

## Enduring Hard Times

### *Shabbat Mikeitz 5784*

December 15, 2023

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Pharaoh has plenty of warning. All the Egyptians do. Thanks to Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's interpretation, they know that seven years of plenty will be followed by a devastating famine. Egypt has time to prepare, and it has the tools to do so. Joseph is not only a dream interpreter, but also an outstanding administrator. What's more, he has a plan. He will collect excess grain during seven years of bumper crops, and Egypt will be prepared to survive even the most devastating famine.

By contrast, Israel and the world Jewish community had no warning of what was coming on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Well, apparently, Israeli intelligence, the military, and the government had been alerted, but that's another sermon. The rest of us had no forewarning—civilians who became victims, ordinary soldiers in the few military bases near Gaza, Israeli reservists who would quickly be called into service, and the families of them all, not to mention the entire population of Israel who would need to mobilize to sustain their society and Jews throughout the world who would find ourselves suddenly needing to become an army of Israeli ambassadors abroad, all the while facing an unprecedented torrent of antisemitism.

No, we were not like those ancient Egyptians. There was no Joseph to foretell the hard times we had coming. Nevertheless, we did have our "stores of grain," sufficient to sustain us through challenging times. That "grain" was not food, of course, but it was our Jewish heritage—our traditions and our faith. And that "grain" also included the strength of relationships with good people who walk alongside us in our grief and in our struggles.

During this last week, we celebrated Chanukah with gusto. Chanukah in the Rock was robustly attended last Friday, as was Sunday's fun and energizing Chanukah party, planned by Eileen Hamilton and made possible by our Religious School faculty and a bevy of volunteers.

One could argue that we should not have celebrated so joyously. After all, Israelis are at war. Over one hundred continue to be held hostage in Gaza, with tragic news of the deaths of soldiers and hostages assaulting us each day—including, this morning, the unspeakable horror of three hostages mistaken as terrorists and slain by Israeli soldiers. We are bereaved, too, by the deaths of innocents in Gaza, particularly children.

Last week, an old friend saw my post on Facebook, sharing Jana Cohen’s invitation for the community to join us for “Chanukah in the Rock.” My friend commented that celebrations should be canceled at a time of war, when the entire Jewish people faces emergency. Perhaps my friend was aware, as Rabbi Russ Shulkes noted in October, that Rabbi Norman Lamm had expressed a similar concern as Simchat Torah approached during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, asking: “How shall we sing while mothers weep? How shall we dance while Jewish families in Israel grieve?”<sup>i</sup>

My teacher, Dr. Elana Stein Hain, addressed this problem by turning to the Mishnah, our sages’ code of Jewish law, recorded around the year 200. The text includes three lines, and Dr. Hain draws a lesson from each.

First, the Mishnah says, “We do not decree a public fast (for collective emergencies such as drought or other danger) on Chanukah and other joyous occasions.” From that, Professor Hain concludes that we should kindle our lights and enjoy our celebrations “despite (or perhaps as inspiration during) the current troubles.”

The rabbinic teaching continues, “But if they already started a series of fasts” before the holiday, “they need not stop the fast.” Dr. Hain argues that this line suggests that we should “allow the ongoing current troubles to take center stage even [during] Chanukah.”

Finally, the Mishnah concludes, “Even though [one should not] interrupt [an ongoing] series of fasts for [Chanukah]...one should not fast the entire day.” And from this, Professor Hain concludes that we should “allow for an admixture of current crisis and Chanukah miracle.”<sup>ii</sup>

I noticed an added quality of joy to our Chanukah celebrations this year—not escapism or denial, but joy all the same. People who might have found an excuse to stay home during another year chose instead to gather to celebrate this year. We needed to be together. We acknowledged the hard times that we and particularly our people in Israel are facing, and we kindled lights to dispel the gloom.

Last Friday night, some of our LAFTY teens were here for our Chanukah in the Rock service, followed by a Chanukah party and overnight at the Temple. They were not alone. Our LAFTY teens invited friends who are not Jewish to share the light and the celebration. We are blessed with fantastic Temple teens, so it’s not surprising that their friends are also terrific. The program and conversation that evening did not likely veer into the topic of Israel, Palestine, the October 7 terrorist attack, and the resulting war. They didn’t need to. By their presence, those guests

offered their Jewish friends unspoken assurance that they are not alone. Having established those relationships long before October 7, our teens had “stored up the grain,” if you will, of their friends’ loyalty at what has become a time of “famine” for our Jewish people.

I, too, was cheered by longstanding relationships during the festival that has just ended. Both on Monday and yesterday, I took Christian clergy partners to lunch—on Monday, Rev. Lindy Vogado of Second Presbyterian; and yesterday, Rev. Robert Lowry of Westover Hills Presbyterian. Rev. Vogado had attended a webinar to which I had invited her: The Shalom Hartman Institute had offered the program for non-Jewish clergy to help them understand what their Jewish clergy colleagues are experiencing now. For his part, Rev. Lowry is working diligently against the tide of the national Presbyterian Church, which has repeatedly taken appalling anti-Israel positions. Years of relationship—not only or especially with me, but with Congregation B’nai Israel, with the Jewish people—are the stores of grain from which Rev. Vogado, Rev. Lowry, and others like them have drawn to nourish our Jewish community with their friendship at our time of trouble.

On Sunday, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism held a webinar, מביא אור, “bringing the light.” We were treated to glimpses of the interfaith relationships that Israeli Reform rabbis have built, including their work with Israeli Arab religious leaders. Many people would be startled to learn that Israeli Arabs would appear with rabbis in public during this war. Those, too, are relationships that may be compared to the grain Joseph stored. My Israeli colleagues and their communities are sustained through this terrible time by the light that these friendships bring.

At our Chanukah party last Sunday, Ellyn Polsky shared a remarkable video. Her nephew was kindling the Chanukah menorah inside a tank. In Gaza. Tonight, his name appears on our prayer list. Ellyn’s nephew was injured in battle this week. He will require a hip replacement; but he has survived, thank God. And he is determined to return to his military command. I keep thinking back to that Chanukah menorah in the tank. This year, the Jewish people, in Israel and around the world, are enduring hard times. We are blessed that, even without knowing this particular calamity would arise, we had “stored the grain,” we had reserves of Jewish faith, light, and life, and we were blessed with relationships with our neighbors, that sustain us.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Russ Shulkes, “Sorrow in our Happiness: Processing a War Over a Holiday,” *Jewish Journal*, October 19, 2023, <https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/364063/sorrow-in-our-happiness-processing-a-war-over-a-holiday/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Elana Stein Hain, Facebook post, December 14, 2023, citing Mishnah Ta’anit 2:10.