גם כי אלך
Even when I walk in the valley

A Sermon for Yom Kippur
Delivered by
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Early in our worship this morning, we recited the words Anachnu Modim Lach, to You we are grateful, o God. Gratitude is what I wish to express. Who would have thought that between last year and now, our world would experience such upheaval -- a violent pogrom against Israel and the Jewish people, a significant rise in antisemitism both here and abroad, frightening rockets raining down on Israel, our own nation unsettled in ways we have not experienced in our generation -- and yet, here we are, you and me, so many with family and friends, sharing together in our beautiful sanctuary.

Gratitude is the proper expression to begin this day. Rabbi Bazeley, I am grateful to you for inviting me to share thoughts with everyone this morning, grateful to you for your leadership to our congregation, and grateful for your friendship. And I want to express my gratitude to Cantor Stanton and our beloved choir, to Rabbi Lotenberg, our Torah readers, ushers, and the entire leadership and staff of our Temple. As I begin my seventh year as Rabbi Emeritus, I am grateful to each one of you for what you mean to me, for your kindness to Joan and me, and for your precious friendship. May we continue to be together, especially in good health, for many years to come.

These powerful Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, are designed for us, individually and collectively, to reflect on the meaning of our lives, the purpose of our existence, who and what we are as Jews, as people, as a community, as God's *Am Segulah*, a treasured possession of the Divine.

The Biblical poet, the Psalmist, has written important words for us at this moment:

גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע, כי אתה עמדי
Gam Ki Eilech, b'tsail mavet….
Even when I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil,
for You are with me, your rod and your staff -- they comfort me.
You have set a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You have anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows.
אך טוב חסד ירדפוני כל ימי חיי ושבתי בבית יי לארך ימים

I shall fear no evil … my cup overflows, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

Those words have sustained our people from Biblical times until now, from Babylonian conquest to Roman destruction and enslavement, from crusader pogroms and

Spanish inquisition, from Holocaust to Jihadist evil. In the face of death, we have survived because we believe in the goodness of life, in mercy, and we do so every day with hope. On this Yom Kippur day, we are here to be reminded of who we are, the meaning of our world, and
despite it all, our hope in the future.

We, the Jewish People

Come with me now. Let's dream, and in that dream, we take the train or bus or drive our cars into New York City. Come out of the Lincoln Tunnel, turn left, then drive north until 45th street. Make a right turn and drive towards Broadway. Park the car and walk through the theatre district. You will see marquees up above. Each one displays the name of a drama, a musical, a comedy that can be witnessed inside. Some are familiar, long running plays; perhaps you have already seen one or more, even know the music and can sing some of the songs. Some are new, you want to put them on your list. On one marquee you see **"The Jewish People: the greatest story ever told!"** Perhaps you pause and smile for you know that play well. Or maybe you just walk by and hardly notice. Maybe, you stop and say, "I want to get tickets. I must see it. It's my story, our story. While standing below the marquee you notice that many people walk by, some quickly, not even noticing or perhaps a slight nod as they go their way. And since October 7 there may be some who walk by and utter curse words like F** the Jews, or "Genocide," or "From the river to the sea."

Now, as you stand in front of the marquee you get to decide. Do I buy a ticket and go in and sit in the audience, or do I enter through the stage door and join the cast? It's your call! For me, when I was young, I decided I wanted to be an actor on that stage, and I have spent my entire life doing so. Which door is the one through which you enter? Did you even enter at all?

Whether you are on the stage or sitting in the audience you will see the set before you. It consists of two sides, one the Israeli side, the other *Galut*, the Diaspora side. When the curtain goes up there will be action, sometimes on one side or the other, often the story unfolding on both sides at the same time and the action crossing between the two sides. There are moments of grandeur and times of despair. There is victory and victimhood. It's all part of the play. The story is truly amazing and powerful. You will often sit on the edge of your seat, sometimes rejoicing and other times wiping the tears from your face. And the music! You never heard such sounds, often in a minor key but always flowing from the heart and even soaring heavenward. Yes, The Jewish People: the greatest story ever told.

Now wake up! Rouse yourself from the sleep, from the dream! It's true, you and I are the Jewish people, some by birth, some by choice, some by association. We are part of the most awesome people in the world, and we are the most stubborn people on the face of the earth. Awesome, not because of our might or superior intellect, but awesome because it is our privilege to be chosen by the Divine to bring light to a world of darkness, justice in places where life is unjust, and peace where others prefer war. The rest of the world knows this. It is why for four thousand years others have tried to emulate who we are, what we do, and how we see the world. And others still, either by jealousy or envy, want to eradicate us from the global community of humankind.

Look around, is there any other people so small in number, so tiny in proportion to any other racial, ethnic, religious, or national group whose impact for good is so significant? Is there any wonder that the words from our most sacred texts are often found inscribed on buildings, written in literature, declared by leaders of nations, prophets in their own time? Just drive past the UN in New York City and see what is called the Isaiah Wall across the street. There inscribed are the words of our People's prophet Isaiah who declared: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Yes, we are the Jewish People. Can you imagine the history of the world without our contribution? What would be the story of humanity without the Jewish People's contribution to that story?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory wrote these words about us. He said: "Think about the Jewish people. How probable is it that one man—Abraham, who commanded no empire and ordered no army, performed no miracle, delivered no prophecy—should today without doubt be the most influential man who ever lived, who's claimed as the spiritual ancestor by 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, and most of you in the room today?

"How probable is it that this tiny people—the Jewish people—numbering less than one-fifth of 1 percent of the population of the world, should have outlived the world's greatest empires. . . How likely is it that, after 2,000 years of exile, our people should have come back to our land and there—having stood eyeball to eyeball with the angel of death in Auschwitz a mere three years earlier in 1948—said, despite the worst crime of man against man, *lo amut kiechyeh*. I will not die but I will live."

On this Yom Kippur, just a few days after the first yahrzeit of those slaughtered by humans who went mad, who committed evil beyond our imagination, on this day of intense reflection and remembrance, I ask you to join me in contemplating who we are, who are the Jews, and what is the significance of our story, the role that we play on the stage of life.

We, our generation and its meaning for the future

I look around this beautiful sanctuary and ask: what were they thinking? Those who contemplated this edifice, what was going through their minds nearly a hundred years ago? Who were these Jews who chose to reside here in New Brunswick? What message did they wish to send to the community that welcomed them when they declared that they were *Anshe Emet*, people of truth? How is it that they, some eighty families, chose to build a temple, with a sanctuary that would seat nearly 500? Did they see themselves as survivors of Europe's bloody history of pogroms against Jews, as descendants of those who fled the Inquisition rather than abandon their faith? Or were they dreamers, players on the stage of **The Jewish People: the greatest story ever told!**

On this Yom Kippur morning, my thoughts turn not just to you and me, not only to our past, but to future generations. We already know that they will inherit a world different than the one that you and I have lived and loved? Our lives have been blessed by a golden age of Jewish

living. For most of us, antisemitism, Jew hatred, has been nothing more than an annoyance. The generations that came before us broke through the barriers to Jews that at earlier times had kept them from living in certain communities, that excluded them from the finest colleges and universities in our country, that prevented them from entering proud professions. Do you know that there was a time when Jewish doctors could not practice medicine at both of our local hospitals? Only St. Peter's hospital welcomed Jewish doctors. It took courage and persistence for some Jewish physicians to break through the barriers at what was then called Middlesex General. Look up at the stained-glass window here in the sanctuary. You see the name of Norman Reitman? How he loved our congregation. This was the very place where, downstairs, he met his beloved Syril when he was a student at Rutgers? Norman, who lived to one hundred and five, once told me of how he and two other Jewish physicians broke the barrier that kept them out of the hospital, and how later he went on to become Chief of the medical staff, and Chairman of the Board of his beloved Rutgers University.

On this Yom Kippur morning, I am thinking about the generation of my grandchildren, your grandchildren and our great grandchildren. What will they say about us and our generation? Will they say that we squandered the inheritance of our golden age in America, the legacy we received from generations that preceded us, that the great synagogues and communities that we built, like Anshe Emeth, are receding vessels of the past? Will they say, as author Joshua Leifer recently wrote: "Mainline Judaism has sunken into indifference, satisfied with its shallowness, and unaware of its own religious ignorance."

I ask you; will our grandchildren drive down Livingston Ave. and say, "That was once a synagogue," or will they declare this: "in our parents and grandparents time, that was the most dynamic and important institution in our community, and it still is. We are so proud to be a part of it because this congregation shapes the meaning and purpose of our life and the life of our children and all who are touched by its powerful and sacred presence?"

My children and my grandchildren have a saying which is: *All roads go through Anshe Emeth.* They truly believe that wherever they go, whoever they encounter, there is an Anshe Emeth connection. And I think they are right. It is not because of who we are, but because of what we were taught here, what we learned about living in community, what we celebrated and continue to celebrate as proud Jews declaring to the world not what was, but what will be.

When I drive by the Temple and see the people in line, waiting for diapers, I ask what do our neighbors say of us? I believe that our task is not how do we become more like America but how do we make America more like us? I hope they will say that Anshe Emeth is a congregation of *ohavey tsion,* lovers of Zion, (to paraphrase Ron Reagan the son, "unabashedly proud Zionists) united with the people of Israel in a bond that is strong and can never be broken. I pray that they will say: We have never met a people like the Jews. Their generosity flows from the depths of their faith, from their commitment to justice for all, and for their belief in a world of kindness and peace. They are the most stubborn people on the face of the earth, and we thank them for being so.

We, the People of Israel

This past Spring I participated in a conference called *Re-charging Reform Judaism*. One of the speakers was my colleague Rabbi David Wolpe. Wolpe served Temple Sinai in Los Angeles until his retirement, then was a fellow at Harvard Divinity School, and now is on the staff of the Anti-Defamation League. During his talk he told us that from time to time he has a conversation with his great grandfather. And in a recent conversation he said to his grandfather "There's antisemitism at Harvard." His grandfather responded: "There are Jews at Harvard?" Wolpe then said, "Yes, and they hate Israel." His grandfather responded, "There's an Israel?" Wolpe gazed into the audience and declared, "Our ancestors would dream of having the problems that we have."

Let's return to the drama on the stage. On the Diaspora side we are witnessing an ugly antisemitism. It is frightening. Some of us have removed the mezuzah from the doorposts of our homes. Others have removed their Jewish stars that they usual wear on the neck. Many college students are uncomfortable and even fearful of who lives down the hall in their dormitory, of walking in public with a ***kipa*** on their head or going to Hillel activities. Thank goodness, elected officials and law enforcement personnel here in America have stood strong side by side with all of us. But that is not the case in every land. This is a time for us to be ever more vigilant in calling out antisemitism and Jew-hatred whenever and wherever we meet it. And it is a time for us to learn to teach our children, to declare openly and publicly how to respond with "We are the Jewish people, and we are not going to take this hatred from anyone. We will not respond in kind but rather continue to be who we are, a people of generosity, of justice, of compassion, and of peace.

When I think of Israel's birth, now76 years young, here is the vocabulary for what I see: miracle, rebirth, renewal, kibbutz, bringing home the refugees of Europe and North Africa, creating a modern and thriving democracy, renewal of a creative Jewish life, welcoming Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, safety, security, peace with some of her neighbors, Startup Nation, Drip irrigation, whatsapp, waze, medical discoveries, spiritual wonder, and so much more. Each word describes a feeling of wonder and pride that we all share in the true miracle of our People's rebirth in its ancient land.

And yet, when we consider our beloved Israel, this past year has given us a new vocabulary: trauma, fear, displacement of thousands, hostages, desecration of towns and villages and kibbutzim, thousands of rockets from far and near, terrorism from without and within, messianism that is dangerous and evil from Muslims and Jews; and also, resilience, brothers and sisters in arms to act when the government fails to do so.

Have you ever experienced such high drama, such emotional stamina and spiritual exhaustion? I wish it were only theatre performance on a stage. But it is not. It is the reality of Jews living in the world. Our security is an illusion, both in Israel and everywhere we choose to live. We could, if we choose, enter into a period of despair, of cynicism, retreating from the world as we know it. But our faith and tradition forbid us to do so.

גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע, כי אתה עמדי The Lord is my shepherd… my cup overflows, goodness and mercy shall follow me wherever I go. Maybe that is why our people's

anthem is Hatikvah, the Hope, hope in a better tomorrow, a better world, a better future for those who come after us.

In a few hours our prayers will turn to those who perished for the sacredness of life, our people, people of good will, martyrs. We will honor their memory and their sacrifice. And we will also recall our own loved ones, parents and grandparents, children too – whose lives we recall with blessing. And this year, I pray that we will add the names of the fallen-on October 7.I would wish that we had time to call out and remember the names of all 1200 who perished that day, and lovingly mention the names of each of the 101 who remain in captivity, along with the brave men and women, our sons and daughters and cousins and friends who defended against terror, the innocent, too.

I want to recall one name, a name until now you didn't know. His name was Yossi Hershkovitz; he was a teacher in Jerusalem, father of four, lover of music, who was called to serve in Gaza. He joined his army unit and from Gaza recorded a video for his students. In it he said, "I was raised to give without receiving, not just out of habit, and thank God I am privileged to be part on an awesome nation of incredible people who give from all their soul to the nation… We are all here fighting shoulder to shoulder, as one people with one heart. We pray that we will defeat evil and bring good to the world."

A few days later, in a quiet moment, his commanding officer heard Yossi begin to sing a song. It went like this:

גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע, כי אתה עמדי
Gam Ki elech, ….
Even when I walk in the valley of shadows, I shall not fear….

It was a haunting and powerful melody. His captain asked him, "Yossi, who wrote that melody?" And Yossi said, "I did." He sang it again so that his captain could learn it. A day later, Yossi was killed by a booby trap in a tunnel. At the funeral his captain sang and played that same melody, and sang the same words, ending with:

אך טוב חסד ירדפוני כל ימי חיי ושבתי בבית יי לארך ימים
"You have anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days my life."

May his memory be for blessing and may goodness and mercy follow us, all the days of our lives.