

The Chayal and The Chatan – Rosh Hashanah 5783
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Without question, there are two moments that defined for me the year 5782. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel to Israel not once but twice this past summer. The first time, for my brother who was finishing his IDF training and the second for my brother who was getting married.

As I close my eyes I can still hear the shouts and cheers of joy as we saw my brother Aaron from a distance on Givat Hatachmoshet, ammunition hill, where the tzanhanim – the paratroopers – finish their masa kumta, a long march of approximately 30 miles that lasts through the night. It was not easy to notice him as he looked just like every other soldier – but there was something beautiful about it. And of course, our hearts filled with pride as we looked on during the ceremony at our brother, the chayal, standing at attention and then as his commander embraced him and offered him his red kumta, his beret, which all tzanhanim receive.

And as I close my eyes I can also hear the shouts of joy as we danced my brother Josh and his partner Shosh up a long hill after their chuppah. This wasn't just any chuppah, in any place... it was in Israel. This chuppah was one celebrating two people who had made aliyah and found each other and decided to make a life together. This was a moment of pure pride for our brother, the Chatan.

These are my brothers, the chayal and the chatan. And as I think about this past year, it is my two brothers, the chayal and the chatan, who brought so much meaning to me and to my family. On one level – perhaps the most selfish – this is because it brought me to Israel for the first time in nearly 3 years, which for me (and I know this sounds spoiled) was a very long time in between trips. And on a deeper level, it reminded me in a powerful way – in the most personal way possible – about the sanctity and the importance of our state of Israel.

Our beloved State of Israel is, of course, always on our mind – we talk and think about Israel all the time, and we daven for her on a weekly basis here at Beth Sholom. But it's different of course to experience Israel, to be there, and not only to be there as a tourist, but to be in Israel in a real and personal way, celebrating and marking two of the most zionistic occasions of family members that one can maybe think of. I'd be lying to you if I didn't say that all of this didn't make me think, on more than one occasion, why on Earth do I live here and not there? Why am I not doing what my brothers did?

Let me be clear – this is not a sermon where I plan on making any big announcements about making aliyah. I also don't intend to guilt or shame anyone for living here, for being here, for making a life here. Everyone has their reasons, including me! Yet having said that, I do want to speak today about Israel specifically, and the Jewish people more broadly.

This coming year, 5783, is going to be the 75th anniversary of Israel, the 75th Yom Ha'atzmaut. There is something beautiful and inspiring about that. Just think, how much has been accomplished in 75 years. Think about how easy it is for us to travel and be in Israel – with a new 3x weekly flight from Dulles! – These are things that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors.

And yet I wonder, and here I'll speak for myself but I imagine this may be true for others, if I sometimes take all of this for granted. There are moments where I can forget, neglect or fail to appreciate the meaning and importance of our state of Israel. This is not 1948, 1967 or 1973 when all of this was in some way easier to feel in such a raw way.

But even more so: Our world, especially these several years, was a very challenging, maybe even a distracting place to live. A global pandemic, a war in Ukraine, an Afghan refugee crisis – that just scratches the surface. All of these things have been on our mind, and here at Beth Sholom we have been blessed to be involved in amazing projects and initiatives to help the world around us. These projects emerge from our basic obligation as Jews to not only care about the broader world around us, beyond our Jewish community, but also to do something about it. And at the same time, as Jews we also have an obligation to turn inward – helping one another in our local Jewish community and also Jews in Israel and across the world. Figuring out how to invest one's time, between the universal – the world around us – and the particular – us – is no simple matter.

Rosh Hashanah recognizes this tension, between that which is universal and the particular.

There are many places in our davening where we specifically recall the world. One of the central ideas of Rosh Hashanah is that we are coronating Hashem as ruler, as king – we say מלוך על כל העולם כלו בכבודך – reign over the entire universe in your glory. At its core, Rosh Hashanah is Yom Harat Olam – the birthday of the world. And the tefilah that we say right before tekiat shofar, כל העמים תקעו כף – All of the nations, join hands – sound the shofar to Hashem in recognition of Hashem's rulership.

Moreover, we believe today that the entire world is standing in judgment. We will say in unetane tokef – וכל באי עולם יעברון לפניך כבני – מרום – all of the world will pass before you like members of a flock. All of humanity – not just the Jewish people – are compared to sheep standing before Hashem.

And there are many other examples. So today, because we are coronating Hashem as ruler, and because all people are all standing in judgment together, we are thinking not only about ourselves but our own families and our community and the Jewish people, but also the entire world. There is a strong pull towards universalism on Rosh Hashanah.

And yet there are parts of our davening today that remind us of ourselves – the Jewish people – the particular. We explore the עקדה, one of the defining moments of Avraham and Yitzchak's journey of faith as they remind us of the special bond that the Jewish people have with Hashem. We read in the haftarah on the first day about tefilat Chana, the basis for much of Jewish prayer. And, there are many tefilot throughout our machzor relating to geulah – redemption. This is what we are working towards – a world in which the Jewish people are brought back, both spiritually and physically, to the land of Israel.

Perhaps no better example of this is the Haftarah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. We read of Rachel's tears, רחל מבכה על בניה – she is crying for her children, the Jewish people, over their exile. And in response to Rachel's tears the Haftarah contains a message of hope, telling us that the Jewish people will return to their land ושובו בנים לגבולם. Our children – including my brother the chaya and my brother the chatan – will return one day to the land of Israel. We ask Hashem that when this happens, that there will be שמחה וששון לעירך – happiness in your land and joy in your cities.

One could reasonably ask: Couldn't we have only focused on Rosh Hashanah on the world around us – afterall, as Jews we are included in that population. And the same question can be asked in reverse: Why does Rosh Hashanah focus on the world around us, when there is already so much to consider just as a Jewish people? Why do we recall both the universal and the particular on this day?

I believe it's because we cannot limit our thinking today to just the world around us, or just to the Jewish people. We need to bring balance to our thinking – because if we spend too much time thinking about only the world, we run the risk of neglecting our own, and if we only think about our own, we run the risk of neglecting the world around us.

And having said that, I want to suggest the following about THIS coming year, 5783. Maybe precisely because of all of the time and energy we have spent thinking about the world the last several years, we must now dig even deeper than we may normally have, as we consider how we will embrace Israel and the Jewish people this year. Even as we continue to hear the cries of those suffering in the world around us, we need to ensure that we tap into the tears of Rachel, who cries for the Jewish people. We need to feel those tears as much today as we feel the tears of the world around us.

We say in the Shemone Esrei on Rosh Hashanah, וכן תן כבוד לעמך – asking Hashem to grant honor to the Jewish people. This is a request of Hashem, but I think it can also be viewed as a set of questions we can ask ourselves. We can also play a role, along with Hashem, in bringing honor to our people. What are our goals this year for bringing honor to the Jewish people?

What are the ways in which we will be supporting Israel this year, as we mark her 75th birthday? What are we doing to combat anti semitism in our midst? And of course, as much as we are alarmed by crises far away, we cannot forget our own Jewish community – people who are suffering, in need of help and care and support, right in our backyard.

I want to bless all of us – the whole world – with a Shana Tovah, a good and sweet new year that we so desperately need on a global level. And at the same time, in the same breath, I yearn for שמחה לארצך וששון לעירך – happiness in our land and joy in our cities. I pray for a Shana Tovah for the Jewish people specifically – for our families, for our community, and for our brothers in Israel. Shana Tovah.