

## **Shaken Foundations and Hearts Broken Open**

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Kol Nidrei 5785*

I was blessed to be in the sanctuary at Congregation Beth El in Sudbury when my teacher and colleague, Rabbi Larry Kushner, shared his final sermon with the congregation after nearly three decades of sacred leadership there. The sermon began with a vision for where the congregation ought to go next, a litany of exciting steps the community might take in its ongoing journey. His words were inspiring, and he was nearing the conclusion when he shared that – in 28 years of rabbinic leadership – he had never repeated a sermon...until that night. The vision he had just shared was, in fact, the first sermon he had given at Beth El 28 years earlier. While they had taken meaningful steps towards all of the goals he outlined, there was more work to be done on each.

I loved that idea, but I will not be able to repeat my first TBS sermon when – God willing, many years from now – my time here comes to an end. My inaugural words to this community were about the upcoming release of the brand new Reform Movement Shabbat prayer book we were soon adopting, which is now 18 years old and certainly won't be rolled out anew when I retire.

This evening, like Rabbi Kushner, I too can share that, in my nearly two decades leading this congregation, I have not repeated a sermon topic...until tonight. Sadly, just five years ago on this eve of Yom Kippur, I was moved to speak on the rise of anti-Semitism in the wake of the murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue, attacks on Chabad houses from Poway, California, to Needham, Massachusetts, and nationwide incidents targeting Jews that numbered 2,000+ annually for multiple years.<sup>1</sup>

Heartbreakingly, on this Kol Nidre, I feel compelled to return to the topic of hatred towards Jews in our world because of the unnervingly seismic shifts so many of us have recently experienced, shaking us to our cores.

Just after my words on this topic on Yom Kippur 5780, March of 2020 saw our entire world shut down when COVID arrived, and once everyone retreated to their homes, anti-Semitism must have stopped, right? You'll recall that – while we were far from the only ones targeted – Jewish communities universally needed, almost immediately, to be on high alert for intruders in our communal Zoom spaces, invaders who disrupted prayer services, holiday celebrations, even funerals, seizing control and often sharing deeply disturbing messages and images while they were at it.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Defamation League's "Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents: Year in Review 2018" (<https://www.adl.org/2018-audit-H>)

2021 saw the beginnings of return to more normal life, and as people emerged from their homes, incidents of antisemitic harassment, vandalism, and assault skyrocketed, reaching new national highs and climbing nearly 30% from pre-pandemic rates.<sup>2</sup>

As 2022 arrived, my rabbinical school classmate, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and his congregants, were held against their will in Colleyville, Texas, by a man who believed in the conspiracy theory that Jews control all the world's seats of power. He engaged in this act of terror with the expectation that my friend could make a couple phone calls and get a political prisoner released, a chilling reminder of the history of outlandish conspiratorial stories which have cost countless Jews their lives throughout the years. Blessedly, Charlie and his congregants escaped, but that incident was just one of many to come in 2022 which also saw a 36% increase over the prior year in anti-Jewish events in this country.<sup>3</sup>

In the first nine months of 2023 alone, we experienced online and campus campaigns in support of Kanye West's Antisemitic and incendiary rhetoric and amplification of countless other voices like his...a social media landscape that became increasingly uncomfortable for Jewish users with very little accountability taken by the purveyors of those platforms for hate fomented there...and a growing wave of anti-Zionist sentiment – often nothing more than thinly-veiled anti-Judaism - across all of these settings.

I imagine there is a pit in all of our stomachs right now because we know that I haven't gotten to the really hard part yet. Let's take a deep breath. We'll get through it together now...just like we have for 370 days already.

Had we only awoken on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to the most brutal, deadly, and vicious attack on Jews since the Holocaust, the punch to our guts would have been plenty hard, and the hole in our hearts would have been profoundly deep. To soon learn that – in cities and on campuses across our nation – celebrations of Hamas' actions were erupting, was almost beyond comprehension. Israel had not yet secured its borders or neutralized the active threat to its people. There had been no military or political response at all so far outside of shock and grief, and yet...anti-Israel protests. Pro-Hamas demonstrations in the public square on American streets. **Were our hearts not broken enough already? Did our foundations need more shaking?**

In a statement last week marking the one-year anniversary since the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre, Anti-Defamation League President, Jonathan Greenblatt, rightly noted that,

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<sup>2</sup> Anti-Defamation League's "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2021" (<https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2021>)

<sup>3</sup> Anti-Defamation League's "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2022" (<https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2022>)

“From that day on, Jewish Americans haven’t had a single moment of respite.”<sup>4</sup> Those words resonate in the souls of many with us tonight, I am sure.

As we prepare to send our daughter, Mia, off to college next fall, I have a particular sensitivity to the meltdowns that took place on too many campuses over the past year. Jewish students were harassed verbally and physically, prevented from walking to or attending classes, had major events – including graduations, Jewish holidays and memorial services - disrupted by protests, and witnessed daily messages of hate against Jews and anyone with a positive – or even neutral - relationship with the world’s lone Jewish state.

Jewish faculty members told me of being barred from campus discussions about the unfolding situation because they would bring a Zionist voice into the room, a Zionist being someone who thinks the State of Israel has a right to exist.

The American college and university system has been one of the great lifelines for our people as we’ve made our homes here *en masse* over the last century. These are supposed to be the very places that burgeoning adults learn not only how to exercise their right to free speech but also how to hear and learn from differing perspectives, how to share in respectful and passionate debate, and how to grapple with complex, layered, nuanced problems that need to be solved. Too many schools failed us, including several which are supposed to be the very pinnacles of academic excellence in the pursuit of understanding and truth. **Were our hearts not broken enough already? Did our foundations need more shaking?**

Our TBS team has spent so much of this past year meeting with, on phone calls with, and in Zoom sessions with our college students and their families. We spoke with our young adults who were victims of written or verbal harassment or felt physical intimidation. We counseled students who needed to confront a professor or administrator about comments that crossed a line. Our outreach included those who were dismayed or frightened by the protest encampment on their campus and also those who were participating in the encampment because they could find no other outlet to express their true, heartfelt, compassionate anguish over the civilian casualties of the war, or because they found belonging there, a feeling sorely lacking – I was recently reminded – for those who had no senior year of high school during COVID, whose first years of college were spent isolated in dorm rooms. All of them are our children...each of them is deserving of our care and support as they navigate the very real daily discomforts of being part of the Jewish community right now.

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<sup>4</sup> “‘A shocking number’: Antisemitic Incidents Reach Record Highs in Year After Hamas Attacks” in *US News & World Report* (<https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2024-10-07/report-antisemitic-incidents-reach-record-high-in-year-since-oct-7-attack>)

Far too many of them have fallen victim to a longstanding form of Antisemitism...holding the collective population responsible for the actions of a sovereign state's leaders. Can we think of another identity group on campus that is asked to bear such a weight for the actions of a sovereign nation over which they have no control?

And we who are not "blessed" to be in our college years at the moment...we've had no immunity from the ceaseless barrage of challenges to our identities and our own places in the world. We have seen the resurrection of centuries-old baseless assertions that Jews control the media, the financial systems, and the world's governments, and I've already noted just how dangerous those falsehoods remain in our day. Similarly well-worn and false tropes about dual-loyalty – our inability to be sufficiently good Americans because we are more committed to our people or our homeland than to this nation – persist and succeed in othering us for no legitimate reason.

Of course we, like many other groups in this nation, can both feel an affinity for – and connection with – one another while still being patriotic Americans. In truth, we know well what a blessing the United States of America has been to us, and we remain fervently committed to its growth and its democratic ideals which have provided us safe harbor from the storms of Jewish history for generations and which need to be painstakingly maintained by us and by generations to come.

Throughout the past twelve months, we have been challenged anew even in life's most mundane decisions. When I spoke about Antisemitism five years ago, I mentioned the challenge of not knowing whether or not to wear our *kippot*, Jewish necklaces, and other outward signs of our identity while traveling abroad. Now, too many of us have those concerns here at home. When the news has us down, too many of us no longer know whether or not it is safe to raise our feelings with neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

Too many of us have needed to stop following a public figure, thinker, or entertainer, because the opinions they were espousing online made our stomachs turn...like cheering for known terrorist groups while holding them accountable for nothing, or like comparing Jews and Israelis to Nazis...the Nazis who systematically slaughtered 6 million of us within the living memory of countless souls who still walk this earth. **Were our hearts not broken enough already? Did our foundations need more shaking?**

Boston Globe columnist, Jeff Jacoby, summed up the agony that many feel one year after our Jewish people was savagely attacked. He notes that those who follow the news might have expected there to be widespread critique of Israel's response to Hamas no matter what it entailed..."[b]ut that [34 student organizations](#) at Harvard [would issue a public statement](#) holding Israel 'entirely responsible' for the massacre while the bodies of the victims were still warm? That tenured professors at Ivy League universities

would exult about how '[awesome](#)' and '[exhilarating](#)' the bloodbath was? That feminist organizations [would refuse to raise their voices](#) against the [...sexual torture](#) committed against Israeli women and girls? That two-thirds of 18- to 25-year-olds would [describe Jews as 'oppressors'](#)? That people would claim — on social media, in protests, at public hearings — that the atrocities of Oct. 7 [never happened](#)? That the number of reported antisemitic incidents in the year since Oct. 7 would [triple to more than 10,000](#)...I wouldn't have predicted any of that," he wrote, and concluded, "Perhaps I should have."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we all should have. To the degree, and in the cases that this is true, *Al cheit shechatanu l'faneicha*...

### **Our hearts are so painfully broken...our foundations won't stop shaking.**

"But, Rabbi Todd," you may be thinking to yourself. "Your sermons usually include lots of humor, and this has been a massive downer so far." Well, then, let me tell you about my recent visit to the dermatologist. I was seeing a new doctor who entered the room with a medical assistant, introduced himself, and immediately followed his name with, "So, they tell me you're a rabbi. How have the events of October 7<sup>th</sup> impacted the American Jewish community?"

I, wearing little more than a surgical gown, took a very deep breath, and replied, "It's been really difficult." My attempt at cutting the conversation short was unsuccessful. He stared back at me – his medical assistant doing the same over his shoulder – in a way that made clear he was looking for more...and that they would be waiting. I took another deep breath, and continued:

"Just like when a family has a painful loss, and everyone in the family grieves that loss differently, [everyone](#) in our extended Jewish family has experienced [many](#) losses over the last year, and [each](#) of us is responding to [all](#) of them differently. That can be extra hard...just like in a family when we sometimes wish we were all experiencing, thinking, and feeling the same things. We aren't...but....

[In some ways we are](#). We're all hurting somehow. A lot of people are turning back towards Jewish community to heal or find support, and that's making us stronger, even in our differences. 3,000 years ago we were twelve tribes but still one people. We can differ about how to get to a better place and still strive to get there together."

I paused at that point, ever-hopeful that there might be a dermatology appointment somewhere in my near future. There was...and before I continue on in this room full of worried Jewish parents, please know that the rest of the routine visit was smooth, and I am fully healthy.

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<sup>5</sup> "For US Jews, the postwar years were a golden age. It ended on Oct. 7." [Boston Globe](#), October 9, 2024

But now that I have a little more time, and I am – as far as you know – fully dressed beneath this white gown, let me share what I meant by that last part. Our foundations have been shaken, and our hearts may be broken, but – as my friend, Rabbi Marc Baker, President of CJP, reminded us at Monday night’s Service of Memorial and Hope – in our Jewish tradition, when our hearts break, they do not shatter, they break open.

On this *Kol Nidre*, my heart, fractured wide, is brimming with profound gratitude for the Hillel professionals and their student leaders on so many campuses who created safe and Jewishly-affirming spaces for the young adults of our communities. The same goes for campus chaplains, faculty, and administrators who showed up vocally, publicly, repeatedly to affirm their commitment to combatting hate on campus in all its forms.

I offer a special note of thanks to those college and university leaders at the highest echelons of power who made clear that free speech is ensured but criminal activity – including threats, trespassing, and verbal or physical harassment based on faith or creed – are not. For all of the campus-based heartache in 5784, it is worth noting that many, many colleges and universities remained safe and welcoming to our communities’ students throughout this past year, and that – at so very many of them – peaceful, solemn, October 7<sup>th</sup> memorial observances were just held along with meaningful and joyful Rosh Hashanah services.

On this Yom Kippur, my heart - still torn asunder - is filled up anew by the solidarity expressed with our community from the lips of our partners in the Needham Interfaith Clergy Association, our colleagues at Eastern University’s Chamberlain Interfaith Fellows Program, and in halls of power from State Legislators’ and Governors’ offices, to members of Congress and the White House as well.

If my gratitude just stoked a grievance you have with some particular political figure and their responsibilities to the Jewish people, then after sunset tomorrow, write to them and let them know that. And if the people representing you have been doing right by you on these fronts...write that note too!!! To that end, it is worth saying publicly and repeatedly, that Temple Beth Shalom’s partners in the Needham Fire, Public Health, and especially Police Departments have been – and continue to be – extraordinary to us, as have our community’s security partners and personnel who are always keeping an eye out for us. I take every opportunity I can to thank these souls directly. If you are moved to do so, please join me. Expressions of appreciation and respect for those who stand by us in times of need have no downside.

And on this *Shabbat Shabbaton* - this Sabbath of Sabbaths – my heart, broken wide open by the events of 5784 is being stitched together at its fraying edges by pride...the pride I feel in our college students – and people of all ages - who continue to find the right times and places to put that *magen David* necklace back on in spite of the doubts, to hang the mezuzah on the doorpost, to light the menorah and place it in the window, to stand up and to - like tomorrow morning's Torah portion instructs us – stand together, representing our people and celebrating our community. I take heart-filled pride in the fact that Rabbi Jay and Dr. Huma Farid continue to be models to us and to our broader Needham community that – even in challenging times, and in spite of the differences that might otherwise separate us – we can be good neighbors, good listeners, even friends.

And I take genuine, heartfelt and heart-filling pride – as we all can – in the ongoing work of our TBS Antisemitism Awareness Initiative and in our Temple Beth Shalom community as a whole which perpetually invites us to learn, stretch, and reflect together...imagine, question, and be challenged together...grieve, support, and act together.

Our hearts are not yet whole...it will be a while. With future *tsurres* sure to chip away at them anew throughout the year ahead. Perhaps we can learn from Reb Nachman of Breslov who suggested that we all set aside just one hour each day to have a broken heart.<sup>6</sup>

During the rest of the hours of 5785, I pray for us *ometz lev* – literally, “**strength of heart**” – and also the Hebrew phrase meaning “courage.”

The courage to embrace and celebrate our Judaism when others would rather we cower, to call out those who would cause us harm and call in our friends from every corner to be with us and stand with us in all our complexity, in our grief, and through our healing. The courage to challenge expressions of hate in all their forms for, as Dr. King reminded us, “darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.” May we have the courage to be those lights.

And may we neither forget – nor ever let anyone convince us otherwise – that in our tradition, every section of the prayer service ends with a fervent hope for peace for a reason. That is the lasting goal. We'll find our way back there together. We may all exhale now. As we do so, let these be the first words to cross our lips...

*Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom...*

*Aleinu v'al kol Yisra'el, v'imru amen...*

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<sup>6</sup> *Sichot HaRan 41:5*