

A Difficult Year and the Challenge of the Jewish Future

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I would like to wish everyone of us not only a Shanah Tovah u metukah, a good and a sweet New Year, but a Shanah Tovah yoter. A good year, but a better year than this one.

I am now 72 years old, and I do not remember in my lifetime a year that was quite as difficult for the Jewish people as this past year.

On October 7, Hamas wounded 3,300 and took 251 hostages during a day of brutal savagery and unspeakable, undeniable sexual violence; 101 hostages, many dead, remain captive in Gaza today. The 101 remaining hostages include seven Americans, four probably alive: Keith Siegal whose family lives in Raleigh.

Over 26,000 rockets have been fired at Israel. The numbers included 13,200 from Gaza, at least 5,000 on October 7 alone — 12,400 from Lebanon, around 60 from Syria, 180 from Yemen, and 400 from Iran — the latter of which in two direct attacks on Israel on April 13 and October 1

Some 17,000 Hamas terrorists and members of other terror groups have been killed by the IDF.

Since October 7, 2023, 729 Israeli soldiers have been killed and another 4,576 have been wounded.

Tens of thousands of Israelis displaced with over 60,000 from the North still unable to return to their homes.

In the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the war, troops have located and destroyed some 4,700 tunnel shafts. The tunnels are estimated to be more than 400 miles long.

Indeed, our losses have indeed been significant.

The human tragedy has been great. Hamas refused to release the hostages as part of a cease fire and uses their own citizens as human shields. Hamas has stolen tons of food provided as humanitarian aid and sold it to Gazans at inflated prices.

According to Hamas, 40,000+ Palestinian lives lost. These numbers do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants.

Tens of thousands of Gazan homes were destroyed.

One cannot help but recognize the enormity of this human tragedy, the ultimate responsibility for which lies with Hamas.

I find myself asking what is it that makes a free and safe Jewish country, the country of Israel, so important to us as Jews.

And so, I want to tell you a true story from the period of the Nazi Holocaust.

In April 1943, the most significant and the first organized revolt against the Nazis took place. It took place in the Warsaw ghetto and the story of the heroism of the ghetto fighters led by 23-year-old Mordecai Anielewicz is legendary.

There were six Nazi death camps and the word about the revolt in Warsaw spread to the death camps. In September 1943, a revolt took place in the death camp known as Treblinka. Treblinka was the death camp where 800,000 Jews were murdered. The revolt was successful and shut down the camp. Very few Jews however escaped and survived to tell the story.

Less than two months later November 3, something happened at Majdanek another one of the six death camps. The Nazis gathered 18,000 people at the camp and slaughtered them in pits which had been dug for their bodies.

Elsewhere in that part of Poland, they slaughtered thousands of other people on the same day. It is estimated that 41,000 Jews died on that day.

The Nazis referred to it as the "Harvest Festival."

Many scholars feel that the reason for this slaughter, a slaughter which wiped out a large part of the Nazi labor work force, was because the Nazis were concerned about the possibility of a revolt at Majdanek.

I mentioned this partially because when we talk about what happened on October 7, we often say that it was the greatest slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. Well, what happened on November 3, 1943, what is the greatest slaughter of Jews during the Holocaust on one single day.

In January 1944, a woman by the name of Gizella Abramson was sent to Majdanek as a slave laborer. Six months later, in July 1944 on the last day of the camp the Nazis lined up the remaining prisoners, remaining Jews and shot them in those very same pits.

Gezella was lucky. She was not hit but fell into the pit and hid there for more than a day. She hoped that somehow or another, she would be rescued.

Indeed, she was rescued by the Soviet troops but then she was left to her own resources. She wandered around Europe as a young woman eventually making it to a hospital in a U.S.-run Displaced Persons camp. After months of recuperation, Gizella came to the U.S. in 1946 to live with an aunt in New York. She was the only member of her family to survive.

Gizella graduated from high school in 1947 and from college in 1951. In 1952 she married Paul Abramson, and in 1970 they relocated with IBM to Raleigh, NC. They had two children, four grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. For over 38 years Gizella dedicated herself to teaching about tolerance and the Holocaust throughout the state of North Carolina.

I was privileged to meet her once. She was incredible.

One of her children, Mike Abramson, is a friend of mine.

Gizella was one of a small group of individuals, including Rabbi Arnold Task and Sylvia Samet, who persuaded then Governor James Hunt to create the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust in 1981.

Mike took over the Holocaust Council in 1999 and thanks to his tireless efforts, on November 18, 2021, the Gizella Abramson Holocaust Education Act was passed into law when Governor Cooper signed the budget. The law mandates Holocaust education in middle and high school in public education in North Carolina. I am proud to be a part of the educational programming and I am proud that the Greensboro Jewish Federation supports the Holocaust Council.

Now let me tell you another story.

A young very pretty woman named Noam Ben David went to the Nova Music festival and danced throughout the night on October 6. On October 7, she hid in a shelter with two other people. All three of them pretended to be dead. Like Gisela, they hid under a pile of thirteen murdered bodies, including her boyfriend, David. Hours later, she was saved by the Israel Defense forces. They took care of her. Unlike what happened to Gisela, they did not set her off on her own to fend for herself.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Defense Forces collected the bodies of the murdered young people from the Nova Music festival and sent them to a base known as Shura.

A 60 year old American woman who had moved to Israel named Sheri Mendez was part of a volunteer unit within the Military Rabbinate. On October 7, she went down to the Shura base and volunteered in the morgue. She viewed it as her

responsibility to take care of the women who were slaughtered, particularly the young women who have been murdered at the Nova Music festival.

Recently she was asked whether that after preparing these young women for burial, their parents were able to get a last look at them. She proceeded to answer, "Absolutely not!" She then said "They were shot so many times in the head that in many cases, it was like there was a purposeful obliteration of women's faces." The bodily mutilation these young women were so terrible that their families were not able to tell their beloved daughters good-bye with a last look.

These stories, my friends illustrate not only that which occurred on October 7 but tell us why it is imperative that there be a Jewish state, existing as a secure, self-determining political entity in the homeland of the Jewish people. It is stories like these which really represent the fulfillment of Zionism.

I want you to know that being a Zionist does not mean that I agree with every decision made by the current Israeli government. Being an American does not necessarily mean that I agree with every decision by the American government. And yet, just as I would not negate the importance of the United States of America as a beacon of freedom in our world, I would never ever negate the critical importance of the state of Israel.

During the holocaust, the Nazis used a propaganda technique know as the "big lie" technique. The idea was that a lie, no matter how false it was, would eventually be believed by most people were it to be told over and over.

The big lie technique exists today, especially among people on both the far left and the far right.

The far right believes that Jews are trying to take over the world. It was the far-right people who chanted in Charlottesville "Jews will not replace us!"

The far left has numerous examples of the technique, including a letter to the editor From the Greensboro News and Record which appeared less than two weeks ago. In this letter, the statement was made that Israel murdered some of its own citizens on October 7 rather than see them captured as hostages by Hamas.

The big lie technique also is used to state that Israel is guilty of genocide, especially in Gaza. Now I do not wish to downplay the tragic suffering of people in Gaza. However, the definition of genocide does not apply to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians no matter what you think about it.

The big lie technique is also used as an instrument to deny what occurred on October 7. The denialists out there are denying that children were not incinerated alive in ovens in front of their parents; that women were not brutally raped and mutilated; that Israel sent hundreds of trucks of aid into Gaza every day; that this aid often did not reach those who needed it because Hamas who stole the aid, and more. I could go on.

One of the most appalling aspects of the last year was the failure of international women's organizations to condemn the gender-based crimes against Jewish women.

Professor Gil Troy, an eminent historian at McGill University, wrote in an article entitled his "Feminists are Consenting to Rape Culture," "On October 7, the violated women shouted, shrieked, cried, begged, rape after rape, cut after cut, fighting off these assaults with their voices and their bare hands as best each could. Some hostages may still be struggling.... And yet you are silent on this... Violating every feminist principle I have ever read and respected, today's feminist movement is ...silently consenting to this mass crime against women and against the victims from three dozen different countries. Some even doubt the testimonials—and the staggering, bloody, heartbreaking evidence of stripped women paraded through Gaza's streets." (October 29 article in Tablet Magazine)

There is however another aspect to what has happened during the past year.

This has been as all of us know a very difficult year for Jews in the United States.

More than 10,000 antisemitic incidents occurred between October 7, 2023, and September 2024 – up from 3,325 incidents the prior year. That marks the most incidents recorded in a 12-month period since the ADL began tracking threats in 1979.

Jews have been beaten in the streets of NY, LA, and every other major city. Synagogues and other Jewish institutions have been vandalized with Nazi symbolism. Windows of Jewish homes have been shattered. U.S. colleges have been limited the movement of Jewish students. Restaurants have refused to serve Jews. Jews have been harassed when leaving kosher restaurants. There have been thousands marching in the streets holding flags of terror organizations dedicated to the annihilation of the Jewish people. U.S courts have had to force academic institutions to not discriminate against Jews. The faculty of major U.S. colleges openly admitted that antisemitism on campus depends on context.

In Greensboro, our Holocaust Memorial was defaced with a Nazi swastika. In Greensboro, a middle school student was bullied by a teacher. In Greensboro,

they have been stories of terrible antisemitic things that have been said to children in school. in Greensboro, religious institutions have had fake bomb threat phone calls dialed into them with the purpose of disrupting their activities. But that is not all. Let me tell you about what is going on at the University of North Carolina.

Last May, Students for Justice in Palestine poured red paint which resembles spilled blood on the steps of the South Building, an office for administrative staff and the chancellor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Faculty members and students are continuing their anti-Israel activism and indoctrination.

Statement by the UNC-Students for Justice in Palestine include:

“It is our moral obligation to be in solidarity with the dispossessed, no matter the pathway to liberation they choose to take. This includes violence.”

On Oct. 12, UNC-SJP held a “Day of Resistance Protest for Palestine” on campus. The event [flier](#) celebrated terrorism by featuring a Hamas paraglider enroute to kill Israelis and commit other atrocities. In a widely circulated [video](#), a protester screamed, “All of us Hamas.”

On April 30, a mob of pro-Palestinian protesters defaced public property at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and yanked down the American flag fluttering over a prominent part of the campus called Polk Place.

On Sept. 19, they formed another mob and marched across the campus, screaming at the top of their lungs and spray-painting graffiti so vile that I cannot even mention it here. Then, of course, they pulled down the American flag that flies over Chapel Hill’s ROTC building.

Whether it is in Israel or in the United States, the Jewish community is facing some of the most serious problems that it has since World War II.

There are four things that we need to do now to respond to this situation.

First, I would like to ask every student who is in middle school, high school college or graduate school to stand up. Here is what I want you to do. If you are the victim of an antisemitic incident this year or witness one, please make sure that you tell your parents. If you are on a college campus, please tell the people at Hillel. And finally, make sure that you call Rabbi Koren and let him know what has occurred.

It is critical that these things are reported to officials within the Jewish community and in our congregation that means notifying Rabbi Koren. You may sit down.

Second, it is important that we make sure that Israel can defend itself. The pro Hamas demonstrators are calling for an arms embargo against Israel. Such an embargo by the United States could leave Israel defenseless. In terms of history, this would be catastrophic. This would only weaken Israel but would in no way serve the interest of the free world.

Sadly, the calls for an arms embargo actually make it more difficult to negotiate the release of the hostages.

It would also embolden Iran.

Worst of all, it would, 80 years after the holocaust, 80 years after the story of Gizella, would make Jews vulnerable to fascist terrorism.

It is as important now as it has ever been to be in contact with members of Congress urging them to continue American support for the state of Israel. American military support.

The telephone number for the Congressional Switchboard, 202 224 3121, is to be found in the worship handout. Please take it and Rabbi Koren's number with you. Any member of the House or the Senate can be reached through this telephone number.

Once again, let it not be said that we did not raise our voices at this critical time when the state of Israel is putting the lives of its soldiers, men and women, on the line to preserve Jewish freedom dignity and statehood.

Third, it is now time for us to increase our commitment to actively expressing our Jewish identity. There is no better place to begin than Temple Emanuel. This is a great congregation!

As we approach the end of these days of awe, let us make a commitment to becoming more engaged in Jewish education, prayer, and social activities.

Let us make a commitment to becoming more engaged in communal building programs and programs that advocate against antisemitism.

Let us dedicate ourselves to becoming more engaged in Jewish life.

Let us work together for a strong American Jewish community and a strong, strong state of Israel.

And that brings me to my fourth and final point. In order to do this, it is imperative for us to stay together. Yes, we will have differences. But now more than ever Jewish unity is a paramount importance.

The most physically difficult experience in my life was when I was in basic training in the IDF when I did what is known as a “stretcher carry.” Here is a picture of such a hike painted by a survivor of the October 7 massacre from the border with Gaza.

The point is here that in a stretcher carry, the people carrying the injured person cannot drop the person. Each person must do their part. Too much is at stake.

In a stretcher carry, the survival of the person is depending on each person.

At this time, the survival of our people and Israel is now dependent on our unity.

One of my teachers and one of the greatest rabbis of the twentieth century, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi taught “The only way we can get it together, is together!”

My colleague Rabbi Andrew Paley teaches that “In life, one can pretend to care, but you can’t pretend to show up.”

The truth is that the Jewish people are in a war of survival and when you are at war, you want to know who is really with you, who stands with you, and who does not.

A proverb from the Ethiopian Jewish community states “When spiders unite, they can tie down a lion.”

We need to unite now!

We need to be together now!

We need to carry the stretcher now!

Yet, it is still Yom Kippur.

Hen Mazzig expresses it so well when he writes:

“This Yom Kippur, I’m getting hungry.

Hungry for peace

Hungry for humanity

Hungry for tolerance, moral courage, and compassion

Hungry for a time where Jews, and all peoples, can pray and exist without fear.”

(Hen Mazzig)

In a year which has been filled with so much sorrow and strife, the only way for us to respond is to be together and to love one another.

In the coming year, my prejudice and hatred be replaced by acceptance and love.

May war and strife be replaced by harmony and peace.

Leshanah Tovah! L'Shana Tova Yoter! May 5785 be a BETTER year, indeed. From our family to yours, to the hostages, to the displaced people in Western Carolina and in Florida on the east coast, to Israel and beyond!

Am Yisrael Chai!

Amen