

Yesh Tikvah B'achritech
ANENI YODEAH MAH L'HAGID

Pashut, Ayn Milim

I don't know what to say, simply there are no words.

In over 40 years of giving sermons on the High Holidays, I never thought I would have to begin a sermon with those words – “Really, I don't know what to say”.

I wish I could ignore the painful reality of the past year, make pretend it didn't happen, bury my head in the sand and talk about other important matters, anything, anything other than the obvious.

It's almost exactly 1 year since October 7 and if that day was the worst day in Jewish history since the end of the Holocaust in terms of the most number of Jews slaughtered on one day, then what has followed ever since with no end in sight, is agony beyond comprehension, on so many levels.

Let's remember, October 6, throughout the Jewish world and here at CKT we celebrated Simchat Torah. In our Cocktail room close to 200 members of all ages danced joyfully with our Torahs in hand, singing and laughing with hardly a care. The next morning, we awoke to news that was impossible to believe. In an instant, Jewish history was changed forever.

In a matter of hours more than 1200 Israelis, including hundreds of young adults celebrating life at a music festival in the desert, were massacred, fathers beheaded, mothers and daughters raped, genitalia mutilated, babies fried alive in microwaves, all the while as Hamas terrorists recorded their atrocities on their go-pros to gleefully share with their family and friends.

251 Israelis were taken into captivity into GAZA. Most were brutally beaten, starved, raped repeatedly and executed. Still today, over 100 remain buried underground in tunnels almost impossible to reach, hoping perhaps 30, 40 maybe 50 still alive.

Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria has continued to shell the North with rockets and bombs causing tens of thousands of Israelis to leave their homes and livelihood and live as exiles in their own country for now almost a year. Thousands of Hezbollah rockets have caused hundreds of casualties including the murder of 13 Bedouin children on a soccer field.

On every side Israel is threatened and attacked; Houthis in Yemen, HAMAS in GAZA, Hezbollah in Lebanon, terrorist cells in the West Bank. What country in the world can or would live under such conditions? And Iran, the prime mover of genocidal hatred which openly calls for the annihilation of Israel and death to Jews everywhere continues to fund and arm her Jihadist proxies on Israel's borders.

Then on one particular night of dread, Iran launched hundreds of drones and rockets directly at Israel, as Israeli's prepared for the worst. If not for Israel's Iron dome protection and support from the US and other allies, the devastation could have been catastrophic, and

Israel's response could have sparked a regional war, as we have never seen before.

In the meantime, well over 700 Israeli soldiers have lost their lives in GAZA, including the dear friend and at one-time boyfriend of my daughter, Ashira, Gal Eizenkot (Z"l) at the age of 24. The depth of mourning, for a country where everyone knows someone is incomprehensible. Every day parents and family members pray not to hear the name of their child called out with the infamous words, "now it is permitted to announce."

All of this takes place in a country that used to pride itself on its intelligence and military might, that all but collapsed completely leading to the attack on 10/7. All of this takes place in a country deeply divided by a far right governing coalition, led by a Prime Minister who in the eyes of millions of citizens is more interested in staying in power than cutting a deal to end the war and free the hostages.

All of this takes place in a country where weekly protests in the hundreds of thousands demand the release of the hostages and a new government.

As the only democracy in the Middle East, where a free press, the ability to peacefully protest and the rule of law is still upheld, Israel is torn apart by competing opinions and yet still remains somehow united in an existential attempt to survive.

On top of all of this, Israel's economy once that envy of the world is in crisis. Tourism has all but ended, and as my friend Uri Feinberg told me "I live within a very small circumference, controlling what little I can in a world which grows smaller and smaller. "In the words of the Prophet Jeremiah who witnessed the end of Jewish life in Judah 2500 years ago, the destruction of Solomon's Temple "and the death of thousands, _____ "my heart is sick, my heart is broken within me."

And that's not all

On 10/7 we watched in horror as our people were slain before our very eyes. On 10/8 we watched as our supposed allies remained silent in the face of our tragedy, or worse devolved quickly into vitriolic anti-Semitic tropes. It didn't take long for any sympathy for our plight to turn into blaming the victim for having the gall to fight back.

Antisemitism has metastasized from a far right KKK, neo Nazi threat to a far left and not so far left litmus test that requires you to renounce any support for Israel. To wit, you can be pro-choice or a Zionist but not both, you can be pro LGBTQ or a Zionist but not both, you can be pro-environment or a Zionist but not both!

Anti-Semitic threats and acts in this country and around the world are at an all-time high, where for the first time in all my life, I have to be conscious of what I'm wearing that might identify me as a Jew in public for fear of my

well-being. Who would imagine in 2024 in the US, I would feel this way? And I know I'm not alone.

But even all this is not the whole story. The tragic death toll in GAZA amongst the Palestinian population is also too hard to imagine. Women, children, babies, and the elderly are left to somehow survive Israel's attempt to eradicate those who led, organized, financed and carried out the massacre. Tens of thousands have died, even as the Hamas leadership remains underground cowardly and callously leaving the civilian population to die and thereby cynically evoke the world's ire and rage.

I can't say this any more clearly. If you have any heart within you, you must never stop feeling – feeling the pain of those caught up in the conflict on the other side. It is okay to believe Israel has every right to defend herself and seek justice for these atrocities as any other country would, but it is also okay to mourn the loss of so many civilians, non-combatants, trapped with nowhere to go. The whole situation is simply misery heaped upon misery.

Well so much for someone who didn't know what to say,
. . . and has no words.

Okay so what can we do?

I've decided not to use my words but yours in looking to
find a path forward.

Over the course of the last year, many of you here
gathered have turned to me asking 4 powerful and
poignant questions. I would like to share these questions
with you this morning, offer a brief response to each one,
and most importantly offer you the opportunity to
continue the discussion in the coming days and weeks in
various focus/support groups in which you can choose to
participate.

The first question often asked is "How can I best help and
support Israel"

There are any number of ways. First, I am grateful that our congregation collected more than \$5,000 in the immediate aftermath of 10/7 which was given to three different Israeli NGO's to help support soldiers, alleviate trauma, and assist displaced families.

So, first I would suggest continued donations to worthy organizations. If you would like suggestions, I am glad to supply them. Second, I strongly suggest staying informed by choosing reliable Israeli news apps such as Times of Israel or the Jerusalem Post. Third, I would suggest joining our Israel connections committee, ARZA, to enhance your love and commitment to Israel, and/or attending the programs and events scheduled for this coming year including speakers, Israeli movie nights, and enjoying Israeli food and music. Finally, I would suggest looking into ways you can support Israel in Israel by joining a mission trip where you can help in the fields to keep Israel's agriculture afloat or prepare and serve meals to IDF soldiers. And there is so much more we can do individually or collectively.

If you are interested in this question and would like to discuss further with like-minded congregants, please email me and we will choose a day and time to meet.

The second question which has been voiced repeatedly is “How do I deal with growing fears and threats of antisemitism in our personal lives and especially for our college age children on campuses across our nation?”

The first thing I would note is how seriously our synagogue takes this issue. Our security and safety committee meets regularly with law enforcement, and other agencies to make sure we are doing everything possible to secure our campus and facilities. Everything from a single point of entry and numerous additional security cameras to our new security wall that protects us all but especially the youngest among us are just a few of the improvements made within the last year.

Secondly, I would practice good judgement in deciding when it is appropriate or necessary to identify publically as a Jew. It is beyond sad that this is even a “thing” in 2024, but being prudent is wise. Third, I would advocate for our Jewish students on campus by holding university

officials and leaders accountable for their safety. Writing letters, withholding financial support and publically rating universities by how well they protect Jewish students, are just a few ways to respond.

Finally, please know if you are feeling this way you are not alone. Once again, please email me if you would like to gather to address this issue, to support one another, and to take action.

The third question broadly asked of me is “How can I communicate candidly and intelligently in speaking up for Israel when there are others even in my own family who show more sympathy for Israel’s enemies?”

This one is for sure a difficult question. Even if you could marshal all the best data points in the world that would support the Zionist perspective, it is also still possible to denounce Israeli leadership and policies. In other words, threading a needle between standing up for Israel and standing by our brothers and sisters in a messy democracy, and being critical of Israel when its leaders

act contrary to the best of Jewish and human values is a tall order. Add in a dose of raw emotion, sometimes competing interests and philosophies, and sheer existential needs, well then the task becomes even greater. So first, I would encourage those who can to join my Talmud class which is dedicated to studying the history of Israel, the origins of Zionism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The class takes place on Thursdays at noon, for 1 hour. Learning to speak with knowledge and facts is certainly a first step.

Second, if you can't attend the class, I recommend the text I will be using in the class to help educate on Israel. Written by Rabbi Daniel Gordis, this book, "Israel-A Concise History of a Nation Reborn", is an eminently reasonable, fair and balanced book on the subject.

Third in all our conversations, we do not have to necessarily agree with one another but rather to understand each other better. Listening deeply before speaking in trying to understand why the other might hold a differing opinion, is a pre-requisite for a healthy and constructive dialogue.

And finally once again, please reach out to me if you would like to discuss this further or form a group to delve deeper into this subject.

The fourth and last question is the hardest. “How can I endure this deep dark night without becoming depressed or giving into despair.” How can I best manage my emotions ranging from fear and anxiety to confusion and anger?

When we are in the depths of despair, the psalmist admonishes that we ought to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, not dwell there. In other words, we are to keep moving. Just like Israeli’s themselves, we must practice active resilience, which means living our lives as normal as possible even in the face of deep darkness. Even at “ground zero” in Israel itself, cafes are bustling, bars are full, weddings take place, and life carries on even in the valley of the shadow of “what could possibly be next”.

Second, we must seek community and reconnection. Over the course of this year, so many new faces have joined our synagogue community or recommitted to being a member. The longing to proudly affirm one's identity as a Jew, to be surrounded by our extended Jewish family, to meaningfully connect or reconnect to our Jewish roots, has been heartwarming.

Third, we all long for that better day. Bayom Ha Hu = on that day . . . there will be a brighter future in Israel and GAZA and Lebanon. Refusing to succumb to pessimism, resignation to the status quo, and despair, we Jews have always managed eventually to rise like a phoenix and find renewed hope for better days ahead.

Fourth, for us Jews, past is prologue. Sadly, we have been here before, and we have experienced even darker times. As it says in the machzor: "And how unyielding is the will of our people Israel after the long nights, after the days and years when our ashes blackened the sky, Israel endures, heart still turned to love, soul turning still to life." Despite the failings of an imperfect government and unlike 2000 years of reliance on others, Israel and

the Jewish people still have agency. Let us work with like-minded Israelis who share our vision of a democratic, pluralistic Jewish state living in peace side by side a Palestinian State. It may seem like a pipe dream, but so was our dream to return to our homeland after 2,000 years. As Herzl put it best, IM TIRZU AYN ZO Agadah, “if you will it, it is no dream.”

Allow me to conclude with what I would call the Anne Frank message of hope, however this time not Anne’s words, but the words of Rachel Polin-Goldberg, mother of Hersh Polin-Goldberg who after 11 months in captivity was executed by his Hamas captors. She wrote this poem and read it at the UN while Hersh was still alive. Listening to her speech at his funeral, I know she still stands by her hope for a better future.

Rachel wrote:

Poem

There is a lullaby that says your mother will cry a thousand tears before you grow to be a man.

I have cried a million tears in the last 67 days.

We all have.

And I know that way over there

there's another woman

who looks just like me

because we are all so very similar

and she has also been crying.

All those tears, a sea of tears

they all taste the same.

Can we take them

gather them up,

remove the salt

*and pour them over our desert of despair and plant one
tiny seed.*

A seed wrapped in fear,

trauma, pain,

war and hope

and see what grows?

Could it be

*that this woman
so very like me
that she and I could be sitting together in 50 years
laughing without teeth
because we have drunk so much sweet tea together
and now we are so very old
and our faces are creased
like worn-out brown paper bags.
And our sons
have their own grandchildren
and our sons have long lives
One of them without an arm
But who needs two arms anyway?
Is it all a dream?
A fantasy? A prophecy?
One tiny seed.*

May the Holy One comfort all who have lost so much
that was precious to them, all who grieve so deeply for

loved ones, all who mourn for Zion and May the Holy One help us to plant seeds of hope and redemption, seeds of love and reconciliation, seeds of understanding and peace for Israelis and Palestinians, for Jews and Moslems for a much better year in 5785 and