

For Just This Moment

RH Sermon 5785 by Rabbi Michael Schwab

Shanah Tovah. It may not come as a surprise to *many* of you, but I come from a family of huggers. My Uncle Joel is a particularly zealous hugger, so as a kid I knew to brace myself when *he* came for a visit. When he walked in the house he flashed a big smile and stepped towards me grabbing me up in a strong squeeze. It was a little much, but I admit that I looked forward to it. It made me feel loved, appreciated and noticed. And many of my *other* relatives give great hugs too -- and I'd like to think I'm not so bad at them myself. For us, hugs always share a sense of wrap-around caring and deep love. They are given to express the joy of seeing one another. They are given to communicate deep happiness at times of celebration, like at weddings and Bnei Mitzvah. And they are often *most* appreciated when given to provide critical and heart-felt *comfort* during sad, difficult and challenging times. I *still* remember the warmth and strength communicated by my parents, aunts and uncles through *their* hugs after my *zaidee* died, and that was almost 35 years ago.

And I have to tell you: this was a year that I wanted to give, and receive, so many hugs. Of course for the happy moments, which were important and certainly needed in order to sustain us through what we endured this year. But unfortunately the *extra* hugs I sought were ones needed for *comfort* and *strength*, as our people reeled from blow after blow, starting, but certainly not ending, with October 7th. We have *all* needed as much wrap around love as we could possibly receive this year.

I remember walking to shul that Saturday, October 7th on a crisp clear day. The night before, we held a wonderful meal in the Sukkah, albeit a little chilly, and I was getting ready to celebrate the holiday of *Shmini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*. Since it was the holiday and Shabbat, when I refrain from using electronics, I had not heard or seen the news before I arrived. When I walked in, a few of our early regulars were here in the *then* almost empty Field Family Sanctuary. Immediately, they approached me with concerned looks on their faces. And with stress and worry in their voices they shared that there were early reports indicating that something *terrible* was unfolding in Israel. That Israel had been attacked from Gaza and that people had died. My face fell, the energy drained from my body and I felt a pit form in my stomach. -- Do you remember where *you* were, when you found out? I bet you do and I would guess you remember how you felt. And, at the time, we did not even know *how many* had died, *how many* were wounded, and certainly we did not know about the massive capture of hostages. *Then*, we had *no idea* how bad it would get and no way of knowing that the nightmare that started on October 7th would still be with us almost a year later.

And from that moment forward, Israelis and the entire Jewish people experienced wave after wave of painful news. We learned that, in fact, over *1200* were murdered, that *250* had been taken captive, that *thousands* had been wounded, and that the whole country was traumatized and thrown into a crisis that still engulfs our people today. We learned the excruciating stories, some shared with us right in this room, like that of the Gat family. A story I learned as I stared at the soot and blood stained ruins of some of the homes in

Kibbutz Beiri when I visited there *myself* only a few weeks after that fateful day.

Alon Gat, plus his wife and daughter, along with his sister, Carmel, were visiting their parents, Kinneret and Eshel, in Beiri for the holiday. Early in the morning the red alert warning sirens blared. The entire family, including Alon's 3-year-old, ran to their safe room as they sometimes had to do. But it was not a *rocket* that targeted their house this time. Instead, Hamas terrorists themselves invaded the kibbutz and actually entered their home. They found, killed or abducted everyone inside, except for the father, Eshel, who hid in the bathroom. The mother, Kinneret, was dragged into the street and shot. Carmel was taken captive by *one* group of terrorists. Alon, his arms and legs bound, was shoved into a *different* car with his wife and daughter. During a brief stop, they somehow managed to flee. Knowing he could run faster, Alon's wife handed him their daughter. Alon, making an *excruciating* decision that no one should *ever* have to make, escaped with the toddler, hiding in a ditch for nearly nine hours, while his wife was recaptured and subsequently held in Gaza for 54 days before being released in the first hostage deal. Carmel, his sister, endured her terrible captivity for almost 11 months, until Sept 1st, only one month ago, when she, along with Hersh Goldberg Polin and four others, were found murdered by Hamas in a dark filthy tunnel under Gaza. What made it even harder to bear was that they were slated to be included in the next hostage deal and Israeli forces were so close to their location. Yet it was not to be. Tragic, a gut punch, awful beyond words. Gat was an occupational therapist from Tel Aviv who enjoyed travel and music. Hostages who were released during the cease-fire in

November said she taught them meditation and yoga to help them survive in captivity. May her memory always be for a blessing.

This is just one of *hundreds* of stories of everyday people who had their houses broken into and set on fire, were given the choice of dying of heat or smoke inhalation or coming out to be shot, raped or captured. As you know, scores of young people were slaughtered at a *peacnik* music festival -- people from all over the world: Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist alike. Each revelation, each story, was like another dagger thrust into our hearts. We *needed* to know, we *needed* to listen, we *needed* to bear witness but it was so, so hard. And as hard as it is for us -- we live an ocean away. How much more painful for our brothers and sisters in Israel itself. What happened on October 7th has shaken our sense of equilibrium in this world as Jews and it has created cracks in our ultimate sense of security, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. And the actions of these terrorists, along with the support of their allies to the north and east *continue* to threaten Israel, the Jewish people and frankly all those who support western civilization.

For me, what has made things even more difficult is how the world has **responded** to the events of October 7th and its aftermath. It took one day, maybe not even, for *protests* to spring up in the US and around the world *against* Israel, and for rallies to be formed **supporting** the actions of Hamas. I remember thinking with sickening incredulity, what are they protesting against? If there was a victim this time it most certainly was the people of Israel. Israel hadn't even responded to Hamas's incursion, other than fighting against the invaders who were still inside her borders. And supporting *Hamas's* actions?! The murder of innocent people of all religions and

nationalities?! Civilians, people at a music festival, people who were sleeping in their homes, children?! It was, and is, incomprehensible to me.

I don't need to rehash for you how these early protests turned into encampments on college campuses, like in the spring at Columbia where a young woman held a sign with an arrow pointing to Jewish students stating 'Al-Qasam's Next Targets,' or where another proudly yelled 'We are Hamas'. In some places individual Jews were even directly threatened and violence was incited against them. Just two weeks ago in Ann Arbor, near the University of Michigan campus, a 19-year-old student was asked by a group of men if he was Jewish. When the student replied "yes", police say that he was physically assaulted and then left on the ground injured. And we know that this happened close to home at Northwestern and other local campuses, where Jews and Israel supporters were intimidated, sometimes blocked from entering buildings, assailed with hate speech employing anti-Semitic tropes and even had to endure people calling for death to the Jews right in front of their faces. Of course, not *all* protestors did these things, hopefully not even the majority, and expressing our views passionately and appropriately is OK, but far too many crossed lines and it is completely unacceptable.

Additionally, we saw rowdy demonstrations in cities around the world, tearing down or burning American flags, destroying civic monuments and defacing other symbols of Western democracy. It happened in Chicago with Buckingham Fountain, in California with a Veteran's memorial in Stanford, and multiple times in DC. We saw many protestors portray Hamas as heroes and freedom fighters, as well as heard protest leaders proclaim that the slaughter of innocents on October 7th was *justified*.

To be clear, it is completely acceptable, in my view, to criticize policies of the State of Israel; it is surely possible to disagree with Israel's democratically elected government and its stances. Many Israelis are doing *exactly* that. And it is only *human* to feel devastated by the innocent Palestinian lives lost in Gaza, especially those of the children, who *no one* can claim is responsible. I know *I* am.

But it is *not* acceptable to delegitimize the State of Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, the land that has been a central part of our people's history and faith for thousands of years. And it is way beyond the pale to *glorify* terrorism and claim that the active murder of innocents is justified. This year ADL *continues* to report a sky rocketing of all kinds of antisemitic and anti Israel incidents, including a 477% increase on college campuses. These actions, events and circumstances are downright disturbing and sometimes make me feel like the world is upside down.

The situation we find ourselves in, reminds me of a Hasidic story about a king and his advisor. The advisor reported to the king that the entire wheat harvest was *tainted* and that all who ate of it would go crazy. Yet without it they would all starve. So, the king said to his advisor, 'We must save enough of our current reserves so that the two of us can remain sane. Then when the people will eat of the tainted wheat, we must *leave* the palace, and travel from town to town amongst them as they begin to go insane. And everywhere we go, we must shout in all the marketplaces and from all the rooftops: Remember, my people, that you are mad!" Sometimes, I feel the world has gone insane and *our* job is to shout from the rooftops the truth as we see it until we are heard, and the world once again begins to see more clearly.

For we should all be seriously alarmed by this situation. We must resist this current reality and refuse to accept it. And yet, that alarm must not make us run and hide. It should not make us become despondent or panic. Instead, it must do what threats against our people have always done -- spur us to action! I remember when our most prominent Jewish institutions came together at the ADL offices downtown in March to shine a light on antisemitism in our community. There, they said loud and clear to the public, "Enough is Enough!" I *recall* each time *our* community, here at Beth El and beyond, rallied for Israel, walked and ran for Israel, advocated for Israel, volunteered *in* Israel and raised money *for* Israel. We did it here in Highland Park, Deerfield and Chicago. We did it in Washington DC and in Israel itself. We advocated, we memorialized, we raised awareness, we comforted, and we provided resources. And we need to do more. We *cannot* let up.

In particular, we must get our neighbors, allies and fellow citizens to rally to our cause as well. As the late and great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, "Jews cannot fight antisemitism *alone*. The victim cannot cure the crime. The hated cannot cure the hate. It would be the greatest mistake for Jews to believe that they can fight it alone. The only people who can successfully combat antisemitism are those active in the cultures that harbour it." As Jews, we cannot defeat antisemitism by ourselves; we cannot defend Israel alone. We must strengthen our allegiances and embolden our friends. And if Jews are silent about our *own* mistreatment and the mistreatment of Israel, we cannot expect others to rise up and raise their voices either.

Over the holiday of Purim this past year, Jews around the world reminded ourselves that the cute Hasidic story about the world going mad,

was not just a story, but for us as Jews a lived reality. It was not only in 2023 and 2024 that antisemites expressed their hatred towards Jews, and even tried to kill us, but also in ancient Persia. So why such a happy holiday for such a sobering story? Because it is a story of *heroism*, of our community standing *up* to hate, of *rallying* our allies to do what is right, and then succeeding! Through Esther, a Jew, and Achashverosh, a non-Jew, we *defeated* Haman's plan. We persevered and we thrived.

You remember the story, the evil Haman, the easily maneuvered King, the brave Jewish Queen and her wise Uncle Mordechai. What you may not remember is that the entire story hinges on *one* key moment, *one* incredible verse. The decree was set, the Jews were to be destroyed and Mordechai had asked Esther to plead in front of the king. She reminded him that entering the king's chamber *unsummoned* could mean her death. Mordechai responded in words that not only changed the course of the *story* but have echoed down through the generations, affecting the course of Jewish *history*. "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life, by being in the king's palace. . . For who knows perhaps for just such a moment as this you have attained your very position." Everything changed with those words and she passionately replied: "Then I *shall* go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"

Esther was the Queen, but she had hidden her Judaism. Like some of us today, she was *afraid* to let the king and the court know that she was a Jew. Thus, the king had no idea that the vile plot of Haman would affect the people *he* knew and cared about. But Esther did have power and she was the only one who could speak out effectively and have the king actually hear the

message. Understandably she was scared, but Mordechai gave her courage by saying that perhaps it was for this moment, to *help* the Jewish people avert this crisis, that she had become queen. And this was the inspiration she needed.

And she did it! She risked her life, went to the king, she revealed her heritage and asked the king to intercede. She raised awareness, helping him to see that her people were in peril. She sounded the alarm and her advocacy was effective. She was a great hero because she did not stay silent and she did not let her fear rule her. She did what she could, even at great personal risk, to protect her people.

My friends, we sit here today, Rosh Hashanah 5785 and we are *all* Esther and OUR time to act has arrived. What will be your *Esther moment*? If Esther were standing here, on this bima on the eve of this new year looking out at a sea of Jewish faces, what would *she* say? I believe she would say - “I made my choice - now you must make yours - :וְיָמֵי יוֹדֵעַ אֶם-לֵעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת: - perhaps for just such a moment as this *you* have attained your position in American society. Please do your part as I did mine.

For the Purim story *compels* us to do our part: to rally our allies and all decent people to call out against terrorism, against Jew hatred and against those who delegitimize Israel’s right to exist. We must, once again, resist the Hamans of the world, and create a safe society for our kids and *all* peoples, and we must perpetuate a world that understands the blessing and foundational legitimacy of the State of Israel. I have provided each of you with a resource sheet to give you various ways to advocate for the values of the Jewish people and of western democracies like ours. Sometimes it is hard

to know what to do and I hope this will give you a starting point for many different avenues to strengthen our people at this troubling time.

For example, you can advocate for the fair treatment of Israel and the Jewish people through sending emails and calling: elected officials, University presidents, school district superintendents and anyone we know in a position of power, to do what *they* can to support Israel and to condemn anti-Semitism. Personally, I subscribe to a number of email lists I trust, which are included in the handout. **Every single day** I go through them, and every day I click on multiple messages they ask me to send, sign petitions they ask me to sign, and I call officials they ask me to contact. In addition, you can speak about this to your friends, neighbors and people you meet. I wear my “Bring them Home” dog tag everywhere I go, and many times it has sparked a conversation at my barber, the Verizon store, in the supermarket. I have learned that while *we* are living the difficult realities of what happened on October 7th, for many outside the Jewish community, this is still on the periphery. Tell them what is happening in Israel and about the rise in antisemitism. Ask them to inform others and to join you in advocating for: Israel’s right to defend herself, for the return of the hostages and for the tools to fight antisemitism. *Remind* them that violence and intimidation against Jews, using hurtful tropes to describe Jews, and saying that Israel has no right to exist, are wrong and harmful to our *shared* society. Sharing our story helps create more allies.

Now the Bible does not tell us much about the dramatic moment when Mordechai challenged Esther to make her fateful decision. It leaves the

details to our imagination. In *my* imagination, I don't see Mordechai delivering his words from afar - I imagine him stepping forward and giving Esther a big hug - one that would have expressed confidence, strength and faith. And like Mordechai did for Esther, we must also strengthen one another, give each other literal or metaphorical hugs, to make sure that no Jew, especially those in Israel, ever feels alone. Best scenario: plan to visit Israel, give your hug in person. If not, be in touch and give them a virtual hug. It is so meaningful to know that someone cares about you. We *are* all in this together. Perhaps, indeed, it *was* for this moment in history that each of us was placed here to do *our* part in protecting and supporting our people. Perhaps, each of *us* must conjure up the heroic Esther inside of us, remind ourselves today to give one another a big hug, and then to go out there to find a way to make a difference at this moment.

For when we do, just as Mordechai described the redemption of our people from Haman's decree, we will experience *Revach V'hatzlachah*, "abundance and fortune". Our stand for Israel and against antisemitism is not only about defending, protecting, and surviving. This is about facing hardship that we experience in order to *flourish*, thrive and grow! This is about believing, as we attest to during this High Holiday season, that we *can* change things and make them better. Not only to *protect* our community but to make our communities **thrive**. To make this happen I ask that you make an extra effort to express special pride in your Judaism during the coming year. Like today, celebrate our holidays with gusto, participate in Jewish communal activities with frequency and passion, as Jews go out and help the

broader community, give to Jewish institutions with *more* generosity and live joyous inspired Jewish lives, the way Judaism was meant to be lived.

Tragedies *have* befallen the Jewish people, not only today and not only in Persia, but over and over again during the course of our history. But such a history should *not* depress us, rather it should give us *hope* and inspiration for our future. Because *each* time we have faced such adversity, not only have we *persevered* but we have found a way to *thrive* and make our lot better. Think of our community over the last 75 years. We were at one of the great lows of Jewish history during the time of the Holocaust and now we have a State of Israel for the first time in almost 2000 years. And so many of our communities have achieved a level of success and acceptance that has *no* precedent in Jewish history. And as Jay Tcath, friend and Executive VP of JUF, wrote in a piece in August, success in overcoming our *current* troubles is indeed *entirely achievable*. Read his full account another time, but he reminds us that we have more allies than social media lets us believe and that there are *way* more Americans than we think that have not eaten from the tainted wheat. He teaches that *not* recognizing our strengths or appreciating our victories may be human nature, but it is dispiriting. For we **do** have the power, the faith, the resilience, the resources and the will to overcome this, **together**.

I wish I could end my sermon today by giving each of you a hug (I know, some of you would like that and some of you would not - I always ask permission). But that is not possible anyway. But I *do* invite as many of you as wish, to become part of the Schwab family of huggers and I want you to give *each other* at least *two* hugs today. One to console and comfort after an

extremely hard year for our people. And *then* a second hug, to communicate strength, inspiration and courage to be like Esther: to act with passion, individually and as a community, so that we can turn our tears of sadness and frustration into tears of joy over our ability to overcome, to survive and to **thrive** like we never have before. As the book of Esther states, and which we have incorporated into our weekly *havdalah* ceremony, “*L’yehudim hayta orah v’simchah*” - “May Gd Grant us the blessings of light, gladness, joy and honor” in the year to come. *Shanah Tovah* - May it be a year of resilience, growth, inspiration and love for each of us, for the entire Jewish people, and for people the world over, Amen.