

## **Sermon delivered at Temple Micah in Washington, D.C.**

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The Tel Aviv coast line reveals itself through the plane window as we prepare to land at Ben Gurion airport.

I am here to escape the headlines and news stories which have been the lens through which I've viewed Israel since October 7th. I have longed to be here in these dark days, to see and experience Israel myself, through my own eyes. To be within the embrace of Israeli society.

At the seemingly empty airport I am greeted not by bustling human motion, but by pictures of the hostages. I imagine them, just an hour south of here.

My first stop is Hostage Square at the heart of Tel Aviv, which is full of makeshift vigils. There's the hundreds of connected empty picture frames, a gigantic clock that counts the time the hostages have been in captivity. There are candles and signs and flowers. Nearby, a school group of young Orthodox girls sing Hannah Senesh's Eli Eli.

When evening is near I walk west on Gordon en route to the shore, but there's no escaping the images and vigils for the hostages. They are everywhere—in the windows of stores, on street benches, on signs plastered to buildings.

The hostages' heartrending absence is the thrum of daily Israeli life.

At the beach my gaze lingers on the darkening skyline. I glance south toward the ancient port of Jaffa and think about Gaza, of the souls there who are also witnessing the sun's final bow. *I'm not sure Israelis are thinking the same thing.*

The next day, Shabbat, I see Nani's Aunt, Ruthie, along with three of her four children—Nani's cousins: Alon, Avital, and Boaz. This occasion is particularly meaningful as it marks a reunion. Until today, Alon has been stationed in Gaza, separated from his two young children. I have a lot of questions.

Alon's been to Gaza before, first, in the early 2000's when he was fulfilling his mandatory military service. He was among the twenty-four thousand Israeli soldiers assigned to protect approximately eight thousand Jewish settlers.

He returned in 2005, as part of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the removal of all Israeli settlements under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. At that time, Alon found himself tasked with physically removing the settlers from their homes, which he did with tears in his eyes.

He was reactivated a third time, in 2014, amidst frequent rocket barrages from Gaza, which posed a constant threat to Israelis living on the Gaza border. He spent a month in Gaza that year, stationed in a tank.

Throughout all this, Alon, who's just a few years younger than I am, finished school, started a career, got married, had kids, but Gaza persisted as an undeniable reality in his life.

After dinner I snap a quick selfie and head home.

Saturday, a strange Shabbat for me, I catch a 6:00 a.m. bus to a Moshav—a farming collective—called Pri Gan, which is along the Gaza border almost as far south as Egypt. I am with other Israelis, and people like me who've come to Israel in solidarity, and we are here to pick tomatoes.

On October 7th, Pri Gan was one of the many communities attacked by Hamas terrorists. But it was fortunate. A group of five Israelis bravely defended the Moshav, saving so many lives before being killed by Hamas terrorists. Their names were Avi Zidon, Oriel Bibi, Bechor Sueid, Aviad Gad Cohen, and Reuven Shishportish.

In the ensuing days, 37 of the Moshav's 50 Thai workers returned to Thailand, and since then, the Moshav has relied on volunteers to harvest their crops. Every day Israeli school children, families, groups brought by organizations like *Achim B'neshek* or Leket Israel—the group that brought me—come to help.

We start picking. It's not long before we hear the distant cadence of machine gun and artillery fire coming from Gaza, which is just three miles away. A seasoned volunteer tells me, "Don't worry, that's us," referring to the IDF. While I feel assured of my safety, a sense of sadness lingers, acknowledging the deeper implications these sounds hold. *I'm not sure Israelis are thinking the same thing.*

Hours later, our bodies sore and clothes dirtied, we finish picking and a table is set with baked goods and salads. We eat, board the bus, and drive north toward Tel Aviv. Along the way we pass the site of the Re'im Music Festival Massacre, Kibbutz Be'eri, Nachal Oz, and Kfar Aza. They

are ghost towns, their residents refugees. Will they return? How could they? How could they not?

Havdalah. I attend a rally at Hostage Square with thousands of other people. Together we listen to pleading, pained speeches by family members of those held hostage. The crowd chants *bicherot akshav*, elections now, and the anger and frustration at Netanyahu and his government is palpable.

Here there are layers upon layers of complexity. Bring Them Home Now! Elections Now! And in the very same breath—Destroy Hamas! How can they hold each of these ideas simultaneously? How can they not?

Early the next morning I return to the Gaza border, this time, to a Moshav called Pa'amei Tashaz. I meet Smadar who raised her children here, whose husband's family has been here for generations. Cigarette in hand, she shows us with practiced grace the proper way to pull a clementine from a tree. She embodies the kind of Israeli I admire—resolute, straightforward, perhaps blunt, yet warm and affectionate. The air is thick with the pleasant aroma of citrus blossom.

Before the war, Smadar employed twenty-five Gazans, benefiting from the 18,000 work permits issued by the Israeli government in recent years for Palestinians to work within Israel.

I ask here, "Will you rehire them one day?" She's taken aback, and then quietly shakes her head, disheartened. "How could I?" she says with a disbelieving smile, "the trust is gone."

Monday I board the train bound for Jerusalem to visit a former teacher, now a cherished friend. He is of the Israeli left, and for this reason I am particularly interested to hear his insights. After telling me of the seemingly endless funerals he and his children have attended, and what it's like for them, he tells me—maybe a bit sheepishly?—that now is the moment for Jews to turn inward, and it takes me a minute for this to compute, because at Micah I'm so used to the language of turning outward, of reaching beyond our own community. Turn inward?

He shares with me a poem translated from Yiddish titled "Good Night Wide World," written by the Polish-born poet Jacob Glatstein in April 1938.

The poem opens: "Good night wide world, Great stinking world... With the Yellow patch – burning – With proud stride I decide, I am going back to the ghetto... (to) My worn-out Gemaras, to arduous Talmudic debates, to lucent, exegetic Yiddish, To Rabbinical Law, to deep

deep meaning, to duty, to what is right. World I walk with joy to the quiet ghetto light... Good night. It's all yours, world. I disown My liberation... Within me weeps the joy of coming home."

Again, I pause. When Jacob Glastein says "I am going back to the ghetto" he's rejecting the world that gave birth to Enlightenment Judaism, our Judaism—a Judaism wherein you can be part of the wider world, as a Jew.

But Glastein was on to something. The Jewish enlightenment in Europe which aimed to modernize Jewish life by promoting secular education, assimilation, and integration into wider society, failed. A year after Glastein wrote "I am going back to the Ghetto," Germany invaded Poland and within seven years, 90% of the Jewish population of Poland would be dead. Maybe the Jews should have turned inward?

But in America, and in Israel, our response to the destruction in Europe was *not* to turn inward. In keeping with Herzl's original vision of what Zionism is, the State of Israel was established for the sake of the Jews albeit with a universalist mission. (Herzl named his weekly Zionist publication *Die Welt*, meaning, the The World, exactly for this reason). And in America, too, we celebrate our lives as *American Jews*, as people of the wider world. We uphold Hillel's famous words that a thriving existence depends on turning outward.

And yet, in this crucial moment, my friend's message aligns with the stark reality I witness in Israel: the nation cannot turn its gaze outward, not now. Not now, as they endure the ongoing grief over the loved ones slain on October 7, and since; not now as their family members are still hostages in Gaza; not now as their children are still serving in active combat in the army.

All these realities grip the hearts of the people, it consumes them. All this while they grapple with the continued brutality inflicted by their neighbors, Hamas, who persistently declare their intentions, "We're coming for you again."

Israelis have always exemplified the resilience of the Jewish people, and perhaps that resilience comes, in part, from knowing when to turn inward. Can we criticize them for this? I don't think so.

Perhaps we take a cue from them and, faced with a shocking antisemitism from even those we thought were our friends, embrace introspection ourselves. This doesn't imply abandoning the endeavor of turning outward—far from it. As my teacher perfectly put it, similar to the pandemic when we confined ourselves at home for a year, it didn't signify a permanent state.

There's a moment for reaching out, but there's equally a moment for family and standing steadfast with our own.

The next day I prepare to leave the cocoon of the Jewish State, back to the wide world, great stinking world. Soon, I'll reorient my gaze, because we can never disown our liberation, such is the mission of the Jewish people, to, even in exile, build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. But for now, my comfort comes from within.