

## **Rosh Hashanah 5785 Day 1 Sermon: Bearing Our Vulnerability, One Pebble at a Time**

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Poster (“ma’arivin”); Stones, large rock

*Shanah Tovah.*

On **October 7** – *one hour* into October 7, here – I got a **phone call**. It was our **oldest son**, Aiden – calling from Israel. “We’re **okay** – but we were moved from Jerusalem, back to our base, northeast of Tel Aviv. Something’s happening down South...” It was 8:00 AM there. They still didn’t know *how bad* it was, down South.

“We’re okay,” he said. That was the **last time** a connected Jewish person has felt “**okay**,” since. It was **MY kid** on the other line... but it *could have been any* of our children. And in Israel, it was **too many people’s** children...

When our **baby cries**, we **console** them... When our **little child falls** and skins his knee, we **hold them**, we dab the blood, we **help** them up and **dry their tears**.... When our **teenagers, stung** by their first feeling of betrayal by friends who don’t stand strong with them – we can **listen**, if they are ashamed at a mistake, or crying because they can’t understand why someone hurt them if they did nothing wrong. We **stroke their tear-soaked faces**, because as **adults** – as parents or teachers or loved ones after a loss, a hurt, a shame – **we** can **rationaly “zoom out,”** see that this pain is not forever – that we will **rebound**, and we say those words of **reassurance** – we say, “**It’ll be okay.**”

**“Sha, sha - It’ll be okay.”** *Can we say that? Can I say that to our children? To our young adults on the college campus? To our Israeli brothers and sisters? As your Rabbi, can I say that to you, right now?*

I tell you: I **desperately want** to be able to assume that role, to reassure, to reaffirm... But still I **feel powerless, vulnerable**... Powerless to honestly say “**it’ll be okay.**” **Powerless to heal the rifts** *within* our Jewish People, *within* our own nation, here in the United States, for that matter... **Powerless to chart a realistic path to peace and security**.... Dozens of you have **asked me, quietly**, away from the rallies and microphones: “Rabbi – **do you believe** we can get the **hostages home**, that they will be **okay**, that Israel will be safe, that **antisemitism** here will ease up, that this will end, or at least quiet down?” To your question – which is really **not a question but a prayer** – what can I say?

Like many of **you**, like most of our **brothers and sisters** in **Israel**, like our **college students**, like **Jews abroad** who live under constant antagonism – I have been carrying that sense of **powerlessness and vulnerability**. I feel it as a **weight**. The **burden keeps me up** most nights. It is... **unbearable**.

I **grew up** – my entire life – **believing in Jewish Power**, in our **invincibility**. I grew up on the idea that – thanks in no small part to Israel – we were **assured a better future**, because we had **re-invented Jewish strength, out of the ashes** of our worst massacre, our **worst vulnerability**, when the world turned its back, during the Shoah. **We wrote the story**, we **composed the mythos** – we were assured that our light unto the nations would never go out.... **NOT** that being Jewish would always be **fun, or easy** – but that there WAS a **path to safety, security, continuity**. I **grew up believing** in **Jewish self-assuredness, pride**, and yes – **Jewish power**.

But on October 7, I **tasted the bitterness** that our **ancestors** had known – that taste of powerlessness, of our **vulnerability**. As Israel scrambled to **re-solidify** its borders and planned its response, one Israeli pundit predicted it: “When we **responded like Jews** (meaning pre-Israel, **sheep-to-the-slaughter, powerless Jews**), we had your sympathy. **Now** that we’re **responding like Israelis**, we’ll lose your sympathy.”

The **world lost its sympathy** with **blinding speed**: First it was justification – “well, there’s a **broader context**, it’s resistance” – **BULL**. There is *never* a “broader context” for **rape**. There was **justification**, and even **celebration** – just like in Paterson, New Jersey on September 11, 2001 – and make no mistake, there **will be celebrations** *this* Monday, October 7, again. But this time, there were **American college professors** joining in on those celebrations! “The antisemitism is just a **minority voice**,” shrugged the university Presidents. But could you **imagine any other group** – people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ – being told to “chill out,” as they were **harassed, mocked, amidst their pain** – told “Eh, we can’t stop this protest gathering, and **only a minority** of the protesters are racist, ableist, homophobic” - ?!

But for us, we **lost the world’s sympathy** – **before October** was over. I know this, because I was in Israel on October 30 – and one of my **Israeli friends** had already **asked me** – *amazingly!* – “**Are YOU okay**, with all the antisemitism in the States?” An Israeli, asking **ME** – “are you okay?” - !

We “lost” the world’s sympathy, the college campus’ **sympathy**, because we **never had it**: I do *not* proudly wave a “**victim card**” as a Jew – I’m *not* proud of that at all. I’m **proud** of the *opposite* – of Jewish Power. **Power to defend** ourselves, yes – but *also* **power to stand**, in disproportionate numbers, as **allies** with others in need – the **disenfranchised**, the **weak**, the **poor**, the **endangered**. There are almost no Jews in **Haiti**, but we are first to send help after an earthquake. There are no Jews in **Darfur** – but we championed that cause. **Civil rights**, free **hospitals** and **burial** associations... inhabiting comfortably, in **disproportionate acceptance** numbers, the **cathedrals of higher education** that now have turned their backs... not to mention museums and theaters and cultural institutions... **Engaging fully, caring for everyone - THAT is Jewish Power.**

But *only* for us **Jews**, is that **power also a liability** – that our success over the past seventy-five years *indicts* us as powerful. And then, our sworn enemies took advantage of a moment of **fracture**, of **weakness**, perhaps of **catastrophic** Israeli **self-assuredness** on the Southern border – and **here we are, vulnerable again. Victims, again.** Though *only* for us **Jews**, did this **vulnerability NOT** earn us the **moral high ground**, this time. We cannot be *too* powerful, but also we cannot be **vulnerable enough**, to be embraced by the world.

Over our entire history, the **world has not liked powerful Jews.** Dara Horn wrote the book, *People Love Dead Jews* – but if they can’t get that, then at a *minimum*, people **hate powerful Jews.** It’s an **insidious** brand of antisemitism – that so long as we are **not too powerful**, we’re *...tolerated.* It goes back to **Pharaoh** and **Haman**, St. Augustine and Umar, **allowing us to live** in Christian and Muslim-conquered lands, but **only as downtrodden, second-class** residents... And it *continues* to Pre-Inquisition Spain, Napoleonic France and yes, pre-Nazi Germany.

And *worse* – like in an **abusive relationship** – many of US, as Jews, have started to *internalize* this distaste for Jewish Power. It’s the **joke**, about **two Jewish men** sitting on a park bench – **one** reading *The Forward*, sighs – “**Oy. So much tzures** – the world hates us, we’re fighting within our own, assimilation from within, antisemitism from without...” – And then he looks over, and the **other guy** is reading *Der Sturmer!* He says, “How could you read that **antisemitic rag?!**” To which the other guy says, “Are you kidding?! It’s **how I get GOOD news!** According to this, we run the banks, we run the media, we have all the power!”

The **joke**, of course, is **tragic**: People **hate powerful Jews**, and we *too* shrink away, we shy away from our own influence. In **public spheres**, we are **embarrassed** by it.

Like **any nation**, *including* the United States, **Israel is far from perfect** – indeed, Ben Gurion said **we’ll know** we will have come into our own when we have **Jewish bank robbers** and **prostitutes** being **arrested** by **Jewish police officers**.... *Despite* this imperfection - **Israel has only proved the world’s distaste for Jewish Power.** **Israel’s success, Israel’s deterrence** of neighbors and world bodies that seek to **delegitimize** and **destroy** her, **Israel’s leadership** in **cybersecurity** and **hi-tech**, and **startups** and **ecology** and **water reclamation** and **LGBTQ** rights and more – this **success, this power** – is **distasteful** to a world that does **not like Jewish power and preeminence.**

And so, on October 7, the **world shrugged**... or **rationalized**... or celebrated – in a moment of Jewish powerlessness. *Despite* **past alliances** with others, we **heard... silence.** We felt... **alone. Betrayed. Vulnerable. Unsure... scared... powerless.**

And *even with* the past weeks’ military successes, for **Israelis** – this sense of **powerlessness cuts against** their very being. **Against our being**, as post-Holocaust, post-Six Day War Jews. A dozen years ago, Elie **Wiesel re-defined** “**Never Again**” – he said “Never again’ has become more than a slogan – it’s a **prayer, a promise, a vow**” – and now, it feels that I, that Israel, that **we cannot make that promise** right now. Because October 7 IS – the “**AGAIN**” of “**NEVER AGAIN.**” **Again**, for the first time in three generations, vulnerable.

And the vulnerability is **not just global** – it’s **deeply personal.** For all of us; for ME, as a Jewish leader, as someone who **cares** about **THE Jewish People**, but also as someone who **cares** about **Jewish people – individuals.** As a **parent!**

I **want** – *desperately* – to tell my children, to tell your children on college campuses, to tell all of you – that we’ll be **okay.** But for the **first time** I can **remember** – we are **doubting** our **ability** to **chart our destiny** as Jews. That was what the **myth** of an **invincible Israel** had given us, *without* having to think too much.... And **now** – we need to **restore** that sense of **Jewish agency**, and power... **If we’re not invincible, we at least** need to **restore our power.**

**Judaism demands** of us *never* to **capitulate to evil**. Israel made that statement, unequivocally, over the past two weeks. **Giving in to terrorists** will only **embolden more antisemitism and terrorism**, throughout the world. It **devalues Israel** as a **strategic partner** to nations like the United States, and also **Saudi Arabia**, who still, after more than a year, *still* wants a strategic alliance. We have learned **how important deterrence** is, against those who seek to destroy us. There are **no “angels of our better nature”** here – who will be benevolent in our defeat. That’s **what “from the River to the Sea” means** – it’s **violent genocide** of Israelis, *not* a **quiet defeat**. Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran have never said anything else.... And in this, we should believe them.

We **cannot back down**. We **cannot forget** the **faces** of the **hostages**, the **exhaustion** and anger of their families. And *no matter* whether we believe that **military pressure** or **diplomatic negotiation** are the best tactic to bring them home – we have to **know** that if, *God-forbid*, those were **our kids**, we’d **move heaven and earth**, and **expect every effort** to make it happen, any other long-term defense priority be damned.... AND *while* we **keep our hearts** with the hostages, we *also* must **make sure** that we **don’t abdicate** those defense priorities, because God knows – **our enemies** who will **mark** this coming **October 7** with **parties and sweets** in the streets are planning their next massacre.

On a **lesser level** – but **still, very real**: We **cannot forget** the **confused faces** of our **college students**, **unsure** if they are **safe** wearing their **Jewish stars** or even **AEPi** or **AEPHi letter sweatshirts** while walking across the quad.

We **cannot forget** our **anguish** – the stories and images of that horrible day – 20-year-old Israelis whispering reports of the barbarism into their cellphones: “They’re playing **soccer with body parts**.” The first wave of Hamas gleefully calling their friends back in Gaza, saying, “Come on! It’s all for the taking” – *that’s* when the **looting and rape** and **kidnapping** and **mutilation** happened even more than the pre-dawn attack. **Please, join me** – *stay angry* about that. **Our rage is part of what makes us human**.

I **know** you *WANT* me to say, “**Sha, sha – it’ll be okay**.” But I **cannot** do that – at least not alone.... Which brings me to the **only way** I can imagine, that we might re-affirm our humanity, that we **might lift** the **weight** of **Jewish vulnerability** and **powerlessness since October 7** off our shoulders.

I discovered this *one* possible way to re-affirm our humanity from a **very personal learning** and moment of grief counseling that I shared with a congregant, a little over a year ago. He had a **beautiful new baby girl**, and in the *same months*, his **sister** had **lost** a **young child** after a devastating diagnosis. The **doctors had been powerless** to save his nephew. And now, especially as he held the joy of his own daughter, *he* **felt powerless** to be present as a consolation for his sister. He **confronted** the **last High Holidays** with **fear**, and **anger... heartbreak, rage, and defiance**. On a **personal, intimate level** – the **same emotions** with which I **began, today**. **How**, he cried out – **how** can I say the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer – “**who will live, who will die**” – when **my family, my sister, her baby, has gone down fighting**, when I **cannot accept** a God who lets this happen?”

As **his Rabbi**, as **your Rabbi**: I could *not* say, “**Sha, sha – it’ll be okay**.” But we looked at the prayer together, and came across the **final refrain**: “**Repentance, prayer and charity avert God’s evil decree...**” Growing up, I remember that being **sung triumphantly**: *[SING]* “*U-teshuvah, u-tefillah, u-tzedakah, ma’avirin et ro’a ha-gezeirah.*” How can we flaunt that, with someone who has **experienced unspeakable loss, vulnerability?**

**Now, I sing it hushed** – not powerful, but a **weak glimmer** of reassurance – a **recipe for resilience**. I **understand it differently**: “*Teshuvah* – openness to charting a **new, better path...** *Tefillah* – prayer, **reflection** on how we can be in **better relationship** with one another and with God... *Tzedakah* – not just giving money, but acting in a way that **adds goodness** to the world. These things do **NOT avert** misfortune, they **do not change** the **reality** of pain and vulnerability in our lives. I **wish** they did – but that’s **not the promise** in the second half of the sentence:

The **refrain** says that **reflection, prayer, and acts of goodness** *[POSTER]* **MA’AVIRIN** the misfortune. That word – **MA’AVIRIN** – it comes from the word **AVAR**, to pass through, to **endure**. The **grammar nerd** in me conjugates it in the **Causative Voice** – that “*ma’avirin*” means that **repentance, reflection, prayer and acts of goodness cause us to, help us to, AVAR** – to **endure** the pain and vulnerability in our lives.

And when that pain feels like... a **BOULDER** – **too weighty to bear**, to lift? These **little acts of goodness, of connection, of love** – little acts to **incrementally**



**improve our path (*teshuvah*)... little prayers for glimmers of hope (*tefillah*)... little gestures of love and goodness for others, that cement a bond of care and kindness (*tzedakah*) – They do *not* fix the pain, they do *not* erase the vulnerability. They do *not*, in one fell swoop, make the boulder bearable.**

But collectively, they **DO** make a difference. I cannot lift the boulder. I am... *powerless*... to move that weight. But **WE CAN** each hold a small stone, a pebble. We can endure, we can make it through – *Ma'avirin*...

That's what I'm going to ask you to do, for this week, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. **Hold a pebble, a small stone... to remind us of the small bit of the lift that you CAN manage.** The small change we CAN make, to ease our burden. Under each aisle seat is a container of small stones. Pass them down. Take a stone. **Feel it** in your hand, in your pocket. **Hold it** – and let it force you to ask yourself: **Whose burden can I help bear? Whom can I console? Whom can I help** – with generosity of resources, with generosity of time, with generosity of care?

**Will it fix** the problems of our world, *wholesale*? Will this little bit of charoset drown out all the maror, the bitterness of our vulnerability, of our pain this year? Will our one gesture, our one vote, our one effort make ALL the difference? Perhaps not, on its own: But never doubt it WILL make A difference. Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." And it *will* make that difference because "*ma'avirin*" – because it will make us more able to bear, to endure, the pain and vulnerability that are, unmistakably, in this world.

The truth is, we are NOT powerless. We are, *collectively*, quite powerful. We CAN lift a boulder – one pebble at a time. Our Jewish tradition teaches, *Lo alecha ha'melachah ligmor* – you don't have to do the entire task – *v'lo atah ben-chorin l'hibatel mimenah* – but we cannot ignore our part completely.

This is your pebble, this is your part, this is what we can each do: **Refuse to be silent... refuse to be paralyzed** when someone makes a statement that questions or denies Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, or when someone categorizes Israel as the evil oppressors in this moment... **bring the plight of the hostages** front-and-center... Demand, in any way we can, that university leaders ensure the safety and inclusion of Jewish students and pro-Israel students – affording them the same protections and voice that any other group would have on campus... **Be safe, AND be proud** in showing our Judaism, in re-claiming our voice... Demand that the world see Hamas' and Hizballah's atrocities and war crimes – against Israelis, against Americans, and against their own Palestinian people as the root of the problem here.

It's a big boulder, friends – it can make us *FEEL* powerless - but we **must shatter our vulnerability**, our sense that the justness of our cause has been silenced, that Jewish vulnerability is now tolerated in public and on campus, and tolerated even *here*, in our own self-doubting hearts – we must shatter this weight, here in the United States, wherever it is... *Whether* it's fueled by antisemitism, wherever in the world that hatred and antagonism toward our right to Jewish self-determination has been de-legitimized – we must shatter this boulder into a thousand manageable stones that we each CAN bear – and along with *acheinu*, our Israeli brothers and sisters, we must believe that we can be strong, together, *again*!

I'll conclude with just one more Israel story – a story from better times, when I was in Jerusalem with our Confirmation Class Trip, about a dozen years ago. We were on our tour bus, trying to navigate a narrow street near the Inbal Hotel – and some guy in a Peugeot had blocked the entire street to run into a building, because there was no parking. Cars lined up behind our bus, everyone honking, angry Israeli drivers. I smiled at my group of teens, and had them get off the bus. We surrounded the car, about twelve of us. We picked up the car, and we put it on the sidewalk. The other cars behind us cheered. Somehow, the honking turned happier, triumphant. We got back on our bus, exhilarated. The car's driver came out of the building, shaking his fist at us, as we drove off. I kept shouting, "We moved... a car!... We moved... a car!"

Some of those car-lifters are here now. They are now in their late twenties. I was a dozen years younger, too. But together, we moved a car, and *ma'avirin* – we were able to pass.

Together, one kindness, one pebble at a time: We can bear the weightiness of our vulnerability in this moment. We can DO things to deter the threats – threats from those who seek our destruction, threats from our neighbors, threats from our own people who have internalized the message that Jews should not be powerful, threats from the silence of those we *thought* were our allies, threats from those here who vilify and victimize us, while claiming we are the

oppressors.... **We can do things to re-affirm our right to live in peace and security, our right to chart a brighter Jewish future... We can do things, incrementally, to build a better world.** Indeed – *as much as* we as a people have a story of vulnerability – *even more*, we have a story of resilience.

**This week – and beyond:** As a reminder of all we can do, **carry your pebble forward. Share with me**, with Rabbi Markowitz – **what it moved you to do** – what **action**, what **kindness**, what **passion** it sparked. **One pebble at a time**, we **will move mountains**. It is **the Jewish way**, to a **better future**. It is the **only way** there ever was.

*Shanah tovah.*