

Goodbye 5784; good riddance.

5784 was the year that nearly broke the Jewish people, *Am Yisrael*.

In 5784, we experienced how the tectonic shifts which for decades have slowly been moving beneath the Jewish people collided, causing a massive quake and tsunami.

We will remember 5784 as the year of upheaval that uprooted all we knew about being Jewish.

We will remember 5784 as the most destructive year for the Jewish people since 5705; the year when, at last, Hitler was defeated, and the death camps were liberated.

Yet here we are.

Together on this first morning of 5785, taking stock of the past year, reconnecting with each other, wondering what surprises 5785 has in store for us.

With all that existentially threatened our people and our community in the last year, I am grateful to say that we endured.

In fact, we did more than just endure, we deepened our understanding of how past generations of Jews remained resilient and compassionate in the face of war and other disasters, as a form of resistance, as a form of survival.

You've heard me say many times from this bima  
 that I believe our collective Jewish unity—  
 relearning how to live together in community and communality—  
 is the single most vital path to flourishing for our generation.  
 It is the antidote to so much  
 that ails and alienates us in this moment in history.  
 Thankfully, the path forward  
 has already been paved for us by our ancestors.  
 Judaism is predicated on the concept of *b'rit*,  
 covenantal love, mutual relationships.  
 To be Jewish is to be bound in love and obligation  
 to each other and the divine.  
 To be Jewish is to be engaged in Jewish community;  
 to allow your life to be intertwined and interconnected  
 with the lives of others,  
 some of whom live their Judaism and indeed their lives,  
 very differently than you do.

Bridging our differences is a monumental task,  
 and it always has been for the Jewish people.  
 There *is* something familial about Judaism.  
 We are asked to act like a healthy multigenerational family  
 (I promise there are some out there,)
 where family members are strengthened by the belief  
 that there is more that unites them as a whole entity,  
 then divides them as separate individuals.  
 The Jewish people *are* a family.  
 As Jews, we are commanded to love other Jews,  
 even those with whom we disagree.  
 In the words of our sages, there's always *davar acher*,  
 a different opinion, another idea to embrace.  
 This is why our tradition teaches that to be part of the Jewish people  
 one must be an *Ohev, Ohevet, Oheveh Yisrael*, a lover of Israel—

the people, the land, the ideal, the nation,  
and by nation I believe that also includes the modern state of Israel.

You and I are here today, the first day of 5785,  
awakening to the sounds of the shofar,  
only because generation after generation of our ancestors,  
inspired by the *b'rit*,  
were willing to band together and believe in our collective survival.  
They bequeathed to us how important it is  
to be *Ohavei Yisrael*, lovers of our people,  
a lesson we desperately needed to learn in 5784.

Let's start at the beginning.  
5784 began in earnest on October 7, 2023.

In Jewish time, there is before, and there is after.  
Whomever we are, however pained our heart may be,  
whatever views we hold regarding this geopolitical moment,  
each one of us has suffered a trauma on that day.

It is easy to forget the shock we felt peering at our screens,  
watching Hamas warriors  
brutally maim, rape, murder, kidnap, and torture Israeli civilians.  
We knew the Israeli military response would be fierce,  
and we knew that Hamas had spent years  
strategically organizing a tunnel network under Gaza,  
placing Palestinian civilians—mostly women and children—at risk.  
The past twelve months have piled  
missed opportunity after missed opportunity  
to de-escalate the hostilities,  
return the hostages to their families,  
and forge a way forward to normalize life  
for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

The amount of suffering for Israelis and Palestinians has been mindboggling.

Had either side de-escalated months ago, perhaps we could have avoided the intensification of Israel's burgeoning wars with Iran and its proxies as well as the humanitarian crises throughout the region; not to mention the subsequent campus unrest and the rise in global antisemitism.

From October 7 forward, my goal as your Senior Rabbi was to ensure our cohesion as a synagogue, as a religious community. I know the term "religious" comes with some baggage, especially here in Seattle, especially in English, which is permeated by Christian concepts. Yet what are we if not a house of worship? After all, we are a *beit am*, a house of the people, a house of *Am Yisrael*, we are Jewish people and non-Jewish people, of all generations and identities. And every member deserves to know that whomever you are, whatever your story may be, we are here as a congregation to support and sustain each other. So, from the onset of the war, we followed Jewish sacred time and Jewish sacred acts as our guide; we leaned into being a religious community. That first evening, we gathered here in this sanctuary, our hearts in our throats, dancing with the Torah through our tears, celebrating Simchat Torah.

Meanwhile, from the start of the war,  
both within the Jewish community and beyond,  
divisions were forming, conflicts were intensifying,  
as we watched the death toll and damage  
to Palestinians and Israelis soar.

Other institutions—seemingly every other institution,  
Jewish and not, corporations and non-profits alike—  
made bold proclamations to one side or another.  
In the public marketplace of ideas, the choice for each of us was binary.  
We were either on Israel's side or on Palestine's.

I know there are some in our congregation who feel this way.  
Some feel we at Temple Beth Am from the war's earliest days,  
should have denounced the human rights catastrophe in Gaza,  
given the astronomical number of Palestinian dead,  
decried the Israeli government, and urgently call for a ceasefire.  
Others believe that from the start of the war,  
Beth Am was not a staunch enough advocate for Israel,  
and it's right to defend itself against those who seek its annihilation,  
especially given the virulence of Jew hatred  
that has exploded globally, across our nation's college campuses,  
and right here in Seattle.

I hear the pain in each of these views,  
and I honor that both sides are deeply concerned  
about the fate of the Jewish people.  
However, I suggest a different path.  
I believe the stakes are too high  
for us to be ensnarled in the trap of binary thinking.  
I agree with Rabbi Hara Person,  
CEO of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, who's written:

“The moment we are living in is not a binary reality.  
 We can and indeed we *must* disagree...  
 who among us possesses absolute truth?  
 In this time of complexity,  
 we have to develop a tolerance for not having all the answers.  
 We have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable  
 with ideas and perspectives that challenge us.  
 We are stronger when we listen with open hearts  
 to ideas that may feel wrong or even dangerous—  
 either we will learn something important or we won’t;  
 but either way, we remain in conversation.”

Either way, we remain in conversation...  
 that was my goal, too;  
 in 5784 we stayed in conversation with each other at Temple Beth Am.

With guidance from the Board, our congregation chose  
 to embody the values of being a pluralistic religious community.  
 We resisted easy answers, rejected simplistic slogans,  
 & embraced curiosity.  
 The goal was to strengthen our capacity for complexity and nuance,  
 and engage in bridge building across our differences.  
 With thanks to our hardworking lay leaders on the Isr. Eng. Team  
 we had several facilitated conversations, and learning opportunities  
 where we engaged in dialogue on the Hamas/Israel war,  
 & its impact on Isrlis, the Jewish people, the Palstns, & the human famly.  
 (That programming is ongoing; please see our website.)

Two months into the war, with the help of Project Bina,  
 our volunteer Committee that seeks insight from you, our members,  
 we heard what resources you needed to help navigate  
 being Jewish in Seattle in a post-10/7 world.

For some of you, it was your first experience of feeling vulnerable and endangered because of your Jewish identity. Many Beth Am'ers expressed how antisemitism was popping up for family members of every age and stage, in astonishingly new ways. They expressed concern for safety, for the ability to live openly at school or work, & for the breakdown in relationships with non-Jewish friends and community allies.

For others, they articulated the pain of family conflict, harkening back to the Vietnam War era, when families were divided because of their steadfast beliefs for or against war. We provided resources for holidays to help maintain *shalom bayit*, peace in the home. As we proceeded through our Shabbat and festival calendars, our sacred gatherings were designed to cultivate the spiritual resilience needed to face each new challenge that 5784 threw at us. We also learned through Project Bina that some of you want Beth Am to be a space where you can come and *forget* the pressures of the world. A place that allows you to fully embrace your Jewish identity. A synagogue, dare I say, where you can *enjoy* being Jewish. (As an aside, this was not an easy year to serve the Jewish people; when you see them, please thank our Board members and professionals for their care and wisdom.)

There were times when we floundered under the various dark clouds that followed us throughout 5784, sometimes failing each other, too. The culture of rage and complaint, long brewing in the Jewish world, ripped through every Jewish community.

I will admit:

The greatest fear I had in the last year is that we Jews don't need antisemites to destroy us. Some of the infighting was so vicious, so unfair, and so unkind, that I believe the venom we spewed at each other aided and abetted those forces that seek to eradicate us. Never mind peace with the Palestinians, sometimes in 5784 I wondered whether it would be possible to bridge the differences within the Jewish community, globally, nationally, locally, and in this congregation. In my bleakest moments, I questioned whether we as *Am Yisrael*, as a Jewish collective, the Jewish People, would emerge whole and intact.

Fortunately, those questions didn't last long. It is a time of war, and we are all on edge. It's understandable if we are more argumentative, or irritable, or pessimistic than usual. Those reactions build a defense around our shock, hurt, and disgust at the enormity of the suffering for our people and others. As a student of Jewish history, I know that time and again, our ancestors, too, feared that they were witnessing the end of Jewish civilization. They were people like us, gifted and flawed, unique and ordinary. People like us who watched as old systems and institutions crumble away and wondered what new systems and institutions would arise in their place.



Here's what one ancestor advised 23 centuries ago:

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֻסַת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד,  
עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

Shimon the Tzaddik (Righteous One), was one of the last of the sages of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands on three things: Torah, Avodah, sacred service, and Gemilut Hasidim, acts of loving-kindness.<sup>1</sup>

Shimon HaTzaddik was instrumental in closing the canon on the Hebrew bible & beginning the formulation of the Jewish prayer cycle as we know it today. He was the High Priest during the “Second Temple” period, so-called because the original Temple was destroyed centuries earlier. In Shimon’s time, the Jewish people were once again a sovereign nation living in the land of Israel, the land of *their* ancestors. The new Jerusalem Temple replaced the old as a pilgrimage hub, and as the spiritual heart of the Jewish world.

It was a time of social and political upheaval, and the Jewish people were threatened by external forces from the Greco-Roman world around them and by internal bickering and backstabbing. Shimon HaTzaddik knew that by learning together, accessing God together, and exhibiting lovingkindness with each other, Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasidim, his community would remain intact in those uncertain times.

Shimon was called a *tzaddik*, a Righteous One,

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<sup>1</sup> Pirke Avot 1:2

because of the depth of his love for his community.  
He was a true *Oheiv Yisrael*, lover of the Jewish people.

What was true in Shimon HaTzaddik's day remains true in ours.  
Out of the whirlwind of 5784, we at Temple Beth Am  
embraced the ancient and evergreen belief  
that the world holds steady for us when  
*together* we engage in Torah  
(learning and living our sacred texts),  
Avodah  
(prayer and other acts of divine service),  
and  
Gemilut Hasidim  
(acts of lovingkindness to people we know and to strangers.)

From Torah Study where we read Torah verse by verse by verse,  
to the Gan where our children are laughing and learning in community;  
to adults of all ages studying to become Bar, Bat, Bet Mitzvah;

from Shabbat and holiday celebrations in the sanctuary and outdoors,  
to our meditation group, and men's circle, Purim players, and choir;

from delivering Healing Challahs and chatting at congregational dinners  
to poker and parasha; to addressing the ills in our city and country  
through our projects supporting the unhoused, the immigrant, the  
hungry, the person unsure how to register to vote.

We do this *together* out of love and obligation, even when we disagree.

We have learned that this is the Jewish way  
to cultivate resilience and compassion in a turbulent world.

Thank you 5784 for teaching us this enduring lesson.

At Temple Beth Am, our power has always been our pluralism,  
and that's also always been our challenge.  
Yet, we learned in 5784  
that we can be better than our worst impulses.  
We know that together, if only we open our hearts and minds,  
we can find respite  
from the polarizing and mean-spirited chatter in the public square;  
from a world brimming with cruel people who seek to harm others;  
and from our own proclivity  
to be uncharitable towards those with whom we disagree.

Goodbye 5784; hello 5785.

In 5785, I pray that there will be peace in the Middle East,  
and that Jews everywhere can live in safety,  
and that Israel and its neighbors can model for others  
that there's more that unites us than divides us as a human family.

Until that day arrives,  
may we here in our little corner of the world continue to be  
a *Beit Am*, a house of the people,  
a Jewish home.  
May our congregation continue to be a Jewish place  
where we bring our grief, rage, hurt, and, yes, our celebrations.  
May our congregation continue to be a Jewish space  
where we take shelter  
and engage in nuanced conversations about complex issues,  
exploring our differences with curiosity and kindness.  
May our congregation continue to be a Jewish sanctuary  
where we pray and sing and study and schmooze.

May our congregation continue to be a *religious* community

that believes  
the world stands on learning, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness.  
Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasidim.

If we can achieve all this then maybe we, too,  
will be remembered by our descendants  
as *Ohavei Yisrael*, lovers of the Jewish people,  
and perhaps even as *tzaddikim*,  
as righteous people who brought love and healing into a broken world.

*Ken yehi ratzon.*