

Long Hot Summer

L'Shannah Tova! Looking around the sanctuary, I have to tell you how grateful I am to be with you, here, right now; how buoyed I am by your presence, and how seeing your faces and hearing your voices in prayer this morning has supported my own prayers. This is the gift that a *kehillah*- a community- gives to each other: the gift of presence, of mutual support for our hopes and aspirations, even in our diversity, and through that, a taste of transcendence.

So take a moment to look around you, and acknowledge your gratitude for the people, sitting here who create this community- young and old, extended families and individuals, even the noisy babies- thank them with your eyes and your smile, for helping us all feel part of something greater than we are on our own.

At the same time, many of us miss the presence of dear ones who are far away- the son or daughter who is off to college, the grown children and grandchildren who live in other cities or even other countries, or relatives and friends whom we hold dear to our hearts, even though we don't see them often enough. That's why the custom developed to send Shana Tova cards, to remind the people in our lives that we are thinking of them and that they are important to us, precisely at the time of year when we turn our thoughts to community, connection and transcendence. Have you noticed that lately, far fewer people send holiday cards than in the past? I don't think that it is because we care less; it's just that we connect now in different ways. There's Email, or Facebook, or Facetime... Bottom line: The cell phone is mightier than the pen.

My daughter Sara Miriam, who is living in Israel this year, talks to me on her cell phone regularly as she waits for a bus or strolls down the street in Jerusalem, just as often and as naturally as when she was a college student on the upper west side of New York. And my son Jonah's use of his cell phone gives new meaning to the words, "small world:" Once he was in a cab, in Jerusalem, on his way to his grandmother's apartment, and the driver wasn't familiar with the neighborhood. So Jonah phoned me at home in Natick, from the cab in Jerusalem, so that I could give street directions to the cabdriver, 6,000 miles away! Another time he called me from a supermarket in Beer Sheva. "Hi pops," he says. "Hello Jonah." "So, I'm standing in the frozen food section, and they have frozen fish. What's up with that? Should I buy it?" I don't think that those calls were really about street signs or culinary choices. The sub-text, the real message, was intimacy - a way of assuring his Dad of our unbroken connection, in spite of being so far away.

A few years later, when Jonah was a lone soldier serving in the Israeli Army, skype technology brought us, through his iphone, up close into the desert field tent where he and his buddies were encamped. There Fran and I were, in the comfort of our bedroom, in Natick MA, and there he was, surrounded, by a dozen other half-dressed, unwashed kids, in a tent only God and the IDF knew where. The connection wasn't good, but it was a connection: a lifeline, and a source of comfort, and courage for both of us. It made getting through the days of his soldiering easier. Sometimes I ask myself, how do Israeli families live with this- live with an army service that never really ends, in a country whose borders, even when quiet, are always on alert?

In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Israeli author Amos Oz writes about his childhood in Jerusalem in the '40s and '50s. All of Israel felt like an outpost in those days, and no less so

Jerusalem, which was surrounded by Jordanians on three sides, and connected to Israel proper only by a thin mountainous corridor. Every few months, Oz's parents in Jerusalem would exchange letters with their relatives in Tel Aviv, in order to set a date to speak on the phone. Neither of them owned phones- almost no one did in those days- and would call from their respective neighborhood drugstores.

They dressed in their best clothes just to walk to the drug store and make the phone call, because it was such a solemn occasion. "As early as the Sunday before," writes Oz, "my father would say to my mother: "Fania, you haven't forgotten that this is the week that we're phoning Tel Aviv?" On Monday my mother would say: "Arieh, don't be late home the day after tomorrow, don't mess things up." And on Tuesday they would both say to me: "Amos just don't make any surprises for us, you hear, just don't be ill, you hear, don't catch cold or fall over until after tomorrow afternoon." And that evening they would say to me, "Go to sleep early so you'll be in good shape for the phone call, we don't want you to sound as if you haven't been eating properly!"

And yet, after all that build up, when it was finally their turn to use the phone in Mr. Heinemann's drugstore, and the operator, at long last put through the call, the conversation was comically simple:

"Hallo, Tzvi?"

"Speaking"

"It's Arieh here, in Jerusalem."

"Yes, Arieh, hallo, it's Tzvi here, how are you?"

"Everything is fine here. We're speaking from the pharmacy."

“So are we. What’s new?”

“Nothing new here. How about at your end, Tsvi? Tell us how it’s going.”

And that was the whole conversation. Each person would get on the line in succession and say the same thing. What’s new? Good. Well, so let’s speak again soon...!

And yet it was no joke: “Our lives,” writes Oz, “hung by a thread. I realize now that they were not at all sure they would really talk again, this might be the last time, who knew what would happen, there could be riots, a pogrom, a blood bath, the Arabs might rise up and slaughter the lot of us, there might be war, a terrible disaster, after all Hitler’s tanks had almost reached our doorsteps from two directions, North Africa or the Caucasus, who knew what awaited us?”

Oz’s reflection reminds us that to be Jewish means, in part, to be acutely aware of the fragility of our human condition; to know that the delicate threads of connection that bind us one to another, that keep us in this world, are precious, and give us strength.

Sensing the precariousness of this connection, even from the perspective of a child, Oz remembers, “I could visualize this single (telephone) line that connected Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and via Tel Aviv the rest of the world. The line wound its way over wasteland and rocks, over hills and valleys, and I thought it was a great miracle. I trembled: what if wild animals came in the night and bit through the line? Or if wicked Arabs cut it? Or if the rain got into it? Or if there was a fire? Who could tell? There was this line winding along, so vulnerable, unguarded, baking in the sun, who could tell? I felt full of gratitude to the men who had put up this line so brave-hearted, so dexterous, it’s not easy to put up a line from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv.”

So much like today’s Unetaneh Tokef prayer: *Mi lamoot U’mi Yichiyeh- Will live or will die...Will we be alone, or will we feel safe?* Notice how, practically in the same sentence, Oz

shifts from the emotions of fear and terror, to an acceptance of what is beyond our knowing, and finally, to a sense of gratitude for the miracle of existence in the face of our fragility.

Ben Gurion once said that in Israel, if you don't believe in miracles, you're not a realist. An interviewer once asked then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to sum up the country's situation in a single word. Barak, thought for a moment, and responded, "good." His interviewer continued: and if you could sum up Israel's situation in two words? To which Barak responded, "not good."

And this is Israel: eternally balancing on the edge of "good," and "not good;" like our individual existences, only writ large. And this summer, it was very hard to find the good. To put it bluntly, it was a frightening, emotionally exhausting summer for the Jewish people, and it left me somewhat shaken. We faced the double threat of Hamas from without, and of fear from within.

It began with the kidnapping of three Israeli teens, Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaar and Eyal Yifrach. For more than two tense weeks, we held our breath and waited, not knowing, and hoping, in vain, that they might yet be found alive. Their kidnapping led Israelis to an incredible moment of unity, of standing together in the face of peril, and their murder unleashed a torrent of raw pain.

Suffering, the Chernobyler Rebbe teaches us, often has the result of narrowing our awareness, so that we become more focused on our suffering. It can become quite a nasty cycle. After the deaths of Naftali, Gilaad and Eyal, the unthinkable happened: a Muslim teenager Muhammad Abu Khdeir, was brutally murdered by Jews in Jerusalem as an act of revenge. The day after their funerals, hundreds of young religious Jews took to the streets, yelling, death to the Arabs! Death to the leftists! My daughter Sara, writing from Jerusalem about that day, relates, "I

was grabbing drinks with a friend off of the popular Ben Yehuda street, when a group of 40 14-year olds stormed the street chanting. Someone asked them to go away, and they poured beer on her, shouted at her “go back to Gaza!” and proceeded to spit at me and a friend who were watching, kicking over the table right to ours. My eyes filled with tears when the mothers behind them claimed that they were proud of their children. I left shaking in fear.”

But there were points of light: The next night, 1,000 people in Jerusalem demonstrated on behalf of coexistence, proclaiming, “We mourn, we do not avenge,” and sporting bumper stickers that read in Hebrew and Arabic, “*Hashchenim Tovim B’eyneynu*,” which roughly translates to: The neighbors are OK.”

Religious Jews from Gush Etzion arranged to break the fast of the 10th of Tammuz along with their Arab neighbors, who fast until sundown daily during Ramadan, and their example was copied around the country, and even around the world.

The parents of the three murdered boys spoke with dignity about life’s preciousness, and about the desire for justice, not vengeance, and Rachel Fraenkel attempted to visit the family of Muhammed Abu Khdeir.

But the discourse of dialogue was overshadowed by immediate danger, as July morphed into weeks of relentless Hamas missile attacks. For years, those rockets wreaked havoc in Israel’s southern towns near the Gaza border. But now, their increased range placed the majority of Israelis within their range. Only the Iron Dome technology, which proved to be successful at intercepting the missiles, stood between Israel’s cities and disaster. The sound of the *Tzeva Adom*, the red alert, sent Israelis running in the streets for safety, or bedding down their

children in bomb shelters at night. For our families in Israel, this became the bizarre new normal.

At first, Sara Miriam would send home plucky, upbeat emails after a red alert to assure us that she was fine. She would tell a funny story about running into a popular bakery for shelter, and the camaraderie of huddling with total strangers in the bathroom, which was the designated bomb shelter, while the Iron Dome missile did its job. But one particular red alert unnerved her. Sara was asleep in her bed, enjoying a Shabbat nap, and slept through the red alert: It was actually the boom of the iron dome rocket, destroying the incoming Hamas missile, that woke her. Maybe because she was alone, it shook her sense of safety. Do any of us really know what the next moment may bring?

As the hot summer weeks progressed, yet another terrifying twist: Hamas terrorists emerged from the ground into Israeli territory, through a vast and sophisticated underground network, and the term “Terror tunnels” entered our vocabulary. The bogey man, appearing from no-where, plotting to kidnap or kill you before retreating into the bowels of the earth, was not a nightmare; they were real. And this was their plan.

I couldn't understand the stubborn unwillingness of intelligent people here and around the world to see the truth of what was happening. Blinded by a myopic moral equivalency that equated a nation state with a terrorist aggressor dedicated to its destruction, Israel was being blamed for successfully defending itself, for not having lost more lives. Israeli casualties were light not because of Hamas' lack of trying, but because the Iron Dome worked. And Gazan civilian casualties were high because Hamas chose to fire rockets from homes, hospitals and mosques, cynically using women and children as human shields... And because the vast network

of tunnels that Hamas built were not made available to shelter defenseless women and children, but to shelter terrorists and to protect rockets.

In an interview with a German newspaper, Amos Oz, the father of the Israeli peace movement, put it this way: “What would you do if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your nursery? What would you do if your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or in order to kidnap your family?”

Our fear was worsened by our heightened sense of isolation in the world. In Europe, Anti-Semitism once again found its voice, and erupted in frightening language and acts of violence. At the UN, anti-Israel pronouncements took on an Orwellian, almost comical character. They condemned Israel for not having leveled the playing field by sharing its Iron Dome technology with Hamas!”

This was a high-blood pressure summer of worry and frustration, and of impotence in the face of a situation that seemed to be spinning out of control. Out of a desire to stand with Israelis in a time of crisis, I downloaded the “red alert” app on my iphone, so that I would know, in real time, when Hamas rockets were launched and which area of the country was under attack. For a couple weeks, I lived with the constant pinging, each one signifying another rocket, another town in immediate danger. But in the end, I saw that this was only ratcheting up my level of craziness and hampering my ability to think calmly or clearly. It was accomplishing nothing, and so I removed it: It was time to take a breath, to assess what was in my control and what was not, and to listen, really listen, to what might be possible. Friends, if you haven’t yet taken a breath from the heart-pumping craziness of the summer, then do so now, as we enter the New Year. Let me suggest that you hear in the final blasts of the shofar today, the hint of what is possible, even during impossible situations.

So here are seven of the things I know to be true after this summer:

1. As the Haggadah says, in every generation there are those who stand ready to destroy us, and ours is no exception. And yet, we are mistaken when we allow our minds to jump to the disaster default mode of, “They all hate us.” It’s not true. We do not stand alone. And I don’t only mean our closest ally, the United States, or even Canada, whose leaders have been heroic in their unwavering support for the Jewish State. Did you know that the largest pro-Israel demonstration in the world this summer was not made up of Jews, but of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs, demonstrating in India? Did you know that, during the crisis, the twitter chatter in China was overwhelmingly pro-Israel?
2. The death of 72 Israeli soldiers and civilians, and many hundreds of Gazan civilians, is a tragedy that will leave a whole in the lives of their loved ones for a long time to come, and the need for healing is great. Israel won this war. But peace is farther away.
3. That Israel came out of the summer with relatively few casualties is primarily due to Iron Dome, and we all owe a debt of gratitude to AIPAC and to the United States Congress. That is a simple fact.
4. There are Israelis and Palestinians, who want to live side by side in peace, and it is better to support their mutual breaking of bread than the breaking of bones. On my last visit to Israel, I *davened* Shabbat morning at Kehilat Zion, in Jerusalem. The Rabbi, Tamar Elad Applebaum, did not give the Dvar Torah that morning. Instead, she invited a Muslim woman with whom she partners on projects in the community, to speak about Joseph from the perspective of the Koran. Later in the service, that same woman led the congregation in a prayer for peace. I remember thinking to myself, what congregation in the United States would have the courage, or the imagination, to do that? But that’s what it means to have faith, and to work toward Tikkun Olam, in Jerusalem today. And we can only think creatively when our minds are calm and our hearts are open.
5. None of Hamas’s spectacular attacks on civilians- to be conducted via long range rockets, drones, hang gliders and tunnels, succeeded. Not one. And for that we need to be grateful to God, luck, and the IDF.
6. Even more than by the IDF, Israel is made strong by the commitment of its people to care for one another, and by us, the Jewish people everywhere, who share in its sorrows, as

well as its hopes and dreams. We are family, and when we know that we are not alone, we have the courage to face even the most difficult situations.

7. And finally, we contribute nothing when we are caught up in frenzy. We contribute something when we listen calmly, and when we support and encourage the voices of hope and possibility.

So let me share with you one more story. It was the High Holidays, 1944. The war in Europe was only beginning to wind down, and news of the horrible destruction that had overtaken European Jewry was becoming known. Some twenty or so Jewish families in Natick were celebrating Rosh Hashanah on the condemned third floor of the Knights of Columbus Hall. Above the makeshift ark loomed an imposing six by nine foot picture of Monsignor Delaney (this was, after all, the Knights of Columbus Hall). By the end of Neilah, those Jewish families—the Sigaloves, the Blumenthals, the Raiders, the Feldmans, the Doxers, the Muskats, to name but a few, had resolved that the time had come to establish a permanent home of Natick Jewry's own. In the wake of the Holocaust, our people's darkest days since Jerusalem's destruction two thousand years ago, the impetus of Jews in America, and around the world, was not to give up, but to build. In Natick, we built this synagogue. It was an act of courage, and of faith in the future, which would be repeated in the coming decade by countless communities, large and small, throughout the country.

Those families could neither reverse the fate of 6,000,000 Jews, nor hasten the end of British rule in Palestine. But they could, at least, in their small corner of the world, create a community of hope and of light, a place where Torah would be taught, where Jewish holidays would be celebrated, and where the Jewish people could take root, and grow and thrive. 70 years ago, 18 families reached out to each other and created light where there was darkness.

It seems to me that the stories of Temple Israel and of the State of Israel founded four years later are inextricably linked.

Last week, Rachel Fraenkel, mother of Naftali, alav hashalom, sent a video message to the Jewish world. This is what she said:

“My 16 year old son Naftali sends us a text and says he’s on his way home. Next thing we know, we are in the middle of the most surreal situation. Those 18 days- they were filled with the darkest hours but also amazing hours. We discovered our family, our friends our community our country, our people. People all over the world had thousands of grass roots initiatives. I spoke to people in Cape Town, in Katmandu, in Australia. There were delegations from all over North America, Europe; people all over were saying, these are not just your boys, these are our children..

Sometimes I ask myself, was this just an illusion? And I have this image of a person walking in the dark and it’s raining, and they are stumbling, and they are figuring out their way, and don’t see anything, and then for a second there’s lightening, and in that lightening they see the reality of their surroundings. It helps them guide their way. We had days and days of lightening; it’s no illusion, what we saw about ourselves. We’re part of something huge, we’re part of a people, of a true family, that’s for real. Somebody called our home and said, ‘you know, I’m considered a non-affiliated Jew. But I want to tell you, I feel so affiliated.’ Cain asks, am I my brother’s keeper? I think our answer came out loud and clear. We are one family, and I am my brother’s keeper. It’s no illusion. Even if day to day life doesn’t feel like this, what we saw was real. Rosh Hashannah is coming up. Let’s all choose an act, large or small, to keep the spirit of those days alive. It was said, we went out searching for the boys, and we discovered ourselves.

My friends, in your Mahzor today, you will find a Shanah Tovah card from Temple Israel, celebrating our community’s 70th anniversary year. On the back is a pledge card, but it isn’t asking for money. It’s asking you in Rachel Fraenkel’s words, to choose an act, actually, to choose seven mitzvot, and to commit yourselves to them in the year to come. It reads, “I’m grateful for 70 years of Temple Israel of Natick, and I pledge to pay it forward.”

Read it carefully today, and then put it in your pocket. At home, consider your choices, and commit to them by checking them on the card. And here are a few things not on the card,

through which you can express your connection to the Jewish people, and help the State of Israel:

1. Come to Washington this March and join us, and 14,000 other supporters of Israel at AIPAC's policy conference. All of Congress will be looking for you. Take the opportunity to be there and be counted.
2. Support organizations in Israel that encourage dialog and possibility, like IRAC, the Israel Religious Action Center, or the MASORTI Movement, or many other groups. Find where your passion is and give them your support.
3. Plan your first, or your next, trip to Israel. Nothing tells another person that you care about them more, than showing up.
4. Talk about Israel. Tell everyone how proud you are of Israel, and how proud you are of your friends and family who live there.
5. Pray for her. Give thanks for her. Hold Israel in your hearts and minds daily.

My friends, I cannot promise that this will be a year of peace. I wish I could. But I can promise that we have far more courage when we know that we do not act alone. Together, we can make this year a little better, a year of bringing light to some of the dark places, and bring healing and renewal to this beautiful, though broken, world.

Shannah Tovah Tikateivu