

One Heart

On October 14, on the first Shabbat following the heinous attack on Israel by Hamas, Rabbi Betsy offered these spontaneous words to our kahal during Shabbat morning services:

The schools of Hillel and Shammai once disagreed over a matter of purity, prompting another rabbi to say, “Ya’ know, we shouldn’t disagree so much. What if somebody says that if even we don’t know what’s pure—this school says pure, and that school says “impure,” I’m not gonna bother with any of this Torah; what’s the point? I certainly won’t spend time studying it. What’s the point, if we can end up with completely different practices? It seems like our laws don’t mean anything at all!”

And another Rabbi says, “Wait a minute. What we need to do is create for ourselves a heart of many rooms, a chamber that holds many chambers.” I think that teaching is so apt for us right now. We’ve just heard Si Hellerstein lein the opening section of our new Sefer Torah. What a beautiful moment! What an honor to this congregation! What joy! Si looked forward to it with such anticipation, and so did those of us who knew it was coming. And our member Josh Garoon just taught beautiful Torah. It was really interesting and lovely, and he mentioned a few times that “our kids, ya’ know, they’re all right.” And he mentioned a discussion in our Talmud Torah where right now our students are learning good Torah from good teachers—and *they* are good teachers too. These are things to celebrate. That room in our hearts is really important.

We come to shul for some feeling of community solidarity, dare I say ,uplift; we come for a sense that things do somehow make sense. And whether they do or whether they don’t, the coming together itself is very good. And that room in our heart needs to be kept open, so that when we need to go there, we can. There are people in the sanctuary today whom I don’t know.

I assume that you have come to be together in community with us, and I'm so glad that you're here. I'm so glad that we are here together.

But the heart has another room, and right now that room is very full, and very dark, and very very painful. Last week, when we were conducting services here, on Shabbat Sh'mini Atzeret and the next day, Simchat Torah, we were barely aware of what was happening in Israel. We certainly did not know the extent and the horror of what was happening. But we knew it was bad, and we made many modifications in our t'fillah on those days, for example, on Simcha Torah, not dancing in this sanctuary with the Sifrei Torah. The night before we danced a little, and the next day we only took them outside, to show how important it is to be Jews in the world, and to be proud to be Jews in the world.

Since then, many members of our congregation have been mourning and worrying their hearts out over people whom they love and whom they know in Israel. We put out in the second letter that I sent to you, during the past week, an opportunity for people to share those names. I would like to share them with you today, knowing that it's only the tip of the iceberg. There's certainly no obligation to make public what is going on for you or even to read your email. We do have more names on our list, al'm told, than the United Synagogue's international list, which does say something about our interest in coming together as a community and holding one another in this very difficult place.

When I say what I'm going to continue to say—when I read all of the names and how each person is connected to one of us, I want again to refer to those rooms of the heart, because we don't know it any moment what room we might find ourselves in and what room the person sitting next to us is sitting in. At a time of trauma like this, we tend to dart about; that is our nature. We are not designed to remain in a state of despondency without reprieve. That's why nearly every funeral has laughter, nearly every Shiva has laughter right there in the midst of grief. It's just how we're built, and that's probably a good thing. So I want to be very respectful and say that if you're not feeling the grief and the horror as I am in the room of grief and

horror, it's okay. We all share in what's going on. We are one big heart together, and the parts of the heart need to support one another.

(The Rabbi then read out all of the names and described the various situations of those names. She also memorialized the nephew of congregants, a young man who was killed in battle. This took about 10 minutes.)

When the war broke out, my husband Scott was visiting our daughter Rena, who lives in Caesaria. They were able to leave Israel on Thursday night. Rena is now in Thailand, and Scott, as you saw came here to bench Gomer. They are traumatized. He is traumatized. I am actually supposed to be "on vacation" now, following the holidays and our mission at the border, but I'm here, wanting and needing to be together with you. I will leave shortly as Scott needs me at home. We have many family and friends who have been called up in Milu'im—the Reserves—and friends and relatives who know people who have been killed and who are missing and of course who are serving.

Our parashah today is probably the most commented on or at least rivaling those most commented on. It is so rich and mysterious, full of myths that come to explain how we live, and how we are. The rabbis are particularly interested in what happened between Kain and Havel—Cain and Abel—before Kain kills his brother. It seems that Kain began to say something to Havel: "He said—" and then we don't know what he said. And the rabbis pounce on that verse. It is an incomplete sentence in the Torah.

The rabbis say that what was happening is that Kain was hurt. Kain felt neglected by God when God didn't take his sacrifice. He went to share his sadness with his brother and his brother was not sympathetic. His brother could not empathize, could not feel his pain, and that's so pained Kain that he killed his brother.

Others say that the two brothers did not know what murder was; they had never seen it before. It had not happened before one of them killed the other. They did not understand the precious value of life in our bodies.

There are disturbing midrashim that explore what might have been real conflict between the two. They converge around themes of fighting over territory and property, and refusing to see or understand the other. They are so haunting to read at this time. From ancient times are people all people have understood that we live just on the edge of “tohu va’vohu”--utter chaos, and the rabbis dare to go there.

But all of that lies beneath the surface of this beautiful, beautiful Torah, which shows a couple of really important things: first, that God creates us in the divine image and models for us, that what we do is create life that begins with God’s creation of life, and ends with God’s command to pursue life. And that is what we do. The other is the notion of human preciousness, the sanctity, of all life. That is what we strive for; That is what we value, and that will always be what keeps us going and coming together.

It is not appropriate to seek to be made to feel better by some false words at this time. It is appropriate to take joy as it finds you, to be in the chamber of your heart where joy dwells. And it is appropriate, when dealing with the worst, most horrific attack Israel has ever experienced, the heinous attack by Hamas on the bodies of our family and friends, to feel horrible, and to come together and to share it—with hope that we will withstand it, and that once again the room of joy will be the room on the surface, and we will be able to celebrate holidays like Simcha Torah in full joy, full pride, and without fear.

I’m going to recite and invite you all to pray along with me a special t’fillah—a special prayer—that was written from this war. It was written by my colleagues in the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel, and there are some copies of it in the back of the room. Then, I’m going to invite you to sing with me the prayer for the release of hostages that we have been reciting here together since we heard the news, and which I sang at the vigil we held last

Sunday night, and which I sent out to you. I will sing it and I invite you to sing it along, or to hum along, if you choose.

Following that, we will bensch for the new month—we'll recite the prayer for the new month. There is some hope in a new month, even though things may get worse before they get better. The new month, Cheshvan, is a month without holidays. How appropriate that is. The service will continue from there and end with the singing of Hatikva.

When we come to the Musaf service, it will be done quickly. There are a number of readings and prayers about the war in the back of the room. I invite you to take from them and to use the time of the Musaf service however you see fit. If you want to be in the room of the traditional text and to be offering something with some sort of joy in your heart, do that; and if not, do what is right for you whether using a text that's been offered, or the text of your heart, or silence.

I invite you to rise in spirit or in body as you are able. (Rabbi Betsy then led the prayer dealing with all aspects of the crisis, in Hebrew and English.)

(Rabbi Betsy introduced the prayer for the hostages, "Acheinu," with these words:) This prayer holds the personal and collective anguish of this moment, of those in immediate peril, those who are wounded, those clinging to phones waiting to hear from beloved soldiers, those desperate for news of someone missing or in captivity, those in mourning, those huddling in shelters and those sharing in this pain.

(Following the singing of "Acheinu" together, the Prayer for the New Month commenced.)