

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - 2024-5785

L'shanah tovah. I'm grateful to be here with you on this Rosh Hashanah.

When we learned that Iran was firing missiles into Israel, we called our dearest friends, who live in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This is a familiar pattern. There's an attack, a bombing, rockets, we call, and they answer.

They were, again, poised, calm.

"We're fine," they said. "Don't worry about us. This is what life is like here. We're used to it." This is not the first time they've rushed into shelters and safe rooms at the sounds of sirens.

I'm not sharing this to downplay very serious concerns and fears. I'm sharing it because it brought home, again, that the reality that this is *k'ragil* - just typical life - is *so full of sorrow*.

Yesterday afternoon, I checked in on them one more time before sundown. They were safe, resting at home, but they shared with me that eight soldiers had died in southern Lebanon. They were all between the ages of 21 and 23.

I quickly went online and saw the faces of Eitan, Harel, Itai, Noam, Or, Nazar, Almken and Ido. They are all young and glowing in the pictures, and instead of getting together with people they love and cooking for the holidays, and laying out meals celebrating the beginning of a new year and the fullness of possibility, their families will spend this Rosh Hashanah in agony, emotional torture, having to wait until after Shabbat to place earth on their sons and begin saying *yitgadal v'yitkadash shmeh rabba*. Then they will get together with people they love and lay out food *for shiva as they sit low to the ground and do their best to just breathe, moving between screaming and silence*.

I know many of us will spend a lot of our time together for these holidays talking about Israel and we'll find our way into policy and politics, conversations about the capacity of ballistic missiles and air defense and the tactical coup of having intelligence inside Iran's Revolutionary Guard and I will probably do the same thing - in fact I already have. So I'm right there with you in this.

But I want to encourage you to let that go right now. Because it can come at a loss of bearing the weight we need to bear, which is to understand, and to feel, that this reality is so full of sorrow. For everyone. Everyone. For Israelis. For innocent Palestinian in Gaza and Lebanese civilians who are simply trying to live and raise

their families. For Jewish communities around the globe. Everyone is holding so much pain.

It can't continue this way. There has to be some disruption.

It's important to me that you understand: I'm not making a political statement and I'm not laying blame. I acknowledge the many, many layers of difficulty and complexity in the founding ideologies of Zionism – but at the most basic level, the modern state of Israel was founded to provide a place, a land, where Jewish people could be safe from constant persecution and serious, existential threats; a place, a land that an offered an ability to self-govern with unconditional recognition of the dignity of a Jewish person's life. Not to the exclusion of others - but that a Jewish life had value, yes, that had to be *affirmed and protected*.

Israel is now at the center of the most complicated geopolitical conflict in the world - ever. We can study and unpack historical facts, narratives and interpretations together another time soon. What I'm saying *now* is that my grandparents left their families in Poland in the 1930s as socialist Zionists to build a home in Palestine cooperatively with those who already lived there. A home that offered them hope of a safe, prosperous future. I was very close with them and I am constantly asking myself if they'd look at us from above and be proud.

I don't know much about the inner lives of people who have lived and died but I do know that they would be heartbroken.

My dearest friends in Israel tell me that they're fine - that Iran firing hundreds of missiles aimed at their homes is part of life. *That is heartbreaking.* And while I'm still reeling and trying to make sense of everything happening so quickly, what I have to offer you is to let you know that *I join them - and I join you- in your sadness.* I know that is not enough. I hope it is something.

I want to give a message of hope this Rosh Hashanah. I've been repeating that again and again to myself for months. Talk about hope. Talk about hope. I will mention it, I promise. But it has been a year so full of grief. And the most frightening part is that no one - no one - has any concept of how this can end.

This past summer, one of my dearest friends in Israel wrote me a note.

It was Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av when we recall and mourn past tragedies in Jewish history.

"Tisha B'Av is usually just another day for me," he wrote. "It's folklore.

This year is different. We saw what destruction looks like in reality.

We have little hope left.

But somehow we still hope that after October 7,

we can make some kind of *tikun*. Make this place feel like *bayit* again.”

That’s the end of his note.

Tikun means repair. *Bayit* means home.

We have this large, dense prayer book that we turn to this time of year. I feel like this year we could take one piece of paper, on one side write “*tikkun*,” and on the other write “*bayit*” and just make that our prayer book for this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Just keep lifting these two words - repair and home - up to God.

In a few days we will observe the first-year Yahrzeit of October 7.

It is hard to understand how the normalcy of life on October 6 last year- making breakfast for children before school, drawn-out work meetings, laundry and stop lights, meals with friends, arguments about everything, and nothing - became October 7.

A year later, we’re still overwhelmed with questions.

How many families will *be defined by* their suffering and trauma?

Will it be three generations, four, five who will feel the full weight of war?

How can we even begin to understand how a human being with a beating heart who was fed by a parent and - we have to believe - experienced some kind of love or care,

has the capacity to dehumanize another person to such an extent that killing them brutally or taking them hostage feels somehow justified?

And oh - by the way - Where were you, God, to Whom we pray for peace? Was Your presence so hidden that it's as if You didn't exist?

The only solace we might take, as horrible as it is, is that this is not the first time Jews have asked these questions. Our parents and grandparents asked these questions. Some members of our own Reyim community asked these questions as children in Eastern Europe. And they are here. And we are here. And when we think of the strength that they brought - and bring - into this world with their resilience and their truth-telling and their grace, we can feel hopeful that *gam zeh yaavor*. That this, too, will pass.

And - and - I'm afraid that will be a long time from now. The families of the Israeli hostages continue to struggle to just breathe, let alone remain hopeful that they will see the people they love again. There is not a single person in Israel who has not dreamed at night about being taken from their children, or their children being taken from them.

Although we may know that a year has passed, in Israel it remains October 7.

From a distance, the choice to end this war in Gaza at least feels clear, especially if it means hostages return to their families, or are buried in their family's cemetery; if it means a stop to the tremendous loss of innocent life in Gaza.

Within Israel, for those who live there, who raise their children there, the choice to end this war is not as clear, even among those who have dedicated their lives to peace in the region, or who protest every week, pleading for the government to do whatever is possible to return the hostages who have been taken. October 7 was *that* destructive to the Israeli psyche. The most basic sense of safety and security was shattered. Both immediate and long-term threats continue to be very real.

I get how hard it is to fully feel this from a distance.

Personally, from the safety of my home, I feel like I at least owe those living there a willingness to hold these tensions with them; to quiet my own voice, and listen more closely to the pain in theirs.

On Rosh Hashanah, we have this little window of time when our tradition asks us to *just listen*. *Listening is the primary mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah. Listen to tek'yiah, to teruah, to shevarim*. To the whole sounds, the broken sounds, the fragments.

Our ancient sages teach that what makes God God is the unending capacity to listen to human cries and respond empathically. This is especially true on Rosh Hashanah.

The blasts of the shofar are meant to sound like a person wailing. That's why the notes are so loud and sharp. The sages imagine that God hears the shofar - the cries - rises up from a *kiseh din*, a seat of judgment, and moves over to a *kiseh rachamim*, a seat of compassion.

They weren't just drawing an abstract image of God; they were giving an instruction to an early, emerging Jewish community: listen closely to all the crying going on - *b'asher hu sham. Wherever it is coming from. Rise up from the seat of judgment and move over to the seat of compassion.* Listen when others will not; *especially* when others will not.

This is also the story we read this morning. God hears the cry of Yishmael, who together with his mother Hagar, is alone in the desert without water, about to die.

The name Yishmael itself means God will hear.

God hears them cry, just as God will later hear the Israelites crying out in Egypt. And God brings all of them from the edge of death to a life that is not yet defined, that is full of possibility.

On that one sheet of paper that could be our entire prayer book this year, together with the words "*tikun*" and "*bayit*," repair and home, we might add two more words:

Shema Yisrael.

Israel, listen to the cries of despair.

The entire life force of Judaism - what has kept it alive over hundreds of generations - is its understanding that *human grief and suffering has no ideology, it is just grief and suffering.*

Judaism recognizes that, when under threat or in defense, war can be a morally justified response. But the tradition is also fully aware of the dangers of failing to have *empathy for people in anguish.* We have to be able to hold our political or moral perspectives up against cries of grief and fear, and say, yes, that fits.

Does that provide clear and specific direction to every strategic political or military decision? No. Does it provide moral, ethical and spiritual grounding that requires constant assessment? Yes, as long as the Jewish character of the state matters, then yes, absolutely.

Where do we go from here? There's so much we don't know.

What I do know is that we're one year out from an event so devastating, so violent and cruel, that its imprint will be left on generations. From feelings of sadness and fear

that have shattered our sense of security, both in Israel and in diaspora Jewish communities, in ways that many of us have not felt or even witnessed before. A trauma that has forced us to confront and reevaluate what it means, what it looks like, and what it feels like to be Jewish now.

I also know that our sense of hope is tough. We have not stopped hoping that there is a path of safety and stability, healing and peace ahead. *Od lo avda tikvateynu. Hatikva bat shnot alpayim.* It's 2000 years old, this Jewish hope of ours.

And I know that our thoughts and prayers matter. Not because they can change the events of the world, *but because they can change us.* Prayer is an act of resilience. When our ability to understand feels helpless and we begin to throw up our hands, our faith reels us back in, like *a malach hasharet*, a ministering angel who accompanies us throughout these high holy days, whispering: don't give up. Don't give up believing that the *human instinct to build is greater than the impulse to destroy.*

As my friend wrote to me - after destruction, maybe we can make some kind of *tikun*.
Make Israel feel like *bayit* again.”

Tikun means repair. It means that leaders will have enough courage to commit to a course of peace. It means rebuilding.

Bayit means home. It means people return to their houses and their families. It means people can live again with a sense of normalcy, just feel safe inside their homes.

That, I think, is our prayer right now.

That parents and children and spouses and friends find a way to *live again* like parents and children and spouses and friends should, without constant fear and grief; that on any given afternoon, family members will call one another casually and happily and they will simply talk about what time they will be back from school or work, and what they're having for dinner and who will stop by the store on the way home.

One year ago this prayer would have felt far too modest - not weighty enough for these high holy days.

Now - it is everything.

And I truly believe - that there is *only one way* to get there.

So on that sheet of paper, together with *tikun* and *bayit*, and *Shema Yisrael* we add these final words, which, really, have always been the heart of it all.

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu, v'al kol yisrael, v'al kol yoshvei tevel, and together now, let's say: amen.

Shanah tovah and may this year bring healing and peace.