



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

Reflections from November 2023 Rabbinic Mission to Israel Rabbi Barry Dov Katz

Israel Mission During Gaza War

Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale

(Adapted from D'var Torah on Shabbat, December 1, 2023, Parshat Vayishlach)

When you turn on Waze in Israel these days you can only see your car on the road. Even if you are in the middle of a huge traffic jam, there are no other cars pictured on the app. This was done so that Hamas terrorists cannot use the app to identify crowds, places where lots of cars are sitting still, and make those cars and the people in them, into targets. When you look at the picture on the screen, you are *levad*.

While I was in Israel on a rabbinic mission from the Hartman Institute last week, that was the word I heard over and over again: *Levad-Alone*.

As in,

- “I was in a safe room for 12 hours *levad*-alone before I was brought to safety.”
- “The terrorists who knocked on my door and asked in Hebrew, ‘Are you *levad*-alone or with kids?’”
- “As a woman, I feel unseen, *levad*-alone, when international feminist communities of which I am a part cannot bring themselves to believe Israeli women and girls who were victims of gender-based violence.”
- “I don’t want American Jews to feel *levad*-alone with rising antisemitism.”
- An Israeli academic, who has three children in the army, one in Gaza, said, “I need you all to breathe with me. I can’t be strong *levad*-alone.”

But I also heard the word in another context—*Lo Levad*-Not Alone.

As in,

- “Even when I was in that safe room, I knew that I was *lo levad*-not alone because the other members of the kibbutz were sending me whatsapps checking in on me.”
- “After my parents were killed by the terrorists, a neighbor on the kibbutz told me that I would never be alone—*Lo tehihi levad*.”
- In Tel Aviv, there is a place that is now called *Kikar Hahatufim*, Hostage Square, a makeshift setting for families to come and be with each other and for others to come to express support. Eden Zecharia is one of the hostages. Her aunt comes there every day

holding a sign with her niece's picture because she feels less alone-*pachot levad*-there.

- At a prayer service for victims of gender-based violence organized by Sara Segal Katz with a special focus on the atrocities of October 7, an activist said, “Wherever you are, if you are a victim, *at lo levad*-you are not alone.”
- *Lo Levad*: There is a palpable sense in Israel that Israelis are showing up for one another in incredible ways. People talk about the shift from the deep divisions of the first nine months of 2023 to a sense of unity and common purpose post-October 7. There are pop-up organizations that take care of everything from meals and warm clothing for soldiers and food and other material needs for the more than 100,000 Israelis who were evacuated from their homes, to outreach to families of the bereaved and more. And many of these pop-up organizations are staffed by a mix of secular and religious, right and left, Jews, Muslims, and Christians, Israelis who are part of the Druze, Bedouin, Palestinian and Jewish communities. For the time being, many of the people who could not talk to one another on October 6, now see each other as people with a common cause, people committed to making sure that no one feels alone.

The night before Yaakov is supposed to meet his brother, he sends messengers to Esav, and then goats and sheep and camels and cows and donkeys...He made sure that his wives and children were safe for the night and then the Torah plainly says,

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ׃

“Jacob was left alone-*levado*.”

But as Rabbi Joel Pitkowsky notes, the next words make it clear that Jacob was NOT ALONE because the next words are,

“And a figure wrestled with him until the break of dawn.”

There are several ways to square the first and last parts of the sentence:

Maybe at first he was alone but then a figure came along?

Or the figure was the angel of Esav?

Or maybe this all happened in a vision; so Yaakov was technically alone?

Or maybe he wrestled with his own conscience, represented by this figure, in which case he was alone?

Rabbi Pitkowsky, who was also on the mission, shared another possibility, “Yaakov thought he was alone but he really wasn’t.” There are times in all of our lives when this is the case. We feel alone but then we realize that we are not.

Israeli Jews feel alone these days. This is more than a feeling. They see nations, organizations, news agencies, and individuals failing to respond with moral clarity to October 7 and the war Israel is fighting with Hamas. They know about the protests against Israel around the world and on college campuses. They understand that, in many ways, they are alone in this war.

And, perhaps, because of this feeling, almost everyone I met spoke of the relief they felt watching long segments of the Nov. 14 rally in Washington DC. They were moved that American Jews and others showed up in extraordinary numbers. They were overwhelmed when I described the work we are doing here in the congregation.

When the participants on our mission, an interdenominational group of women and men, got off the bus and told the Israelis we had come to visit, “We are rabbis and Jewish educators from North America who represent thousands of diaspora Jews. We are here to try to express care, support, and solidarity in whatever form you need,” they were overwhelmed. And instead of focusing on the fact that some of us didn’t fit their image of what a rabbi looks like, they just said over and over again, “Todah-Thank you for coming. Especially now.”

The first time this happened, it felt strange. You are thanking me?! Given all the ways that Israelis are stretching right now, our simply coming did not feel like much. I shared this with Rabbi Dani Segal, a friend and a teacher on the Hartman faculty. He wrote me a note after we said goodbye to each other in Jerusalem,

“Yaakov always feels like he must meet Esau. This explains why he went out of his way [to do this]. It is a long road from Haran to Beit El but he insists on going to see him and insists on meeting him....There is something about being in person. Nothing meaningful happens until he is actually there. Barry, this is what you did. And we all felt this very strongly. If I were you, I would speak about presence this Shabbat. To tell people how important it is to come and be present. This is exactly what you all did.”

The day after I arrived in Israel, I visited five of the six kids from the shul who are on gap year programs. I brought them gifts. One of our kids is at a women’s yeshiva in the north and I know some of the leadership there. When they heard I was coming they asked me to speak about this moment from the perspective of an American rabbi. They asked a lot about antisemitism with one student stopping me in my tracks by asking, “At this moment, where do you feel more secure-in Israel or America?”

When I first considered this mission, I wasn’t sure about going. I wondered: Am I going more for myself or for Israelis? How does one show up at such a hard time and have the visits and

discussions feel authentic, caring and sensitive? How does one show up with the required modesty and humility? Can I really help people in Israel feel less alone?

What I appreciated about this mission was that it took these questions seriously and encouraged us to simply listen.

We listened to four women from Holit, a kibbutz in the South, talk about their experiences on October 7. They sat alone in their shelters as Hamas terrorists rampaged through their kibbutz. One woman turned to her eldest son when she thought the terrorists were about to break in and told him to recite the *Shema*. He said, “*Ima*, I already did.” Somehow the terrorists did not make it inside. These women fought for their lives as they escaped. By the end of the day, 11 of the 84 members of the kibbutz were murdered along with two migrant workers. As I struggled to take this in, I was overwhelmed by the ways these four women’s lives were intertwined before the massacre and the way they and other kibbutz members are trying to rebuild communal life even as they know that it is not yet safe to physically return to their kibbutz.

Our group met with Jon Polin and Rachel Goldberg, parents of Hersh who is a hostage in Gaza. They spoke of the ways they are working together with other hostage families, how they are surrounded by friends who come to their house every day to try to raise the world’s consciousness to help free Hersh and the others. Rachel said that as much as they know they are surrounded by so many loving people, “We live in a different universe than the rest of you. We live on the planet beyond pain, despair or tears. The planet of agony.” Rachel said that they know the Jewish community is with them, but where is the world? She wants to expand awareness and encourage activism in other faith communities. She and Jon recently visited the Pope. After they showed the pope a graphic video of Hersh’s abduction, he was clearly shaken and said, “What you’ve experienced is terrorism and terrorism is the absence of humanity.” It is. The absence of humanity is another kind of being alone. And its effects will be long felt by Israelis and the people of Gaza.

As I mentioned earlier, the trip was organized by the Hartman Institute. They mobilized graduates of their Rabbanut Yisraelit Program, their rabbinical school, to plan and lead most of the sessions and experiences. These Israeli rabbis introduced us to people they knew. With them, we spent time with evacuees from Kibbutz Magen who, eight weeks later, are still living in a hotel near the Dead Sea. We heard a congregant of one of the rabbis talk about making films of survivor testimony so that these atrocities are documented in a careful and sensitive manner. On our last day, we volunteered with Israeli rabbis and talked to them about what it means to provide leadership and pastoral care to a nation where everyone has experienced trauma.

Our group listened to scholars from the Hartman Institute and others share broad perspectives on the theological, internal political, geopolitical, and social impact of this moment in Jewish history. And we heard them share searing personal stories of being parents and spouses sending their loved ones to the army during a war.

Many of the speakers shared some version of what I have been feeling: They do not want innocent people and children in Gaza to suffer or be killed. The situation is tragic. Despite the despair and anger of this time, most Israelis want peace with the Palestinians and their Arab neighbors, even as there are many opinions (just as there are in our own CSAIR community) on how to get there. Some shared their critique of the government, but feel they need to work together so that the hostages can come home, Israelis can safely return to their homes near the borders, and Hamas is not a threat.

The Goldberg-Polins shared how important peace and coexistence is for their son, Hersh, and explained that of all the nations of the world, Germany is a leader in advocating for the hostages. This is partially due to Hersh's friends from the world of soccer who have mobilized others. With a nod to the awful history that makes this fact capture one's attention, they added, "It gives them hope that perhaps in 80 years, Hersh's grandchildren will be playing soccer with Palestinians. Even when nothing seems possible, anything can happen."

Dr. Yossi Klein HaLevi, one of Hartman's scholars, spoke of how depressed he was on October 6 with the state of Israel and its internal divisions. He then listed all of the ways that October 7 has shaken Israelis' sense of security and raised hard questions. But, while no one would have wanted it to come this way, he said that with everything they lost, Israelis have regained a basic sense of cohesiveness. The fault lines are there and will reemerge. But there is a renewed confidence in Israel's ability to find a common language and the capacity to pull through this. And a credible hope that Israeli and American Jews will be able to share a common language around Jewish peoplehood. When he said that last part, it was clear that he was incredibly relieved to have found his way to believe in our shared future.

While in Israel this past week, the fighting between Israel and Hamas was on pause. While still grieving, people could imagine not opening the paper the next day to news of more death. Those with children and loved ones at the front slept a little better. There were expressions of joy as hostages were released along with anxiety about the fate of those still held in Gaza. Israel's breathing slowed a bit.

I wonder if Yaakov felt his breath slow down in the morning. It seems like despite his wounds, as the sun rose on his meeting with Esav, Yaakov felt less alone. He names the place of his encounter, Peniel, which means, The Face of God. And then he goes to meet his brother, Esav.

When I got off the plane from Israel early Friday morning, my breath was slower than before I left. But as I watched the sun rise here, I heard that the pause in fighting ended with an attack on Holit, the kibbutz where those four women lived. While I waited for my bags at Newark Airport, I texted my friends in Israel and Israelis here, made some online donations to organizations doing good work, wrote to elected officials asking them not to forget the hostages and thanking them for their support. I don't know how this made anyone else feel, but I felt less alone. Less *levad*.

*In the light of the Hanukkah,
May we see each other
May we feel God's presence
May we all know peace.*