

“My People Are Drowning”

Shabbat B'reishit 5784

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“It’s a modern-day pogrom,” they said. Many people googled the word “pogrom.” But not Jews. We know. On April 8, 1903, Easter Sunday, thugs entered the Jewish neighborhood of Kishinev, “a sleepy city on the southwestern border of imperial Russia.” In the days thereafter, the rampage escalated. The *Harvard Gazette*, retelling the story in 2009, writes, “In the end, 49 Jews were killed, an untold number of Jewish women were raped, and 1,500 Jewish homes were damaged. This sudden rush of hoodlum violence,” the *Gazette* continues, was “prompted by accusatory rumors of Jewish ritual murder.” In the words of Jewish cultural historian Steven Zipperstein, the pogrom became a metaphor of risk that transformed 20th century Jewish life.”ⁱ

That massacre was far from the deadliest in Jewish history. Its impact was enormous all the same. As news spread in Russia, Jewish opposition to the tsarist regime intensified. Some made the ill-fated decision to join what would become the Bolshevik Revolution. Others left for Palestine, casting their lot with the destiny of their people, seeking to build a refuge in our homeland. Many followed previous waves of immigration to the United States, before America’s gates shut. Even in that age of slower communication, the pogrom became known worldwide, leading Jews and their allies to conclude that our people could not be safe in many of the lands where they were living, enhancing support for Zionism across Europe and North America.

Last Saturday morning—for the Jewish world, Shabbat morning on the festival of Atzeret-Simchat Torah—a day of rejoicing was turned to grief.

One friend’s immediate reaction stunned me. Hamas’s deadly attack on civilians—not in the Occupied West Bank, but inside Israel—indicated that the Jewish people cannot be safe in their own land, that the Zionist project has failed.

That response, though, could only come from outside Israel. Israelis reacted with horror and resolve—even unity, which is not to be taken for granted. Since January, every single Saturday night, and often in between, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets to protest what they regard as their own government’s assault on democracy in the Jewish State. Last Saturday, though, the protest movement mobilized instead to organize blood drives, to absorb evacuees from the Gaza border—and, for hundreds of thousands, to head out to emergency duty in the Israel Defense Forces, whether they were called up or not.

A popular song in Israel proclaims, אין לי ארץ אחרת, “I have no other land,” and those words were on the lips of countless Israelis in the aftermath of the unprecedented terrorist assault. Israelis mean these words literally. The homes that their parents and grandparents left, in Europe or across the Muslim and Arab world, are no longer available to them. With the terrifying rise in antisemitism right here in the United States, emanating from the white supremacist right as well as the extreme left that has become so visible and vocal in recent days, American Jews, too, may feel insecure. Echoes of the Kishinev pogrom were heard in Pittsburgh in 2018. Massacre was avoided in Colleyville, Texas in 2022, only because of the heroism of Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker. We do not anticipate that America will become uninhabitable for its Jewish citizens. Still, with threats to American democracy and a rising tolerance for authoritarian leadership, we have reason for concern, cause to cast our eyes toward Zion as a potential refuge.

Even tonight, some members of our community have stayed away out of concern for their personal safety. A Hamas leader set aside today for the Jewish community to be terrorized worldwide. ADL and Secure Communities Network, together with the FBI and our U.S. Attorney, Jonathan Ross, told us that there is no credible threat and certainly not a local one. Still, I am grateful that Mayor Scott directed Chief Helton to add two on-duty Little Rock police officers to guard the Temple tonight in coordinated with our loyal, contracted off-duty officer. LRPD Assistant Chief Michael Dyer, currently acting chief while Chief Helton is out of the city, has been here tonight, as have the mayor and U.S. Attorney, among other public officials.

Being here, together, is important. I knew that intuitively, but I am grateful that my teacher, Dr. Elana Stein Hain, provided language from our Jewish tradition to explain why a gathering such as this one is vitally important.

In the Talmud, our sages teach: “During the first three days after a bereavement, a mourner may not go to another mourner’s house to console them. From this point forward, a mourner may go, but” should still sit among the mourners, not those providing comfort.ⁱⁱ For a few days, the best any of us could do was to sit and absorb the news at home, reaching out to those more affected than we, particularly if we have family and friends in Israel or we know others who do. Most of us, though, were not ready to receive comfort, even from one another.

I feel certain that I’m not the only person here who was in a state of shock after receiving Saturday morning’s news. No, I am not an immediate mourner. Still, the news came to me from my sister-in-law in Israel. Karen was out of harm’s way in the Galilee, but she told me that her youngest daughter, my niece, Hannah, was sheltering in place with her three small children at home in Herzliya, while her

husband, Dvir, was called up to reserve duty. No terrorist reached Herzliya on the ground, but rocket sirens blared. Dvir, a farmer, is a Hummer driver in the Israel Defense Forces. He is stationed “in the south.” Terrifying.

Later Saturday, I would read that Ofir Liebstein, head of the regional council of Sha’ar HaNegev, had been murdered by the terrorists. I had met Mayor Liebstein just this past February. As part of our Central Conference of American Rabbis convention, a busload of us had gone to what’s called “the Gaza Envelope” with our colleague, Rabbi Yael Vurgan, who serves the community there. The kibbutz we visited was infested with terrorists on Saturday. Along with others nearby, it lies in shambles, evacuated, many of its residents murdered, others abducted, still more injured—and we know that, as in Kishinev, captured women were raped.

So tonight, we whose brothers and sisters were tortured on Saturday yet sit among the mourners. Now, though, days have passed. We can absorb the consoling presence of friends and neighbors, and we are comforted simply by being together. Still, we sit among the mourners.

We know that horrific days lie ahead. No, I don’t anticipate that terrorists will again infiltrate Israeli communities. Instead, I fear that citizen-soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces will lose their lives. More funerals lie ahead. Israelis tell us that they must cut short their time at each funeral to go to the next. Our Reform rabbis and their congregations are stockpiling *shiva* candles, which are burned throughout the period of mourning. Horrifying thoughts. And my mind goes to Dvir, driving that Hummer, even as each Israeli mind is focused on their loved ones—in most cases, several people—now in harm’s way.

We know, too, that Israelis have not been and will not be the only people to lose their lives in this conflict. Hamas terrorists did not distinguish between Israeli Jews, Palestinians, Bedouins, and guest workers from as far away as Thailand, as their murderous rampage cut down each one indiscriminately. Hamas callously places its weapons and its leaders among ordinary residents of Gaza, civilians, whose lives Hamas is happy to sacrifice in its effort to gain the world’s support.

We must not permit ourselves to become callous to any loss of innocent life. At our Passover Seder each year, we reduce our cups of joy because the plagues brought suffering to Egypt. We read the passage from our rabbinic sages, who imagine the angels rejoicing as Pharaoh’s armies are drowned in the Sea of Reeds. God cries out: “My children are drowning! How can you rejoice?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Earlier today, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of our Union for Reform Judaism, circulated a powerful message. He reminded us that, in the opening

verses of Genesis, words of Torah we read this week, night always comes first: “And there was evening, and there was morning.” And so, we pray for peace, with faith. This night is a dark one, and it will likely be long. We yet affirm, though, that our prayers for peace will be answered, and dawn will break once again.

Amen.

ⁱ Corydon Ireland, “The pogrom that transformed 20th century Jewry,” *The Harvard Gazette*, April 9, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *Mo’eid Katan* 21b.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 39b.