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“Leading Diaspora Jewish Communities at a Time of War In Israel”

An open letter to Rabbis, Cantors, and Educators

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Beyond the anguish we Jewish communal leaders are feeling, and the exhaustion of serving our people, we find ourselves in unknown territory. We are dealing with a level of crisis, shock, and collective trauma that we have not experienced before in our lifetimes and there are no models and no literature to help guide our way. I pray that this letter begins an important conversation for us and all those we serve.

Collective Trauma Multiple Crises Require Different Types of Response

A doctor’s common refrain is, “before we can treat it, we have to know what the problem is.”

Today, we are dealing not with a single problem, but with several, simultaneously. Our task is to be able to identify which crisis(es) individuals and groups are facing, and be wisely prepared to support their specific needs.

I believe there are eight related but distinct threat categories/areas to which people are reacting which map to earlier traumas in their lives: (1) The Shoah, (2) anti-semitism, (3) anti-Zionism, (4) physical or mental abuse, (5) war and violence, (6) trust in authority, (7) loss of hope, and (8) moral confusion.

The Shoah

Many are likening the brutality of the terrorists on October 7th (rape, indiscriminate slaughter, dismemberment, the abuse of children in front of their parents and vice-versa, point-blank murder, kidnapping, etc.) to the Nazis. To support Holocaust survivors and their descendents, we can sympathize that Oct. 7th may feel like a genocide. We know from Shoah survivor Victor Frankl, that psychosocial unity is imperative when facing a crisis. To accomplish this, we should bring a diverse set of people together, to feel the support of strangers, to feel the commitment of others to our faith and theirs, and to be reminded of the humanity that we share.

Anti-Semitism

People who have experienced physical or psychological harm as a result of being Jewish (exclusion, violence, or intimidation), may be uniquely triggered by what they perceive as anti-semitic reactions to the war in Israel. To support people feeling overwhelmed by anti-semitism, we can empathize with their concerns and needs for emotional and physical security. They may be comforted to learn that you take their concerns seriously and to share your new increased security plans and protocols to make sure they are safe at your synagogue, JCC, school, camp, etc.

Anti-Zionism

In many places, anti-Zionism is being conjoined with anti-Israel. This is on display at some Universities, along with organizations like the Writers Guild of America and American Bar Association, where voices seem to defend Hamas' actions as acts of liberation. Those who are proud Zionists may support unilateral military action to destroy Hamas at any cost. This group will be looking for Jewish leaders to vocally stand with Israel, call for the destruction of Hamas, and frame this war in terms of David v. Goliath, or civilized people v. barbarians.

Physical or Psychological Abuse

The war in Israel may be especially traumatic for victims of physical, emotional, sexual, or mental abuse. The hostage crisis is psychological warfare and will be on-going. Those in our communities who are victims of abuse may need their Jewish leaders to know about their abuse, to see them, to empathize with their suffering and victimhood, and offer them the support and relief to pursue their freedoms.

War, Violence, 9/11

The cruelty of war, violence, abuse, rape, dismemberment, assassination, and murder, that began on Oct. 7th are direct triggers for those that have known war and violence. About this war, some say, "this is our new Independence War. The next 75 years of our future depend on this moment." Some American leaders have likened Oct 7th to the 9/11 attacks. Those within our communities with close ties to soldiers, veterans, or children of military personnel, will find comfort in knowing that their Jewish leaders share their concerns about war, violence, and the sacrifice of military service members. They may find solace in hearing the Prayer for Soldiers,

reading the names of those fallen during Kaddish, and offering practical ways for people to get involved in war relief efforts and supporting soldiers and their families.

Trust in Authority

It's been said that the authorities in Israel who were responsible for keeping their country safe, were distracted or over-confident and are to partly blame for Oct. 7th. Israelis that I speak with feel betrayed by their government authorities. One Israeli who is in Tel Aviv, wrote to me over Whatsapp, "the mood is low, the level of frustration and rage at the government and military leaders is high." For those that struggle with trust in authority (trust of government, politicians, clergy, God, etc.), they would benefit from hearing tales of unity, togetherness, family, belonging, and Peoplehood.

Loss of Hope

We may be at the beginning of a national depression that spares few. The powerful rock of the State of Israel, the land that nourished the Jewish People with the warmth of milk and honey, the safe room for every Jew in the world, has fallen. Once, there were t-shirts that said, "Don't worry America, Israel has your back." Now, we see the folly of that self-conception as the walls were so easily breached, and how Israel needs protection from other countries and international organizations. Jewish leaders that can remain steady in this storm and serve as a container for people's anxiety, stress, and worry, may be able to keep hope alive. This wise leader who can speak to the painful realities we are facing today, *and* speak about a brighter future, will be that prophetic voice we are desperate for at this moment.

Moral Confusion

My wife and I have Muslim friends in our neighborhood circle. Within hours after the attack on Oct. 7th, our friend began posting on her social media accounts a perspective that shocked us. To us, she seemed utterly blind to the evil and horror that rained down on innocent children and families enjoying a peaceful Shabbat afternoon, and young people raving at a concert. Did she understand our pain? Our suffering? Our torment? Do we have the capacity to understand hers? The courageous leader will find a way to acknowledge the nuance, the pain and suffering everywhere, to find a way to hold space for the pain and death of Israelis and Gazans, and to model a path that walks humbly with their God.

Jewish Leadership In a Time of War
Providing comfort so others may be strengthened

The range of trauma and moral injury that individuals, families, and communities are facing at this time is immense. Our role as Jewish leaders and educators is precious. This is a moment for us to be a bright light in an otherwise dark time.

We may not always have the luxury to know exactly what crisis area an individual or group is experiencing at any one time. Irrespective of which crisis a person is facing, I believe that establishing a culture of comfort and care gives people the strength to uncover their own resilience and coping mechanisms.

Whether it be a pastoral counseling session, a staff meeting, a class, a board meeting, a worship gathering, a community event, each of these can now be imagined as an opportunity to provide comfort and care, to give people the strength to uncover their own resilience.

The battles we face today are many. For those of us leading Jewish communities in the diaspora, our battle is to protect the hearts, souls, and minds of our beloved parishioners, members, students, staff members, and program participants. They are suffering in ways large and small. Even if we do not always have the answers, our role is to bring them solace, encouragement, and to be the loving voices that inspire them with the strength to face another day.

Dear colleague, I apologize in advance if I have offended your sensibilities, if you feel that I missed something urgent, or if you feel this discussion is premature, I ask for your forgiveness. My only hope is to share ideas so that we can strengthen each other as we reach to strengthen our people in this time of immense need.

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