

Struggle, Crisis and Hope – Israel and the World

Rosh Hashanah 5786

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In the spirit of repentance and renewal, I confess today: this year, I have truly struggled. It is not easy to publicly confess, because you know you will be judged. But the time has come to talk openly about it. I have come to a crisis in my relationship with Israel.

Midway through the Torah stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Genesis, we have a remarkable moment of personal crisis. Isaac and Rebekah had prayed for a child and their prayer was answered -- and doubled. Rebekah was pregnant with twins, an incredible source of joy. But in the next moment we read:

וַיִּתְרָצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶן
וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי
But the children struggled in her womb,
and she said, "If so, why do I exist?"¹

The very thing that Rebekah prayed for, didn't dare to believe in, became a source of struggle, pain and fear for her.

The world overwhelms us sometimes and the things we dream of can become the source of our disappointment. In our imagination, everything lines up perfectly and leads us on a straight path. But messy reality can undermine that perfect vision and the struggle becomes so great that you begin to question your assumptions. "If so, do why I continue on this same path?"

I want to share with you my struggle – a struggle of my vision and mission clashing with the reality of the world. Perhaps you share some element of my struggle – one confronting the Jewish people in our post-October 7 world.

I grew up in a deeply Zionist home and Jewish environment. My parents grew up in a world in which a sovereign Jewish homeland was a future dream. Pre-state Israel rescued my mother after Auschwitz when Europe and America made it clear there was no other home for her in the world. Israel was the place of my father's birth, his family's home for many generations and as a young man he fought for its independence from the British. I grew up safe in America with Israel as a reality, knowing the history of our people and the 2000 years of longing to return to our ancestral homeland that led to its founding. I grew up watching in admiration as this tiny country made the desert bloom and grew a technological economy that was the envy of the

¹ Genesis 25:22

world, all without the oil wealth of its neighbors. I grew up with the hope – Hatikvah – that this expression of Jewish independence would fulfil the biblical promise of being a “light unto the nations.”² I believed that Jews have something important to give to the world and that, alongside what we create in America, Europe and around the world, a Jewish state where Hebrew is the spoken language, where Jewish values are put into action, can be a source of pride for the Jewish people.

Rebekah learns from G-d, that the struggle within her womb is the struggle of two peoples.

שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטֶןָהּ
וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיֶד יִפְרָדוּ
“Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body”

The personal becomes political and the struggle within her is revealed as a representation of a national struggle.

From the moment of its birth Israel has been locked in a struggle with the nations around it. In my youth that struggle was expressed with armies and tanks always at the border ready to attack, as they ultimately did in the Yom Kippur war of 1973. I remember how that war devastated my father – the first sign that Israel really could have been defeated and destroyed by its enemies. Almost exactly 50 years later, on another Jewish holiday, a horrific attack nearly brought Israel to its knees. Not uniformed national soldiers with military hardware, but a well-armed terrorist incursion slaughtered face to face civilians in their homes – over a thousand murdered, over 250 taken hostage - the largest loss of Jewish life since the horrors of the mid-20th century.

For the past 718 days, Israel has been locked in the most devastating war of its history. And we – I – have tried to make sense of our changed reality and our – my – place in it.

All my life, and especially in the 31 years I have been a rabbi, I have seen it as my responsibility to understand Israel and to explain it. I do not live there – that was a choice – I do not vote there or serve in the army. My ability to influence Israeli society is quite limited. When I was in high school, my father was strongly recruited by Menachem Begin to return and serve in the Israeli Knesset. Had he made that choice, which he seriously considered and we even planned for, my life might have turned out quite differently!

But these past two years have been a very serious struggle for me in my relationship with the state of Israel. Increasingly, the Israel of my dreams, my ideals and my morality has clashed with the reality of its actions.

Two years ago, after October 7, I supported this war on Hamas as a terrible necessity. Any nation attacked as Israel was would have responded against a clear and present threat – and

² Exodus 19:5

most would have done it with far less regard for civilian casualties. Over the past years I have fought the disinformation campaign which has been in place for decades before this war – exaggerating civilian losses and claiming, without evidence, the most horrific crimes against Israel, exactly mirroring the anti-Semitic tropes which portray the Jew as both infinitely powerful and infinitely depraved.

But today I feel like Rebekah with a struggle inside asking “how can I continue?”

I have long supported a two-state solution, which was proposed and accepted by the pre-state Jewish community in 1947, even before independence. I rejoiced and blew the shofar when the Oslo accords were announced in 1993 which mapped the path towards that reality, and had my heart broken when the negotiations fell apart and violence followed. I thought the Abraham Accords were among the most important accomplishments of the first Trump administration, but mourned that they bypassed the hopes of the Palestinian people. I have long supported the rights of Palestinians and other Arabs within Israel and decried the Jewish extremists of the settler movement who have systematically – and with the help of successive Israel governments – destroyed the hopes for Palestinian Independence. It was complicated, but I saw hope for a future of two nations, twins like Jacob and Esau, finding a way to live together in peace. I thought that Israeli extremists, some in my own family, would eventually be so rejected by society that their influence would cease, much like the violent and racist extremists I grew up with in the American South.

Today, those extremists are the government of Israel. And they have worked to shatter my dreams – and the dreams of millions of Israelis.

But I held on. I hoped that the fever dream would pass and that extremists on the Israeli and Palestinian side would cease to drive the narrative.

But last March, right after the start of Ramadan and a few weeks before Passover, Netanyahu announced that Israel would stop the entry of all goods and supplies into Gaza until Hamas agreed to a US ceasefire proposal³. From that moment, even knowing there was sufficient supplies in Gaza to last, everything changed for me. My struggle, like two nations within me, became unbearable. I could not, cannot not abide the use of hunger as a tool of war, to influence the enemy to accept your demands. It is not Jewish. In fact it goes against Jewish law. The Torah demands that even during a siege the Jewish army may not cut down fruit trees.⁴

In a few days, we will commemorate the fast of Yom Kippur, a time of personal reflection and prayer. I know how hungry I feel when I end that fast. My Muslim friends know that experience daily throughout the month of Ramadan before their lone evening meal. To even threaten a Muslim population with hunger during that time is unspeakably cruel. To sit at our Passover

³ <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/02/nx-s1-5314852/israel-stops-aid-to-gaza>

⁴ Deut. 20:19. See also Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 6:7-8

meal and say “Let all who are hungry come and eat” during a siege is heartless. This is what the Prime Minister of Israel has done.

But to struggle is to remain engaged. I could not walk away. And so I went to Israel. And I joined a protest.

This summer Cantor Cahana and I were invited to join a small group of Reform rabbis and cantors from across the US in a week of study in Israel. We spent the time in the Israeli Arab city of Jaffa on the border of Tel Aviv. Our conference was organized by Beit Daniel, the largest Reform synagogue in Israel, along with the Israeli campus of our seminary, Hebrew Union College and the Israeli Reform Movement. It was titled “From Crisis to Creativity” in recognition that the Jewish people have always faced our most difficult times, our times of crisis, with enormous creativity. These times are often when the most important changes have occurred. In Israel, we learned from scholars, peace activists and artists who share my Zionist dream of an Israel at peace in our ancestral Jewish homeland, living alongside a Palestinian state where their ancestors also dreamed of peace and self-determination. We heard over and over again the call for Diaspora Jews to help our Israeli colleagues overcome a government they see as betraying their ideals. They pointed out repeatedly that although Israeli society is split politically in much the same way that America is, surveys show that between 70-80% of the nation want an end to the war, the immediate return of all the hostages, and the removal of Hamas from Gaza. An overwhelming majority are frustrated that their government doesn’t listen to them – and are frustrated that the world sees them as pariahs. So many feel that their government does not represent them.

The most important part of our experience in Israel this summer, to me, was joining the protest in Hostage square. I have been to Israel since October 7, 2023 – in fact just about a month after that terrible day. Along with a group from Federation, I stood in the fire bombed homes in Kibbutz Kfar Aza, about a kilometer from the Gaza border. With sukkahs still standing and children’s toys littered about, and the smell of kerosene still lingering, these homes were the scenes of unimaginable terror. I saw the bullet holes shot through the safe rooms where entire families had fled. I saw how the terrorists torched everything in the house, intentionally destroying any memories or possessions. It was gut-wrenching.

But standing in hostage square in Tel Aviv two years later was a different kind of gut-wrenching experience. Not a traumatized society of victims, although there is much trauma still raw in people’s lives, but a society angry, energized, protesting and demanding. It is hard to express what it is like to stand in a public square surrounded by 10s of thousands of Jewish Israelis demanding an end to the war; demanding a return of the hostages; furious that the government was putting the lives of the hostages at risk with the coming invasion of Gaza City, which had been announced the day before. We heard emotional pleas in Hebrew and in English from the hostage families crying to be reunited with their loved ones, dead or alive. It was Tu B’Av, the Jewish Valentine’s Day and we saw an emotional video of a romantic dinner for two, with one empty seat and a spouse alone at the table, telling stories of their loved one held

hostage in a tunnel in Gaza, crying for them to come home. We heard angry denunciations of the government and the exhaustion of those who are fighting this war. And we heard a growing awareness of the devastation being visited on Gazan civilians caught between a relentless Israeli army and the Hamas leadership who does nothing for their safety. Nearly 600,000 people were on the streets that day.⁵ More than a million the following week.⁶

The protest that evening began with a Havdalah ceremony – a separation from the holiness of Shabbat and the ordinary week, led by rabbis and lay people from the Israeli Reform Jewish community. We realized that our colleagues were leaders in a Jewish moral vision for the nation. We looked around and saw friends of ours who were Reform rabbis and cantors in the crowd – who had been there protesting the government every Saturday night for 3 years – long before the war in Gaza. I became convinced that we have to help them.

There is a vision. There is a path forward. But we heard over and over again that Israel can't do it on its own. Our friends are asking for our help. Our friends are particularly asking American Jews for help.

The Middle East has changed enormously over the past few years and especially in the past two years. The Abraham Accords have shown that building bridges between the Arab nations and Israel can be advantageous to both. And since October 7, Israel's elimination of Hezbollah in Lebanon which for decades has held that country hostage, the fall of a truly evil and murderous government in Syria which displaced and slaughtered millions of its own people, and the demonstration that Iran's military threats are not existential, has reshaped the power dynamics of the region. Politicians, activists and pundits are now talking about what is sometimes called "the 23 state solution"⁷ or more often "Regional Integration"⁸ – that is the inclusion of Israel into the body of surrounding Arab nations living in peace and security and including a path for Palestinian self-rule. This would end Israel's isolation in its home region and increasingly around the world. But it must start with an end to the war, the return of the hostages, the elimination of Hamas as a military or political force and the beginning of reconstructing Gaza with a pathway for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. While Netanyahu and his coalition have espoused a desire for regional integration, in practice they are delaying and destroying hopes for peace and acceptance.

⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/masses-rally-across-israel-against-gaza-city-takeover-plan-call-on-soldiers-to-refuse/>

⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/large-protests-expected-across-israel-as-national-strike-for-hostages-gets-underway/>

⁷ <https://jstreet.org/the-23-state-solution/>

⁸ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/07/an-emergent-us-favored-regional-order-in-the-middle-east-and-its-challenges/>

What can we do? We can support those who are working for a change. My colleagues and friends in the Israel Reform Movement – Reform Jews from institutions much like our own synagogue – hold a vision of the kind of Israel I had always imagined. They believe in a peaceful, democratic nation, which celebrates diversity and honors the humanity of every person – even those who have historically opposed us. But our Reform institutions are under attack in Israel. Last Spring on Yom HaZikaron, Israel’s Memorial Day, the Reform synagogue in Ra’anana was violently attacked by hundreds of Jewish right-wing protesters as they were screening a joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony – held in Jaffa and organized by bereaved Israelis and Palestinians who have lost family members in the conflict. The protesters threw objects at the building, forced their way inside and assaulted participants⁹. There is a deep and sometimes violent struggle going on within Israel, between a Messianic right-wing expansionist vision that seeks to push out the Arab population, and a moderate vision of living together in peace. I want to support those who are willing to do the hard work, take the hard chances, for peace. We have a plan for our Temple to help us build those connections between our communities.

According to the midrash, the twins in Rebekah’s womb were struggling and quarrelling with each other over how to divide the two worlds of their inheritance.¹⁰ So long as we struggle and quarrel about dominance, our worlds are small and we can cry as Rebekah did “אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה” if so, how can I continue? But many in Israel – led in part by our Reform Jewish institutions – have a vision of a different way forward. They are protesting in the streets and demanding attention from their leaders. I want to build connections with the Reform Movement in Israel, synagogue to synagogue, person to person. I want us to learn from their struggle, from their protest, from their courage – and I want them to know that we are with them, that we share their vision. Soon, we will be announcing a twinning program called “Keshet La’Atid” – Connecting for the Future – our synagogue with a Reform congregation in Israel - where we can get to know some of these heroes and they can know that we care. We will learn how we can help them help shape the future of the Jewish state.

This past weekend, Israeli Knesset Member Yair Golan, Chairman of the opposition Democrats Party wrote a Rosh Hashanah message to Diaspora Jews.¹¹ In it, he wrote:

. . . we need Diaspora Jews to support us in withstanding the assault from within. Our partnership is urgent and strategically consequential. Israelis of diverse backgrounds defending our democracy are more likely to succeed if Diaspora

⁹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rioters-attack-synagogue-hosting-screening-of-israeli-palestinian-memorial-event/>

¹⁰ Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 111:2

¹¹ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/on-rosh-hashanah-israels-reckless-government-needs-to-hear-from-diaspora-jews/>

Jewry steps up. You have a right and an interest in doing so. If Israeli democracy is destroyed, it will not only be a catastrophe for Israel but for world Jewry.

That is why I am calling on Diaspora Jews to be more vocal. Now is not the time to distance yourself from Israel and Israelis, however repellent you find our current government, but to draw closer in an unprecedented liberal partnership.

Yair Golan's party also includes the only Reform Rabbi serving in the Knesset: Gilad Kariv. We met with Rabbi Kariv in Jaffa and heard his plea for engagement and support from American Jews. He called on us clergy to share sources of hope – to recognize that the majority of Israeli Jews oppose this government, oppose the war and the threatened annexation of the West Bank. He reminded us that Israel's greatest crises are usually followed by periods of peacemaking. There is hope. Out of crisis comes opportunity.

These past years have been a great struggle for me, a personal crisis, as I have tried to align my life-long, deep love of Israel with a government acting in ways that violate ideals I have long held. Like our Matriarch Rebekah, I have wondered how I can go forward. I know I will always support Israel because I believe in the necessity of a Jewish homeland; the Zionist dream of an indigenous people living in peace in their ancestral homeland. But I want to do what I can to help bring about the Israel I have always believed in. In my crisis, I want to help. In modern Hebrew, the word for crisis is מְשִׁיבָה – which in Biblical Hebrew means a birthing stool.¹² Crisis leads to the birth of something new. Throughout the history of the Jewish people, crisis has led to our greatest creativity and trauma has given way to hope. I see a rising group of passionate Israelis who share a vision of peace. I want to join and support my friends there in helping to build this vision. I hope you will too. Don't walk away. Don't give up on Israel. I promise that I won't. Let us remain engaged and let us support those who are trying to make a difference, who dream of a better Israel. The struggle is still alive. The dream is still alive. It is worth it. Let us struggle for peace together.

¹² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Letters to the Next Generation*, Letter 2.