



## 'Reasonable Optimist'

**Kol Nidrei President Remarks 5785 – 2024**

Marc Freedman, Founding President

*Transcript*

**I consider myself a reasonable optimist**, always have been, and likely always will be. You see, I believe reasonable optimism is defined as a time when the odds are more often than not in your favor, and that despite setbacks along the way, things will always balance out. I believe that the future will always be better than the past, but that the path we take to get there will undoubtedly include setbacks, detours, and disappointments. We stand here tonight, three years into Congregation Ahavat Olam's journey. Honestly, I think like you, I'm in awe of how far we've come. A lot's happened over the past thousand days or so of our existence, but none more pivotal than the events of this past year, especially those on October 7th. You see that day our world changed the challenges we face as modern Jews intensified. Yet so too did our resolve.

Last year, I handed out the blues stand up to Jewish hate pins. Who knew how soon those words would resonate with such profound urgency here in North Andover. The raising of a Palestinian flag across the street from this very chapel became a symbol of a much larger conflict. Many of us felt disheartened and broken. *Yet amid that storm, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in our congregation.* **In the face of adversity Congregation Ahavat Olam did not retreat, but we stood strong in the immediate aftermaths.** After the brutal attacks in Israel, Rabbi Idan showed unwavering leadership. He approached our town asking for a symbol of solidarity, a request to raise the Israeli flag alongside the American flag. The unanimous agreement by our town Selectmen to fly it for 30 days was more than just a gesture. It was a declaration that we as Jews belong here.

But as we know, those challenges did not end that day. When the Palestinian community requested that their flag be raised. After the Israeli flag came down, the discussion evolved into a wider debate, one that brought tension and fear to our doorstep. Yet again, we did not shy away. *Rabbi Idan became the calm, the beacon, and the compassionate voice in the face of mounting hostility.* His



presence in both national and local media, as well as in front of our town, became a testament to the strength of this very congregation. And on that pivotal night, when 800 people gathered at the north end of our high school, security was high tensions, even higher. **But we did not stand alone.** Our town rallied behind us. And despite the difficult outcome, we emerged with a deeper connection to our neighbors, to our community, and especially Chief Gray in the entire North Andover Police Department who stood with us, stood watch with us in those uncertain moments. Now, I'll bet many of you didn't know that on that evening, Rabbi Idan and his family were provided police protection to and from their home that evening.

In today's world, the role of our police is often thankless. Yet at Congregation Ahavat Olam, we've made it a point to express our gratitude. A simple thanks for being here may seem small, but to those who protect and serve, it means the world. They stand with us, and we will continue to stand with them. Knowing that appreciation and respect are the cornerstones of the partnership that we collectively have built. *You see at the 'Shul@1600', our synagogue has become more than a place of worship. It's become a beacon for Jewish life, for inclusion, for resilience.* We have earned a seat at the table on the issues of antisemitism and justice. And just today, I'm proud to announce that Senate minority leader, Bruce Tarr, has appointed us as his representative on the State Commission on antisemitism. His confidence in our efforts affirms that Congregation Ahavat Olam continues to play a crucial role in the conversation, not just for Jews in the Merrimack Valley and the North Shore, or even the Southern New Hampshire area, but the values of peace, dignity, and equality for all... Not bad for a startup temple. *Our mission of one Judaism has never been more vital.* When I stood before you at our first Kol Nidrei in 2022, I promised that this congregation would be a place where everyone is welcome. *No matter which holidays you, you observe who you love, how you express your Jewish identity. Because today, in this world of political polarity, we don't care how you vote, what flag you fly, or what hat you wear, you are all welcome here. Period.*

Last year we raised over \$10,000 for Israelis in need, coming together through music, community, and compassion with a concert called A Song for Israel. It was



performed by Ron, Tutti, Gitit and so many others at our shul. And this year we've seen the resilience of our faith in action. Congregation Ahavat Olam twice, hosted residents from Kibbutz Magen, whose lives were shattered on October 7th, but who found solace in sharing their stories with us. And again, during a Shabbat service, In May, our members, college students shared their perspectives about antisemitism on college campuses. And we were especially touched by Chloe Ginsberg's experience at Union College. Her story was heartbreaking, and it resonates with many students on our college campuses. And just this week, my daughter, Mindy, was shocked when two of her closest friends told her that their friendship would need to end. These are women who've been to our house, who've celebrated our holidays with us, who met Idan and Einat. They were sisters in Mindy's sorority, roommates after college and travel friends. So, what happened? Over the past week, these women have concluded that being friends with someone who is Jewish is okay, but being friends with someone who stands with Israel is where they draw the line.

Apparently in their eyes, these positions are mutually exclusive. As parents, Laura and our hearts ache, we listened to her cry and express bewilderment. *'How could so-called best friends be so harsh?'* Imagine how you'd react if your child called you with the same circumstance. You know, some of the greatest support Jews have been able to rely on these days come from our Catholic and Christian community. The notes, the phone calls, the invitations of fellowship that Idan, me, and our congregation receives are just incredibly hardening. It's comforting to know that they stand with us as we uphold our resolve to fight for justice and peace. And so, as we approach 150 members, *not bad for a startup*, our vision for a permanent home is more alive than ever. Our beloved 'Shul@1600', though a temporary space will continue to be filled with permanent love, support, and purpose until we find a new home that reflects the light of everything that Congregation Ahavat Olam stands for.

***So, as we reflect on this year and sit with some of those most unfathomable of events to strike our Jewish spirit, I still remain reasonably optimistic. That's because even in adversity, there is light.***



The lesson from October 7th is not just one of grief, but a reminder of resilience. We will move forward, not because it's easy, but because it's necessary, for our children, for our future, and for our people. So tonight, on this Kol Nidrei evening, before you lay your head on your pillow, ask yourself the question our free-spirited son, Jerry asks Laura and I every day, *"Dad, what was the highlight of your day?"* Think about that. What was the highlight of your day? Not only why are you tired, or what took up too much headspace and impacted your mood today? But instead, what was the highlight of your day? Now, let that reflection guide you into slumber and let Congregation Ahavat Olam be a place where those highlights multiply. In a world full of uncertainty, discourse, political polarity, and yes antisemitism, reflect on this question tonight and every evening. What was the highlight of your day? I think you might start seeing life through a more reasonably optimistic lens. Because at Congregation Ahavat Olam, highlights are what keep us resilient in times of adversity. We are strong because we stand together, because at Congregation Ahavat Olam...

*We share one Judaism, one God, one Torah, and one family.*

*G'mar Chatima Tova and Ve'esarei.*