

## A Few Thoughts on Simchat Torah this year & Parashah Bereshit (Genesis 1:1 - 6:8; Isaiah 42:5-21)

October 25, 2024 Hazzan Leah Frey-Rabine

For most of my life October 7 was simply my Mother's z'l birthday, which, by the way, is also the birthday of Vladimir Putin. When I began singing at the Semperoper in Dresden and the Staatsoper Berlin, then in the German Democratic Republic, I learned that October 7 was the anniversary of its establishment in 1949. I was happily living between these incongruous poles until last year, when October 7 became "a date which will live in infamy," as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt described the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Here in the Diaspora, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, are two separate days, while in Israel they are a single day. And last year this single day was also Shabbat, and many of us here in Europe came to our synagogues anticipating a day of jubilant dancing with our Torah scrolls and celebrating another new beginning. It was indeed a new beginning, but not of joyful anticipation, but of stunned horror giving way to increasing anxiety due to rising antisemitism and internal conflict. We, who are no strangers to tragedy and mourning, still don't quite know how to mourn the initial event of October 7, 2023, and its ongoing aftermath. We have lashed out vowing revenge, and we have turned inward with acts of self-flagellation. Tempers flare as we debate Israel's actions and the world's reactions. Many of us hide any outward signs of our Jewishness for fear of being attacked by those who blame all Jews for the suffering in Gaza. Like many of our elders after the Shoah, some of us rail against HaShem while others turn to stricter forms of orthodoxy. As Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), the book we read during Sukkot, teaches, there is nothing new under the sun. Grappling with the torture, enslavement, rape, and murder perpetrated by the Romans as they destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, Talmud Tractate Bava Batra 60b debates the initial reaction of the survivors. Many became ascetics, refusing to eat meat or drink wine. "Shall we eat meat, from which offerings were sacrificed upon the altar, when it has ceased to exist? Shall we drink wine, which is poured as a libation upon the altar, when it has ceased to exist? Rabbi Yehoshua replied, 'If so, we will not eat bread, since the meal-offerings have ceased.' They replied, 'It is possible to subsist with produce.' He said to them, 'We will not drink water, since the water libation has ceased.' They were silent, as they realized that they could not survive without water. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them, '... To not mourn at all is impossible, as the Sages do not issue a decree upon the public unless a majority of the public is able to abide by it. ... A person may prepare all he needs for a meal, but he must leave a small item in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple.'" In other words, instead of punishing ourselves for something over which we had no control, we must strengthen ourselves to prevail for the sake of our progeny. Elie Wiesel remarked that only during the Shoah was he able to understand what the Vilna Gaon meant when he said that the most difficult mitzvah to fulfill is *ve'samachta be'chagecha* (you shall rejoice on your festival). Along with IDF soldiers battling the Egyptians during the Yom Kippur war, Jews in Auschwitz, in Soviet Russia, and in countless other perilous circumstances have observed this commandment with all their hearts and with all their strength. Now, it is up to us to do likewise. Our parashah is the story of beginnings, and the story of how we humans immediately began to upset the balance HaShem had created. Adam and Chava are children, who, like all children, disobey and then blame each other. Eating from that fateful tree abruptly ends their childhood, and armed with knowing the difference between good and evil, they set out on the journey that we now continue. Unfortunately, choosing good over evil has always been difficult, and we rarely seem to learn much from our mistakes. Our Haftarah portion takes place in times as tumultuous as our own. After the Persians had defeated the Babylonians, who had destroyed the first Temple, the Israelites hope to return home. Isaiah inspires them with visions of HaShem sweeping through the land, destroying their adversaries and leading them on new, better pathways. Although he blames them for having caused their exile by turning to idol worship, he reminds them of HaShem's promise to gather them in and redeem them. One of the passages in our High Holiday Machzor that I persistently refuse to utter is "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land, and driven far from our soil; and we are unable to perform our obligatory offerings in Your chosen House, ... because of the hand that was sent against Your Sanctuary." To me, this is the voice of the ascetics with whom Rabbi Yehoshua contended, and of the ultra-orthodox anti-Zionists who live in Israel but refuse to defend its national sovereignty. I cannot believe that we lost our homeland because of our sins. For millennia we have been reviled and persecuted for a multitude of reasons, and until the birth of Zionism we have even been ridiculed for going like sheep to the slaughter. Now, we are condemned for daring to defend ourselves and fight back. As we read in our Pesach Hagadah, in every generation they try to destroy us, and HaShem saves us from their hands. HaShem has kept this promise, even when we are lax in upholding our part of our eternal covenant. Now, we offer prayers rather than sacrificial offerings, and our mitzvot still guide and inspire us, wherever we are in the world. As we know, one of these mitzvot is to rejoice on our festival. So let us dance together joyfully with our Torah scrolls to honor those who were murdered, to bring hope to the hostages and their families, and to renew and strengthen our resolve to continue working toward a better future for us, and for our world. AM YISRAEL CHAI!

Shabbat shalom and CHAG SAMEACH!