

This has been a hard year, and a heartbreaking one. The final shofar blast that brought Yom Kippur to a close was still echoing when the murderous attacks of October 7th – an event that it's hard to imagine occurred almost exactly a year ago – were carried out. And barely any time after that – before our dead were even counted, before a stunned Israel had even begun to respond in any way – statements started coming out from certain groups on college campuses, gleeful and giddy at the devastation, at the violence, at the death, at the horror. And in those first few days after the attacks, while so many of us were still reeling from the reports, the ever-worsening and sickening reports from Israel, as we listened to the number of dead increase, and the number of hostages increase, and the stories and – God help us – images and videos of callous murders and systematic rape started to reach us, when all we could do was stagger and weep under the weight of it all – voices emerged on college campuses claiming that the attacks were fully justified and that Israel was solely to blame for the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas. There was no such thing as an innocent Israeli: somehow, all those murdered and captured had simply gotten what they had coming.

This has been a hard year. And I have grappled every day since October 7th, both as a rabbi and as a father of two children in college (and one who will be starting college next year), with what exactly happened on so many university campuses, how it came to be that these voices reveling in and glorifying the violence perpetrated on October 7th fueled protests and then encampments across the country. This has been a hard year. A year where I saw our oldest son Tzvi struggle not only with his own deep sadness at the horrors of the massacre in Israel and the ensuing deaths of so many civilians in Gaza, but also with the fact that students were turning on fellow students. That rather than acknowledging or empathizing with the fear and suffering their classmates were experiencing, students on all sides were hardening into positions that demonized the other, downplayed the suffering of those who lost their lives, and looked to score cheap rhetorical points.

Tzvi goes to school at Columbia, the epicenter of these protests. So Aimée and I have witnessed firsthand the devastating effects these protests and encampments have had. Tzvi, regularly, walking to Hillel past protestors chanting “Globalize the Intifada,” or being confronted on campus and told he supported genocide. Fellow Jewish students, protesting on campus on Saturday night and being shouted at to “go back to Poland” or being gestured at with signs reading “Al Qasam's next targets,” referring to Hamas's primary military brigade. Friends who were not involved in activism, but were harassed just for being visibly Jewish. What happened, so many of us wondered, to universities as places of learning and inquiry, where people from different backgrounds and with different beliefs could share their perspectives and – if not come to agreement – at least find ways to be in conversation with one another based on their common experience as students and a shared commitment to work toward learning and understanding?

Since the horrific massacres of October 7, I think all of us have been going through a progression of feelings for ourselves – from disbelief, to horror, to deep sadness, to outrage as we witnessed the proliferation of rampant pro-Palestinian protestors who were being shielded from any of the consequences of their actions by hand-wringing university administrators; and perhaps as well to fear or despair as we have seen the resulting massive spike in anti-Semitic assaults and incidents, as the anti-Israel rhetoric inevitably metastasized into vicious anti-Semitism by the emboldened protestors and activists.

I think for many of us, the reactions on campus over the past twelve months have served as a wakeup call for just how far universities have strayed from being the places of inquiry and open debate that many of us remember from our own student experiences. We have seen not only the encampments and occupation of university buildings and the disruption of graduations, but also the way that college administrators feebly proclaimed their hands were tied in terms of taking any kinds of steps to restore order on campus or protect the wellbeing of Jewish students who were being regularly targeted. We all remember the testimony of a number of college presidents before Congress back in December, where they proclaimed that they were helpless to respond to calls for genocide or to hate speech directed at Jewish students unless it was (quote) “directed, severe, and pervasive,” to use the legalistic phrase they all employed to describe when speech crosses the line into harassment. The argument seemed to be that the Constitution protects free speech and the universities either could not or should not abridge it.

As I have noted before, both of these statements are wrong. The idea that universities like Columbia or Harvard or Penn can’t curtail student speech because of the First Amendment is patently false since they are private institutions which are free to establish more restrictive standards than the Constitution allows, and frequently do; back to that in a minute. Public universities do have less leeway, but even they can legally implement policies that would restrict how and where students can engage in certain types of speech to limit harassment. The second part, that universities shouldn’t abridge student speech is also wrong, unless a university sees itself as a place entirely divorced from values or any consideration of the sort of students it is seeking to foster and the qualities and sort of character it seeks to nurture. That would be an approach that says all attitudes and perspectives are equally valid – that promoting cross-cultural understanding and, say, calling for white power are equally legitimate – and we know that this isn’t the way universities operate, and nor would we want them to.

When I say ‘we know this isn’t the way universities operate,’ I think one thing that we’re all aware of – or have become aware of – is that many universities have been making decisions for some time about *certain* kinds of speech being unacceptable and that targeting certain groups of people is anathema. For example, if instead of calling for the genocide of Jews, a student or group of students at any of these schools had called for, God forbid, genocide of Blacks or LGBT people they would have been expelled before they completed their sentence – *and should be!* Campuses have been very careful about protecting certain groups from microaggressions – comments that can be made from ignorance or even with good intentions but which can nonetheless be damaging to the dignity of the people being spoken to or about. But somehow in the flurry of educating students about the harms of microaggressions, administrators failed to recognize how the macroaggression of purposely intimidating Jewish students, of ripping down posters with pictures of the hostages and snatching Israeli flags out of their hands, of marching across campus with chants of ‘from the river to the sea Palestine will be free’ – and of screaming ‘go back to Poland’ at students returning from Shabbat services – of how all these target the dignity and wellbeing of Jewish students, who somehow don’t seem to count as the kind of people deserving of or worthy of protection from university administrators. We know from first-hand accounts of Tzvi and his friends at Columbia that student activists blocked parts of campus and set up ‘no-go zones’ for Zionists, verbally and sometimes physically attacked fellow students who were visibly Jewish, or that one of his fellow students who was part of a group called Columbia University Apartheid Divest publicly declared that “Zionists don’t deserve to live.”

In other words, as much as the objectionable speech itself, part of the problem of the university presidents' answers before Congress was the hypocrisy – the double standard of saying they need to take aggressive steps to protect certain students, while their hands are tied by freedom of speech when it's other types of students who are being targeted. One solution – and one which has been proposed to address the problem – is to eliminate any speech restrictions at all, to avoid any kind of double standard by saying universities should allow any speech that isn't directly threatening or harassing. This approach has the appeal of being easy, but that doesn't make it right. While free speech absolutism has its proponents, Judaism has more often approached speech through the lens of responsibility and obligation: are we using our words to help support values of truth and kindness and dignity? This is why, for example, Judaism takes so seriously the sin of *leshon ha-ra*, of evil speech, which plays such a major role in the transgressions and shortcomings we are called to recognize and account for during these High Holidays and which includes even making a statement that could cause some inadvertent hurt or embarrassment. The onus in Judaism is on the speaker to be mindful of his or her words and their impact on others. Free speech absolutism may be impartial, but I don't know that we as a society *want* to be impartial if, for example, a student is hanging an Aryan Nation banner or a Confederate flag out his window and shrug: hey, nothing we can do, he has the right to say whatever he wants.

The alternative to unimpeded free speech is complicated but, I think, vitally important; and that is for colleges and universities to seriously consider what sorts of values they want to promote and how rules and guidelines about acceptable speech can foster these. As Claire Finkelstein, a professor of law and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania has written:

Though open expression and academic freedom are critically important values in higher education, there are other values that universities must promote as well. For example: encouraging civil dialogue across differences, cultivating critical listening skills, developing the skills to build community relationships, promoting the ability to engage in moral reflection and building resilience in the face of challenge. These normative skills cannot be taught effectively in an environment where students and faculty are hurling calls at one another for the elimination of ethnic, religious or racial subgroups. (she adds:)

Universities must also consider their obligations to the broader society as they prepare young people to assume responsibilities in public life. What values do university presidents think are most important to prepare leaders in a democracy? The ability to shout intemperate slogans or the ability to engage in reasoned dialogue with people who have moral and political differences?

And Harvard professor Danielle Allen, who served on the university's 2018 Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging, writes: "We have been focused so much on academic freedom and free speech that we have neglected to set standards for a culture of mutual respect."

The comments of Professor Finkelstein and Professor Allen highlight a fundamental tenet that Jewish tradition and this Holiday season seek to foster in us. We are called to engage in dialogue – that's a core Jewish value – and there is nothing wrong with voicing challenging ideas or even ones that might make people uncomfortable to hear, but we should do so without attacking or shaming others. We are called to use our words thoughtfully and responsibly, in ways that uphold the critical values of kindness and mutual respect, of freedom, and human dignity. And most importantly at this High Holiday season,

we are called to engage in *teshuvah*: the process of inward reflection and self-scrutiny that leads to understanding and growth. While some of the protestors and activists who have been taking over campuses surely wanted to pursue what they felt was a just and righteous cause, many have come to represent the antithesis of all these values: by lashing out, spreading hate and distrust, dehumanizing others, and indulging in a toxic self-righteousness that makes them believe any action they undertake is justified. Such self-righteousness, such blind certainty in the absolute rightness of one's cause that closes us off from hearing other perspectives, is the opposite of *teshuvah*, of the openness and vulnerable self-reflection in which we are called to engage, the honest and searching questioning that God expects from us.

We are called to be better; and being better means that even as we stand up for Israel's right to exist and defend itself from vicious acts of terror, we shouldn't fall into the corrosive trap of giving in to hate, or of writing off or minimizing the real suffering of innocent Palestinians who have been caught up in this horrible war. It's clear, by the way, that this is in no small part the result of Hamas' evil strategy to embed themselves in the civilian population in order to lead to as many Palestinian deaths as possible to keep the world turned against Israel. But that doesn't and shouldn't make the loss of human life and the suffering in Gaza any less tragic or painful. Being better means that we don't dare fall prey to the same wicked impulses as our enemies, spewing vitriol and dehumanizing those with whom we disagree in ways that make us feel entitled to lash out however we want. We are called by Jewish tradition and by these Holidays and by God to be better: to uphold values of life, and dignity, and respect, and justice, and peace.

This is an especially hard posture to maintain when people seek to demonize Israel or demonize 'Zionists' who support Israel's right to exist. We know that those opposing Israel will seize on any opportunity to portray Israel in the worst possible light, going so far as to accuse Israel of perpetrating a genocide against the Palestinians: a charge that is as obscene in its message as it is deceitful. Those who gaslight the world by accusing Israel of genocide have no interest in the truth, but just in using the most charged and incendiary rhetoric they have at their disposal – rhetoric that's incendiary with good reason, as we still have loved ones among us with tattoos on their arms and memories in their hearts of their loved ones being led to the gas chambers.

It is in connection to this point that my friend and colleague Rabbi Shai Held wrote shortly after October 7, "If you only care about Palestinians when they are abused by Israel then you do not care about Palestinians, you only care about demonizing Israel." This statement highlights the fact that much of the Arab world has generally shown a stunning and callous indifference to the fate of the Palestinians except when they can be used as a wedge issue against Israel, usually to distract their populations from the failures of their own repressive governments. I don't have time to list the litany of examples in these remarks, other than to observe that Egypt shares a border with Gaza, and if it wanted to ease the humanitarian crisis there it could easily let Palestinians in, but this is a step it has steadfastly refused to take and about which no one seems particularly concerned.

Historically, the types of oppression and hardship being faced by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are tragically no different than those a number of other minority populations are facing in numerous places around the world – the Uighurs in China, the Yazidis in Iraq, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the Darfuris in Sudan, among many, many others. This is not to excuse the suffering the Palestinians are experiencing right now; but it does raise the question why there aren't massive protests outside of

the Chinese embassy, why there aren't broad-based calls to divest from Myanmar, why encampments haven't sprung up on campuses across the country against Sudan. The sole and inescapable conclusion is that the protestors are less interested in fighting for justice for oppressed people everywhere than they are in demonizing Israel and in celebrating the attacks against what they laughably perceive as a colonialist, white supremacist state. Those latter charges incidentally, no matter how absurd, highlight how insidious and pervasive the narratives are that underlie the protest movement, and how activists will not allow inconvenient facts to get in the way of their ideological biases. The sad truth, however, is that these narratives have poisoned the minds of tens of thousands of young people who aren't necessarily anti-Israel ideologues, but rather are well-meaning and idealistic college students who care deeply, but are either woefully uneducated or cynically misled about the facts and history.

Taken together the situation looks, I'm afraid to say, pretty bleak as we enter this New Year. Which raises the questions: What can we do and where can we find hope?

I'd like to suggest that one of the answers – one of the most important answers – is found right here, doing exactly what we're doing right now. Coming together, marking the New Year, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of this particular moment and making the choice to root ourselves in Jewish time and values and rituals and community: these are key ways we can find the strength and resilience to move forward with determination and hope. In the face of surging anti-Israel sentiment and straight up anti-Semitism it is more vital than ever that we have places to come together, to be with other Jews in vital and vibrant Jewish spaces, to proudly and unapologetically celebrate our identity, and commit to working toward building a brighter Jewish future. For our college students, this means Hillel houses and Chabads and AEP and ZBT and the other campus organizations that can support them and provide a refuge from what they might be contending with as they go about their daily lives on campus; and all of us should be supporting these organizations at our own alma maters and where our children and grandchildren go. For those of us who aren't students, it means supporting a place like Beth Rishon – yes, financially; but also by volunteering our time and energy, by showing up, by connecting with other community members, by recognizing that we have a stake in keeping this synagogue strong and vibrant whether we're here every week or whether we're here only at this season.

Because now more than ever, we have been given a vital reminder of how important Jewish community is – especially in a place like Wyckoff where Jews represent a relatively small fraction of the total population – and how we can't afford to take this synagogue for granted. I will be honest: I have heard from a number of members of this congregation expressing fear and concern about being too public about their Jewishness in the wake of October 7 – not wanting a child to wear a Jewish star to school, not wanting a spouse to wear a t-shirt with Hebrew lettering, and even more than one conversation about wanting to take down the mezuzah off the front door – and my response is always the same. While we should never be reckless or foolhardy, neither should we allow rising anti-Semitism cause us to live in fear, that we need to redouble our commitment to strengthening our Jewish institutions and to recognizing the importance of living our Judaism with joy and pride. We have to support Israel and recognize the vital importance of a Jewish state for the safety and wellbeing of Jews around the world; even if we don't support all its policies or all its leaders we must keep the importance of Israel at the center, engage with its society and people, and build our connections with those institutions there that reflect our values. Because as I said earlier, we don't want to sink to the level of those that spew hate. And so instead our response needs to be to come back stronger, prouder, more

engaged, grateful for this rich and beautiful tradition we have inherited and committed to do our part to transmit it to the next generation and to the generation after that.

'The next generation and the generation after that': this is how Jews have lived and survived as a small and often despised minority for thousands of years. This is why we can't stand idly by while our children are scared and anxious. This is the promise that has sustained our people through oppression and persecution and worse; a tragic narrative in which the events of October 7 are now indelibly inscribed as the latest chapter. This is the way we have found hope in God's promise that stood for our ancestors and for us – *v'hi she-amdah l'avoteinu* – that even though there are those who seek to weaken or even destroy us – *she-lo echad bilvad amad alienu l'khaloteinu* – that we stand on the side of goodness and right, and God stands with us to help strengthen us in the face of all the forces that oppose us – *v'ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu m'yadam*. And so as I call Adam Fox up to the bimah to help lead us in these powerful and ancient words – words from the Passover Haggadah that have also taken on so much importance in Israel in recent months – I pray we can embrace their message, can dedicate ourselves with renewed fervor and commitment to our precious and embattled people, and can find the resolve to write a good New Year for our families, our community, and the Jewish people, in this year and for endless years to come.