

Suddenly, A People

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5785

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Most of us are old enough to remember 9/11, when despicable terrorists, fueled by Islamist extremism, slammed large passenger airplanes into New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Another plane was diverted by heroic passengers, who gave their lives to save many more. Younger folks know about that tragedy, too, of course, but might not have heard about the way Americans came together after 9/11, forging a previously unknown unity and new patriotism.

That unity didn't last, and perhaps it was never real. Our vaunted unity was squandered before it evaporated. Twenty-three years later, America suffers from toxic divisions.

A year after October 7th, we don't hear exclamations that the Jewish people are more united than ever. American Jews react to events in and around Israel in a variety of ways, often disagreeing acrimoniously. Israelis take to the streets by the hundreds of thousands in opposition to their government.

Still, there is a phenomenon akin to post-9/11 "unity." In this year after October 7, researchers have seen a surge in the number of people who are interested in Judaism and eager to be involved in Jewish life. We at Congregation B'nai Israel and at synagogues across North America have a sacred duty to make the most of the opportunity that this otherwise-terrible moment has provided: to enhance Jewish life and to welcome more people than ever into the joy and deep meaning of Judaism. Together, we can make 5785 the year of Jewish resurgence and new connections.

In the spring, a survey conducted by Jewish Federations of North America, JFNA, found what has been called "'The Surge:' Of the 83% of Jews who were 'only somewhat,' 'not very' or 'not at all engaged' prior to October 7, a whopping 40% are now showing up in larger numbers in Jewish life." JFNA leaders proclaim, "This group—equal to 30% of all Jewish adults ...—represents the greatest opportunity for broadening and deepening Jewish life." The opportunity for Reform congregations like ours is enormous. The JFNA study found: "Among Jews who are not members of synagogues...37% say they'd be open to joining one now. The most synagogue interest comes from those who identify as Reform."ⁱ The folks who created and are analyzing the study emphasize, though, that relatively uninvolved Jews aren't the only people affected by "the surge," relating that "The 17% of people in the Jewish community who were already engaged at a high level...are also saying they want more..."ⁱⁱ

And it's not only Jews. The Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported in June that American rabbis are seeing “an unprecedented spike in the number of people interested in converting or enrolling in [Introduction to Judaism] classes.” This trend impacts settings across the Jewish spectrum—Reform and Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist or Renewal, the whole gamut. It includes people who knew that some of their ancestors were Jewish and others who had long experienced “a strong yet inexplicable connection to the Jewish people.” My friend, Rabbi Mark Glickman, told a *Haaretz* reporter that he initially found the phenomenon “kind of weird.” Who in their right mind would want to join a people who seem to be unsafe in the world? Might it be some perverse fascination? Rabbi Julie Zupan, who describes the Union for Reform Judaism as “absolutely flooded with requests from conversion candidates,” urges us not to be so skeptical. “Many people,” she says, have been considering Judaism for some time, and are now “saying that it’s time to put a stake in the ground.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We can, and we must, make the most of this extraordinary opportunity.

First, we must understand what we are seeing. An Israeli rabbi, scholar, and musician I met this summer, Rabbi Rani Jaeger, has an idea. Jaeger emphasizes that worldwide antisemitism became a central concern for Israelis, even in the traumatic days of mid-October 2023. Israelis were suddenly newly aware that their fate is linked to that of Jews around the globe. Jaeger explains the phenomenon with the words and music of a song from the 1960s that became popular again in recent months: פתאום קם אדם בבוקר ומרגיש כי הוא עם ומתחיל ללכת, “Suddenly, a person wakes up in the morning, realizes that they’re part of a people, and gets moving.”^{iv}

That recognition of a shared destiny is by no means confined to Israel. In the past, I perceived that our congregation was not interested in sermons or education about Israel, whether for adults, teens, or children. After October 7th, even congregants who had never been to Israel and shown no interest in going were deeply concerned about the welfare of our people in Israel. Increasingly, news about Israel feels like news about **us**, even seven thousand miles away.

We have seen the surge here, although I admit not knowing what we were experiencing until the Federation study explained it. Our regular attendees became, well, more regular. Several occasional participants became active. And new people came, including folks now pursuing conversion. We have the largest Judaism 101 cohort of my tenure here—including some, but not all, with Jewish ancestry, and others, but not the majority, with Jewish spouses.

We have been a people all along, whether we acted like we knew that or not. Our fate has always been linked with that of our people in Israel and around the

world. Now, though, to quote the song, we have awakened, and it's time to get going.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has alerted us to an important reason for us to enhance our Jewish engagement, albeit a motivation unconnected to the Jewish people's current predicament. Our nation is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness and isolation.^v The opportunity to be part of something important and larger than ourselves is critical to our wellbeing. Judaism offers a community of purpose and a life of meaning through Torah.

Bruce Greenberg, our president, has articulated a mission to enhance friendships in our congregation, inviting interest in new ways for us to engage with one another Jewishly. We have an obligation to enhance Jewish life here in Central Arkansas to feed a growing hunger. Whether you have long been deeply engaged in Judaism, are seeking greater involvement, or are coming to Judaism anew, we have something here for you at Congregation B'nai Israel—and if we don't yet have what you're seeking, Bruce, Eileen, and I are eager to help you build it.

On Rosh Hashanah, we have been taught to pray, in words of the Talmud, that the old year will end, together with its curses.^{vi} We know all too well that the curses of 5784—the aftermath of October 7th in Israel and growing antisemitism around the world—will continue to plague us in the New Year. We cannot control that. The curses of 5784, though, brought us blessings we could not see through our tears, blessings that have now been revealed to us. In 5785, let us embrace the gift of the surge of interest in Jewish life, and let us make that blessing our own.

Amen.

ⁱ Mimi Kravetz, Sarah Eisenman, and David Manchester, "'The Surge,' 'The Core' and more: What you need to know about the explosion of interest in Jewish life," *ejewishphilanthropy*, May 9, 2024, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-surge-of-interest-in-jewish-life/>.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Judy Maltz, "'Time to Take the Plunge': How October 7 Sparked a Huge Wave of Conversions in America," *Haaretz*, June 2, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2024-06-02/ty-article-magazine/.premium/time-to-take-the-plunge-how-oct-7-sparked-a-huge-wave-of-jewish-conversions-in-america/0000018f-d964-d5bc-a1bf-df7408700000>.

^{iv} Rani Jaeger, "A Time to Mourn and a Time to Heal: A Personal and Musical Journey to and from October 7th," Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 17, 2024. Hebrew song lyrics by Amir Gilboa; translation, mine.

^v "New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 3, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>.

^{vi} Megillah 31b.