

Remarks at the Community-wide Israel Rally

Rabbi Aaron Starr

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On behalf of the Officers, board of trustees, members, clergy, and staff of Congregation Shaarey Zedek, welcome to our sacred home. I would like to extend our gratitude to Matt Lester, Steve Ingber, David Kurzmann, Lior Zisser-Yogev, and to all the leadership and staff at the Jewish Federation of Detroit, including its Israel and Overseas Department, for organizing tonight's event. Thank you also to Gary Sikorski and his team, to Peter Banks and Roger Radcliffe, and to the Shaarey Zedek staff under the leadership of Dr. Robert Rich. We welcome all the dignitaries joining us this evening, and I would like to acknowledge my rabbinic and cantorial colleagues whose leadership over the last few days and every day strengthens the Jewish People and brings healing to our community. And I thank each of you for being here this evening.

Today we gather to declare in one voice, *Am Yisrael Chai*. We struggle to make sense of the terrible pogrom perpetrated against our brothers and sisters in Israel, to process the loss of life and the suffering inflicted against us. We worry for the scores of hostages taken and we worry for our family who continues to be under attack. We worry what might come from Israel's other enemies, and we worry for Israel's soldiers who, despite their yearning for peace, must defend our people, our state, and our land. May God be with them, with their families, and with all the citizens of the Jewish state. May God comfort the citizens of Israel, and may God spread over them a Sukkat shalom – a canopy of peace and of healing. May the shield of Abraham rise up in their defense.

My prayers and my love are with my family in Israel, and especially Detroit's Partnership Region. Almost two years ago, an exuberant, smart, and funny young man named Itay Schwartz from Shimshit, Israel, in the Partnership region, moved in with our family for the second half of his year as a shinshin in Detroit. Since then, Itay has become part of our family, and we are blessed to have become part of his. He is like another son to us, a brother to our children; his sisters, Gali and Roni, are like our own daughters, and his parents, Miron and Hila, like my brother and sister. They're family.

We felt a sense of relief when Itay was accepted to the IDF's Atudah program. Though only 20 years old, he is studying to become a lawyer and then, after law school, he will serve in the IDF's legal department. As a matter of course, Itay began preliminary basic training just a little bit ago. So it was that Itay found himself in the south of Israel this past weekend, ten minutes from the Gaza border. Having barely learned to fire his gun, Itay and his fellow new recruits were ordered to load their weapons with live ammunition and to stand guard at the base. There Itay remained at the ready for thirty straight hours until relief could come. When fresh troops arrived, Itay was sent home for a night's rest. He woke up this morning to the news that his best friend, Sgt. Rotem Dushi, also of Shimshit, was killed. Then Itay received a call from his commanding officer that he is required to return to training immediately. May God protect him. So many of us know of similar stories. Every person in Israel knows someone killed or taken hostage.

This week we read the opening chapters of Genesis. We learn that in a fit of jealousy and rage, Cain slaughtered his brother Abel. That we read this portion every year reminds us that evil is ever present in our midst. Evil is what we witnessed this weekend with the savage nature of our enemies' attacks on innocent women and men, infants, children, and the elderly. We are horrified and outraged by the slaughter of our people. In God's response to Cain's actions, we

learn that evil cannot be ignored, that wickedness cannot be tolerated. This same lesson was taught to us again in the Holocaust. In this way, we stand with Israel as it defends itself against those who seek our destruction. We call upon our elected officials, and upon all who love life and peace, to support Israel's efforts to combat this evil. We cannot, we must not tolerate this desecration of human life. Israel is morally obligated to defend itself and to free those hostages taken as prisoners of war.

God saw the evil that Cain committed, and God resolved to create the antidote to evil. When questioned by God about the murder, Cain responds with the words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The entire Hebrew Bible is the commentary on the answer to that question. We are our brothers' and our sisters' keepers. We are commanded to choose life and we are also forbidden from celebrating even the death of our adversaries. Even more, God selects Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants as partners with God in the effort to bring justice and compassion to the world. Even in our heartbreak, our fear, and our anger, we affirm our role as those who pursue justice and who offer compassion, and we celebrate Israel's efforts to bring justice and compassion to the world. We cannot and we must not allow our enemies to change our nature. Through our tears, our destiny is to be among those who bring justice and compassion to the world, and through justice and compassion, we attain peace. Despite the evil that exists, we pursue peace, and we love peace. We pray for peace, and we yearn for peace.

In addition to the other action steps that we can take and about which we will hear this evening, and in addition to continuing our efforts to bring justice and compassion, the Hebrew Bible teaches us that faith and hope are necessary ingredients to achieving peace. While our brothers and sisters in Israel rightly take up arms in self-defense, our job is to hold for them the faith and the hope that are at the heart of Israel's mission. We must maintain our ancient faith and we must continue the 2,000-year-old hope to be a free and safe people in the land of our ancestors.

When Joshua prepared to reclaim the Promised Land, God instructed him, "*Chazak ve'ematz*: Be strong and courageous; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the ETERNAL your God is with you wherever you go." Likewise do we say to our brothers and sisters in Israel today, "*Chazak ve'ematz*: Be strong and courageous; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the ETERNAL your God, the American people, and especially the Jewish community of Detroit are with you wherever you go. That goes for us Detroiters too: *Chazak ve'ematz*: We also must be strong and courageous."

Welcome to Congregation Shaarey Zedek and thank you for being here this evening. Thank you for standing with Israel. Thank you for proclaiming in one voice, *Am Yisrael Chai*. May the One who makes peace in the Heavens above, grant peace to Israel, to us, and to the world. Amen.

With love, with friendship, and with partnership, it is now my honor to welcome to the bimah our new community shlichah, Lior Zisser-Yogev.