

In the Silence: Hope, Despair and One Another
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How many times have you answered the question “what is your favorite Jewish holiday?” at some ice breaker or interview or conversation? Allow me to sharpen the question. What is your favorite moment of the Jewish year? What are the few seconds in the annual cycle of Jewish time you anticipate with a particularly open heart.

My top 3 or 4 answers rotate depending on mood and the context, but the one I want to share tonight is a fleeting silence that fills me up every year. I am talking about the sound of a community, of a kahal, just as Yom Kippur’s Tekiah Gedola ends. The day is over. Though weakened, we are full. Congregants who remain for Neilah hold a special place in this rabbi’s heart and they are rewarded with a heavenly nugget of golden soulfulness. It is not just that the intense rituals and prayers of the Yamim HaNoraim are done. That collective held breath between the end of the shofar blast and the inevitable Yashar koach / ooohs and ahs that flow up to the bima in support of the *ba’al tekiah*, is the most hopeful, one might feel about the world. (That and holding a newborn.) Exiting shul on the way to break-fast I hold the bright possibilities within that gorgeous silence.

The obliteration of that optimism, the total eclipse of that brighter world was unprecedented in the final moments of 5784’s locked new year gates. On October 7th, 6:29am hopes for the new year were banished as the massacre in Israel unfolded one horrifying hour to the next. On Monday October 9th we learned that the nephew of one of our Israel staff was missing and Wednesday came news of his death. On October 15th we sent Harvard the news we were ending our 35-year partnership. We were scrambling to fund immediate needs of evacuated Israeli citizens through site visits from colleagues with on the ground connections: tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of dollars for hotel rooms, meals, social workers and clothing were sent from the Foundation nearly every day starting on October 9 and continuing for two weeks; millions of dollars in 14 days. The Wexner family has given more than 23 million dollars to support this emergency and locally have worked in close partnership with Jewish organizations to provide security and a long-term strategy for safe gatherings. Four months later, the trembling and fear, the grief and mourning, continue. The needs continue. There is so much death and pain piled upon pain. It is unnerving and all-consuming, especially for our colleagues living in Israel. We wrap our arms around you and pray for your well-being and the safety of your families.

Still, that gorgeous remnant of sacred silence from September 26, 7:39 pm is stored deep inside of me. Please God it lives inside of you, a heartbeat of oneness, of solidarity at having arrived to a high place together. A very different kind of oneness has been experienced since 10/7 by the Jewish People, and it too has brought comfort. Though a oneness born of brokenness, it pierces the darkness in these weeks when we have been called upon to exercise leadership even as the ground shifts constantly beneath our feet. We feel unprecedented support and strength. We feel isolated and anxious. We also feel the sharp divisions that have developed in these 122 days. There

are opposing positions, shouts across one side of the Jewish street to the other. We are weary from ugly accusations, lazy language, lack of nuance and generational divides. We are frustrated about Instagram as a primary news source and angered by algorithms configured to control stubborn and shockingly hateful narratives against Jews and against Israel. There is rising antisemitism and rising islamophobia. Solidarity persists for some and fissures within our community are deepening as the fog of war grows thicker. What do we do? We lock arms with those with whom we most agree and move further away from those we believe are misguided, misinformed, and missing our point. All the while, our family in Israel is suffering, grieving, and experiencing the ongoing trauma of 10/7.

There was a brutal butchering of innocent Jews and non-Jews by barbaric terrorists seeking to wipe out Israel. Three weeks ago, I was in Israel with 3 other Foundation colleagues, Barry Finestone from the Jim Joseph Foundation, Rachel Monroe from the Weinberg Foundation and Lisa Eisen from the Schusterman Foundation. We were there to learn, to listen, to witness and to support. We exited Ben Gurion airport and traveled immediately South with Major General Noam Tibon, our heroic Wexner alum who rescued the wounded on his way to saving his son's family from their safe room at Nahal Oz. Horrific photos have been shared that reveal the barbaric murders of innocent Israelis going about their early dawn routines on quiet farms. Making coffee. Sleeping in on a Shabbat morning. Clutching teddy bears on a lazy holiday. A community is frozen in time, it lies in ruins. But seeing the remains of that day moved me to a state of disbelief. Utter disbelief. ***[Please note the following content in blue is descriptive of what we saw and heard including quoting actual and frightening text messages from morning of October 7. If you want to skip please go to top of next page]*** Our guide, Uri, narrates a tour of terrorism three times a day...three times daily he repeats the stories of his young cousins who hid behind that tree while their father was murdered guarding the front door. He stops in front of a home that appears intact and then, haltingly, describes the rape and butchering of two teenage girls that unfolded behind the door that will remain closed. We follow him into a small safe room inside the charred remains of a home, a pastel-colored armoire decorated with the name of the girl who hid in the crowded space where the 5 of us now stand in sorrowful silence. How much is enough during these disaster tours? And how dare we make that determination when those who lived through it ask us to bear witness. I was ready to leave, I had to get outside just as Uri pulled out his phone and said, "Listen to what happened right here." We hear the panicked voice of...the girl whose name is on the armoire. She is sending WhatsApp voice messages in desperate hush tones: "They are here, help me." "Abba is bleeding...yes, yes, I have turned him on his stomach to apply pressure." "I think Imma is dead." "The room is filling with smoke but when I open the window they are throwing in grenades." Horrified at the sight of that still opened window, we hear what she heard, shouts of Hamas terrorists closing in on her. We hear shots fired. The girl and her father survived. Together, while mourning a mother and brother, they returned to Kibbutz Be'eri several weeks later and picked the first ripe avocado from the fields. It is all unbearable. Whatever I expected to see, I view what is before me, around me, ahead of and behind me, with increased disbelief. How could anybody commit such wanton violence against another? This is terror.

Israel retaliated to this worst single attack on Jews since the Shoah with a military response designed to disable Hamas. The battle has resulted in the death of too many Israelis and too many innocent Gazans including children. Israelis we met refer to this war as Israel's second war of independence. Walking through the ruins of Be'eri, one fully understands the need for dismantling this brazened enemy. And of course there is this: 132 hostages remain in Gaza. I was hoping, praying as I wrote these words that I would have the opportunity to change these lines before this evening. Each day the hostages are held, our anguish grows, the agony and frustration of hostage families deepens. Last month we met Nadav, a 30-year-old living in Tel Aviv awaiting news about his father Lior Rudaeff a 61-year-old volunteer medic from Nir Yitzhak presumed kidnapped on October 7th. Lior has a heart condition and Nadav is losing hope. During a quiet and teary conversation with us in Kikar Chatufim, Tel Aviv's Hostage Square, he shrugs and shares: "Hope dies last."

Prior to my January visit I went to Israel to be with our Israel Alumni for candle lighting the 6th night of Chanukah, their first convening since the attack. We gathered in a restored wine cellar at Mikveh Yisrael, a sprawling agricultural school and working farm established in 1870 by Charles Netter, a stunning setting of many acres on the edge of Tel Aviv. Invited to speak before *hadlakat neivot* I stood before the packed room and...I was silenced, the silence of love and pain, of disbelief and respect, a silence of presence and solidarity. Through tears I spoke about growing the light even when we cannot see a way out of the darkness. Selected Alumni spoke about how they have exercised leadership in this era of Jewish history. I was overwhelmed by the blessing of presiding over an organization that brings me into relationship with exceptional human beings. This evening, I want to weave our Wexner networks together and bring you edited versions of the stories that we heard that Chanukah night. You will, with their permission, meet Nimrod, Yasmin, Nadav and Efrat, also Wexner Alumni honored to know they would be in *this* room. The Foundation holds all of you in a single network. These stories are inspiring, deeply personal and they are hard not only because of the content, but because of the emotions our Fellows bring to the telling. Listen...***[shared with permission of speakers and please note that Efrat is sharing very emotionally about her role as CEO of Schneider Hospital where hostages were received and treated]***

<https://youtu.be/sll6SXm67sw>

Silence right *now* is a good response.

That room in Mikveh Yisrael and this room at the Princeton Marriott are many miles apart but through my eyes, through the eyes of the Foundation, you occupy one space, the Wexner tent – the Network. As the fighting lingers, I have many questions. I experience fear, sadness and rage that goes in many directions. We all do whether in Princeton or on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Since 10/7, I have wondered repeatedly, how

far can the net of our precious pluralist network stretch before it frays and unravels. I speak for a Foundation, and for funders, who imagine an ever-expanding tent of Wexners. Pluralism is one of our core values and we strive to create meaningful cohorts with different experiences of Jewish life. The tensions often characterized by the generational differences in attitudes and positions about Israel, well known to us in the last decade, have now surfaced in particularly divisive ways. Over the years we have opened more doors and have pushed out the sides of our tent. The network has held, and while not always with ease, ultimately the Wexner community is more effective and its members wiser for engagement with the other. We now face this question, "How far can our net be stretched without us being torn apart?" And friends, there are limits to Wexner pluralism, limits to how far we can stretch ourselves. I have been asked many, many times the last 4 months what our boundaries are. When this conversation surfaced on Wexnet, several Fellowship Alumni wrote me privately seeking clarity on who we are as an organization. Written with love and curiosity, here are just a few samples of what you expressed:

- Do we or don't we believe Jews have a legitimate and historic right to a Jewish homeland?
- What is demanded of us right now as Jewish leaders?
- Criticism of Israeli policy and certainly its current elected government has always, as I experienced it at Wexner, been part of our discourse. But is Wexner okay with denying Israel's right to exist?
- Can our network hold together through all of this?
- I don't know if I can draw lines in my own organization, but I am looking to Wexner to model clear boundaries. Will you?

I will.

First, some context. What was once obvious or assumed about our communities, about your organizations and this one, can be assumed no more. We wrestle with how to be welcoming and inclusive while abiding by established values which, by definition, limit who may be invited as a Fellow or Heritage Member. It is upon the shoulders of the leader, even when the load is heavy, to define and maintain those values. It is incumbent upon our Foundation team to thoughtfully engage with those seeking to be named Fellows or Members and ascertain if their values are consistent with ours when they apply. Regarding Israel, our mission statement articulates:

The Wexner Foundation aspires to contribute to the development of a robust, meaningful and diverse North American Jewish community and a professional, networked collaborative civil service in the State of Israel. We are committed to Jewish Peoplehood and actively foster connections between Wexner leaders in North America and Israel, promoting engagement between them as a priority for leadership in both communities. We continue to believe in the illusive dream of One People.

The Wexner Foundation works in partnership with Israel's public service to create a secure homeland for the Jewish and for all of Israel's citizens. We aspire to contribute

to a thriving and democratic State of Israel. Wexner has invested millions of dollars in civil service leaders developing their skills and visions while transforming Israel for the good. That is who we are and who we have always been.

We find ourselves in a time when many of us are in conversation with a growing number of Jews, largely but not exclusively younger, whose “Jewishness isn’t tethered to Israel” as David Klion (*The New York Review*, January 28, 2024 “*The Jewish Left in Exile*) puts it. Klion asks (as some of you have asked), “Do these Jews need their own institutions?” While I will not attempt to explore that important question in the confines of these remarks, it is, simply put, hard. In this regard I want to shine a light on the overwhelming responsibility shouldered particularly by our Hillel and University based colleagues who are wrestling, and I use that word with all the angst and exhaustion implied, to hear and hold their raging or alienated students. It is very different judging their sometimes thin, unnuanced, or TikTok based knowledge from afar, then it is to sit face-to-face with a Jewish kid, a kid who loved their summer camp or shul, even *your* shuls, who has turned against the State of Israel and are increasingly resentful that they were raised to love it. Others in our community are highly educated, well read and informed Jews who have decided that their identity need not have anything at all to do with Israel, that Israel is even a liability to their experience of a soulful Judaism.

Leading and teaching communities and congregations, even families who represent every possible position on Israel is also hard. You are charged to hold people together in a historically complex environment. If ever your Wexner Fellowship association might benefit you, it is now. Please lean into the wisdom, experience, and the much-needed compassion you will find in this room. I encourage you all to reflect upon the questions posed by Klion even if we stand vehemently opposed to or are outraged by the very idea of a Judaism severed from a meaningful connection to, an unwavering belief in, the Modern State of Israel. This Foundation is unshakable in its solidarity with the modern State of Israel and can also be a place for contemplating those extraordinarily hard questions. This has always been a place for uncomfortable conversations, and we can discuss all positions on Israel as a learning and growth exercise even if the population we are trying to reach is not intentionally included in or perhaps feels silenced by the Network. Let me state the obvious. Wexner cannot determine what journey alumni will take over the course of a lifetime or what forces will push any one of us from one set of beliefs or values to an entirely new set. I know and have seen it happen in all kinds of ways, not only around Israel. Alumni voices will not be censored or silenced even while we are very clear about our Foundation values. We are, you are, capable of holding sensitive, if at times messy, conversations.

For as long as I have been associated with the Foundation, Graduate/Field/Davidson Fellows have offered constructive critique of Israel’s policies, practices, and elected leaders. We hold these discussions here while affirming Ahavat Yisrael, an unshakable commitment to the State of Israel and the People Israel who are, in these awful months, demonstrating resilience and courage born of tragedy. The People, our People, hundreds of thousands of them, are motivated by a desire and drive for a better Israel working at the grass roots. The room in Mikveh Israel was simmering with conversations

about a transformed Israel as well. Please God, we will forge new pathways to speak across divides and across countries. In a world where it is sorely lacking, let *this* room and *that* one be populated by thoughtful pluralists, a network known for its nuance, knowledge, and genuine curiosity, a network defined by clear values that understands both the possibility and the limits of pluralism because this is, above all else...*above all else*... a community comprised of *people*, not ideas or platforms, but good, well-meaning, struggling to make sense of this moment, people.

Rav Kook (*Eretz Cheifetz*) wrote:

*The Land of Israel is not some external entity; it is not merely an external acquisition for the Jewish people.
It is not merely a means of strengthening our physical existence.
It is not even merely a means of strengthening our spiritual existence.
Rather, the Land of Israel has an intrinsic meaning, it is connected to the Jewish people with the knot of life.*

My dear colleagues, my friends, that knot of life can be beautiful and enduring. That knot can be frustrating and constraining. Some seek to untie themselves and speaking personally, that causes me tremendous sadness. Speaking as the President of The Wexner Foundation, we believe as Rav Kook does that:

*[Israel's] very being is suffused with extraordinary qualities.
The extraordinary of the Land of Israel and the extraordinary qualities of the Jewish people are two halves of a whole.*

The Mikveh Yisrael wine cellar and this Marriot ballroom.

The chagim arrive late this year, just about as late as they can be relative to the Gregorian calendar. That final Yom Kippur shofar blast will be sounded as darkness falls on October 12. It seems we will need the extra time to find our way back to that sacred second together. One people in that sunset hour all ascending to a high place after intense prayer and repentance, one people seeking change, hungry for wholeness and better prepared for that better world, we will, for a fleeting second, stand together in a silence filled with hope...only hope...because yes, hope dies last.