

***In a world of hostility and hate, reasons to have hope for Israel and the Jewish people in 5775***  
**Rosh Hashanah 5775**  
**Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD**

When I checked into my hotel room after a long, exhausting trip, I was greeted by a beautiful bowl of ripened fruit, a tall glass bottle of mineral water, a lovely little sprig of freshly cut flowers, and a table tent with a welcome greeting from the hotel's general manager, inviting me to enjoy my stay. And slipped right in between the vase and the water bottle was this photocopied list of instructions:

*Dated July 9, 2014.*

“Below,” it reads, “please find instructions provided by the Home Front Command on how to behave when an alert siren is heard. In a building: enter the protected space, shelter, or reinforced security room...and close doors and windows. Outside: enter the closest building. If there is no building or cover/shelter nearby, or if you are in an open space, lie down on the ground and protect your head with your hands...Civilians are requested not to stay at the entrance to the building until the all clear is given, since there is a risk of shrapnel and explosions as a result of missile landings in the area near the building. It is important to stay away from foreign objects or rockets lying on the ground...” To tell you the truth I could have figured that one out myself. If you see a rocket, don't touch it!

And the list went on and on...This was my welcome message to the Carleton Hotel in downtown Tel Aviv earlier this summer. It was hard to get over the contrast between the beautiful fresh fruits and blossoming flowers on the same tray as this sheet of unsettling instructions. It was less than 24-hours after I checked-in that the siren blared across Tel Aviv, and I was ordered by a bus driver to run back into the hotel and take cover. I can still hear the explosions of the Iron Dome intercepting rockets from Gaza right over my head. I will never forget the plumes of smoke and vapor trails that hung in the sky long after the all clear was given. And I can't shake the realization that if those rockets were allowed to fall on the busiest, most concentrated streets of Tel Aviv, the casualties and destruction would have been incalculable.

The signature prayer of these High Holidays describes this time of year as *nora ve'ayom*, full of fear and dread. As 5774 comes to a close and 5775 begins, we feel the fear and dread of

Unetaneh Tokef perhaps more palpably than ever before or at least in recent memory. What a summer this was! Ebola, Ferguson, an immigration crisis, mounting tensions between Russia and Ukraine, ongoing massacres in Syria, *dayeinu!* Wrong holiday, I know, but really that would have been more than enough crises for one season! But we also had the kidnapping and murder of three innocent, precious Israeli teenagers and the horrific act of vengeance that resulted in the killing of an innocent Muslim teenager, the War in Gaza, the precipitous rise in power and brutality of the Islamic State, the gruesome, barbaric beheadings of three Westerners. And as all of this has transpired, a frightening, escalating anti-Semitism has spread like wildfire. Demonstrations and rallies against Israel in major cities have featured some of the ugliest myths that the world has seen since the 1930's. Like the Hamas spokesman who conjectured on international television about Jews requiring the blood of non-Jewish children for the baking of Passover matzo's. Who believes this *mishegas* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century...I'll tell you: More and more people than you or I would like to admit; The very same people who have made *Mein Kampf* a break out best seller across the Middle East. Who lobbed Molotov cocktails at the Alte Synagoge in Wuppertal, Germany, the very site where an earlier synagogue once stood before it was destroyed on Kristallnacht in in November 1938. A Belgian café posted a sign saying "Dogs Allowed But Not Jews," and European grocers have clamored to remove kosher foods from their shelves, so as not to incur the wrath of hostile shoppers. A crazy French comedian makes his living lashing out at Jews and popularizing a form of the 'Heil Hitler' salute. All over the world criticism of Israel has morphed into an insidious modern anti-Semitism. In many places once again, it feels dangerous to be a Jew. An old Jewish joke asks, What's the definition of a *Jewish* telegram? The answer: Start worrying, details to follow. As Deborah Lipstadt wrote in a recent New York Times column, "The telegram has arrived. Jews are worrying."<sup>1</sup>

One hundred eighteen years ago, an assimilated, non-observant Jewish journalist in Vienna was shaken to his core by the pervasive anti-Semitism he witnessed in Europe. Yet rather than converting to Christianity or disappearing from Jewish life as so many others did at that time, this 36 year old bachelor sat down and wrote a pamphlet in which he argued that the only way to rescue the Jewish people from insidious anti-Semitism was for Jews to once again have sovereignty and self-determination in their ancestral home land. In his pamphlet he wrote: *We*

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<sup>1</sup> "Why Jews Are Worried," Deborah Lipstadt, New York Times, August 20, 2014

*are one people-our enemies have made us one...Affliction binds us together, and thus united, we suddenly discover our strength.*<sup>2</sup> And it was this inner-strength that a young Theodor Herzl summoned in order to create first Jewish commonwealth on the map of the world in 2,000 years. But, his dream that anti-Semitism would disappear because Jews would no longer live among hostile neighbors, that has hardly been fulfilled. Not only that, but the Jewish state, which was supposed to be a beacon of light and inspiration for the Jewish people everywhere; a place that brings Jews together in common cause and unity has been one of the most disunifying factors in the modern Jewish community! In a recent survey an unbelievable number of **rabbis** reported that they were afraid to talk about Israel from the pulpit...*afraid*...because of a backlash from congregants of widely different opinions on the subject. Just the other day an article suggested that the topic of Israel is “too hot to touch,” for many rabbis who are afraid of offending someone to the right or to the left; afraid of losing their jobs for taking any position on such a controversial topic. Well, dear friends, this rabbi is not afraid to talk about Israel. *Especially now that you offered me a 10 year contract!*

My friends, I am an optimist, I really am. You know that optimists live longer than pessimists, right? 7.5 years longer, according to a Mayo Clinic study, so I encourage you to consider it. I’m an optimist, but I’m not crazy (at least my psychiatrist tells me I’m not) and I don’t think I’m naïve. Optimism is the Jewish way...Consider even the blasts of the shofar today: *Tekia*, the loud, strong, confident blast...followed by *Shevarim teruah*, the quivering, trembling, sobbing sound that reminds us of our fears, and our vulnerabilities, and our *tsurris*. But that’s not end of the shofar blasts! We go back to *tekia* and then conclude with *tekia gedola*—a powerful, persistent blast of conviction and faith. And so I want to tell you, on this day of sounding the hopeful notes of the shofar, why I am an optimist about the Jewish people and about Israel even in this insane and inscrutable world.

This summer while traveling from northern Israel south to Jerusalem for Shabbat, we pulled off at a highway rest stop on *K’vish Shesh*, the Trans-Israel Highway. A whole squadron of young Israeli soldiers was also stopped there, with trucks and heavy equipment. I asked them where they were going (even though I already knew the answer was Gaza). And I looked these young soldiers in the eyes and I said to them, *Atem ha’gibborim shel Am Yisrael*. You are the modern

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<sup>2</sup> Herzl, Theodor. “A Solution to the Jewish Question,” 1896

heroes—not just of the Jewish State, but of the Jewish people. *Atem ha'Maccabim shelanu*, you are our modern Maccabees. Israeli is the 153<sup>rd</sup> largest country in the world—and let me tell you there aren't many after that on the list...there's St. Maarten, Curacao, Barbados, Aruba, the Cayman Islands, the Virgin Islands, basically you can take a Caribbean cruise and visit most of the countries of the world that are smaller than Israel! Despite Israel's size it has among the most powerful military forces in the world. And that fact is a profoundly important reason to be optimistic. It occurred to me while I was huddled in a bomb shelter in Tel Aviv that for the first time since the Bar Kochba Revolt against Rome some 1,880 years ago, the Jewish people can finally protect themselves. After centuries of forced exile, persecution, pogroms, inquisitions, so many nights of broken glass, we are finally able to defend our own people. And this army of ours, get this, is an army that despises killing. Remember what Golda Meir said to Anwar Sadat, “We can forgive you for killing our children, but we can never forgive you for forcing us to kill your children.” The IDF would love nothing more than to heed Isaiah's prophecy and beat its swords into ploughshares. It is not an offensive army; it is not an army of conquest. The very name of our Jewish army: Tzahal: *tzeva haganah le'Yisrael*, means the Israel DEFENSE force. It is an army with strict moral codes and swift accountability. That's what makes it a *Jewish* army. And a Jewish army is a reality that the Jewish people have not known in 2,000 years. As I said goodbye to those young soldiers at the bus stop, I knew some of them would never return to their homes or families. And as a father I felt a surge of anguish and sadness, but as a Jew I felt immense pride that because of these young men and women the Jewish people will never again be like sheep led to the slaughter.

Another rather new idea that makes me optimistic is that the Jewish people have allies. I know we tend to focus on all the enemies, and we have plenty of them too, but we also have something we're not all that used to having, and that is friends. Americans are overwhelmingly supportive of the State of Israel today—even if Obama and Netanyahu are not going to go out and drink beer together...they're clearly not interested in being BFF's! Nevertheless Jews have fared better in America than any other country in the history of the world. I recently heard Rabbi Benjamin Blech, a renowned speaker and author, reflect on the fact that the very same year that Jews were exiled from Spain 1492, the Americas were discovered—was this the hand of God in history that the very year that Jews were forcibly removed from a country they had prospered in for centuries the door would open for them to settle in a nation like this one with its untold blessings and

freedoms? Not only that, but in the European countries where Anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head, the leaders of those nations, unlike in the past, unlike the 1930's and 40's are outspoken in their rejection of Anti-Semitism. Consider the rally that just took place a few weeks ago in Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate, no less, where Hitler once hung huge swastika banners between the colossal pillars and storm troopers held massive parades in 1933 celebrating the Nazis coming to power. In that very same place 75 years after the start of World War II Angela Merkel spoke to 8,000 demonstrators saying that Jews are a national treasure; that Jewish existence in Germany is a miracle, and all Jews should feel at home in Germany. In the strongest terms the chancellor repudiated anti-Semitism and said it had no place in German society: "I do not accept any kind of anti-Semitic message or attacks at all" she proclaimed. "It is our national and civic duty to fight anti-Semitism." And of the thousands present, many of them were non-Jews. Not only non-Jewish Germans, but others, like Syrian Christians, Muslim Kurds, and persecuted Nigerians who stood shoulder to shoulder with German Jews because they find common cause rallying against hatred and extremism. I believe the world is also slowly waking up to the fact that although ISIS and Islamic Jihad and Hamas and Boko Haram and al Qaeda and Hizballah and the Muslim Brotherhood all represent different particularities and persuasions, the inhumanity and savagery is exactly the same. For a long time the Jewish people have been the world's canary in the mineshaft, identifying and predicting danger for many others. It is becoming clearer and clearer every day that the sworn enemies of the Jewish people are also the enemies of the free world, are also the enemies of Christians as Pope Francis himself recently declared.

Speaking of that, among our most vocal supporters are Evangelical Christians who make up some 30 million Americans. These folks actually believe what the Bible says in Genesis: *v'avar'cha mevarchecha, u'mekalelcha a'or...* I will bless those who bless the Jews, and curse those who curse them.<sup>3</sup> And, no I don't care what they believe about the end times or the so called Second Coming, or where they stand on other political issues. I have plenty of friends, as I'm sure you do, who have vastly different political opinions and religious beliefs than I do and it does not prevent us from being friends or genuinely caring about each other. And this is a community that genuinely cares about the Jewish people and the State of Israel. This summer's

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:3

war with Hamas and the media's often unfair treatment of Israel despite all of its efforts to minimize collateral damage did cause some Americans to question their support for Israel. But poll after poll reaffirmed that evangelicals never wavered in their compassion or advocacy for Israel. That's called true friendship.

I'm also an optimist because we live in a world where just one action can have a global effect. Do you know that the Arab Spring, the movement that has brought down dictators and regimes across the Middle East like dominos was started by one accidental activist who posted a picture on Facebook and created a movement that is still alive 4 years later? This is what is referred to in chaos theory as the Butterfly Effect—you know how a butterfly flitting its wings in one part of the world can affect the formation of a hurricane in some other part of the world. In this world of instant communication, Twitter and social media are the butterfly's wings that can create hurricanes of activism. That's why all the benighted regimes of the Middle East block all of those platforms because they know how dangerous they are to their own hold on power! The Rambam wrote in his laws of Repentance, "*Zeh she'tzadak, hichria et kol ha'olam lizchut, ve'hitzilo*" a single righteous deed performed by one person can influence the merit of the entire world, and even save the entire world.<sup>4</sup> One person...one voice... one social media post can change the world. Can you imagine how different things would have been if people could have posted pictures from Auschwitz on Facebook or Instagram in 1938? I'm guessing the allies would have intervened a whole lot quicker, and that there would be many more Jews in the world today. The ability to tell our story and influence others and stand up for sacred causes is at each of our fingertips like never before.

But there's one caveat to all of this optimism, one *major* qualification. Did you ever wonder why we can't wrap up the whole new year and atonement thing all at once on Rosh Hashanah? Why do we need to reconvene on the tenth of Tishrei, a week from Saturday, for Yom Kippur? Why do I have to miss the first ever Ohio State-Maryland Big-10 football game? Why not get it all over with now, today? Our sages provide an answer...according to tradition it was on Yom Kippur that God said to the Jewish people: *Salachti kidvarecha*, I forgive you as you have requested.<sup>5</sup> But what was it specifically that God forgave the Jewish people for on Yom Kippur?

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<sup>4</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:4

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 14:20

The answer is the sin of the Golden Calf. But if you read the story carefully, you will notice that the people who actually worshipped the Golden Calf were slain right there on the spot! *Vayipol min ha'am bayom hahu kishloshet alfei ish*, on that day some 3,000 Israelites died.<sup>6</sup> So which Jews was God forgiving if all the perpetrators were already dead? The answer is, all the rest of the Jewish people. And what was their sin? Their sin was standing by and doing nothing. They didn't lift a finger or open their mouths to try to prevent this terrible calamity from happening. Indifference, silence, apathy, these are the sins of the Golden Calf as much as worshipping that idol was. And my optimism about the future of the Jewish people and about the future of Israel in 5775 is predicated on the assumption that we will not commit the sin of the Golden Calf all over again; There's an *al cheit* for that you know, *Al cheit shechatanu lefanecha be'chachash*...For the sin we have committed against you by being in denial. This is no time for denial. This is the time to get off the bench and get in the game, because the Jewish people need each and every one of us right now.

There is a sign in Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv that I noticed, just as I was exiting through passport control to the international departures terminal; it made such an impression on me. The sign said: "*Be'chutz la'aretz, ha'Medina—zeh atah.*" Outside the borders of the State of Israel, Israel is you. Israel is you. I felt like that sign was speaking directly to me. In other words, everyone is an ambassador, everyone is an advocate, everyone is a promoter and protector of the cause. So we have to find our voice. We have to be more educated. We have to become more active. I want you to come with me this March, I want you take a little time off of work to join me on Capitol Hill when AIPAC convenes thousands of pro-Israel supporters to make an unmistakable impression about the importance of US support for Israel. You know how many Har Shalom members went last year? 30. That's great compared to the year before, but friends, look around, we could do a whole lot better. If we're not there advocating for Israel, who will be there? Well the evangelicals will, that's for sure, but really who else? Guess how many Congressional districts in America have a majority of Jewish constituents...think Monsey, or Pikesville, or Miami Beach, or Brooklyn, or Skokie...guess how many. The answer is **zero**. There is no district in this country where a Jewish constituency is the largest constituency-- Which means we have to work even harder to get our message and values across.

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 32:28

And let me add, there is simply no substitute for going to Israel. Our great grandparents could only dream of going to Israel; they wept over it, they prayed about it, they dreamt about it, but going there was never a possibility. And now that we can go whenever we want, only 35% of American Jews have ever been to Israel. That's a shanda...when I was there this summer, the country was desolate, as groups cancelled their trips left and right. On Friday night at the Kotel I saw no synagogue groups, no teen groups, none of the hustle bustle of a freilach summer Friday night at the Western Wall. Only two groups were there, and both were Christians—you can tell by their cardboard yarmulkes. But no Jews! It's time to prioritize going to Israel...Everywhere I went Israelis thanked me profusely for being there during a war. But the truth is the country was overwhelmingly peaceful and safe and beautiful...and empty. We have a trip from Har Shalom this coming summer (you can read more about the details on p.25 of your High Holiday Booklet), and I hope that many you will join us. It's not just a vacation or trip...it is a mission to go to Israel in the truest sense of the word, it is an act of solidarity, it is an expression of love and unity with the Jewish people and the Jewish state.

A few weeks ago Rachel Fraenkel, the mother of 16 year old Naftali Fraenkel of blessed memory, who along with two of his friends were abducted and murdered by Hamas terrorists this past June gave an interview to the Israeli media. I cannot even begin to imagine her grief and pain when her precious son was found, his lifeless body left in a pit alongside his 16 and 19 year old friends. It's utterly inconceivable. Yet, when the interviewer concluded the conversation by asking her how she's doing, she answered with two unbelievable, "jaw-dropping" words: *Kim'at mushlam*. Close to perfect. How in the world is this even possible? Naftali's shloshim just ended not long ago. The reason Rachel Fraenkel is able to be *kim'at mushlam* is the unity and solidarity that brought Jews together from around the world in support for those three kids and their distraught families in a massive, unprecedented expression of love. That incredible, mysterious, unbreakable bond that links us all across time and space: left wingers and right wingers, doves and hawks, believers and skeptics alike, is what enabled her to put the pieces her broken heart almost back together. And friends, if Rachel Fraenkel can be an optimist, so can I...and so can you.

May 5775 be a year when we are more unified than ever. We can question, we can and should debate the issues facing our people honestly, we can have different positions to the left, and to



the right. But let's have those conversations premised on love for our people and what we stand for; and loyalty to the Jewish state as a refuge for any Jew who is threatened in any corner of the world. May we join in solidarity with people of all races and religions to stand up against the hatred and tyranny that threatens so much of our world. *Adonai Oz le'amo yitein, Adonai yivareich et amo va'shalom...* May God give strength to each one of us, and may God bless us, our families, and all the families of the world with peace.

