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Yom Kippur PM 5787 – “...Let’s eat”: *Teshuva* for post-October 7th Jews”

This is a sermon about Israel that is not actually about Israel. This is a sermon about antisemitism that is not really about antisemitism. This is a sermon about doing *teshuva* in the context of these times. *Teshuva* means “returning to the right path” and it is the reason for Yom Kippur but it’s also important every day of the year. “Doing *teshuva*” starts with recognizing that we have strayed from the right path and we seek to return to that path.

It is impossible to speak meaningfully of living a Jewish life (which includes *teshuva*) in this third year after the massacre of October 7th, without including Israel and antisemitism. So, I’m going to take you through some difficult territory so that we can talk about Jewish life and *teshuva* today.

There is an old joke that says we can summarize the story of most Jewish holidays like this: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.” Rabbinically speaking, I always disliked that joke. It overplays Jewish victimhood while trivializing it at the same time. But increasingly, these days, I have come to appreciate the joke’s message. These past three years have revealed some terrible truths. Antisemitism is worse than most of us ever believed it would be at this point in history both abroad and here. By “worse,” I mean a few things by that: first, the prevalence of antisemitic incidents is shockingly high. Second, our culture has shifted so that there is no longer much shame in expressions of antisemitism. Public figures – especially political candidates - share antisemitic opinions and sometimes proudly keep company with outspoken, violent Jew-haters without fear of negative impact. We also learned, since October 7th, that many so-called justice advocates and social welfare organizations shamelessly supported Hamas’ mass murder, rape, torture, and kidnapping of innocent civilians. We also learned that the sadism and gruesome violence of antisemites had not been left behind in the medieval torture chambers of the Inquisition or the streets of Kishinev. I don’t know how else to say this: It’s pretty damn bad for Jews in most places.

So, what's a Jew supposed to do? One popular response is to be more actively and proudly Jewish. Several writers, like Sarah Hurwitz and Bari Weiss,¹ urge, "Rather than shy away from [Jewish] religion, we should lean in, study more and be unapologetically Jewish."²

Another common response is to keep your head down, don't make waves but be ready. This is an updated version of the Jewish Enlightenment maxim: "Be a Jew at home and a regular person in the street."³ Adherents to this approach often profess mixed feelings and sometimes a form of *Zugunruhe* – a migration anxiety – that leads them to obtain foreign passports based on their ancestry and think about their escape routes.

One of the strongest responses to emerge over these past years is to fight. This response leans into our warrior history - the Maccabees defeating the Greeks; King David, who slew Goliath with a sling shot; Mordecai Aneliewicz and his band of resistance fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto.

This warrior response to antisemitism has always been part of Judaism. A common variant of the joke I told earlier is not "they tried to kill us, we survived" but "we won" – it's not that we escaped but that we fought back and we killed them. For most of history, however, this was little more than a revenge fantasy from a powerless people. But not today. Today, there is a Jewish state, the State of Israel, that is one of the greatest powers on earth in its economic, technological and overwhelming military force.⁴ To be clear: Israel is not just a military force. It's the product of generations of Jewish aspiration, and the realization of Jewish theology and history. Every book of the Torah includes the promised land; our holidays, liturgy and culture emphasize the dream of a homeland. This should also be clear: You do not have to support the dream or reality of Israel to be Jewish. You don't. Just like you don't have to keep kosher or believe in God to be Jewish. And, while

¹ From a 2019 review of Weiss' book at <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/81109-how-to-fight-anti-semitism.html> accessed 9/7/2026.

² From a review of Hurwitz's book at <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/as-a-jew-reclaiming-our-story-from-those-who-blame-shame-and-try-to-erase-us> accessed 9/7/2026.

³ "Gordon, Yehuda Leib" article, <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/1800>

⁴ Israel's economy ranks in the top tier of countries by many standard measures, including GDP and GDP per capita, see <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>. Israel's military is ranked in the top tier by several indices, see https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=israel

there have always been critics and skeptics about Israel, it is undeniably true that support for Israel, supporting the dream of a homeland is a core, normative part of Jewish identity.

All of what I have said so far, converges into a serious problem for Jews and for Judaism today. Antisemitism is never good for Jews and, sometimes, our response to antisemitism is also not good for us. Responding to today's antisemitism by embracing our Maccabee/Warrior legacy to the exclusion of other Jewish values degrades the historical and religious meaning of Israel and distorts Judaism. One, it hardens our hearts to the suffering of other people, and our tradition prioritizes compassion and kindness. Two, it makes us vengeful and our tradition opposes vengeance. Three, it makes us overly practical, and we are meant to be overly aspirational people. Let's explore these three core values a bit more.

Judaism teaches us that, more than anything else, to be Jewish is to be a mensch.⁵ This starts in the beginning, with the Torah's description that we are made, "in the image of God - *b'tzelem elohim*," (Gen. 1:27). Jewish teachers over the centuries explained what it means to be "in the image of God." Jeremiah (9:22-23) says, "I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world." Which means we should act with kindness, justice and equity in the world. The prophet Micah (6:8) says, "You have been told... what is good and what God seeks from you: only to do justice (*mishpat*), love kindness (*hesed*), and walk modestly (*hatznei*) with your God." In almost every place that the sages attempted to teach the essence of Judaism in their own words, they taught kindness of compassion.⁶

There are Jewish teachings that are not compassionate and some that are outright cruel. It's true. Those are, however, the exception and not the rule. There are also widely studied non-Jewish teachings that belittle altruism and emphasize self-interest, like the philosophy of Hobbes or Machiavelli or the recent American ethos behind "Stand Your Ground" laws. But we are not meant

⁵ For a more robust exploration of this idea and sources behind it, see Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, "Humanness: From Mensch to Warrior," Lecture, July 17, 2026. <https://www.hartman.org.il/humanness-from-mensch-to-warrior/>

⁶ See Hillel's teaching, for example, in B. Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a, https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.31a.6?ven=english|Sefaria_Community_Translation&lang=bi

to be like other people. We are, by design, meant to be unlike other people. In Leviticus it says “*kedoshim tihiyu* – you shall be holy, because Adonai your God is holy.” And being “holy” means “separate,” different and special in a positive way. You can make a strong argument that in a post October 7th world, we should do what everyone else does when they are attacked. But we are not meant to do what everyone else does, even if it’s ethically normative and practically do-able. We are a holy people, *mensch*es to the end.

Being *mensch*es does not mean being led “like lambs to the slaughter.” Judaism, in fact, teaches the opposite: your life is so valuable that you are required to protect it even at the cost of another person’s life. The mitzvah of self-defense is grounded in the Book of Exodus (22:1-2) and explained by the Talmud, which ultimately says, “If a person comes to kill you, rise and kill him first.”⁷ This has become a common mantra in some Jewish circles these days, but we must remember that self-defense is a core Jewish value, while vengeance is not.

This is a hard lesson to abide in this increasingly antisemitic, violent world and especially after October 7th. The impulse to strike back hard is understandable both for the restorative feeling of punishing those who hurt you and for the sense of deterrence it creates. The Torah sometimes call for vengeance - like the commandment to kill all Midianites in the Book of Numbers or the infanticide at the end of Psalm 137, “By the Waters of Babylon.” But Scripture and Jewish tradition convey discomfort with revenge and restrict human vengeance first, by making it God’s purview alone, and then has the audacity – as we say in Unataneh tokef – to challenge God for the “*roa ha-gezera*” the evil of such decrees.

The scripture readings tomorrow afternoon preach against vengeance. Leviticus chapter 19 (verse 18) teaches, “*Lo tikom v’lo titor* – You shall not take vengeance, and you shall not bear a grudge.” The entire story of Jonah is a moral allegory against vengeance. Jonah runs away because he knows God will forgive the people of Nineveh despite their evil ways whereas Jonah wanted to see them hurt and suffering. God is not happy with Jonah for that and says so in the end. The Hasidic rabbis like Nachman of Breslov take this further and explores the spiritual degradation we

⁷ Sanhedrin 72a, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.72a.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

experience when we seek vengeance. Rather than asking what we ethically can do to our enemies, we should ask what seeking to harm our enemies does to us for even the most wicked person has a *nekudah tovah* – the inner good point from some time in their life.

There is a story about Golda Meir, the Israeli prime minister who oversaw the Yom Kippur War and the Mossad operation to find and kill all the terrorists connected to the 1972 Munich Olympic attack. Through it all, Golda Meir kept a sense of dignity about the lives of Israel's enemies. She reportedly once said: "Someday we may be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our [children], but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill theirs." Golda knew from experience that the loss of our own humanity when killing other people does the worst damage to us individually and as a people.

This core Jewish understanding has been lost in recent years to some Israeli and diaspora Jewish leaders. In one egregious example, reported by the *Times of Israel*, Israel's minister for homeland security, Itamar Ben Gvir, announced the construction of a complex of gallows for executing Palestinian terrorists with special viewing booths for people to watch. Reportedly he promised a recently freed hostage that he could personally pull the lever to hang his former captor.⁸

This is not the Jewish way. A true Jewish leader would have enacted the mitzvah of self-defense on and before Oct 7th. He would have heeded the warnings of the *tatzpitaniyot*, the women from the IDF border observation unit, like 19-year old Roni Eshel, who saw and reported the clear and presently dangerous preparations of Hamas before October 7th. The IDF has the recording of her voice – some of her final words - as she calmly describes, movement by movement, the activities and positions of Hamas fighters breaching the border on October 7th just before they came and killed her and 15 other young women at their look post near Nahal Oz.⁹ Someday, maybe, there

⁸ See TOI article, accessed August 21, 2026, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-announces-ground-broken-on-gallows-where-terrorists-will-be-executed/>

⁹ "Israel's female spotters are free – now their families want to know why warnings were ignored," *The Guardian*, Feb. 1, 2025, accessed on Sept 20th - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/01/israels-female-spotters-are-free-now-their-families-want-to-know-why-warnings-were-ignored>.

will be a Yom Kippur for October 7th and a *vidui* for the misdeeds of Jewish leaders who now mistake vengeance as a worthy Jewish response for their failure of self-defense. Don't make that mistake yourself. In case you haven't noticed how many guns are surrounding this building tonight compared to what it was like once upon a time, we take our own protection seriously and I hope you'll support those who will fight people trying to kill us simply because we are Jews. But please, let's never allow vengeance to become our way.

The third Jewish value at stake today is our future looking hopeful. Over the centuries, Judaism has developed a legal and ethical system that is highly practical, sometimes to the extreme. Ours is a tradition that says on the holiest day of the year, today, you should fast and refrain from eating or drinking for 24 hours and then quickly rules that anyone who needs to eat for medical reasons is not just allowed but commanded to do so. Don't, however, be misled by our myriad practical work-arounds to Jewish legal and ritual matters. Judaism is not just practical; it's aspirational.

Jewish aspiration starts with creation and God's expectation that humanity will be good stewards of the earth. It continues when Abraham answers God's call: Go forth and leave your country, your birthplace, your familial home to a place that I will show and where I will make your offspring great. Psalm 126 conveys the principle well. הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים - We are meant to be, it says, "like dreamers." Our tradition holds on to the hope that "those who sow in tears will reap in joy," (Psalm 126: 1,6). Even the choice for a Jewish national anthem – a modern human choice – reflects our emphasis on "hope" and the dream to be free, which is notable especially when compared for example to our American anthem, in which we sing about rockets and bombs and our tenacity in an all-night battle.

Just before last Rosh Hashanah, Prime Minister Netanyahu gave a speech asserting that Israel needs to become a super-Sparta, by which he meant radically self-sufficient, militarily unbeatable, and singularly focused. It is such an obvious distortion of Judaism to choose, of all models, the ancient Greeks – enemies of the Maccabees and desecrators of our temple. In a

lecture series from 1950, Jewish philosopher Claude Levi Strauss, described the strengths of Greek culture and the strengths of Judaism, noting the Jews can never become like the Greeks because of our emphasis on aspiration and Prophetic dreams for the future.

It is not coincidence that the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, is one of the few holidays about which we cannot say, “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” It says everything you need to know about Judaism, that our holiest day is not about how we survived every historical attempt to kill us, but about how we survived the spiritual degradation that comes from following our baser instincts. It says everything you need to know about Judaism that our holiest day is about the promise that each of us can return to the path of living a decent and meaningful life no matter what we’ve done in the past year or what’s been done to us. Our holiest day says everything you need to know about Judaism: that we believe not even God really knows who deserves punishment and who should suffer. That *Tefila*, *Teshuva*, *Tzedakah* – acts of faith, generosity, and humility supersede the harsh decree. It is not the death of sinners that God seeks but that they should turn from their ways and live.

We are created B’tzelem Elohim and meant to be *mensch*es even in dangerous times. We are commanded to defend ourselves but never to become vengeful. We are meant to be like dreamers and always keep hope alive. May **that** be what we seal in the Great Book of Life this year. *Gamar Tov*.