

In Israel, sirens are sounded to warn about missile attacks; people scurry to shelters.

In Israel, sirens are sounded as reminders to memorialize, as calls for resolve, on Yom haShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and on Yom haZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day; everyone, everything, pauses.

Here, when the shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashana, we pause. We pause to consider our year, and resolve to make the coming year better.

We come together to smile at familiar faces, we greet those not yet familiar. We come together to sing the venerable tunes we know, and make a decent effort at learning the newer melodies. We bring with us the heavy hearts of personal loss; we bask in the joy of the recently married and the welcome glow of a new generation.

We come together on Rosh Hashana in prayer, in penitence. This year, we also come together in pain.

I feel that, since October 7, we are all hurting — suffering inexorable sadness and anxiety for 363 days, so far. If nothing else, we've learned that misery does not love company.

Palestinian terrorist groups caught Israel with its guard down, and true to their missions, they slaughtered, mutilated, terrorized, victimized anyone they could reach, mostly civilians of all ages. Israel struck back in self-defense.

The attack was in too many ways brilliant. The murders and mutilations did indeed strike terror into the heart of Israel, as did the taking of hundreds of Israelis and other nationals, spiriting away babies — they took **corpses!** — all as pawns in a depraved chess game. And, it mobilized a well-oiled worldwide, western-oriented public relations disinformation campaign that cynically tapped veins of Jew-hatred ignorance that pervaded, in particular, American and European college campuses.

We were astonished at the breakneck speed with which the world pivoted from decrying atrocities inflicted by demons to demonizing victims and lionizing perpetrators.

We all know this story. We've been living it, reading, listening, we're probably overdoing the webinars, the podcasts, the TV pundits; we're — we're up to our ears in it... and the muck just seems to keep getting deeper.

Prominent in the news this past spring were the tepid-at-best responses by Western university administrations to disruptive, often aggressive anti-Israel demonstrations that roiled campuses over the past year.

Locally, at Stockton University, there were issues, but not headline-quality disruptions.

On Monday evening this week, Cantor Jacki and I were among some 30 people — local clergy and other religious community leaders, one-fourth of whom were from the Jewish community! — who discussed with Stockton University administrators issues of interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

The event was hosted by Stockton and Bridge of Faith, an inter-religious group founded years ago by Rabbi Aaron Krauss and Atlantic City councilman Kaleem Shabazz.

Stockton President Dr. Joe Bertolino explained that October 7 caused massive upheaval beyond Israel. He found that Muslim and Jewish students were using near identical language to describe feelings of isolation, guilt and fear. The evening's discussion was meant to solicit the advice of local concerned parties and to develop goals and strategies to enable students to have discourse without discord.

President Bertolino asked that if the difficult conversations can't be had on campus, where and when will young people learn to accept, tolerate, understand and advocate? He said that it Stockton is responsible to keep students safe and to help them feel safe. However, he added, it is not the university's responsibility to assuage students' discomfort. If anything, students should be encouraged to step out of their comfort zones.

Among the takeaways from the evening:

- For now, specifically about October 7 and what preceded and followed that event, we need to learn, teach and talk more about the challenging issues.
- For our own sakes, and for our children, our students, our communities — more dialogue, more compassion and maintaining mutual respect.
- Also, particularly for clergy, we need to be willing, when appropriate, to answer some questions with the words: I don't know, or, I don't know ... yet.

Existential threats to Israel can keep us up at night. Imagine what they're doing to Israelis! The other day, Ellie showed me a photo posted on Facebook of a group of Israeli children lying prone on a sidewalk, hands over their heads. It was a birthday party for an 11 year old, interrupted by sirens warning about a missile fired from Yemen.

After making aliyah, our daughter Hannah served in a search-and-rescue unit in the IDF. Now 17 years into her Israel life, because she faces the prospect of being called up for reserve duty at any time, in her car she keeps a bag packed with necessities for the first week of active duty.

Ellie and I visited Israel in May. We, and others who've been, note that it feels as though a pall of sorrow and uncertainty is hanging over the whole country. Even so, life in Israel has not ground to a halt; weddings and babies, b'mitzvahs are still happening. As we were leaving, a literary festival in Jerusalem was just beginning.

Many of us are hurting ... from the agony we see that is fracturing Israel. Each of us may be in pain, even if from different causes or nuances, for example:

- the imagined suffering of hostages and their families
- more than 700 soldiers lost, with grieving life partners or without the potential mates who will never know them
- concern for our loved ones' perseverance
- the manipulation of symbols and causes against Israel

- feelings of betrayal by people and organizations we'd considered allies in social justice and civil rights action
- discomfort about casualties, even if the Gaza-supplied numbers are inflated
- the yearning, almost as old as "hatikva" itself, for a period of true peace in our ancestral homeland

Closer to home, some of us get downright depressed when considering the obscene amounts of money we have had to spend on security at Shirat Hayam and elsewhere. This is also a painful reality.

Too many of our local tax dollars — and your dues — have been spent on hardening targets such as this building; think about that money being spent on improving national health, education, or research, or, right here on our Sunday School Galeem kids or adult programming.

There have been and continue to be so many responses to the pain of October 7: Books, essays, op-ed pieces, films, music, paintings.... It's understandable, and, as is the situation itself, overwhelming. It is also affirming that so many express concern, solidarity, empathy and sympathy in so many ways!

In one local effort this past Sunday, a group at Shirat Hayam baked more than six dozen Rosh Hashana round challot, most for preordered sales. The proceeds are going to the Hostage and Missing Families Forum in Israel.

I have had déjà vu at times, particularly when pointlessly contemplating solutions to Israel's many challenges. Perhaps naively, I still engage in wishful thinking, as in: why the hell can't we all figure this out and get on with our lives? How can tiny Israel be so important to Iran with its vast resources? Over the years, how many times before have you felt that?

I have felt similarly about how Jew-haters claim we run the banks, the government, the media, and so on. What amazing power we have! Who knew?

Surely you've heard the classic tale of the Jewish man sitting on a park bench in Munich, reading a newspaper. It's the 1930s. He's not reading just any newspaper; it's *Der Sturmer*, a rabidly Jew-hating, privately-published rag that helped fan the flames of Naziism. A friend of the man happens by and stops, a horrified look on his face. "How can you read this antisemitische dreck?!" the friend bellows. The man looks up, calm as can be. "Listen, when I read the Jewish papers, terrible things are happening to us — pogroms, restrictions, exile. When I read this *schmatte*, we control the banks, the media, governments. Good news!"

Occasionally, there is some good news amid the rancor and recrimination directed at Israel and, by extension, to all Jews who understand Zionism's place in our religion and history. One story that offers a glimmer of light was made into a novel, *Apeirogon*, by Colum McCann.

The book, published in 2020, is based on the true story of the extraordinary friendship between an Israeli father whose 13 y.o. daughter was killed in a homicide bombing and a Palestinian father whose 10 y.o. daughter was killed by a bullet from an IDF soldier's rifle.

Sirens sounded in the aftermath of those incidents; those sirens may have been heard differently by each of the protagonists, but they meant the same thing: Someone was losing a loved one.

Today, we can wonder about the odds of such a friendship coming out of the current situation. Those fathers met through a grieving parents group of Israelis and Palestinians called Combatants for Peace.

The following statements, presented in random order, are recorded in the novel as verbatim statements by Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan:

- What can you do ... to help prevent this unbearable pain for others?
- We have no idea what the other is like.
- Despair is not a plan of action.
- We wanted to kill each other to achieve the same thing, peace and security.

- You never heal, don't let anyone tell you that you ever fully heal.
- My enemy could have no pain, he could have no feelings.
- I know it will not be over until we talk to each other.
- The Germans killed six million Jews and look, now we have an Israeli diplomat in Berlin and we have a German ambassador in Tel Aviv. You see, nothing is impossible.

This feels to me like dialogue we've been hearing for decades now. However old it may sound, however tired, it is still true. Even today, especially today, it might be instructive to try to sort out which statements came from which father.

Another quote by Bassam Aramin stood out for me. He cited a poem, a one sentence poem, by the 13th-century Persian Sufi scholar known as Rumi:

"Beyond right and wrong there is a field, I'll meet you there."

"Beyond right and wrong there is a field, I'll meet you there."

Many of us are perpetually looking for, hoping to find that field, and we're willing to greet anyone else who makes it there.

In last week's Torah reading, we are told that God's teaching, i.e., Torah, is not far from us; it is not in the heavens, nor across the ocean; it is not so esoteric that it is beyond our reach. Indeed, it is close to us, in our mouths, in our hearts; that is, it is accessible, achievable.

Likewise, I believe, is peace. However, it is beyond my ken to suggest a solution. Others, more informed and authoritative than I, need to develop and implement ways we can live beside one another. Even so, on the hazardous road to peace, we will carry our pain, our sorrow, as we pay the toll to travel that road.

In a Rosh Hashana reader from the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Joel Seltzer writes about the haftara for

second day Rosh Hashana. The haftara is well-known for its image of our biblical matriarch Rachel, embodying the mothers of Israel: “A cry is heard ... wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children” in exile.

Today, he writes, many of us may feel like Rachel, ... weeping, inconsolable over the loss of so many innocent souls. Some of us mark the bitterness by wearing numbers on pieces of tape, counting each day of the hostages’ captivity. Others wear symbolic dog tags or ribbons, daily reminders of our people’s pain.

Rabbi Seltzer suggests that we may find comfort in God’s consoling Rachel in the haftara with the words: “*yesh tikvah l’achariteich* / There is hope for your future — *v’shavu vanim ligvulam* / your children shall return to their country!”

He concludes, Through our tears, let us also find *tikvah* / hope in God’s promise for a better future.

Hope. Hope and optimism. It has become a commonplace that optimism is something that can happen without us, something that is, effectively, wishful thinking, whereas hope implies agency on our part to MAKE something happen.

It is perhaps telling that the famous hospital ship is named HOPE rather than, say, BEST WISHES, or SUNSHINE or REPAIR & RECOVERY or THOUGHTS & PRAYERS.

A few among us can remember a time before there was an Israel. For most of us, Israel has been a reality all our lives. So we hold tightly to hope. Because it is hard to envision a future without it.

Tikvah / Hope.

Sirens sound in Israel; the shofar calls.

(*blow shofar*) **Tekia:** we are summoned to heed the call, to be attentive to potential.

(*blow shofar*) **Shevarim:** mournful brokenness telling us there may well be pain in the process of change.

(*blow shofar*) **Truah:** Wake up! It is time to act.

(*blow shofar*) **Final tekia:** We are spurred to action, charged with energy and needing to DO something. What do we do?

What can we do?

We can advocate. How? We can respond to nationally-known journalists who get it wrong, such as a recent piece implying that AIPAC is at the beck and call of the Israeli government. We can respond personally when we feel that others don’t quite understand the nuances of Israel’s dilemma.

We show up: when? Local pro-Israel weekly demonstrations, events that feature speakers or films about October 7 and its aftermath. National gatherings such as the General Assembly in Washington this November. Go on a mission to Israel. Sign up for our Shirat Hayam trip rescheduled for October 2025. Attend Shabbat or other services to connect with ancient expressions of yearning for Zion and to bond with community.

Also, we can vote in next year’s World Zionist Congress elections. A huge amount of money is at stake. The percentage of votes for various constituent agencies determines the amount of funding that organization receives from the Jewish Agency and Keren Kayemet l’Yisrael, the historic Jewish National Fund in Israel. Voting for the Conservative Movement’s MERCAZ party can help assure state funding for pluralistic Judaism in Israel, including Masorti synagogues, Ramah camps, USY teen experiences and more.

Pick up a card from the lobby table on your way home today. On Saturday night or Sunday morning, register for the March 2025 election.

We all feel the pain. We are in this together. We can take action; we can support one another in various ways. As Torah tells us with regard to a suffering animal or a stranger in peril: we may not stand idly by.

The shofar calls. How will you respond?