

#587: Good News From Israel

My first day Rosh Hashanah sermon

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Shanah tovah. May we all be written in the Book of Life for a new year filled with hope, health, and above all, peace.

Our hearts are tied to Israel as our brothers and sisters there yet again fight for their lives. At times like these, it may seem inappropriate to tell jokes. However, telling jokes at times of crisis is one of the most Jewish thing there is. We know that jokes were even told in the Nazi death camps.

Just as Sarah laughed in her moment of need, we laugh in ours. Though I considered giving a humorless sermon, I decided to start with a joke after all because to laugh is to be strong and that is what Am Yisrael is, strong - hazak and resiliently alive - chai v'kayam.

This one is about Pope Frances, who was sitting in his offices in the Vatican when he hears a commotion going on outside his window. He sends one of his priests to find out what's going on. A few minutes later, the priest returns.

"So, what's happening down there?" asks the pope. "Why are there helicopters in the air, why are the reporters from CNN and SkyNews here?"

"Well, I have good news and bad news," says the priest.

"OK," says the pope, "let's have the good news first."

"Well," began the priest, "it seems that Jesus has returned."

"What?!" exclaimed the pope. "That's not good news -- that's fantastic news! It's amazing! It's the best possible news ever! What could the bad news possibly be?"

"Well," the priest said hesitantly, "He says he needs a minyan for kaddish."

All jokes aside, five thousand seven hundred and eighty four was our *annus horribilis*, our most horrible year in a very long time. If you base your opinion solely on the headlines, there is virtually no good news and an ocean of bad news.

Frankly, it seems that every day, the news for the Jews gets worse. If it's not an escalation of violence against Israel, it's another anti-Jewish fever on a college campus.

But that is the wrong way to think about the year that we have just endured. I'm here to tell you today that there is good, happy news for Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. It may not get headlines, but it is most certainly there. You just have to know where to look for it.

This year, each of my High Holy Day Sermons will be based on Psalm 27, the psalm of repentance that we recite twice a day during this season. For today, I call your attention to the third verse, which tells us to be hopeful even when that seems illogical:

SHOULD AN ARMY BESIEGE ME, MY HEART WOULD HAVE NO FEAR; SHOULD WAR BESET ME, STILL WOULD I BE CONFIDENT.

אִם-תִּחַנֶּה עָלַי מִחַנֶּה לֹא-יִירָא לְבִי אִם-תִּקּוּם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בֹטֵחַ:

My reading of the psalm is that despite the massacre of October 7th and the resulting war, there is still reason to allow hope and even joy into our lives. Even though the armies of the enemy are at the gate and through the gate, we still have reason to celebrate.

Mind you, it is wise to keep in mind that Oct. 7th was 9/11 times 40 for Israel and the Jews at large. I do not mean to minimize the horror of that day or the subsequent war in any way. Without question, this was the worst thing to happen to Israel and the Jews at large since the Holocaust.

Having said that, I believe that many of us have overdosed on bad news. There is too much of it for our brains to process, so we just throw our hands up and try to look away. We can't think about it anymore, so we say, let's just see what's on Netflix.

Good news is like Narcan nose spray for those of us who have overdosed on bad news. I want us to wake up, take a deep breath, and realize that in spite of the terror and the unbelievable barbarism of this world, there are still reasons for Israelis and Jews to rejoice and, more importantly, to hope.

We're going to look at three different examples of good news: Israeli survival, Israeli volunteering, and Israeli ingenuity. As you'll see, each of these kinds of good news ties in with a specific aspect of Rosh Hashanah.

Israeli Survival

The first kind of good news to consider is Israeli survival. This year, over 2,000 Israelis have been murdered by Hamas and Hizballah terrorists. But even so, Israelis survive and thrive, and it is not an exaggeration to say that some of these survival stories are miraculous. One example is the simultaneously frightful and beautiful story of two IDF soldiers, Kfir Zar and Dor Zimel.

Reserve officer Kfir Zar was inside a tank in Gaza when Hamas terrorists fired a rocket at it. He somehow survived, but his lungs were very badly damaged, ruined in fact. They were so damaged that doctors put him on a heart-lung bypass machine until two compatible lungs could be found for him.

Not long thereafter, Major Dor Zimel was killed in action by a Hizballah drone and rocket. In accordance with his wishes, the family donated his organs, and his lungs were used to give Kfir Zar his life back. A man who was all but dead was brought back to life and his family by the sacrifice of his fellow soldier.

Another example of Jewish survival is an Israeli woman named Elai Golan. When Hamas firebombed her house on Oct. 7th, they left her for dead. Fortunately, they underestimated Ms. Golan's will to live. She was in a coma for 51 days but then woke up.

And let me tell you, she did more than just wake up. She woke up, she got out of bed, she went back to medical school where she had been studying, and she graduated as a doctor

in May. She's now doing her medical internship at Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan, Israel's largest hospital.

The connection between the theme of survival and Rosh Hashanah is the Unetaneh Tokef, the beloved prayer in which we read, "Who will live and who will die? Who will be exalted and who will be brought low?"

This most famous of High Holy Day prayers recognizes the bitter truth that not everyone gets to survive in a crisis like October 7th. So many died before their time. But some did survive, and their survival, often under the most crushing of circumstances, is a reason for all of us to rejoice.

The survival of heroes like Kfir Zar and Dr. Elai Golan are not just news items to say, "Aw, that's great." Each of them should be a wellspring of inspiration for us. If they can survive the horrors they saw, then maybe, just maybe we in America can survive our much less challenging circumstances.

Focusing on the survivors is the most important part of our healing. The healing will leave a scar, but we will heal because we have no other option.

We will say Kaddish for the victims and Psalms of Halleluyah for the survivors. Each of us is Kfir Zar, each of us is Dr. Golan. Israel survived October 7th. We out here in the Diaspora have to survive the hostile world that October 7th created.

We have to remember that despite the pain and suffering of waiting, Israelis are still getting married, having children, and building Jewish families.

Israeli Volunteering

The second kind of good news is the massive amount of volunteering that is going on in Israel. The massacre of October 7th last year extinguished the lives of so many people. Hamas slaughtered couples, fiancées, and even babies.

Yet even in the darkness of such terror, the Jewish fire of voluntarism cannot be drowned.

The hub of volunteer services and emergency aid in Israel is at the Expo Tel Aviv International Convention Center. In the early weeks after October 7th, 15,000 volunteers assembled to help the displaced and those who had lost everything.

At a former cooking school in Tel Aviv, volunteer professional chefs prepare 1500 meals a day for those in need, and they buy their produce from the farms near the Gaza border to help them survive economically.

Listen to the words of Rabbi Nathalie Lastreger, a French-Israeli Conservative rabbi in Israel who answered my request for good news from Israel:

"Every day since October 7...hundreds of thousands of Israelis, both Jews and non-Jews, get up in the morning and volunteer on behalf of the soldiers, the kidnapped, those who have been evacuated from their homes, and elderly people who have lost their homes."

Perhaps that is why Israel, in spite of being in a near constant state of war, is rated by the World Happiness Report as one of the ten most happy countries on Earth. This year, Israel came in fifth and America is relatively miserable at twenty-third place.

We might well ask, “How can Israelis be so happy when they are constantly threatened by terrorists of all kinds?” I think the reason is that Israelis have a completely different definition of what happiness is.

Typical Americans define happiness as the feeling they get when good things happen to them. Typical Israelis define happiness as the feeling of purpose they get doing good things for each other. For a Jewish state in a rough neighborhood, no other definition will work. And because Israelis define happiness as the result of what they do for each other, they can take control of their happiness in a way that many Americans cannot. We wait for good things to happen to us; Israelis get up, get busy, and make them happen.

The word volunteer comes from the Latin word that means “want,” because a volunteer wants to do something. In Hebrew, the word for volunteer is *mitnadev*, which literally means, “to make oneself noble.” You can hear that even in the definition of what a volunteer is, there is a difference in how Israelis think.

When we Americans volunteer, we want a parade and a medal, and frankly, some volunteers deserve a parade and a medal. But when Israelis volunteer, they know they are simply doing the right and noble thing for their country and the Jewish people. The Shofar, the quintessential symbol of Rosh Hashanah, fundamentally represents the call to volunteer in this moment. Whereas the tekiah represents joyful celebration and the shevarim represents our crying, the staccato blasts of the teruah were the emergency call to action in biblical Israel.

Israeli Ingenuity

The third kind of good news is Israeli ingenuity. Even in the darkness of our Jewish world right now, we must remember that Israelis are forging ahead and using their impressive brainpower to make this world a better place.

For instance, an Israeli company called IceCure just released the results of a breast cancer treatment study. They froze the breast tumors of 389 women with injections of liquid nitrogen at -321 degrees Fahrenheit. Virtually nothing can survive a temperature that cold. Then scientists at IceCure waited to see how many recurrences of breast cancer happened. The results were amazing: 99.74% of the women remained cancer-free after five years. The procedure is called cryoablation.

Now Israelis didn’t invent cryoablation, it was an *American Jew* who did that. But IceCure has made this procedure practical for regular use in cancers of the breast, kidney, lung, and liver.

I'm personally most excited about Israel's forthcoming flying car. Whereas other companies have made flying cars that are actually airplanes, the Israeli startup AirOne has invented a drone that a non-pilot could get into, push a button and fly over congested roads. It even has an emergency parachute.

And I'm sure it has an emergency parachute because the inventor's mother insisted on it. The Rosh Hashanah symbols of ingenuity are the fish heads or ram's head that appears on many New Year holiday tables. The head is there for two reasons. One, Rosh Hashanah literally means "The Head of the Year."

Two, there is a verse in the Torah that says, וַיַּתְּנֶךָ יְהוָה לְרֵאשִׁית וְלֹא לְאַחֶיךָ God will make you the head and not the tail. Israel and the Jewish people are always the head. Even when the world treats us like the tail, we do not give in to desperation.

Full disclosure, my personal reaction to being offered some fish head or a ram's head to eat is, "Thanks, I'm good." But the symbolism of these heads is significant whether we actually eat it or not.

I realize that I've taken a risk in this sermon. The standard rabbinic thing to do this year is to wring my hands about the forthcoming anniversary of the Oct. 7th attacks. And it would be an easy sermon to write. Nothing is easier than writing really angry speeches filled with well-deserved vitriol against the enemy.

But it's Rosh Hashanah, and while we should all pray for the hostages and the soldiers and all Israelis, we need to remember that Israelis are experts in survival, celebration, and innovation.

We will never forget or forgive what happened on Oct. 7, nor should we. But both we and Israel will have to move forward, we have no other choice. They've got this, and so do we. The Mishnah ([M. Berakhot 9:5](#)) tells us that we should recite a blessing when bad things happen (i.e. Barukh Dayan Ha-Emet) and we should recite a blessing when good things happen (i.e. Sheheḥeyanu).

On Oct. 7th, we got the bad news, a reason to say Barukh Dayan Ha-Emet thousands of times. The bad news, among so many deaths, is that as things stand, the hope for a two-state solution is also dead. I won't say there's no hope for a future two-state deal, but I don't see a lot of it. And as for a one-state solution, that would either be a Jewish dictatorship, a Muslim dictatorship, or just sheer chaos.

In the weeks and months after Oct. 7th, we got more bad news here in the diaspora, namely that we have a whole lot of antisemites who were previously quiet but who are now emboldened by what was done to us.

But fear not, because we're getting the good news today, Rosh Hashanah of the year five thousand seven hundred and eighty-five. The good news is that we're still here, Israel is still thriving, and there is much to celebrate.
Shanah tovah.