

## **“Peace at Last, Peace at Last”**

This Monday, just as I was polishing off the last words of my sermon today, my cell phone dinged.

“You might have to change your sermon,” read the message.

Hmmm... I wondered right away what it could be. Immediately I went to my news feed, where the words flashed across the screen of the Times of Israel website, “White House releases a comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict.”

Followed by words from Prime Minister Netanyahu to President Trump: “I support your plan to end the war in Gaza.”

Could it possibly be true? Peace in Israel? An end to the fighting in Gaza? The return of our hostages? An opportunity to rebuild and begin again both physically and spiritually? Hope?

Halavai, if only it could be true, that here during the Yamim Noraim, our Days of Awe, when God’s ears are most open to our cries, that finally, finally our prayers have been answered!

While Hamas still has not signed on to the agreement, it has also not rejected it. More than that, the plan has the support of the world over, including Europe, the Arab Nations, and even the majority of Israelis.

For the first time in a long time, I felt a weight lift off my heart, off all of our hearts. The word we have been longing for so long - Shalom, may finally return to our people and to the world. This was an occasion to celebrate.

And, as the texter suggested, a good time to restart my sermon.

These last twenty-four months have been some of the most intense in my Jewish life and in many of yours. Harder than the Lebanon War, the Soviet

Jewry crisis, the assassination of Rabin, two Intifadas, and a slew of Gaza wars combined. And I was in Israel during several of those occasions.

From the moment we first learned of the October 7th attack, to this latest news, not a day has gone by where our Jewish Neshamah hasn't broken just a little bit more than it had before.

October 7th feels both so very long ago, and a blink of an eye.

Do you remember where you were when you first heard the news?

I know where I was, right here at Shir Shalom for our Simchat Torah service preparing to dance and sing with our sacred scrolls.

In those first few hours after the attack, we received information in dribs and drabs. What exactly had happened was still very much unclear. First, we were told about hundreds of terrorists streaming across the Southern Border, and then thousands. Dozens dead, then hundreds dead, then over a thousand. A few hostages changed to many hostages, until the number reached several hundred. In the space of a day, the news went from bad, to worse, to catastrophic.

We gathered around phones, glued to our screens and tvs. Cried with one another in our sanctuary. Each new piece of information was like a knife in our hearts - the Nova Music festival, Bei'ri, Neir Oz, Kfar Aza. The elderly, babies, pregnant women, toddlers, Holocaust survivors all taken, brutally murdered in their homes, on the road. Miles and miles of underground tunnels used to perpetuate the attack, to hide the hostages. It was the Biblical nation of Amalek attacking from behind, an unimaginable attack on one of our happiest days of the year. We were in shock, both by what happened, and by the response to it.

Already on October 8th, there were protestors out on the streets yelling "From the River to the Sea" and "Global Intifada." Before we even had a chance to process what had happened, we were forced into the defensive.

Even as my nephews and niece were getting called up into the IDF, and all of Israel was preparing for a long and painful war, the world was largely silent, if not outright hostile.

Here in Western New York, we gathered by the flagpole at the Jewish Community Center, a rainbow appearing overhead during our prayer vigil. A sign of hope, we prayed.

Five hundred thousand of us, including two bus loads from Buffalo, gathered at the National Mall in DC to cry and mourn together. There was a feeling of unity and solidarity we had not experienced since the rallies for Soviet Jewry in the 1980s. Even if the whole world was against us, at least we were together.

Halavai, if only it could last!

Sadly, it could not, as Israeli forces entered into Gaza and Lebanon, protests erupted on our college campuses, the anger palpable out in the streets and in our sanctuaries. We were at war against Hamas, at war with our friends and neighbors, and at war with one another over Israel's response.

The loss of life these past few years has been unfathomable. While the numbers are disputed - there is no doubt that thousands of Israelis and tens of thousands of Palestinians have been killed. Whole sections of Gaza flattened its population at risk of starvation. And, as much as it pains me to say, we have some measure of culpability. Yes, Hamas and yes, Israel as well.

Regardless of the outcome, we have not come through this unscathed. There is much rebuilding to do, of infrastructure and spirit.

Israel's standing in the world stage has declined greatly, as more and more of our allies have decried our actions, currently advocating for a Palestinian state.

Here in this country, Jews have been singled out repeatedly for actions we have no control over, asked to account for something we are not at fault. Worse still, a Times/Siena poll released this week shows Americans support for Israel is at an all-time low.

No, we have not come through this unscathed.

And, yet, here on our Holiest of Days, let us take a moment to celebrate the good news of the potential peace deal and reflect a little both on what we have lost, and what we have gained over these past two years.

On the loss front, our pride has certainly taken a hit. October 7th attack rattled our souls, Israel displaying a sense of vulnerability we haven't felt since the Yom Kippur War. We, as American Jews, have been greatly affected as well. The anger and animosity thrown in our direction has been hurtful and painful. Despite all the strides we have made in secular society over the past few decades, we still sometimes felt like second class citizens.

What about our sense of unity? More and more we feel divided as a Jewish world - Zionists and Anti-Zionists, Orthodox and Liberal, Democrat and Republican. Instead of bringing us together, the conflict has so often only increased our divisions.

It is hard to not to hear the voice of Mandy Patankin, of Princess Bride fame, who said this in his interview with the New York Times: "To watch what is happening, for the Jewish people to allow this to happen to children and civilians of all ages in Gaza, for whatever reason, is unconscionable and unthinkable. And I ask you Jews, everywhere, all over the world, to spend some time alone and think, Is this acceptable and sustainable? How could it be done to you and your ancestors and you turn around and you do it to someone else?"

While his anger was mostly directed at Benjamin Netanyahu and his war cabinet, it was also directed at all of us, who have stood by and watched the destruction take place.

My own rabbinic community feels ready to break apart over these very same issues. Each side pointing fingers at the other. Each side ready to walk away. Accusations of not being supportive of our friends and family in Israel, while others being accused of callousness in the face of the tremendous loss of human life.

Lastly, on the loss front, I would add our own sense of safety and security. The threats against us have piled up from every direction. It seems every major shooting - the 5/14 shooter, the Minneapolis attack - has antisemitism at its root. And, we have been attacked directly. From April to June, we witnessed Governor Josh Shapiro's house being set on fire by an arsonist on the night of the First Passover Seder, the murder of two Israeli embassy workers - a newly engaged couple - Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgram outside of the Capital Jewish Museum, and the firebombing of a "Run for Their Lives" event in Boulder, Colorado.

Around the world, Israeli athletes have been barred from events. Israeli musicians have been chased off the stage. Israeli authors have been blacklisted.

Here, in our own community, we had one of our member's front windows smashed because they were displaying a sign in support of Israel. Another family friend felt they needed to move school districts because their child was getting threatened to be beat up because of their Jewish identity. Not a week goes by without another incident being recorded.

But, there are also reasons for hope. October 7th started a surge of Jewish pride and identity, the likes of which we have not seen in my lifetime. People coming to services for the first time in years. People joining Jewish clubs, connecting with Jewish friends, coming back to their Jewish roots. Jewish stars and Hamzas hanging proudly from our necks.

Even more amazing, many converts have decided to join us in solidarity. At Shir Shalom alone, we have had more than a half a dozen conversions since October 7th. The feeling of Jewish pride still shines forth in spite of everything we have endured.

I feel this palpably here on High Holy Days. There is meaning and purpose to being here. Yes, there are some who have stayed away for many of the same reasons you have chosen to come. But, overall, this has been a time of great Jewish renewal.

It has also shown our resilience. We are survivors, having withstood more genocide and destruction, inquisition and expulsion, pogrom and protests, than all other groups of humans combined. Here, during the Eila Ezkarah service on Yom Kippur, we recount acts of bravery and resistance going back to the days of the Maccabees, each more tragic than the next. In time, October 7th will be added to this horrific list. No, there is no doubt that this time period has left a permanent mark on our collective psyche, but we have faced far worse in our history and still are here to tell the tale.

And, for me, it has reminded me just what I love about being Jewish. Despite all our differences and divisions, we still allow for discussion and debate. We are willing to face the most challenging of circumstances imaginable and find our way through. We can see both our rough edges and our bright centers. Sure, we may rail against one another from time to time, but there is love and appreciation underneath. Our ties are too strong for any terrorist group to pull them apart.

In the Talmudic tractate Shavuot 39a, we learn: “Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh La’Zeh”, “all of Israel is bound together.”

Bound, meaning responsible for one another.

Bound, meaning tied together like a rope.

Both things are true simultaneously, all sixteen million of us are connected as one big global Mishpachah family, supporting, praying for one another's wellbeing.

But we are also stuck together, judged as if we were one community with one voice.

Here on Yom Kippur let us speak with one voice.

Together, we can abhor violence and war.

Together, we can encourage acts of justice and love.

Together, we can pledge ourselves to the betterment of humanity and the world.

Together, we can be bridge builders and peace makers.

If Shalom does indeed arrive, let us greet it with open arms and open hearts.

Moving forward, peace deal or not, we need to strengthen our ties with one another. We need to stop creating litmus tests determining who should be in or who should be out of our community. This should be a place where we can be our full selves, even if our views differ from one another, even if our views are in opposition with one another.

A month ago, when I met with two dozen of you on Zoom, each of you expressed a different feeling about the war in Gaza. And, amazingly despite our differences, we listened respectfully, we did not judge, we showed kindness and compassion regardless of what was being voiced.

This is not the time to push people away. It is the time for us to draw one another near. If your heart is aching, let us ease the pain. Shir Shalom is strong enough to hold you, whether you are on the left, right, or in between.

Everyone is welcome here. And, for those of you who told me you no longer feel comfortable coming because of what has been happening - as some of you have openly shared with me - we understand as well. Know this: the doors of our sanctuary will always be open to you whenever you choose to come back inside.

Today on Yom Kippur, Jews are gathering in synagogues across the world, in small shtiebels and mighty sanctuaries, to take account of our own lives and that of our communities. We recognize how fragile our existence is and how much we need one another. The Gates of Heaven call out to us, open and ready to receive our prayers. And, on the forefront of Klal Yisrael, all of Israel, are those sacred four Hebrew letters, that are ancestors prayed for, and that we pray for now - Shin, Lamed, Vav, Mem - Shalom.

The Yonah, the dove, that beautiful bird of peace, is perched right above our heads, ready to serve a beacon better times ahead. But she, as always, is elusive, taunting us from afar. Let this be the moment when she finally arrives and signals a new beginning.

Please God, as we ask in the Sim Shalom prayer: "Let there be peace."

And, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

"In the days to come,  
The Mount of GOD's House  
Shall stand firm above the mountains  
And tower above the hills;  
And all the nations  
Shall gaze on it with joy.  
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
And their spears into pruning hooks:

Nation shall not take up  
Sword against nation;  
They shall never again know war."



(Isaiah 2:2,4)

Verses from scripture about which the Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai added: "Don't stop after beating the swords/ into ploughshares, don't stop! Go on beating/and make musical instruments out of them./ Whoever wants to make war again/ will have to turn them into ploughshares first."

Baruch Atah Adonai, Oseh Hashalom, Blessed are you the heavenly maker of peace.

To an easy and meaningful fast, a Gmar Chatimah Tovah, and a peaceful and more hopeful year ahead.