

Unconditional Love, With Expectations¹
Rosh HaShanah I 5786
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Congregation Beth El, Norwalk

“So, Donniel, be our teacher. What should we say about Israel on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur?”

That’s what one of my colleagues asked Rabbi Donniel Hartman just a few weeks ago.

I had the privilege of spending three days in New York with the Shalom Hartman Institute, one of the world’s leading centers for Jewish thought and education. 80 rabbis gathered to study and reflect with top-tier faculty in preparation for the High Holidays. Our final session was with Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, co-President of the Institute.

You could feel the weight of the question in the room—rabbis leaning forward, laptops open and fingers at the ready.

What would Donniel say?

“Rabbotai, my rabbis,” he began, “I would not talk about Israel.”

Silence. Surprise.

But then he continued, “But if you must, speak about the Israel you know can exist—the Israel that lives up to its ideals, its highest standards.”

Friends, I believe we must talk about Israel today—because today, Rosh HaShanah, is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, the day we look honestly at ourselves and those we love. This day is about striving for our personal and communal ideals, and to get there, we must acknowledge where we are now. And Israel weighs heavily on our minds and our hearts.

I’ll tell you where I am.

I love Israel. My Jewish heart bursts with pride that our people found a way to return to our homeland and built a flourishing modern Jewish State. I am constantly in awe of the people of Israel, the culture, the language, the openness, and the scientific and

¹ I’m grateful to my chevruta, my study partner of the last 16 years, Rabbi Noah Arnow, for connecting the concept of “unconditional love, with expectations” to today’s conversation about Israel.

technological advances. I believe in the potential Israel holds. I dream of Israel coexisting peacefully with all of her neighbors.

And I am so deeply saddened by today's reality. I am frustrated and angry with Israel's top leadership. I am horrified that 48 hostages remain in captivity after almost 2 years. I am heartbroken at the ongoing and unimaginable suffering, the extreme hunger, the destruction, the tens of thousands of deaths, the displacement in Gaza. I am so angry that Israelis are again--still?--dealing with and dying from terrorist attacks. I am so angry that extremist Jewish settlers continue to commit crimes against Palestinians living in the West Bank. I cannot believe that this war has not ended, that a deal has not been reached. And I am continually frustrated that so many players fan the flames of violence instead of attempting to deescalate the tensions.

Perhaps your heart has been sitting in this place, too.

The question of how to relate to Israel these days is a hard one. Maybe impossible for some. And although this is one of the most potentially polarizing issues of the day, I--dare I say, we--will not shy away from it. Israel is too central, too crucial, too much a part of the Jewish people to ignore. Today, I will try to bring us together, not drive us apart. I will try to comfort us during this very painful time, not pile on. If I upset you with my words today, I invite a conversation. This is hard for me. It's hard for all of us.

And so I'll be direct in my message: The people of Israel need us. They need our empathy. They need to feel they are not alone in the struggle.

The truth is that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Israelis feel exactly as we do 7,000 miles away. They are heartbroken that there are still 48 hostages held in captivity--these are their brothers and sons, their friends and neighbors. They know them by name and by face. They know their ages and what they love to do. They know exactly what they were each doing at 6:29am on October 7, 2023. They, and we, fear for their very lives every single day that passes--718 horrible and fear-filled days.

And the majority of Israelis are deeply frustrated and angry at their elected leadership for stretching out this war, over a year past when the army's leadership felt it was necessary. Yet they are also the ones who show up every single day to defend the country, to serve the State. So many reserve soldiers and officers have tallied close to 400 days of active army service since the start of the war, putting their lives, their families, their jobs, on hold. Over 900 of them have fallen in this war--unimaginable.

To be Israeli is to inhabit this struggle. Israelis have never been shy about speaking their opinions, in a way I've always admired and, I admit, been rather intimidated by. Their boldness, however, is exactly what is required at this moment. I'm reminded of the encouragement Mordechai offered to Queen Esther as she prepared to reveal to the king Haman's evil plot against the Jewish population of Persia. He said²:

"If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter...

וְיָמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת:

And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

Now, we're not royalty, last I checked, but we are in a moment of crisis, and we do not have the choice to be silent.

It is precisely because of our love for Israel that we, like so, so many Israelis, must acknowledge its shortcomings at this moment in history. We love Israel, and we expect more. We expect better.

We expect the government to direct the Israel Defense Forces to defend the people of Israel. We expect the government to negotiate to bring the hostages home. We expect the army to fight Hamas, and it has. We expect the army to conclude the fighting when it has done all it can. We expect the elected leadership to heed the passionate advice of the army's Chief of Staff, and its intelligence apparatus in the Mossad and Shin Bet, not to contradict it.

We expect Israel to do a much better job facilitating humanitarian relief for the people of Gaza as it fights Hamas. We expect Israel to be a better partner with international aid groups so that Israel will not have to bear this burden alone.

We expect Israel's leadership to ensure its place among the nations of the world, to work toward more normalization, not alienate it from its allies or endanger its future economic welfare.

² Esther 4:14

And finally, we expect that the leadership of Israel be guided by the best interests of the Israeli people, not by politics or fear of imprisonment.

And perhaps by articulating these expectations out loud, and out of love, we can move the needle, even just a bit.

What do we do?

I'll share with you the wisdom of 2 powerful teachers–2 mothers, actually–which I've gleaned over the last week.

The first is Rachel Goldberg-Polin, mother of Hersh *zichrono livracha*, who has become a veritable spokeswoman for the Jewish people, for Israelis, for the hostage families. She is a teacher of Torah, and she tells it like it is.

Interviewed last week by Dan Senor on his podcast “Call Me Back”³, Rachel was asked what message she would share with the Jewish people this high holiday season. She pointed to the crisis scene in the Torah where our patriarch Jacob wrestles with an *ish*—an angel? A part of himself?—all through the night. Noting his utter exhaustion from this life-and-death experience, she lifts up three things that happen:

1. He is forever injured. He ends up limping for the rest of his life because this crisis is so internal.
2. His name changes from Yaakov to Yisrael.
3. Profoundly, he says to this entity, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

Jacob is completely transformed in the aftermath of this crisis—physically, spiritually, and in name. He is no longer Yaakov, but Yisrael, one who strives with God and prevails. And despite this eventual triumph, he carries with him an eternal reminder of the crisis, of the struggle.

Rachel connects the third point—about Yisrael demanding a blessing—to her friend Sarit Zusman, whose son Ben was a good friend of Hersh's in high school and who was killed while serving as a combat soldier in Gaza in December 2023. During the shiva, she remembers Sarit saying that our story will have a good ending—a tremendously positive thing for a grieving mother to say shortly after her son's death.

³ “Call Me Back”, episode 397, 9.15.2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35Nj59RPumM>

Rachel's message, of course, is that we too are being transformed by this crisis. We will not be the same once it concludes, and we will carry this pain with us into the day after, but we will—we must—have a better ending.

The second teacher whose message I share is Julie Platt, mother of Ben, Jonah, and Henry Platt. As immediate Past President of Jewish Federations of North America, Julie delivered the keynote speech at our Federation gala last Wednesday evening. At the end of her incredible encouragement to support Federation and its work in Israel, she relayed a Chasidic story I hadn't heard before. It's spot on for this moment.

Back in the old country, there was a rebbe whose students had gathered at his home. There he showed them a chair that had broken, and he challenged them to figure out how to fix it. One brought glue and carefully placed the pieces back together, but the glue simply wasn't strong enough. Another student took the pieces and attempted to reconfigure them into a new chair. Nothing was working. The rebbe looked around and asked if anyone else could fix the chair. One last student volunteered. He took the broken pieces, sanded a little here, a little there, grabbed a hammer and nails, and not long after, presented it to the rebbe. A stepstool! It brought a smile of delight to the teacher's face.

Very often, our Jewish message is *Chadesh yameinu k'kedem*, "renew our days as of old"⁴, like we say as we return the Torah to the ark. That's not going to work this time. We cannot turn back the clock to October 6, 2023—things were tumultuous and highly problematic in Israel then too, and we were all under the impression that all was safe. We, and Israel, must find a way to sand a little here, hammer a little there, and craft something new, something good, something different than what has been. We must not give up mid-crisis; we must demand the blessing that follows.

I'll leave us with a few to-dos as we struggle together:

1. Stay connected to Israeli family and friends.
2. Listen to Israeli voices across the spectrum—right and left, religious and secular, Jewish and Palestinian.
3. Donate to organizations that do excellent work, such as combat hunger in Israel, fund trauma support, and support hostage families during this crisis.
4. Participate in local gatherings in support of bringing the hostages home, such as Run For Their Lives.

⁴ Lamentations 5:21

5. Go to Israel. It is more meaningful than ever—for those of us who visit *and* for Israelis to have us there.
6. Come here. We pray for the safety and rescue of the hostages every single Shabbat.
7. Take our winter adult education class: Zionism for the 21st Century.
8. Advocate with our elected officials for your beliefs, whether that be more financial support for Israel, or pressuring our own leaders to help Israel's leaders bring the war to an end, or whatever you are most passionate about.

This is the Israel Donniel Hartman was talking about—the one we know can exist. The one worth loving. The one worth expecting more from.

As we welcome this new year, may we be blessed with the strength to love deeply, the courage to expect more, and the humility to keep showing up—for one another, for Israel, and for all who seek peace and justice.

Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God's will.