

The Aftermath of October 7: Its Impact on Reform Jews and Progressive Zionists in New York

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Shabbat Shalom!

Thank you, Rabbi—it is a great pleasure and honor to be with you and your community this Shabbat. I want to assure all of you, and especially my wife, Audrey, who is here, that Rabbi Stoller gave me a strict time requirement tonight.

So when I was president of our congregation, and when we gave our rabbi time limits for when he was asked to speak at an event—no matter the time we said, he would always say “No problem.” Ten minutes—“No problem.” Five minutes—“That’s fine.” No matter the time given, he was always OK with it.

And when he was called upon to give his remarks, he would inevitably begin with the following—“I have been given five minutes tonight, and, so, before I begin, I would like to make a few comments.”

My few comments are about how I came to be here tonight.

In early October 2020, 8 months into the pandemic, my 93-year-old father suffered a stroke in New Orleans—where I am from—and three weeks later, he passed away. This was during a time of “high pandemic anxiety”—a time when we would cross the street to avoid being near other people and no one was meeting in groups. My father’s funeral was family only, and the *shiva* was virtual.

When I came back to New York, I wanted to find a way to say *kaddish* daily. There were no daily in-person minyans, and, so, I looked for a Reform daily minyan online.

The all-knowing Internet directed me to Temple Israel of Omaha—a Reform congregation that held a morning minyan—every day. Omaha! Who would have thought?

I began attending Temple Israel’s minyan every day with Rabbi Stoller; and because my mother got Covid and passed away three months later, I was at minyan every day for the next 15 months.

This is not the important part. What is important, is that Rabbi Stoller not only provided a way for me to begin each day with prayerful intention, worship and the ability to say *kaddish*, but Rabbi Stoller created a warm, inviting, welcoming community for me and for all of the others who participated.

I did not know anyone at the minyan when I began attending. But through Rabbi Stoller’s warmth, graciousness, sensitivity and care, within a few weeks, I felt at home in our minyan community. Even though I was more than 1,200 miles away, Omaha was my home for those 20 to 30 minutes each morning.

I know that I was very lucky to have found Rabbi Stoller and his minyan. And, therefore, I know just how fortunate all of you are—and all of Temple Beth-El is—to have him here in person with you as your rabbi.

I am sorry that I was not here for his installation in December—which I had planned to attend—but, I was in Israel. This brings me to the real reason for my presence this Shabbat.

For the past 25 years, I have been actively involved in the Reform Movement’s Israel programming, engagement work and the Zionist organizational world. I’ve had the opportunity to travel to Israel

frequently for meetings and to visit with family. And, like many of you, Israel and my relationship with Israel is integral to my Judaism.

So, when I woke up to the news on October 7, I was totally confused. The reporting was not making sense.

Like all of you, I followed the news constantly throughout the next six weeks as the true horrors of the day unfolded. I attended meetings, briefings and updates, and worked to develop ways to provide support to Israel.

And, on November 26, I traveled to Israel with a group of eight rabbis and 15 lay leaders on a Reform Movement solidarity mission.

Our purpose was:

- To better understand the situation by seeing, hearing and feeling for ourselves;
- To provide support; and
- To bear witness.

We were in Israel during a very unusual week. It was the week of the cease-fire and the week that hostages were being returned. It was a week without sirens and no running to shelters. We all had hope that this was just the beginning.

As I have been thinking about that week and the impact of 10/7, I have organized my thinking into five general themes.

The first theme to share is: Israelis are not OK!

Israelis are shaken to their core, and the world as they knew it no longer exists. The infallible Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—with its state-of-the-art security technology and top-notch military—failed to protect its people.

One Israeli explained to us that on the morning of October 7, the government of Israel disappeared. Those living in communities along the Gaza border said that the covenant they had with the Israeli government had been broken.

People are angry and hurt. More than that, they feel totally isolated and abandoned—for many Israelis, every morning since is October 7!

Every Israeli knows individuals or has direct connections with people who were murdered or held hostage—and virtually everyone has friends and family members currently serving in the army.

Israel, Israelis and Jews around the world are different today than we were on October 6.

None of us are OK!

Theme two: Where the government failed, civil society succeeded. Volunteerism is filling the gap.

As I am sure many of you are aware: The nine months preceding 10/7 was a period of an Israel divided over the government's proposed judicial reforms.

The protest movement objecting to the reforms was extremely well organized and operated with great competence. On October 7, this entire protest movement transformed itself into a civil society response to fill the gap left by the government's absence.

The 300,000 or so reservists who had been called up lacked basic equipment—and families who were relocated from their homes in the south and the north were now living in hotels, guest houses or kibbutzim. They were missing everything.

Remarkably, Israeli volunteers rose to the occasion and set up distribution centers to meet the needs of the country.

We visited the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center—in essence a mini Amazon warehouse—operating in a repurposed acting school. Run by volunteer organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it has 4,000 volunteers from all elements of society—Orthodox, secular, college age and retired age—who work around the clock to match supplies with needs.

And similar volunteer centers operate all over the country.

Thousands of other volunteers began filling other gaps. Cousins of ours joined hundreds of others to travel daily to the Gaza area to prepare and serve food to soldiers, so they would have home-cooked meals.

In an effort to save Israel's critical agriculture industry, other volunteers travel to the south to harvest fruits and vegetables—the work formerly performed by Palestinian workers, who are no longer allowed in, or foreign workers, most of whom fled the country or were murdered.

Where the government fell, the civilian population rose. So, despite the shock that the population has suffered, we saw a strength and a resilience that is inspirational and gives hope.

Theme three: The mental health needs of the country are great and will only grow.

Everywhere we went and everyone we spoke with revealed deep emotional shock and trauma.

- Not only those who survived the massacres;
- Not only those whose family members are held hostage;
- Not only those who have lost family, friends, colleagues—either on 10/7 or in the resulting war;
- Not only the soldiers, many of whom were yanked away from their normal lives and careers and are now deeply entrenched in brutal combat in Gaza or at risk along the northern border.

We learned that everyone is suffering.

Mental health professionals are burned out and are in need of care themselves. When we were there, the government announced that it had just hired 100 new trauma counselors. The country cannot hire psychologists and psychiatrists fast enough, and the long-term impact is not yet even known.

A dark joke that we heard: Asking for a friend, do you know a good shrink for 9-million people?

Theme four: Israel's connection to the diaspora and its allies has been strengthened and that relationship is highly appreciated and valued.

Throughout our visit, we heard great appreciation for the United States, President Biden and the entire U.S. administration. Even those not normally aligned with the Democratic administration fully recognize the critical importance of the U.S. government's support and expressed their thanks regularly.

Interestingly, with the rise of anti-Semitism around the world, Israelis, many maybe for the first time, have developed a greater appreciation for the challenges that we face as Jews in the diaspora. We were there to show our support, and, yet, we heard Israelis expressing their concern for us and for our well-being.

In the last few years, we had seen a growing sense within Israel that it no longer needed us in the diaspora. We had heard from the government that Israel no longer faces any existential threats—its army is strong and it can defend itself.

We had even heard representatives of Netanyahu's government tell elements of the American Jewish community that it did not need our advice or input, especially when such input was not in alignment with the government's positions.

This is not necessarily the case today.

Every Israeli with whom we met—everyone—thanked us for being there and for showing our support.

Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh—the notion that all Jews are responsible for one another is strong and we felt that the bond between Israelis and Jews around the world has been strengthened.

Theme five—and this is perhaps the most complicated: Progressives in Israel and progressives in the United States do not see the situation in the same way.

Virtually everyone with whom we met in Israel firmly believes that Hamas must be eliminated and eradicated. There is no ambivalence. There is no gray area. Those on the left who support a two-state solution and those on the right who support the expansion of settlements all agree. Hamas is a terrorist organization that must be eliminated, and its members must be killed. Period!

We did not hear anyone prioritizing concern over civilian deaths as is often heard here.

We traveled one afternoon to Kibbutz Dorot, which is next to the town of Sderot. Dorot was not invaded on October 7, because the terrorists just did not make it that far. They were lucky.

We met with two long-term residents, Sharon and Yael, who told us that the reality of how close the terrorists came to them hits them every morning.

Prior to 10/7, Sharon volunteered every week to drive Palestinians from the Gaza border to doctors' and medical appointments in Israel. Every week.

But when we asked, Sharon said that despite having had long-term and close relationships with Gazans who had worked on the kibbutz for years, she never wants to see a Palestinian on her kibbutz again.

This progressive, one could say "pro-Palestinian" Israeli, who worked for years to build relationships and better the lives of Gazans, now expresses tremendous anger at Palestinians and their leadership for not doing more with the billions of dollars they had received over the years.

One of our Israeli Reform rabbis, who defines himself as "so progressive that if he was any more to the left, he would be in the sea," says that he is embarrassed to admit that at this point in time, he has no room in his heart to feel sympathy toward the Palestinians in Gaza.

The attitude of Israelis is far different than the attitude of many American Jews. When we were there, Israelis did not want to hear about the suggestion of a cease-fire.

Within Israel society today, we are seeing a significant divide over what takes priority—the return of the hostages or the prosecution of the war. It has become increasingly clear, unfortunately, that these two goals are likely mutually exclusive.

It is a gut-wrenching situation that is raising new divides within Israeli society and between Israel and elements of the American-Jewish community.

So, what does all of this mean for us Reform Jews living in New York—and what can we do?

First, please know that the Reform Movement—both in North America and around the world—is in constant contact with our congregations and leadership in Israel as our Israeli brothers and sisters navigate these difficult times.

Our Movement has many issues with several of the current government’s policies and opposes the rhetoric and proposals of the extremists within this government. But we firmly support Israel’s right to defend itself and protect its people. Many of us will be back in Israel in a week to continue this work.

Second, Israel needs our support—and it can be provided in the following ways.

- 1.** Urge your representatives in the House and Senate to support military aid to Israel.
- 2.** Send a message to The White House thanking the President for his support. Public sentiment is measured regularly by The White House and congressional offices, so these communications are important.
- 3.** If you have the capacity, contribute to one of the many emergency fundraising efforts available. The Reform Movement is encouraging contributions through the Jewish Federations of North America. In New York, that is through the UJA Emergency Fund for Israel.
- 4.** If you have family, friends or even acquaintances in Israel, reach out to them—just to say “hi” and to offer your support. We don’t realize how important this is and how much it is appreciated by those who are feeling so alone and marginalized. Send an email, text or even make a call.
- 5.** Stay informed.
- 6.** And because you are informed, call out false information and fictitious claims about Israel and its conduct. Do so on your social media feeds and in your conversations with friends and colleagues. It is no secret that the volume of anti-Semitism in the form of anti-Zionism is increasing and we must combat false claims.
- 7.** Those of you who have been active in social justice work—hold your allies and partners accountable. Use your relationships to encourage them to reject calls for the eradication of Israel, to reject false claims and to spend the time required to better understand the complex reality of Israel. Even when we may disagree with some decisions about the current Israeli government or some policies of some ministers, it is important for all to understand that there was a cease-fire in effect on October 6 which was not broken by Israel.
- 8.** Finally, if you can, go to Israel. Visit! Support! Volunteer! It is safe, and it makes a difference.

In the Torah portion that we read tomorrow, the Children of Israel are asked to donate gifts (*t’rumah*) for the building of the Tabernacle, so that God may “dwell among them.” (25:1-9)

Today, the people of Israel are challenged and in need. Jews around the world are feeling threatened and under attack. We know from our history that there have always been those who have sought our destruction. We also know that the Jewish people remains resilient and strong.

Israelis today may be suffering, but they are proud to serve their nation and their people. Israeli reservists—even those who were not called up—dropped everything to return home after 10/7. Unprecedented numbers of Israelis are volunteering at all levels. The Israeli people's resolve and commitment gives us all inspiration for our future.

May we all have the strength to donate our own gifts—our own *t'rumah*—to keep Israel strong and her people secure.

If you are interested in getting regular updates about webinars and programs related to Israel from the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA), you can join the ARZA mailing list at www.arza.org. You will receive Josh Weinberg's very interesting and informative weekly message, as well, and you can become a member of ARZA for \$50/year at www.arza.org/arza-membership.

You can also join the mailing list and get notified of programs and events from the American Zionism Movement, which offers a broad based not from the Reform Movement's perspective, at <https://azm.org>.

Shabbat Shalom.