Manuel in Jerusalem: A Rosh Hashanah Story of Teshuvah and Redemption

Rabbi Uriel Romano - Broward Central Synagogue - Rosh Hashanah Eve 5786

Many times, when we read or hear stories from the Torah, the Talmud, or the Hasidic tradition, we respond with skepticism: "No, that could never have happened."

And I'm not just talking about miracles or divine interventions. I mean those stories that seem *too perfect*, too cinematic–where the coincidences are so striking, they feel scripted. Maybe we believe they have some historical roots, but over time, they've been embellished–polished and adorned to move an audience more deeply.

Tonight, on Rosh Hashanah, as we begin the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah–the Ten Days of Repentance–I want to tell you a story that, at first, might sound like one of those tales. To be honest, if someone else had told me this, I might have said, "Beautiful. Perfect for a Hollywood film–or the imagination of a science fiction writer. But surely it never happened." But it did happen. It happened to me. And to forty members of our community.

It is, without doubt, one of the most extraordinary stories of teshuvah–repentance–and tikkun–repair–that I've ever heard, let alone had the privilege to live.

June 13. Around 6 PM. Jerusalem. It was a Friday afternoon. The war with Iran had begun less than 24 hours earlier. That morning, as one of the leaders of our group of volunteers–men and women, ages 18 to 50 from our community in Israel–I faced a decision. Israel had declared war at 3 AM local time. By dawn, the news was grim: Iran had launched hundreds of drones toward Israel.

We were given two options: Stay in Tel Aviv or relocate to Jerusalem.

Most of the Birthright leadership recommended we remain in our Tel Aviv hotel. But something stirred in me–irrational, inexplicable. A spark of what our tradition might call *ruach elohim*, or divine intuition. I knew we had to go to Jerusalem.

So we went. On that day, the usually clogged highway was nearly empty. In under 45 minutes, we arrived at our Jerusalem hotel. Minutes later, the news came in: All the drones had been intercepted. Not one reached Israeli airspace.

That was the first decision that led us to the story I want to share. The second was this: to leave the hotel that Friday night.

It wasn't forbidden, but most groups chose to stay put for "extra security." The only rule was simple: if we went out, we had to stay together and within 10 minutes of a shelter.

So we went out. The sky was clear. Shabbat was descending. For many of our participants, it was their first time in Israel. How could I deny them the beauty of Shabbat in Jerusalem–even under the shadow of war? We walked down Jaffa Street, tried to enter the Old City–but for the first time in our lives, found the gates literally locked. Only residents were allowed in or out. Undeterred, we descended into the Mamilla Valley, facing the golden walls of the Old City.
There, we began Kabbalat Shabbat.

It felt like a dream. The sunlight glimmered on ancient stone. We sang Psalms. We chanted *Lecha Dodi*. We proclaimed *Shema Yisrael*. We prayed the *Amidah*–toward the very place we always face in prayer, but now, it was right before our eyes. As I was about to conclude with *Aleinu L'shabeach*, I noticed people glancing at their phones. Sirens? I asked. Yes. The first wave of Iranian missiles was on its way. I said, "Then the Aleinu will wait. Let's start moving."

We calmly guided the group into the nearest shelter: the Mamilla mall parking garage. Others streamed in too: a French Jewish family, scattered tourists.And then I saw him. A tall, broad-shouldered young man, walking alone, disoriented. I approached and asked if he wanted to join us. In English, he said yes. We were required to stay for at least ten minutes. To ease the tension, I struck up a conversation. That was the third decision that led to this story: To speak to a stranger.

"What's your name?" I asked. His name was Manuel. He was from a small town in southern Germany. He had arrived in Israel the day before–alone.

He told me he was Christian.He had never met a Jew in his life. But he had long admired the Jewish people–their resilience, their history, the miracle of Israel. At first, I assumed he was one of many Christians drawn to the land for religious reasons, seeking connection to the Hebrew roots of his faith. But then he said something more. He said it calmly–without shame, without hesitation–with a gravity that pierced me: "I came to Israel because my grandfather was a Nazi officer. I came to try to repair his sin."

Think of it: Just hours before a war with Iran begins, this German grandson of a Nazi officer arrives in Israel.He came not out of guilt, but with a desire to witness the survival and spirit of the very people his grandfather's regime had tried to destroy. And he ends up–by chance?–in a Jerusalem shelter, surrounded by Jews. Embraced by a rabbi and his community.

Manuel told his story again, aloud, to the group. We listened, stunned. As the ten minutes passed and we prepared to part ways, one of our participants–Ofir Weiss, son of Dvir–asked, with childlike simplicity: "Why don't you join us for Shabbat dinner?" Manuel's eyes widened.He had never met a Jew. And now, in Jerusalem, in the middle of a war, a group of Jews was inviting him to their sacred table. He turned to me, almost in disbelief: "Am I even allowed, as a Christian, to join a Shabbat meal?" "Of course," I told him. And so, with the innocence of someone stepping into a new world, Manuel walked with us to our hotel.

The night unfolded like a dream. A group from Australia, with a Chabad rabbi, was also there. Despite our differences, we shared one table. With Manuel. We sang *Shalom Aleichem*. We made *Kiddush*. We broke bread with *Hamotzi*. We shared a festive meal.

The sirens interrupted us again and again–once, twice, three times–until 3 or 4 AM. Each time, we returned to the shelter. And through it all, Manuel was with us–eating, singing, laughing. For a few hours, he was one of us. And then–like the angels in the Torah who appear suddenly, deliver a message, and vanish–Manuel was gone. He returned to his hotel. He gave us his number, but never replied to my messages again. I believe he was a malakh–an emissary, an angel–sent to pierce our lives with his presence.

On this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah, as we enter the year 5786 and the Days of Awe, I carry with me the teachings of Manuel. This was not just a "movie moment." Meeting him changed me deeply.

Here are the teachings I bear as a witness to this story:

1. Teshuvah is Courage

Manuel embodied **gevurah**–moral strength. The courage to face his grandfather's crimes–not with denial or shame, but with honesty and resolve. To say: **"That was not me. That is not who I am."** That is true bravery. The kind we rarely see. And that is the kind of courage **teshuvah** demands of us. To say to ourselves: "That version of me–those choices–that harm... that is no longer who I want to be." People–and nations–**can** change.Manuel taught me that.

2. Tikkun Across Generations

His presence reminded us: we are not responsible for the sins of our ancestors. But we **do** have the power to heal what they broke.In Germany, people like Manuel are doing just that–not erasing or excusing the past, but transforming history into responsibility. There are descendants of Nazis who hide their family's crimes in shame. Others who justify them with pride. And then there are those like Manuel–who **break the cycle** and show us that change is possible. If even descendants of Nazis can change–who's to say our enemies today might not change tomorrow? That is a message of hope.

3. The Angels Around Us

Manuel's story would never have been told if I hadn't spoken to a stranger. **Angels often come disguised**–as interruptions, chance encounters, or unfamiliar faces. They wait for us to step out of our comfort zones and say, simply, *"Hello."* The rabbis of the Talmud often failed to understand the Torah from within the walls of the Beit Midrash–until they stepped outside, into conversation with strangers. This year, let's dare to step out of our comfort zones. Let's talk to someone we don't know.They may carry the message we've been waiting for.

4. The Other's Gaze

Sometimes, it takes the eyes of a stranger to remind us of what we take for granted. Manuel had never met a Jew, yet he admired us deeply. He came to Israel because he was in awe of our resilience. How often do we forget our blessings, our strength–until someone from the outside helps us see them anew?

5. We Are Ambassadors

By welcoming Manuel, by offering him a seat at our Shabbat table, we changed his life–and he changed ours. That is **hachnasat orchim**–sacred hospitality–at its purest. I picture him now, in a small German village, telling his family about the Jews who embraced him in Jerusalem. About the night he prayed and sang with us–even as missiles filled the sky.

- May we enter 5786 with hearts wide open–attentive to the angels who cross our path in unexpected ways.
- May this be a year of courage–the courage to look at ourselves honestly, to change what must be changed, and to become who we are meant to be
- May it be a year of hope–the hope that if people and nations have wounded, they can also heal, and that tomorrow can be different from yesterday.
- May it be a year of vision–to see ourselves anew through the eyes of others, to remember our blessings and our strength.
- And may it be a year of sacred pride–to walk as proud ambassadors of Judaism, carrying the light of our tradition into a world so deeply in need of it.

Shanah tovah u'metukah - May it be a good and sweet year.

Rabbi Uri