

Does the name Max Steinberg ring a bell to anyone? Max Steinberg was your seemingly typical Jewish kid from LA. He loved Bob Marley, coffee, and playing baseball. Everything changed for Max after his older siblings finally convinced him to go to Israel on a Birthright trip. Max immediately fell in love with Israel and decided to move there, despite not speaking a word of Hebrew or having any family or friends in the country. With Max's grit and determination, he joined Golani's 13th Battalion, where he became a sharp shooter.

On July 20th 2014, Max Steinberg was killed during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza after rejoining his team after being injured days before.

The next morning, at 8 a.m. on Sunday, three representatives from the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles knocked on Evie and Stuart Steinberg's door. After hearing the tragic news, Steinberg's parents grew nervous that very few people would even show up for Max's funeral as they had no family or friends in Israel. In fact, this would be their first trip to Israel.

Initially fearing that they would not even make a minyan, the funeral was eventually delayed 30 minutes to enable all 30,000 people to reach Har Herzl.

Nearly everyone who attended the funeral did not know Max, but answered the call because they saw Max as a brother, a son, and a friend.

He was a part of Am Yisrael. Spending that summer in Israel, Max's story had a major impact on me as it reminded me that the true strength of Jewish people is in our ability to see each other as one family, as one soul.

Our existence, our greatness, actually depends on this oneness.

Another story. My cousin Amnon recently told me about his experience reporting to his base during the Yom Kippur War. He was nervous for many obvious reasons, like going to war but another reason was because his base was located in Mea Shearim, arguably the most religious neighborhood on planet earth. He was terrified about disturbing the prayers and upsetting the Hassidim as they prepared to leave for war. When he got there, he recalled being overwhelmed after seeing all these Hassidic women waiting outside the base, giving the soldiers food so they would be well fed as they left for battle. Remember this is Yom Kippur in Mea Shearim. Would this happen today? I don't know but, it's important to remember that this interconnectivity between Jews, this ability to transcend our differences is not a fantasy, it's very much possible.

Why do I bring this up tonight? Isn't Yom Kippur about each of us individually doing Teshuvah? About each of us individually yearning to be better? What does the Jewish people have to do with Yom Kippur?

In short – everything. Look closely at the words we will be saying tonight.

All the prayers are in the plural. “We have sinned, we have robbed, we have spoken slander.” “Grant us atonement for all our transgressions. For the sin we have sinned before You.” “Tear up the evil decree against us.”

“Write us in the book of pardon and forgiveness.” “We are Your people and You are our God.” “We are your glock and You are our Shepherd.”

The Kohen Gadol is atoning for all the sins of Israel. There is no individual Jew on Yom Kippur, just the Jews. The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks poetically proclaims, “Just as there can be no divisions within God, so there can be no divisions within the collective Jewish soul. As Jews, we are individuals only as bodies, not as souls.”

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great Kabbalist asked why we say, “We have sinned, rather than, I have sinned? Because all Israel is one body and every one of Israel is a limb of that body; that is why we are all responsible for one another when we sin. So, if one’s fellow should sin, it is as though one has sinned oneself; therefore, despite the fact that one has not committed that iniquity, one must confess to it. For when one’s fellow has sinned, it is as though one has sinned oneself.”

Yom Kippur is a collective experience, a shared obligation, and responsibility. As Jews, we’re bound to the same fate, whether you wear a strimal or have a tattoo.

The individual Jew has no holiness, only as a part of the Jewish people does a Jew acquire holiness, only as a part of the Jewish people do we receive Hashem’s blessings. The secret to Yom Kippur is understanding the meaning and purpose of the Jewish people.

The big question for us to reflect on is whether we still believe in Am Yisrael? Does our existence as a people mean anything anymore or are we simply a group of loosely associated individuals who occasionally practice ancient rituals together?

Sadly, the Jewish community has largely replicated the trend of the rest of American society in terms of polarization and division. For those who like the hard facts. The recent Pew Study revealed some concerning trends.

About half of Orthodox Jews in the U.S. say they have “not much” or “nothing at all” in common with Jews in the Reform movement. Reform Jews generally reciprocate those feelings: Six-in-ten say they have not much or nothing at all in common with the Orthodox.

In terms of responsibility to fellow Jews: Only one-third of Jewish adults say that being part of a Jewish community is essential to what being Jewish means to them. To put it differently, two-thirds say that being a part of a Jewish community doesn’t matter. Only about half of Jewish Americans say they made a donation to a Jewish cause in the past

year. And finally, 51 percent of Jewish Americans say they feel at least some responsibility to help Jews in need around the world. Forget intermarriage for a second. We can barely have a majority of Jews say they feel some responsibility to a Jew in need. This is not alarming — it's embarrassing.

What about how we publicly shame other Jews? Would we air out the dirty laundry of family members? Yes, Hassidim should've been wearing masks and following social distance throughout COVID but what good did posting about it on Facebook do? Did we attempt to talk to them about it?

Did we try to help explain the issues? Have we made any attempts to help them get vaccines? The same script can be flipped. The scenes of Hardeim spitting on Women of the Wall and tearing their siddurim is beyond words.

As Jews, we're better than this. We must be better. Despite what Jewry looks like, Judaism itself has no notion of sects, we're only klal yisrael.

This was a challenging year for Israel as it endured yet another war with Hamas. Where was American Jewry during this time of need?

Mostly apathetic, silent, with some even publicly critiquing Israel in the New York Times. Let me be clear, Jews can and should hold Israel to the highest ethical standard. Alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians and holding the Israeli government responsible for building a moral society.

But that does not discharge our responsibility to the people of Israel, to Jewish peoplehood. As a rabbi, I didn't even feel comfortable expressing my solidarity with Israel on Facebook.

Nearly a half-century ago Rav Soloveithik was disturbed by American relations with Israel. He said, "*We must understand that the fate of the Jews in the Land of Israel is our fate too. Is it not our sacred obligation to come to their aid? Is it forbidden for us to seek the security of the Yishuv?*"

He concluded by saying, "our sense of nationhood is damaged. We do not grasp the notion of the experience of Shared Fate and the essence of peoplehood." Again, I'm not saying to not be critical of Israel, but it can't be at the expense of speaking out for the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel since we should know by now that no one else is likely to do so.

We've also bought into society's glorification of the new and a forgetfulness of the past. One-third of Holocaust survivors living in the USA live in poverty. Yom HaShoah is relegated to lighting candles and watching Schindler's List. A Jew that ignores the past is denying the core to our identity.

Yet we are not linked by history alone but we share a common vision for the future. The beauty of Yom Kippur is understanding this higher purpose of the Jewish people. This is why we received the 2nd tablets on Yom Kippur, our spiritual mission statement. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The gravest sin is for a Jew to forget what he represents.” We’ve a mission and it’s more than bagels and lox. Today is a reminder about running towards our higher calling not away like Jonah.

We’ve so much to offer (especially to this current moment), yet we’re afraid to self actualize, to see our potential clearly. Heschel went on to say, “It is our destiny to live for what is more than ourselves. Our very existence is an unparalleled symbol of such aspirations. By being what we are, namely Jews, we mean more to mankind than by any particular service we way offer.”

We are called on to change the world and our message is so desperately needed. The world is on fire with radical individualism, with greed, corruptness, violence, falsehood, vanity, despair, death. We teach the power of the collective, of generosity, of justice. Judaism is not interested in power and rights — but righteousness. Human life is most sacred and the triumph of life over death is our greatest dream. In the words of my teacher, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, “The Torah’s vision projects that ultimately the whole earth will be purified of death and evil behaviors.” We taught the world that every human being is equal, is worth infinite value, and totally unique.

In such dark times, we need hope. Israel’s national anthem is HaTikvah - as a Jew never gives up hope in a better future. Helping the oppressed is the most repeated message of the Torah. We’re intended to challenge the idols of the moment, to revolt against the vulgar, to build a society whose foundation is love and kindness. In the words of Rav Kook. “it is the destiny of the Jews to serve toward the perfection of all things.”

This day has endless potential, but it’s realization is only possible if we can recommit ourselves to not just being better Jews, but more faithful members of the Jewish people. We’re taught that whoever forgets one segment of the Torah commits a great sin. How much more is a person guilty if he forgets to see the majesty and potential of the Jewish people.

My Zayde was my role model for understanding what it means to love our fellow Jew. As a boy living in Des Moines Iowa, he learned about the horrors happening in Europe by reading the Forward in Yiddish. Unable to standby, he enlisted in the US Army at the age of 18 to fight the Nazis and help save his people. On a cold, wet night, my Zayde and his unit liberated the

Wöbbelin concentration camp. In a letter to his brother, describing an encounter he had with two inmates he wrote, "When I said that I was also Jewish they threw their arms about me and kissed me. It gave me a strange feeling which I've never before experienced and can't describe very well. We eventually recited the Shema together." My Zayde was far from a mystic, but he always believed that Jews had some sort of magical connection with each other. He believed that we had a sense of responsibility for each other. He believed that we had a message to share with the world.

Tonight is about remembering this spark that connects us in these disconnected times. Tonight is about remembering that we as Jews stand for something. May Hashem bless us with a renewed love for each other.