

In February of 1996 I was in New York, between semesters of study at the Schechter Institute in Israel, which is one of the organizations to which, thanks to you, we gave a substantial donation to help with their relief efforts during this most recent war. Though a time of great instability due to a simmering Intifada, Jerusalem had been fairly quiet, this despite the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin just a few months earlier. Yet as fate would have it, all Israel, the Jewish people, my rabbinical school class and me personally were dealt a fateful blow, as our classmate and good friend Matt Eisenfeld and his soon to be finance Sara Duker were killed in a bus bombing on February 25th. It was about as hard to deal with as it sounds. And I didn't - or maybe couldn't - talk about it publicly after the funeral. I never wanted him or them to become a story like other stories, for the sacrifice and loss to become diluted in any way through repetition.

In fact I didn't speak about this loss publicly for 18 years. I decided that their chai yahrtzeit would be the right time to recommit to making sure their names, personalities, commitments, and the loss to their families and friends was not forgotten. So occasionally I'll mention my friend and teach something of his short but rather accomplished life. For instance, he had just finished the Talmudic tractate of Kiddushin, which he had started in the Yeshiva where we spent a year together before Rabbinical school. As it happens, the daily page of Talmud study program - it takes seven and half years - just got to the end of Kiddushin a week ago, and you better believe I thought of Matt when we declared that we would return to this just completed Tractate. I think he would have been through the Talmud a couple of times over by now; he was a very dedicated student and an extremely kind, compassionate person and I think of him often.

What I haven't mentioned too frequently is what I did when I got back to Israel, a return trip which was really never in doubt. In addition to reconnecting with classmates and a

lot more mourning, and in addition to getting back to learning which is what they no doubt would have encouraged us to do, I remember well that one of the first things I did was to get on a public bus, I don't remember where it was going and I'm not sure it mattered. There were people, visitors mostly, who were avoiding public transportation for obvious reasons and that made sense. But my sense, born of anger or defiance or ignorance or a combination of all of those, was that what these Hamas murderers - the descendents of whom attacked Israel on October 7th - wanted was to disrupt life in the good, civilized, energized, and sometimes crazy country that Israel had built over these decades. Many felt that the best way to fight back was to live with as much normalcy as possible, and getting back onto buses was a small act of resistance, though for many it was also just the only reasonable way to get to school or work.

So when people asked why this Israel mission that I had the honor of attending recently left and got back last week was taking place the public answer was we are going to

show solidarity, love, and concern, to bring the generous donations made by our community to the great work our Movement is doing on the ground there, and to bear witness to what took place so we would be better informed about what took place there, and what is taking place in the aftermath of what most are calling the worst day in Israel's modern history. But as a Zionist and in my heart there was an additional answer. Which is that one of the goals of those who attacked Israel on October 7th was to put fear into people's hearts and to cause us to think twice about whether all the effort and stress of standing with Jews in Israel is really worth it. It's as if they are saying you know, we will always be lurking in the shadows and as we proved to you, you will never know when we will seek to strike. And who is going to want to be a long term partner in that - we will break your will and distance those who support you one destructive threat or act at a time.

And this mission and others like it, and all who support and stand with Israel now are giving the clearest possible response. Which is that it won't work. Unity of purpose in

Israel and unity of our people around Israel has never been stronger. As we always say it should not take a war or an outbreak of anti-Semitism to create that sense of unity but our predictable pattern is that we do “together” better in a crisis than we do in more peaceful times. It is astounding that seven weeks ago Israel was on the verge of breaking apart internally and alienation between our community and Israel was at an all time high. Look what has changed. More or less, everything.

We don't know what will happen when the guns go silent, the hostages are home, and better times once again arrive, which they will. But that era should include a continuation of the affirmation of the values we hold in common. A strong, safe and secure Israel. A vocal, clear, smart, and effective response to anti-Semitism in all of its forms from subtle to overt. And what we are seeing in sharper focus than ever, which is that the strength of Diaspora Judaism - evidenced in 290,000 gathering in Washington, evidenced in missions of support and unity, evidenced in well over 500 million dollars raised just for

the JFNA campaign and not including much more for individual causes and projects of great concern - we are seeing more clearly than ever that the strength of our communities is intricately tied up with the strength of Israel and the strength of Israel is intricately tied up with the strength of the largest Jewish community outside of Israel and that is here in North America. We can say without equivocation or hesitation that the best place to ensure the continued strength of our communities is the same place where we can gather, raise our voices, support each other, educate our children, live out our Zionism, and reinforce our partnerships is right here, in this synagogue and others like it.

By celebrating here today, by committing to long-term association with this synagogue or any other that stands up for Israel and for the Jewish future, you earn the feeling that you are doing your part to make sure that all of the values that we see on display now have a chance of continuing to the next generation. We should not need them again in a crisis but should use them to foster Jewish

engagement that is meaningful, uplifting, and inspirational. May we do so in a world that includes the opportunity to visit and connect to an Israel at peace, secure in her own borders and secure in the knowledge that her most reliable friends showed up at a time of great concern. It is here that we can best declare that as partners in this miracle of a modern Jewish state, we always will.

Am Yisrael Chai and Shabbat shalom.