

### **If I am not for me, who will be for me?**

Shanah tovah friends. Oy! What a year. I am not going to sugarcoat it. 5784 was a horrible year for the Jewish people and it will go down in the history books as such, joining the likes of 586 BCE, 70, 1492, 1933, and now 2023. This was the worst year we have experienced as a Jewish community in decades. Sadly, however, a new year does not magically bring improvement or change. But we are desperate for it.

Our lives have forever been affected by October 7. Like many of you, I have not gone a single day since then without thinking about the hostages and the tragedy that the day birthed. As I write this there are still around 60 hostages whose fate is unknown. We pray for their safe return to their loved ones. My remarks on Kol Nidre will focus on these individuals.

Rosh Hashanah feels different this year. Even though we are nearly a year removed from October 7, 2023, the pain we felt then is ever-present. The global Jewish community is still in mourning. The grief has not subsided. The wounds are still fresh. How can I possibly talk about anything other than what is on most of our minds? This evening I want to talk about October 7 and the days immediately following it and tomorrow I will address how this has affected college campuses.

I remember waking up on that Shabbat morning to the horrific news and feeling utterly bereft. I now better understand the term, "Doomscrolling." Not everyone at Torah study that morning had heard the news. We chose not to discuss the *parasha*. It seemed trivial. I allowed the group to just process what we had all been reading about. Some of us were at a total loss for words. We were in a state of shock. Afterwards, Andrea and I led a shabbat service and I have no idea how we got through it. I wanted to be present for the community, but I also wanted to be home with my family. Was this barbaric attack going to spread? Was this just the beginning of an all out jihad against Jews and the west? I know this is how some of us felt immediately after 9/11. I sure did working in a high rise building early that morning in downtown Los Angeles.

I wrote a letter to the congregation in the afternoon of October 7. The following is from that letter:

*There is no justification for this planned and coordinated terrorist attack, occurring exactly 50 years after the Yom Kippur War. There are not multiple sides to this story. This is a war between good and evil. Full stop. While we pray for a quick resolution to this deadly conflict, and most importantly, a safe return of all Israeli hostages, we are keenly aware that reality may not align with our hopes.*

What followed surprised me, but looking back, I realize I was naïve and should have been prepared. At the time I was shocked to receive multiple responses questioning my summation of the situation as “good versus evil.” Not a day had passed and already I saw the writing on the wall. And then came October 8 and news outlets began airing pundits justifying Hamas’ actions. Almost immediately following Israel’s necessary military response, and mind you, while the IDF was still clearing out terrorists from Kibbutzim, journalists decried the disproportionate numbers of casualties on the Palestinian side. Devastating as those number are, urban warfare experts acknowledge the near impossibility of defeating Hamas without causing many civilian casualties. It’s a horrible price to pay.

With fresh tears falling down our cheeks after watching the horrific videos that the sadistic Islamist murderers posted to social media from the Nova music festival and from several kibbutzim in the south, folks everywhere were celebrating this uprising against “colonialism,” “imperialism,” “occupation,” “oppression,” “racism.” To some it was “exhilarating.”

It felt as though the world had gone mad.  
It felt as though we were all alone.

In the days, weeks, and months that passed, we waited for our allies to show up, to march for Israel, and to condemn the psychotic jihadist culture that had shown the world its playbook:

Murder Jews.  
Wipe Israel off the map.  
Spread jihadism from “the river to the sea.”  
Brainwash impressionable minds to fight for their cause.

Instead, what we witnessed was a barrage of attacks against Israel and the intimidation of American and Western Jews.

We saw with our own eyes people tearing down pictures of the Israeli hostages, many of whom are children, infants, the elderly.

We experienced some of the most hateful and racist attacks in many of our lifetimes. In case you haven't seen the latest 2023 Hate Crimes report from the FBI, it should come as no surprise that anti-Jewish incidents were at the very top of the list.

We watched footage of Jews being barred from college campuses, restaurants, coffee-houses, and bookstores.

We heard of bomb threats against Jewish community centers, Jewish owned businesses and synagogues (including CBI).

We heard people outright deny that Hamas used sexual violence as a tactic on October 7. We are still hearing this denial and we hear the silence from so many who claim to be advocates for women's rights. This is Jew hatred, pure and simple.

We noticed our friends and family members hiding their *magen david* necklaces and other outward signs of their Jewishness.

We heard our friends call for the United States to stop supplying Israel with funds to buy arms. Can you imagine for a moment what Israel would look like without the Iron Dome, David's Sling, or Arrow defense systems which are designed to intercept drones, tactical ballistic missiles, short to long-range rockets, and cruise missiles? Hundreds of thousands of Israelis, from all religious and ethnic backgrounds would be dead without these lines of defense.

And we keep hearing from our friends and allies about "both sides" as if we should give any credibility to the death cults that surround Israel's borders. Not the civilians, but the leadership. Israel is all alone in the most hostile neighborhood on the planet. It needs help, not constant condemnation.

The attacks on Israel and the Jewish people have been relentless.

I met with one young Jewish man not long after October 7. He had been active in anti-Israel events around town. I asked him why he participated in rallies against Israel when the real problem is Hamas and jihadism. I asked him, "Why not organize a march to free Palestine from Hamas. Innocent Gazans are suffering under Hamas' rule. I would gladly join in and we'd be able to march in solidarity with Jews, Muslims, Christians, the left and the right." I was told that I was missing the point. Zionism was the root of all evil. The oppressed and victimized were finally fighting back against decades of occupation. This perspective is pervasive. Israel isn't blameless, but there is absolutely no moral equivalence.

Soon came all the encampments on college campuses. Even here at Western Washington University, just a couple miles away, there was an anti-Israel encampment on the lawn in front of Old Main. I walked through it twice. One of the times I was walking through campus on my way to meet with members of the college's administration team, I passed several people wearing black and white checkered *keffiyehs* completely wrapped around their heads. If their goal was to intimidate Jews on campus, they achieved it that day. My guess is that these social justice warriors missed the lecture on cultural appropriation.

Time and time again when I would try to explain to people in our Bellingham community about the pain and trauma that their Jewish friends and neighbors were suffering through, it felt as though my words fell on deaf ears.

Sharing all this is dispiriting for me and I imagine it feels that way for you right now. So the question is, what do we do in this moment? This moment of pain, sadness, loneliness, and exhaustion.

One rabbi, in particular, has helped me understand with more clarity the path we need to take.

Hillel the Elder is considered one of the most influential Jewish leaders in our people's history. He lived during the first century CE in Babylonia, served as head of the Sanhedrin, and was the founder of the House of

Hillel, a school of Jewish law famous for its disputes with the rival House of Shammai. His teachings are scattered throughout the Mishnah and Talmud and we've all tried his famous Passover sandwich.

His teaching that has impacted me the most since October 7 comes from Pirke Avot 1:14. It reads:

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי

*He [Rabbi Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?*

In his book, *Hillel: If Not Now, When?* Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes, “Hillel poses two questions, each intended to articulate a paradox. The first challenges an attitude of absolute altruism pursued at the expense of one’s own interests. As Hillel suggests, if a person is not concerned with his own needs and well-being, why should he expect others to be?...Such a level of self-sacrifice seems pointless. After all, the biblical verse that explicitly mandates, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ implicitly commands us to love ourselves as well.”<sup>1</sup>

For years, the progressive American Jewish community has put others before itself. We have chosen universalism over particularism. Many of our Jewish values support this pursuit. We have marched and stood up for all sorts of causes that affect people both in and out of our own community. Social action and the prophetic teachings are central to who we are. I am proud of what we have advocated for and what we will continue to do in the name of *tikkun olam*.

But we are at an inflection point and must decide if now is the time to pivot with respect to our priorities. If we do not defend ourselves and Israel, I am afraid that no one will. It has become clear to me that the world does not care for the plight of the Jewish people. It does not support Israel’s right to defend itself and it certainly does not support Israel’s right to win. We are a family and loving our own family first and taking care of it is not prejudiced. It is a necessity. Recalibrating in the short term by focusing on our own

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<sup>1</sup> Telushkin, Joseph. *Hillel: If Not Now, When?* Nextbook: Schocken, 2010. p. 165

does not mean that we are forever turning our backs on others. This shift is for self-preservation. If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? The answer is crystal clear.

Telushkin goes on to say, “On the other hand, ‘If I am only for myself, what am I?’ This sentence should logically read, ‘who am I?’ But, as Professor Louis Kaplan taught, ‘If you are only for yourself, you cease to be a real human being, and you become no longer a who, but a what.’”<sup>2</sup>

Hillel’s second question, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” is an important question. However, I don’t think that shifting our balance of this equation, in the short term, means that we are negating other people’s needs. We haven’t in the past, nor in the future will we only be for ourselves. What we need to do at this time is seek out partners who will stand with us and keep us going when we’re running on empty. Let’s not give up on our long time allies. We should, however, tell our friends why it pains us that we haven’t felt their support. These conversations are hard but crucial.

These first two lines of Hillel’s maxim cogently expresses two sides. We either care for oneself or for others or find a comfortable balance somewhere in-between the poles. The choice we make is left up to us as Hillel doesn’t say how to choose, just to choose. Each person must calculate this balance and decide when the time calls for one or the other. And this is the most crucial aspect, time. The final line, “If not now, when?” teaches us that we should not delay in making this decision. This is an urgent matter and the worst thing we can do is to delay making a choice.

What I hear Hillel telling me in this moment is beautifully summarized by Telushkin when he writes, “you should not veer off to an extreme, treating yourself as a nonentity and only others as important. You have the right to fight for and to push yourself forward. Be for yourself, just don’t be only for yourself.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 166

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 167

For too long we have not been for ourselves. We have taken Israel for granted, forgetting the cost it took to realize and sustain a 2000 year old dream come to fruition. Not since 1948 has Israel felt so isolated and so vulnerable. And it's been decades since Jews in America have faced so much anti-Semitism. The Jewish world needs to speak on its behalf now. Whether or not we support whichever Israeli government is in power is irrelevant. We must unapologetically defend Israel and our people. If we can't come to the world's lone Jewish country's defense, who will? The task is great and there can be no hesitation. Sitting it out is not an option.

This year, let us all make an effort to double down on our commitment to Jewish peoplehood, Jewish culture, Jewish community, religion, and to the Jewish homeland. Education is one of our core values. Read books or listen to podcasts by Jews focused on Jewish topics. Learn Hebrew or Yiddish. Read Israeli poetry and novels. Listen to Israeli news. Study sacred texts with friends. Expand your mind. Come to shul. Wear your *hamsas* and *magen davids* with pride. Affix a *mezuzah* on your doorposts if you don't have one up yet. (Call me, I'm happy to help with this.) Place your *chunukiyah* on your windowsill. Invite your non-Jewish friends to a Shabbat meal or a festive celebration at the synagogue. Buy Israeli products. Reach out to Israelis in the community. This year, let's recalibrate the equation and focus within. This is how we'll be able to come out of this trauma stronger and more resilient. This is communal self-care.

We will get through this dark period. But, as I've said plenty of times from this bima, it will continue to get worse before it gets better. Luckily we are a battle-tested bunch and we know how to survive. In the Spring 2024 issue of *Sapir*, Noa Tishby writes about a Jewish response to trauma that is passed down through the generations. She calls it "post-traumatic growth (PTG)." PTG, she writes, "is the phenomenon through which people experience positive psychological changes following a life crisis or traumatic event."<sup>4</sup> We will grow from this moment.

Our God and God of our ancestors, give us the strength to persevere. Help us harness the wisdom and resilience of those who came before us. Continue to help us be the moral people we strive to be. When we falter, open our eyes and show us how to improve. Give us glimmers of hope to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sapirjournal.org/resilience/2024/06/the-courage-to-be-uncool/>

hold onto. Release the hostages and bring them home to the loving embrace of their families. Return the displaced to their homes. End the pain and suffering for all the innocent civilians caught in the middle of this war, including the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples. Bring them a life of dignity and a future where their dreams will be fulfilled. May this be a *shanah tovah yoteir*, a better year for Jews, Israelis, Palestinians, Lebanese and all lovers of peace. Amen.