

Shabbat Parashat Noach 5784

Rabbi David Englander

Jewish Unity, Jewish Courage

I'm no future-predicting Carnac but I can tell you with high confidence what the most oft-quoted verse from the Torah portion is this week in sermons being delivered around the world. Right at the beginning of our Parasha, the third verse reports about the state of the world before the flood: "The earth became corrupt before God: va'timalei ha-aretz chamas, the earth was filled with lawlessness." Yes, the Hebrew word for lawlessness of the order of magnitude that caused God to rethink this whole humanity thing is the same word as the one we have been focused on day and night since the attacks in Israel precipitating war just two weeks ago.

Of course the word in Hebrew is not the same as that of the terror group - in Arabic it is an acronym for what I don't know and about which I don't really care. What I do know is that there are two ways to talk about what is happening. One is to give vent to our sadness and our anger, both of which are well and legitimately sourced. We're angry over what we are sad about - the devastatingly horrible losses that would be mind-numbing to consider if they weren't so searing. Yizkor on Shmini Atzeret will never be the same; we will always remember those lost to their families, to Israel, to the future.

And we are legitimately, what's the word, torqued about coverage of this war that seems to forget how and by whom it was instigated, somehow holding 'both sides' to equal account for loss of life. Without stating, remembering, or even inferring that if Hamas did not attack Israel thousands of people would be alive today who are now dead. It's not hard. This inner rage and coming face to face with such incomprehensible levels of irresponsibility has been compounded by the reporting on the so-called hospital explosion this week. Even after multiple sources of evidence were produced as to its cause that would have been widely acceptable in almost any other circumstance, the origin of the explosion is still being labeled by

the New York Times and others as “cannot be independently verified.” Loss of life there, while tragic, was immediately declared and accepted as being many hundreds; evidence is showing it was a far smaller number, and beyond any doubt was caused by a misfired rocket from within Gaza, whose purpose, we should not fail to emphasize, was to hit - I don’t know - a hospital, school, apartment building, or other populated place to purposefully kill as many Israelis as possible. Giving voice to the rage of this upside down world’s reality where Israel is wrong and everyone else is right is indeed very tempting.

From the press to university administration to too many not taking a stand so as not to alienate “either side”, we have what to be angry about. That anger should lead to productive engagement, to generous giving, including to the recently announced Federation campaign of which Beth El is a full-throated supporter. We are honored that Beth El members Jeff and Laura Gottlieb and Rick and Lori Goldstein have stepped up to chair it. Beth El has always led on Israel, and there will be even more ways to demonstrate this generations-long commitment.

Within the darkness, there are sources of light. It’s important to talk about them. People showing courage and strength, communities coming together, rallies like this past week’s in Philadelphia organized not for spewing hate or threats or calls for revenge but to affirm unity and purpose. To pray for the fate of hostages, who the world seems to have also forgotten about, and to reaffirm that the ultimate goal of any conflict - that will be hard fought and hard won - the ultimate desired end result is peace.

I want to share an example of one exceedingly rare sighting of such unity that you should know about because it represents a couple of very important things. One is that it is possible for the broadest range of our Jewish community to stand together for Israel. And the second is the content of the message, which encourages one response to our collective trauma that does not exclude but goes beyond sadness and anger and grief. I hope you’ll listen closely to the joint statement of the heads of some 30 south Florida Jewish day schools, from Miami Dade to Hillsboro

counties and ranging in affiliation that includes every school from Orthodox Yeshivas to Community Schools. It reads:

Dear Community Members,

We, the professional School Leaders of our Florida Jewish Day Schools, are writing with heavy hearts as we stand united in support of Israel. We extend our deepest condolences to the victims of these heinous terrorist attacks in Israel that have shaken us all.

These deplorable acts have left us profoundly saddened, as innocent lives were brutally targeted, fraying humanity's moral fabric. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Israel, particularly those who have suffered loss and are enduring the traumatic aftermath of these senseless acts.

In times of adversity, it is crucial that we, as a Jewish community, come together to demonstrate our support. Therefore we call upon our families to stand strong and proud in the knowledge that although the current situation is difficult, we will prevail by not backing down. This takes many forms, amongst them continuing attendance at school, not removing outward symbols of our Judaism like a Kippah or Magen David, an increase in prayer, performance of mitzvot and the study of Torah. We encourage everyone to take on one additional Jewish related responsibility. Find just one Jewish thing, and add it to your daily routine!

Together, we stand united in our support of Israel and the victims of these attacks. Our thoughts and prayers are also now with our IDF soldiers during this difficult time. And it was signed by all of the leaders of these dozens of schools.

I was especially drawn to how not backing down takes many forms, some of which require maybe just a little bravery, which is of course pretty insignificant compared to what our Israeli brothers and sisters are going through right now. We don't judge anyone's family decisions on how to stay safe, we can only encourage people to change their prior plans, including school attendance, including Hebrew school and other synagogue programming attendance, only after careful consideration. Mainly we hope

to stand up to, for and with each other by continuing to gather, to express our Judaism with at least and perhaps a little more than our usual pride, and to declare over and over what I had a chance to say in my fullest rally voice in Philadelphia the other day. New Jersey's favorite son sings Two Hearts are Better Than One but we are Am Echad Im Lev Echad, one people with one heart, entwined with Israel, today, tomorrow, and always.

Shabbat shalom.