

## Shabbat Breishit 5784 – Israel Solidarity Shabbat

Rabbi Michael Safra

B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville MD

Shabbat shalom. This is an emotional morning. It is heartwarming to be together, but this is difficult. Our hearts are heavy. The shock and anger at what happened, the anxiety and fear of what comes next, the emotions are real.

On our internal synagogue calendar, today was already designated as an emotional Shabbat, for a different reason. October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and we had designated October 14 as Purple Shabbat. I am grateful that our friend Jake Ravick is here as a representative of JCADA, and for our commitment not to be silent about Intimate Partner Violence. There will be a purple table with information at *kiddush*, but I know you understand why I won't say more about that important topic right now.

There is only one topic for this morning. That's what solidarity means. It means being together, united, focusing our attention in one direction, east, toward the sovereign State of Israel, the Jewish homeland.

Still, I'm not sure where to begin. It feels so long ago, but it was just last Shabbat that I arrived in the building and was informed of the cross-border attacks by Hamas. It sounded bad, and the horrors only worsened: 40 killed, 200, 900. ... The numbers continued to rise. By the end of Simchat Torah Ia, the death toll was at 1,000 and rising. We learned about the ruthless savagery of the attacks – burned buildings, decapitations, men, women, and children. And then the comparisons began. How many Israelis killed? How many Palestinians killed? Here come the moral equivalencies, the Oppression Olympics.

I could begin with President Biden: "America has Israel's back." Or Secretary of State Antony Blinken: "The message that I bring to Israel is this: You may be strong enough on your own to defend yourself, but as long as America exists, you will never, ever have to." On Thursday evening at Har Shalom, Representative Raskin reminded everyone that war is terrible, but some wars are just wars and Israel's cause is just. Things will get worse before they get better. Palestinians will suffer. Criticism will mount. And we will have to remind ourselves that this is not a war against the Palestinian people. This is a war against Hamas, a terrorist organization that attacks innocent Jews, hides amidst civilian populations, and uses innocent people as human shields. This war is tragic ... and it is necessary. There is no other way.

I could mention the personal connections. For us, Israel is not just a news story. Members of our community come from Israel, have family in Israel, have been or may be called to fight in Israel, and they are scared. Members of our community have children who made *aliyah*; we know people who have been kidnapped or killed, and if we don't know people directly, we know people who know people. We have visited Israel; we have family studying in Israel; we have trips planned; we are anxious.

On Wednesday, I attended a gathering of parents from the Schilit Nursery School. Some of our parents served in the IDF. They traveled the same road the terrorists traveled. They feel what so many Israelis are feeling: If those terrorists had turned left instead of right. ... It feels very personal.

My predecessor as Assistant Rabbi, Allen Selis, reached out to remind our congregation that he has been living in Israel for the past three years. He visited a *shiva* this week. The brother of one of the high school students he teaches fell while defending the sovereign State of Israel. This is not a news story. We feel it in the gut, not just in the head.

That is what made President Biden's speech before the roundtable of Jewish leaders so powerful. His connection to Israel, his affinity for Jews is not strategic; it is emotional and personal. He labeled Hamas's attack "a campaign of pure cruelty" and called last Saturday "the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust." He reiterated the lesson of the Shoah: "Silence is complicity." He got louder, banged on the lectern, and proclaimed, "I refuse to be silent, and I know you refuse to be silent!" This is not a news story. This is not *hasbara*. This is *us*. Israel is integral to our Jewishness.

On Wednesday afternoon, I attended a small interfaith Bible study I had helped to organize and schedule months ago. Very appropriately, our Catholic host began by expressing outrage at the Hamas attack and support for his Jewish brothers and sisters in faith; and he invited us to share our feelings and offer a message. He took notes he might use for the sermon he needed to deliver to his own congregation. I pointed to an article I read from Kate Cohen in last Sunday's Washington Post: "America doesn't need more God," she wrote. "It needs more atheists." I disagree. We are grateful for our friends in the faith community, as we are grateful to the stranger who dropped off a bouquet of flowers with a note: "There are no words," it said. "God bless Israel."

I explained to the other faith leaders how for us, Israel is not politics; it's not news; it's not cocktail party conversation. Israel is who we are. We see it in the very first Rashi of the Torah. Drawing on an ancient Midrash, the great medieval commentary asks why, if the Torah is a book of law, does it begin with creation? Why doesn't our law book begin with Exodus 12, "הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁוֹן חֳדָשִׁים, This month shall be for you the first of the months," which is considered the first of the commandments? His answer is that it's about Israel. If the nations of the world would ask why our ancestors captured the land from the seven Canaanite nations, we could respond that the Holy One created the entire world and apportioned land in accordance with the divine will. God willingly and intentionally placed the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

I don't see in that Rashi a political statement. It is unhelpful to read the Torah as a manual for international diplomacy anymore than to read it as a biology textbook. But that commentary demonstrates just how ingrained Israel is to the Jewish psyche. Rashi is the most important of the medieval commentaries. It is the first commentary traditional school children learn. And his very first comment mentions our unique connection to Israel. Israel is not just a place. It is quintessential to our Jewishness. The Jewish connection to Israel is ingrained in our understanding of creation.

We speak about three pillars of Jewish belief: God, Torah, and Israel. You can't have Judaism without God. You can't have Judaism without Torah. You can't have Judaism without the land and people

of Israel. An attack on Israel is an attack on us. Attempts to separate Israel from Judaism is a denial of our identity. That's why we gather in the synagogue and call out to God for comfort and strength.

It's why I was so annoyed about Kate Cohen's piece calling for more atheists. She describes religion in fundamentalist terms and argued that if you don't believe it all. ... If you don't believe that God created the world in six days. ... If you question why God could allow illness or crime or war or tragedy. ... If the binaries of good vs. evil and power vs. impotence feel more complicated, then it is time to give up on God. God belongs to the fundamentalists, she essentially argued. If you don't aspire to be fundamentalist, you should just walk away.

Way to discount religion's timeless wisdom! What a missed opportunity for comfort and strength in a time of danger and uncertainty.

We don't believe in God because our world is perfect. We don't look to religion because we expect it has all the answers. We don't pray because we believe our words will magically spur divine action. We believe in God because we understand the limitations of human reckoning. We pray because we feel weakened and diminished, and we yearn for courage and strength. We gather because we are one, and God is one, and we yearn for the day when our world might come together as one.

That is the meaning of solidarity. It's okay to question. It's okay to disagree. It's okay to cry out in anger. But we do it together. Because we understand that this is our people; Adonai is our God. We believe in the power of God – and in the power of humanity as God's partners – to impose order where chaos still reigns. We believe in Isaiah's promise Isaiah from today's Haftarah, "אשים מחשך לפניהם אור," that God will yet "turn darkness before them to light, rough places into level ground." We believe in the State of Israel, in the People of Israel, and in the possibility that the Psalmist's prayer will soon be fulfilled:

ה' עוז לעמו יתן, ה' יברך את עמו בשלום

That Adonai who endows God's people with strength, Adonai will bless God's people with peace.  
Shabbat shalom.

