

# **Finding Our Confidence After the Aftershocks of October 7th**

## **Rosh Hashanah: 2025/5786**

### **Rabbi Michael Siegel**

Rebo'no Shel Olam, Creator of Heaven and Earth, You who created each of us in the Tselem Elohim in Your Sacred Image. On this day of Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate Your Creation. On this day of Rosh Hashanah, the difficulties that our brothers and sisters in the Land of Israel face weigh heavily upon us. These past two years have been filled with pain and suffering. Even as we have, after 2,000 years of homelessness, been restored to sovereignty in our ancient homeland, we are deeply aware of the challenge of national power, and on this Yom HaDin fully accept the responsibility of that sovereignty. You do not turn away from the suffering of all those created in Your image. We have been taught to imitate you. We dare not turn away from the suffering of innocent ones. At this moment, we turn to you in prayer and ask that You provide wisdom to our leaders and humbly ask for your blessing of peace for us, for all Israel, for all humanity. (Rabbi Yehiel Poupko)

Today, I come before you deeply aware of the gravity of these times and pray to address this moment in the best way possible. I will focus on the war in Israel and the state of the country in an in-depth conversation with Yossi Klein Halevi, one of the most important thought leaders in Israel in a recorded interview. I hope that you will watch it on Yom Kippur afternoon along with your friends and family members.

There is a photograph that never fails to bring a tear to my eye. It is of Ben Gurion standing at the table, at what is now Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, declaring the Statehood of Israel. Above his head is a large picture, not of Abraham, who was promised the land, or Moses, who led the people to its boundaries, or Joshua, who fought the battles to settle there. No, it is Theodore Herzl, the man who is known as the Father of Modern Zionism.

You could be forgiven for thinking that Herzl was the sole force in the creation of the modern Jewish State based on the way he is celebrated. Not to diminish his importance, but there were a number of people who played important roles, laying the groundwork for a political solution for Jews scattered across the world. People like Moses Hess, Sir Moses Montefiore, Leon Pinsker, and Max Nordau.

All of them recognized that the ground beneath them in the Diaspora was shaking. The earthquake was coming; the tectonic plates of Jew hatred were agitating just beneath the surface and eventually they would shudder with a violent force. Europeans who allowed Jews out of the Ghettos as part of the French Revolution were now showing signs of regret.

The trial of Colonel Alfred Dreyfus is simply the best known of a long list of ominous signs, including the pogroms which swept across Russia and Eastern Europe. The Jewish People needed a land of their own.

Max Nordau, a physician and social philosopher, played a pivotal role in all of this and largely served as Theodore Herzl's partner. He authored the Basel Program, which was the foundational document of the Zionism Movement. Less known, is that at the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, Max Nordau laid out a vision that became known as

Muskeljudentum “muscular Judaism.” The Muscular Jew, in Nordau’s view, was strong, physically fit, capable of labor, confident and proud. The Muscular Jew stood in contrast to the Diaspora Jew, who, in Nordau’s view, had become pale, weak, and overly intellectual. In the ancient past, he argued, Jews were warriors, Maccabees. What was needed now was a regimen of exercise and athletic clubs to make young Jews strong again. Together Herzl and Nordau dreamed of a land transformed by a people, and a people transformed by their return to their land. While Herzl traveled the world creating the political foundations of the Judenstadt, the Jewish State, Nordau inspired Jews to prepare their bodies to work the land. Our image of the Sabra, the Kibbutznik, the tough Israeli, all emanated from the vision of Max Nordau, as did the Maccabiah games. I believe that Max Nordau’s Muskeljudentum speaks to us today about the importance of a confident Judaism to carry us and our children forward.

Jews in the Diaspora are still feeling the aftershocks of the earthquake of October 7th. For more than 700 days since the Hamas attack on Israel, the ground underneath the Jewish people has been shaking, from Tel Aviv to Chicago to Sydney. How the world has changed. Flying to New York the other week I thought of the leading Mayoral candidate, who endorses the slogan Globalize the Intifada. And for the first time, I wondered if it would be more prudent to put my Kippah in my pocket, in New York City of all places.

More recently, Zohran Mamdani has stated that if elected he would see to it that Prime Minister Netanyahu be arrested if he landed in New York, for war crimes. Not so long ago such statements would disqualify a candidate. Today they seem to only win them more votes, showing how normalized such thinking has become!

One does not have to travel to New York to see the impact of these aftershocks. All one needs to do is to look outside at what was a year ago, our Grace Street entrance, and see a wall there instead, placed for security. That wall is a powerful reminder of just how much the landscape has changed for the Jews of America.

To anyone who thinks Israel’s actions are the sole cause of this change, I disagree. There is no question that Israel’s standing in the world has been damaged badly since October 7th: by horrid statements and actions by extreme elements in the Israeli government, by questions about the true intentions of the Prime Minister, by the lack of clarity as to the war goals and where the fate of the hostages fits in, by threats of annexation, and most of all, by the constant images of death and destruction flowing out of Gaza, unchecked, without thoughtful, credible responses from the government in Jerusalem. While all these factors have had a negative impact, none of them properly explains the rush to judge Israel and with it, Jews around the world.

Even those in the Jewish community who have been questioning the war early on, must reckon with the vociferous fury of the response to Israel and Jews worldwide since the murderous orgy of October 7th.

Rather than raising moral questions about Hamas and its supporters around the world, the unprovoked attack on Israel unleashed seismic waves of antisemitism, greater than most of us ever imagined possible in this country. It seems, as Cynthia Ozick put it, that Israel’s response to the murders, the rapes, and the hostage taking, gave the world permission to express its antisemitism more openly and violently. Just as

Herzl and Nordau looked at their reality honestly and then had the courage to dream with confidence of a different Jewish future, so must we.

As we begin a New Year, I ask us to take a pause from the day's headlines, or our favorite opinion writers and podcasts, and do as Jews have always done at such moments. Let us look to an ancient text for wisdom and direction. I offer you the well-known words of Hillel the Elder:

הוא הִיה אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי

He used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי .

But if I am only for my own self, what am I?

וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי .

And if not now, when?

Hillel lived in a time of great upheaval in the Jewish community, and rather than offering a solution to the problems that our people faced, our great sage presented a framework from which to approach such moments.

He began with a focus on the self, on our people, and yes, on our own parochial concerns. Implicit in Hillel's dictum is the fact that if we cannot prioritize the needs of our own people first, then we are lost. I submit to you that many in the American Jewish community have not felt the need to focus our attention on the first part of Hillel's statement. If I am not for myself who will be for me? We have felt safe in America. Admirably, we looked past our own needs as a community and focused on those of others who needed our help. It was the second part of Hillel's statement that truly spoke to us.

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי .

But if I am only for my own self, what am I?

The history of American Jewry in the 20th Century is of a people fully confident in the dream of America. So much so, that we felt that if we kept our attention on the rights of others that it could only redound to the benefit of everyone, including the Jews. Examine the founding and early leadership of labor rights, the civil rights movement, women's rights, anti-poverty work, immigration justice, environmentalism, and gun violence prevention, and you will find a preponderance of Jews engaged in the fight. In the post-World War II era, we literally made social justice into a religious mandate in the form of what had been traditionally a Jewish mystical idea now Americanized: Tikun Olam.

The problem is that those ancient tectonic plates of Jew Hatred never stopped moving below our feet. David Nirenberg is a historian who argues that hatred of Jews has been a core element of Western thought for millennia. According to his thinking, throughout our history Jews serve as the ultimate shape shifters taking the form of whatever the society fears and detests. From Christianity to Islam, Jews were painted in the ugliest of ways, people to be feared, despised, and kept down. Communists

portrayed Jews as rabid Capitalists in Russia, while American Capitalists pointed to Jews as Communists living in our midst. In our own day, those in the progressive sphere who revile settler colonialists have identified Israel as the ultimate evil. Therefore, anyone who supports Israel is part of this cabal. For those Conservatives who subscribe to an America First approach, Israel is a powerful force, pushing the U.S. into war for its own benefit through a fearful fifth column, the insidious Jewish community. We have come to a point where the one and only thing that these very different groups can all agree on is that the Jews are the problem!

In the time of Moses, a pagan prophet by the name of Balaam looked out on the people of Israel and prophesied:

הֵן-עַם לְבִדָּד יֹשֵׁן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב:  
There is a people that dwells apart,  
Not considered among the nations.

Sadly, his words ring true to this day. The question for us on this Rosh Hashanah is what do we do with this knowledge? How shall we go forward?

Will we contort and assimilate ourselves to what Dara Horn refers to as conversionist anti-Semitism, as Jews have done for centuries. Since the time of Mordecai and Esther, Jews have denied part of their identity in order to make ourselves acceptable to the non-Jewish world. Jews have negated the basic tenets of our religion, severing our connection to the land of Israel, rejected our ethnicity by changing our names, or trying to fully assimilate through marriage to be fully accepted. None of these efforts have proven to be successful. There is always a moment when the outside world reminds us how futile it is to allow anti-Jewish hate to define us.

As we begin a New Year, let us confidently say to the world we are Am Yisrael. We are a people with powerful ties to one another, a family. We share a rich culture, books of deep wisdom. We are a nation with ancient roots to the land of Israel. We are a religion with a mandate from God to follow the Torah, to accept its moral code and ultimately to serve as an Or L'Goyim, a light to the nations. God, Torah, People, Land, these are the parts of Judaism that make us whole, make us Am Yisrael.

Thousands of years ago Hillel framed the issue:

אִם אֵין אֶנִּי לִי, מִי לִי,  
If I am not for myself, who is for me?

Only from that strong and confident sense of identity can we determine our own path forward.

What I am speaking of this morning is not theory, but something that I have witnessed here at Anshe Emet. People leaning into their Judaism. Rather than putting away their Judaic symbols, they are wearing them openly with pride. Jews are coming to our congregation in larger numbers. Jews are finding greater joy and meaning in Jewish life, in Jewish culture, in Jewish thought, as members of the Clal Yisrael. Our parents are hungry to learn how to have Shabbat at home to celebrate the Jewish calendar with their children. Walk around the building today and you will find that all five of our adult services, as well as our children's and youth programs, are full to

capacity. Through the vision of generosity of Betsy Gidwitz along with Michael and Helen Arkes, we are creating a city-wide senior center here at Anshe Emet in partnership with the Council for Jewish Elderly.

I am proud that Anshe Emet has become a safe place where Jews can have thoughtful conversations about Israel. Through our work with the organization "Resetting the Table," people are learning how to have dialogue across the spectrum of diverse opinions that are represented in this community. At a time when Jews are finding fewer places where they can comfortably gather, we strive to be that place, that center for Jewish life. This program guide, our largest ever, is an invitation for you to find your place as part of a vibrant Jewish community. Our theme M'Hayil l'Hayil - from strength to strength is a clear statement about how we see our role in the Chicago Jewish community today and tomorrow.

What I am most concerned about this morning is our children. They are confronted with challenges in their schools that you and I never had to face. But I can also report that our youth are amazing. Our B'nai Mitzvah espouse strong convictions. They find meaning in our tradition and stand with pride and confidence on this Bimah as they prepare for Jewish adulthood. We owe them the best education possible, secular and Jewish, not as a response to anti-Semitism but as an embrace of their Jewish and American birthright! Our Religious School has more than 200 students, ably led by Mardi Caminer, who herself is a graduate. Beginning next year, Bernard Zell's new headmaster will be Mitchell Daar, who himself is a graduate of that school. Both Mardi and Mitchell were Bnai Mitzvah on this Bimah. What a wonderful statement of the work of this congregation moving M'Hayil le hayil, from strength to strength.

I am excited that we will have a new state of the art Jewish High School in Chicago opening in 2027. It speaks well of our congregation that many of the leaders of this effort are members of our Anshe Emet family. People like JR and Katie Berger and Ilan and Rebekah Shalit, as well as the named donors Tony and Laura Davis. In this liminal moment, it is good to know that the Chicago Jewish community, with the vital support of our Jewish United Fund, is responding in the most positive way possible in this challenging moment. Creating tomorrow's leaders strong and confident in their own Jewish identity.

It is from this place of confidence that we can respond to Hillel's second challenge.

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי .

But if I am only for my own self, what am I?

Over the past two years we have had to face the pain and shock of leaders and communities that we had stood with, abandoning us in an hour when we most needed their support. Rather than walking away, I believe this is the moment to lean in. In part because of people like Pastor Chris Harris, who has stood with us in the face of withering criticism and physical threats. This goes beyond friendship; the Jewish community needs partners to stand with us on our issues to fight for the America that we believe in. That can only happen if our communities face one another and build enduring relationships. Along with Lee Rosenberg, another member of our community,

we are assembling a national Black and Jewish leadership effort called the Unity Forum. Our goal is simple, creating a better future for both of our communities and working toward an America that is true to its ideals.

אָם נישט נאָך, ווען?

And if not now, when?

There is a sense of urgency about all of this, but this should not be a moment of panic. It does no one in the Jewish community any good to be making invidious comparisons to the 1930's. You and I are privileged to be part of the most powerful diaspora community in history and to live at a time where there is a Jewish State. Let us learn from Max Nordau's muskeljudentums and walk with confidence.

As I stand before you today, I am deeply aware that this will be my last time addressing you on Rosh Hashanah as your Senior Rabbi. While I have a wealth of personal feelings and deep gratitude for this the 44th time that I have stood here on the High Holidays, it is the gravity of this moment that grips me. With this knowledge and awareness, I offer you the two words that Moses spoke to those who would follow after him.

זיין און זיין

Be strong and be of good courage

- A confident American Jewry is knowledgeable about their own tradition, finds meaning in its ancient wisdom, solidarity in community, and the joy and spiritual depth of our calendar and Torah.
- A confident American Jewry can love Israel deeply, engage with her people fully and understand that the country and its leaders are human, and the State is imperfect. If we want our children to love Israel, then we must educate them in a way that tells the full story of the history of Israel and acknowledges all the people living on the land, and their narratives. Even when they conflict with our own.
- A confident American Jewry makes visiting Israel a priority, especially for their children, and has attained a sufficient knowledge of the history and complexities of modern Israel to be thoughtful in their assessments. To not be afraid to criticize when the country or its leaders, or its soldiers fall short.
- A confident American Jewry can praise without apology what is extraordinary in Israel and her people beginning with the resilience of Israelis, the courage and sacrifice of the soldiers and their families and the remarkable achievements of the IDF in Iran and Lebanon. At the same time our hearts can break in the face of the death and destruction that has been wrought upon Gaza.
- A confident American Jewry can engage with other Jews in hard dialogues and disagree without casting each other out of the Jewish people.
- A confident American Jewry confronts anti-Judaism openly and can say that, as heinous as other forms of hate are, anti-Semitism is unique. When our enemies threaten to destroy Israel and the Jewish people, we must take them at their word.

- A confident American Jewry can say that there are times when we can be right and much of the world wrong as was evident in the past few days as France leads the world in recognizing a Palestinian State. Pretending all the while that the timing of this act will not be seen as a rebuke of Israel and a victory for Hamas.
- Finally, a confident American Jewry understands that we have significant responsibilities to this country. Jews have played a unique role from America's birth to the present day. It was the Torah's notion of equality: Let us make man in our likeness and in our image that the Founders joined to the Greek understanding of Democracy. Look at the ceiling in this room and you will see that the inspiration for the preamble of our Constitution comes from the Jewish tradition.
- Those words from Genesis taught the world a revolutionary concept: that all human beings have inherent worth. They serve as a reminder to us on this day that we have a responsibility to act courageously Veamatz, and say no to those who denigrate the image of God in others, who attempt to silence free speech, who erase the history of others, who belittle the power of dialogue. Jews represent a great tradition, and just as we contributed at this country's founding so, too, must we today. We are at a pivotal juncture and America needs what the Jewish community can teach.

חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ : Hazak Ve'Amatz: Be strong and of good courage!

At a time when the ground continues to shake beneath our feet, let us stand together without fear, but in the spirit of Max Nordau, as confident Jewish Americans, as proud Zionists standing strong with our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world as Am Yisrael. People who understand what America means to us and what we mean to America. Embracing the full importance and urgency and wisdom of Hillel's framing of this moment.

הוא הִיהָ אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי

He used to say:

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וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתָי .

And if not now, when?

*Am Yisrael Chai*: The People of Israel Lives!