometimes violent. Sometimes painful. But always present. How can we approach it? How can we engage with each other, across the aisle if you will, without coming out at worst hurt, or at best exhausted by the extension of energy that Professor Feldman describes?

Let me share what we did here in Ridgewood. This is a special place. Walk one block that direction and you pass my house, then another block to the house of the imam, my friend Mahmoud Hamza, and just after that is Rabbi Cobert's house. Two rabbis and an imam met on the bike path. So, last year, a few days after October 7th, I called the imam, who was immediately apologetic that he hadn't called me first. We expressed our shared sadness over what had taken place, and our

commitment to find a way to help our shared community through a difficult time. Ridgewood's mayor, Paul Vagianos, helped us figure out how to do that. We met with him, along with a small group of local Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders, almost daily for a two-week period, crafting a statement we read and signed at a public gathering in town in early November. Joined by leaders of Temple Israel and the Ridgewood Muslim Society, as well as many of Ridgewood's civic and clergy leaders, we held hands together, as the imam and I stood arms around each other, he dressed as a Muslim cleric, and me in kippah and tallit. Our approach was that while there were and are very significant and painful issues that we disagree about, we could find the principles we agreed on. In a delicately negotiated document, we condemned terrorism and mourned the loss of all innocent life. We condemned both Islamophobia and antisemitism, we affirmed the right of self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians, and called for mutual respect for human rights and an end to violence. We did not foresee that a year later these principles would still be aspirational. But a few months after that statement we held a service at Emanuel Baptist Church on East Ridgewood Avenue. After much planning, the imam and I decided to speak at that service to each other's concerns. I spoke about the humanitarian disaster in Gaza and the urgent need to stop the fighting so that food and medicine could be brought in. The imam spoke about the affront to human dignity of keeping hostages and called for their immediate release. What was most memorable about that day for me was meeting the members of Ridgewood's Muslim community who came up to me so grateful for my words, and the members of our community who expressed their gratefulness to the imam for what he said. Why should it be so surprising that a rabbi would want innocent civilians to enjoy food and safety, and why should it be so surprising that an imam would want innocent civilians to be returned to their loving families? And yet that is the world we live in today, where we take sides and fail to recognize our common humanity. Neither of these two extraordinary moments would have

happened without the wisdom and guidance of Paul Vagianos. Mayor, please stand for a moment so I can thank you.

Imam Hamza and I were honored to receive our Rotary District's Champion of Peace Award. And we shared ten minutes of fame, appearing together on José Diaz-Balart's show one morning in December on MSNBC. We wanted to stand up for peace, and to be proactive so that our community would not see the tension and anger that flared up in some of our neighboring towns, and on so many college campuses. And we had something we wanted to teach, that there is a way to hear and respect each other, to see the human being in each other, even as we held such differing viewpoints and perspectives. To stand for peace does not mean to deny difference. "There are times when you have to fight," I heard myself saying on national television. But we always aspire towards peace.

We will have many opinions on how to get there, but we should be able to agree on the goal. However, I do want to suggest—no, preach—that if we ever want to see that goal we need to see the human being on the other side. Yes, there are people out there who are blinded with hatred, who have done terrible things, and who plan to do more terrible things if they are not stopped. But not everyone. We must learn not to dismiss our fellow Jews who hold opposing views to our own, we must learn to respect the patriotism of all our fellow Americans as we near a contentious and important election, and we must recognize our brothers and sisters among our neighbors, even across the fields of war.

Miri Michaeli is an Israeli teacher whose house suffered a direct missile hit in October 2023. She wrote the following poem called סלאם עליכום ילדה, "Peace Be Upon You, Little Girl." I will share an abridged version in English translation. While the poem is in Hebrew, she greets her addressee in Arabic.

Salaam Aleikum.
Little girl from Gaza.
I'm writing to tell you
That it's not your fault

I know you're not to blame
That our home
Suffered a direct hit by a rocket
That it was not your choice
That all our property burned down
My nightmares and ours—
Are not your fault
Aleikum Salaam
Little girl from Gaza
I'm sorry you are hungry
It's not my fault.
I didn't choose
For you to stand
So long in line
For such a miserable portion of food.
Forgive me, honestly
I know
That you are not at all connected to this
That you are exhausted
That you are cold at night
The little you had
Was taken away from you
I also know
That everyone's feelings here
Have been blunted
That no one feels pity
...
Between corrupt men
Pursuing profit
With dulled senses
From this side—
Miserable
Politicians
On your side—
Terrorists
Forgive me, little girl from Gaza
I know that if you could
You would release
All the hostages
And ask to return with your teddy bear
To the place that perhaps
Once was your
Relatively warm home.
...
Excuse me if inadvertently (or not)
We also killed your mother
Or perhaps
A relative

...
Maybe when you grow up
Things will be slightly different
Forgive me, little girl from Gaza
It's not your fault
You are really wonderful.
I ask forgiveness
You don't have to forgive
I just wanted to write to you
...
You should know that in our hearts too,
(In spite of lack of symmetry),
A deep chasm has opened.

This poem is an extremely rare and courageous document, included by the editors of *Shiva: Poems of October 7,* with the hope of encouraging more voices from Israel to see the humanity on the other side. Here, the poet, who lost her home and all her possession to a rocket from Gaza, understands that not all people in Gaza are terrorists. The word for sorry is *selihah,* from "Selihot" or the penitential prayers we say this season. While the word for fault, when she writes how the little girl is not at fault, is *asham,* or guilt. This is a loaded word, as it refers to a specific sacrificial offering in Leviticus, the "guilt offering," leading me to think of the victims of war as sacrifices. But it also reflects back on us. Next week, on Yom Kippur, we will all rise for the public confessional, the Vidui, and sing *Ashamnu!,* we are at fault. These themes of reflective culpability haunt this poem. The poet puts blame on the leaders of both sides, although she does not equate the "miserable politicians' in Israel with the "terrorists" in Gaza. And that is essential to understand, that seeing, hearing and acknowledging the other side does not require us to cede our perspectives and opinions. But still, the doubt seeps through. The most powerful line of the poem is when she writes סליחה אם בטעות (או שלא) הרגנו גם את אמך שלך, Excuse me if inadvertently (or not) we also killed your mother. The poet, and her audience, know that the official position of the Israeli government is that civilians are never intentionally killed. But Michaeli suggests here, quietly in parentheses: "or not." It is a painful understanding that civilian casualties are sometimes inevitable when Israel does what it needs to

do. The parenthesis screams off the page. The poem is not a criticism of Israel. It is an elegy, a lament, for war. Myself, I believe that that there are times when one is justified in taking up arms, and this, especially now, is one of those times. Not everyone sees it that way, okay. But we need to remember the humans on the other side. If there is any redemptive hope in conflict, it is the peace that must follow. While Miri Michaeli addressed this poem to a little girl from Gaza, a human being on the other side, of course she is really addressing it to the people on her side. And to us.

On this Day of Judgment, our Rosh Hashanah, we might permit ourselves to appreciate when justice finds those who deserve it, but not at the expense of failing to see the human on the other side, bearing no less than us the image of God. May the new year bring us peace and happiness. Amen.