

Chief Rabbi's Speech

'May He who makes peace in high places, bring peace for us and all the people of Israel and let us say Amen.'



Tamar Kedem, living on a Kibbutz near Oz in Israel. She was in touch with friends in Australia whom she messaged "Hi guys, we're doing okay, we are in a safe room in our house." One hour later, Tamar wasn't answering any calls, nobody could get in touch with her. That is because Tamar, her husband Yonatan, the very young daughters Shachar and Arbel and their son Omer had all been mercilessly and brutally murdered by terrorists. This is one of numerous incidents of heinous crimes which have been perpetrated in the last few days.

Here in the UK, we recall the life of Nathanel Young Zichrono Livracha Hashem yikkom damo. We are deeply concerned about Jake Marlowe who is missing, both graduates of JFS School. Together with so many others. When getting in touch with family and friends, the first question is how are you? How is family? How is everything? That is because hardly a single Jewish family in the UK doesn't have a direct connection to Israel at this time.

This evening in our service, we will be drawing inspiration from the book of Psalms. We will be chanting this verse from Psalm 122 'Lema'an acha verei'ai adabberoh-no sholom boch'. It's a call to Zion, for the sake of our brethren, friends. We seek your peace. That is the call that we issue this evening, 'Lema'an acha verei'ai', we have brethren in Israel. Parents, siblings, children, nieces, nephews, we have friends there. Israel is the very heart of not just the Jewish people, but the Jewish faith.

We send out a strong message to 'acha verei'a', our brethren and our friends in Israel this evening. You are not alone, we share your pain, we are crying with you. We share your anguish; we share your fate and your destiny, and we will always stand shoulder to shoulder with you in your time of stress. It has been so encouraging and heartwarming for us to receive so many messages of support and solidarity. Having emerged from the two-day festival of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah last night, I have been flooded with so many messages from treasured friends, faith leaders and political leaders. That is because no civilised person can be unmoved, no civilised person cannot be deeply shocked, having seen the sites that have unfolded the last few days.

Prime Minister, thank you for your messages of support. To have seen 10 Downing Street lit up last night, sent such an extraordinary message not just to us, not just to Israel, but throughout the Jewish world, throughout the decent world. We thank Sir Keir Starmer, leader of His Majesty's official opposition, for his statements of support and solidarity for our community, for Israel. We thank leaders of other parties together with so many.

But Prime Minister, this event was put together in such a short space of time. When we issued the invitation, you responded saying you want to attend, you turned your diary upside down to be here. Not just to be here but to speak here too. A good friend is not just somebody who is with you when you celebrate, a good friend is also someone who is with you in sorrow. The best of friend is with you when you are in sorrow and others are questioning you. Because good friends are able to differentiate between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, between true and false between right and wrong. And Prime Minister you are a great and wonderful friend of our Jewish community and of the State of Israel.

No words can adequately encapsulate our feelings of gratitude for you being with us right now. We know you and your government and with some exceptions and yes there are some exceptions, that you and your government and the British people are solidly behind that which is right and false go against that which is wrong.

In our Psalm 120 we will declare 'Ure'eih-vonim levoneicho sholom al-yisro'eil'. 'God, may You bless us to see our children's children and may you bring peace upon Israel.' What's the connection between being able to see your children and your grandchildren and peace upon Israel? The connection is that it is possible that in the absence of peace, lives will be taken, people will be murdered, and parents might not see their children, grandparents might not see their grandchildren and maybe they will die or be murdered, maybe even the grandchildren will be killed.

'Shalom Al Yisroel', but peace upon Israel is the natural yearning and prayer of every Jewish soul. That is why in Psalm 120 we declare 'Ani Shalom vechi adabber hemmah lammilchamah' – 'I am peace, but when I speak about peace all they want is war'. That I believe encapsulates what we are enduring right now. 'Ani Shalom' it is not just I am for peace, but Ani Shalom – I am peace. We the Jewish people are synonymous with peace, that is what we yearn for, that is what we want, that is what we pray for. Peace comes at the heart of every single synagogue service and ceremony.

However, 'hemmah lammilchamah', sadly and tragically you cannot deny it, that's all our enemy right now is interested in, 'milchamah', war. Israel is aiming to kill murderers, Hamas is aiming to kill innocent men, women, and children. Every civilian in Israel right now is on the front line of this war and Israel has a responsibility to defend herself. The prime responsibility is to make the country secure, and our foes are terrorists, let no one question that. Let no one ignore the fact, they are seeking to brutally murder innocent civilians. When innocent Palestinian civilians die or are killed, that was not the intention. Of course, our hearts go out to all those who suffer the loss of innocence. Israel must continue to do whatever it can for the sake of her citizens.

In Parshat Pinchas, we read about a plague of death amongst the Jewish people. In numbers chapter 26 God gives a commandment through Moses to the people 'Se'u et-rosh kol-adat benei-yisra'el', count the number of the people of Israel. There are two conflicting Midrashim, what was the purpose of this census? One Midrash says it is like a shepherd who had a dear flock and then wolves came and attacked the sheep and after some were killed, the shepherd counted his flock in order to know how many were missing. The other Midrash says, it is like a shepherd looking after his flock, wolves attack them, afterwards the shepherd counted his flock to know how many had survived.

Rav Soloveitchik taught from here, that through Jewish history we go through two phases when it comes to conflicts, when it comes to attempts to annihilate us. Firstly, we count those who are missing and afterwards we count those who have survived. Right now, we are going through that first phase, we are counting those who are missing. We are hearing reports hour on hour, more and more, people who have been mercilessly killed. The number now has exceeded 1000 with many thousands who have been injured, with over 130 innocent pure-hearted men women and children, some elderly, some tiny, who have been dragged from their homes, paraded in streets and who are now being held as hostage. We do not know where some people are, we are still counting the missing.

Rav Soloveitchik says, "we will emerge into the next phase, and in the next phase in Jewish history, we start to count those who have survived". We look to the strength that we have for the sake of the future, 'Shebechol dor vador lomdim aleinu lechaloteinu', as we say at the Pesach Seder, 'in every generation there are those who strive to annihilate the Jewish people'. 'VeHaKadosh Baruch matzeainu me'adam', 'but Almighty God always saves us, we prevail'. Once we start to count those who have survived, we draw our inspiration from those who went missing and those who were killed, and we guarantee that the forces of light will always prevail over the forces of darkness and peace will prevail against every possible enemy.

Israel today is strong, yes Israel has gone through numerous trials during the past year, but Israel is strong and even stronger because the Jewish world is with Israel and so many others in the world are with us at this time. There is no doubt, even though we still will face added trauma and God forbid may it not be deep. We will nonetheless emerge, and we will be strong to face many more years. This Shabbat we read from the beginning of the Torah and in the biblical count of creation we see how the world at first was bathed in darkness, but out of that, God created light. We see how at first the world was filled with 'Tahu Vavahu', 'chaos, confusion', but that was followed by order and peace and that tonight is our prayer. That the darkness we are currently experiencing will pave the way for peace for us and the entire region and that the chaos and confusion will lead to the period of order and of peace.

May it happen swiftly, decisively, and successfully, not only for now, but also for the long-term.

'Oseh Shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu V'al kol Yisrael V'imru Amen.' 'May He who makes peace in high places, bring peace for us and all the people of Israel and let us say Amen.'