Strength Through Friendship: God in the Post-October 7 World

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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On October 2, 1940—Erev Rosh Hashanah—Rabbi Jacob Rudin gave a sermon to this congregation entitled, "God in the Blackout."[1]

"No generation of rabbis ever faced a more difficult task than does the one of which I am a part," he said. "We see about us a world in disintegration. Jewish life is tortured and hard pressed. Melancholy and despair ride the heavens, glowering birds of prey feeding on the broken hearts of a people well-nigh bereft of hope and faith."

Rabbi Rudin's lofty language rings of an age gone by, but he could just as well have been speaking about our world today—the world after October 7, 2023.

I admit it's unsettling to liken our own time to the 1930s and '40s. But when I think about the cruel and heinous crimes Hamas committed against the Israeli people on October 7, I realize that history is repeating itself, just in a different idiom.

Instead of German officers, they were Palestinian paragliders; instead of swastika armbands, they're wearing kaffiyehs; instead of Nazi racism, it's Islamic fundamentalism.

But their aim is exactly the same: the annihilation of the Jewish people in their part of the world.

To those who doubt it: Just read Hamas's founding charter.[2] It says:

"Israel exists and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it. …

"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight Jews and kill them. Then, the Jews will hide behind rocks and trees, and the rocks and trees will cry out: 'O Moslem, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him.'"

That chilling image is actually a prophecy of Mohammed. And, oh my God, it will be forever seared in our mind's eye, because the terrorists brought it to life on October 7.

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[1] In: Jacob Philip Rudin, *Very Truly Yours*, 234-240

[2] Excerpted from "The Hamas Covenant," https://embassies.gov.il/holysee/AboutIsrael/the-middle-east/Pages/The%20Hamas-Covenant.aspx

Picture the young Israelis at the Nova music festival fleeing in terror from the murderers; the children stolen from their beds on the kibbutzim; the women dragged by their hair and raped and mutilated; the families, the babies, the old and the young, kidnapped and secreted away to dark tunnels beneath the earth.

This is pure evil.

And yet, far too many people are minimizing it, justifying it, even celebrating it.

We've seen the demonstrators shout anti-Israel slogans in Times Square; and barricade Jewish students and faculty on college campuses; and threaten subway riders that, if you're a Zionist, "this is your chance to get out!"; and bloody a Jewish man's face in midtown on Monday as they tried to wrestle an Israeli flag from his hands.

As the pro-Israel podcaster Dan Senor has said, "I always thought the outrage after October 7 would be directed at those massacring Jews. I didn't think the outrage would be directed at Jews for *objecting* to being massacred."[3]

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For the last year, many of us have asked the same questions Rabbi Rudin's congregants asked in 1940: "Where is God in this blackout of humanity? How can [God] permit this savagery to come to pass?"

The answer, for some of us, is that there is no God. Or if there is, that God is absent or just doesn't care.

The Israeli writer Assaf Gur expresses this in a heart-wrenching poem about October 7, entitled "Kaddish"[4]:

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'meih rabbah
And no one came
Many thousands called to Him on Shabbat morning

[3] "Call Me Back" podcast, April 17, 2024
[4] Printed in *Shiva: Poems of October 7*, R. Korazim, et al, eds., 21-22

Crying His name out loud
Tearfully begging him just to come
But He had ceased from all His work
No God arrived
And no God provided comfort…

We can all sympathize with his pain and anger. Many before him have felt the same way.

In the wake of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel didn't *deny* God's existence, but he did accuse God of criminal negligence. God fell down on the job, he said, and made it possible for wicked human beings to commit mass murder.[5]

Others would say Wiesel's indictment of God is misdirected. God gave human beings free will, so how can we blame God when people use their free will to commit atrocities?

God hates it when we do horrific things to each other, but God doesn't have the power to stop us from doing it. All God can do is watch in pain and cry.

Some of you might say: "I have no need for a God like that."

But I think we do.

See, I think that, for generations, we've been taught a terrible misconception of God. The old belief that God controls everything that happens in the world and rewards good people and punishes bad people is just not true.

The Holocaust and October 7 disprove it definitively.

And yet, we stubbornly hold on to this fallacy. And when bad things inevitably happen to good people, we either blame God for failing to stop them or say that it proves there is no God.

Either way, we deny ourselves a real relationship with God. And that's a tragedy, because I believe a relationship with the divine is something every human spirit needs and yearns for, consciously or not.

[5] See Wiesel's essay "Job, Our Contemporary" in his book *Messengers of God*

So, we need to let that old belief go once and for all and learn to think about God in a new way.

I've told you before: I think of God as my Eternal Friend, the best friend a person could have. I like this metaphor because it lets me know what I should—and shouldn't—expect from God.

A friend is someone we turn to for support and guidance. We hope they'll listen to us when we need to talk and challenge us when we're missing the mark. We look to our friends for compassion, empathy, and comfort.

We don't expect them to stop bad things from happening to us, because we know they can't do that.

But what a friend *can* do is give us strength to get through it.

To me, the same is true of God, but all the more so. Because unlike any human friend, God is endlessly compassionate, gracious, patient, loving, faithful, and forgiving.[6]

If we embrace it, friendship like that can be a source of great strength. It's something we need in our life—something the Jewish people as a whole need, too—especially in times like these.

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Since October 7, I've been thinking about a poem from the kabbalistic tradition called "Ana B'koach." "Koach" means "strength."

The poem begins like this:

Ana b'koach…
Source of Mercy
With loving strength
Untie our tangles.[7]

[6] Adapted from *Exodus* 34:6-7 (the 13 attributes of God)
[7] Translation by Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, as published on the "Velveteen Rabbi" blog https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2012/04/ana.html

It's cryptic language, but it helps me see, as Rabbi Rudin said, that "God *is* in the blackout."

How so?

After October 7, we were stunned by the failure of Israel's legendary defenses, the depth of the terrorists' cruelty, and the people celebrating what Hamas did to the Jewish people.

For months, we were tangled up in confusion, despair, and self-doubt.

It seemed Israel's enemies had figured out how to win, crushing Israel's spirit by taking hostages and steadily draining its resources in a war of attrition.

Mass protests and political infighting paralyzed Israeli society. World leaders were pressuring Israel not to fight back too much, betraying a terrifying ambivalence about the existence of the Jewish state.

Meanwhile, an explosion of Jew-hatred here at home has caused the American Jewish community fear and anxiety. Just last week, the ADL reported a more-than-200-percent increase in antisemitic incidents in the U.S. since October 7.

But suddenly, a few weeks ago, something changed.

Almost miraculously, out of nowhere, Israel retook control of its own destiny and started fighting to win.

The international hostility, the gaslighting, the pro-Hamas demonstrations—those things are still there. The war is still raging, IDF soldiers are on the ground in Lebanon, rockets are raining down on Israel, and, of course, Hamas is still refusing to release the 101 innocent people it holds hostage.

And yet, it feels to me like the tangles are starting to come untied.

I think Israel and the Jewish people are stronger and more confident today than we've been at any point since October 7.

The Israeli author Matti Friedman describes it as "an incredible energy that's bubbling in Israeli society at this moment of crisis."[8]

Seeing Israel fight back is not only a source of pride; it's also a tremendous comfort—because we know they're fighting for *us*, too. As precarious as the situation is right now, we *know* that Israel will never surrender the security of the Jewish people to anyone.

I'm not sure we could have said that with confidence three or four months ago.

To me, this remarkable shift can only be described as a triumph of unfathomable strength.

Where did it come from?

Well, every day for a year, we've cried out to God in prayer, screaming in pain, pleading for help. And I believe God has answered.

Not by intervening to change events. God can't defeat our enemies or rescue the hostages. Only *we* can do that.

No, I believe God has answered by giving us strength we never could have found on our own. It's a strength that comes from being in a caring and intimate friendship with the Source of Life and Love.

And it's *that* strength that enables *us* to change history.

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This has always been God's promise: "Do not fear, for I am with you / Do not be frightened, for I am your God / I strengthen you and help you / I hold you up with my righteous hand."[9]

So, tonight, we turn to our Eternal Friend and plead:

Ana b'koach…
Source of Mercy,

[8] Stated in an interview with Dan Senor on the *Call Me Back*
[9] *Isaiah* 41:10

With loving strength
Untie our knots. …

Cleanse and bless us
Infuse us ever
With loving care.[10]

"By your help, we survive all who seek our destruction."[11]

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Click here to listen to a performance of "Ana B'koach."

[10] Translation of this stanza taken from "The Velveteen Rabbi," https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2012/04/ana.html
[11] From *Gates of Prayer for Weekdays and at a House of Mourning*, 19