

Hope and Healing in Israel and for World Jewry

Shabbat B'reishit 5786

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This week, the Jewish people celebrate a new beginning. While we marked the New Year weeks ago on Rosh Hashanah, we did so with anxiety over unfinished business. Twenty hostages continued to languish in the tunnels of Gaza—starved, deprived of food, water, even air, not to mention human touch, many of them bound and shackled, imprisoned in tiny cages. Israeli society was tearing itself apart, a process that predated the war. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis repeatedly took to the streets to demand that a deal be reached to return the hostages and end the war. They shouted slogans, blaming and even defaming Prime Minister Netanyahu, whose supporters responded with ugly epithets, directed even at hostage families.

The suffering of Israelis has been extraordinary, alongside the deadly catastrophe for Gaza civilians. Finding themselves increasingly branded as criminal pariahs worldwide, Israelis faced horrifying mistreatment whenever they were abroad and were distraught by rejection from nations and individuals whom they had long counted as friends. Some Israelis found themselves accused of wrongdoing they were actively protesting, all the while feeling complicit. Soldiers and reservists were constantly at war, repeatedly taken from their families. Focus on the hostages obscured from the public eye the deaths of citizen-soldiers who were repeatedly sent into battle. Injuries in this war have been horrific, often with lifelong consequences, like those sustained by American personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The economic impact of the war has also been devastating. Reservists struggle to earn a living when they're repeatedly called to military service. People who live in both the south and north were displaced, often for extended periods, a financial strain, whether the individuals or the government is paying the bills. Spending billions on war has overwhelmed government budgets, and the tax burden on working Israelis—that is, the same sector of the population that serves in the military—has been extraordinary. Some economic sectors, such as tourism, a

significant industry for Israel, were devastated, with Jewish solidarity missions, sometimes including allies, being the only visitors. Even Israel's friends, including many diaspora Jews, have stayed away, and not only because of hate. War is a terrible time for a first-timers' tour.

Jews around the world, too, have suffered, despite not being on the front lines and nonparticipants in Israeli democracy and therefore not able to have direct impact on wartime policy. We have faced new threats of antisemitism—and even when it did not rise to the level antisemitism, severe criticism of the Jewish State—often from friends or allies, primarily a problem on the extreme left until it began to metastasize on the far right as well in 2025, despite President Trump's steadfastness. Internal divisions might have hurt us most. Disagreement over Israel ruptured families, congregations, and communities.

On Monday, though, all that could be forgotten, if only for a moment. I suspect I'm not the only one who cannot stop watching and rewatching clips of reunions of newly released hostages with their family and friends. How skinny is he? How pale? And that smile on his face. Is that the first time he has smiled in two years? Two years!

This year, we **really** celebrated the new year, not on Rosh Hashanah but on Atzeret-Simchat Torah, with the miracle of hostage release. We danced with the Torah scrolls with the greatest joy on Monday night, and we celebrated with prayer, thanking God for keeping us in life and sustaining us to this joyous moment. Long ago, our rabbis chose this date for renewal of our annual cycle of Torah readings. This week, as Israel embraces a new reality, we have fittingly returned to *B'reishit*, the creation of the world.

Yesterday, my friend, Rabbi Binyamin Minich, the Chair of MARAM, the Council of Israeli Reform Rabbis, spoke about the inspiration he has taken from the creation story this week. He noted that the second verse of Torah begins, וְהָאָרֶץ וְהָאֲרָץ, “The earth was unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep.”ⁱ The Genesis creation story begins with darkness, and creating light is God's first act of creation. The narrative moves from chaos towards God's order. Having experienced two full years of chaos and worse, the

order now provided by President Trump is most welcome. With light and order, Rabbi Minich, his colleagues, and their communities can begin to rebuild and heal.

He also pointed to the third day of creation, when God says, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, so that the dry land may appear.”ⁱⁱ Dry land is a prerequisite for human life, and Rabbi Minich emphasized that the word God uses to describe the “gathering” of the water is יקוו, which comes from the same root as the word תקווה, hope. Each smile we see on an Israeli face radiates hope for a better future.

I would add a word about the sixth day of creation. One human being is created, as the Torah seeks to teach that all of humanity is one family, all descended from one person. That is the basis of the famous Talmudic teaching, echoed in the Qur’an, that killing one person is tantamount to destroying the whole world, while saving one person is credited as saving the entire world, for if that first, one and only, human, had been destroyed, none of us would exist.ⁱⁱⁱ Because that first person lived, so do we all. Israelis have taught the world that the individual human being—in this case, each hostage—is worth a sacrifice, even a redefinition of “victory.” And we must affirm the scope of world-destruction in each death of an innocent Gaza civilian, too.

My teacher Yossi Klein Halevi, a widely published author, spoke about this new beginning in the *For Heaven’s Sake* podcast this morning. His first reaction to Monday’s hostage release and the sights and sounds he experienced that day was “an overwhelming gratitude to be an Israeli.” After thanking world leaders, Halevi turned to the Israeli people. He underlined the meaning of Zionism, which empowers the Jewish people to take control of our own destiny. Even more than this great moment, this new beginning, was facilitated by President Trump, it was made possible by the extraordinary persistence of the hostage families and by the soldiers of the Israel Defense Force.^{iv}

The hostage families and their supporters across Israel and around the world never let us take our eyes off their loved ones. We wore our ribbons and dog tags. We learned their names and came to recognize their faces. They made the cause

personally dear, first to President Biden and then to President Trump, who brought them home.

The IDF, meanwhile, destroyed the military capacities of both Hamas and Hezbollah and humiliated its ultimate and most powerful ally, Iran. President Reagan spoke of “peace through strength.” Make no mistake: Israel won this war. Now, let us pray, its leaders will have the strength to make peace.

The challenges will be many and varied. Hamas is not a partner for peace, which is the reason that President Trump incentivized Qatar and Turkey instead. They have turned their weapons now on their rivals in Gaza, continuing the carnage. They have failed to return the mortal remains of all murdered hostages, in violation of the ceasefire, a violation for which President Trump has demanded and received Israeli patience. Returning to war won’t bring them home.

Before this week, I had always thought of שִׁיר הַמַּעְלִוֹת, the psalm we sang at the beginning of the service, as a Shabbat psalm. This week, though, I learned from Rachel Goldberg Polin that it’s also the psalm traditionally recited upon release of captives. The psalm’s opening line is often translated, “When יְהוָה restores the fortunes of Zion—we see it as in a dream.” The word “restores” in Hebrew is שׁוֹב, or “return,” and Rashi understands the line to mean, “When יְהוָה returns the returnees to Zion—that is, from the Babylonian exile—we were like dreamers.”^v This week was not the first, nor will it be the last, when Jewish people who had been banished from our holy land are able to return. Each time, from antiquity to 1948 to Erev Atzeret-Simchat Torah 5786, the repatriation of our people to our land is worthy of blessing. This new beginning, for Israel and for the Jewish people—and of the possibility of a better future for Palestinians, too—is cause for the greatest rejoicing.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 1:2.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 1:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a. Quran, Surah Al-Ma’idah (5:32).

^{iv} Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein Halevi, “After the Joy,” *For Heaven’s Sake*, Shalom Hartman Institute and Ark Media, October 17, 2025.

v Rashi on Psalms 126:1.