

Bereisheet 5784

Rabbi David Englander

“One People, One Heart”

The distance between Israel and the United States might be measured in the thousands of miles but our hearts have never been closer. As I have sought to align the resources of Beth El toward supporting others since last Saturday morning, I have felt supported in ways large and small since we woke up to the most horrific news just a week ago. And I hope all who are concerned, worried, and maybe even scared are also finding sipuk nefesh, spiritual connection and inner strength, during these uncommonly difficult days. Even more important is that by every account Israelis are also hearing about the gatherings, drives, collections, advocacy, and just the staying in touch that has made everyone feel just a little less isolated.

I have to say that I am also uplifted at a dark moment by Nomi's celebration; you will be able to say that you stood proud and strong at a moment that will likely be remembered for all of Jewish history, and everyone here and many who are not here are proud of you for doing that. You should celebrate your achievement and be celebrated for reaching this milestone, just as you, your wonderful family, and our community will also have Israel in mind at every moment, always looking for ways to be of meaningful support. And Beth El will continue to update you on ways to do just that, as we have throughout this week.

These are extraordinary times. They would be debilitating except that we cannot afford to be debilitated, any less than Israel can afford to pack up and go home because there is no other home. There will be many questions asked and answers provided, and mourning will eventually give way to joy but that is all for the future. Now is for acknowledging that great evil has been perpetrated, war has been brought to Israel, and justice - not revenge, not vindication - is and will be done by those empowered to defend the state of Israel. We will pray for and support their efforts, even as we wish we had woken up Saturday morning only to

prepare for the two day holiday that was to include the festivities of Simchat Torah.

That holiday is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah - believe me, I've checked. It was only invented fairly recently, in the middle ages, maybe as early as the 11th century or as late as the 16th; in Jewish history both count as 'fairly recently.' The central observance of that holiday is so ingenious that I wish I had thought of it, and seems so obvious but had not been for at least a thousand years of reading Torah in public, which started in the days of Ezra and Nechemiah, roughly 440 BCE, or in Jewish terms, the day before yesterday.

And now the almost universal custom of this holiday, its central ritual, is to finish the Torah, and then begin it again, just a few minutes later, in the time it takes to bring a second Torah to the table and lift and tie the first one. I always viewed this as an indication that our learning of Torah never stops, we don't want to remain in that space of finishing but not starting again for a moment longer than we have to, and although it was not always obvious that this is a special way to demonstrate this value, communities world wide do that now. And while we muted our celebratory dancing, and our joy was certainly subdued, we did so as well.

This year, that ritual of finishing and starting meant something different to me. The thought was along the lines of we just completed, with no chance to edit or change even a moment, the story of the year that has ended, and now we are at the beginning of the year that has still just begun. And the thought was why does it seem like, every so often or very often, the way those columns of text will be read will be to seek meaning and connection, solace and comfort as our people face struggle or loss? And immediately the Torah gives us some insight. All that God created was Tov M'Od, was very good, and just a few sentences later Cain kills his brother Abel, the first murder, committed out of, as far as the Torah implies, a kind of enraged jealousy that led to the first but hardly the last time people would turn on each other in a way that has become all too familiar through Jewish history.

Since then we have been on a continuum between those two poles - v'hinei tov m'od, and it was very good on the one hand, and "Cain where is your brother Abel" - a question Cain could not answer - on the other. We have experienced, in our own lives and as part of a people that has suffered and celebrated, been brought to the brink of defeat - destruction, diasporas, persecution, the Shoah - and utilized exceptional built in seemingly unbreakable resilience to start pushing the rock of despair back up the mountain of hope. Seeking to move the needle toward God's view of creation, and further away from any connection to or experience of Cain's lashing out with disastrous consequences. In brief, embracing the good, dealing with the bad, and being thankful for the chance to try to make a positive difference even in times of instability and uncertainty.

We rely on Jewish muscle memory to do that; we all have it, it is not limited to those born Jewish or those who have chosen Judaism, it is a gift we have shared with the world. Keep learning. Be helpful. Life triumphs over death. Peace is the ultimate goal, not endless conflict. Justice is to be pursued, and can be without losing our humanity. Israel is central to our identities. We don't need a crisis to understand that, but when Israel is suffering, mourning, defending, and mobilizing they are doing so on behalf of the entire Jewish people and we stand with them. Many will shift or lose attention - we never have, not before, during, or in the aftermath of these challenging days. May that aftermath include the alignment of much of the world behind what Israel now knows it must achieve, though it will be hard, painful, and in too many circles and capitals, increasingly unpopular to do so.

May we soon veer closer to creation than destruction, may Israel see a just peace in our days, and may God bless all who are expending time, effort, funds, and especially those risking their lives with safety and great success. Beth El stands with Israel - Am Yisrael Chai.

Shabbat shalom.