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HOMELAND & HOLY LAND:

Teshuva and October 7th

Initially we were shocked. We were confused. We were tormented and in profound pain. After October 7th, we walked the streets of Israel and of the Diaspora shaking our heads in disbelief. At the same time, we observed an unprecedented outpouring of love and compassion. After immense political disunity, Jews and Israelis came together in solidarity from across the globe and across the political and religious spectrum. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis returned from every corner of the earth to serve in the IDF. The response to terror was abounding love; people in Israel's center took in families from the South, volunteered in hotels, and did the laundry of strangers, week after week. Diaspora Jews came together united in support of Israel with a shared narrative of fate and destiny, the kind that only a family can experience. We witnessed virtue and goodness in action. We watched a young generation become leaders almost overnight. And, for many, this was itself a form of repentance for the polarization that had characterized the state of our people.

October 7th changed us.

We are not the same as we were at this time last year, not as individuals and not as a people. There were so many Israeli deaths and so many hostages that the wreckage in human life was mentally and emotionally inconceivable. October 7th revolutionized the world outside of us and then re-shaped the universe inside of us.

October 7th and its aftermath also exposed the profound hatred that terrorists and their supporters harbor. The disgust and cruelty to Jews and Israelis, in particular, that previously lay hidden in the hearts of many surfaced. Initially, there was unusually strong worldwide support for Israel. But this lasted for only a brief amount of time until compassion morphed into questioning and then into criticism. College campuses were acid playgrounds of polarization, where even those who knew little about this centuries-old conflict found community through vandalizing property and making Jewish students feel unsafe and unwanted. Jews that previously thought they were safe learned that antisemitism is alive and well.

October 7th certainly shook the foundations of my world. Early that morning, I was in a Jerusalem synagogue with my sons when I heard the blare of sirens. First once, then twice, then three times. People were walking the streets panicked. I ran to my mother's apartment to check in on her. My son, a combat reservist in the IDF, was ordered to his base. He quickly gathered his gear, and we sent him off to war.

That night, as we began to learn of the tragedies in Israel's South, the enormity and scale of what happened began to reveal itself. The horrific losses alone were incomprehensible and unbearable. But something else broke that day: our sense of Israel's existential security and that of our own in the Diaspora in the aftermath of October 7th.

Now, on the precipice of the Days of Awe, we look back on this year of trauma and what it demands of us. Maimonides advised that in times of crisis, we examine our ways and stake out a future path of religious growth and virtue. There is much reflective work to be done.

Every year, we seek to repair our relationship with God. Every year, we seek to improve our relationship with

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those around us. This year and every year after, let us also improve our relationship with Israel as a central part of our Jewish identity. For the attack that is happening today is not only a physical assault against the land of Israel but also an assault against the very idea of Israel. Israel is both a reality and a sustaining idea that has nourished the Jewish people for millennia. Although today it is a state among nations, since antiquity the idea of Israel has been at the root of hatred against the Jews.

"Place" in Jewish and Monotheistic Thought

From the beginning of Judaism's origin story, Israel as a geographic entity has embodied holiness and sanctity. Abraham was told to journey from his father's house to a new land in which God would appear to him. The sanctity of the land is manifest through the sanctity of its fruit, the special laws that govern its agriculture, and the virtuous behavior required of its inhabitants.

But Israel for the Jewish people is not just a holy land, it is also our homeland. "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession" (Gen. 15:7), God declared to Abraham. It was for him and Sarah and for all their descendants for eternity: "I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8).

There are a number of Torah requirements that are contingent upon Israel as a homeland; these are often

clustered around several biblical words: *nahala*, an inheritance, *she'arekha*, your gates, and *ahuza*, your legacy. A land that is an eternal inheritance cannot be sold permanently in Jewish law. Similarly, there is a distinct prohibition of stealing another person's property in Israel because it is that individual's inheritance, *nahala*. Israel in the Torah must have a political and legal system so that it can serve as a just homeland; this includes a system of judges in every city's gates and a process to appoint a king, if the community wills it. In a homeland, the Jews are to create a society in which all are protected; this is expressed, for example, in the ritual of the *egla arufa* that expresses collective responsibility for loss of life in the land.

In Jewish law, holy land and homeland are at all times intertwined. The Jewish people's presence in the land unlocks the full force of the land's sanctity, as illustrated by the rules of the sabbatical and Jubilee years. It is *because* the land is holy that Israel must establish its homeland on the basis of the most elevated religious and ethical values or the land will be unable to tolerate its residents. The biblical and rabbinic ideals of economic and social justice, spirituality and virtue, all emerge from the correlation between Israel as both holy land and homeland. This dual understanding of Israel has been transmitted from generation to generation; Israel is imprinted on our souls and reflected in the actions.

The Monotheistic Revolution

While the duality of holy land and homeland is obvious to us, it was novel and misunderstood by other nations. In a world filled with idols and idolatry, every nation and every land had its own gods. In this context, the fact that Israel was the homeland of the Jews and their God was intuitively understood and accepted in the ancient Near East. In these cultures, someone visiting another country was expected to offer sacrifices to the native gods of that region. In the book of Jonah, for example, the sailors who experienced God's salvific powers sacrificed to Jonah's God, who clearly had power over the ocean.

What was not understood by these nations is why the Jews did not recognize and accept that other countries

were also holy lands for their gods. The distinguishing element of Judaism's practitioners from the adherents of idolatry is the universality of God as the one God of the entirety of the world, who cares for all of the inhabitants of the world. Jonah described his God as the God of the "sea and the dry land," an all-encompassing God who was invested in the souls of the sinning Ninevites, far from where the Israelites lived.

This aspect of Jewish belief was befuddling to ancient idolators. Our monotheistic belief proved infuriating to the enemies of the Jewish people as expressed by Haman and the other Persians in the Scroll of Esther. Mordechai and the Jews refused to recognize the local deities of Shushan and those throughout the Persian

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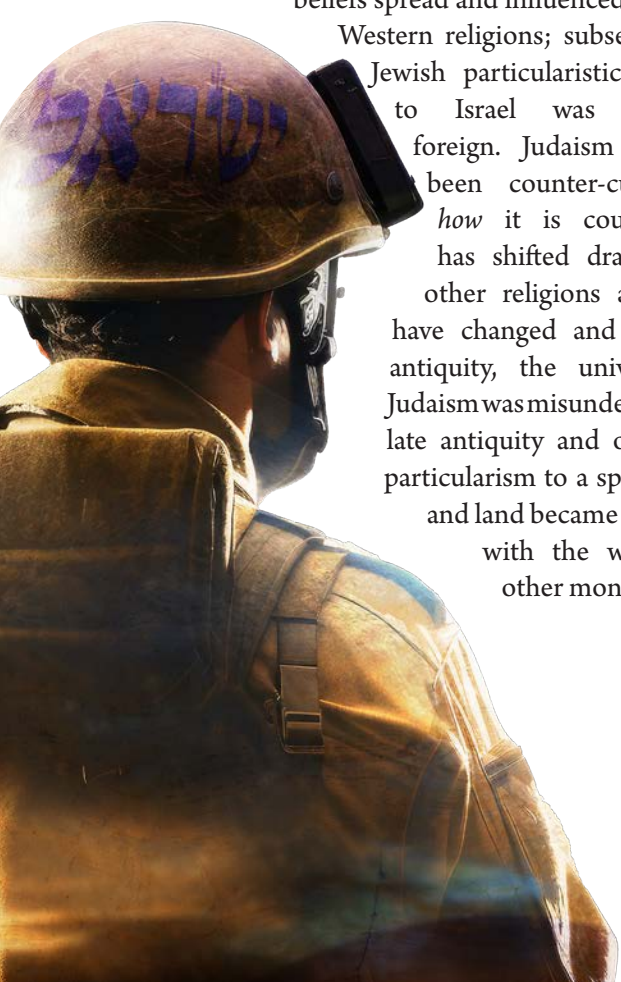
empire. This Jewish religious outlook was regarded as strange and threatening to members of the empire who worshiped other gods. They wondered why Mordechai refused to bow before the cult of Haman. After all, this was a normative practice for others at the time. That the Jews maintained their own traditions to the exclusion of others made their faith incomprehensible, and, in Haman's argument a danger to the country.

Similarly, the appellation Mordechai the Jew, *HaYehudi*, and the phrase "many members of the nations of the land became Judaized ('*mityahadim*')" (Esther 8:17),

conveys this subtle message of a universal religion. *Yehudi* is a title for one who lived in the region of Judea. To be a *Yehudi* in Shushan, and to welcome those into the fold as “*mityahadim*” is revolutionary; it implies a reach far beyond the land of Judea. That Judea was the homeland of the Jewish God was understood; that it was the sole holy land in the world and the place to which all prayers are directed even outside its borders was incongruent to the idolatrous world view.

The dissonance with other cultures moved in the opposite direction in the common era when the daughter religions of Christianity and Islam emerged from Judaism and adopted the universal element as their own. Christianity and Islam envisioned God as the ruler of the entire world, not residing in any one place. Along these lines, there is no single place in which all Christians and Muslims are called upon to live. Christianity and Islam have holy sites, like Rome and Mecca, but there is no one homeland for all Muslims and Christians in the way there is for Jews.

This new theological context profoundly overturned the earlier prevailing worldview. Judaism’s universal beliefs spread and influenced other major Western religions; subsequently, the Jewish particularistic attachment to Israel was increasingly foreign. Judaism has always been counter-cultural. But *how* it is counter-cultural has shifted dramatically as other religions and cultures have changed and evolved. In antiquity, the universalism of Judaism was misunderstood; from late antiquity and on, Judaism’s particularism to a specific people and land became incongruous with the worldview of other monotheists.



Judaism and Monotheistic Faiths on Repentance

This profound disconnect spilled over in some unexpected ways among the world’s largest and oldest religions. One such dissonance is the concept of repentance and return which is so central to monotheistic faiths. Islam and Christianity conceive of repentance individualistically. A person sins, feels remorse, repents, and is forgiven. These monotheistic faiths also promote a more global form of repentance that is linked to the messianic era. As part of a future eschatological period, they believe there will be a judgment day on which each person must give an accounting for his or her actions. Repentance involves a return to intimacy with God and improved relations with people who have been wronged. It ultimately results in the entire world serving one God.

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Judaism offers a similar religious approach, but in the Torah, *teshuva* has an additional nationalistic element not found in Christianity or Islam. In Deuteronomy, repentance is conceived as a return to God that is interwoven with a return to the land. Once the Jewish people return to Israel, the next stage of *teshuva* is to create a just and holy society that brings together God, the land, and the Jewish people. As a direct outgrowth of Judaism’s tripartite theology, the Torah regards repentance as personal and collective, individualistic and nationalistic. The land’s sanctity demands that we form a society worthy of housing the presence of God.

This national conception of repentance cannot be achieved without Jews returning to the homeland, which involves *kibbutz galuyyot*, the ingathering of exiles to Israel. The personal and national identity of a Jew is always richly braided.

How different the comprehensive Jewish view of repentance is from other monotheistic faiths was a point brought home to me years ago when I was a student at Hebrew University. I was looking at a photography exhibit depicting the Old City of Jerusalem in the lobby of the University, and an Arab-Israeli university student happened to be standing next to me. We struck up a conversation. I introduced myself, explaining that I was originally from New York and had now moved to Israel. She was from East Jerusalem. We spoke about our very different perspectives on life, politics and security. The whole conversation was eye-opening; it surprised her that I moved to Israel. She could not understand why. She understood why Israelis who were born and raised in the country would live there, but why had I come to Israel if I was comfortable in America. Why would I move? And why have so many Ethiopians and over a million Russian Jews moved to Israel? "Why are you all here?" she wondered.

Her questions were sincere and not combative; they prodded me to think of the language to express the Jewish connection to the land. This conversation helped me better understand one of the ways in which Judaism is profoundly different from the other major monotheistic faiths. We believe that Judaism requires a homeland that is also a holy land for its fullest expression.

There are places that are sanctified in Islam, to be sure. Mecca is the place of Mohammed's birth and early years. Medina is the place of his ministry, and Al-Quds is the place from which Mohammed ascended in his nighttime ride to the heavens. These are holy places for every Muslim. But Israel does not occupy a special place in Islam in which Muslims are expected or destined to live. Israel, like Spain or any other country once ruled by Muslims, is considered *dar al Islam* as part of a once-dominant empire. But there is no one place that is a homeland for Muslims.

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The language with which I naturally thought about Israel was alien to her. I have found a similar gap in conversations with members of other monotheistic faiths. This gap is not political but epistemic. The religious lens in which the world is viewed is different.

The internal narrative of the Jewish people that is reinforced all throughout our culture and tradition is that Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel are not just founding patriarchs and matriarchs but our great, great grandparents. Their story is our story. The journey that they began is our journey, and the years that generations of our family spent outside of Israel, reflecting two millennia of Jewish history, is the story of Jews in the diaspora. Israel, even for those not physically residing in it, has always remained the hope and the homeland.

This is core to Jewish identity historically. In truth, I have found this gap not only between Jews and members of other monotheistic faiths, but at times even between more traditional and very progressive Jews. If one is not reared with this deep sense of Jewish family and an intergenerational notion of personal identity that is viscerally connected to Israel as a Jewish homeland, then the current Western culture which reinforces the ideas of individualism and universalism can easily become defining categories. From this perspective, Jews who have a deep attachment to Israel seem nationalistic and tribal.

The charge that links the Middle Eastern enemies of Israel with the progressive protests on college campuses is colonialism. That Jews are colonialists in Israel is at the core of the charter of Hamas, a centerpiece of the UN resolution that Zionism is racism and the driving force behind the international effort to delegitimize the

existence of Israel. Sadly, universities in this country and beyond are filled with professors who see the world through this colonialist prism. They place Jews as oppressors to an indigenous population. This is a modern iteration of the centuries old challenge to the premise that Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people.

While the central assault of October 7th was a massacre against the Jewish people the likes of which we have not seen since the Holocaust, the new antisemitism it unleashed is undergirded by the fundamental challenge to the Jewish idea of a Jewish state.

It is not just the State of Israel that is under attack, but the Zionist identity of the Jewish people that is also under assault. While it is intuitive to the majority of Jews that anti-Zionism is antisemitism, there is an international effort underway to delink Israel from Judaism.

As such, inherent in our response during this season of repentance and return is to strengthen the ways we transmit our multi-valanced commitment to Israel to our children, within our communities, and to the broader society.



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Our children must understand that even if we are not residents, Israel is both our holy land and our homeland. We must give them the tools to internally withstand the ideological assault that is taking place. We must help them become effective advocates in their places of study and work environments so that they can communicate the richness and complexity of Judaism and its roots in the land and the State of Israel. But more importantly, for their own development as fully developed Jews, we must teach the centrality of loving Israel viscerally and unconditionally.

Teshuva means return — a return to the wholeness of a covenantal commitment. Let it be an emotional return, not only because Israel is suffering, but because Israel is a great gift that enriches our lives and ennobles our purpose.

October 7th changed us. It placed the Jewish language of heritage, home, family, values, commitment, and love at the core of our consciousness. It reminded us that all Jews are deeply connected to one another. An event that happens on one side of the world, affects all of us in all parts of the world. And it inspires us to not only combat antisemitism but to spread to all of our society the positive values on which Israel is built.

Since that fateful day, my son has served two tours of duty as a combat soldier in the IDF and my daughter has finished two years of national service to the country. Their commitment is a living embodiment of the tradition that was passed down through the generations from Abraham and Sarah to my grandparents who survived Nazi occupied Europe to my parents who raised their children in America and made aliyah later in their lives. We are living today in miraculous times. The great dream of national teshuvah — of return, hope and rebuilding — that has sustained the Jewish people throughout millennia is our current reality. On these days of contemplation and teshuva, may we commit ourselves to move history forward and bring in the time foretold by the ancient prophecies, when Israel will be infused with peace and the love of Hashem felt throughout the world.