

We are the People Israel
Vayera 5785

Things are difficult right now. In Israel and in Gaza. In the world. In the US. On college campuses. And, in our Torah portion, Vayera. While there are many things going on in the Torah portion, I wanted to focus on a moment of despair that turns into hope – Abraham and Sarah not being able to have a child to finding out they will have a baby. Sarah then names their baby, Isaac – a laugh that is interpreted to be unadulterated joy by some and also as a sarcastic scoff by others. After the laugh, Sarah says “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age.” (Genesis 21:7).

I feel like so many of us are in this mindset right now in our current world. Surprised statements followed by truth.

Who would have said to us that there would be a mass murder of Israeli civilians! Yet we had October 7th.

Who would have said to us that there would be so much antisemitism! Yet we are seeing it all over the world.

Who would have said to us that antisemitism would be found most on college campuses! Yet students are receiving death threats and horrible fear has been instilled in us in a world of academia.

Who would have said to us that we would be checking on our Israeli friends and family just to have the narrative flipped and then ask us how we are doing. Yet my Israeli friends who had asked if they could come stay with us have now chosen to stay in Israel because, **for them**, it feels like the safest place to be Jewish right now.

Who would have said to us that definitions of terrorism, terrorists, genocide, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism could be different than we have always known them to be! Yet, we are seeing definitions change in the middle of conversations, where people can't agree on definitions that have been long held by international organizations.

Who would have said to us that the horrors of what happened in Israel on October 7th would be forgotten by the world stage in less than a month. Yet, we watch people tear down posters of the hostages and justify the attacks.

Who would have said to us that the Israelis would be coming together as a community after 10 months of strong political divides. Yet, we are watching people show up to serve in the IDF who would have never done so before, those who said they wouldn't respond to the reserve calls come up before they even get the call, and the Israeli community coming together to help each other get through this.

Sometimes, it feels like too much to bear. Statements we never thought possible, coming to fruition. It has felt overwhelming for many. While I was preparing to write this sermon, I saw some commentary put together by Rabbi Billy Dreskin, a Reform American rabbi. In his article, he shares a passage by American poet philosopher, scholar, and theologian, Noah benShea, which I want to share with you.

I once asked a person, “Where do you find the strength to carry on?” And the person responded, “Life is a heavy burden to carry...but I do find strength in the ashes.”

“In the ashes?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the person. “You see, each of us is on a journey. A difficult journey. And during this journey, we may feel that we are alone. But in the process of our journey, we must build a fire—a fire for light, for warmth, and for food. When our fingers scrape the ground, hoping to find the coals of another's fire, what we often find are ashes. And in those ashes, which will not give us light or warmth, there may be sadness, but there is also testimony. Because these ashes tell us that somebody else has been in the night.

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Somebody else has bent to build a fire. And somebody else has carried on. And sometimes that can be enough.”¹

Carrying on is enough. We see Israelis who for 10 months had been spitting vitriol at each other due to political differences who are now serving in the IDF together, volunteering together, coming together to make the Jewish community around the world stronger. We learn about the heroes and heroines whose stories have only continued to emerge. We hold the families of the more than 230 hostages in our hearts while supporting them from far away. We think of the Israelis who are being interviewed in international communities to try to explain what is happening – like my former camp counselor and friend, Dan Feferman who has been on news outlets all over the world. We see parents naming their newborns after the kibbutzim which were devastated. We think of those on the front lines defending Israel and trying to destroy terrorism – like my friends Roie Sharon, Omri Hertzberg, and Natan Herman, among others. We hold up the Israeli Reform rabbis who are leading their communities through trauma, grief, and fear while dealing with their own – something I have heard about first hand from my friend Rabbi Rinat Safania, who is leading her community of Shoham, a suburb of Tel Aviv. We watch Israelis open up their homes to displaced Israelis from the Gaza envelope and the south, including my teacher and friend, Shlomit Naim-Naor, who, while her husband Nissimi, serves as the Military Deputy Head of Burial of the Jerusalem area, she is hosting a survivor and his dog from Kibbutz Holit, a kibbutz on the Gazan border that has been completely destroyed. Shlomit, along with her daughters, are also hosting her sister-in-law and her 5 children under the age of 8.

We are finding light and joy in a time when we are surrounded by darkness. We find hope and love in the support by random people who tell us they stand with us. We see a new facebook group, Mothers Against College Antisemitism, amass more than 42,000 members in its first week where stories of anxiety, fear, and anger are shared, but even more so, support, love, and camaraderie which has morphed into a movement with a communications manager, moderators, legal team, and more. We watch videos of Bazy Rubin, a mother at home with her 4 children while her husband is serving in the army who is using her video skills to create humorous videos about her experiences. We watch videos of Israelis who are choosing to get married and not let this war stop their love – including my friend Omri and his bride, Tamar, who have asked me to officiate at a civil wedding over zoom. We see Israelis, Druze, Muslims, and Christians who are volunteering in any and every way possible – including my former professor, Rabbi Jan Katzew and his wife, Cantor Alane Katzew, who were visiting their family and were “tired of doing nothing but waiting for sirens” so threw themselves into volunteering. We hear the stories of people bringing bags and bags and bags of supplies to the IDF, including my colleague and former HUC administrator, Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback, who brought his own 9 bags of donated items. We are reminded of the work on the ground and internationally as we are updated by UT Health Sciences Center San Antonio who has been working, before October 7th, on helping Israeli mental health professionals. Their most recent support group and learning setting for mental health professionals had over 4,000 registrants across Israel. We think of the email we received in the past week that the San Antonio Jewish community has raised over \$3 million to support the Israel Crisis Fund. We are sharing multiple anniversary blessings from our bima tonight, the reminder of the resiliency of marriage. We are celebrating Miriam becoming a bat mitzvah – connecting with her Judaism and the Jewish life of her family before her.

We are here. We are carrying on.

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/and-god-took-note/>

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We are the people Israel – the people who wrestle with God – a people who have struggled for thousands of years. We have seen Holocaust survivors who are reminding us to stay strong, even through their shock, grief, and anger. We listen to the national anthem of HaTikvah, which means Hope. We are a people who don't take hope lightly. We are a hopeful people. We are Am Yisrael Chai – We, the people of Israel, are still living and will not stop. Amen.