

Standing Alone for What We Believe In
Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5785
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Six years ago, we were struck by the deadliest act of antisemitic violence in our nation's history. It was a quiet Shabbat morning, the first after Simchat Torah concluded our joyous and uplifting High Holy Day season. But the shalom of that Shabbat morning was shattered by the tragic news of the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Eleven were murdered, six were injured, simply because they were Jews at shul. We were shaken, and we were scared. In the days that followed, though, came an outpouring of support from all corners of society that buoyed our spirits. We had a gathering here in Boca Raton of more than 2000 people, and the voices of concern from leaders came from a variety of directions, tinged with a diversity of accents and perspectives. The following Shabbat our Sanctuary overflowed, as a campaign to "Show up for Shabbat" led by American Jewish Committee drew folks to come together in strength and solidarity. The love and the warmth rang true. That was in 2018.

Over the following five years, things changed. When we woke up on October 7 last year and heard the news of what was unfolding in Israel, our hearts were shattered. We learned that the scope of the evil was something not seen in generations, and it ripped open our emotional heartstrings, raw from the rising incidents of antisemitic violence like at Tree of Life, in Poway, and in Colleyville. As we began to realize how terrible the attack was- how many lives destroyed, how many hostages in captivity- our pain set in, pain that has been almost too great to bear. What we needed in that moment was what we needed after Pittsburgh, after Poway, after Colleyville, the support of our friends and neighbors telling us that they were with us and cared for us, like the grieving friends that we have been.

But what we heard after October 7 was something else: near silence. While there was at least initially a general concern for Israel and Israelis, there wasn't much concern for the Jews in the US at all. Few public statements of solidarity with our Jewish neighbors. A deafening dearth of texts or calls from friends from other faith traditions. No, "Just wanted to check on you"s. My rabbinic colleagues around the country and I all experienced it. We shared with one another privately and in groups how disappointed we

were, how hurt we were, how deeply alone we felt. Fostering and maintaining interfaith relationships has been an important part of what Temple Beth El has stood for for decades. But after years of building relations with with the churches in town- Catholic, Protestant, Latter-Day Saints- and the mosques up the road from us, after meaningful moments of getting to know one another, marking Thanksgiving together, and showing up for them in the wake of tragedies that affected their communities around the world, the lack of concern for us was almost overwhelming.

Three weeks after the attack, my phone finally rang. It was a pastor in town with whom I was not particularly close. But he called to apologize. He was honest and sincere when he said, “It just didn’t occur to me that what happened to Israel would mean what it means to American Jews. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner.” “What can I do?” he asked. I invited him to come to Shabbat services that Friday, to show their support. Which he did, and brought some folks from his church along with him. Our friendship has grown since that day, but his story really became the exception that proved the rule: as Jews, as Zionists and *ohavei Yisrael*, lovers of Israel, we were in for a lonely, hard, draining year.

From the first days after Israel was attacked, even before the IDF responded, we started to hear calls that Israel was acting immorally. I felt my mind start to spin on so many occasions as I heard people- some of whom until that point I deep respect for- misrepresent and mischaracterize so much of what has transpired over the past year. They were quick to blame Israel for attacking schools, hospitals, and mosques, only to learn later that the IDF wasn’t responsible (and heaven forbid they acknowledge that truth). They blamed Israel for civilian casualties, when those civilians were used as pawns by Israel’s enemies to protect themselves and maximize the number of deaths they could try to blame on Israel. They inflated casualty counts and accused Israel of genocide. It was Israel’s enemies who were bent on genocidal desires, wishing to cleanse the land of its Jewish inhabitants, targeting women, children, and the elderly, without any concern for their own people either. As I heard each of these accusations, each demonstrably

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false, I felt we had gone through the looking glass, into moral wonderland, with Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum telling us that up was down and down was up. As the war has recently intensified in the north, the moral inversion has continued. Since October 8 rocket attacks from the north have destroyed dozens of communities and displaced some 60,000 Israelis from their homes. Just two days ago we saw Israel targeted with 181 ballistic missiles; thank G-d for Iron Dome and the other protective technologies that kept her generally safe. Yet the world would have us believe that the fighting in the north started with the pager and radio operation of two weeks ago, and not the violation of Israel's sovereign and internationally recognized border, and the right of her citizens to live in safety and security.

Some of the loudest voices in the choir of anti-Israel bias have come from folks we thought were our friends. For the past many years, we have been amplifying our social justice work, and with particular focus on supporting and working for the benefit of historically marginalized communities, like racial minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. I am immensely proud of the work we have done, like building Beth El Pride, our group of LGBTQ+ folk and allies who have helped us imagine and reimagine Pride events at temple. Our racial equity work has also inspired me. We have travelled as a congregation to historic sites in our nation's struggle for civil rights, read important works that challenges our presumptions about race, have worked to build relationships with historically Black churches and their leaders, both efforts undergirded by our tradition's teaching to celebrate the divinity in the diversity of humanity. I mention those two efforts intentionally, because I have also struggled when I have seen advocates for the LGBTQ+ and the communities of color be some of the most challenging and vociferous critics of Israel, some going as far as calling for the end of the Jewish state. More than a few times I have been asked, understandably so, "Rabbi, we were with that group of folks when they needed us...and now they are standing up for our enemies. Should we still care about them?"

It's a fair question. There is an element of allyship that is transactional- I'll be there for you if you'll be there for me. It's part of what I expected our interfaith partners to do after October 7, and why I was hurt when they didn't. But our racial equity work and our work supporting the LGBTQ+ community was never transactional. Supporting marginalized communities is a manifestation of the values that emanate from within our tradition, to see the holiness in each person created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, and to celebrate the magnificent diversity of humanity as an illustration of God's awesome love. In that work we partnered with others who may have engaged for their own reasons, and some of those folks have failed the moral test of seeing us Jews and our humanity. It is infuriating and dismaying that these folks' moral compass that I thought was so similar to ours could actually be so different. And there is no question that my thoughts about the individuals who would proudly wear a "Queers for Hamas" have changed considerably. [Deep breath and shake head in dismay]

It's been a hard, heavy year. It's been a year and the hostages aren't home, and the fighting is on going, and it's not clear when or how there will be a peaceful night soon. I can't imagine the depths of the emotions that Israelis are feeling, but I know for me and for us, seeing Israel at war and antisemitism raging its ugliness in ways we haven't seen in generations in our half of the world, things are really hard right now.

It's been hard as Jews, taught over and over again to pursue peace, to watch our people's army do the tragic but necessary work of waging a defensive war. Thank God that we have a State and an IDF who can defend our people. But as she has done so, we cannot turn a blind eye to the absolutely, heartbreakingly, devastatingly tragic reality of the loss of life in Gaza. Ours is a tradition that holds up the sanctity of each individual life. Not a single innocent life should be taken for granted, minimized, or made expendable. Not an innocent Gazan, nor an innocent Israeli. Our value of self-defense and self-preservation sits in tension with our value of human life. That tension brings up anger, and pain. Israel's safety and security is non-negotiable, nor is our right as American Jews to live out our tradition here. And yet,

innocent lives are put in harms way when Israel needs to defend herself. Our tradition calls upon us to pursue justice in our community, and we need to hold to account those who would spread anti-Jewish hatred in it. We also need to take care of our own, individual emotional needs, to find moments of peace to replenish our energies, even as our *Am Yisrael* need us to show up for one another. Holding these values, while they are in tension with one another, is hard- intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. But holding them nonetheless is the Jewish way.

Near two thousand years ago the rabbis taught the importance of recording of each single opinion, even if the majority felt another way.¹ In the great debates between Hillel and Shammai, debates that our Talmud declare to have been for the sake of heaven, what holds Hillel's opinions above Shammai's time and time again is that while Shammai listened only to himself. But, Hillel would listen to Shammai, internalize his values and his reasoning, and then incorporate the best of it along with his own. Closer to our own time, the great thinker of last century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught that those "who look for a clear bottom line in everything including matters of faith, upon seeing the mighty struggles of opposing views, will ask in agitation: How can Torah be learned in this way? If there are two mutually exclusive ways of interpreting a single statement, and each carries its own truth, do we not have dualism?" No, he answered, rhetorically objecting, "Is it possible to have a living Torah without the struggle of opposites, without disputes, without the many permutations of ideas?"² No. Our tradition invites and challenges us to hold at once multiple ideas and values, even if they conflict. We are guided to see the questions we face through the lens of both-and. We are taught in that moment, even if we have to decide which way to follow, we should hold both sides in our minds as good and true. It is incredibly powerful when we orient ourselves to make our way through life collecting ideas and not discarding them. It allows us to be empathetic and

¹ Mishnah Eduyot 1:5

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, Continuum Publishing: 2006, page 702.

understanding. We should not let the pain we are in cloud our judgment or block us from actualizing our values.

Our empathy is not a limited resource, and neither is our ability to hold on to our values. So, when we witness the devastation that defending our people necessitates, we can feel empathy. Empathy for the loss of innocent lives in Gaza and emotional pain at the destruction they are suffering through is not an abandonment of our Zionism, of our commitment to our people's right to live safely in Israel or anywhere in the world. That empathy is the manifestation of our Jewishness and our humanity. We wish that we could have a safe and secure Israel without the need for the loss of a single life; it's Israel's enemies who demand that those wishes be in conflict. As Jews, we can hold that tension and not sacrifice our morals or values.

Maintaining our commitment to justice for those who have been marginalized does not mean that I have to stand with, or let myself be cast with, everyone who stands with those folks. We may share that one value, but do not see eye to eye on others. We do not need to let ourselves be put in the position of having to leverage our commitment to justice and freedom for Jews over or under other groups. We get to stand in defense of all of our values, and should not let anyone tell us that we have to abandon one to pursue another.

Our tradition is unique and complicated, but our ability to hold values in tension, remain true to ourselves, and find our way in the world is part of what makes it beautiful. The rabbis of the Talmud skillfully turned what seemed to be irreconcilable conflict into harmonies of moral expression. How did they do it? They held on to what was most important to them, even if they had to prioritize one over the other. Our's is the tradition of both-and, not either-or. Ours is a people who will stand up for what we believe in, even if we have to stand alone.

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In a moment, as we stand before the Ark, we will ask *Avinu Malkeinu* to hear our prayers, to forgive us, and to renew us in this new year. On these *Yamim Noraim*, we imagine God sitting not with *din*, judgment, or *rachamim*, mercy, alone, but with both-and. When we appear before the Holy One for judgment, we ask that God hold both of those values, just as we strive to in our lives. As we think of the year that has passed, a year of pain and sadness, of grief and tension, we pray that we can navigate these troubling times grounded in our moral values, and that our inscription for the year that begins be for blessing, for wisdom, for empathy, for strength, and for peace.

Shana tova.

We rise now and turn to page 223.