

October 7th Reflection

by Rabbi Allison RH Conyer

Temple Beth Israel, Melbourne

365 Days.

A 12-month journey through shock, disbelief, denial, devastation, outrage, division, invisibility, helplessness, courage, connection, purpose, and action.

Reflecting on the year since the devastating Hamas attacks on Israel's innocent civilians on October 7, 2023, my thoughts and emotions are fragmented. The tragedy of Simchat Torah, a day of joyous Jewish celebration, now holds a heavy duality. A day designed for joy as we dance with the Torah, celebrating our Jewish identity, values, and community. Yet, the very joy we are commanded to express was violently shattered. Now, a deep irony clouds that day. Do we restrain our celebrations in mourning for those whose lives were taken, the hostages still held captive, and those who died fighting for their release? Or do we, *davka*, increase our joy as an act of defiance, as a statement to those who seek to destroy us that terror will not define us or steal our capacity for joy and celebration?

The unfolding of unbridled antisemitism around the world leaves me speechless. My heart breaks for the older generation of Jews in Australia, many of whom came here seeking safety and a better life, a place where everyone is promised "a fair go." And my heart breaks for the younger generation, who are struggling to feel safe expressing their Jewish identity on university campuses and in high schools. The silence and denial surrounding the Israeli women and children who were raped, tortured, and murdered only deepens the pain. Their suffering has been overlooked, their stories dismissed. What kind of message does this send to Jewish women and children here in Australia who have experienced abuse? That their pain, too, is invisible? *Me too, unless you're a Jew.*

Im ain ani li, mi li? If I will not be for myself, who will be for me?

Many of us find ourselves torn between sharing our Jewish identity and speaking out against antisemitism. We fear being ostracized, ignored, or attacked. But if we don't challenge the lies and half-truths manipulating public opinion, who will? If we don't call out anti-Zionism as a form of antisemitism, who will? What other nation is denied its right to exist because of its government's actions? Where else would a country defending itself after the largest civilian massacre in its history face international denial and distortion of the facts? How did the advocacy for Palestinian rights become so entangled with the vilification of both Israel and the Jews, and even the glorification of a terrorist organization like Hamas? How does killing innocent Israelis, or targeting Jews worldwide, help the Palestinian cause?

Uchshe'ani l'atzmi ma ani? If I am only for myself, what am I?

Our Jewish tradition teaches us compassion, reminding us to empathise with those who suffer, for we know firsthand what it means to be devalued, persecuted, and suffer loss. After all, Hillel teaches us: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others" (Shabbat 31a). How can we not feel sorrow for the innocent lives lost, the homes destroyed, and the livelihoods shattered in Gaza? Just as we mourn the suffering of our own people, we can also mourn the suffering of the innocent in Gaza. The binaries imposed upon us—Pro-Israel or Pro-

Palestine—oversimplify and obscure the reality. Both peoples have suffered. Both peoples have a right to self-determination and to live in peace. But the dominant voices of power are drowning out the calls for empathy, return of the hostages, and coexistence.

V'im lo achshav eimatai? If not now, when?

365 days since our people were murdered, violated, and taken hostage.

364 days since the world began to blame the victims, twisting the narrative.

Today, 97 hostages remain in Gaza, thousands of Israelis have died, and hundreds have been displaced. Global antisemitism has increased by 500%. Today, we mourn the lives lost, our shattered sense of safety and inclusion, and unfettered joy. And yet, within us, remains the strength and determination of our Jewish spirit, emboldened by our historical perseverance. Today, we are more committed than ever to Israel's right to exist, to defend herself, and to continue celebrating our Jewish identity. Now, more than ever, is the time to remember that joy and light are stronger than darkness and sorrow. Now is the time to hold one another close, to draw inspiration from the resilience of our community, to speak out against antisemitism, and to cry out with unwavering conviction: *Bring them home alive, now.*