Not Just a Slogan

First Morning Rosh Hashanah 5785 (2024)

If I say to you, "Just do it," I'm talking about... (Nike), if I say "Impossible is nothing"? (Adidas), "I'm loving it" (McDonald's), "There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's (MasterCard)." "Like a good neighbor (state farm is there)", "America runs on (Dunkin)", "(Red Bull) gives you wings"...

We live in a world of slogans: short, memorable, and persuasive phrases used in advertising and marketing to communicate a specific message about a brand, product, or campaign. Every billboard on 595 or I-75, on every webpage we visit, every commercial break during our favorite programs—we are surrounded (and saturated!) by slogans. Sometimes we buy the product, and sometimes we don't but what always stays? The slogan.

Do we have a slogan in Jewish culture? What would be that short, memorable, persuasive phrase repeated over and over that we can consider our slogan? Perhaps from the Torah we could say:

Shema Yisrael (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל)
"Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."
Ve'ahavta l'reacha kamocha (וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ)
"Love your neighbor as yourself."
Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem (קְדֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם)
"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."
V'asita hayashar v'hatov (וְעָשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטּוֹב)
"Do what is right and good."
Tzedek, tzedek tirdof (צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוֹף)
"Justice, justice you shall pursue."

From the Talmud, we could add:

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh (כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה)
"All of Israel is responsible for one another."
Im ein ani li, mi li? (אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי?)
"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"
Talmud Torah keneged kulam (תַּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגֶד כֻּלָּם)
"The study of Torah is equal to all [the other commandments]."
Al shlosha devarim haolam omed (עַל שְׁלוֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד)
"The world stands on three things: Torah, divine service, and acts of kindness."

And from general Jewish tradition, two key words:

Shalom (שָׁלוֹם)
"Peace."
Tikun olam (תִּיקוּן עוֹלָם)
"Repairing the world."

Without a doubt, if we were a group of advertisers trying to create a marketing campaign to introduce Judaism to the world, we could use some of these slogans. Or perhaps the most well-known slogan to describe our history and our festivals: **"They tried to kill us, they couldn't, now let's eat."**

And yet, they killed us. And on the last October 7th, almost exactly a year ago, we were massacred in a way we haven't seen since the dark times of the Shoah. I can't imagine a rabbi in any synagogue in the world who wouldn't use the first opportunity to address their community about that fateful October 7th—a day that began almost a year ago but still hasn't ended. An eternal day. How do we speak about that day? How do we approach what is unapproachable? Do we talk about the horror of the destroyed kibbutzim? The bravery of the soldiers? The threat of Islamist terrorism? The failure in Israeli security? The government crisis and tensions within Israel? The hostages, whose very thought breaks our hearts? The bloody history of the Israeli-Arab conflict? What do we speak about, and how do we talk about something that transcends our words?

The Talmud tells us that the Torah, when speaking about God—something also ineffable and incomprehensible—does so by **"Dibra Torah kilshon bnei Adam"** (the Torah speaks in the language of humans). It speaks of things that exceed our linguistic capacity in "colloquial" terms, in words and ideas we can understand. Something like slogans. And today, I've decided to approach the unapproachable through slogans that became popular in Israel and the diaspora after that October 7th.

Never Again is Now

This is the power of slogans. They take us directly to a place. And this slogan is doubly powerful. It takes us back to the first "Never Again," that cry which became the demand of the entire Jewish people after the Shoah. Never again gas chambers. Never again defenseless in the face of antisemitism. Never again genocide. Never again the indifference of the world. This phrase was popularized by Meir Kahane in the 1970s as part of his Jewish Defense League campaign. However, although it's impossible to know for sure where the phrase originated, it likely goes back to the poet Yitzhak Lamdan, who wrote in 1927, inspired by the Zionist spirit, "Never shall Masada fall again!" Almost 100 years later, we say "Never Again," but now we bring it to the present, in light of the tragedy—"Now."

For decades, we spoke about "Never Again" in classrooms, sermons, and speeches at community gala dinners. We spoke about it in theory. We spoke about it in the past tense. We would never let Jews die simply because they are Jews. We would never again be defenseless against murderers. We would never let antisemitism go unpunished again. And yet, on that fateful October 7th, "Never

Again" was absent. In six hours, 1,200 Jews were murdered. The State of Israel seemed to disappear. That same day on social media, and a few days later throughout the United States, Europe, Arab countries, and Latin America, the most rampant and virulent antisemitism swept across the world, without disguise or pretense. **Never Again?** All over again.

That's why, as a people, we had to update "Never Again" and emphasize the "Now." The "Never Again" is no longer mere theory for professors, rabbis, and fundraisers... "Never Again is Now" is a call to wake up again. It seems that, as a Jewish people, both in the diaspora and in Israel, we had been living in a slumber—decades where we felt we had conquered antisemitism, and that the conflict with the Palestinians, with the Iron Dome, was under control. We fell asleep. We forgot, ignored, or wanted to believe that the world had become a different place... we turned a deaf ear to what we read in the Haggadah every year: "In every generation, someone rises to exterminate us."

BeYachad Nenatzeach ("Together we will win")

Walking through the streets of Israel, you see graffiti and stickers with this expression: "Together we will win." We all know the rule of history that nothing unites estranged brothers or citizens better than a common front. The same is true in Israel. **Am Echad veLev Echad**—"one people with one heart"—is a nice expression of goodwill but not a reality. The Midrash tells us that the only time in history the Jewish people were united was when receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. After that, there were always different camps, many of which were ideologically opposed. Pre-October 7th Israel presented one of the most divided moments in the history of the modern State of Israel. Bibists versus anti-Bibists, secular versus ultra-Orthodox, hawks versus doves. Protests filled the streets, both for and against Bibi Netanyahu. Political discord penetrated every fiber of society. And then came that fateful Shabbat. The black Shabbat. The country united. 360,000 reservists, doubling the number of active soldiers, with the largest mobilization in Israel's history, from all social strata and ideological positions, united. Pacifists, vegans from Tel Aviv's high-tech scene who despised Bibi Netanyahu with all their hearts, went to battle alongside hawks, nationalist Orthodox from Judea and Samaria, for whom Bibi was the king of Israel. Embraced. They defended and fought together like brothers. That was the image Israel saw. Ultra-Orthodox violating Shabbat to save secular Jews from the kibbutzim near Gaza. Left and right no longer existed. These were hours, days, and weeks of true national unity. Social and political activists raised their voices with "BeYachad Nenatzeach" (Together we will win), but also "Together we will be eternal," so that the people would realize that disunity had also left them at the mercy of an enemy that breached the fence in 130 places during those early hours of that Saturday morning.

They continue to fight side by side on the battlefield, regardless of political ideology... but on the streets of Israel, the social and political division has only deepened. "BeYachad Nenatzeach" became a reality on the battlefield, where life and death are at stake, but on the street, it became just another slogan.

Am Yisrael Chai

"We are prepared to defend ourselves against the will of Hitler's Germany to destroy us. We must defend ourselves because we are a people that lives and wishes to live. My last word that I wish to speak to you is this: our people lives—Am Yisrael chai!" These were the words of Rabbi Stephen Wise, leader of the Reform movement and fervent Zionist, in 1933. It's one of the earliest recorded instances of this slogan. Many may think that "Am Yisrael Chai" and its melody are as old as the Torah itself or the Psalms of King David, but no. It began to be popular in the 1930s and 1940s, but it only became widely known in 1965 when Shlomo Carlebach set it to the melody that still beats in our hearts today, asking for the freedom of Soviet Jews—the last great cause, perhaps, that united all American Jewry.

King David wrote in Psalm 34:12: "Who is the man who desires life, who desires many days to see the good?" The Jewish people are the people who love life and yearn for life. Our tradition does not venerate death or place emphasis on the world to come. There are stories of Jewish martyrdom, but they were always about giving life for the cause, never killing for the cause. There are stories and traditions about the **Olam Haba**, the world to come, but as Rabbi Yehuda taught: "One hour in this world is better than all eternity in the world to come." What we have always wanted as a people is to live. And we have lived longer than almost any other people in history. We have a history of 3,700 years. We have lived through and outlasted empires. We have lived through and survived the Diaspora. And 160 years ago, a group of Jewish idealists also decided that we have the right to live in our ancestral land.

Beyond singing and being moved by "Am Yisrael Chai," we must raise our voices without fear or hesitation. "We are alive" does not simply mean that we breathe. Being alive means continuing to invest in Jewish culture and the State of Israel, not just as a state of the Jews but as a Jewish state. "Am Yisrael Chai" should not just be a slogan we sing, but one we live by. What are we doing to keep our Judaism alive? What Jewish practice have we adopted and revalued since October 7th? What deeper connection with Israel have we established since October 7th? How are we ensuring that our children and grandchildren know that our people are alive?

Am HaNetzach lo Mefached leDerekh Arukha
(The Eternal People Are Not Afraid of the Long Journey)

Of all the slogans born from this terrible war, this is perhaps the least popular but possibly the most profound. It is based on one of the writings of Rabbi Kook, the first "Zionist rabbi" of the new **Yishuv** in British Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century. It embodies the essence of our people, our history, our theology. First, **Am HaNetzach**—the Eternal People. Similar to "Am Yisrael Chai," in this idea, we assert the eternity of our people and its persistence throughout history. We are not a large people, we never were. In fact, the Torah affirms that we were not "chosen" because we were many, but precisely because we were few... but we are the eternal people.

Nachman Krochmal, in his masterpiece **Moreh Nevukhei HaZman** (Guide for the Perplexed of the Time), argues that all nations have a life cycle: they are born, grow, reach a peak, and eventually decline and disappear. However, he argues that the Jewish people are unique in their ability to

survive throughout history, even after suffering great catastrophes. This survival is due, according to Krochmal, to the spiritual essence of Judaism and its deep connection to divine morality and law, which transcend time and historical circumstances: "The Jewish nation is eternal, not because it is immune to the cycles of history, but because it is rooted in principles that are not of this perishable world."

Simon Rawidowicz, in 1948, in his essay **Israel: The Ever-Dying People**, develops the idea that the Jewish people live with the constant sense of being on the verge of extinction, facing one threat after another throughout history. However, what distinguishes the Jews is their ability to be reborn and continue, overcoming crises that would have destroyed other peoples. For Rawidowicz, this constant struggle and rebirth are essential to Jewish identity: "The world has many peoples, and all of them think of themselves as existing forever. In this respect, the people of Israel stand alone. It is the ever-dying people, always on the verge of ceasing to be, yet it survives."

October 7th once again testified to the eternity of our people. In the face of the massacre, in the face of Hamas' genocidal call and its allies even in the West, here we are, and here we will continue to be... but this eternity gives rise to the second part of this phrase: **"lo mefached lederekh arukha"**—we are not afraid of the long journey. Being eternal, having a history of 3,700 years, having endured crises, expulsions, pogroms, discrimination, the Shoah, gives us a different sense of time. We are not in a hurry. We know the road will be long. The path to achieving peace is long, but we know we will get there. Being eternal gives us, in times of haste, in times of magical and instantaneous thinking, a different appreciation, a relativity of time. Hamas, and fanatical Islamist extremism, will be defeated and reeducated, but it will take time. If Europe, at war for centuries, achieved peace, why can't we do the same with our neighbors in the Middle East? "The eternal people are not afraid of the long journey" must not be just a slogan; it must be a position and perspective to break away from defeatism and the denial of a better future. That future will come—we will build it—but it will take time. A long time.

Bring Them Home Now

Of all the slogans that arose after October 7th, this is perhaps the most urgent of all, the one that broke all our hearts, the one that has become an accessory of Jewish identity worn around our necks. Many of us here are wearing a pendant that says "Bring them home now" in Hebrew, and "Our hearts are in Gaza." This is the central demand of Israeli society and Jewish culture. Since October 7th, more than 250 of our brothers and sisters have been taken captive. 110 returned alive through negotiations in November, 7 were rescued by IDF soldiers, 6 were executed in Gaza by Hamas, and an undetermined number were killed on October 7th itself. How many are still alive? We don't know. At the time of writing, there are 101 whose status—alive or dead—we don't know, but we want them home to reunite with their families or to be buried. Only **Tzedaka** and **Pidyon Shvuyim**—redeeming captives—are considered **Mitzvah Rabbah** (a great commandment) by the Talmud. Why? Because they are urgent. The hunger or clothing of a needy person cannot wait for

society to find a mechanism to eradicate poverty. The pain, anguish, and imminent potential for death in captivity cannot wait for political or military deliberations. National security is important, and preventing another October 7th is crucial. But the urgent task is to redeem the captives.

There is a significant part of Israeli society that believes, with good reason from statements by Israeli government leaders, that the hostages are not a priority. That if they can be freed militarily, so be it, but there is no room for further negotiations with terrorists. That's why hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been taking to the streets for months with this slogan, feeling that for some in the government, it's just a slogan and not a moral or political statement. We cannot let "Bring them home now" become just rhetoric or another slogan. We need them back home urgently, even if the price of negotiation is high. Israel has the strength, the historical memory, and the military might to deal with the potential dangers of an unfavorable deal with Hamas, but we cannot afford to abdicate a pillar of Jewish and Israeli ethos: every life matters, no one is dispensable.

We Will Dance Again

Finally, "We will dance again." A reaffirmation of life, continuity, and resilience. More than 350 of the victims of October 7th died at the Nova electronic music festival. Dozens of the hostages were taken from those desert dance floors. It was Mia Schem who tattooed these words on her arm after 55 days as a hostage in Gaza.

This phrase can be heard and seen everywhere. It's a bet on life. That October 7th, perhaps the longest day in our history—the day that still hasn't ended—will someday end. A few weeks ago, we saw Noa dancing at a party with her father. She had been held hostage for over 7 months and was freed by the IDF. She danced again. Luis Harr, also freed by the IDF, when asked why he dances when there are still hostages and the war continues, said it's because he is alive and free. We haven't stopped crying for those still in captivity, for those who fell defending the State of Israel, for those who were massacred on October 7th... but we keep dancing because even in tragedy, we continue to choose life. Because we can't let grief consume us.

Last October 7th, at 6:30 PM, in our "old ballroom," we were supposed to gather to dance with the Torah. It was **Simchat Torah**. But that morning, as a community, we decided we couldn't dance on the saddest day of our recent history, when we still didn't fully understand what was happening and the magnitude of the tragedy. That day, we didn't dance with the Torah, but we gathered as a community to unite with our brothers and sisters in Israel, to cry together, and to raise our prayers.

In a few days, it will be another October 7th, and in two weeks, it will be another Simchat Torah. Let's not allow "We will dance again" to be just another slogan. Let's follow the example of Noa, Luis, Ben, and his wife—whom we met at Tel Hashomer Hospital—both of whom lost a leg at the Nova festival and who recently married and danced at their chuppah. Let's dance again. Come this Simchat Torah to embrace our Torah. To dance, even with tears in our eyes, but to continue reaffirming that we are still here. Let's not allow "We will dance again" to be just another slogan.

Let's also pray with our feet. Let's make the walls of our new ballroom shake as we reaffirm each of our slogans:

Never Again is now, and we say it while dancing, proudly raising our Jewish identity in private and public, making it clear to the antisemites that we do not forget.
BeYachad Nenatzeach, and we say it while dancing, leaving behind our political arguments in Israel and the United States. We unite in melodies and dances that transcend the words that divide us.
Am Yisrael Chai, and we say it while dancing to these words and to the melody that awakens our passion for our people and culture like an anthem.
Am HaNetzach lo mefached lederekh arukha, and we say it while dancing, knowing that we have endured many tragedies, but we always choose to dance again.
Bring them Home now, we say it while dancing, aware of those who still cannot, hoping that soon it will be a reality and not just a prayer.
We will dance again, we say it while dancing this upcoming Simchat Torah here as a community.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah,
Rabbi Uri