

Rosh Hashanah 5785

“The State of the (Jewish) Union”

My fellow Congregation Beth Israel community: the state of the Jewish people across the world is precarious. We are on the precipice of something extraordinary. Potentially something great. Or possibly grave. We don't know exactly which direction we're currently heading, and that sense of the unknown is deeply unsettling.

Even within this room, your answers would differ widely when asked the question, what is the state of the Jewish union? Or rather, the state of the Jewish people? No matter what the response, we all know that the Jewish people have been forever changed since last October.

When I awoke on October 7, 2023, to the devastating news from Israel, I, like everyone else, couldn't quite comprehend the magnitude of that day. As I made my way down to the kitchen where my husband sat with our daughters, he immediately told me something happened, something really, really bad. But I knew. I had already stared at my phone, scrolling and trying to understand the news in my early morning, just woke up and hadn't had any caffeine haze.

As we sat at the table, our children were running around with the energy only young kids would have at that time of day, and we tried to put the pieces together. I couldn't sit there and think about this, though. After all, October 7 was Shabbat morning *and* Simchat Torah, a day of celebration and joy.

I needed to get ready for services. I needed to check in with my clergy colleagues and see how they were doing. I needed to think about how to address this horrific situation with only fragments of news coming through. And then a thought occurred to me: what is going on in the world?

As the weeks and months unfolded after that fateful day, I noticed the fragility of the Jewish community. We were heartbroken, walking through the world as though it was thick with fog nearly as dense as the darkness that enveloped Egypt long ago. We struggled to comprehend why these terrible events happened, and why people couldn't, or wouldn't, empathize with us. Why were we so alone?

Now, we come together more than a year later, still heartbroken, still experiencing that immense darkness, and oftentimes, still feeling alone. As a people, we come together for the good times and the bad, the moments of pure joy, and when life hands us our greatest challenges. We grieve together, we laugh together, we cry, weep, and pray, we share our lives through events and celebrations, despair and bitterness, all mingled in one. But at a time when we sometimes struggle to even have a civil conversation around the state of the world, how can we come together as a people? How can we be a unified people when we disagree, occasionally entirely disagree, about the best path forward?

The Jewish community has been in this place before. Too many times before. But we are also feeling the intense division within our own community, a division that the terrorists who committed the atrocities on October 7 wanted to instill within us. Yes, their actions were reprehensible. Yes, they killed and injured and traumatized and brutalized with glee. But more than anything, they have made the world believe that we were to

blame, that we had this coming. They have driven a wedge between us, preventing our community from fully embracing one another, from seeing each other's pain, from hearing our strife. The chasm grows wider by the day, threatening to pull us apart completely.

No one, not one single person in the entire world, not an individual or a group of people, deserves to experience any kind of abuse or violence, whether it be physical or emotional. No one. And that includes Jews!

We have seen and witnessed the tremendous uptick in anti-Semitic incidents throughout the country, most especially since last October. We've read about the harassment and violence against Jews around the world. Our children tell us stories from school about comments and hateful words hurled their way. We know about the tense and demanding situations on college campuses. We've expressed our fears around wearing jewelry or clothing that outwardly showcases our Judaism, worried how others will react.

None of this is new. For decades and centuries, our people have been the target of oppression and revulsion. And yet, as Michael Steinhardt wrote in his recently published book, *Jewish Pride*, "After all, it is, on balance, good to be an American Jew in the twenty-first century. We do not face anything like the persecution, discrimination, or other hardships the generations before us suffered" (pg. 1).¹

Steinhardt wrote that line sometime before his book was published in 2022. Before October 7. Before the world changed forever and seemed to turn its back on the Jewish people yet again.

¹ Steinhardt, Michael. [Jewish Pride](#). A Wicked Son Book, 2022.

But Michael Steinhardt authored this book because he saw a change in the Jewish community well in advance of the terror from one year ago. His book hinges on the major problem plaguing our people. He explains:

Our community has been, for decades, stuck in a kind of malaise. On the whole, we are not fired up. We are not in love. We are not, as a community, showing courage or creativity or heroism. If anything, the opposite is true. Every year, more and more young Jews seem to just drift away. However you want to measure it- our sense of Jewish purpose seems to be dissipating (pg. 1).²

When I read this blunt, yet powerful statement, I almost gasped. His words sting, but the truth lingers in the air. Have we forgotten who we are as a Jewish people? Have we forgotten that we ARE a people? We are tied together through the generations, bound by our shared traumas and joys, our stories and traditions, our food, faith, and love. We are bound to one another even when the path becomes treacherous, especially when we are broken and shattered.

This does indeed date back many generations. Tomorrow morning and for those who observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, synagogues around the world will read from one of the books of our prophets as part of the Haftarah portion. In Jeremiah chapter 31, we read:

Koh amar Adonai matzah chein bamidbar am s'ridei charev haloch lhargiyo Yisrael. Thus said the Eternal: A people- survivors of the sword- gained grace in the wilderness (Jeremiah 31:2).

² Steinhardt, Michael. Jewish Pride. A Wicked Son Book, 2022.

We were once called survivors of the sword, a people exiled and dispersed around the world, far from the land we once called home. According to the commentary found in Mishkan HaNefesh, our *machzor* or prayer book for the High Holy Days, our sages selected this text because it speaks so deeply about our need for comfort during such grim times. It speaks to the pain we've endured time and time again, dating back many thousands of years ago. The commentary explains, "Addressing a people fearing for their future, Jeremiah begins by assuring them of God's enduring concern for them. '*Ahavat olam ahavtich*, with an everlasting love I have loved you'" (p. 254).³

But I know how distant God's love has felt during this past year. When we experience the heartache and pain of so much violence and death, when we feel isolated and divided, God's embrace feels further and further away. And yet, we yearn for it. We long for that comfort, the sense of security, the knowledge that we will be ok.

So, we have dug deep within ourselves to find a way to move forward. Because all we can do is take the next step, shaky though it may be, unsure and filled with trepidation. We keep walking and carving out a new path, one filled with a quiet determination and resiliency, same as it has always been for our people. And we lean on one another for strength, for support. We've done so because we *must*. We *must* keep moving forward. Our people are fractured, but we are not broken. We may be on unsteady ground with an unknown path ahead, but in finding strength with one another, we forge a new future, one built with a spirit and sense of *shleiumut*, wholeness, and *shalom*, peace.

³ Mishkan HaNefesh, Rosh Hashanah prayer book

How can we embrace the chaos of the world and keep moving forward to a place of peace and wholeness? What will steady this imbalance in the world? Rabbi Hara Person, Chief Executive of the CCAR, shared this beautiful message from our teacher, Dr. Michael Marmur:

He points out that *tikvah*, hope, is related to the word *kav*, meaning line or cord. Lines of course can divide us—think of redlining or lines in the sand. Lines disrupt our ability to speak to each other. Lines on maps are meant to keep us safe but have also caused countless strife throughout human history, creating borders that keep us from one another, dividers that block our ability to interact and engage.

It is *kav* therefore, that line or cord or thread, that ties us together, pulls us toward hope, and can unite us. When we allow threads to bind us to each other, to those like us and to those not like us, to those in our communities and those who we might see as “other,” we can understand that our fate and future is bound up in the fates and futures of others, and we can find *tikvah*, hope. The place where we are sewn together is a seam that pulls us together into relationship with each other. It is a place of generativity and creation, and that is the place where hope can grow.

We have made our way through these challenges because of our perseverance and ability to maintain our hope. And to be clear, it’s not necessarily about maintaining optimism, but *specifically* hope. Hope and optimism are not the same thing. Because the truth is, how can we be optimistic when the world seems to crumble around us? We have learned that lesson several times over.

To further explain it, I turned to the brilliant words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l:

Hope and tragedy do not differ about facts but about interpretation and expectation. But they make a moral difference. Those who hope, strive. Those who are disillusioned, accept. In that respect, they are self-fulfilling prophecies. A morality of hope lives in the belief that we can change the world for the better, and without certain theological beliefs it is hard to see where hope could come from, if not from optimism. Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope.⁴

Our people were written into the history books as many things, but hopeful supersedes them all. We raised ourselves up as exemplars of justice and righteousness. We pride ourselves on being in community with one another, through the good and the bad. As has become the constant refrain of those who survived the horrific attacks in Israel, “We will dance again.”

So, here we stand, prepared to enter a new year, a new year filled with possibility. Last year, we welcomed 5784 with an almost naiveté, unconcerned about our place within the broader world. This year, we enter with trepidation, with a growing sense of caution and fear, unsure what will become of the Jewish people.

⁴ Sacks, Jonathan, 1948-2020. To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility. Schocken Books, 2005.

But we do so with hope, the same hope that has sustained our people time and again. The hope that is still alive within each of us, if only we reach out to one another to find it. To do so, we need to see one another, to speak and listen in return. We need to build bridges within our community, rather than burn them down with anger and frustration. Instead of drawing lines in the sand, we draw on the line that connects us, the seam that brings us together.

You may be thinking, 'Yes, that sounds great, but how?' It starts with an open mind and an open heart. It starts with listening to those within our own community. And it continues by knowing that we are not always going to agree on the best path forward but knowing that peace must be the ultimate goal. It continues by keeping those lines of communication open and flowing. When we retreat into ourselves and away from those with a different opinion, we cease growing and learning. We cannot move forward if we cannot at least attempt to start the conversation.

We have some healing to do, both as individuals and as a community. With time, with respect, with that ever-present hope, we can and will move forward as a people. We will reignite the passion that burns deep within each of us, driving us toward building a stronger and more peaceful world.

As we enter 5785, may we do so with a newfound sense of hope, of love for our fellow human being, of the desire to seek peace and bring it to fruition. May we do so with an openness and ability to change the world for the better. May we find another way for our unbreakable community to come back together as one, one Jewish people. Amen.