

**Coming and Going:
Kol Nidrei 5785
October 11, 2024**

[Note on the impact of Hurricane Milton.

Welcome community clergy.]

Apparently, the Flat Earth society still exists. There really are those who say: science is a hoax, our world is flat, and we are not on a journey through the universe.

Most of us know, though, that we live on a globe. And so, perhaps, in terms of travel, the farther away you go, there is a chance... of coming back.

I want to speak with you, tonight, of comings and goings. Of going away, and coming back.

Upon high school graduation in North America, while some begin jobs, most of our youth go off to college. Life is different in Israel. Shortly after high school, almost everyone goes into the army. Apparently, enlistment day is a scene you have to see to believe – Jewish mothers by the dozens with umbrellas in one hand if there is a hint of rain, and neatly-wrapped packages of home-made kugel in the other, as they send their children off to serve.

Even at times of relative calm, the IDF is an intense experience. So much so that when they are done, many, many young Israelis take off – for a few months, a year, a decade - to travel, to see the world. To decompress.

One destination exceeds all others in popularity. This is so much the case that the word has taken on a power beyond its own actual borders, it has become a generic term, like Kleenex for tissues or Xerox for copies. Upon completion of army service, Israelis say “I’m going to India.” Even if they are off to South America, I am told, the phrase is “going to India.”

And in India, one city, in the Konkan region on the southwestern coast, stands out as a favorite destination. Many of the Indian shopkeepers in Goa now speak Hebrew.

But something happened last October.

The resort region, at the time, was teeming with young people from two places. There were Israelis. And there were Russians, relocated and warily watching events back home.

And October 7 happened. And on October 8, the Israelis began packing. And the Russians could not understand what was happening.

They had come to Goa, these Russians, to avoid, to evade, to flee a war. The Israelis... they were leaving Goa to go into one.

October 8th. It may be hard, now, to remember what happened, what it was like, in the immediate aftermath.

Do you know what percentage of Israelis who were called came in for reserve duty? Do you know what the response rate was? It was... 150%. Seriously, literally. Many more showed up than were called in.

What in Goa got them going? What yanked, what brought them back, what is it that made them come? And what does that have to do with us?

My friends, I believe the most important question before us this moment, this season, this year is this: are you coming, or are you going? Do you feel a pull, do you sense a bond, is something tugging at you in a way which makes you feel, somehow, still connected to the world of Jewish life and the Jewish people?

Or are you checking out? Is the primary sense one of distance, of alienation, of wanting to be somewhere – maybe anywhere – else?

And sometimes, too, there are those who are surprised, shaken and stirred by the ties which remain. Maybe “Hotel California” is spot on: “you can check out any time you want. But you can never leave.”

So, really, that’s it. Are you coming in, or are you going out? I have arguments, I have examples, I have all kinds of persuasive rhetoric meant to make you care. But I know: you won’t remember “reasons.” Few of us absorb the details of what someone says. What we truly take away is how an experience makes us feel.

A story, which seems to be true. It is October of 1913, 111 years ago. And it is Kol Nidrei. And it is in Berlin.

There, a young man was on his way to “check out.” Thoughtful, idealistic, feeling a connection with all of humanity, what he would later become was far into the future. But on that night, on that eve of Yom Kippur, Franz Rosenzweig was on his way to convert to Christianity.

And something happened. History is not clear on why he went, nor on what it was he felt so powerfully. What we do know is that Rosenzweig stepped into a small Orthodox synagogue that night. It changed his life.

Was it the haunting power of the music? Was it something in the content of the words? Or was it the reawakening of a sense of connection, of belonging, a remembrance of being at home with his people?

Whatever it was, he set aside his plan to leave. And Franz Rosenzweig went on to become one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the 20th century.

I believe that this is a time, a season, indeed a period of history when we are called to come together once again.

The challenges are great, the strife is real, and Jewish life does not feel as easy or un-self-conscious as it did just a year or so ago. Do students with an attachment to Italy or Ireland or Indonesia get stopped on the grass and grilled about their loyalties before being “allowed” to enter a classroom? Do posters

for other organizations get defaced, or torn down? Do biology and math and poetry professors insist on speaking about China or Ukraine or Darfur in the middle of their lectures? (And if they're not talking about Darfur, for God's sake, why not?) Are we going to indefinitely ignore the four hundred plus mass shootings so far this year alone in our own land? Do churches in Europe or in Linwood live with locked doors, limited access, and guards at the gates? Synagogues do – and too many mosques as well.

What others do to us. Actions. And then there are our own reactions, our own sense of peace and place in the world. Do we now think twice about the necklaces we wear, the company we keep, the symbols we place on the doors of our home? Do we hide, or feel pride?

“How can a person know everything at 18 but nothing at 22?” But it is not just our youth. There are those of all ages we have taught to cherish justice, to defend the underdog, who now stand with some of the protests. More on this in a moment, but, for now: do they yet feel a tug, a pull? Do we dismiss them and write them off too easily to avoid hearing what they have to say? Can we not see a thread that ties us together, even now?

This people. This place. Is your bond a burden or a blessing? Is it a source of strength, or a constant struggle? Or both? Sometimes, for some of us, what we are going through only makes us more determined, more committed, it generates pride and purpose. For others, perhaps, it prompts us to pull away. Are you coming in, or are you going out?

It is not just about Israel, in terms of its impact *on us*. I also believe that this is a time to reconnect *with* Israel.

That which was once the source of our greatest unity has become the focus of our fiercest fights. Yes, I guess, now we can see that were swept up in part in a mythic heroic vision, a picture at once naïve and shaped to serve our own needs. It may be equally true that some of the tension now comes from exaggerated disappointment and impossible expectations. But...

We all can see that *some*, much, maybe even most of the anger against Israel comes from hatred and hostility. Some of it, though, does not. And remember that there are massive protests in the streets of Israel as well. This is not so much about Lebanon, or Iran, about which there is wide agreement. But about Gaza? These clashes are intense. And these are *not only* arguments about what will work; they are also real fights about what is right.

I want to stay with this point for a moment. I speak of coming in or going out. And I want to say out loud, I want to acknowledge... This is hard. It is hard to say, and it may be hard to hear. But I think sometimes the stance and statements of the Jewish establishment – even things I may agree with, do *not* reflect the worldview of some of our more idealistic members. Reading them out, saying they are lost, pronouncing that they have no place with us because they dare to disagree with a communal consensus has the effect of keeping people away. I have my own red lines, but this I know: **viewing dissent as intolerable makes coming together impossible.**

To those with doubts who nevertheless still feel even a whisper of connection, I say: we need you. We need your views, your voices, your values, your own authentic selves... to be the whole of who we are and should be as a people!

Personally, I believe that this war was caused by Hamas, Hezbollah and, above all, Iran; that Israel's overall cause is right, its actions mostly taken in self-defense, and it needs our support. I am and remain a Zionist, and view actual anti-Zionism as, at a minimum, at least adjacent to antisemitism. Siding with Hamas, which has happened *far* too frequently in this country, is, of course, beyond the pale. Those who do so are a threat to us.

But it is neither antisemitic nor anti-Zionist to question – or criticize – the conduct of an originally just war. The human cost of this conflict is immense. It's not easy or really fair to compare this to other wars; we are aware of what is going on in Gaza only because of social media and video footage of a kind which, let's be honest, we simply never saw from Afghanistan or Iraq. Or Syria or Sudan.

So, the reactions of those who want Israel to be better... it may not be fair. It may be a higher standard; it may be unrealistic. But that does not mean the questions are not real. And standing up for a just war need not, should not, cannot inoculate us from empathy for suffering on all sides. (Why, after all, do we take ten drops of wine from our cups on Pesach? Why did God stop the angels from applauding death, even though it was of our enemies?)

But still and always, and maybe more than ever before, Israel, with all its nuance, and in all its complexity, needs us now. And, as I have said before, in truth, I believe we North American Jews need Israel as well.

Last year, on Kol Nidrei, I proposed a congregational Trip to Israel in the summer of 2025. Events have delayed our plans. And what I envisioned as a fun-filled family-oriented first-timer Israel 101 package may turn into more of a mission, along with the awe and wonder for those who have never been before. We may be called to combine personal growth with the need to bring presence and support to a part of our family in pain and suffering still. And much will depend on developments on the ground, in the coming weeks and months.

But I would still like to try. I am hoping for a Beth Israel mission to Israel, in July 2025. And to explore our options, I invite you to an Israel Trip Planning Brunch, on Sunday, November 17, here, at 11:30 AM. If you are interested, please let me know. Your involvement and your input, will shape the potential for and program of this trip.

Agree or disagree with particular policies, fierce critics or steadfast supporters of any particular government, in the end, when it comes to Israel, do you feel a tie, or are you indifferent? Do you care, or could you care less? Do you feel bound up with its story, or turned off and sent away? Are you coming in, or going out?

I also believe that this is a time to face another challenge: to stay involved with the world around us. It is easy to pull back from those who have let us down, to cut off those who have disappointed us.

It has been a bitter year with erstwhile allies. Too many of those we walked with on other causes simply were not there for us. Some of us have been stunned by the an absence of support, a lack of concern, brutal insensitivity, or condemnations which come across as utterly one-sided.

But stepping in cannot also mean shrinking back. I believe... I believe that coming back towards one another *must* include an ongoing engagement with the larger communities in which we live.

One question has haunted me this year, a cry from the soul I thought long left behind as part of our painful past. It is the Anne Frank question. It is to wonder, somewhere in the middle of the night, of our neighbors, of our non-Jewish friends: if it should happen here... would you take us in? Would you save my family? Would you be there for me, for us, or not?

But if we are going to ask such a thing, there is something else we should ask as well. If the same question came to you, if a terrified neighbor stood before you, oppressed, targeted, insulted, demeaned, vulnerable, even viciously lied about, if they were fleeing a roundup, afraid for their lives... if the knock came on your door, what would you do?

If you do feel that pull of connection to other Jews, what does that mean in terms of Jewish *ideals*? **As a Jew... and as a human being... who are you?**

We are part of a congregation, a synagogue, a Jewish community that has long stood with others around us. From civil rights activism decades ago to our new Beth Israel NAACP Spirit of MLK Award for local high school seniors, from work with community officials to the recently renewed Bridge of Faith interfaith initiative, we are part of, not apart from, the story of Atlantic City and this region.

And we know those bridges, buffeted by world events, shaky, perhaps, nevertheless yet hold. In the aftermath of the attack, we called Christian clergy and community leaders, and helped coordinate a united Jewish communal response. When I reached out, I had a simple message: whether you know it or not, your neighbors are hurting. We need you. And on October 17, with nearly as many people in this Sanctuary as on this night, the community came.

Doubts were already surfacing, disagreements brewing. But when we said we were in need, our neighbors – and least some of them, more than a few – when we said we were in pain our neighbors came.

Comings and goings. Long ago, we learned a vital lesson:

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאַנִּי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי

Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Pirkei Avot 1:14

Come in, come in! To those who have strayed, to those who have doubts, still, yes, always, you are welcome here. To those who have gone far, it may yet prove to be a journey back. And to paraphrase Cheers, in a sentiment I have expressed before: perhaps it should be a Bar Mitzvah, not a Bar, where everybody knows your name. And we're always glad you came.

With Tolkien: all that glitters is not gold. And not all who wander are lost.

Erev Shabbat, Friday night. It is the regularly scheduled, ongoing weekly gathering of the Jewish people. Then, and there, almost every week – left out tonight because of the holiday - we include a mystical, medieval composition called *L'cha Dodi*. And it our custom, when we reach the final stanza, to rise, to face the entrance, to greet Shabbat as a guest and welcome her into our midst.

May this be the image that lingers, and the impulse that lives on in all of us. May it be a shared sentiment, and a renewed mission. Let us call out an invitation to one another, to meet, to greet, to send a message clear and real and deep from the heart: all are welcome here. Welcome back. Welcome home.

And in a world of choice and almost infinite options, as Franz Rosenzweig learned, being here, together, now... that is its own affirmation of coming in.

This night, we came together with ancient words, and sacred ones. They are a premise, and a promise:

*Bishivah shel malah,
uvishivah shel matah —
al daat hamakom
v'al daat hakahal:
anu matirin l'hitpaleil
im haavaryanim.*

בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעֲלָה
וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה,
עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם
וְעַל דַּעַת הַקְּהָל,
אָנּוּ מַתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל
עִם הָעֲבָרָיִם.

In the heavenly assembly, and in the earthly one, in the sight of God, and in our action and behavior, may we make our peace and find our place peace with each other on this Day of At-One-Ment, this Day of being At One.

Shabbat Shalom. And *L'shanah Tovah*.