

Hashta Atai, Now He Is Coming

Responding to Crisis in Israel, Kol Nidre 5784

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I was not yet of-this-world on Kol Nidre eve 5735, October 5, 1973, fifty years ago. That night proved to be a night of calm before an existential storm. At 2 pm Israel time the next day, which was the middle of the night here in America, the armies of Syria and Egypt launched attacks against Israel in the north and the south. In America that morning, rabbis discarded the sermons they had spent weeks preparing, so they could “wing it” in front of their congregations. Israel was under attack. Reservists were pulled out of the synagogue and conscripted into active duty. There was no telling how it would end.

Over three weeks of war, 2,656 Israeli soldiers would be killed, and 7,251 injured. This in a country whose population at that time numbered only 3.3 million. It would be equivalent to 265,000 American soldiers killed, more than 4 times the number that died in Vietnam. Sharon had a friend from college who was born just a few months before the war began. Her father was killed in that war. They never met. So many Israelis can share similar stories.

There is a cute scene in Guy Nativ’s movie “Golda” (which, incidentally, I recommend) where the prime minister is meeting with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and telling him that Israel needs assistance. The war is not going well. Kissinger tells Golda Meir how he has prioritized his identities: “I am first an American,” he says. “Second I am the Secretary of State. And third I am a Jew.” To which Golda responds, “That’s okay, because in Israel we read from right to left.” Apparently, the exchange really happened.

Before the Yom Kippur War, America and Israel didn’t have the ironclad relationship we know today. The US hesitated to get involved, for fear of inciting the Soviets. But as Israel’s predicament became more dire, President Nixon authorized airlifts with tens of thousands of munitions. These airlifts flipped the script. The movie draws a direct line between Israel’s victory in the war and the peace accord with Egypt that was signed in 1978. Although peace with Syria has been elusive, that border has remained quiet for 50 years. Israel emerged from the crisis having made important strategic gains.

The Yom Kippur War strengthened the American Jewish relationship with Israel as well. The United Jewish Appeal that year raised \$668 million, a \$290 million increase over the year before, with a significant portion of those funds being raised during the 30 days after war broke. This was the beginning of a dynamic we mostly take for granted today: the American Jewish community supports Israel, lobbies the halls of power, and rises in full force to protect the Jewish homeland in a time of crisis.

The war had a profound personal influence on the singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen. In *Who By Fire*, the Israeli journalist Matti Friedman describes how Cohen travelled to Israel at the start of the war. After a chance encounter with a few popular Israeli musicians in a Tel Aviv café, Leonard Cohen ended up

traveling to the front with a borrowed guitar, and performing for troops. The experience changed his life. In his recollection, “I came to raise their spirits, and they raised mine.”

You see, before the war, Leonard Cohen was experiencing a bit of a mid-life crisis. A year earlier, in 1972, he had performed in Jerusalem, and it was a debacle. He was apparently high, and he ended up walking off in the middle of the show. He said that performing in Jerusalem had unnerved him, making him feel that his Jewishness was inauthentic.

But if you Google Leonard Cohen Israel concert, that 1972 debacle doesn’t come up. Instead, you will see a recording of his 2009 concert in Tel Aviv. You can watch the finale in which Cohen holds up his hands and pronounces in his old Ashkenazi Hebrew, “*Yevarekhekho Adonoi v’Yishmerekho,*” and the crowd goes wild. The artist who had once felt Jewishly “inauthentic” had become quite comfortable Jewishly.

It was during the war that Cohen wrote “*Lover, Lover, Lover,*” which became one of his most famous songs. About a year later, he wrote “*Who By Fire,*” his interpretation of *Unetaneh Tokef*. But this isn’t really about Leonard Cohen. So many American Jews experienced similar transformations. The crisis on Yom Kippur 50 years ago had this positive effect on so many – famous and not. It energized the American Jewish community and created a new dynamic for the US-Israel relationship, which has only gotten stronger since.

Fifty years later, tonight we enter Yom Kippur amidst another crisis, and I wonder what its effect will be. The current crisis cannot be blamed on Syria, or Egypt, or the Palestinians. This crisis is coming from the inside. The current government has suspended any efforts to recognize Judaism’s non-Orthodox religious streams. It has pushed a different approach towards the Palestinians and begun implementing radical reforms to Israel’s judiciary. The details deserve discussion, but I don’t want to do that now because that’s not what really matters. What matters is the way the crisis threatens to undo the relationship between American and Israeli Jews, which took so long to build.

The governing coalition seems determined to press forward with its reforms despite more than 30 weeks of massive protests involving hundreds of thousands of Israelis. American Jewish leaders have lodged their warnings and criticisms, but the response has been all but dismissive. It feels like some in Israel no longer think the relationship is that important. And we know that too many American Jews are also skeptical of the importance of Israel to their Judaism.

That’s the part that scares me. Not just the reforms; not just the elections; but the sense that our communities are moving in different directions, that we don’t feel that sense of shared destiny that ultimately saved our people fifty years ago.

There is a strange story in the Talmud, in the middle of a section describing a practice at that time whereby Torah scholars would get married and then go away to study for extended periods of time in the schools of famous rabbis. It isn’t a practice we follow, or even understand today; but it made sense in their context. Each scholar had his own arrangement for when his wife might expect him back home.

It is said that Rabbi Ruhimi used to study with the great sage Rava in the *yeshiva* in Mechoza. His practice was to return home once a year, on erev Yom Kippur, for the meal before the fast. But on one Yom Kippur eve, Rabbi Ruhimi was engrossed in his studies and he didn't go home. His wife waited expectantly, saying herself, "*hashta atei, hashta atei*, He's coming now, he's coming now." But he didn't come. The rabbi's wife began to cry. At that exact moment, says the Talmud, Rabbi Ruhimi was sitting on the roof of the study hall, and the roof collapsed under him, and he died.

It's a strange story. If my message tonight was about happy marriages or even the importance of Jewish education, there is no way I would tell that story. But I relate it tonight as a metaphor. I don't know which character represents the Israeli Jewish community and which represents the American Jewish community, but I feel that sense of separation and despair. Much of the year, our communities do just fine on our own. They have their beautiful customs, and we have ours. We have done amazing things to strengthen community and improve the world, while they are protagonists in the unfolding of a miracle. We live separate lives, but there are moments – times of crisis, on visits, and during holidays like this one – when we come together. And then we return to our separate communal lives.

Except, what would happen if one year we didn't come together? We might have a reason. Maybe we are angry. Maybe they don't understand us. Maybe we are just too busy and worry about other things. But what happens when they are expecting us, and we don't show up? I don't know which community is Rabbi Ruchimi and which his wife, but I worry about her tears. We need each other, even if it doesn't always seem obvious.

I tell that story of Rabbi Ruchimi on erev Yom Kippur as a warning, because we can't let it happen again. We talk about three fundamental principles of Judaism: God, Torah, Israel. You can't have Judaism without God. You can't have Judaism without Torah. And you can't have Judaism without merging the land and people of Israel. Tonight, we must invest in the relationship. We must renew our investments in Israel, because this is a time of crisis.

If you've never been to Israel, or if it's been a while, make this the year. Particularly teens. Last year, our synagogue invested more than \$20,000 to send 15 students on immersive experiences in Israel. And this year, we want to spend more. In addition, we want our teens to take advantage of other incentives: there is a \$3,000 per student stipend from Root One, a project of the Marcus Foundation, plus up to \$2000 from Federation's Israel Quest.

Exact amounts vary depending on the length of the trip, but the message is clear. We have the resources. We want to make it easy. We want to invest in the relationship. Remember that visiting Israel before college does not disqualify you from visiting Israel during college with Birthright. There is no reason to put it off. Our *mishpocha* in Israel is waiting and believing: *They will be here soon*, they keep saying, *hashta atei*. We can't let them down.

We must also invest in religious pluralism. Some people think they might teach Israel a lesson by walking away, but that's the wrong approach. The best way to realize our values in Israel is to support the people in Israel doing our work. This year, our Jewish Federation is doing just that, with its Homeland for All Jews campaign. Federation has committed up to \$150,000 in matching funds. Every donation by a

member of B'nai Israel, up to \$500, will be matched and forwarded to the Masorti movement in Israel. Donations from other synagogues will be matched to support the other movements. It's not a competition because religious pluralism wins either way.

The campaign will close after the holidays, so this is our last chance. In a little bit, when ushers collect the Israel Bonds envelopes, they will also have a flyer like this one. If you haven't supported the Homeland for All Jews Campaign, take a flyer and make an investment after the holiday.

And that brings me to the envelopes at your seats. We appeal for Israel Bonds every year, and B'nai Israel consistently demonstrates leadership and support.

I ask you to open the envelope. You can see that the eMazel Tov bond is available for a very low minimum subscription. The Shalom Bond allows you to make a gift to the synagogue or other institution – you purchase the bond, and when it matures, the money goes directly to the beneficiary organization. You can also invest online. It doesn't have to be a lot. Israel is more interested in increasing the number of *purchasers* of Israel Bonds than increasing the total dollars raised. We can help. If you've never purchased an Israel Bond, make a pledge. And if you have purchased in the past, do it again. Our family in Israel is waiting.

One thing that's been interesting with the weekly protests in Israel has been the ubiquity of the Israeli flag. That's symbolic at a protest because it means that the protesters, while they have a beef with the government, are *not* giving up on Israel. They protest *against* a policy, but they are fighting *for* Israel. That's what Israel needs from us right now. We dare not run away and call it an act of righteousness. Now is the time to invest in Israel, strengthen connections with Israel, call family and friends in Israel, and keep the faith that Israel will emerge from this crisis as it emerged from crises past.

Let us assure Israel that they can believe in us, too. *Hashta Atei*, Now they are coming. Now we are coming. For there is simply no other choice.

Kein yehi ratzon, May that be God's will.