

## Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE Yom Kippur 5785/2024

*May all the Torah shared below serve as a zechut – as a spiritual merit for the success of the IDF and for all our brothers and sisters in Israel.*

### Sustaining the Awakening

(Kol Nidrei Night)

Omer Barak, a popular Israeli writer and journalist, wrote the following in the aftermath of the Oct 7th attacks. “As part of my soul-searching and what I thought in the past and think differently today, only two words come to mind, two words that I refused to say: ‘I’m Jewish,’”

“Wow. How I hated those two words. At every lecture abroad, I would say that I’m Israeli, and if someone asked about my Jewishness, I would say that I’m not – that I was born Jewish, but there is absolutely nothing Jewish about me. And in the past week, this answer pierces my soul and leaves me no rest”.

“I grew up in a home where there was contempt for Judaism ... I wanted to believe that I was a great man of the world. Author. Journalist. Screenwriter. My Judaism is not part of my identity, it’s not even on my *Teudat Zehut* [ID card]. And I was wrong about that too. For the first time in my life, I realized that no matter how hard I try, I can’t escape it.

“And for the first time in my life, I realized that I also don’t want to escape it”.

“I am proud of my Judaism. I am ashamed that I denied it. I won’t start walking around with a kippah now ... but I’ll seek my Judaism. I’ll seek my God. I’ll seek the identity that so many years and eras have threatened to destroy, and that I mistakenly almost obliterated with my own hands. Today I lit [Shabbat] candles with my children – the first time in my life. We didn’t know what *brachot* to make so we said the Chanukah *brachot* – so be it. And I davened, for the hostages, for the soldiers ... for us ... I don’t know where this journey will take me. I do know that I am Omer Barak. Author. Journalist. Screenwriter. Israeli. And a Jew.”

Since Oct 7th there has been a Jewish awakening both in Israel and in the diaspora. The IDF reported over 60,000 requests for Tzitzit, and thousands of pairs of Tefillin by soldiers not generally observant but who wanted to observe these mitzvot as they fought to defend the Jewish state.

But this post Oct 7th spiritual awakening hasn’t only taken place in Israel. It is also happening in parts of Europe and right here in NYC. Hillel and Chabad Houses on campus have reported spikes in their attendance and according to a recent Jewish Federation survey - of the 83 percent of American Jews who labeled themselves as “not very engaged” in Jewish life, 40 percent are now participating in some form of organized life. Our numbers here at MJE reflect that same figure, our attendance has also been up by 40 percent.

This spiritual awakening isn’t surprising. When you are attacked and called upon to defend yourself or your people, it forces a deeper question: what am I defending? Is it simply my ethnicity that I’m protecting or is there something deeper? What is about Judaism that is worth defending or preserving? Why not just shed our Judaism and assimilate into other people’s cultures? Fighting anti-Semitism demands we know what we’re fighting to preserve. That’s why in the past year when I’ve been asked by companies like

Morgan Stanley, Earnest and Young and UBS to come and speak to their Jewish groups about anti-Semitism, I've instead taught a class which I entitled: "What About Judaism Is Worth Defending?". Because having to defend ourselves as Jews ultimately calls us to explore what it means to be Jewish. That's why Alan Dershowitz once jokingly said to me: "a little anti-Semitism is good for your business rabbi".

So, thank God there's been a renewed interest in Judaism – it's good for business, but what happens when the IDF eventually destroys or contains Hamas and Hezbollah? Or, perhaps more realistically, what happens after we get used to having to defend ourselves and this just becomes our "new normal - what is going to sustain our renewed interest? Rabbi Soloveitchik famously taught that whereas we cannot control *what* happens to us in life, we can control *how* we deal with it. The Jewish people have dealt with the massacre of Oct 7<sup>th</sup> by coming together, by unifying and by further identifying as Jews. The question is, how can we make this new Jewish pride and identity stick? How can we ensure our new founded interest in Judaism will endure?

There are three Biblical heroes of Yom Kippur: Moshe, Aharon and Eliyahu Ha-Navi. Moshe gives us the *Yud Gimmerl Midot* - the thirteen attributes of divine mercy – that constitute the prayer refrain of the day. Aharon gives us the *Avodah* – the Temple service that forms the backbone of tomorrow's Mussaf prayers and looms in the background of our liturgical consciousness: we wax nostalgic for those ancient times and dream of a rebuilt Temple. And Eliyahu gives us not only the soft still voice of the stirring *Unesaneh Tokef* prayer, he also gives us the closing line of the day. When we call out *Hashem Hu H'alokim* – "Hashem, He is our God" seven times as Yom Kippur ebbs away, we are quoting the very words Eliyahu uttered on Har Carmel during his showdown with the *Nevviei Ba'al* with the pagan and corrupt prophets of Baal.

The three heroes of the day, Moshe, Aharon and Eliyahu share one thing in common: they are the three individuals in Tanach who are told by God exactly when they were going to die, and they all react in the same way. Each of them immediately identifies a successor to ensure their legacy would outlive them:

- Moshe taps his protegee Yehoshua to lead the Jewish people.
- Aharon clothes his son, Elazar in the priestly vestments.
- And Eliyahu passes his prophetic mantle to his student Elisha.

Today on Yom Kippur, we also come face to face with our mortality and we do all sorts of things to reflect this. Like a person on their deathbed, we recite the *Vidui* - the confessional. We wear a Kittel, this simple white robe, something we Jews are buried in. Living people eat and drink, but on Yom Kippur we refrain from consuming food and drink. Living people procreate but on Yom Kippur we abstain from intimacy. On Yom Kippur we proclaim that the books of life and death are open today; and in the *Nesaneh Tokef* prayer we will say tomorrow we even articulate the ways that people meet their end: *mi bamayim, mi b'aish* - "who by water, who by fire ...". This year some people added: "who by beeper, who by walkie talkie".

ON Yom Kippur we confront our mortality not to scare us or to freak us out, but to remind us that we are not here forever. Life is fragile. And so, like the three heroes of Yom Kippur who upon learning when their end would be, appointed successors to ensure what they started would not end with them, Yom Kippur inspires to do the same: to do what we need to do to ensure that what we believe in, what we stand for in this world, also survives us.

If we want to sustain the renewed interest in Jewish life since Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>, we need to engage our Judaism in way that resonates with us, and which can ultimately outlive us. And so, if you're a more rationally

oriented person, then this year explore the incredible Torah wisdom of some of the medieval Jewish rationalists like Sa'adiah Gaon and Rambam which I and the other educators at MJE incorporate into our classes or which you can just read about on our own.

If you're a more spiritual person than come and learn some Kabbalah and Chassidut with us. I teach a Tanya class every Wednesday night which explores the relationship between finite, physical beings and an Infinite Creator and spiritual impact of the mitzvot we do – what metaphysically is taking place when we follow the mitzvot of the Torah.

If you're not intellectually or spiritually oriented but on a more practical level you are attracted to the lifestyle Sabbath observant Jews enjoy - the strong family life, the tight knit community and *that* resonates with you, then join us on Shabbat and start being part of our warm and inviting community. I had a student last year who, when I asked him why he joined MJE's yearlong Fellowship learning program, said it was something he was inspired to do on a ski trip. He went skiing with a few of his buddies and they happened to be staying in the same hotel as a group of Jewish Syrian families who had come together to ski. On Shabbat though, the group did not ski. Instead, they prayed together, ate Shabbat meals together and played board games together. He said he was blown away when he noticed no one was using their phones and by the respect the teenage kids were showing their parents. He said he wanted that, so he spent an entire year learning with us and joining us on Shabbat. He did something. He committed to something concrete which made all the difference.

This past February, a colleague of mine Ya'acov Gibber who is a Rabbi in Boca Raton went with 25 of his congregants on a mission to Israel. One of the Nova survivors that the group met by the name of Tomer asked Rabbi Gibber if he could speak with him privately. Tomer told the rabbi: "I was at the Nova Festival. I saw the Hamas gliders and the terrorists landing and firing at every Jew they saw at the festival. I ran to a forest, hoping I could find some thick trees behind which I could hide. I could hear the shots and the screaming behind me. I ran down a ravine and saw a ditch near a tree. I was afraid no tree was wide enough for me to hide behind, so I jumped into the ditch, hoping I could squeeze in so I would not be seen above ground. I was there for five hours before I felt I could safely peek out and see if the coast was clear. When I crawled out, I ran toward a highway, where some soldiers picked me up and drove me to a place from where I could get home." "Rabbi," he continued, "I have my tefillin with me from my bar mitzvah. I have not put them on in ten years. Please drive me down to that ditch. I want to put on my tefillin in that very same ditch and say the Shema."

Rabbi Gibber said he couldn't speak. He hugged Tomer and cried with him and told him. "Of course, let's go". They went to the concert grounds and though October 7<sup>th</sup> was months earlier, Tomer recognized his escape path like it happened yesterday. They walked along the long ravine Tomer had run down and then stood outside the ditch where he had hidden. Rabbi Gibber convinced Tomer to first put on a pair of Tzitzis and then with the help of the rabbi he put on the Tefillin. "Rabbi," he asked, "please come into the ditch with me." They crawled down into the ditch, huddled against each other and then Tomer cried out the Shema with a voice that must have pierced the Heavens.

I'm sure that on a pure psychological level that experience helped Tomer deal process what he'd been through, and maybe a way to express his gratitude for surviving. But by saying Shema in that ditch Tomer was also putting his feelings for being Jewish into something concrete, something that he could eventually incorporate into his life and one day pass on to his children. Saying the Shema, donning Tefillin and all the Torah's mitzvot are transmittable. They are a tangible and enduring way to express the Jewish feelings October 7 awakened within us. Mitzvot have the power to fill our lives with substance and the kind of

meaning we are all are so desperately seeking in our world today. Pick a mitzvah and make it yours. Dedicate yourself to some aspect of Judaism that resonates with you and don't let go of it. That's your ticket to heaven. Not the heaven up there, that's already heaven, but the heaven we're trying to create down here on earth. Let's make this the year we become more seriously engaged in our Judaism. It's the best thing we can do for ourselves while helping to ensure that this spiritual awakening does not fade with the passage of time. I can think of no greater way to elevate the souls of our holy Jewish brothers and sisters who fell this last year. May their memory be a blessing.

## **That One Moment** (Yom Kippur Day)

A couple had been married for 40 years and they were celebrating their 60th birthdays. During the celebration, out of nowhere, a fairy appears and tells the couple: "because you been such a loving couple for so long, I will entitle each of you to one wish".

All the wife wanted was a romantic vacation with her husband, so she wished for them to travel around the world. The fairy waived her wand and boom! The wife suddenly had two tickets in her hand to travel the world. Next, it was the husband's turn. The fairy assured him he could have anything his heart desired. He thought for a moment and then said, "Honestly, I'd like to have a woman 30 years younger than me." The fairy picked up her wand and boom! The husband turned into a 90-year-old man!

Although it's just a joke, it really is incredible what can happen in just one moment.

Yoav Kimmelman, was born in Sosnowiec, Poland into a pious Jewish family of Hassidim, followers of the Gerer dynasty. At the age of sixteen, Yoav was deported to the concentration camps and four years later liberated by the American army at Buchenwald. Yoav somehow survived the Shoah but only to realize he was the sole survivor of his once large religious family. Yoav had a crisis of faith and stopped practicing Judaism. After what he'd been through, he was done with God and with Judaism. The first Shabbat after freedom, he and some of the other survivors found some bacon, which they fried with onions in honor of their first Shabbat as free men. They recited the Kiddush and began to sing *zemirot* (Jewish songs). Yoav later said they did this, not necessarily to honor God, but to show the Nazis they hadn't been defeated. At that point, all Yoav and his friends wanted to do was enjoy whatever good life they could find in Germany.

Working with these young men was an American Chaplain, Rabbi Hershel Schacter, father of my beloved mentor Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter. Rabbi Schacter knew that if there would be anything Jewish left to save in these young survivors, he would have to get them out of Germany, and so he arranged with the Red Cross to bring them to Switzerland for rest and recuperation. Yoav had no interest in going to Switzerland, but Rabbi Schacter asked him if he would at least accompany the group to the railway station to say goodbye to those that were going. Reluctantly, Yoav went and as the train was about to pull out of the station, Rabbi Schacter prearranged with one of the American soldiers to grab Yoav from the platform and lift him up into the moving train. Yoav resisted but he was overwhelmed. He was angry at the Rabbi because he preferred to remain in Germany. At the same time Yoav was moved by Rabbi Schacter's genuine concern for him. It was a feeling he had not experienced in a long time.

Once in Switzerland, the group was taken in by the Red Cross, who had established a DP camp in Rheinfelden for the survivors. Leaders and volunteers from different Jewish groups - from the secular

Zionist Hashomer Hatzair group on the left to the Orthodox Agudah group on the right - were all trying to influence the young men and women to accept their ideology, but Yoav was immune to them all. He didn't want to have anything to do with Jewish life anymore, and anything religious. However, a prominent Rabbi from Lucerne, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchick, (grandson of the great Rav Chaim Soloveitchick) came to visit the camp one Shabbat. Yoav was walking around smoking a cigarette and someone approached him on Saturday afternoon, asking whether he could help make a minyan. They had nine men for Mincha but they needed a tenth. Yoav later in an interview said: "Even though I was an *apikorus*, a skeptic, I was not going to deprive the others of a minyan, so I went inside". They started to pray and for some reason Rabbi Soloveitchik would not read the Torah during that Mincha prayer. "Is there someone who can read the Torah", one of the men asked. No-one answered. Yoav remained silent. The gentleman repeated the question: "Can anyone here read from the Torah?"

Silence.

Finally, Yoav stood up and told the group that even though he hadn't looked at a Torah Scroll in years, he could probably figure it out. Yoav put on a cap, glanced at a Chumash (Hebrew Bible) for a few moments, walked over to the Bimah and stood in front of the open scroll of Torah. He began to chant the ancient melody and started to *lain*, to sing the words from the Torah portion. As Yoav stood before the Torah he said he felt the letters reach out from the parchment and grab hold unto him. He finished reading the section for Mincha and tried stepping down from the Bimah, but the letters would not let him go. Their grip on him was too great. In that moment, he was somehow transfixed by the words and letters of the Torah.

Many years later, an observant Jew once again, Yoav told the interviewer: "... the letters have not relinquished their grip on me, to this day". Yoav Kimmelman recently celebrated the wedding of one of his many grandchildren and is today a father, grandfather, and great-grandfather of dozens of religiously committed Jewish men and women.

Think back to that one moment, that one act which changed everything: Yoav is standing at the train station seeing his friends off to Switzerland and Rabbi Schacter has an American soldier pull him unto the train. That moment changed his life, and really Jewish history forever. Think where Yoav would be today had he remained in Germany, had that American GI not pulled him unto the train or if those Jews did not recruit him for that Mincha minyan.

Each of us has that moment of truth in our live - that one decisive moment where things could go either way. The Talmud teaches - "*Yaish Koneh olamo b'shaa'ah echat*" – one can acquire his share in the World to Come in just one instant. One moment, one decision, can make all the difference.

For me that moment came when I was had to decide between pursuing the rabbinate and entering law, in which my father of blessed memory and much of my family were involved. I had finished all my schooling and was juggling careers until someone offered to help create MJE but only if I decided to do the rabbi thing - the MJE thing full time! "If you want the money to start this organization", the donor said, "you have to choose". It was a tough decision. That was 25 years ago and because of that moment of truth in my life, MJE was created, and thousands of people's lives have been positively impacted, hundreds who are today living lives of Torah, sending their children to Jewish schools. I am eternally grateful to my father z"l for giving me the advice and support he did even though it was a choice *not* to join him and my brother in his amazing work.

Each of us has had those moments in our lives, where we face a life-changing decision - a fork in the road that sets us in one direction and cut us off from another: The time we had to decide whether we were going to break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or stay in the relationship and make it work. The time we had to decide whether we would stick it out in that mediocre job or take a chance and quit and look for something new. Or when on a Friday night we had to decide between an invitation for a Shabbat meal and going out with friends to a bar or to a movie. That Saturday morning, when half asleep, we glanced at the clock and realized if we get up now, we could make it to MJE's awesome services or just turn over and do what most do on Saturdays: sleep in. Those moments, those decisions, the big ones and the small ones, shape us and ultimately develop us into the people we become. Like Yoav when he joined that Mincha minyan and someone called out: "who can read the Torah?". He had a choice and the moment he stepped forward to read the Torah, his life changed forever.

We all have that call in our lives: "who will come forward and read from the Torah?"

Who will step forward and do the right thing?

Who will donate to that worthy cause?

Who will approach that newcomer and make him or her feel welcome?

That one hello, that moment we get out of ourselves to help another person - that one gesture can literally change the world for someone else. That is literally how people over the last 25 years have come into our community, how dozens of people have met their soul mates, how hundreds have become Shabbat observant, through one gesture, one introduction, one moment. It happens in a flash; a split decision to do the right thing that changes everything.

The Talmud tells us of R. Eleazar b. Dordaya whose sexual appetite was so great that he made sure to be with virtually every prostitute in the world. Once he heard that there was a certain prostitute in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of coins for her hire. She was very expensive. Eleazar b. Dordaya took a purse of coins and crossed seven rivers to see her. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: "As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will [you], Eleazar b. Dordaya never be received in repentance".

When Eleazar heard this remark from the women, something hit him. Finally, he began to feel some shame for the lifestyle he was living. He started to pray and cry out to God and involved himself in sincere teshuva (repentance). He sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: 'O, ye hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!' and the mountains and hills replied: 'How can we pray for you? We are in need of mercy ourselves ... so he went to the heavens and earth and exclaimed: 'Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me!' They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves". He then went to the "sun and moon and then later to the stars and constellations and asked the same thing but they also said they too were in need of mercy. Until he finally realized: The matter then depends upon me alone! Elazar placed his head between his knees and wept aloud until his soul departed (he died)".

Then a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming: 'Rabbi Eleazar b. Dordaya is destined for the life of the world to come. Rabbi [on hearing of it] wept and said: One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour! Rabbi also said: Not only are penitents accepted, they are even called 'Rabbi!'" [Avoda Zara 17a]

Crazy story. This man spends his entire life steeped in the physical, and not only is his teshuva (repentance) fully accepted, not only does he merit a share in the world to come but he's called Rabbi! Someone who never studied, let alone taught Torah is called Rabbi?! And what is the meaning of the bizarre behavior of the prostitute? Why does she say what she says and why does Elazar take her words so seriously? Finally,

what is the deal with Elazar's conversation with the mountains and hills, the sun, moon and stars? Why can't they help him and why does he die?

Eleazar b. Dordaya's dialogue with the hills and mountains is the easy part to figure out: the Talmud is teaching us that we cannot turn to anyone or anything else to do teshuva for us. We alone must do the hard work when it comes to making good on our past deeds. Not even nature can intercede on our behalf. That's why we have this day of Yom Kippur to give us the time to make good on our past.

But perhaps the natural world refuses to pray for Elazar to teach us another lesson: Teshuva does not lie within the cosmos, within the natural world. Teshuva is a metaphysical gift from God, something beyond the laws of nature, which dictate that once we do something wrong, there's nothing we can do to take it back. You can say you're sorry, but whatever wrong we said or did, it still happened. Jewish tradition teaches Teshuva *can* turn change things. The Talmud (Yuma 86b) teaches that a teshuva done out of fear transforms a sin into an accident, and a teshuva out of love can transform a sin into a merit! How is this? There is no rational explanation. It is simply a gift from the heavens, something to be taken advantage of today on Yom Kippur.

What about the woman's behavior and her comment? As Elazar was with her, she blew forth breath and said: "As this breath will not return to its place, so will [you], Eleazar b. Dordaya never be received in repentance". The word used is *heficha* - breath. The first time that word, or the derivative of that word, *heficha* is used in the Torah is when man is given his soul: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed (*vayipach*) into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis, 2:7).

The prostitute was telling Elazar that his soul had become irrevocably corrupted. She was able to see that he was lost, maybe in a similar way that she was herself. This shocked Eleazar, who perhaps always thought of himself as flawed, but still redeemable. He probably told himself he was a decent guy who just likes to party a lot, never noticing the extent to which he had deteriorated spiritually. Suddenly, this woman's cynical laugh tells him he is hopeless and finally he becomes motivated to change.

Elazar walks away from the prostitute and separates himself from sin. He wants his soul to be pure again, as pure as it was the day he was born, which explains his next action: "He placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed". Eleazar assumes a "fetal" position and then cries until his soul departs. He symbolically reverses the process of birth and life to achieve the purity his soul possessed when it first came into the world. And this is why he is called "rabbi" because a rabbi is a teacher and Eleazar b. Dordaya taught us a valuable lesson: Teshuva, returning to God is *always* possible and it can happen in a moment's time. All we need is that one moment of clarity, one decision that puts us on the right path.

Who will we date or marry?

Will it be with someone I can create a Jewish home?

Will we dig deeper this year to give more to charity?

How much of our free time will we spend helping other people?

Supporting State of Israel now in her time of need?

Will we visit Israel in the coming year to do some volunteering?

How far will I extend myself to observe Shabbat? To keep Kosher? To refrain from speaking ill of others?

How much time will I spend learning more about Judaism? Coming here to MJE on Wednesdays reading a Jewish book, deepening my understanding of my purpose in this world.

In the coming year will I choose physicality or spirituality? My soul or my body?

Let's take this moment, this holiest moment of the year to choose our soul over our bodies, the spiritual over the material. This year - let's choose the road less traveled.

Now is that moment. Now, as we come before God on Yom Kippur as spiritual beings, as angels, refraining from eating and drinking, immersed in prayer and supplication, now is the time to choose the path of our soul. To choose a new mitzvah - one that will help another human being, and one that will bring us closer to God. Life is short and we only have this moment. But that's all we need. *Yaish Koneh olamo b'shah achat* - we can acquire life in just one moment. Let's seize that moment now on Yom Kippur and in doing so give Hashem Almighty ample reason to bless us all with a new year of good health, peace, purpose and meaning.