

Beresheet: Am Yisrael Chai - 10/14/23

(A sermon draft written for speaking by Rabbi Michael Schwab)

In the fall of 1998 I lived on Kibbutz Saad for almost four months. Saad is located just to the south of Sderot and only a few miles from the Gaza border. It is a lovely place: quiet, with kind industrious people. It features a beautiful cactus garden, and an abundance of carrot and avocado fields. While there, I staffed the Conservative Movement's gap year program (Nativ), I studied Talmud with a member of the Kibbutz twice a week, and I even rotated, as part of my kibbutz work responsibilities, *staffing the guard booth* during the day time hours, opening and closing the security gate for those exiting and entering. Times were clearly different then. I made friends there and had a Kibbutz family with whom I stayed in touch for many years.

It was therefore *terrifying* for me to learn that that beautiful place, Kibbutz Saad, was attacked this past Shabbat. Highly armed terrorists attempted to infiltrate the kibbutz. Fortunately for Saad, their fence was strong and their internal security apparatus was able to repel the attackers who likely moved on to seek easier targets. But knowing what it is like to live there, picturing the Kibbutz's quaint residences, quiet streets and lovely families, my heart breaks every time I imagine the fear of the kibbutzniks that day as terrorists armed to the teeth tried break into their community to commit what we learned later were unspeakable acts of violence. Instilling and causing such trauma and fear due to such a terrible threat, even without the actual commission of violence, is already barbaric. And we all know that many communities on the Gaza border were not so fortunate.

I will not recount to you the horrific acts that were inflicted upon the residents of these communities in the Gaza envelope; most of you have seen, heard, or read about this already and I want to respect the fact that there are many young people here today. But these actions were nothing short of a massacre - pure terrorism. As Israel's President, Hayim Herzog remarked, the actions of Hamas parallel the actions taken by ISIS and the atrocities to our people on this scale in a single day have not occurred since the Holocaust. And at the same time these attacks took place, thousands of *rockets* were launched against Israel and continue to relentlessly rain down upon Israel as I speak, creating their own terror, trauma, damage and death. And I literally cry almost every time I think about a helpless child who was abducted from their home by armed men, being held hostage in Gd knows what condition, having no ability to understand what is happening to them. And with a broken heart, I imagine their parents, distraught, frantic, and forlorn that they could not stop this from

happening to their child. We pray for the safe return of all captives with all of our hearts.

While I wish we had nothing like this for which to gather, I was indeed honored to participate at the JUF community Rally on Tuesday. There, Rabbi Wendi Geffen delivered a powerful message and said, “From here to *Eretz Yisrael* is 6,208 miles - so ‘far away’. But at this moment, ‘far away’ seems so close that we can feel it pressing up against our hearts so hard that they ache. *Zachor et asher asah Amalek*. Remember what Amalek did to us.” The death toll in Israel has risen to over 1,300 and is still not final. More than 3200 Israelis have been wounded. Over 150 hostages remain trapped in Gaza. Over 6,000 rockets have been launched at Israeli towns and cities. It is the same as if 30,000 Americans were killed and 100,000 were wounded – numbers we should not have to fathom. “No doubt that every person here today is no more than two degrees away from someone who has been murdered, wounded, or kidnapped. A horrific nightmare”.

As our JUF staff person in Israel, former Ambassador Ofer Bavli, wrote, “in a country as small as ours with barely one degree of separation, each Israeli knows at least one or two victims. This is a *very personal* event for all of us, and the national sentiment is a mix of extreme sorrow and frustration but also unity in the face of sheer evil. A friend of mine had to tell her 13-year-old son today that one of his classmates' older brothers was killed. This kind of talk between parents and children takes place *all day, every day*, all over the country. The long-term psychological effect and post trauma will be vast and widespread.”

And Thursday night, at our amazing solidarity event, an 18 year old Israeli young woman, who is volunteering in our community in the months before she enters the Israeli Defense Forces, stood up and shared with us in simple and painful language that some of her neighbors are dead or missing, many of her friends are now on the front line, their fate yet unwritten, and that she endured the trauma of seeing, as she scrolled through images and videos of those who were captured, people she knows *personally* being hauled off in the hands of these terrorists. No one, let alone an eighteen year old who just graduated high school, should have to bear such burdens. As our own member and Consul General, Yinam Cohen said, “October 7th, 2023 will be forever remembered as the darkest day in the history of the state of Israel.” In the words of our martyrology service on Yom Kippur, we cry out, “*Eleh Ezkara V’nafshi Alai*, “These I recall and my **soul melts with sorrow**, for the bitter course of history, **tears** pour from my eyes”.

However, using Rabbi Gefen’s imagery, we say to ourselves here in the United States: “is there such a thing as distance when it comes to our own? We

are not *Da'at Yisrael* - the faith of Israel; we are *Am Yisrael* - the Jewish people". And no matter *where* we are, *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Ba Zeh*, we are bound to one another, we belong to one another! As she wrote, "[we are bound together] *through* the deepest yearnings of our souls, and this day, through the varied beating of our collective broken heart. Together, we link our hearts with all *ohavei Yisrael* (lovers of Israel) and all *ohavei shalom* (lovers of peace) in our solemn and fervent prayer for an end to the ruthless and senseless campaign of terror on Israel and her citizens; for the safety and well-being of all of those whose lives and way of life now hang in the balance; for *shalom* and *shleimut* for each and every innocent person, whose lives and souls have been violated; for the safety and security of all of those fighting for safety and peace; for the soldiers and first responders for risking their *own* lives to protect the lives of others; for healing of the wounded; for the safe return of the kidnapped; for comfort for the worried and the grieving; for peace for the souls of the murdered. And together we pray that, alongside our fear and despair, our anger and craving for justice, we hold fast to hope and a commitment to bring light in the face of darkness. This past weekend on Simchat Torah, we concluded the book of *Dvarim*/Deuteronomy with a phrase I have heard used to end briefings by many an Israeli soldier: *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*—be strong, be strong, let us strengthen one another." And as our fellow and congregant and Congressman, Brad Schneider said, "We're here as one people. We stand together. We stand strong. Our hearts are broken, but our knees are not bent. Our back is not bowed. We will stand with Israel as long as Israel needs us, and Israel will stand strong forever".

And there *is* great hope and reasons for pride and optimism. For example, Ofer Bavly reported that at this time Israel's civil society is proving itself at its finest. The protest movement demonstrating *against* the government for 40 weeks in a row, are now all enlisted to *support* the army and the civilian population under attack. This umbrella group has set up the most widespread system of collection points for food and clothing donations and they are distributing aid to the thousands of residents that have been left homeless, many of whom have also lost loved ones. Planes to Israel are filled to capacity with IDF reservists demanding to return to the country and enlist, many of them not even required to do so. The IDF sent a c-130 transport plane to Athens to collect all the Israelis traveling in Europe after their army service and looking for a way to *rejoin* their units. Bavly reported that he drove by a large logistics base in southern Israel and saw hundreds of private cars parked all along the highway, some as far as two miles away because the roadside was packed, all belonging to reservists showing up for service. Supporters of the government, which until

a week ago called protestors “traitors” are now lauding their action in support of civil society and the IDF. The country *is* coming together.

And as USY Almnus Micha Cownas, who now lives in Israel relates: “Yesterday I stood in line for upwards of 9 hours (with hundreds of others) waiting to donate blood in Jerusalem. Volunteers at the blood drive and random others walked through the crowd offering snacks, water, and when mealtime hours came, full catered sandwiches. At one point someone set up a speaker and played guitar for the crowd. When inside, a clown came, blew up balloons, entertained, and boosted morale. People cheered each time the donor number called reached the next 100. Among those standing in line with me were a former English teacher from my high school who got *stuck* in Israel after visiting for the Chagim (the holidays). A father, son, and daughter from Long Island. Secular Jews. Orthodox Jews. Non-Jews. A group of 35 Christians from all over the world who came to Israel to see the holy sites - they came to donate. All of us, whether we were supposed to be here right now or not, felt that we had something we must give.”

And as Consul General Cohen shared with us, there are also accounts of great heroism that should give us pride and hope. Such as the story of Sergeant Guy Simchi, a paratrooper, who valiantly saved the lives of 14 of his friends at the music festival. He fought unarmed against the terrorists until he was killed by a hand grenade. When his father, General Dedi Simhi, arrived to rescue his body, he knelt down, embraced Guy, and said, "You lived as a hero and you died as a hero."

Or what about Rachel Edri, a grandmother from Ofakim, a town near the Gaza border: After running to a bomb shelter on the morning of October 7, Rachel and David Edri returned to their home to find five Hamas terrorists waiting for them inside. The attackers, brandishing a rocket launcher, grenades and Kalashnikov rifles, terrorized the couple. They broke their cell phones, ransacked their house, threatened to kill them, including grabbing them and putting guns to their heads. Praying silently, Rachel fought to remain composed. For 20 hours, Rachel – who speaks Arabic – kept their captors calm with conversation and even bandaged the hand of the injured terrorist. She also plied them with food. She knew hunger can be a dangerous trigger. “I saw they were mad, and I asked them if they were hungry,” she said. “I made them coffee and gave them cookies and even made them chicken.” The counterterrorism squad, which included her son, eventually came to the house. To let the rescuers know that there were five terrorists in the house, Rachel stood near the window and held five fingers up to her cheek, explaining to the suspicious terrorists that her

head hurt. Resolving the crisis took a very long time but because of Rachel's courageous actions, they had the time they needed and the SWAT team, along with a rescue dog, eventually managed to enter through the roof and kill the terrorists, freeing the Edris. It is hard to imagine how this grandmother could have been so brave.

I want to leave you with one last story that highlights my message today. Many of you may have seen the video going around of the young soldier on the way to Gaza sharing a message to all who might view it. His words were poignant: He said, "As I travel towards battle and defending the State of Israel I ask one thing of you. Be a light to someone else. Do one good thing for someone. Tell a joke, make them laugh, do a mitzvah. Be a light. Everyone, no matter where they are, can be a light." We cannot all go to the front lines. We cannot all have the impact we want to have on the situation in Israel. I shared Thursday night so many things we *can* do, but there is so much that is out of our control. But what we can *always* do, is be a light and do a mitzvah. Our defense of Israel and our people is so that we can live. And we live to fulfill our aspirations as Jews and human beings. We live so that we can do mitzvot and be a light to others. That is why we must *keep* being a light even and especially during these dark times, keep doing mitzvot even as the terribly difficult current circumstances continue to unfold in our beloved Jewish State. We have an amazing Bat Mitzvah girl to celebrate today - and we are grateful for the joy she brings to our community. We have engagements, weddings, births and birthdays about which to smile. We have Shabbat and holidays to embrace. And we have so many opportunities to help others in our community and overseas - to do *Gemilut Hasidim*, to perform acts of loving kindness.

The story of *Beresheet* - of creation - is about creating order from chaos. The original mission was to create a loving civilization based on core values and compassionate living, from turmoil. We are to emulate Gd as creations of Gd and as partners with Gd. Therefore, it is our role to do the very same: we must continue to bring light to the darkness, to bring compassion to destruction. We must continue to do one *more* thing for someone else, each day as often as we can. We must do everything we can to support our brothers and sisters in Israel *and* we must continue to live rich Jewish lives, cherishing our *simchas* (our happy occasions) and finding any opportunity to do a mitzvah and perform acts of compassion. That is how we further Gd's creation, which we celebrate today in our Torah reading, and that is how we will truly fulfill our great motto - *Am Yisrael Chai* - the People of Israel *lives!*
Shabbat Shalom!