

Shabbat Noach 5784
Israel: Strength and Peace - unformatted
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Shabbat Shalom.

One week ago, I was profoundly sad about what happened in Israel on October 7th. The Hamas murderous attack on Israeli civilians and soldiers left a devastating death toll and frightening number of Israeli captives. That sadness has not left me.

But today, I'm also consumed by a storm of other emotions when I follow the news from our Jewish homeland. I'm angry, I'm disappointed, I'm devastated, I feel betrayed, and I'm enraged. I could detail them all, but our hearts have throbbed with enough pain these two weeks. And yet at other moments I am inspired. Three things have given me energy during these trying days.

First is being together with you all. Your physical presence at the Beth El Solidarity Gathering 9 days ago was deeply uplifting. Seeing 300 of you rise out of these very seats and proudly wave the blue and white flag took my breath away. If you were here that night - and many of you were - you know exactly what I mean.

Second is singing and hearing Israeli songs and Hatikvah. Those words just mean more now. There was a moment last Tuesday afternoon when I was walking from one part of this building to another, and I passed the Sager Beit Midrash. Inside Hazzan Greenberg was leading the afternoon Hebrew school kids in *Al Kol Eileh*, and the song just got me. It made me stop. That day the melody soothed my anxious soul.

And the third thing that has given me strength is guidance from the Jewish tradition. I think of a verse from Scripture that I heard taught by Alan Dershowitz, the well-known lawyer and staunch defender of Israel, who is not uncontroversial. I heard him speak in a synagogue years ago during another difficult moment in Israel's history.

He quoted the last verse from Psalm 29, which we sing in full every Friday night as part of Kabbalat Shabbat services. It reads, *Adonai Oz L'Amo Yiten, Adonai Yevarech Et Amo Vashalom*. "G-d will give strength to His people; G-d will bless His people with peace." We sing these words frequently, and they are in fact the last words of the full *Birkat Hamazon*, Grace After Meals.

Dershowitz taught that there is indeed a deep connection between G-d's blessings of strength and peace: Sometimes peace comes only as a result of strength. But the purpose of strength and power must always be peace.

Indeed, sometimes only strength can bring about peace. Peace does not come about passively, not by waiting nor wishing. Peace is a verb, and it must be actively achieved. Sometimes peace comes from extending an olive branch, and this approach is optimal, teaches the Torah. Do not forget that Israel has pursued this direction many times in its history.

In 1937 and 1947, the Jews and Arabs were offered the chance to split Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Both times the Jews said Yes while the Arabs said No.

In the year 2000 and again in 2008, Israeli prime ministers offered the Palestinians a very generous package of land for a Palestinian state and more in exchange for peace. But the Palestinians said No both times.

Israel has made peace with two former enemies, Egypt and Jordan. From 80 years ago through today, Israel's reflex has been to seek peace with its neighbors.

However, now is not the moment to achieve peace through an olive branch. It gives me no pleasure to say that, but I can't forget October 7th. Now is the moment peace must be achieved through strength, through eliminating the terrorist group Hamas.

At the same time, the end goal of possessing strength and power must always, always be peace. Israel is doing its very best to avoid civilian casualties, as it should, but it's an impossible task when Hamas intentionally uses Palestinian civilians as human shields. It saddens me deeply when innocent Palestinians are killed or wounded too. To quote a post from Jack Levy, "Not a single person who has been killed or injured since Saturday would have been, were it not for Hamas." Israel's long-term goal must remain to achieve calm and quiet for both Israelis and for Palestinians who are not Hamas.

Today's reading of Parashat Noach speaks of how violence - in Hebrew "Hamas" - led to the destruction of all creatures on earth, save for Noah and those on the ark. But the portion concludes with the picture of restoration and peace. First, we see the olive branch in the dove's mouth, and later we read about the rainbow G-d places in the sky. Why a rainbow, of all signs? Ramban suggests that the rainbow looks like the bow and arrow, and when it arcs upward, it appears as if heaven is no longer aiming arrows toward humanity, as it were. The inverted bow signals G-d's peaceful intentions. And on

this special bow in the sky, there is no string on which to place arrows, another sign of laying down the weapon.

Adonai Oz l'Amo Yiten, Adonai Yevarech Et Amo Vashalom. "G-d will give strength to His people; G-d will bless His people with peace."

These words guide me during this scary moment. The words speak to my head, but the melody speaks to my heart. I invite Hazzan Sandler to sing this now.

(HJS sings *Hashem Oz*).

Shabbat Shalom. Am Yisrael Chai.