

Israel: The Dimensions of Distress and Determination

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple

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On Monday I returned from the shortest visit to Israel in my life: five days. Five days, but it felt like a lifetime. Israel - where I have traveled more often than I can count, where I lived with Rachel for our honeymoon year after marriage during our first year of cantorial and rabbinical school, where our family lived for a half year for a sabbatical after Mount Zion's sesquicentennial. Israel - where I have led congregants to love the land, culture, and people; to stand in awe before the stratified layers of our history revealed in site after site, to meet with Israelis and Palestinians of many backgrounds and witness their people-to-people cooperation and join with them to protest injustices; to remember or learn the inspiring stories of the *chalutzim*/pioneers surviving against all odds to form a country meant to be a light to the nations, espousing prophetic ideals; and finally to wrestle with the contradictions infused in having that nation-state and the messiness of realpolitik that comes with being sovereign for only the third time in our three millennia history.

I went for a condolence visit. The national mood and feeling in the streets were of a nation in trauma, distressed but also determined.

With a government that has been largely absent in helping the population, the civil society was well-structured because of ten months of protesting the judicial reforms to organize - even by the evening of October 7 - structures of support for those in need with an inspiring volunteer corps. The work is just now abating even with 200,000 internally displaced Israelis from the north and south. The whole society still is in trauma, not in post-trauma.

Just a couple months ago, Abby Gore and I led a group of Mount Zion 11th graders in New York City for our annual trip. On the morning of visiting Ellis Island, we imagined that it was the year 1903. We were fleeing Russia after the horror of the Kishinev pogrom, trekking across lands to Hamburg, Germany, boarding a steamship to America. Hundreds of thousands of lives around that time were uprooted, so many people migrating half-way across the world to Palestine, to America because of the horror of the Kishinev pogrom. Poems and stories were written including Bialek's famous, *In the City of Slaughter*.

49 Jews were killed over three awful days in the Kishinev pogrom. 49.

On October 7, though the numbers are still being updated, over 1200 were slaughtered. The equivalent of 25 Kishinev pogroms. Most of the victims were civilians, babies to elders, some killed in gruesome ways. The stories are still being told and will be for years to come including horrific, now-documented cases of rape and sexual mutilation.

In Kibbutz Kfar Aza where I stood just this past February on my previous trip meeting with the Mayor of Shaar haNegev, Ofir Libstein, and where I returned last week, the small Kibbutz of some 700 members experienced the deaths of 68 people including Ofir Libstein, one of the first to help defend his community. We went to his home. In his beautiful garden were several fruit

trees, full on every branch. No one to pick them. The rotting oranges on the ground screamed from the blood spilt on it.

אֵין בַּיִת אֲשֶׁר אֵין־נֶשֶׁם מֵת From Exodus, there was no house that was not touched by the death.
(Exodus 12:30.)

A poem, a hard poem, by Rivka Miriam called, "The Holy Holies, the Inner Sanctum":

קודש הקדושים (רבקה מרים)
לקדש הקדשים נכנס אהרן
מסיט מהפפרת כרובים ושרפים
פושט את בגדיו ושוכב בארון
עם בניו השרופים

Aaron walks in to the Holy of Holies
He sends away the Seraphs and Cherubs from the Seat of Mercy
He takes off his sacred clothing and climbs into the ark/coffin and lies down with his
burnt sons.

Translation by Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi

It will take a *shloshim* of *shloshims* to move through this mourning period. We are shaken by the utter cruelty and devastation of what happened, with some acts of evil cruelty done to a degree seldom seen in our world.

And, and ... it isn't of course the only pain.

The deaths of children and innocents in Gaza scream from the earth. From Kfar Aza we stood only a couple kilometers from Gaza City and could see the unsettling, black smoke from Israeli bombs hovering over the horizon under a blue sky and could only imagine what was happening.

Many in American and around the world - many of us - have not been able to focus on offering condolences to Israelis because of a feeling of helplessness in the face of the daily deaths in Gaza. We are repulsed by the idea of a Jewish state doing this even knowing that this was caused by Hamas' unprecedented attack and their strategy of goading Israel to cause Palestinian civilian deaths.

There are so many truths in this moment. Palestinians have been and continue to suffer in the West Bank. Jewish settlements are choking the possibility of any kind of normal life and new right-wing government leaders are allowing awful acts against civilians. And Israelis are still traumatized by the rejection of two state offers - a political horizon that is so needed for all the people from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea - and are still reeling from the intifada that followed in 2000 and have subsequently elected governments that make such political solutions more remote.

We won't all agree on which truths to prioritize and that is ok. Let's give each other the benefit of not holding each other to the first thing we say, to listen compassionately. and to affirm what is true in what we hear.

Most Israelis I spoke with last week didn't have that heart-space, the capacity, to feel pain for Gazans. I was surprised to the degree that this was true. Their own security was shattered, their children called up in record numbers to serve to protect, the entire country mobilized to act and volunteer. I can't imagine how I'd feel if St. Paul were overrun by terrorists and what I'd want the American government to do.

Our expectations of Israelis need to be understood in this way. When a family is in the midst of their mourning, we all know to be careful of what we say and what we expect. We experienced that here at Mount Zion this Fall in the couple weeks leading up to Simchat Torah. Many of us - a circle or two away from the deep loss our fellow community members experienced - still felt we couldn't handle anything else.

And this is why I went to Israel and why I am speaking tonight knowing that many will find it hard to stay even for a moment with the pain that Israelis are feeling. But this is not either / or. All of us can feel the moral outrage that 127 people are still held as hostages in the tunnels under Gaza. Today is day 84 of their captivity. I am wearing a necklace that says, "Bring them Home," created by the families of the hostages who have kept their plight front and center in Israel and around the world. Landing in Ben Gurion, I was confronted with the pictures of hostages as I scanned my passport and walked down the long passage to baggage claim. They were on billboards, projected on buildings, posted in supermarkets; they were everywhere. And walking in Tel Aviv, life-sized teddy bears stained with red bullet wounds sat on benches with the names of people killed. People tried to live normally walking by. How do families walk with their children? What does normal mean?

We met with families of the hostages in Hostage Square in Tel Aviv by the long tables with empty place settings for those missing in front of the Tel Aviv Art Museum. Meirav, a volunteer, said what we knew, that we get accustomed to every new situation. The danger is that the human heart and mind can get used to the horror of hostages being held in captivity. These remarkable families and supporters are not letting politicians and others do so. They are pressuring the Red Cross to visit the hostages as the organization is supposed to do.

Dani Miran spoke with us. A farmer from the Galilee, he is the father of Omri who was taken hostage by Hamas from his home on Kibbutz Nir Oz. For some miraculous reason on October 7, the terrorists left his wife and girls, two years old and six months old, in the saferoom and they are now safe.

My colleague Rabbi Steve Moskowitz described that moment we experienced in Hostage Square; "As Dani told this story, he turned to us and said, Don't be sad; we are a strong people. And with that, we jumped up, formed a circle and started singing and dancing Rebbe Nachman's familiar words. We sang, '*Kol haolom kulo gesher tzar maod, v'haikar lo lefachad klal*. The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence is not to be afraid.' We sang and we danced. The crowd took videos and pictures. We hugged Dani and we hugged each other."

This Shabbat we finish the year 2023 and we finish the book of Genesis, *Bereshit*. The Torah portion called, “And he lived, *vayechi*,” includes the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, and the first *hesped*, likely a funeral dance, for seven days as they brought Jacob to be buried in Hebron with his ancestors. Before they died, Jacob blessed Joseph’s two sons Ephraim and Menashe, raising the status of the younger Ephraim, meaning “fruitful” over the elder, Menashe, meaning, “causing to forget.” And after an intergenerational discussion between father and son about right and wrong and the facts of the matter and who should be blessed first, Jacob brings some healing to the brother-to-brother violence that is part of the entire book of Genesis and human history, by making his hands wise in putting his right hand on the younger Ephraim’s head and blessing, and blessing.

At the end of a book, and how appropriate for tonight, we say, *chazak chazak venitchazeik*, be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other. I pray that we will be strengthened as we forget what needs to be forgotten and remember what needs to be remembered, namely our values of justice and self-preservation balanced as best we can so that all brothers and sisters can be fruitful and blessed.