

A Year Like No Other: On Hope, Healing, & Heeding The Call of The Shofar

Blow the shofar (shevarim/teruah)

Today is day 362.

We are just about at the one year mark since the largest pogrom, the most violent, murderous, anti-Semitic rampage perpetrated against the Jewish people since the Holocaust. And the end of this war – a war that the people of Israel did not ask for – is nowhere in sight.

Indeed, in the last week it has expanded, as expected, to Lebanon and the Northern part of Israel where some sixty thousand Israelis have been displaced from their homes for much of this past year due to the almost daily barrage of rockets sent by Hezbollah since October 8th. What will happen after this week's escalation of war between Israel and Iran is anyone's guess. These unsettling and uncertain times go on.

As we gather together during the most sacred days of our year, how might we try to glean meaning from this year, and how can we continue to manage the swirl of intense emotions that have accompanied so many of us throughout?

It's hard to even know where to begin. Words are not sufficient.

When looking back at the year, I am in many ways at a loss. In part because this was something I never imagined or believed could really happen, and because I feel such a loss. And I know that I am not alone.

There is a reason that I started this sermon with the sounds of the shofar; with the *tekiah*, the *shevarim*, and the *teruah*. Our Talmudic sages debated and disagreed about many aspects of blowing the shofar: about how long each blast should be, and about the orders of the blasts that should be sounded. But there was general agreement that the sounds are to remind us of some type of crying. Perhaps the cry is more like one long moan (*tekiah*), perhaps shorter breaths (*shevarim*), or perhaps that hyperventilating cry that we do when we are nearing a state of panic (*teruah*). With all of these combined sounds, over and over, it is most important to focus on the fact that we are beginning the year with the sounds of crying.

Today, this seems particularly appropriate.

In the past year, both of our daughters had a chance this year to meet Rachel Goldberg Polin, the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, the 23-year-old American-Israeli who was held hostage in Gaza for close to eleven months, starved, tortured, and god knows what else, only to be murdered only hours before the

IDF were able to reach him. Last spring, when Leora was spending a semester in Israel, Rachel came to speak to the group, and Leora sobbed through her story. Aviva, our oldest, left for a year in Israel the day after Hersh's funeral, and less than 72 hours after landing at Ben Gurion, she and a group of friends went to pay a shiva call. Through hysterical tears, she passed along the condolences of our family and our community, to these suffering parents, members of our extended Jewish family.

Sometimes, tears are the only way to greet a tragedy.

And so we start with a crying- for all of it. For the countless mothers and fathers of our brave IDF soldiers who have been injured or killed in this war (*tekiah*). For the families of the hostages who remain in captivity (*shevarim*). For the loss of all human life (*teruah*). As Jane-Rachel's grandfather, a World War II veteran used to say to us "war is hell." This war is no exception, even if it has been a necessary war for the survival of the people and state of Israel. Even if it has been described, by scholars, as legal, and as a historic example of fighting an urban war in a way that reduces civilian casualties to historically low levels.

Still, we cry.

But tears cannot be our only response. Walking around in a fog, overwhelmed and feeling lost and hopeless is not the Jewish way. We always have to find a way to move forward. We always have to get up from sitting shiva. Because even when we're in the depths of pain and mourning, we have to remember that all is not lost.

The word *shevarim* means broken. The cries of the shofar sound the way many of us feel after this year: broken. But brokenness cannot last forever. The Jewish people have endured a serious blow over this past year, but we are still very much here, resilient, determined, and in many ways more united than we have been in quite some time. Our people have persevered and survived for thousands of years, and we aren't going anywhere. Even though we will never let go of the pain and heartbreak of this past year, we must, and we someday will, arrive at a place of wholeness. We will arrive at the *tekiah gedolah*. This must be our aspiration, as this new year begins.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "*Surrender to despair is surrender to evil, It is important to feel anxiety, it is sinful to wallow in despair.*" The greatest heresy, Heschel taught, is forgetting about humanity's power for goodness and for love.

It is this goodness and love that we must seek out and hold onto. Even, and especially, now. Even as we keep in our hearts the hostages who were brutally snatched from their homes and from a dance party, and dragged into hell, simply because they were Jewish. Even as the war has expanded to the North and we are uncertain of what comes next. Even as we witness the incessant anti-Semitism that has reared its ugly head this year on college campuses across this country. Even if we are afraid, as I know some are, to wear our Jewish stars jewelry in public, to put Hannukiyot in our windows, or to hang mezuzot on our doors (to name some of the things that people have spoken with me about this year).

It is easy to be tempted to wallow in despair, especially when we have experienced so much hate. In May, writer Mitch Albom called out the protests across college campuses for what they truly are: anti-Semitic gatherings of hate. These have not been protests about the importance of a two-state solution (something I, along with the vast majority of Israelis, had always hoped for, by the way). No. Protesters who wave the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah, who chant in support of Intifada, who want Jews eliminated “from the River to the Sea,” who hold up signs saying “Go back to Poland,” or “Final solution,” are not interested in peace. They are not concerned with the complicated history of Israel and the Middle East. They want to incite and promote fear. They want to

isolate us and use the same, tired, ancient trope of the scapegoat that we will recall on Yom Kippur.

I am not minimizing the threat, nor am I saying we do not have a right to feel afraid. But, as we gather together on this Rosh Hashanah as Jews have done for thousands of years, let us remember that generations before us have endured exile, pogroms, and forced labor and death camps, and we are still here. We must never forget our resilience. We must never forget that the one thing our enemies cannot take from us is our love for life and the ability that we have to choose faith and hope, over fear and hopelessness.

I know that this is not easy, but we must try not to be afraid and not to lose faith in our people, our history, and our resilience. This is essential to our survival. We have to hold onto hope, even when our faith has been severely tested. Even when it seems to be hanging by a thread.

As Viktor Frankel once wrote: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way...When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Here we can return to Rachel Goldberg Polin and Jon Polin, and the unbelievable resilience and hope that they held onto throughout Hersh's captivity. Three snapshots of their refusal to give up come to mind.

The first: over the summer, as they were trying to raise awareness about the plight of the hostages and rally support for their return, the Goldberg-Polin family decided to dedicate one week as a "week of goodness," encouraging everyone in their vast network of supporters to volunteer, study, sing, pray, give charity, or otherwise bring goodness into the world. "*We will flood this world with goodness, and do good deeds in the merit of the hostages,*" Rachel enjoined us. The week culminated with the dedication of a sefer Torah. As Rachel marched with the Torah, clutching it next to the masking tape pasted to her heart with the number of days the hostages had been in captivity, I remember feeling both broken, and in complete awe. If she could walk forward, literally holding onto Torah, onto the symbol of our faith, couldn't we? Shouldn't we?

The second snapshot: At the end of August, when families of the hostages went to the border of Gaza to scream out into the abyss, hoping that their loved ones who might be alive (as Hersh was at the time), could hear their cries, a human version of the call of the shofar. I will *never* get the image of Rachel screaming for Hersh out of my mind. It is forever seared into my heart and my soul.

"It's Mama," she screamed. "It's day 328. We are all here, all the families of the remaining 107 hostages. Hersh, we are working day and night, and we will never stop. I need you to know that I am giving you now the blessing I give you every single morning when I pray for you: May God bless you and keep you. May God shine His face upon you and be gracious to you."

And the third snapshot: at Hersh's funeral. At the time where we all would have understood if they had crumbled, the family maintained their steadfast refusal to give up on life and on hope. At the end of Jon's heartbreaking eulogy, his words of tribute to his murdered child, he somehow amazingly uttered four powerful words from the Israeli national anthem: ***Od lo avda tikvatenu***. We have not yet lost hope.

I do not know how this family does it. I do not know where they found the strength. I do not know how they got out of bed every morning this year, let alone crisscrossed the globe encouraging everyone they encountered to do acts of goodness, and to hold onto hope. But I do know that they have inspired me, and I'm sure have inspired many of you, to try to hold on to whatever hope we can, for dear life.

This year, alongside the pain and hatred and fear, we have also seen the resilience of the Jewish people. The thousands of Israelis who returned to Israel from around the world to fight after October 7th. The hundreds of millions of dollars of donations – of money, medical supplies, military equipment, and more – to help the war effort. The hotels that opened their doors to evacuees just hours after they fled from the terror of their homes in the south. The long list of the ways big, and small, that Jewish people around the world came together this year is incredible. And the effort continues. Because hope is not enough. We are Jews, and we know that we are judged by our actions more than our intentions.

At the funeral, Jon Polin said that Hersh's memory would be "a revolution." In order to make sure the horrible losses of this year are not in vain, we must be inspired to pursue a revolutionary, counter-cultural focus on our Judaism, on the Jewish people, and on Israel. This can feel complicated, but we must strive to create a relationship with the Jewish people in Israel and around the world that is thick, thoughtful and filled with love.

Gili Hadar was one of the 364 young music lovers killed by Hamas at the Nova music festival. Gili had, in 2019 and 2022, served as a *shlichah*, an Israeli emissary

to America, at Tel Yehudah summer camp in New York. Just a few weeks ago, her parents wrote in the Jerusalem Post:

“Gili never believed in a blank-check relationship with Israel, the kind that says always support and never question. She did, however, see the bonds between American and Israeli Jews as inviolable and fragile: ties that cannot be denied yet must be nurtured with joy, music, dance, food and more. Today, as some young American Jews drift away from Israel, we ask them to remember that Israel is also Gili. It is Gili dancing at the Nova music festival, living a normal life in her early 20s, trying to figure out what career path she’ll pursue. Young American Jews should remember that they don’t have to choose between loving Israel and criticizing it: they can have a complex relationship that includes both.”

It is ok, and maybe even a good thing, when our relationship with Israel is complicated. We can struggle with the decisions of the Israeli government, we can struggle with the incredible loss of innocent life in this terrible war. But at the same time, as we enter year two of the most challenging time for the Jewish people in recent history, our obligation to take action must rise above our conflicted feelings about Israeli politics.

We can start with actively fighting anti-Semitism wherever and whenever it emerges. It is obvious that anti-Semitism is alive and well on all sides of the political aisle. Regardless of your personal political affiliations or loyalties, let's not waste energy arguing about which candidates are “better for the Jews.” There is enough arguing and hatred to go around, and we need to stand united to call it out Jew hate whenever we see it, full stop.

And while offering criticism of Israel may be fair game, positions that take on an anti-Zionist stance, whether it be advocating for BDS, chants on college campuses that implicitly and explicitly call for the destruction of the country and the Jewish people, or journalists and political leaders who regard Hamas and Hezbollah as anything but terrorist actors is anti-Semitic.

We have a right to a state of our own. We are not colonizers, rather our people are indigenous to the land. We are not committing apartheid, rather Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East – albeit a flawed democracy, in many ways just like our own American democracy. Israel is a state that collectively rejoices when a Bedouin hostage is rescued and collectively mourns when Druze children are killed by a missile strike from Lebanon.

In order to be able to authentically fight back against this pernicious hatred of Jews and Israel, we must educate ourselves. If you're not sure where to start, I recommend two books, both by actor and Israel advocate, Noa Tishby. One of her books is an accessible, user-friendly guide to the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the, called *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Jew* records a dialogue between Tishby and former NFL linebacker and sports commentator Emmanuel Acho. Both of these books offer practical information and framing

that are useful for anyone who wants to know how to talk about Israel with your non-Jewish friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

There are piles of these two books in the lobby, and I encourage you to take one home with you today. First come, first served, but if you are a teen or a college student you get to go to the head of the line. If you take one I only ask that you read it, and then call me so I can buy you a cup of coffee and hear about your impressions and reactions.

We cannot be advocates for Israel, or the Jewish people, if we don't have the knowledge to back up our advocacy. There is so much misinformation and disinformation out there, it's incumbent upon us to be informed and to help spread the truth.

Finally, now is not the time to hide. Now is **not** the time to tuck our star of David necklaces into our shirts, to take off our kippah, or to run from our Judaism. If there is a situation where you genuinely fear for your safety, that is one thing. But we would do well to remember that those who hate us aim to make us afraid. The only antidote to this fear is leaning into our Jewish identities and our Jewish communities. I am not saying "be Jewish because of the tragedies of this year," but I am saying that our religion and culture are too old, too precious,

and too significant to just drop because we are afraid or because it's hard. Apathy is in many ways the biggest challenge we face as American Jews in the 21st century, and the only way we can ensure that Judaism survives and thrives is if we care enough to learn, to practice, and to get involved with our Jewish community. We, your synagogue and spiritual home, are certainly ready to help you do that in any way that we can. All you have to do is ask. Send an email. Pick up the phone. Show up. Bring your kids, your grandkids, your neighbors. Get involved. It is really as simple as that. I promise your spiritual life and health will be forever changed. And you will have helped preserve a way of life that goes back millennia.

Blow the shofar with one set.

From brokenness to wholeness. Rabbi Saadia Gaon taught that, while there are many reasons for the sounding of the shofar, the ultimate reason is that it reminds us of the possibility of redemption. So we can move from crying to “redemption,” always holding on to hope.

As Rabbi Hannah Yerushalmi writes so beautifully in this poem called “In His Pocket:

The rabbis
advised:
keep two truths
in your pocket,
one should read:
I am but dust and ashes
and the other should read:
the entire world was created for me.
An 8-year-old
has something else
in his pocket.
Confetti.
Why?
It's his emergency confetti,
he says,
during these raw days
he carries it with him
everywhere
just in case there is good news.

So may it be. May we soon be ready to toss our own actual or symbolic confetti to celebrate good news: about the return of our hostages, about Israel's displaced residents moving back home, and about an end to this horrible war.

May the memories of those killed while taken hostage or in defense of the state of Israel be for a blessing. May Israel and the Jewish people know peace. May we see better days ahead. May we never forget to stubbornly, and defiantly, hold onto some confetti in our pockets.

Am Yisrael Chai.