



BETH TFILOH בית תפלה
CONGREGATION

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What the World Needs Now

When a colleague asked me what I was going to speak about on Rosh Hashana, I quickly answered, “Whitney Houston, Dionne Warwick, the Beatles, Taylor Swift, Led Zepplin, AC/DC, James Taylor, Sister Sledge and Naftali Imber.” “Why those?” he asked. I responded, “Anything to avoid talking about this past year!”

What’s there to say about a year that started with a pogrom from Gaza and ended with missiles from Iran, with 97 Jewish hostages still held through it all. As Israelis regularly express it: *Ein milim* – there are no words.

I don’t have to tell you what kind of year this has been for our people. These three magazine cover stories say it all:

Commentary Magazine: The Evil War Against American Jews.

The Economist: Israel Alone

The Atlantic: The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending
Right beneath that: “Hatred from the Right and the Left

It hurts! It hurts to be hated by people who don’t know you and don’t want to know you. It hurts to be hated by people to whom you have given Einstein, Freud, Salk, Sabin and other Jews who have contributed to all mankind by discovering cures for diseases, new technologies, literary and musical masterpieces and advancing causes for freedom and human rights.

Hayom haras olam – Today is the birthday of the world! Today God created the heavens and the earth. The question is: why did He do it? Wait ... let me correct that with the proper pronoun to show you I am still “with it.” Why did He/She do it? Didn’t He/She have enough to take care of? Why this world, and why us? The Torah itself provides no answer but Jewish

tradition does. In the words of my teacher, the great Jewish thinker of the 20th century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, God created the world “in order to care, to sustain and to love.” For God, the universe was a lonely place. God wants to love and be loved. God wants relationships, and for that God had to create a world that is other than Gods ... with people who are different than God.

“God wants to love and be loved.” It’s not only we Jews who didn’t feel loved this year. I thought about this when I opened the May 30th issue of the Wall Street Journal and the first article I read was by Peggy Noonan, with the headline: “We are starting to enjoy hatred.” That was followed up a few days later on the website The Hill with an article headlined, “Do Americans hate each other enough to tear the country apart?” And then the New York Times tells us: “How Creators are Facing Hateful Comments Head-On.”

You see, there have always been differences of opinion – different views and perspectives, etc. etc. But now it has reached a point where we don’t simply disagree with each other ... we oftentimes have come to hate each other. Perhaps never before in our time do we need to take to heart the words that Dionne Warwick belted out:

What the world needs now
Is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of

(Come on everyone ... sing it!)
What the world needs now
Is love, sweet love
No, not just for some, but for everyone

It’s interesting that this song was written by Burt Bacharach and Hal Davis, two Jews. Their words capture the essence of Judaism. It’s right there in the Talmud where Rabbi Akiva – the greatest of our sages – said: “The fundamental principle of the Torah is the commandment, “*v’ahavta l’reacha kamocho* – you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” We Jews took those words to heart and put them into practice.

Here in America it started in the early 1900’s with the influx to our country of Jews from central and Eastern Europe who found a home in the labor and socialist movements ... FDR – New Deal ... Jews regularly voting for liberal Democrats. Worker’s rights, civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, freedom of religion, peace movements and other left-wing and social causes. We walked hand in hand with them. And then came October 7. And they stabbed us in the back! We shared their values, but we found out they don’t value us!

- Queers for Palestine? You've got to be kidding!
- The NAACP calls for a cease fire ... upset at Palestinian losses? We helped start the NAACP! So much for our love.
- Greta Thunberg, the climate activist nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, cries out, "CRUSH ZIONISM" at a pro-Palestinian rally.
- Headline: Jewish Sex Therapists Battle Their Professional Association. That's after we gave them Dr. Ruth!
- Jewish students, synagogues are attacked! There are calls for Israel's destruction!
- Where was the voice of feminist organizations when Jewish women were being raped?
- Pictures of Jewish hostages get torn down, while pictures of lost dogs stay up.

Why? Why do they hate us? That's a good question! Here's a few more:

- Why were Jews butchered by Crusaders a thousand years ago?
- Why were we accused of causing the Black plague? Of killing Christian children for their blood?
- Why were we expelled from England in 1290 and Spain in 1492?
- Why were we killed by the hundreds of thousands in the Ukraine?
- Why did Marx accuse us of being capitalists, and Henry Ford accuse us of being communists?
- Why did Martin Luther and Voltaire and Richard Wagner and Kings and Popes and Czars hate us? Why? Why? Why?

Taylor Swift speaks for our people in her popular song, "Shake it Off" ... "And the haters are gonna hate, hate, hate, hate ..." No, it's not everyone! But it's enough for us to need armed guards in front of every synagogue in America. It's enough to make Jews the world over feel more insecure than at any time since the Holocaust.

We as Jews are living through a pivotal time in the history of our people. Where we, as American Jews, will go from here is yet to be known. But one thing I do know. My greatest concern, our greatest threat, comes not from those "out there" who hate us, but from within the Jewish world, those Jews who don't love us.

- The Jewish Voice for Peace published a Haggadah this year in which Pharaoh is depicted as the Israeli government and includes a list of the ten spiritual plagues of Zionism.

- Several students at the Rabbinical School of the Reconstructionist movement drop out because the school seems to teach an anti-Zionist perspective. At graduation some of the new Rabbis wore Arab Kaffiyahs!
- Many of the protestors on college campuses are young Jews who think they are practicing *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world.
- In December, more than 1,200 alumni of the Reform movement – graduates of its summer camps, youth movement and young adult programs – signed an open letter to their denominational leaders, urging them to call for an immediate cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war, warning of the grave risk of “genocide” in Gaza. Not a word of support or compassion for Jews who had been raped, kidnapped or slaughtered, leading a major Reform Rabbi, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, to deliver a sermon that has had over one million viewers entitled, “Where did we go wrong?” Announcing, “We have lost Generation Z!”

Where did we go wrong? You remember the words of the most important mitzvah of the Torah – “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself?” You know what happened? We got so involved in teaching our kids to repair the world and love their neighbors that we forgot the last words of the commandment. “Love your neighbor” is not the whole story. “Love your neighbor” requires *kamocha* - loving yourself.

In order to love others you must first love yourself. You remember what Whitney Houston sang: “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.” She is telling you exactly what Rabbi Akiva taught us thousands of years ago.

Here’s the case as taught in the Talmud. Two people are lost in the desert with enough water for one of them to survive. Ben Patura says: they share the water, even though it means they will both die! But Rabbi Akiva said – and we follow his opinion – that no, the person with the water drinks it. Our tradition teaches: “Your life takes precedence over the other’s life.” The same, Rabbi Akiva, who taught that the most important principle in the Torah is to love your neighbor, agrees with Whitney Houston. “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”

We repaired the world ... but abandoned our own Jewish world. More Jewish adults than ever classify themselves as religious “nones.” Pew survey on American Jews shows fully 40% of Jews under the age of 40 describe themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular” rather than as Jewish. In the last 20 years one-fifth of Reform Temples and one in three Conservative synagogues have closed. One can understand how we got here. Hebrew

school enrollment has plummeted 40% in the last decade and now those who go to Hebrew school go once a week at best. Soccer comes first! Bar and Bat mitzvah for many requires no Hebrew school and no synagogue. Just a tutor and a country club. For most, no Jewish education after Bar Mitzvahs. You go to college and hear accusations like: “Colonialism,” “genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” “apartheid.” Jewish students in the world of Tikkun Olam ask: Does Israel stand for that?

To quote Prof. Rachel Fish: “These are students, unfortunately, who have parents who don’t know how to help them. They, themselves, don’t have the language. They don’t have the standard knowledge. They didn’t prepare their children to walk through the world with a strong spine, steeped in their particularism, while understanding their responsibility for universalism.” How many of our “social justice” children know that that the famous verse in the Torah, “*Tzedek Tzedek tirdof* – Justice, Justice thou shalt pursue ...” continues with the words, “so that you shalt inherit and possess the land which the Lord your God gave you?” As Reform Rabbi Hirsch sadly puts it: “We’ve lost Generation Z.” And if that’s not bad enough, Daniel Gordis, scion in the Conservative movement, announced in January that he is leaving the movement. Why? In his words: “When it comes to Israel the movement tolerates hatred and hostility it would never stand for when it comes to gays, lesbians, African Americans.” For us as American Jews this is the State of the Union. Sad but true! Sad and dangerous ...

But there is one place where the Jewish world is stronger than ever before. Do you know where we don’t have to tell Jews the verse about learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all? You know where? In the one Jewish state – the state of Israel.

You know I have always loved Israel. It’s in my heart, soul and kishkas. But never have I appreciated it more than this year. Israel is absolutely amazing! Remarkable! Unbelievable! There is no other country like it! As someone put it: “Israel is the only country in the world whose citizens can be subjected to daily attacks from hostile forces who live right next to you. Do you think it’s normal to drive a car and consider that someone might shoot you, stone you, or toss a Molotov cocktail your way. It is not normal to stand on a street corner and wonder if a vehicle will ram you. It is not normal to walk on the sidewalk and speculate whether someone will stab you. It is not normal to sit in a café or on a bus and contemplate whether someone has placed a bomb there. And it is not normal to be the recipients of enemy rockets and missiles on a regular basis.”

All this before Oct 7th. There are no words to fully describe what Israel has been through since Oct 7. I don't know how they do it!

- One day you can be working in your bank, the next day you are in uniform in Gaza.
- One day your father sleeps at home, the next day he is gone and you're not sure when he's coming back.
- One day all seems normal, the next day it's your grandmother who is taking care of you ... your parents have been "called up."
- Who knew that your math teacher is really a commando fighter and your kindergarten teacher is actually an intelligence officer?
- Who knew you have to constantly rearrange your schedule to go to the funeral of someone you knew who fell in battle?

Can you imagine living like this? Unbelievable! Remarkable! Amazing!

It is said that Israel has three generations in its midst – the generation of the “founders”, those are the ones of 1948. Then there is the generation of the “builders”, that's the generation following the Six Day War in 1967. And now there is this generation ... which had no name, and, so, was called “Generation Z.” Remember what Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch said about American Jews: “We've lost generation Z.”

Well, in Israel this generation, Generation Z, had often been criticized for being superficial, shallow, misinformed and social media obsessed. In Israel, people doubted that they had the same warrior spirits of Israel's great founders and builders. After Oct 7th we learned that we were wrong! Israel's young soldiers have proven that they are willing and able to fight a tough war, and have shown us that they are true heroes, dedicated patriots, and that we can count on them to lead us. By the hundreds of thousands, they left behind families, children and careers, work and peaceful lives, and went out to defend our people's homeland. This is the generation that lost friends, evacuated the wounded, paid shiva calls—and didn't lose hope and pressed on.

And you know what else? They kept having babies. While the birthrate is down in most every country, Israel is the only developed country with a growing population. Unbelievable!

They are bringing more Jewish children into this crazy, mixed-up world. How do you explain that?

Or try this: During the past year 30,000 new immigrants moved to Israel. This, while a war was raging!

And if that's not enough, you know what else? In the most recent World Happiness Report, gathered by Gallup Polling Co., this year, despite its months of war in Gaza, Israel was ranked as the world's 5th happiest country! How do you explain that? It's simple. As the Beatles so eloquently put it: "All you need is love." They love being a part of the Jewish people! Since October 7 more and more Israelis have taken on more and more Jewish observance – *tzitzis*, *tefillin*, *tzedukah*, *t'hilim*, *davening*. And it's not just them! The average self-described "secular Israeli" is far more religious than he may realize and far more connected to Jewish life and observance than his Secular relative in the United States. The average Israeli may send his children to a public school but he certainly conducts a Seder each year, gives his son a Brit Mila eight days after his birth, and a Bar Mitzvah thirteen years later, and fasts on Yom Kippur. Israeli families, religious and secular, join together for Friday night Shabbat dinner. Most every Israeli learns the Bible in school, and celebrates in some way most every Jewish festival. Indeed, every Israeli can do what very few American Jews can do: read, write, speak and understand Hebrew.

The Torah describes the Jewish people as being God's "*Am segula* – a treasured possession." A poll was recently taken ... how many Israelis feel that they are part of an *Am segula*? 70% said they do! They feel collectively that they are part of something bigger than themselves. It's not a matter of secular or religious, liberal or conservative, Hawkish or Dovish. It's a matter of shared traditions, shared holidays, shared Shabbos tables, shared Hebrew language, shared Jewish calendar, a shared connectedness. As Sister Sledge sings out: "WE ARE FAMILY" ... a family connected by 3300 years of tradition. And that connects the Jews of Israel in the greatest love of all.

But what about us, here in America? We have got our work cut out. We repaired the world, now we have to repair our own world – the Jewish world. And ultimately, the responsibility is on each and every one of us. Ultimately, not the anti-Zionist rabbis and not the left-wing college professors ... but us - parents and grandparents are Generation Z's most important teachers. So you tell me ... as my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt asked his congregants:

- Your children have seen you lift a cocktail glass. Have they ever seen you lift a Kiddush cup?
- They have seen you text. Have they ever seen you study a Jewish text?
- Your children have seen you party. Have they seen you pray?
- They have seen you celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Have they seen you commemorate a yahrzeit or Jewish holiday?
- They have seen you go to the Philharmonic. Have they seen you go to a rally or prayer service for Israel?
- They have seen you cheer and shout at ball games and concerts. Have they seen you rise to say Kaddish to honor a parent who has died?
- And what about an adult education class or trip to Israel or keeping kosher or going to an Israel rally or making at *motzi* or putting on a yarmulka – even if you are not in Levinsons.

We are living through historic times – a time when Israel is threatened on all sides, by Hamas, Hezbollah, Houtis ... and that's just one letter of the alphabet! And the next letter begins with a capital I ... Iran! $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Jews living in Europe hide their Jewish identity when out in public. And you know how we feel these days as Jews living in our country where anti-Semitic hate crimes keep rising. So listen carefully: Just as the generation after the Holocaust asked their parents, "What did you do while Jews were being gassed?" ... someday our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will look back and will ask: "What did you do in 2024 when the Jews faced a world-wide crisis?"

For all too many Jews these days, Judaism is no longer a way of life. It has become an extra-curricular activity. In physical therapy I am constantly being told that I have to strengthen my core. That's what we Jews have to do these days – strengthen our core.

We who are here today – in this synagogue and in every synagogue - we are the ones who must pick up the slack to help keep our family secure. Ours is not a synagogue filled with candidates for sainthood ... not you and not me. Those Jews who consider themselves "*frum*" and their leaders "saints" are the very ones who are protesting to stay out of the Israeli Army. They may think they are on Led Zepplin's "Stairway to Heaven" but may one day end up finding themselves on AC/DC's "Highway to Hell!" You who are here today when millions of others are not, are the future of the Jewish people, and that is why here at Beth Tfiloh we do

everything possible to try and get you to do a bit more Jewishly, for your sake and for the sake of your children ... for the sake of your family! “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”

It’s not that we don’t care about other families, we do! It’s just that we have a particular love and concern for the members of our own family. We are the ones who have to be proud when others are ashamed. We are the ones who must be educated when so many are ignorant. We are the ones who have to love when others hate. We are the ones who have to care about our own when others only care about others. What I’m trying to say is that we all have got to try and do a little bit more for our people. Each of us has got to do our share, for nobody can do it all. It’s not possible! Our tradition would have us study Torah all day, raise Jewish children, make a living, visit the sick and so much more ... and no one person can do it all. But in a family, everyone has got to do something! Everyone has to bring something to the table.

If you care about your family, you make sacrifices for your family. And certainly there are sacrifices to be made to have a kosher affair, to sit shiva, to come to synagogue for kaddish and a Yizkor, to visit Israel, purchase a Bond, come to a rally and to give your time and from your pocket for your family. When our mail becomes filled with envelopes appealing for funds for projects in Israel ... don’t be annoyed! Fill them with checks and show your family what you are doing. All these sacrifices pale in comparison to the sacrifices Jews have made over the centuries and those living in Israel make to this very day. Our family has values and ethics and rich religious traditions that are the envy of mankind. Ask yourself, honestly, how much of that do you bring into your homes? And how much of it are you passing on to your children and grandchildren? If we care about our family – the Jewish family – we’ve got to do more than we have been doing.

It doesn’t take much. Listen to this story: The owners of a small plant nursery in Kibbutz Be’eri, one of the worst devastated communities in the October 7 Hamas onslaught, thought they had lost their business when they were forced to evacuate. The owner wrote on social media: “Be’eri had a thriving nursery for household plants. A little blossoming paradise that made everyone happy.” “When we were forced to evacuate, it was clear that all the plants would dry up. Rain does not get inside and the watering was done manually. After two days without water, the plants start to wither.” “Now we found a small miracle in Be’eri,” she writes, posting a video of the thriving nursery they found when they returned several weeks later and a sign explaining it. “Sorry we broke into the nursery, we had to water the plants. With love, the soldiers,” the sign said. That’s family! That’s the Jewish people!

When I read this, I cried and couldn't help but think of the words of the psalmist: "He who plants in tears will reap in joy." These days, there is a lot to cry about. But let us be grateful for the good that is there.

Learn from Dionne Warwick, the Beatles, Whitney Houston, Taylor Swift, Led Zepplin, Sister Sledge and AC/DC ... and take to heart the words of one last song, this from Naftali Imber. Listen to the words:

As long as within our hearts
The Jewish soul sings,
As long as forward to the East
To Zion, looks the eye
Our hope is not yet lost,
It is two thousand years old,
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Those are the words of the Hatikvah, Israel's National Anthem. Yes, it is a 2000 year old dream, and we are the privileged generation to see it fulfilled. Be proud to be a Jew! And show it! And to the world, we say the words of the great Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky: "Whether you like us or not, we don't care; we arrived before you and we will leave after you." And to You O'Lord, for making us Jewish, every year and on this New Year we express our gratitude with the words sung by James Taylor: "How Sweet It Is To Be Loved by You."

Od lo avda tikvatenu: our hope, has never been destroyed. We hope that this year will be filled with blessings, good tidings, health, and renewal.

"Hashem oz l'amo yitain. Hashem yevoreich et amo bashalom – the Lord has given strength to His people. May He now bless us with peace." Amen.

