

Rosh Hashanah Day 5785: Not Shame, But Pride
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Stop me if you've heard this one already.

A priest, a reporter for the BBC, and an Israeli commando are captured by Hamas. The terrorists tell them they may each make one final request. The priest asks if he can record one final sermon to send to his parishioners. His request is granted. The BBC reporter asks if he can record a final broadcast to send to his studio. His request is granted. The Israeli commando looks at the terrorists and asks, "if they will kick him hard in the tuchus." The terrorists look confused, shrug their shoulders, and kick him. Only that's when the Israeli commando springs into action: breaks off his shackles, seizes the guns from the terrorists, and saves the day. Confused, the reporter for the BBC says, "I don't get it. Couldn't you have done all of that without the kick in the tuchus?" And what, says the Commando, "Have you go on the news and report that I was the aggressor?"

Following the attacks of October 7, a young Israeli poet Michael Zats wrote a poem. It's called: *Illusion*.

מדהים / איך הכל נראה / זכה, גם / כְּשֶׁכָּל־ / לא נשאר / אותו דבר.
Amazing / How everything looks / Unchanged / Even / When Nothing / Remained / The same.

When I first learned Zats' poem on a trip to Israel this year I remembered my opening joke. I heard it from my rabbi on the High Holy Days over twenty years ago. It still stings.

Nearly one year after October 7, the Jewish people have been saying to ourselves, "Amazing, How everything looks / Unchanged." So much about this year has felt familiar. It's the same old story.

And yet, October 7 and its aftermath remind us that nothing about our world has remained the same. Not anymore. Twenty years after that joke Hamas is still calling for the death of Jews. That's still the same. But today their calls are accompanied by moral confusion. "Once," according to reporter Douglas Murray, [society] celebrated heroism and achievement, "now we celebrate who can be the biggest victim." People we thought were our friends, university presidents, and members of our government have disappointed us. They cry out: "it's the Jews' fault." Shame on you! That's what has not remained the same. That's what's confusing for us. Dr. Ken Stein from Emory said it best: We've realized that the world may recognize us, but they will never accept us. That is the change that in the year 5785 is tearing our people and other people of conscience apart.

October 7 was the largest massacre of Jews since the Shoah. A year later, Hamas is still murdering our family in tunnels. Hezbollah and Iran are shooting rockets indiscriminately at civilians, including kids playing on a soccer field. Yet these facts are painfully dismissed by the rest of the world. Why? Because the world has changed. Today's battlefield isn't only about weapons. It's Facebook. It's Instagram. It's psychological manipulation.

Dr. Alex Sinclair who lives in Israel and whose son serves in Tzahal said it: He doesn't worry about Hamas and Hezbollah: he knows Israel can win those wars. What he worries about are the internal struggles ripping us apart...that Israel may be performing valiantly on the battlefield, but that we may lose the psychological war for the soul of our people.

Friends, that's what changed: I hear him, and so do you. When I visited Israel this year, I ran for cover when I heard a siren. I watched an iron dome missile launch. But do you know what frightens me? It's not that. It's when I hear a friend say that her daughter doesn't want to work at a Jewish summer camp because it's Zionist: like Zionism has somehow become a dirty word. What frightens me is the cynical manipulation that is convincing many Jews and others across the world that this war is all our fault, and we bear all of the shame. It's the hideous lies on social media. It's young, gullible, useful idiots on college campuses. It's that 20 years ago, when the terrorists would kick us in the tuchus we could fight back: now, they still tell us it's our fault and to compromise. But how are we supposed to compromise when that compromise is Sophie's Choice: "die now, or die later?"

Look, we are Jews. I'm not sure if anyone told you...but shame and guilt hold very dear places in our religion. Yet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known as the *Sefas Emes*, writes that there are two kinds of shame, one holy and the other profane. Holy shame is why we are here. In shul. Holy shame leads us to be reflective and to make healthy changes. We read stories about Abraham nearly sacrificing his child, sending another to die in the desert. We say wow, hold on a second. We contemplate the complexity of our own relationships. We grow. We heal.

But there is also harmful shame. The kind of shame that, according to Dr. Erica Brown, leads us to "be derelict," to want to run away from being Jewish. And make no mistake: this new shame that we are seeing is designed to psychologically scar us and break us down. It falsely turns October 7's victims into villains in the International Criminal Court of Injustice. It gives a pass to anti-Semitic professors and sanctimonious students who cowardly hide their faces, intimidating and terrorizing Jewish students on campus. It is this shame that enables the world to turn its back once again on the suffering of Jews, as it tells us that our women, our infants, and our innocents possess no value.

Folks, Israel isn't perfect: you'll recall that the country was on the verge of tearing itself apart over judicial reforms before October 7. And yes, war itself is awful. Loss of innocent children is heartbreaking. As Jews we can feel compassion. That's not wrong.

But how do we explain the lack of compassion for us? If we're supposed to find compassion for Palestinian children, where is the compassion for Kfir Bibas, Rose Lubin, Hersh Goldberg-Polin and the victims of the Nova Festival? For all the victims of October 7? Where is the compassion for parents who send their children into battle, children whose parents go into battle, only for them never to return home again? And where do Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and complicit Palestinians get off claiming any moral high ground when there is only one side murdering and torturing women, children, and innocents in tunnels?

That's why as Jews, as we celebrate the creation of the world on Rosh Hashanah, as the world calls us to account, it's long past due that we take the world to account for its glaring double standard against the Jews. As the world seeks to shame us, criminalize us, to dehumanize us, on the birthday of the world we must defiantly force the world to take an honest look at its own shame that it must bear. *J'accuse!* Here is what I see:

I see groups calling for liberation from the River to the Sea on campus. Let's label these calls for "liberation" for what they truly are: a cover for terrorism. These are calls for the genocide of Jews. Shame on me?! To these groups, I say, where is your shame? Your soul?

I see the United States and other countries giving hundreds of millions of dollars to UNRWA because instead of basic social services, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority invest in terrorism. Today, both Hamas and the PA still in the year 2024 give hundreds of millions of dollars to financially incentivize terrorists to kill Jews. It's true. Look it up. It's called the Palestinian Authority Martyrs Fund, a "Pay to Slay" Program. When the United States and other countries support UNRWA, instead of demanding the Palestinians invest in their own people instead of families of terrorists, that's indirectly where our tax dollars go. Shame on me, I say?! Where is your shame? Where is your soul?

I see the UN, the ICC, and countless agencies across the globe for what they are, shams of institutions who instead of calling out the bad guys, created moral equivalency between democratic Israel and terrorism. Shame on me, I say?! Where is your shame? Where is your soul?

I see university presidents who refused to say that calling for the genocide of Jews was evil, that it "depended upon the context," and who then sat down and negotiated with Hamas supporters on campus, instead of calling the police: and I, like you wondered, as I watched my alma mater Columbia University flounder: if the same calls in support of terror as free speech were being made against any other minority, would the president of a university be sitting down for coffee with them? Shame on me, I say?! Where is your shame? Where is your soul?

The New York Times took five minutes to condemn Israel for bombing a hospital that was a HQ for Hamas, but it stumbled on its retraction when it turned out that terrorists were responsible, because it didn't fit its shameful narrative. To which, I asked when I unsubscribed: "Are you still a paper of record, or are you simply an app for all of us to play Wordle?" Shame on me, I say?! Where is your shame? Where is your soul?

מְדַהִים / אֵיךְ הַלֵּל נִרְאָה / זִהָה, / גַּם / כְּשֶׁכְּלוּם / לֹא נִשְׁאַר / אוֹתוֹ דָּבָר.

That's what frightens me. *How everything looks Unchanged, Even When nothing Remained / The same.*

Rabbi Jonathon Sacks writes "we should never be embarrassed about being Jews. Our people have survived so long and contributed so much, that we should see being a Jew as an honour and a responsibility." But as we have been subjected time and time again to the post-October 7 shame machine, I know that for some of us that is not how we feel. This hasn't been a year where we've celebrated heroism or our own resilience. Instead, this has been a heavy year full of psychological shame. We mumble support for Israel. We tuck in our Jewish stars. We caution our children to avoid Jewish gatherings on campus.

And so, in addition to our mourning, what we must do in closing, is for all of us here to unapologetically assert our sense of pride in all that we have done this year as Jews and human beings. As Zionists. As lovers of our people and Jewish community.

All of us in this room should be proud of how we opened our homes and our hearts to our brothers and sisters when they needed us most. We sent money, supplies, and stood shoulder to shoulder with the first army in two thousand years to protect Jewish and Israeli lives. We helped the displaced persons in Israel--they jokingly refer to this as the "duffel bag phenomenon"--as supplies came pouring in from abroad to support Israelis who were displaced from the fighting.

We sent words of encouragement to soldiers that meant more than you know. Folks, I was in Israel in November. I met a young soldier from New York. He had just made aliyah. His job was to work all month in a morgue alongside the Chevra Kadisha Burial Society processing the victims of October 7. You cannot even possibly imagine the joy that I saw on his face when he hung up the cards we made at his workstation written by our Religious School kids. It brought that young soldier comfort when he needed it most.

Lastly, we should take pride in the way so many of us, confronted by public antisemitism, chose not to hide, but to turn around and seek out Jewish community. We didn't give in to our fears. We attended rallies. We took on a new mitzvah. We joined a synagogue. We doubled down on who we are. We found comfort in each other.

Because here in conclusion, is the truth about shame:

There is no shame in protecting our family and those who stand beside us. There is no shame in calling out illiberalism and anti-Semitism deceitfully claiming itself to be human rights. There is no shame in being a Zionist committed to Jewish peoplehood. There is no shame in fighting terrorism, no shame in calling out hypocrisy disguised as benevolence, no shame in resilience in the face of tragedy.

The only shame we should feel is if twenty years from now someone listening to my sermon becomes a rabbi and has to tell that opening joke once again. It would mean that the world has not learned its lesson, and neither have we.

As Jews, we can see through the illusion the world has created for itself because we live in the real world. So let us cry out Am Yisrael Chai. Let us fix our broken world and heal our broken spirits. Let us remember that we are the good guys, and that we are, as we always have been, a light unto the world, even in our darkest hour. Please rise for Hatikvah as we express our collective hope for a better future, a better world this coming year.