

An Uncertain Quest for Certainty
Rosh Hashanah ~ 1 Tishrei 5786 ~ 23 September
Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa

Shanah tovah. It's good to be with you again. Josette and I hope that in a world filled with uncertainty, you will be blessed with a year filled with laughter and love, health and happiness, satisfaction and serenity, prosperity and peace.

As some of you know, we are reverse snowbirds. We go to Israel in July for the summer heat and return to Canada for the winter. Last July, we returned to Jerusalem, having missed the 12-day war with Iran, only to discover that we had brought with us a bit of Ottawa and Toronto: a light rail was being constructed directly in front of our apartment building.

We finished our first Shabbat dinner with family when warning sirens began, and all of us went downstairs to the *miklat*-shelter of our building. The Houthis were welcoming us to Israel. Our youngest grandson, Lior, later told us two jokes: What do you say when awakened by sirens? "*Good Warning!*" What do you say when you come out of the shelter in the middle of the day? "*It's after-boom.*"

Though Jerusalem is targeted less frequently than the Negev, Tel Aviv or the coastal cities, sirens have sounded for us — with grandchildren on a sleepover, our walking, during a Zoom meeting. Warnings about emergency procedures — whether in fields, at performances, in malls or museums — are posted. Uncertainty abounds.

Israeli society zigzags between hopes for ceasefires, stalled talks for hostage release — the living and dead — and disagreement about military action in Gaza. All contribute to social conflict. The Government's efforts to oust the Attorney-General, the need to call up soldiers for additional reserve service, and controversy over exemptions for Haredi yeshiva students led many to question the political leadership of the country. Uncertainty abounds.

An unstable Palestinian economy, attacks on Jews in Yehuda and Samaria, and settler reprisals against West Bank Arabs also foster instability. Recent terrorist attacks at bus stops and hotels make Israeli families worry that another Intifada might be seething. For everyone, particularly for families such as ours, with family members on duty, uncertainty abounds.

In Canada, Jews once felt secure. That sense has eroded. Intimidation of Jewish-owned businesses, the cancellation of Jewish and Israeli voices, and pro-Houthi chants in our streets have not yet brought a strong response from society at large.

Anti-Zionists have targeted tennis and TIFF, cultural performances, parades and political events. Vandalism and shootings at synagogues and schools — from Halifax to Victoria — and violent attacks — on parents with children or an older woman shopping at Loblaws — have shattered daily Jewish life. Uncertainty increases.

The decision of our Government to recognize a Palestinian state further clouds the moral landscape. In the long-term, this might be understandable, but at this time, it seems to reward Hamas violence. And this decision contributes to the social tsunami that threatens Jewish life here. Uncertainty grows.

Last week, Prime Minister Carney had a call and conversation with Jewish leaders from across Canada. His statement aligns with the statement of his predecessor and the statements of other public officials. They clearly are concerned about the safety of Jewish citizens, but their words have proven inadequate to ensure our domestic tranquillity. New laws will be helpful, but what is truly needed is moral clarity and courage to call out evil, promote mutual respect, and revive the norms of decency that once defined Canada.

With these worries - insecurity in our societies and uncertainty in our our personal lives — who shall live and who shall die, who will prosper and who will struggle, whose family will grow or shrink — I recall Adrienne Rich's poetic words:

...we were trying to live a personal life
...But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, ...

Last Rosh Hashanah, approaching the first anniversary of October 7, I spoke about the rope of hope, how *tikvah*, like a rope under tension, stretches but doesn't break. This past year, our rope of hope has been stretched again and again. How do we strengthen it for the future?

A Talmudic vignette:

An elderly woman complained to Rav Nahman about her sukkah being expropriated by powerful public officials. Rav Nahman disregards her, citing a legal principle that if property has been seized by the government, one despairs of its return. The original owner can be compensated, but not regain the property. The woman said to R. Nahman: "I, descended from

Avraham Avinu, with his three hundred and eighteen fighters, cry out, and you ignore me?" (Sukkah 31a)

Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin observes that Avraham and Sarah's despair at childlessness was transformed when visitors paid attention and foretold the birth of Yitzhak. Only after the experience of despair is the re-emergence of hope possible. An example of Avraham's refusal to despair is seen when he courageously battled four kings, a significant enemy force. He gathered 318 fighters, one more than the numeric value of the Hebrew word for despair (יא"ש) (317. Three hundred eighteen represents perseverance beyond despair.

Rav Nahman assumed the woman should have accepted her loss once the wood of her sukkah was taken by the powerful forces of the Exilarch. But she insisted that, as a daughter of Avraham, she had not agreed and deserved justice.

Decades ago, a young Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of "Saadia's Quest for Certainty." The work of the great Babylonian rabbi was intended to save Judaism from uncertain beliefs that might undermine communal faith and practice. How do we continue that quest today?

Maimonides also sought certainty when he articulated the basic beliefs he thought that all Jews should affirm. In the face of intense Muslim intellectual, spiritual and physical challenges, he asserted that Jews had core beliefs that would stand the test of time. Some of you know the phrase *ani ma'amin*; we sing a version of his 12 principles of faith in Yigdal.

I learn from my Jerusalem neighbours, Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son, Hersh, was executed in the tunnels of Gaza. Before his murder, Rachel's words, "We love you, Stay strong, survive," became a lifeline. She encouraged people to wear stickers counting the hostages' days of captivity. I began doing this on day 100. Hersh's funeral was on day 332. Today is day 718.

Even after his death, Hersh's parents urged, "Hope is mandatory. The line between hope and despair is fragile. The hostages and their families need every ounce of strength we can send. I pray we use all of our creative and godly resources to succeed. We must."

In one interview, Rachel reflected: How do you walk through a desert with no water? ...We need wells of water. [In grief, we need wells of solace] to replenish ourselves. The pain of our loss will [grow], but we [must build] strength to carry the pain."

Last year, I mentioned the geography of hope and how Jews carved out islands of faith in tumultuous times. This year, witnessing Israelis in mourning, entangled in many emotions, yet still engaged in daily life, I asked how they do it. This is what they told me.

- Take breaks: vacation, Shabbat, time without news, step away from *tzoris*.
- Spend time with loved ones, friends and family, they are your batteries.
- Share meals, walks, play sports or board games. Create alternate realities.
- Be kind to pets; let them replenish you.

When antisemitism, fear and frustration, anger and anxiety impinge on you, create inner islands — reserves of calm - to cope with the uncertainties that surround us.

Omer Shem Tov, who spent 505 days as a hostage, 454 days alone, lived in constant danger. He had certain survival tactics. He thanked God daily for life, recited *Shema*, did not eat meat and milk together, and made kiddush on water. Eventually, he was allowed to watch the news. When he saw his parents and others continuing to fight for him and the other hostages, “I knew I would get home. I knew I had support.” Knowing that others care about us is a source of strength.

Mary-Frances O'Connor, a neuroscientist, teaches that strong human bonds are physically encoded in the brain. Losing someone creates a neural “hole”. Grieving is the brain's attempt to adapt to a changed world, to create new pathways and deep learning. This is why processing loss takes so long.

In a sense, the uncertainty and grief caused by anti-Zionism and antisemitism require us to relearn our place in the world. Our former assumptions and reality are gone. “...the great dark birds of history [have] screamed and plunged into our personal weather.” We must adjust.

We know that Israel must be strong and tenacious to survive and deter its enemies in a very harsh environment. But we also want Israel to be accepted and respected by Western democracies, the media, and public opinion. Today, these desires are in conflict. Because we are family, our agreement or frustration with Israeli policies doesn't change our deep love. We remain attached even as the reality shifts.

Some mourn the loss of the Israel we knew and loved in our youth. *Ahavat kelilota'yikh*, the love of our youth, is the phrase from Jeremiah embedded in Musaf. We cling to our youthful feelings for Zionism and the rebuilding of our people. Developing a mental map of a different Israel takes time and effort. Deciding what we can support now is difficult. A Jerusalem friend who made aliyah years ago from Toronto told me that his opinion can shift multiple times daily.

A younger generation, lacking those formative feelings, is more susceptible to the critical images flooding social media. Fostering a relationship that transcends particular politics and policies must be cultivated through lived experiences and personal stories, not just arguments.

I deeply resent those who deny Zionism's legitimacy, or denigrate Jewish national identity as imperialist, settler colonialist, and genocidal. Such accusations are historically inaccurate and personally offensive. Our deep connection to Israel, the history of our people, and our awareness of the realities of a complicated, complex nation-state fuel our anger at simplistic and baseless accusations.

We are also awakening to a different Canada, less welcoming as we imagined. Antisemitism is no longer hidden and covert; it is vocal and violent. As we grieve this loss, we must learn to respond — on social media, with technology, and using Canadian law - assertively and fearlessly.

O'Connor writes that the brain's reward for attachment conflicts with the pain of loss. We grieve in uncertainty. We must learn new ways to live with a new reality— personally and publicly.

Our rabbis portray Avraham as standing courageously alone against the culture of ancient Sumer. But a midrash reminds us that Avraham was also initially full of questions and doubts. Only through time, testing, and thoughtful reflection did he shape what became the Jewish journey.

Facing uncertainty, we must deepen knowledge of and connection to our tradition — for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. We cannot take identity for granted. Each of us should develop a short “elevator speech” that captures our faith or commitment.

Think of the woman who challenged Rav Nahman: I am descended from Avraham and Sarah, who refused to yield to *יאוש*, despair. I deserve your respect. We must claim our historical dignity.

Sarah Hurwitz, former speechwriter for President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, captures her own version: Jewish life is about sanctifying life and constructing a community of kindness and justice - *hesed* and *mishpat*- to model to others. Hold onto these ideals.

Rachel Goldberg was asked whether, after her son’s murder, she and Jon regretted making aliyah. She responded: "This is our life. This is our place. We hitched our wagon to the fate and the faith of Israel. Even in tragedy, we feel lucky to be part of the people of Israel. Hope is mandatory.”

For my part, *ani ma’amin*, I believe that God and the Torah tradition place human beings before political ideology: I demonstrate for the repatriation of hostages, for a ceasefire to save the lives of Israeli soldiers and Gaza civilians, and for a legal structure to safeguard individuals. I want Canada to stand for democracy and against hate, and I will advocate with all my strength for justice and safety for Jews and all minorities.

Of these ideals, I am certain. They give me strength, faith and hope.