

Jewish Thriving: Kol Nidre 5785

On November 9, 1938, the evening we know all too well as Kristallnacht, teachers and students at the Hochschule in Berlin, a rabbinical seminary and institute for the academic study of Judaism, were together at school when the violence of that terrible night erupted. A leading center of Jewish learning, even under the intolerable conditions imposed by the Nazis, the Hochschule's faculty and student body contained an impressive cast of scholars and theologians, many of whom would go on to become Diaspora luminaries after the Holocaust, amongst them Leo Baeck, Ismar Elbogen, Emil Fackenheim, and a young man named Hans Harf. When Harf, who eventually became a congregational rabbi in Buenos Aires, passed away in 2004 he was widely eulogized, and a story about Kristallnacht at the Hochschule came to light.

As the pogroms began on November 9th, students and teachers at the Hochschule were paralyzed with fear. Glass shattered all around them, "Death to the Jews" could be heard in the streets, and huge stones landed at a dizzying rate inside the seminary walls, just narrowly missing the frightened humans cowering there. Rabbi Leo Baeck, unofficial leader of the faculty and professor of midrash, gathered the terrified group together and ordered each person to pick up one of the stones that had been thrown in from outside. "We swear to each other today," he said, "That at the first chance we get, we will escape from Germany and settle in other countries around the world. We swear to each other that we will build Jewish communities there and create thriving Jewish life. We swear today that each of these rocks will eventually become the cornerstone of a new synagogue or school. We swear that we will continue to celebrate the joy and wisdom of Jewish tradition to our last dying day!"¹

This teaching of Rabbi Baeck's is not nearly as famous as another teaching that emerged from the Hochschule, that of Baeck's colleague, Dr. Emil Fackenheim, but I find it wildly more resonant. Dr. Fackenheim, of course, is best known for suggesting that a final, 614th commandment be added to our corpus of Jewish law after the Holocaust, asserting "Do not grant Hitler a posthumous victory." In elaborating further upon this *mitzvah* (commandment), Fackenheim explains that we are commanded "to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish," "remember the martyrs...lest their memory perish," and to not "deny or despair of God...or...the world...lest Judaism perish."² While I can understand where he was coming from, it is a defensive and ultimately pessimistic way of fostering Jewish engagement, one based largely on guilt, fear, and what scholar Salo Baron calls the lachrymose theory of Jewish history which sees our past as being primarily one of suffering.

Yet Rabbi Baeck's charge, shaped by the same set of circumstances, is precisely the opposite! Rabbi Baeck is not saying we should build synagogues and schools so that the Nazis will see they weren't successful, we should build synagogues and schools because we have holidays to celebrate and Torah to learn, values to pass down to our children and *chesed* (acts of kindness) to carry out in the world. We should create Jewish communities not so that other nations will realize we still exist and are a force to be reckoned with, but because we have prayers to recite and Shabbat meals to eat in friendship, losses through which to support one another, and *smachot* (happy times) that are so much richer when shared with others. We should remember our slain not only to ensure that they are never forgotten but also because the history of our people is rich and inspiring and instructive, even those parts which are difficult, and because knowing from where one comes gives a person a sense of rootedness and identity.

¹ schechter.edu/the-stones-cast-by-the-oppressors-became-the-keystone-emil-fackenheim-the-614th-commandment-and-kristallnacht/

² www.sinaitemple.org/learning_with_the_rabbis/writings/2006/042806The614thCommanment.pdf

In short, we should indeed be devoting our energies to creating vibrant, thriving Jewish organizations and communities. We should do this, however, because our tradition helps us to live lives of meaning, purpose, joy, and connection and not simply to spit in the face of our enemies.

It is ironic, but often true, that nothing brings the Jewish people together like a good crisis. When our survival is imperiled, when our reputation is destroyed, when we are terrorized or threatened or made to feel other and alone, we tend to experience surges in affiliation, identity, and unity that it would be a blessing to maintain in better times. While during the summer of 2023, Israel nearly tore itself apart over proposed judicial reforms, after October 7th the same WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages that had been set up to mobilize rallies were immediately repurposed to create *hamalim* - volunteer-run command centers to provide for the evacuated, the bereaved, the single-parent families created by fathers going off to war. UnXeptable, one of the primary groups organizing anti-government protests in North America, changed its motto from "Saving Israeli Democracy" to simply "Saving Israel." The rallying cry of the war became *yachad n'natzeach* – together we will win!

Back here in the United States, despite escalating tensions between American and Israeli Jews over the last many years, exacerbated by a fierce repudiation of the Netanyahu government and its extremist elements by large parts of the Diaspora community, 290,000 people attended the March in Washington last November. Israeli philanthropies have experienced an enormous spike in giving, raising more than 100 million dollars within the first seven days after October 7th alone.³ The country has also been flooded with solidarity mission participants – including so many from this shul! – some of whom specifically told me they just had to go stand with the people of Israel.

And finally, despite the hand-wringing, Pew report prognostications, and anxious concern that many of us have about declining patterns of affiliation and engagement amongst non-Orthodox Jews, post-October 7th there has been a significant uptick in attendance at synagogues and at Hillel and Chabad campus events⁴ along with a dramatic increase in Jewish day school enrollment⁵ (even as some of these trends have started to recently reverse as individuals feel increasingly nervous about publicly identifying as Jewish). One study, published in *eJewishPhilanthropy* described "an explosion in Jewish belonging and communal engagement that is nothing short of historic," dubbing this new phenomenon "the surge" and reporting that an incredible 43% of Jews have expressed a new interest in increasing their participation in Jewish life and a staggering 25% have already taken a first step towards doing so.⁶ Indeed, nothing brings the Jewish people together like a good crisis. This latest one, unique in its devastation, also appears to be unique in its power and promise.

I am thrilled, of course, to see the trends I've just described, they are some of the things giving me hope in these dark times. And yet, I can't help but wonder if the identity, engagement, and unity we've been experiencing over the past year is more in the vein of Fackenheim – a brittle, brave defiance against our enemies which I fear may be thin and potentially short-lived and ultimately unable to sustain itself for the long term – rather than in the vein of Baeck – a turning toward tradition based on its inherent beauty, meaning, and wisdom that might possibly have staying power even, God willing, after this terrible period has ended.

³ <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/israel-sees-surge-in-donations-from-u-s-in-aftermath-of-oct-7-attacks>

⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/insights-on-how-jewish-life-has-changed-so-far-after-the-oct-7-hamas-massacre/>

⁵ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/study-finds-growing-interest-in-jewish-day-schools-after-oct-7/>

⁶ <https://www.jewish-chicago.org/Mag/tmpl-article.aspx?id=454768>

In a powerful piece published in his political magazine, *SAPIR*, journalist Brett Stephens explores the many reasons why he believes it is unproductive and even dangerous to put countering antisemitism at the center of the Jewish communal agenda. He argues that antisemitism (and its recent proxy, anti-Zionism, which is separate, of course, from reasonable criticism of Israel offered within the context of its right to exist) is ultimately unsolvable as much of it derives not from a lack of information or historical context but rather from a toxic value system championing the sorts of repugnant ideas to which Judaism stands in radical opposition: anti-democracy, anti-particularity, anti-morality, anti-equality, and more.⁷ Paradoxically, education, particularly Holocaust education, often harms as much as it helps, as it can be manipulated to paint Jews as hypocrites responsible for the very kinds of behaviors for which they blame others (think all the accusations of “genocide” being made on our college campuses) or twisted to suggest that Jews are using privilege to prioritize their own trauma when there are so many other horrors that have taken place throughout history. Stephens is not saying that we should give up on trying to eliminate antisemitism – and neither am I. What he is saying, however, is that rather than putting the bulk of our communal time, energy, and resources towards trying to solve this intractable problem, we should rather invest in something far more important. He suggests that we rather prioritize Jewish thriving.

Over Rosh Hashanah I encouraged each of us to think about our sacred purpose for the coming year and mine is to work on this. To be sure, we should not give up on all the difficult and necessary battles we need to continue to fight in our world today: on campus, on social media, at the ballot box, in the world of public opinion. But if we are only channeling our energies towards the *defensive* – defeating antisemitism, eliminating anti-Zionism, countering hateful rhetoric and misinformation, fighting terrorism and hatred – I fear that we will emerge from this crisis without enough left to sustain us when all the enemies have been quieted. So, what does Jewish thriving look like? Stephens defines it as, “a flourishing, secure, and morally self-confident State of Israel. It is a Diaspora that is proud of and knowledgeable about its own heritage. It is robust attendance at synagogue services and Shabbat dinners and Jewish cultural events. It is the desire to...raise children Jewishly. It is the conviction among all Jews, whatever their level of observance, that their Jewishness is the most cherished element of their identity, a precious inheritance from their forebears and a priceless bequest to their posterity.”⁸

To Stephens’ powerful words, I would add that Jewish thriving is about constantly pushing ourselves to grow as Jews: in knowledge, in skills, in practice, in engagement. It is building a Judaism so rich and vibrant that the next generation simply can’t imagine doing without it; they feel called to pass it forward, not by a guilty sense of obligation and duty but by a loving desire to steward it and make it their own. Jewish thriving is about modeling the kinds of values we wished existed out there in the world around us: generosity, compassion, justice, respect, truth. It is about building communities of meaning, purpose, joy, and connection.

Stephens suggests that were we to create the kind of Jewish thriving he most hopes for, there is a good chance we would also, in fact, lessen antisemitism: it would make us more self-confident, invite friends and admirers, grow our numbers, and – yes – deliver a decisive victory against those who hate us (although also, potentially, further enrage them and grow their malice). But all of this, I would argue, is quite beside the point! With all due respect to Dr. Fackenheim, the mere survival of Jews and Judaism is not nearly sufficient to qualify as “success” for our people, and a desire to defeat those who would do us harm is entirely inadequate as an animating force for participation in Jewish life. For the Jewish people

⁷ <https://sapirjournal.org/antisemitism/2023/08/three-falsehoods-about-antisemitism-and-one-truth/>

⁸ Ibid

to flourish, both we and our homeland, of course, must be safe and secure. But we should never confuse the prerequisite for the ultimate goal.

In the year 5785, the new year just begun, I hope that we will continue to do many of the impactful and important things we've been doing for the last twelve months: showing up for rallies, contacting elected officials, wearing yellow ribbons, making frequent trips to Israel. I hope we'll keep up the lawn signs, post regularly on social media, use our philanthropic dollars to punish our alma maters and to provide necessary medical and military services in Israel. I hope we'll teach our children about the evils of the Holocaust and about how to respond to anti-Zionism on campus. These efforts have created meaningful change in our world and they've made us all feel just a little less helpless.

And in the year 5785, the new year just begun, I hope that we will do other things as well. I hope we'll take a class or read a book or listen to a podcast about something Jewish, because Jewish thriving is based on continually deepening and expanding our own knowledge. I hope we'll show up for a daily minyan or make a shiva call or invite a new family for Shabbat dinner, because Jewish thriving is about creating thick communities where people feel named, noticed, needed, and known. I hope we'll dance our feet off next week at Simchat Torah, that we'll pelt children with candy at upcoming b'nai mitzvah, that we'll belt out our congregation's favorite tunes on Shabbat morning because Jewish thriving is about celebration. I hope we'll live Jewish lives so filled with meaning, purpose, joy, and connection that we can't possibly imagine living any other way.

We, the Jewish people, have had many rocks thrown at us this year and may we indeed make them the cornerstones of new places of Jewish thriving – not to defeat our enemies but rather to deepen and enrich our own short and precious lives.

G'mar Tov!