

# **Yom Kippur Sermon 2025/5786**

## **Am Yisrael Chai: The People of Israel Live**

### **Rabbi Michael S. Siegel**

1945.

The Bergen Belsen death camp.

50,000 people, most of them Jews, were murdered here, including a teenage girl named Anne Frank.

After British troops liberated Bergen Belsen it became a displaced persons camp where they cared for the survivors. On April 20, just five days after the liberation, British Chaplain Rabbi Leslie Hardman organized a Friday night service. Still wearing their dirty striped uniforms, thousands gathered amidst those waiting to be buried and others in the process of dying. All of this was captured by a reporter on BBC Radio as the group broke into song. The announcer had no idea what they were singing but allowed their voices to be heard by their listeners across Europe. It was not Lecha Dodi, or the Mourners Kaddish. They sang Hatikva!

צוֹפֶיֶה לְצִיּוֹן עֵין, קְדִימָה, מִזְרָח וּלְפָאֵתִי, הוֹמָיָה יְהוּדִי נֶפֶשׁ פְּנִימָה בְּלֵב עוֹד כָּל

As long as in the heart within,  
The Jewish soul yearns,  
And toward the eastern edges, onward,  
An eye gazes toward Zion.

As the song stops, we hear the British Army Chaplain spontaneously say these words: *Am Yisrael Chai: the people of Israel liveth*, capturing the remarkable scene that he was witnessing. A group of Jews who had survived a genocide sang the anthem of a yet to be declared Jewish State. Many of those people would in the years to come, have to find ways to evade that self-same British army to enter Palestine, take up rifles, and fight for a Jewish homeland. Instead of being the victims of Jewish history they chose to be amongst those to change its trajectory. Those survivors of Bergen Belsen standing there that April day embodied the remarkable spirit of a people who had the will and the courage to survive and build a new life and future. In three well-chosen words, Rabbi Hardman described the moment perfectly: Am Yisrael Chai! The People of Israel Live.

Twenty years later, in 1965, the words Am Yisrael Chai were put to music by Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach in a tune we all know. *Am Yisrael Chai, Am Yisrael Chai...* It became the anthem for the Soviet Jewry Movement and with it, another story of the Jewish will to live despite the unrelenting efforts of a brutal dictatorship determined to extinguish the Jewish spark burning in our people's souls. Carlbach added the words *Od Avinu Chai, Our father yet lives*. The reference is both to the biblical Jacob, the man who

became Israel as well as the God we acknowledge as Avinu Malkeinu, Our Father, Our King.

In this way Carlbach speaks to the mysterious and miraculous nature of Jewish history the descendants of Jacob. For Rabbi Carlbach, our continued existence is a proof that God's hand remains involved in our history and, as a result of our tenacious will to live, we serve as witnesses for God's presence in the universe.

Am Yisrael Chai: The People of Israel Lives  
Od Avinu Chai: Our Father still lives.

80 years after that day in 1945, I stood on the Bimah in the Sanctuary with Eli Sharabi who had been held hostage for 491 days after the 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Taken from his home in Kibbutz Be'eri, he was separated from his wife Lianne and their children, Noiya and Yahel. Eli told us that night that every Friday night in captivity he would raise up a cup of water and make Kiddush and take his old stale piece of Pitah, which was his meal, and make Motzi so that he might have Shabbat wherever they held him. In front of his captors, Eli would sing *Aishet Hayil, a Woman of Valor* to his wife, bless his children from a tunnel somewhere in Gaza and dream of the day when he would hold them in his arms again. When Eli was released, he learned that his wife and two children had been murdered by Hamas on October 7th. Despite this crushing blow, in just a few months Eli was traveling the world telling his story, inspiring us all with his remarkable strength, courage and faith. Most importantly, Eli demanded that we continue the fight for the release of the remaining hostages. His words pierced the air that night when he announced: *I am not a poster, I am a person, and I am a Jew.*

In his book, Eli records visiting the graves of his wife and children, crying uncontrollably for 40 minutes, and then standing up and stating: *This here is rock bottom. I've seen it. I've touched it. Now life!* I stood with my arm around Eli as the hundreds who had come out that night sang *Am Yisrael Chai*. In that moment, it felt as though I was holding on to the living embodiment of those words: *The People of Israel Live*. In a short time, these 6 words have become a Jewish proclamation of Jewish **עקשנות (Akshanut)**. It is a Hebrew word that captures our people's tenacious and stubborn will to live.

How would a non-Jew begin to make sense of continued Jewish existence against all odds. Enter Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. In 1899, he and his family were living in Europe and witnessed the outbursts against the French Jewish community surrounding the Dreyfus Affair. Horrified by the unbridled anti-Semitism and the vulnerability of the Jewish people, Mark Twain wrote an essay for Harpers entitled "On the Jews." In one memorable paragraph he spoke directly to the mystery of the continued existence of Jews.

*He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no*

*infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?*

Twain left the question floating in the air.

So then, what is the answer to Twain's question? How do we explain continued Jewish existence against all logic.

For me, there is one story in the Bible that offers an answer better than any other, and it is all of 7 verses long.

וַיֵּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבֶדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

When he saw that he had not won out against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמְרָ לֹא אֶשְׁלַחְךָ כִּי אִם־בְּרִכָּתְנִי:

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׁרִית עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אָנָשִׁים וַתִּזְכָּל:

Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out."

For me, the most amazing part of the story is not that Jacob wrestled an angel, or that he was victorious. The most important part of this story is that Jacob would not let go when dawn was breaking, even while the angel was begging to be released. No, he would not let go until the angel changed his name from Yaakov, which means heel, to Israel, as the one who struggled with God and man and proved to be victorious. That story is our *Yerusha*, the inheritance of the Jewish people. We are the people who tenaciously hold on, striving to fulfill our name Israel.

This morning, let us discuss those things that Jews have held on to with tenacity in ways that even Twain, a man who knew a thing or two about books, could not fully comprehend. The struggle to survive and the tenacity to continually become Israel has the hallmark of Jewish history.

When our people were carried into Babylonian exile they created the earliest form of

As a result, our people returned to the land of their fathers and did not .Zionism

:The words of the Psalmist speak to the moment .Diapsora disappear into the

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה אֶת־שִׁיבָת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים:

A song of ascents.

When the LORD restores the fortunes of Zion

—we see it as in a dream<sup>a</sup>—

When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, our Rabbis created Yavneh, and a Rabbinic Judaism was formed through the power of the interpretation of the holy word. A Judaism that could be practiced in Jerusalem and anywhere else in the world.

When Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand expelled the Jews in 1492, Jews looked inward into the mystical world of Kabballah.

In the wake of the Khmelnitsky massacres, the Baal Shem Tov brought the joy of Chasidism into the world.

When Jew hatred was rearing its ugly head across Europe, Theodore Herzl inspired Jews around the world with his vision of political Zionism, and 50 years after the First Zionist Congress, a Jewish State was born.

That is the Jewish story. Like Jacob we tenaciously hold on and have the wisdom and the will to continue to evolve, to grow in the face of every challenge, and be Israel, the one who struggled with men and God and prevailed

There is an old joke that contains a deep truth. The Prime Minister of England called the following leaders - the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi, and the Grand Imam to an urgent meeting. Scientists had discovered a huge tidal wave coming directly towards England and was scheduled to hit the English coast the next day. Each of the religious leaders was asked to go on the radio and speak to their religious communities. The Archbishop of Canterbury instructed them in the proper prayers to be said in this moment, expressing their faith in their Lord. The Imam directed his fellow Muslims to key passages in the Koran to recite in this horrible moment. The Chief Rabbi of England got on the radio and said, "My Jewish brothers and sisters, we have 24 hours to learn to live underwater!"

On this Yom Kippur, this Yom HaDin, it truly feels like so much hangs in the balance.

Every Shabbat I think to myself that the world cannot get any more extreme, any more dangerous, and somehow, as the sun sets the following Friday, it does! We Jews are at an inflection point both in Israel and in the Diaspora. While I cannot tell you what the Jewish world will look like in 2 years much less 20 or 40, I can tell you what components you will need to build that future. Like Jacob, we will need to struggle with and tenaciously hold on to each, allowing them to evolve as we become the Israel that we need to be in the coming time.

A Torah and tradition that continues to offer lessons that speak to us in our day. A system of Mitzvot that gives shape and a sense of Kedusha/sanctity to our lives. A Jewish calendar that imbues time with meaning, beginning with the gift of Shabbat. A God who desires to be in relationship and has expectations of how we live in this world. An ethical code, whose ideal we will read this afternoon: *V'Ahavta l'reicha Kamocha: love your neighbor as yourself*. While these words begin with concern for the Jewish people, they most certainly do not end there. Our moral measure does not come from the national press or social media, but the Bible, from Prophets who rebuked the people when they failed to see those suffering before them. I am quite sure that Isaiah would not look away from the pain and suffering in Israel, nor would he look away from Gaza, most especially the children, nor should we. The perverse immorality of our enemies has never been a measure for Jews. The *whataboutism* that is so prevalent today was never part of the Jewish vocabulary. We have always answered to a higher authority. Let us hold tight to Torah to ensure that it speaks to us and our children in our time.

A Siddur which opens us to the world of Jewish prayer and a deeper relationship with God, a more powerful awareness of the beauty of God's creation and our own soul, and a reminder of what God asks of us. Let us hold on tight to learn how to use it in ways that have meaning.

A Synagogue and a Jewish community where you always have a place to celebrate life's joys and sorrows. A place to immerse in Jewish music and culture. A place to engage in the issues that face us as a community. A place of Jewish learning and a Center of Jewish life. A place to simply be Jews. Let us tenaciously hold on to this vital institution shaping this space in ways that will feel welcoming and meaningful for generations to come.

A State of Israel that is at once remarkable and imperfect. Its people, our people, have shown such resilience, courage, and fortitude in these past two years and deserve our love, and our support. But real love, real caring, allows for thoughtful criticism as well. While we might not be sending our children to fight in the IDF, that does not mean that Jews in the Diaspora have not been impacted, by statements by elected officials, or decisions as to how the war has been conducted. Our voices deserve to be heard. This afternoon we will air my recorded interview with Yossi Klein Halevi. Here is what I know for certain. Some people will applaud the positions he takes and others will be upset by them. I hope that you will watch and discuss what you hear with others. We are a people that celebrates the power of the *Mahloket*, hard and thoughtful debates. Rabbi Donniel Hartman speaks of himself as a "troubled committed Zionist." I share his position and his fear that if we do not allow for honest and passionate debate in the Jewish community, both here and with our brothers in Israel, that we will see more troubled uncommitted Zionists, or worse, more committed anti-Zionists, in the Jewish community.

Israel remains the eternal inheritance and homeland of every Jew. That must be our starting point. Visiting Israel with our children remains a priority, as well as making ourselves knowledgeable about the country's history and political system. The fact that Birthright has sent more than 900,000 Jewish young people to Israel from around the world is one of the most remarkable achievements of the diaspora and has transformed Jewish lives the world over. Let us tenaciously hold on to that which makes us Israel, our people and its land, even when we disagree. Let us pray fervently that this latest proposal will bear fruit and that the war will end and the hostages come home to their families.

I am keenly aware of the fact that this will be my last Yom Kippur sermon in this room as your Senior Rabbi. I have been speaking in the community hall every Yom Kippur since 1982: 44 years times. To serve in this capacity has been a great privilege and I am so grateful to each of you for making it possible. It probably would not surprise you to learn that I have been paying attention to Moses' last orations to the people of Israel before he turned the reigns of leadership over to Joshua. He spoke to the people in this transitional moment and said to them something that I wish to impart to you.

That which you seek, that which is needed in this moment, is not beyond your reach. *Lo Bashamayim Hi*: it is not in heaven, *lo Me'ever l'yam* nor is it beyond the sea. No, the thing is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart. My friends it begins with embracing that which has sustained us, the Aitz Hayim, the tree of life, our Torah and tradition.

On Rosh Hashanah I shared the words that Moses spoke to those that would follow him. Knowing that it will not be an easy path ahead, I offer them to you this day:

*Hazak V'Amatz: Be Strong and Be of Good courage.*

We are part of a remarkable people that have gone forward in every generation. We are not the *ever-dying people* as one author once wrote, we are the ever-living עִקְשָׁנוֹת, tenaciously evolving people. Like those who stood in Bergen Belsen and sang Hatikvah, like those who left the former Soviet Union, like Eli Sharabi, who suffered the murder of his wife and children and endured more than a year as a hostage and yet chose life. Each serve as a living embodiment of Jacob who became Israel by wrestling the Angel and holding on till he became Israel. The wrestling match has not ended. We are actively engaged. Just as Jacob's descendants have tenaciously continued to struggle with God and Man, emerging victorious, deserving of the name Israel so shall we.

Hazak V'Amatz

Am Yisrael Chai: The People of Israel live!