

## To Jerusalem and Back

A sermon delivered by  
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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, New Brunswick, NJ  
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It's very hard to believe that I returned home just one week ago. I knew when I boarded the plane at Ben Gurion that my life had changed forever, that Israel had changed forever, and the Jewish People had changed forever.

When I decided to travel to Israel it was because I could not stand being so far away from the Israel I love. As you all know, we had planned to be in Israel this month, fifty of us, to celebrate Israel's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to be together with Israelis, to learn, and to rejoice. Israel is the greatest modern miracle in Jewish history!

None of us could have imagined that our trip would be postponed because of a massacre against the Jewish People, that a few hundred would be taken hostage and unheard of since that day, and that war would break out, a war that would impact the lives of so many on both sides, an impact that would change their lives forever. I hope that when our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary mission takes place next November, that so many will join us. We need such a journey, and Israel and Israelis need us to come and be with them. Please consider joining us!

You and I share a sense of relief about those who have been set free and are or soon will be returned to their loved ones. The Jewish value of *Pidyon Shv'u-im*, "redeeming the captive", is considered one of the highest values of our faith. Let us hope that all of the remaining hostages will be freed in the coming days.

I said that my life had changed forever. I trust the same is true for you. I believed that "Never Again" wasn't just a slogan. We know that is no longer true. I believed an existential threat to Israel was mostly rhetorical. I now know that the threat is real. There are those who seek to do all that they can to eliminate Israel from the "family of nations." I believed that antisemitism was a nuisance, sometimes scary, even frightening; but I could not imagine that antisemitic language, threats, acts would rise in such a way that we have witnessed. We know that antisemitism is the oldest evil disease we have ever encountered. It is more viral than polio. You can vaccinate against it, put it in a box, confine it, but from time to time it will get out and do its destructive work. Antisemitism cannot be eradicated. Only overwhelming goodness, kindness, and justice can defeat evil. I hope and pray that the people of goodness in the world can rise up and defeat the evil among us.

I shared with you that Israel had changed forever. Here is an example of what I mean. During my journey to Israel I came across these words written by Israeli poet Lital Cohen. She plays on Hebrew phrases well known to all of us: *mah nishma*, *ma koreh*, *ma shelomcha*, these are phrases used in daily Israeli parlance. They all mean the same: "What's up?" But this is what Lital Cohen has written: The phrase *Ma Nishma* is now moot. In its place one should ask:

*Ma Nishmat?* (What has been eliminated) *Ma Nishbar?* (What has been broken) *Ma Nish'ar?* (What remains); The phrase *Ma Koreh* is now forbidden and in its place one should wonder: *Mah Kores?* (What is cracking) *Mah Nikba?* (What is buried)  
 In response to the words *Ma Shlomecha?* The answer is: *Shlomi k'shlom ami!* How are you? How is your peace? My peace is only as good as the peace of my people.

For months Israelis marched in the streets, protesting on behalf of democracy and equality. After October 7, Israel changed its focus. I witnessed a country that had transformed into a nation of volunteers. Israelis recognized that their government had failed them, both in securing the safety of the people and in providing for the welfare of the people. Israelis are angry but are containing their anger, saving it for a time when the war comes to an end, when the inquiry that will surely occur delivers its results about the failure of the IDF, the failure of the government. Who knows what the future will bring? For now, care for the survivors, care for the evacuees (more than 120,000) and care for all of the mourners – that is all that matters. And at the same time, picking the crops on the farms, providing for those whose loved ones are in uniform, and helping to respond to an economy that has been shattered – all of that is part of the new Israel. And we can't even imagine what that new Israel will become in the years to follow, but surely it will be a different country than the one we have come to know.

I shared with you that the Jewish people has changed forever. I hope and trust that those who lead our Jewish community locally and nationally, will reassess our relationship with Israel. In the Netanyahu era, the Jews of America experienced a distancing from Israel; that is bad for Israel and bad for Jews in the Diaspora. This is a time for us to begin to reconnect with Israel. We will need to develop a new narrative for our children and for ourselves about what Israel means to us, what is our relationship with Israel, and most significantly how we develop relationships with Israelis who we come to know and who come to know us. Currently we do not have the tools, the curricula for our students, the language and narrative that we will need. And we certainly have not begun to seriously educate our adults and the larger community as well.

Here is an example of what I mean. You will recall that as part of our year-long celebration of Israel's birthday we began to develop a relationship with the Reform community in Shoham, the congregation whose Rabbi, Rabbi Rinat Safania, was our student Rabbi a few years ago. As part of our program of engagement, six high school students came and spent a week with us during Sukkot. How wonderful it was to have them here. On October 7 Joan and I were honored to host them for Shabbat lunch, and they were to join all of you to celebrate Simchat Torah that night. As they became traumatized by the events the role we played in their lives took on an importance we could not have imagined. Last week, on my last night in Israel, I had dinner with them and their parents. It was a powerful reunion. They wrote the following to me: "Dear Rabbi Miller, Hineni, you were there for our kids, for our community, when we and they needed you the most. Thank you for modeling Jewish unity and Jewish leadership for them and for you and your wife's incredible hospitality. We know you are part of us, and part of our kids' lives forever."

Last Sunday morning I was privileged to speak to a group at the Presbyterian Church of Bound Brook. They wanted to understand, they wanted to learn, and they wanted to ask questions. It was an open and honest conversation, including my saying to them that when the

massacre took place, in its aftermath, we Jews who have long been involved in inter-faith work and who have broken bread together with our neighbors, we were so very disappointed that we didn't hear from them. Going forth we will need more conversations with our neighbors, real conversations.

Truth be told, I could go on and on about what my recent mission to Israel means, what all of us could learn from it. And I am sure that many of you have questions about my journey, about this Israel-Hamas war, about Jewish life as we enter a new stage in our people's story. But tonight is Shabbat, we just gave a beautiful baby a Hebrew name, linking her to the Jewish people, to our past and to our future. And this is Thanksgiving weekend, a time to celebrate gratitude for all of the gifts of life that we behold, and a time to celebrate all of the gifts of life that we bestow on others.

Permit me to close with the words of the psalmist, the biblical poet. For many years when I would lead groups to Israel, as we approached Jerusalem, I would share these words. And since October 7 I have been reading these words each morning.

שיר המעלות לְדָוִד שִׁמְחָתִי בְּאֵמָרִים לִי בַּיִת יְהוָה נִלְוֶה:

A song of ascents. Of David. I rejoiced when they said to me,  
“We are going to the House of Adonai.”

עֲמַדוֹת הָיוּ רַגְלֵינוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם:

Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem,

יְרוּשָׁלַם הַבְּנוּיָה כְּעִיר שִׁחְבְּרָה-לֶקֶה יִחַדּוּ:

Jerusalem built up, a city knit together,

שְׂאֵלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם אִשְׁלֵיוֹ אֲהַבֶּיךָ:

Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem;  
“May those who love you be at peace.

יְהִי-שְׁלוֹם בְּחֵילְךָ שְׁלוֹהָ בְּאֶרְמְנוֹתֶיךָ:

May there be well-being within your ramparts,  
peace in your citadels.”

לְמַעַן אֲתִי וְרַעֲי אֲדַבְּרָה-נָא שְׁלוֹם בְּךָ:

For the sake of my kin and friends,  
I pray for your well-being;

לְמַעַן בֵּית-יְהוָה אֵלֹהֵינוּ אֲבַקֶּשׂה טוֹב לְךָ: {פ}

for the sake of the house of the Adonai our God,  
I seek your good.