

The Meaning of October 7th

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There is a bizarre story in the Talmud that pictures Moses sitting in the back row of the classroom of the great Rabbi Akiva. This is odd because Moses lived about 1400 years before Akiva.

In response to a student's question about a certain law, Rabbi Akiva says, "That law was given to Moses at Mt.

Sinai.” Moses is surprised that Akiva attributes the law to him, because this is the first time he has ever heard it.

While the law Akiva was teaching was developed long after Moses’ time, Akiva attributes it to Moses because the law was rooted in the ideas, principles and teachings that Moses taught in the Torah.

That’s what we Jews do-- we root ourselves in our ancient wisdom *and* we innovate.

The destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent exile to Babylon in the 6th century B.C.E. led to the creation of the Hebrew Bible.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. led to the development of Rabbinic Judaism, a.k.a., the Judaism we practice today.

In 14th century Poland, Christian authorities prohibited Jews from baking bread---so the Jews boiled it instead, for which we are eternally grateful, because that was how the bagel came into existence.

The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 led to the creation of Kabbalah.

The Chelmnitzki revolts against Polish landlords in 1648-1649 led to the murder of 3,000-6,000 Jews and paved the way for the creation of Hasidic Judaism which offered solace for the despairing Jewish people.

The Shoah accelerated the development of the two most vibrant Jewish communities in history—Israel and North America.

And now add October 7th to the list.

My colleague Rabbi Jeff Salkin—who will speak here on December 20th—notes that the Hebrew word for “crisis” and “birthing stool” are the same—משבר.

We Jews have always given birth to something new after a crisis, and I hope—I believe—October 7th will be no exception.

October 7th has created a משבר a crisis of confidence for us American Jews.

In the last several years, we have experienced a disconcerting surge in antisemitism. In the two weeks after October 7th, there was a 400 percent increase in antisemitic incidents in the U.S.

We Jews have long been accustomed to the antisemitism, all too often violent, if not deadly, of the far right—the murders of Jews in Pittsburgh and Poway—to name a few examples; and this far right antisemitism continues to be an enormous threat to us, which we ignore, minimize or underestimate at our great peril.

We have experienced antisemitism that is not clearly from the right or the left, like the attacks on the kosher

supermarket in Jersey City and the Hanukkah attack on a rabbi in Monsey, both in 2019.

Antisemitism from the left is in full bloom and is particularly challenging because it emanates from the circles in which we Jews have usually been comfortable, like the world of the arts, literature, education and more, where we are experiencing nothing less than an attempt at erasure. All too often, if you're a Zionist, you are persona non grata.

We have been deeply hurt that organizations whose putative raison d'être is the betterment of the world apparently have a blind spot when it comes to the slaughter and rape of Jews, either equivocating, staying

silent, or worse, justifying or celebrating the attacks—all this before Israel had fired even a single shot in Gaza in response to the terror attacks.

Perhaps the symbol par excellence of this crisis of confidence for us is campus antisemitism. If there is any institution that symbolizes how at home we feel in the U.S, it is the university.

As Rabbi Salkin puts it:

“For centuries, Jews have put their faith in the university—in higher education, rationality, and intellectualism. We saw universities as temples of enlightenment. Jews have held that ticket in their hands as their ticket into the world.

Many Jews feel betrayed, and for good reason” (*Tikkun Ha’ Am—Israel and the Crisis of Liberal Judaism*, p. 16-17).

All this has created a crisis leading us to ask, “Is America really different?”

There is a crisis, that is for sure. The question is, What will it give birth to?

I believe we started giving birth on October 8th— to a renewed and strengthened sense of “peoplehood.”

Peoplehood is the idea that we Jews are an ethnic-religious group, we are not only practitioners of a religion, but we belong to a people, with our own unique language, land and history, notwithstanding the claim of some anti-

Zionists that we are a religion only. We are a people, a large extended family.

Peoplehood is something we feel as much as describe, whether because we were born into the Jewish people, joined it through conversion, or are part of Jewish families and identify with the Jewish people.

We feel peoplehood, we feel that identification with our family, when something like October 7th happens and it hits us so hard. We may have never stepped foot in Israel, we may not know Israel from Islip, we may have never met a single Israeli, but so many of us feel like we were hit with a ton of bricks on October 7 because it happened to our *people*.

When I visited Israel this summer, I was shattered by the devastation I saw at Kibbutz Nir Oz, by the stories of survivors, the stories of those who were murdered. of those who are displaced from their homes. I was shattered because what I saw and heard happened to *my family*, my people. It is tragic if it happens to anyone, of course.

But it hits me harder when it is my family whose houses were burned with people inside, whose babies were killed, whose women, men and children were raped, tortured and kidnapped. In Israel, when people ask, “How are you?” people will often respond *Shlomi, Shlom Ami*,” I am as good my people are.” For Jews around the world, we are

not good because our people are not good. That's what peoplehood feels like.

And I believe that 10/7 is leading to a rebirth of peoplehood, of belonging and connection to the Jewish people.

I felt peoplehood in action when I stood with hundreds of thousands of other people—Jews and non-Jews alike—on the Washington Mall in November, rallying for Israel, and at our MetroWest Federation rally last October 8th and on this past Monday's memorial commemoration.

Our strong sense of peoplehood is manifested in the way we have raised our voices to fight antisemitism, support and raise funds for Israel, travel on solidarity missions to

Israel, raise awareness of the hostages, and because we know what it is like when one of our own suffers, to remember that innocent people in Gaza and Lebanon are enduring horrific suffering of their own, caught in the crossfire of Hamas and Hezbollah's and Iran's war to kill as many Jews as possible and eradicate Israel.

We see peoplehood in the fact that Jewish life on campus is as vibrant as ever, if not more so, despite the antisemitism, and even, oddly enough, because of it.

Ironically, the anti-Israel protests have created new Zionists, students who are now connecting to Israel, Zionism and their Jewish identity because of the vilification they have faced.

We also see an increase in the number of people engaging in Jewish life and expressing interest in conversion.

As R. Josh Weinberg puts it:

“We have come to refer to this demographic as the October 8th Jew. They represent a diverse demographic within the Jewish community who were profoundly affected by the October 7th attacks and the subsequent rise of antisemitism. They now feel a renewed sense of Jewish identity and have become involved in the life of the Jewish community. They are driven by a desire for safety, solidarity, and a strong Jewish identity...This is a group seeking affirmation and a sense of belonging. ...They make up 30% of the Jewish community surging in every age

demographic with “young adult” and “mid-life” making up the largest portions of the community.” (“One Year Later—What Has Changed for Us?” from www.arza.org, 10/6/2024)

In the wake of the crisis of 10/7-we are indeed giving birth to a stronger Jewish people.

Now, that will also entail focusing a lot of Jewish communal time and energy on another demographic, whom Rabbi Donniel Hartman calls the “troubled committed,” who represent about 60% of the North American Jewish community. These are Jews who are “troubled” mostly because they feel that Israel and the established American Jewish organizations’ approach

towards Israel and Palestinians is inconsistent with their values and with Jewish values; but “committed” because they care about Israel and feel a connection to her and to their Judaism and the Jewish people.

And talking to the troubled committed and understanding them needs to be an important part of our communal response to October 7. Talking and understanding is not the same as agreeing.

We ignore or belittle the troubled committed at our great peril and Israel’s great peril because in an era of increasing anti-Zionism, we need as many people as possible to feel a strong connection to Israel and the Jewish people.

That is why my hope is that October 7th will be the birthing stool for a new 21st century Zionism, one that reflects the world of today's Jewish community if we are to maintain and strengthen the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel and to prevent the troubled committed from becoming the troubled uncommitted.

It will require of all of us a new level of openness to, and genuine curiosity about, different views on Israel. It is easy to talk only with people with whom we agree; if we are to give birth to a stronger sense of belonging to the Jewish people, then this moment in Jewish history demands that we break out of our echo chambers and take each other's

views seriously, so we can create a Zionism that embraces all of us.

That means that those of us who are right of center being open to seriously addressing the issues that young Jews and others prioritize, even when it is painful. 21st century Zionism, R. Hartman suggests, will need to find a way to integrate into Zionism the priorities that the troubled committed have like Israel's commitment to democracy, human rights, religious pluralism, minority rights and to making more efforts to at least try to end or ameliorate the Occupation.

It involves those of us who are left of center realizing that the view from Israel is different than the view from here.

We would do well to remember that as we speak we are sitting one mile from Dunkin' Donuts and not one mile from terrorist organizations whose main goal is to kill as many Jews as possible, and we need to refrain from trying to make Israel into a Middle Eastern version of liberal America.

That means that just as Israelis usually think first and foremost about security concerns, we need to also. Just as Israel does not define itself solely through the Occupation, neither should we; just as Israelis see the conflict with the Palestinians as part of a larger regional security issue, namely the threat from Iran, so should we—even when it is painful.

This is a tall order and creating a Zionism for today's world and not the world of fifty years ago, will require all hands-on deck—historians, theologians, philosophers, rabbis, cantors, educators and Jewish communal leaders from Israel and around the world—coming together to articulate a vision for Israel and the Diaspora and our joint priorities. This isn't an academic exercise—the wellbeing of Israel and the Diaspora are intertwined; it was true before 10/7 and even more so now. 90% of Jews live in Israel and North America; we need as many of us as possible to feel a deep connection to our people and to Israel and that requires a new 21st century Zionism.

This is hard. But you know what, it was even harder for our ancestors to survive the destruction of two Temples and exiles, expulsion from Spain, the Shoah and so much else.

We have centuries of experience creating new things in the aftermath of crisis, of transforming **משבר**/crisis into **משבר**/a birthing stool for something lasting and strong.

Just imagine that decades, centuries from now, we are Moses sitting in Rabbi Akiva's classroom and we listen and hear as our descendants say, "It is because of what our ancestors did long ago that we are blessed with a vibrant, strong, diverse and flourishing Israel and worldwide Jewish community and that nothing makes us

prouder than to say we are a part of the Jewish people—

Am Yisrael Chai.