

Kol Nidre 5785
Our Mental Maps
Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake, Westchester Reform Temple

You are probably familiar with a celebrated *New Yorker* cover from March 29, 1976. Entitled *View of the World from 9th Avenue*, it parodies a provincial Manhattanite's perception of life beyond the Hudson River, a worldview in which Zabar's looms larger than Asia.

Which I totally get, by the way. Can you even get a good bagel anywhere over there?

But back to 9th Avenue. Brownstones rich in architectural detail, minimalist office buildings, storefronts and parking garages crowd the foreground, with cars humming by and pedestrians dotting the sidewalks. Just beyond the Hudson lies everything else: Jersey, Kansas City, Texas, Nebraska, Chicago, Mexico, Canada, some mountains and prairies, a Pacific Ocean about the width of the Hudson, and a few vague blobs indicating China, Russia, and Japan floating on the horizon. It's a perfect cartoon, which spawned countless imitations, and put famed illustrator Saul Steinberg—as it were—on the map.

It also neatly encapsulates the idea of a "mental map," the way in which our perspectives—whether cultural, familial, or intensely personal—influence, and shape, how we understand the world. We superimpose our own experiences and assumptions on the world, in order to make the foreign familiar.

Put another way: we see the world not as it is, but as we are.

My interest in mental maps grew this year as I observed artists and musicians, writers and athletes from around the globe lining up to castigate Israel—and not just folks from Arab countries. I mean people from way outside Israel's "neighborhood."

There's the roster of performers boycotting Israel while accepting concert dates in countries with seriously checkered human rights records. And the Irish women's basketball team that refused to shake hands with the Israeli team at the EuroBasket qualifiers this summer. And the attempt to disbar Israel from the Eurovision song contest, led by all the countries of Scandinavia, and, again, Ireland. And the proposals by French lawmakers to sanction Israel at the Olympics. And South Africa's efforts to tarnish Israel

among the community of nations with charges of “genocide” and “apartheid.”

These critics offer little nuance in their understanding of the Middle East and the tangled Israeli-Palestinian conflict. How many have read beyond the headlines? Studied the history? Met with Israelis *and* Palestinians? Visited the region?

Such is the power of mental maps: we see the world not as it is, but as we are.

And so, for many in Ireland, Gaza looks like Belfast, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict looks like The Troubles, the violent conflict that consumed Northern Ireland for thirty years and whose aftershocks still reverberate, decades later.

Many Americans’ perceptions of the world are shaped by our country’s treatment of people of color. For them, the actual contours of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict recede like hazy blobs into the background of a mental map drawn from the compounded traumas of slavery, Jim Crow, urban blight, “separate but equal,” police brutality, mass incarceration.

And what kind of mental maps are now taking shape in impressionable young minds on college campuses? No doubt the topics receiving heightened focus in academia today—racism, settler-colonialism, white supremacy, imperialism—all favor the promotion of activism over critical reasoning. These preoccupations take center-stage while global Islamofascism is sidestepped, its danger downplayed.

In all of these scenarios, sentiment tends to favor the group perceived as lacking power; to wield power is preemptively deemed immoral. Oppressed populations, meanwhile, are given a free pass to pursue their liberation by any means possible, no matter how depraved.

In the case of the Middle East, what emerges is a mental map in which Palestine exemplifies the fight of a “virtuous, oppressed, indigenous population” against a “white, privileged, European colonizer.” Scratch just beneath the surface, and its erroneousness reveals itself.

The Israel of today, for starters, is more than 60% *Sephardi* and *Mizrachi*, meaning a majority of Israelis trace their ancestry to Jews who came as refugees forcibly expelled from Arab-majority lands: speaking Arabic, practicing Arab-world customs, indistinguishable by skin color from Palestinian Arabs. Israelis react with disbelief when they hear themselves

characterized as “White European Settler-Colonialists”—just think of how that must land with Israel’s nearly 170,000 Jews whose families come from Ethiopia.

But such is the power of mental maps: we see the world not as it is, but as we are.

We should also hold accountable the Western press for foisting upon the world a distorted mental map which insists on presenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the most important story in the world.

More than ten years ago, journalist and author Matti Friedman pointed out that his former employer, the Associated Press, had more correspondents covering Israel and the Palestinian territories than were stationed in China, Russia, India, or all 50 countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined.^[1]

Our mental maps continue to imitate what medieval Christian maps depicted: the world as a circular landmass with Jerusalem smack dab in the middle, the Holy City as the navel of the earth.

As a result, millions across the world are up in arms about Israel’s wars in Gaza and Lebanon without a scintilla of outrage over the half a million human beings who perished in the Tigray War which consumed Ethiopia just two years ago; or the more than a half a million dead in the Syrian Civil War of the last decade; or the more than 150,000 killed in war in Yemen, also lying in freshly dug graves, coupled with another almost quarter-million dead of famine; or, for that matter, the dead of the Russian-Ukrainian War, now into seven figures after thirty months of fighting.... To say nothing of countries like the Central African Republic, from which WRT resettled two refugee sisters five years ago. (And as a happy sidebar, we just learned that they passed their American citizenship test yesterday.) A war has raged there since 2012, with zero media coverage.

Our mental maps have failed us, damaging our ability to separate facts from feelings, information from propaganda, reality from imagination.

And perhaps we have failed, too. For it is not enough—especially on *Kol Nidre*, this night of introspection and self-examination, of judgment and self-judgment—to look *outside* ourselves, to blame the world for all our woes.

And yes, there’s plenty of blame to go around. But we also need to ask: what kind of maps do *we*, the Jewish community, carry around in our minds? How do *we* see the world, and how could seeing things differently

create different outcomes for us? How could a different *Jewish* mental map illuminate a different way forward?

What I have discovered, overwhelmingly, over the past year, is that when we Jews look at October 7th, we see the *Shoah*.

This is understandable, of course. October 7th was in fact the worst attack on Jewish lives since the Holocaust. It evoked the horror of the Nazi *einsatzgruppen*, roving killing squads sent out across Europe to round up and murder Jews, years before the Final Solution, with its trains and gas chambers and crematoria. Further, Hamas shares a Nazi-like ideology that calls for the total obliteration of Jews and Israel.

Our trauma summons old ghosts. We have been wounded, scarred, burned, tortured, and taken captive. On Yom Kippur only a year ago we thought that the litany of doom presented in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer was a relic of antiquity: "*who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast, who by strangling and who by stoning, who in fullness of days and who before their time.*" This year we learned viscerally that "who shall live and who shall die" refers to *us*. One could argue that at no time in the last eight decades have we been more vulnerable—not in Munich in '72, or Yom Kippur in '73, or Lebanon in '82, or Pittsburgh in 2018.

And yet, even with all this, even now, one key factor differentiates the Jews of 1945 from the Jews of 2024, and that is **power**. Even after October 7th—*especially* after October 7th—we must remember that we have political, economic, and military power previously unimagined in Jewish history.

Much of this is attributable to the oath that the Jewish People swore after the *Shoah*. "Never Again" meant not only that we would not allow the Jews to be genocided out of existence; it also meant that we would never again submit to the condition of powerlessness. **Powerlessness may be our history, but it would not be our destiny.**

And if October 7th was a devastating blow to our sense of invincibility, then every day after has served to remind us that we Jews will not tolerate a condition of perpetual victimhood.

And rightly so. What I propose this evening is that we, the Jewish community, now have an opportunity to draw for ourselves and our children a better mental map. One that does not erase the fact of antisemitism, pervasive and pernicious as it obviously is, one that cannot make us invulnerable, but also one that does not forever relegate us within the boundaries of victimhood.

We need a new Jewish mental map: one that *embraces* Jewish power, that is not ashamed of it, that uses it ethically and wisely, that leverages it for good.

This may seem counterintuitive, especially for anyone who reflexively associates powerlessness with virtue, power with vice.

We would also acknowledge that, especially ever since our people lost political sovereignty with Rome's brutal conquests of Judea two thousand years ago, we Jews have had an ambivalent relationship with power. We are not used to it, and neither is the world.

Consider that while sixty-four countries have religious symbols on their flags—almost all of them crosses and crescents—only one flag comes emblazoned with a six-pointed star. And that only this one country—a seventy-six-year old newcomer born after 2,000 years of statelessness—has its right to exist unrelentingly challenged.

Consider also our unqualified success here in America, a country that has offered us security, unprecedented freedom from state intervention in our religious affairs, and prosperity on a scale unseen in the history of Jewish civilization.

I have, in fact, met many American Jews who, for all of these reasons—to say nothing of the burdensome responsibilities and agonizing choices that come with wielding state power—cannot wrap their heads around why Jews would want or need it at all.

Still, half the world's Jews do not live *here*; they live *there*. And Israelis' mental maps are so very different from our own: shaped by different narratives, different histories, different priorities and different perils. They and we belong to the same family, the same *mishpacha*. What affects Israel is not a matter of "foreign policy" for us American Jews. We are all in this together.

The new mental map that we could begin to draw at this moment, one that embraces Jewish power, might start with the recognition that the trauma of our present chapter in Jewish history is twofold:

There is the acute trauma of October 7th; but there is also the trauma of every day since. A *midrash*, a Rabbinic legend, considers the Biblical patriarch Jacob on the night he made camp all alone on the banks of the river, anxiously awaiting the dawn, when he would confront his long-

estranged brother Esau.^[2] The twins had last seen each other as adolescents, Jacob absconding to a foreign land with Esau's birthright and blessing, Esau left behind to stew in a murderous rage.

At this moment, the Torah reports that Jacob felt both fear (יראה, *yir'ah* in Hebrew) and distress (the Hebrew word צרה, *tzarah*). "Are these not the same?" asked the Rabbis. The meaning, says Rabbi Judah bar Ilai, is that Jacob was experiencing two different kinds of fear: Jacob *feared* that Esau *would slay him*; and he *felt distress* that *he would be forced to slay* his brother.^[3]

This is the dilemma with which every Israeli lives, a dilemma that arises only when we have power: not only do we have to fear those who would slay us, but we must also now fear having to slay another.

Speaking to a group of rabbis this summer in Jerusalem at a seminar sponsored by the Shalom Hartman Institute, the always brilliant author Yossi Klein Halevi distilled the dilemma down to its essence:

"Power means that you have forfeited your innocence," he said. "On October 7th we were victims, but *not* on October 8th. Starting October 8th... all parts of Israeli society made a collective decision to go to war, not to allow the disastrous perception of Jewish victimhood to stand. To *use* our power. ...One of the responsibilities of power is that you have to give up the identity of victim. You can't have it both ways."^[4]

This comports with what Halevi's frequent dialogue partner Rabbi Donniel Hartman wrote more than fifteen years ago, during another Israeli incursion into Gaza:

The competition between Israelis and Palestinians over who is the bigger victim "is a competition which Israel cannot, nor I hope, ever win. I welcome Israel's power, and pray that we will always lose in the competition over relative victim-hood when it comes to wars that are forced upon us."^[5]

We need a mental map that rejects Jewish victimhood, and embraces Jewish power: both its benefits and its burdens.

In today's terms, this means that, no matter how cruel and crafty the enemy, no matter how malignant the designs of Hamas or Hezbollah or the Islamic Republic of Iran that sponsors them—Israel, the Jewish State—the *Jews' state, our state*—still must take responsibility for conduct in war and, yes, for damage and deaths incurred in war, combatant and noncombatant alike.

In other words, Jewish power must coexist with Jewish morality. This notion is as old as Judaism itself. Ruth Wisse, in her landmark book *Jews and Power*, observed that the Biblical Prophets “linked a nation’s potency to its moral strength.”^[6] The Torah commands even the King of Israel to keep a copy of the sacred scroll of Law by the royal throne, and to read from it every day.

At all times, even in war—I would argue, *especially* in war—Jewish power must be regulated by Jewish moral concerns which insist on the pursuit of justice and the practice of compassion. This is not to say that we should not fight wars, only that we should fight just wars in just ways and accept responsibility at all times for the excruciating price that war exacts. This includes maximizing humanitarian aid for all caught in the crossfire, and committing to leveraging Jewish power toward just and permanent *political* solutions to our violent conflicts, which will inevitably require difficult compromises and sacrifices. Welcome to having power.

Let us also not forget that Jewish power extends beyond the IDF and the Mossad, nuclear deterrence and American military assistance. We Jews may be small but in number (and often in physical stature 😊), but we are mighty. Jewish power includes our collective ability to organize, to lobby our elected officials, to change the outcome of elections, to rally and command the attention of Washington and Jerusalem, to demand accountability from our college presidents and administrations. We Jews can maximize opportunity and liberty, prosperity and education, minimize suffering and tyranny, poverty and ignorance.

Yom Kippur comes to tell us *not* that we are powerless, that “who shall live and who shall die” is entirely out of our hands, but rather that we **have** power, power we must use wisely and well: power to change our fate, power to change our moral trajectory, power to change our lives, power to change the world. We have powerful tools to change outcomes in the new year: *Teshuvah*, *tefilah*, *tzedakah*, repentance, prayer, and charity. And also: our voices, our votes, our values.

CODA

I wonder: if God had a mental map of the universe, what would it look like?

What would loom large in how God imagines the world unfolding, and what would vanish into the background?

I like to think that God's mental map consists of but two words—the keystone of tomorrow morning's Torah reading, maybe of the entire Torah.

וּבַחֲרַת בַּחַיִּים - ***U'vacharta ba-chayim***: "Choose Life."^[7]

As the Torah reaches its conclusion, this is what it wants us to know about God's vision for the Jewish people, the human family, and, indeed, the world: **Choose life**. Seize the considerable power you do have, as a Jew, as a living being, as a vital, conscious, morally capable and morally culpable creature—and choose life.

At every moment we can choose from infinite paths. Some lead to suffering, others to fulfillment. *U'vacharta ba-chayim*. Choose life.

This is a choice available only to those with power. The martyrs who accepted death at the hands of the Romans, the Crusaders, the Inquisition, the Cossacks and the Nazis—they had no power, no agency to choose.

But we who carry the memory of slavery and exile, we who wear the scars of destruction and dispersion, persecution and pogroms, now find ourselves with the greatest power of all: to choose life, and thus choose to become God's instruments of redemption in a fragile and hurting world.

You can attribute this extraordinary reversal of fortune to fate or the random vicissitudes of time; to Jewish *chutzpah* or the hand of the Divine; but you cannot just shrug it off. We are yet living in the greatest epoch in the history of the Jewish people, and for that we must give thanks. Let this era in Jewish history be remembered not for our victimhood, but our heroism. Let it be remembered that in one of the most harrowing chapters in our story, we chose life, for ourselves and others.

Baruch ata, Adonai, she-kocho u'g'vurato malei olam^[8]:

Blessed are you, Eternal Source of Life, whose power and potential fill the world.

Amen.

[1] Matti Friedman, "An Insider's Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth," *Tablet*, August 26, 2014.

[2] See Genesis 28:15 and surrounding verses for context.

[3] *Bereshit Rabbah* 76:2.

[4] “For Heaven’s Sake” (Podcast), July 10, 2024.

[5] Donniel Hartman, “Fighting a Just War Against Hamas Justly,” January 13, 2009, cited online at <https://www.hartman.org.il/fighting-a-just-war-against-hamas-justly/>.

[6] Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power*. New York: Schocken Books, 2020. p. 13.

[7] Deuteronomy 30:19.

[8] This blessing is traditionally recited upon hearing thunder.

Rabbi Jonathan Blake is Senior Rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple (in Scarsdale, New York), a position he has served since 2003 (Associate, 2003-2011; Senior, 2011-Present). Rabbi Blake shares his love of God, Torah, and Israel through education, preaching, writing, public advocacy, and sacred relationship with the congregational community. Rabbi Blake is a prominent commentator on Judaism and spiritual life. He has appeared in The New York Times, GQ Magazine, the documentary films *51 Birch Street* and *112 Weddings* and has authored numerous essays and articles for print and online publications. He regularly shares reflections on his blog, rabbiblake.org, and as a host of the podcasts *Everything is Connected* and *The Clergy Pod*. He currently serves on the Boards of UJA-NY and Zioness, as the Co-Chair of the Annual Giving Campaign of the CCAR, and on the President’s Rabbinic Council of HUC-JIR. He is also a chaplain of the Police and Fire Departments of the Village of Scarsdale. A summa cum laude graduate of Amherst College (1995) and ordained from HUC-JIR (Cincinnati, 2000), Jonathan’s journey to the rabbinate began in a loving and vibrant Reform Jewish home in Allentown, PA.