Yom Kippur Day Sermon | September 21, 2026

Lifting Our Eyes Again

אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל הֶהָרִים, מֵאַיִן יָבֹא עֶזְרִי

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?" (Psalm 121)

Where does our help come from?

It is Tuesday morning, and I'm in Haifa, sitting in my parents' new home. I have been in Israel for two weeks now, and each day has brought with it new experiences, treasured memories, difficult conversations, and questions about the future.

Life in Israel has, in many ways, returned to something resembling normal. Cafés are open, children play in parks, people hurry to work, and the beaches are full. Yet beneath that appearance of normalcy lies an exhaustion that is difficult to describe.

Israelis have lived through unimaginable years: the massacre of October 7, the war in Gaza, attacks from Lebanon and Yemen, missile barrages from Iran, nights spent in bomb shelters, and the unbearable waiting for hostages to return home. Even now, while daily life continues, Iran remains a looming threat, and no one knows what tomorrow may bring.

I was privileged to spend my first Shabbat at Kehilat Ohel Avraham, the Reform congregation at Leo Baeck School, led by my dear colleague, Rabbi Ariella Graetz-Bartuv. During Kabbalat Shabbat we sang melodies filled with hope—songs of harmony, love, and genuine peace among the nations. Among them was Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains…"

As we sang, I found myself thinking about the deepest yearning of Israelis today—not victory, not conquest, but peace. Real peace. The kind that allows parents to tuck their children into bed without wondering whether sirens will interrupt the night.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned such a future: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4). For much of my life, that verse shaped my worldview.

Then came October 7, 2023.

Like so many Jews around the world, something inside me broke. Nearly 1,200 innocent people were murdered. Families were torn apart. Hostages were dragged into Gaza. Thousands of Israeli soldiers have since given their lives defending their country. I found myself mourning as though sitting shivah—not only for the victims but for a shattered sense of security.

If I am honest, my commitment to peace gave way to something else. I wanted justice. At times, if I am even more honest, I wanted revenge. I devoted myself to advocating for Israel, supporting Israeli soldiers, and standing beside my family and my people. Those commitments were—and remain—important. But somewhere along the way I realized that my heart had become captive to my pain.

The Torah understands this temptation. In Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18 we read: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against people, but love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Eternal" Our tradition does not ask us to ignore evil. Judaism insists that justice matters. The Talmud teaches, "Whoever is compassionate to the cruel will ultimately become cruel to the compassionate." There are moments when defending life is a sacred obligation.

And yet Judaism also refuses to allow vengeance to become our identity. Maimonides teaches that every person should strive for the middle path, resisting the pull of destructive extremes. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot 4:1 reminds us, "Who is strong? One who conquers their own inclination". The greatest battle is often not against an enemy across the border, but against the hatred that threatens to take root within our own hearts.

Being in Israel this July, I discovered that something had quietly shifted inside me. I still believe Israel has the right—and indeed the obligation—to defend its citizens. I still grieve. I still carry the wounds of October 7. But I no longer want revenge. I want peace.

Not a naïve peace. Not a peace that ignores terror. Not a peace that forgets the hostages or dismisses Israel's security, nor Israel's right to exist. Rather, a peace with open eyes—a peace that is cautious, a peace that understands evil exists, yet refuses to surrender our humanity because evil exists.

And I found that I was not alone.

Again and again I heard Israelis say, "We're tired." Tired of war. Tired of funerals. Tired of asking every evening whether missiles will come tonight. Will we need to run to the shelters again? Will our children wake to sirens? Will this ceasefire last? Will our loved ones come home safely?

These are not political questions. They are profoundly human questions.

Our sages imagined something far different. The prophet Micah dreamed of the day when "*everyone shall sit under their vine and under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid*" (Micah 4:4).

If God is willing to set aside Divine honor for the sake of peace, how much more should we cherish it.

The Priestly Blessing concludes not with wealth, power, or victory, but with one final gift: "*May God favor you and grant you peace*" (Numbers 6:26).

Peace is not the absence of strength. Peace is what strength is ultimately meant to protect. That is the Israel I encountered this summer. Not a people hungry for endless war, but a people longing to live ordinary lives: to celebrate birthdays, to argue over soccer, to gather around Shabbat tables, to send children to school without fear, and to dream once again. I encountered A People ready to extend their hand across the boarder and invite their neighbors for pita and hummus.

On Yom Kippur we stand before God stripped of certainty. We confess not because we are weak, but because we know that wounded hearts can become hardened hearts. Our liturgy reminds us that every human being is created in the Divine image. Even after all we have endured, that truth remains.

Psalm 121 begins with a question: "From where will my help come?" The Psalm answers: "*My help comes from the Eternal, Maker of heaven and earth*."

Perhaps our help comes not only through God's protection, but through God's invitation: an invitation to defend life without glorifying war, to pursue justice without surrendering to vengeance, to remember the dead by choosing life, and to keep our eyes open to danger without closing our hearts to hope, and to peace.

As we enter this holiest day of the year, may grieving families know comfort. May wisdom be given to leaders. May enemies lay down their weapons. May every child—Israeli and Palestinian alike—one day know what it means to sleep without fear.

And may we, together, fulfil the ancient command: "S*eek peace and pursue it*." (Psalm 34:15)

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.