

## Light on a Very Narrow Bridge

Kol Nidre 5786

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September 11, 2001 was Election Day in New York. Rabbi Serge Lippe of Brooklyn Heights Synagogue and his wife Deb voted that morning, so they were a bit delayed getting to their offices—his, at the synagogue, and hers, at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in midtown Manhattan, Tuesday not being the day of her standing weekly meeting in the World Trade Center’s South Tower. As they became increasingly aware of the horror unfolding across the East River, Deb’s instinct was to get to her office, which, Rabbi Lippe writes, “set off my own sense of panic. ‘What the [heck] are you thinking?’ I thought, as images of my wife putting life and limb at risk below ground flashed by nightmarishly...in my imagination.” Rabbi Lippe need not have worried about **that**. Getting into Manhattan was already impossible.

Still as the hours passed, and Rabbi Lippe became aware of losses in his community, his mind exploded with additional concerns. He writes, “Anxiety and agitation mixed with profound sadness and confusion—emotions that smothered my own usually sharp sensibilities. A jumble of incoherent questions kept popping in my head: Were we safe? Was this attack over? What should I be doing? Who do we know who might not make it home today?”<sup>i</sup>

Rabbi Lippe, like all American rabbis, had to go back to the drawing board in preparing High Holy Day sermons, only days before Rosh Hashanah, a particularly intense exercise for New York area rabbis, who were preparing for the holidays between consoling bereaved members, attending to the injured, and officiating funerals, often without remains to bury.

Rabbi Lippe was a song leader for many years, so he unsurprisingly turned to music, specifically *Gesher Tzar Me’od*. He explains, “Rabbi Baruch Chait composed the song...while performing for Israeli soldiers during the Yom Kippur War. The song is usually translated as ‘The entire world is but a narrow bridge; the most important thing is not to be afraid.’” The translation of the **song** is correct, but Chait had changed the Hebrew words from the original, written a century earlier by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. Rabbi Lippe translates **Rabbi Nachman’s** text: “And know, that a person needs to cross a very, very narrow bridge, and the essential principle is not to make yourself entirely afraid.” Rabbi Lippe found that helpful, writing: “You couldn’t sensibly expect anyone in [New York] during those days ‘not to be afraid at all.’ But not to make oneself *more* afraid, not to add to one’s existing fear, not to give into the terror of that time—that [was] wisdom I could share.”<sup>ii</sup>

American Jews suffered 9/11-type trauma again on October 7, 2023. I am sure I'm not alone here, resonating with Rabbi Lippe's words about "sadness and confusion," muddling his own thought process. My son Robert called me in the wee hours of October 7, but I was out cold, exhausted from dancing with the Torah scrolls at our Simchat Torah celebration that evening. I answered the phone, but I couldn't absorb what he was telling me. A message from my Israeli sister-in-law erased my denial when I awakened in the morning, but I still did not grasp the scope of the disaster. By the time I arrived at Temple for our Shabbat and Festival morning service, I knew we had to do **something**. I asked Cantor Dubov to conclude the service with Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem. She responded that she didn't have the music in her iPad. Naturally, Cantor Dubov could lead Hatikvah without the sheet music, which she did—but initially, her rational thought process, too, was confused by a trauma we did not fully understand.

We still don't.

The enormity of our fears has only multiplied over the last two years. Few of these fears are universally shared. Some will dismiss one basket of fears as resulting from Jewish supremacy, while others will reject another set of concerns as rooted in disloyalty to our Jewish people. Many will charge that other people's concerns are founded in denial or in a fanciful view of reality. Some of these fears are mutually exclusive. Still, I hope we can acknowledge that all these fears and more are present in this room.

- Will there be a Jewish State of Israel the next time that Jewish people need to escape antisemitic oppression where they live?
- Does Israel's conduct of the war teach us that a Jewish State is not a good idea, if it ever was?
- Can a nation rightly call itself both Jewish and democratic? Has Israel done a reasonable job at being both?
- How long until another, perhaps more deadly, attack? And where will it come from? Nuclear weapons from Iran? Hamas in the West Bank? From Gaza again?
- Will antisemitism in America continue to proliferate, as forces on the extreme right join the extreme left in twisting their criticisms of Israel into Jew-hatred?
- Has our focus on the hostages led to the deaths Palestinian civilians?
- Does the continued war in Gaza threaten the lives of the hostages?
- Is Israel turning the West Bank into another Gaza by embittering the lives of Palestinians there?

- Was the West Bank already another Gaza, threatening Israel's existence even now?
- Can my child get through a school day, or go to the college of their choosing, without constantly confronting antisemitism?
- Will desperation for peace lead to a solution that will endanger Israel?
- Is any hope for peace gone forever?

Our Yom Kippur work is not to analyze or answer any of these concerns. Instead, let us all understand today that we are on a bridge, between October 6, 2023, on one side, and the future on the other. We must get to the other side—each of us individually, alongside the State of Israel and among the Jewish people. Whatever our worries, we all have them, and the bridge is increasingly narrow.

Yom Kippur is also a bridge—between the person we were in 5785 on one side and our future on the other. Let us utilize this day outside of time to forge a path toward the other side without succumbing to paralyzing fear. “The core of Reb Nachman’s message,” Rabbi Lippe writes, “isn’t about denying fear. It is about not allowing fear to freeze us in place. His words remind us that life is lived by moving forward, not by allowing ourselves to become immobilized.”<sup>iii</sup>

I only know one way to walk across a bridge, putting one foot in front of the other. We cannot reach the other side without action. Just as Yom Kippur does not command us merely to set good intentions for our future, but to act on them, we can direct our behavior in ways that address the worries that have plagued us since October 7.

On the afternoon of October 7, our congregant Joe Margolick, a trauma surgeon, together with his wife Lauren, put their worries for Israel into action, researching and making inquiries that would take Joe to Israel to work as a paramedic the next month. I also went in November among a small delegation of Reform rabbinic leaders, to bear witness and to pay a pastoral call on our Israeli colleagues and the communities they serve. Throughout these two years, Temple member Lee Rudofsky, a federal judge, has taken groups of judges, and now also prosecutors, to see Israel with their own eyes at its time of crisis. He has also worked diligently if quietly to stem anti-Israel antisemitism on the extreme right. A volunteer opportunity is available to folks ages twenty-six to fifty, to join our Operations Manager, Michael Roberts in Israel during winter break. This trip is extremely inexpensive, a few hundred dollars, seriously. Including the flight. Please let Michael know that you are interested.

A trip to Israel will increase some people's worries—for themselves or for their loved ones. Each time I go, my father is terrified. Not everybody can take such a trip, but there are things we can all do:

- Learn more about the conflict, or about Israel, or about the Palestinians, reading books and articles from a variety of perspectives.
- Educate others, if you feel qualified.
- Confront antisemitism forthrightly. Don't let it pass unnoticed.
- Donate to causes that bring your values to life in Israel and/or the Palestinian territories, and here in America, too.

All the world, כל העולם כולו, and certainly, the State of Israel and the Jewish people, are on a גשר צר מאוד, a very narrow bridge, as we reach the second anniversary of October 7<sup>th</sup>. We have reason to be afraid, but we do not come to Temple on Yom Kippur to languish in our fears or to multiply them. Instead, Yom Kippur is our opportunity to build a better future. Let each of us seize that opportunity—and may we, Israel, and our Jewish people, alongside the mixed multitude in the region—reach the other side in peace, sitting under our vine and fig tree, with none to make us afraid.<sup>iv</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Serge A. Lippe, “September 11, 2011: Crossing the Narrow Bridge,” *The Sacred Struggle: Jewish Responses to Trauma*, New York: CCAR Press, 2025, p. 216.

<sup>ii</sup> Lippe, pp. 219-220.

<sup>iii</sup> Lippe, p. 220.

<sup>iv</sup> Micah 4:4.