

Rabbi Jon Roos
YK PM 5785: The Surge We Need

Gamar tov. This will be my Yom Kippur – Israel – October 7th sermon. It may not be what you expected but it's what I think we need. It is not a retelling of October 7th and it is not about the ethics of the war and or public discourse that has raged since. I urge you to join us tomorrow here at 3:45 for our afternoon service, which will be an extended meditation on and commemoration of the one year anniversary of October 7.

Over the past year, you have shared with me, our clergy team and the staff members who greet you here at temple, that you are exhausted, you are sad, you feel alone and isolated, you feel outraged, and you feel hopeless. That is what we need to talk about as we start this Shabbat Shabbaton, our holiest day for reflection and teshuva.

Over this past year, many of you have experienced a great coming undone and a feeling of important things in your life falling apart. Along with all the damage and pain that people in Israel, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories have suffered this past year, here, in Chevy Chase, and DC, and Bethesda, the affects have been

felt in strained relationships, a sense of alienation or discomfort with Judaism, and a sense of heavy moral responsibility and failure. Tonight, let's address the damage done to your relationships, to your Judaism, and to your feelings about yourself.

A great challenge for many members is the sense of personal accountability and moral responsibility for what has happened, and continues to happen daily, since October 7th. One common protest slogan - "Not In My Name" – captures the feeling. Some of you have been in the position where friends and acquaintances turn to you as a representative for Judaism and the Jewish people and that leaves you feeling isolated and inadequate. These are heavy burdens to carry and it's no wonder this year has left you exhausted, confused, sad, or mad.

It is important that you know and really try to assimilate the fact that you are not, in fact, personally or morally responsible for anything that has happened in Israel, Gaza and the Middle East since October 7th. Also, you are not the spokesperson for Judaism, the Jewish people, or any Jewish organization, including the Jewish state. People will try to impose either or both of these dynamics on you and you have cultivate a sense of self that is not defined by their

opinions of you or their unrequested and unwelcome job assignments.

Judaism teaches that we are all in this together and that society is better when we help each other do the right thing and stop each other from doing the wrong thing. You will hear that message throughout Yom Kippur especially. And, it is a principle of Judaism that individuals are ultimately only responsible for their own actions. The Talmud traces the evolution of this idea. Early in the Torah, Exodus (34:7) says, “God visits the iniquity of parents upon their children and children’s children.” Later, however, Deuteronomy (24:16) says the opposite, “Parents shall not be punished for the misdeeds of their children, and children shall not be punished for the misdeeds of their parents.” The Talmud then cites the prophet Ezekiel, one of the later sources, as confirming the position of Deuteronomy. Ezekiel says simply, “The person who sins, that person alone shall be punished.” (Ezekiel 18:20). That’s a core principle and it applies to you today, yesterday, and always.

Judaism also teaches that we should not simply ignore injustice and wrongdoing. When Cain kills Abel, God confronts him, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” It is a

mitzvah in the Torah (Leviticus 19:17) to give a righteous rebuke to those who are close to you who do wrong. This mitzvah of rebuking is called a “*tochechah*.” And, the Torah is also very clear that rebuking someone for doing wrong does not also attach the other person’s guilt to you. It says, “You must reprove your fellow but you incur no guilt because of them.” I am sure you did not need the Torah to tell you that things have been wrong over this past year and you should say or try to do something about it. You know inherently that somebody needs to be rebuked for what’s going on – whether that’s Hamas, Israel, the UN, your parents, me, or the president of Columbia. It is disorienting; it is heartbreaking; and it is infuriating because I think you also understand but maybe have not been able or willing to accept the truth that it is beyond your ability to stop what is happening. No matter how clearly you see rebukable horrors unfold every day, you just can’t. I’m really sorry. And it’s not your fault. No matter how confidently other people claim to be doing something in your name, and regardless of your connection to the perpetrators, you are not personally indictable or morally accountable for their actions.

Among the saddest experiences of this past year, has been learning about how many important relationships have been

damaged or ended because of disagreements over Israel, the war, and other issues made toxic since October 7th. Children are not talking to their parents, parents are not talking to children, life long friends are breaking off contact, and co-workers are avoiding each other but for absolutely necessary work tasks.

Judaism is a very practical religion and our sources frequently explore a common challenge: how to resolve two competing obligations. Like when it's Yom Kippur and you are supposed to fast from all food but you have a health condition that endangers your life if you don't eat, you should eat. Among the ways that Judaism solves these conflicts is the principle: A person who is already busy with a mitzvah is released from the obligation of a competing mitzvah. It gets complicated because not all mitzvot are equally important nor do their performance or lack thereof have similar outcomes. It's a lot easier when one of the elements has an immediate life or death outcome. It's much harder when we compare competing relational commitments.

Since October 7th, many in our community have felt a historically high threat and existential need to prioritize standing with Israel over anything else. Others have felt the historical weight of this moment pushing them to prioritize justice for strangers and

protecting vulnerable people over anything else. These are both important though nowadays often competing commandments. When these recalibrated priorities lead to breakups of old friends and family members, it reveals, perhaps, a metastases of otherwise good Jewish values into a malignancy that leaves you and your friends miserable. That's not the practical balancing act that has kept Judaism going through all these millenia.

It is a core value of Judaism to create, cultivate and tend to positive interpersonal relationships. Your friends and family are significant connections. They are more important than your relationship to Israel – whether that's loving Israel, hating Israel, some mix of feelings. Hillel said it plainly: the essence of Judaism is encapsulated in how we treat other people and it was Hillel's tilt toward kindness even with his rivals and adversaries that made him the default voice of law when disagreements arose.

I'll put my cards on the table: I think Israel is important to Jewish continuity and to the Jewish creativity and dynamism that keep Judaism significant and meaningful throughout history and the changing world in which we live. And, in the four thousand years since Abraham, a Jewish sovereign state has only stood for a few hundred of those years and yet Judaism has not only survived but thrived. But no form of Judaism has ever survived the collapse of

family connections, Jewish friendships, and the interpersonal relationships on which the passing of Torah relies. There are good reasons for ending relationships, even within families, but disagreements over Israel is not one of them. If a sovereign Jewish state in the land of Israel survives for the rest of eternity and we lose our families and friends, that would be a failure and maybe the end of Judaism as we know it. It does not have to be an either-or binary. But don't mistake which one of these obligations supercedes the other.

The past year has also revealed how important it is that we must attune ourselves to entropy – the tendency for things to fall apart in our world. For this new year, we need to strengthen and prepare ourselves to building and rebuilding the things that are important but prone to collapse.

Over this past year, we have seen ways in which Judaism has become harder for some of you. We have experienced a curious phenomenon over this year in which more people are showing up more often and yet simultaneously feeling less than great about their Jewish identity and Jewish practice. During and after Covid, the trends pointed to a decline in Jewish engagement especially in synagogues and other legacy institutions. The past twelve months,

however, have seen the opposite and some community leaders are calling this “The Surge.” But the numbers don’t tell the whole story. The surge is not a warm, fuzzy sold out Maccabeats concert or old school Purim carnival. There is sadness, confusion and darkness that hovers around this surge.

One of my colleagues told me that after October 7th she stopped doing kiddush at home on Friday nights. She was the Jewish anchor in her house and kiddush had always been her thing but she just couldn’t bring herself to chant the melody these days. The members of her family, who had previously always teased her and rolled their eyes at mom’s super Jewy-ness, now felt adrift and missing something. Her youngest kids eventually staged an intervention, claiming that they had studied on Youtube and learned to do the blessing and if she didn’t re-start doing kiddush on Friday nights for the whole family, they would start doing it in her place and also start drinking.

Many contemporary authors who had been writing about antisemitism and the challenges to Jewish life for years before October 7th often end their works with a call to embrace more Judaism. (Bari Weiss, Dara Horn, Deborah Lipstadt, Sara Hurewitz, et al.) That’s not such a surprising thing to hear in shul on Yom Kippur.

It's what we need to do. But let's address the unacknowledged pain and confusion alongside the surge. Things do fall apart. It is the nature of the world. But you cannot let the actions of other people and events beyond your control, ruin Judaism for you and your family and friends – those with you today, those who came before, and the ones who will follow in our footsteps to wherever we lead them.

In the wake of the last and perhaps greatest trauma in Jewish history, Rabbi Philosopher Emil Fackenheim, discerned a 614th commandment – a new mitzvah with equal weight to all the others from the Torah. We must update what Fackenheim wrote then and live it today and tomorrow: “We are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish.... We are forbidden... to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God [and Judaism] are dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives would be to hand Hitler other, posthumous victories. It would grant to Sinwar and the Ayatollahs, and also to the fascist religious zealots of Zion, the perpetual state of war they love, the victory over the decency they seek, and the destruction of Judaism itself.”ⁱ

The stakes are very high after October 7th. They are, of course, high for Israelis and Palestinians and Lebanese and Iranians and anyone within the zone of combat. But here too, far from the threat of missiles and tanks, the stakes are high for different reasons. The past year has been defined by anger and alienation; disappointment and despair. We, the lucky, privileged, relatively safe and comfortable, residents of the nicest parts of the DMV; we members of Temple Sinai get to surge now. Doing that, we can no longer allow the actions and beliefs from half way across the world take away or damage our sense of our own moral integrity, our friendships, and our Judaism.

The First Source, the Spirit that Hovered Over the Waters before ever a word of Torah was known is calling you back in teshuva, L'dor Vador. For generations to come.

Gamar Tov.

¹ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 213 (taken from Wikipedia entry on Fackenheim on 10/10/2024)