

Chazak V'Ematz -- Be Strong and of Good Courage -- Yom Kippur 5767 (2006)

As some of you know, I was in Israel this summer, first studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and then leading our annual Temple Solel tour. As it happened, literally the day our tour group touched down at Ben Gurion Airport, the war in Lebanon broke out. And it didn't take our jetlagged travelers long to realize that they had landed in the middle of a war.

However, I must tell you that that information was not gleaned from what they saw on the ground. The only signs of war we actually saw were on the television. The overwhelming shock for all of us, was the tremendous sense of normalcy which pervaded all but the north of the country. Cars filled the highways, people filled the streets, shops, and restaurants. Everyone went, undeterred, about their normal routines. The only thing that changed, was the topic of conversation, which always began and ended with concern about the war. Israelis are, sadly, used to war.

Obviously, for those living in the northern cities it was a different story. Many were able to evacuate, and the rest spent their days and nights living in bomb shelters. I watched the hotel clerks in action. They really put themselves out to make rooms available to displaced families and give them the most discounted rates possible. And Israelis in the rest of the country were also incredibly generous. They mobilized very quickly to host displaced families in their homes, and worked tirelessly to collect and deliver supplies to those living in the shelters – everything from groceries, to diapers and toys for the children.

In this respect, I have to tell you that Israel is an amazing country. In a crisis, Israelis become one big family and they pull together. And, perhaps, this is why when just one Israeli soldier was kidnapped from across the Gaza border in July, all of Israel instantly knew his name and his face - Gilad Shalit. And when two more soldiers were kidnapped from the north by Hizbollah, it was as if the children of all Israelis were being held hostage.

It is difficult for us to understand this. But, in a way, every Israeli is a hero. I have a very close friend who made aliyah to Israel just after we graduated college together. His children are about the same age as mine. As Davida and I excitedly make the college tours and think about our son, Jacob's, bright future, he thinks about his son Yoni. Only Yoni, who happens to be brilliant & fluent in Latin, won't be going to college next year after high school. Like every Israeli, he'll be spending his next three years in the army.

When one Israeli soldier is killed, he is the child of a family like yours and mine – a family which also had hopes for his bright future. And more than likely, he and his family are also known by name in the small country of Israel.

When the war in Lebanon broke out, it was an instant tragedy for Israelis. Aside from the regular army that went into harm's way, thousands of reserve soldiers were also called up. Reserve units are truly bands of brothers. Following their regular army service, they stay together, every one of them, as a reserve unit with the same assignment until they have completed their service, at age 51. By that time, they are no longer just sons and brothers. They are now also husbands and fathers, who continue to train together, and fight together when called to active duty. And, when one of them is killed in battle, it is not just their parents or siblings who mourn the loss. It is their wives and children who lose a husband and a father.

This is what it means to be an Israeli. And this is a reality that hangs over the head of every Israeli family. Not only has every family lost a relative, but every family knows that the future is literally a bullet to be dodged.

So, when Israel goes to war, it is no small thing. It is not taking place on a distant shore, with troops who are not really their children. It is on their border. Their cities come under attack. And their children are lost in battle – 119 of them to be exact, this time around.

But, now the war in Lebanon is over, at least for the time being. And Israel is digging out from the rubble, not just physically, but also emotionally. The aftermath of a war is sobering. Damage has been done. Lives have been lost. And there are questions to be asked, one of which certainly has to be, what is it that gives Israelis the courage to keep on going?

The mood in the country is very low at the moment. I don't know if we think about this from our couches 7,500 miles away, but this was the first time since the 1948 War of Independence, that major Israeli cities have come under direct and sustained attack. Four thousand rockets were raining for a solid month on Kiryat Sh'mona, on Tiberias, Sefat, and Haifa. Could we imagine 120 rockets a day landing in San Diego?

Israelis in the North were terrorized in a significant way. That theoretical umbrella of protection which Israelis for the last 58 years thought they had, turned out not to exist this summer. And despite any gains which may have come out of Lebanon, this is a very sobering new reality for our fellow Jews in Israel.

In fact, I would say this war has given us all something to think about. Even though I was in Israel for much of the war, I did come home to interesting times. During my first week back in the states, a crazed gunman forced his way into the Seattle Jewish Federation and killed a much beloved campaign director, in fact a past president of one of our Reform Congregations. During that same week, 20 Jewish shops in Rome were severely vandalized, with swastikas painted on their front walls. During that same week, Mel Gibson was arrested in Malibu on drunk driving charges, and went into an anti-Semitic tirade which blamed the Jews for all the wars in the world. Even worse, that same week, when the story was written up in the L.A. Times, letters came back which said things like, "I really don't think his opinion of Jews is completely wrong," and "So what if he doesn't like Jews . . .The man is showing some humanity."

And now, Temple Solel is in lock down mode, studying and praying behind closed gates, with a security guard out front. Guess what? We don't live in a bubble. What happens there, happens here, too!

And this leads us to do some soul searching of our own. We live in vulnerable times. Not just in terms of anti-Semitism, but even in our whole way of life. Today, we have to take seriously the possibility that our children could become prey to internet predators. We have to worry that a terrorist could blow up our airplane, or attack the building in which we work, or take over one of our schools.

This is also our new reality – not one we would have dreamed of, or imagined for ourselves. Our umbrella of protection has also been vanquished. Our country isn't as safe as it used to be. And we might ask the same question Israelis are asking today – what gives *us* the courage to face these uncertain times?

The truth is, without even asking, I know what any Israeli on the street would tell you – *ein b'rerah*, there is no alternative. We have no choice but to go on from here – what else can we do?

And indeed, this is the essence of the Jewish condition. How many times in our history, have we have been plagued with the deepest darkness? Yet through every trial, we have persevered.

It is not that we mock danger. No, we are realists, and we feel pain when it is real. It's just that we Jews understand that all of life is uncertain. Even when we build on a firm foundation, we know that, at any moment, it could all come crashing down. To be a Jew, is to co-exist with uncertainty.

When Moses stood before the Burning Bush, did he understand the plan God had in mind for him? Did he realize he would never live to see his life's dream fulfilled, and die on Mt. Nevo, with only a glimpse of the Promised Land from afar?

Our Torah, our entire history is about living with uncertainty. How well you and I know that, as hard as we try, we can't be in control of every aspect of our lives. We cannot ward off all sickness and harm. We cannot keep accidents from happening. We can't control what other people or other countries might do that affects us.

In fact, is this not precisely the condition our *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer this Yom Kippur describes for us? Who shall live and who shall die, who shall be serene and who shall be riven with strife? It forces us to confront all our worst fears, and then it asks us how we're going to cope with them. Will we become embittered and cynical? Will we retreat into a bunker of our own making? Or can we still put our whole selves into life, even though we don't know how things are going to turn out?

Well, I cannot stand here and take those fears away from you. I can't give you false assurances about the future. But I can tell you there is a way for all of us to get through this.

Every year, we recite those words of the *U'netaneh Tokef*. But I don't think we really appreciate their brilliance. Because, they not only describe what keeps us awake at night, they also tell us how to get through the night. As simple as these may sound, *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, *Tzedakah* – are absolutely what can help us face our vulnerability. Though the decree itself may not be altered, the way we respond to it, is what can make all the difference.

If our life is sometimes a battle, then what are the fundamental things that are worth fighting for, maybe even dying for? *Teshuvah* is about affirming our most core values, and recommitting ourselves to stand up for them. Our bulwark against adversity, is our inner compass – a true North, a dialed-in sense of who we are, and what we know to be good and right. No matter what swirls around us and seeks to sweep us off our course, *Teshuvah*, our inner compass, will bring us back around to our magnetic true North.

Tefillah, our prayer this Yom Kippur, is about building within ourselves the courage to stand behind those convictions. In order to face uncertainty, we need to be able to rise above fear. And there is only one way to do that – with the hope and faith that prayer can bring. Faith, that no matter how bleak any given hour may be, there is always something in it worth living, something to build a day on, even a world on. And hope, that the future can always be better than the present.

Finally, *Tzedakah* lets those who suffer, know that they are not alone. Those shell-shocked families, enduring daily rocket-fire in their cities and bomb shelters, felt that they were not alone when they received our donations from abroad. And I would say that any of us who has suffered tragedy knows, that not being alone makes all the difference.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, this is the most important message of Yom Kippur. Despite our frailties, despite our vulnerability and lack of control, we are not alone. *Atem Nitzavim ha-yom kulchem* – you stand here this day, all of you, declares our Torah reading.

And here we all stand today. It has not been a good summer in many respects. Our beloved homeland of Israel went to war yet again, and children like yours and mine, were killed. Rockets poured down like rain on cities and *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* for 34 days. All the early warning systems could not give but 2 or 3 minutes notice of impending disaster. And the great umbrella of protection which Israelis thought they had, turned out not to be there. And now Israelis feel exposed and they want to know why their government cannot protect them.

We ourselves were jarred from our complacency this summer. Again, another Jewish institution was attacked. Not in some foreign capital far away, but right here on our own coast. Seattle might as well be San Diego. And Mel Gibson's rants, and his public's approval, must also give us serious pause.

We are at risk, even in America. The umbrella of protection we thought we had, the veneer of a civilized society, is tarnishing. We are vulnerable.

And what is it that will see us through these uncertain times? This is the question I want you to think about and talk about with your spouse, your children, your friends. Because how we answer this question, will determine a great deal. It will determine the future of our Jewish State. It will determine the future of our American Jewish community. And it will determine how you personally navigate your life in stormy seas.

If we all respond to these threatening times by retreating into our bunkers of self-preservation, we will surely perish there.

If Israel worries only about surviving, but forgets about the supreme ideals, dreams, and values that make it a Jewish State, it will become a failed experiment.

If we American Jews build our communal life only around fear of anti-Semitism, and turn our synagogues and Jewish institutions into insular fortresses, then that great post-enlightenment experiment, which declares that open Jewish expression can be accepted in the modern world, will also fail.

And if we, as American citizens, become paralyzed by threat and potential danger, too fearful to venture out, then our noble pioneering spirit will be extinguished, and with it, the American dream.

I think that even in a dangerous and uncertain world, it is possible still to live with optimism, as long as we continue to nurture it in each other. This is what sustained our Israeli soldiers in battle, and it is what can lift us up and carry us, as well.

We cannot take the uncertainty away, but neither can we let it rule over us. *Ein b'rerah* – we have no choice, but to be courageous today, and hopeful about tomorrow.

Consider these words, found in 1945 by Allied troops on the wall of a cellar in Cologne, Germany – presumably engraved there by one who was in hiding from the Nazis:

I believe in the sun

Even when it is not shining.

I believe in love

Even when feeling it not.

And I believe in God

Even when God is silent.

In the spirit of the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer, I would say to you, that we can reclaim hope and faith on this day. Despite our deepest fears, we can proclaim our boldest dreams. And despite our worst losses, we can aspire to our greatest achievements. *Atem Nitzavim ha-yom kulchem* – you stand here, all of you, this day – not alone in your struggles, but united in the courage to make tomorrow better than today. *Ein B'rerah* – we have no choice!