

Central Reform Temple

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5785/2024

Hope and Healing

Last year, at this time, a group of CRT members and myself were enjoying a 10-day trip to Oxford England. We learned so much about Jews in medieval times in Oxford town and surrounding areas. Life had been very good to them despite some restrictions for over 100 years. They left a rich legacy of buildings and charities and houses of learning and Jewish texts and manuscripts. They provided a service to the Crown and the Crown protected them. But as that protection was removed, Jewish life in England in the late 12th century came to an end. It was the beginning of the pogrom or massacre of Jews and culminated in their expulsion from England for 400 years.

And it was while we were in England that the latest pogrom or massacre of Jews took place almost a year ago on October 7th in Southern Israel. It was the worst atrocity against Jews since the Holocaust and was savage and brutal in its ferocity and outcome. Over 1200 people slaughtered in their homes or streets or the park of a music festival, the vast majority of whom were civilians - grandparents, parents, children and even babies. 250 people were taken hostage and hidden in the tunnels inside Gaza – the youngest Ariel Bibas aged 5 and his brother Kfir Bibas aged 18 months are still there along with their parents and over 100 others. We don't know how many of them are still alive.

Their families in Israel are in sheer agony not only about knowledge of them and their well-being but also of the politics that has denied them the possibility of return. Hersch Goldberg-Polin's mother, Rachel Goldberg, delivered an emotional speech imploring for the release of her son and the other hostages from Hamas: "Why is no one crying out for these people to be allowed access to the Red Cross? Why is no one demanding just proof of life?" She kept hope alive for her and her family and all the families of the hostages. pleading on the world stage; European Parliaments, the UN, the Democratic Convention, for a cease fire agreement. And then, at the beginning of September, news came that Hamas had shot the very hostages picked for release in any cease fire arrangement, Rachel said at Hersch's funeral:

"I have had a lot of time during the past 332 days to think about my sweet boy, my Hersh. And one thing I keep thinking about is how out of all the mothers in the world, G-d chose to give Hersh to me. What must I have done in a past life to deserve such a beautiful gift?"

Now, my Hersh I ask for your help.

As we transform our hope into grief and this new unknown brand of pain, I beg of you, please do what you can to have your light shine down on me and our family. Help shower us with healing and resilience. Help us to rise again. I know it will take a long time, but please may G-d bless us that one day, one fine day, I will hear laughter, and we will turn around and see... that it's us. And that we are ok. You will always be with us as a force of love and vitality, you will become our superpower."

The hope has changed. It has been transformed into healing and resilience with the eventual possibility of acceptance. But she has not despaired entirely, and she will continue to love and be loved. She is one of the heroes of this agonizing moment of Jewish history in the making. October 7th is a defining moment for Israel and the Jewish People as have to reconsider again our safety and future. It has left a population traumatized and in doing so has been forced to defend itself against that aggression but at the same time it has cruelly lashed out at the population in Gaza. So much destruction and loss of innocent lives, so much displacement of homes and families of innocent Palestinians. It is heartbreaking to witness knowing that Israel and the good name of Jew has been trampled on across the world for doing so.

It has affected all the subsequent events in the Middle East and is rapidly becoming more and more dangerous as we speak. It surfaced a rise in Antisemitism across the world as institutions and individuals were attacked verbally, physically and through the emotional reaction to the hatred expressed all around us. We think of the soldiers we have lost and their bereaved families; the displaced families from the south and the north; and so many soldiers wounded in body and soul.

In order to come to some sense of what that might mean for all of us, Marcia and I travelled to Israel in June to listen and hear and seek out those who could offer some hope for our battered souls.

We joined a 'mission' of Progressive Jews from London and met them at Ben Gurion airport on the way to the Gaza Envelope (region). This area of Israel just beside Gaza is populated with small towns, kibbutzim and industrial parks – not the prettiest place in Israel but full of people who dreamed of trying to overcome the obstacles to peace between Israeli and Palestinian. The Nova dance festival 'field' is a dusty, forlorn wide open space with few trees or buildings. Today stands hundreds of individual stands with pictures of those who were killed at the site. Each stand has been 'planted' in the soil with individual mementoes of the victims plus a beautiful ceramic poppy that has become the symbol of remembrance throughout Israel. We walked slowly and sadly past each person's picture and description. Most were young and full of joie de vivre but there was the picture of Muslim security guard who tried to protect them and there was the mother of four who had come to have a carefree time. Our prayers were joined by

an Israeli reserve officer who it seems had assigned himself to be there every day as a vigil and a small offering of warm humanity in an inhumane place.

We met with Noa Hanukkah (she loves her name!) from one of the local kibbutzim who was 9 months pregnant on October 7th and on hearing the news urged her husband to go help others. She hid in her basement but then heard that he had been shot and she needed to get to hospital as her waters broke. When she finally got to a hospital herself, she assertively told them she wasn't having the baby until her husband arrived. Everyone waited until finally she got news that he was alive and well and then she went into labor! Noa had to show us pictures of her nine-month-old baby! She left us with the message:

We are resilient

We live here

Love is better.

Anna Kislanski, executive director of the Israel Movement for Reform Judaism told us of the great work of healing the Movement and its rabbis have done all over the country. Reform Rabbis have been conducting services for all those who lived in the Gaza region and have been displaced to many different areas. Household needs are supplied for displaced families including clothes, food and supplies. The Movement is acting as a community social work organization as well as a religious Movement. It is a remarkable feature of Israeli society that everyone came together to help after Oct 7th despite the paralysis of the Government.

We felt the gloom and anxiety in Israeli society, the deep unhappiness with Netanyahu and his '*meshogne* Government', However something else was apparent to us, which is less obvious to Israelis themselves. They have suffered a terrible trauma, and they are still reeling from it. As a small country, over 1200 people murdered has a huge impact on everyone who knows someone who knows someone. The very nature of the terror inflicted on the victims and subsequently the whole population has made everyone fearful and defensive. Even the journalists we interviewed didn't think Israeli society could stomach what is happening in Gaza with any empathy and so Israeli news is largely devoid of the pictures and stories we are seeing in the West. As one person put dejectedly put it, "We know we can't win a war against an idea and yet we have to win that war, or they will kill us all".

But we also saw the transformed hope that Rachel Goldberg and Noah Hanukah and the Israeli Reform Movement and others exemplified. As the violence and suffering in the land deepens, it can be easy to feel consumed by hopelessness. Yet, amid growing hostility and separation, there are ongoing and vigorous attempts to bring hope to a future of coexistence even now. It may take a generation, but it has to take root now.

One such attempt is the Jerusalem Youth Chorus that we and Emmanuel Church hosted for a concert here in this very sanctuary in December and then again in March. The JYC brings together Israeli and Palestinian youth in Jerusalem to sing, dance, socialize and learn about each other. Despite overwhelming odds, they have continued to be together over this past difficult year. They told us

We are the Jerusalem Youth Chorus: Palestinians and Israelis raising our voices to push back against the violence surrounding us—to reject war, occupation, and terror, and instead sing out for peace, justice, inclusion, and equality. We don't all share the same opinions—and have hard conversations about them every week—but we do share the same future, no matter what the politicians say. In JYC we have a rare chance to truly hear each other, and that's what makes the chorus a home for all of us. Every kid deserves to grow up with that same safety and dignity. We know we don't have the power to single-handedly stop war, but we also know that the reason war continues is because people think there is no alternative. We are the alternative.

This new year of 5785, rather than being settling or renewing, feels increasingly unsettled for many. In such circumstances it can be tempting to allow hope to give way to cynicism, to protect ourselves from bitter disappointment and hurt by pre-deciding that there is little point in working towards anything different.

But this is not the Jewish way. Judaism is a religion of liberation. As it says in the Hatikvah – Israel's National Anthem – *Od lo avda tikvatenu* – Hope is not yet lost. It is extremely difficult to remain hopeful under these circumstances. But as Maoz Yinon, the peace activist who lost both of his parents on October 7th says, *we are not searching for hope, we are creating hope.*

The values of Judaism demand that we place supreme value on the pursuit of peace which requires compromise and painful decisions for the sake of peace and security. Judaism believes that all are created in the image of God and every life has value. It is from that vantage point that we have to view an enemy. Our religion and history are steeped in a belief in the importance of law including the laws of war. They include the need for self-defense, but they also include the limits of war particularly in reference to civilians and their welfare in time of war. We must do all we can to support the work of those facilitating dialogue and understanding between Israeli and Palestinian. Two peoples sharing one land. This is perhaps the most important work of the Jewish People in our time.

We are a religion that recognizes that whilst we may never reach the Promised land, we must always work towards it – toward a world of peace and stability which has justice at its core.

The utopian vision set out in the Torah, and most strongly in the words of the prophets, focuses on the needs of the vulnerable which, they demand, must be protected. As Isaiah (62:1) strongly proclaims:

For Zion's sake, I shall speak out
For Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest
Until its righteousness shines like the dawn
And its salvation burns brightly.

To stand with the vulnerable requires courage as we are asked to be the carriers of hope, sometimes against a background of fear and discontent.

This relentless commitment to hope and change, alongside the obligation to care, is the power of these High Holy Days.

They are our season for self-reflection and adjustment. They are the days where we take a sincere look inwards and ask ourselves key questions. What do I want to be different? What do I want to do differently? What can I do to bring that about? How can I support the work of co-existence and dialogue? How can I build bridges rather than tunnels?

As Naomi Shemer, the Israeli songwriter wrote:

Do not uproot what is planted - *Al na takod natua*

Do not forget the hope - *Al tishkach et hatikva*

turn me - *hasheveni vashuva*

And I will return to the good land - *el haaretz hatova*