

RH Day I 5785

The Word of the Year

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If prayer works on any meaningful level, and you and I both would like to think that it does, this year of all years there is reason to say that we do not have time for a sermon - don't get your hopes up. But why is that?

Because since October 7th we have been raising our prayers, as well as our concern and active advocacy for Israel and especially the hostages, some 102 of whom await their return home at this very moment. So if prayer works perhaps an eighteen minute chant of Bring Them Home would move the needle. Maybe we should be thinking about, and praying for, nothing else. What good is our health, wholeness, and even the happiness that in other years we place at the center of our personal prayer experience, when over a hundred of our own brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters are being held in the most extreme conditions imaginable, and whose plight is being ignored or even justified by way too many people?

The intense challenge of these days, and if I'm being honest also in preparing for them, is acute and searing - there is a popular saying in Israel that there the calendar has not yet turned even to October 8th and I have found myself very often commiserating with that somber but determined observation. And as long as there are innocent captives in the Gaza tunnels, Israelis, American citizens and those of other countries, young women, and unaccounted for children, it is hard to imagine how that page will turn. This, even as the one year mark since the darkest day in Israel's modern history arrives on both the English and Hebrew calendars. To mark

October 7th we will gather as a community right here at Beth El on Monday night. For the Yahrtzeit we will be together for Yizkor on Shmini Atzeret when we will begin a liturgical evolution that will be generations in the making, bringing the casualties of October 7th and its aftermath into the Yizkor prayers as we also remember our own loved ones of blessed memory. I hope you'll make a point to join in both, in person or from wherever you are on our livestream, this year as much as any other.

The stark and deadly conundrum Israel finds itself in right now is not a new one. Give in to all demands including the unreasonable ones and get living souls as well as bodies back for burial. Or keep fighting to dismantle infrastructure that was used to plan and execute that black Sabbath day so that it has the least chance of ever happening again, at the potential cost of the lives of the hostages, too many of whom have already been lost. The way we know this is not a new intractable problem is actually right in the book we use to guide us through the prayers of these holy days, or the siddur we use for any other day as well. Once I started looking for it, it felt like it was all I could see. I had simply never noticed just how many references there are to *assurim*, those who are bound in a place and to a fate far different than the one they would choose for themselves. And how many references there are to God as *mattir assurim*, the One Who releases, or desires the release, of those who are held in any way against their will. It can mean anything from someone recovering from temporary physical limitations to the exact and way too repetitive plight of the 100 or so being held now while their families suffer. And we are all their families.

Our prayer book would not mention it so many times if it was not a recurring motif of the Jewish experience. With this much experience you would think that by now we would all know what to do. If we have been through it so many times the way forward must be obvious. So which is it: do whatever you can to get them out, no matter the cost? Or don't pay a ransom that will put people in more danger than they were in before, don't incentivize the taking of Jewish or Israeli captives because then they will know we will pay any price to get them back, and that price can put the security and even the existence of Israel at risk.

It's not new. Perhaps you remember the guy we read about just an hour and a half ago. When Abraham hears that his nephew Lot has been taken captive - there's that word again - whether he thinks about negotiation or waiting it out is not recorded. What is reported is that he gathers an armed force, a so-called crack response team of which he, the future patriarch himself, is a part. And he goes in and rescues Lot even though they had previously agreed to separate from each other. Because when your family is in trouble, if it's up to you, you don't hesitate to do everything you can to help them including at their moment of desperate need.

Based in part on that story, our rabbinic teachings going back up to two thousand years say clearly that the redeeming of hostages is a cardinal value for us and we have to go to great lengths to make it happen. There is even an unresolved conversation about whether a community can - or must - sell a Torah scroll, or all of their Torah scrolls, to raise money for ransom. Once you bring selling Torah scrolls into the mix of a discussion,

you know you have arrived at something that is considered essentially important. And it was.

Until the late 13th century, when the greatest Torah scholar of his generation, known as Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, was taken prisoner while trying to flee Germany for the land of Israel. Prison sentences could be paid off but he rather famously issued an edict affirming that it was forbidden to pay an exorbitant ransom for him or anyone else, because it would lead to the taking of more Jewish prisoners and ever increasing ransoms. He died in German custody, and in one of the twists and turns of the story, representing the diabolically difficult calculus of saving a life versus putting future lives in potential danger, his body was eventually released back to the Jewish community - after a large sum of money - an outlandish ransom - was paid for it.

As the only Jewish state in the world Israel takes all of this sordid history into account when it gets a proposed bill for the release of hostages. Many times in the last 70 plus years they have paid that bill, including in the 2011 deal to get back Gilad Shalit, when it traded 1,027 security prisoners, all of whom were being held after having committed crimes against Israelis, to get back one single living soldier. That deal was approved and endorsed by Israel's then and current Prime Minister. And as you probably know, one of the prisoners in that exchange was a mastermind of October 7th and is currently being targeted by Israel, but who by all reports has surrounded himself not only with human shields from his own people but also with an unknown number of the hostages. In addition to the prayer of matir assurim, dear God, release the bound, bring them home, I feel like there

should be another prayer - thank you God for not making the decision of what Israel should do up to me.

The challenge cuts so deep because it represents a clash of many things we hold dear. And we don't have to be a hostage negotiator to understand this. We all have, in non-technical terms used by some in the mental health field, a hard side and a soft side. Our hard side steels ourselves against the inevitable assault, pressure and confrontations of daily life, it is what gives us the capacity to stand up to what is wrong instead of slinking away, it is what gives us the ability to push back when forces seek our or anyone's destruction - of life, of character, of reputation, of inherent worth. It is what compels us to hope that Israel's hard side in the form of the IDF at the direction of the government will truly decimate a ruthless enemy that has declared that it does not want the calendar to turn the page from October 7th. Instead they would like nothing more than to plan and execute more of the same.

But it is our soft side that steers us to different destinations, calls us to different goals, embeds within us something other than fight or flight. It offers flexibility, compassion, and relevant to this season, to seek and to grant forgiveness. It's why we can feel for any innocent human being who has been harmed anywhere including those in Gaza who if given a choice would not choose this. It allows us to reflect on and identify with the question of what we would do if speaking out against those in charge of our authority structures meant long imprisonment or death, if not supporting them meant hunger and poverty for our families. It gives us the inner strength to never give up on the compassion we hope will eventually be

embraced by all in whom it is deeply embedded, and it is the combination of our hard and soft sides that has allowed us, over these hard months, to persevere.

And we did persevere. Even before October 7th last year at this time I pledged to you that as others turned away from Israel Beth El would lead the way in turning towards it. Reacting in the moment on that dark Shmini Atzeret morning, I said we would mourn and we would also continue to build lives of great meaning which would include embracing rather than cancelling things like bnai mitzvah and weddings and more. I said that when the time was right we would start going to Israel to be of any needed support. We have done all of that.

We have been inspired by the exceptional perseverance of those closest to the events of October 7th, those in Israel itself. We have seen it up close and from a distance. A remarkable balancing of the different exorbitant emotions that are part of everyday life now. Of pushing forward while knowing a dark black cloud has descended on the heart of every parent and child. It includes the informal national slogan of we will dance again, exemplified by Noa Argamani's return to life party. Noa was a hostage rescued by the IDF and a clip of an energized and rather raucous celebration with her on the shoulders of her father was widely circulated. Reflecting all the mixed and conflicting emotions of these days that felt out of place and too soon and it also felt like exactly the right thing because what good was any other alternative? And she went right back to advocating for and speaking out for the remaining captives, in a role that has been so courageously embodied by those who could never in a

thousand lifetimes have thought they would be called to do that. A role taken on by all the parents and family members of hostages who have traversed the world to ask, beg, demand, and shake free any obstacle to secure the release and return of their loved ones.

I thought that might be the word of the year, perseverance. But I've come to think it's a different one. I wonder if you will agree. More than the capacity to push forward despite challenges I think it is the capacity to embrace our hard and soft side, to let them interact with each other, to actively figure out how much of one and the other we should hope will guide our decisions and our actions, because without both we are either intractable and prone to shattering or a pile of undefined, unprincipled mush. And that word, that state, that stance, that we have been called on to embody even as we have been inspired by Israel's remarkable capacity to demonstrate it in so many different ways is: resilience.

I thought it would be great to teach you, and if I'm being honest, to find out for myself, the Hebrew word for resilience. So I looked it up in multiple dictionaries. I Googled it and Google translated it and I found that...there is no word in Hebrew that translates directly to resilience. The closest anyone can surmise to a term that approaches its meaning is is Kosher Hit'osh'shut, which means, movingly, Capacity for Recovery.

Israel and the Jewish people's Kosher Hit'osh'shut, capacity for recovery, has been sorely tested over the last year. But resilience means more than recovery, doesn't it? It means building up, maintaining and even increasing our ability to deal positively with all of the inevitable challenges that come

our way. Israel has shown that to the Jewish and broader world since October 7th, and the Diaspora community and our friends - and we have many of them, and could use even more - have shown resilience as well in so many ways. We have stood up, spoken up, and showed up. Our college students have been inspiring to us, packing Hillel's and Chabad's for Shabbat dinners and campus quads and city parks and blocks for Israel vigils and refusing to be cowed by the increased pressures and discrimination they have faced. While no one wishes for them to go through anything like this, their experience in standing up to anti-Israel hate which too often bleeds into anti-Semitic expression and action will stay with them as much as anything they will learn in a college classroom or laboratory. Let's continue to make sure they know we have their back, and we will continue to advocate for their right to pursue their education, and the Zionism they learned here, unhindered.

I wasn't the first person to search for the Hebrew word for resilience. Others had and discovered what I did, which is that there isn't one. A reason for that has been suggested: "Perhaps that's because the Jewish people themselves encapsulate everything there is to know about resiliency: the ability to rise above and find new strengths despite any setbacks."

As much as I want anything for you I want you to be blessed with this capacity to find and strengthen your resilience in the year to come. For those who have faced personal loss, and there are so many of you in our gathered congregation today, I pray that your resilience will be found in the form of carrying forward beautiful and inspiring memories and moving



forward from any lingering hurt with a sense of forgiveness and love. For all of us who have felt that something has shifted and changed in Israel and here, for the ways it has left us suspicious and angry but also unified and purposeful, I pray that your and my resilience too will be expressed in an ever-increasing commitment to Jewish life and the places that help it to flourish and thrive, none more important to us than our beautiful Beth El. May our children and students of all ages know that this gift of resilience is embedded within them thanks to the good role models they have in their lives and in our ancient ancestors and modern heroes. May we seek together to give them the best resources for being inspired to follow your, and their examples.

And may Israel maintain her resilience in the face of unwelcome war and negotiations poisoned by intractable enemies, as it seeks to determine and then to do what is just and right and good. May they and we too seek to do that in the form of building a society that stands for the best of what we are all capable of, including security of body, peace of mind, and the everlasting Rosh Hashanah hope, as poignant now as ever, that it will be a healthy, safe, and deeply meaningful New Year.

From my family to yours, I wish you Shanah Tovah.