

## October 7 & October 8: Healing and Brokenness

Rabbi Michael Swartz  
Beth Tikvah Synagogue  
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*You say I took the name in vain, I don't even know the name. But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?*

*There's a blaze of light in every word, it doesn't matter which you heard-  
The holy or the broken Hallelujah.*

I begin with these iconic words of Leonard Cohen this morning because I've been reflecting a great deal about brokenness lately. Cohen wrote extensively about it; "A broken Halleluyah" is the tip of the iceberg. According to one commentator, the words "broken" and "brokenness" appear in 10% of his lyrics. Brokenness, and its inverse wholeness, are a motif throughout his writing, as they were in his life. As they are in our lives.

These motifs resonate deeply during these Yamim Noraim, these sacred days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The holy and the broken Hallelujahs are woven into the fabric of this season, offering a lens for understanding the brokenness in our society, our politics, and in the international conflicts that rage around the world. It feels like everywhere we turn we see brokenness, and the need for its opposites, wholeness and healing and repair. Today I want to address the brokenness we American Jews face in 2024. On Yom Kippur I will turn to the brokenness we encounter in our personal lives.

The journalist Bari Weiss offers a way to understand today's brokenness. She writes, "Our holiday from history is over." The history she is referring to is the centuries-old history of antisemitism and Jew hatred that our People have endured wherever we have lived. It has taken many different forms, but it has been a constant and a given, with occasional periods of dormancy. Weiss suggests that the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was such a period; a holiday from normative Jewish history.

It is important to recognize that antisemitism was very much alive in the U.S., particularly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an example I give you Leo Frank, a Jewish businessman in Atlanta who in 1913 was accused of a

murder he didn't commit, and who was taken from prison by an openly antisemitic lynch mob and hanged.

I give you the rabid antisemite Henry Ford, who spread his hate and lies in the Dearborn Independent, a widely-disseminated paper he published in the 1920's. Ford was so effective in spreading his antisemitic hate message that he earned a shout-out in Adolph Hitler's notorious book Mein Kampf.

I give you Father Charles Coughlin, dubbed "The Radio Priest," who throughout the 1930s was one of the most influential figures in the United States. Coughlin was a Catholic priest in the Detroit area whose virulently antisemitic sermons were broadcast on the radio and reached tens of millions of listeners each week. He also espoused pro-Nazi views, so much so that he became a person of interest to the FBI.

I give you the Nazi rally that took place in February 1939 in Madison Square Garden, of all places, organized by the German American Bund. More than 20,000 people attended. The Bund billed the event, which took place two days before George Washington's Birthday, as a pro-"Americanism" rally; on the stage hung a huge portrait of Washington with swastikas on each side.

These examples are reminders that antisemitism was alive and well in the U.S. through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are good reasons that it has been called "the longest hatred" or "the eternal hatred." And then, of course, came the Shoah, the Holocaust, in Europe.

And then something interesting happened. After the end of the Second World War antisemitism went underground for several decades. This was our holiday from history. Perhaps it was guilt in the Western world as more and more revelations about the scope and horror of what the Nazis had perpetrated came to light. Perhaps it became politically incorrect for a time. And while it never disappeared, only going underground for a time, this was the period when Jews were able to integrate into and to thrive in American society.

Weiss comments on growing up during this unique period in our people's history. "I have always considered myself among the luckiest Jews in all of history...These were the years of plenty for Jewish Americans. The hospitals and law firms Jews had built because they'd been shut out of the others were now the ones everyone was clamoring to join. The consummate outsiders had, in mere decades, become the insiders, capable of advocating

not just for themselves but also for those still facing systemic discrimination.” Here she is undoubtedly referring to Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 60’s and 70’s.

This was the period that Weiss describes as the holiday from our long history of persecution. This is the period in which those of us of a certain age grew up in. As Israel’s Special Envoy Combatting Antisemitism, Michal Cotler-Wunsh, asserted recently, “What we don’t realize is that those of us who grew up in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lived the *anomaly*. The period of acceptance of Jews was the *exception*. The generation growing up today, experiencing antisemitism—this is the norm of Jewish history.”

The end of that “holiday” has brought us, among other things, Charlottesville in 2017, the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2019, as well as other attacks on Jewish institutions and individuals. The Anti-Defamation League’s annual audit of antisemitic incidents in the U.S. showed a precipitous rise in 2023 in all categories: assaults, vandalism and harassment. Many of these occurred after October 7, but the trends were apparent even before then.

October 7, the single most devastating day for the Jewish people since the Shoah. Let us make no mistake. The Hamas invasion was not about resistance or occupation or pursuit of a two-state solution. Rather, it was about genocidal intent, a desire to crush the Jewish state, and to kill, mutilate and kidnap everyone in its path. On that day and since Israel has faced unimaginable, gut-wrenching challenges and trauma.

This is not simply a war between Israel and Hamas in the south, nor a war between Israel and Hezbollah in the north. This is the Iran-Israel war. The events of the past few days are a stark reminder of this. This is not a war between Israel and the Palestinian people, but between Israel and the radical Shiite axis. The deeper war that has been declared against us is ideological: a war against the legitimacy of the Jewish story. Furthermore, Israel is on the front lines in a confrontation between Western civilization and jihadist Islam, which views Israel as the “little Satan,” while the U.S. is the “great Satan.” It has been suggested that the horrific events of October 7 be dubbed “10/7,” to parallel 9/11, as both attacks ultimately stemmed from the same source—jihadist or radical Islam.

Bari Weiss visited Israel shortly after the attack. She reported, “There was not a single conversation that I had in the week I spent in Israel where the person did not say a version of the following: ‘There was an October 6

version of me and an October 7 version of me. I am forever changed. I am a different person.”

Micah Goodman, a well-known public intellectual, told Weiss that the country went through a collective near-death experience. Imagine an entire society that, between sunrise and sunset, peered together into the abyss. “For the first time in our lives, we had a moment where we could imagine that the whole thing was over. That the whole thing ended. You know how when individuals have a near-death experience, they’re transformed. Because they learned that life should not be trivialized. As a country, we had a near-death experience, and now we’re transformed because we know that Jewish sovereignty should not be taken for granted. It can’t be trivialized.”

Needless to say, all of Israeli society has been living with trauma and PTSD since October 7. The country’s concern for the surviving hostages in Hamas tunnels remains raw and unabated and makes it virtually impossible for the trauma to subside. Israel is a relatively small country with the culture of an extended family. People feel the pain and suffering of their neighbors and fellow countrymen in a way that we here do not.

And yet, while the shocking and horrific attack of October 7 bent the country, it did not break it. We have learned once again about the incredible resilience and unity of Israelis. Despite the challenges, the anger, the pain and the divisions in Israeli society, Israel remains remarkably resilient. Israelis have shown indescribable courage, determination and ingenuity in the face of what they have been through. The stories of heroism, of Israelis in the country rushing to the south and risking their lives, some of them losing their lives, to rescue people caught in the crosshairs of the Hamas terrorists; the Israelis outside the country who rushed to return to do what they could to help, are a testament to the fortitude and bravery of Israelis. The heroism of the IDF soldiers who, in the midst of urban warfare and entering the Hamas tunnels, risked their lives to save hostages like Noa Argamani, 26, Almog Meir Jan, 22, Andrey Kozlov, 27, and 41-year-old Shlomi Ziv who were all kidnapped at the Nova music festival. Or Qaid Farhan Alkadi, a Beduion Arab. These rescues, and others, were cheered and celebrated throughout the country. All of these instances of selfless heroism deserve to be honored, sanctified and remembered forever.

While we hear a great deal about October 7, what about October 8, the day and days after? What has ensued in the aftermath of the 7<sup>th</sup> and what have we learned from it?

We have learned about the moral bankruptcy of much of the world. This is not a new learning, but it is fresh and raw nonetheless. The lack of response to terrorism against Israel is very revealing. The UN recently had an exhibit about victims of terror and not a single representation of Palestinian terrorism was on display; not a single Jewish victim of terrorism was shown. The denial in some circles of the horrific violence perpetrated against women in the attack, despite the ample video footage taken by the attackers themselves is astounding. The lack of compassion and empathy evidenced by the tearing down of posters of the hostages, as if they are a political issue and not a human issue, is painful and telling.

The outbreak of anti-Zionist and antisemitic protests on many college campuses since October 8 was very jarring, but not new and not surprising. Some knowledgeable observers have been sounding the alarm bells of increasing antisemitism in academia for years. As Natan Sharansky, who survived years in a Soviet prison, asks: “How could it be that American universities, once bastions of the free and unfettered exchange of ideas, are now awash with young men and women who wave the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah and readily repeat antisemitic lies without sense or compassion.”

“How can it be?” Sharansky asks. It can be because for decades students in some of our most elite universities have been exposed to insidious ideologies that espouse a binary victim-victimizer worldview, in which Israel is portrayed as the victimizer. Or a narrative of settler colonialism in which Jews are falsely portrayed as colonialists and have become a reference point for any injustice in the world. Historian Gil Troy calls these ideologies the “academic intifada.” How can it be? It can be because many young people get their so-called information from images on Tik Tok and other platforms that are devoid of context and historical background and that often block pro-Israel messaging. My son Barak, who over the past year became an Israel advocate on social media, often talks about the protestors on college campuses as “overly emotional and underly informed.”

One person who was on the front lines of the campus turmoil last year was Rabbi David Wolpe. Wolpe was a visiting scholar at the Harvard Divinity School. He had barely settled into his new digs in Cambridge when all hell

broke loose on October 8. Harvard immediately became a hotbed of anti-Israel fervor. Wolpe was asked to serve on a new antisemitism committee by Claudine Gay, who was only two months into her term as Harvard's President. After a few months of frustration that he and several others on the committee experienced due to the lack of action by the administration, Wolpe resigned from the committee. His long and detailed resignation letter went viral and was viewed by millions on various platforms. In it he alludes to the ideologies I just described. Wolpe wrote:

“The ideology that works only along axes of oppression and oppressed places Jews as oppressors and therefore intrinsically evil, is itself evil. Ignoring Jewish suffering is evil. Belittling or denying the Jewish experience, including unspeakable atrocities, is a vast and continuing catastrophe. Denying Israel the self-determination as a Jewish nation accorded unthinkingly to others is endemic, and evil.” Wolpe asserts that “Harvard, along with other institutions, is in need of a ‘vast unlearning.’” I would add that this is true not only of the institutions, but also of the tens of thousands of young people who have been indoctrinated, and I have no idea how to accomplish that.

Student protestors chant empty slogans like “From the river to the sea,” even as most of them do not know which river or which sea. Many if not most of the campus protestors are women who are seemingly unaware that were they to be living under the authority of Hamas, or any of the other radical Islamist societies like Iran, the Taliban, ISIS, and others, that they would have none of the rights or freedoms as women that they do here as they would be subjugated to subservient roles. Surely some of the protestors are LBGQT, who have no understanding that their sexual orientation would land them in prison, or worse, under the Hamas dictatorship they support. Some brandish signs saying “Queers for Palestine,” yet they fail to understand the irony.

Campus protestors routinely accuse Israel of *genocide*, which is a lie that I find to be particularly offensive and painful. First of all, it was the genocidal attack by Hamas that started this war, a fact that is often ignored or forgotten. Secondly, and contrary to how Israel's military operations are often reported, the IDF goes out of its way, often taking risks in the process, to minimize civilian casualties, something that is much easier said than done given that Hamas routinely uses the civilian population as human shields.

Don't take my word for it. Instead learn, as I have, from John Spencer, who is one of the leading experts on urban warfare, a subject he teaches at West Point. Spencer has been to Gaza, has been in the Hamas tunnels and has studied the IDF's operations. His *expert opinion* contradicts those all-too-common accusations of Israel's committing "genocide." Spencer asserts, "In their criticism, Israel's opponents are erasing a remarkable, historic new standard Israel has set. In my long career studying and advising on urban warfare for the U.S. military, I've never known an army to take such measures to attend to the enemy's civilian population... In fact, by my analysis, Israel has implemented more precautions to prevent civilian harm *than any military in history.*" This from an objective renowned expert in urban warfare.

I now want to talk about the Jewish students who have been on the front lines. Several weeks ago the noted pollster Frank Luntz convened a focus group of Jewish college students from campuses all over the U.S. Among their descriptions of their experiences were:

- Terrifying
- I am constantly walking on eggshells.
- I have friends who have been spat on.
- I have been called a kike and a baby killer.
- I have heard my fellow students chanting: 'Hitler didn't finish the job.'

And add to these the instances of physical attacks on Jewish students.

May I point out the obvious. What is happening on these campuses goes well beyond anti-Zionism, it is *blatant* antisemitism.

May I also say that I have heard several Jewish students, some of them leaders, from around the country. They are strong in their Jewish identity and convictions. They are not intimidated. They are positive about the future. Their Jewish pride helps them persevere. They are not broken. They see their struggle as a familiar chapter in the history of the Jewish People. Some of them are your children, your family members. They are part of our Beth Tikvah mishpacha. I am so proud of them, as we all are.

They have our support as well as that of Jewish organizations on and off the campus.

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect on the year that has passed. It goes without saying that it has not been a particularly easy year. So much seems broken or on the verge of breaking. But I want to suggest that, to cite Leonard Cohen once again, while it seems like there is a crack in everything, that is where the light gets in. And there is light at the end of the tunnel.

There are those who draw parallels to what is happening today with Germany in the 1930's; I am not among them. 2024 is *not* 1934. The Jewish community has strong communal structures and organizations in place. There is support at the highest levels of our government-- two years ago the Biden Administration created a position of Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, with the rank of *Ambassador*, and appointed the renowned Holocaust historian, Deborah Lipstadt, to the post. And polls show that, despite the rise in antisemitism, we continue to enjoy widespread acceptance and are viewed positively in American society.

We *have to* and we will combat antisemitism unflinchingly, wherever it rears its ugly head, and wherever possible in partnership with other people and communities of good will, and there are many. We must ensure that younger generations of Jews understand not only the evils of Jew-hatred, but, even more, the beauty of Jewish tradition and Jewish life that has made our centuries-long journey so extraordinary.

I am profoundly moved by poet Sarah Ruhl's words: "To be a Jew today is to live with a unique combination of grief and hope." We can mourn our losses while holding onto hope for a better future. As we gather this morning and in the days ahead, may we carry our broken Hallelujahs with us and be inspired to create a world of healing, wholeness, and hope.

תכלה שנה וקללותיה, תחל שנה וברכותיה

"May this year and its curses come to an end, and may a new year of blessing begin."



