

Erev Shabbat Parshat Matot-Masei, Kfar Vradim, in the Western Galilee, Israel

Dear friends, both near and far,

May G-d be with you.

Tomorrow morning, just before we return the Torah scroll to its place, we will stand and bless the incoming month, the month of Av. The sages already knew how to give it the nickname "Menachem-Av," in the hope that the days of calamity that befell Israel in the past would give way to days of joy and salvation, and that the fourth fast and the fifth fast would be transformed into good for the House of Israel.

On the same day that the house was destroyed, Menachem was also born. Comfort carries within it hope—there is no comfort without it. The ability to come and raise a person from their sorrow, mourning, and pain lies in the faith and hope that tomorrow will be better than yesterday, and the place of loss will be filled with life and joy. Comfort must come with hope—we know that.

And for 300 days now we have been in painful mourning for those who will never return after they were brutally murdered on the seventh of October.

300 days of fighting for our right, as citizens of Israel, to live in peace and security. A war that has claimed many hundreds of soldiers who gave their lives for this cause.

300 days and nights of frantic concern for the hostages held captive by Hamas, 300 days and nights of prayers and attempts to return our sons and daughters to their families.

Tomorrow, when we bless the month of Av, we will pray that there will be both Av (a father) and Menachem (a comforter).

Not all of you know me, so here is a short summary: My name is Nathalie, and I am the rabbi of the Masorti Family Minyan in Kfar Varadim, a small and wonderful community that has existed for about 30 years. I have been living here for eight years, in a village located in the Western Galilee, 9 km from the Lebanese border. I have three children, and six granddaughters and grandsons who have not come to their grandmother's house in the north for 300 days because here, for 300 days, there has been war and no peace: for "from the north shall disaster break loose," such that the Iron Dome battery, located at the edge of the village, is active—unfortunately—almost every day.

Romi Gonen, the daughter of Eitan and Merav, members of our community, was kidnapped by terrorists from the escape route from the Nova party. Romi will be 24 years old in a few days; she has already been in the hands of the worst and cruelest of our enemies for 300 days and nights, along with 114 other hostages. And it's impossible to breathe anymore. And there are no words, truly.

In good times, there is no pastoral beauty like the Galilee. But in this period, we are defined as a "settlement on the conflict line." The terrible events of the seventh of October caused a strong upheaval throughout the country, of course, and also here on

the northern border, when all the settlements along the border fence were evacuated for fear of infiltration by Hezbollah terrorists into the settlements adjacent to the fence. Some of them came to us and nearby settlements, and some to more distant settlements. They have been refugees in their own country for about ten months, and this beautiful area has become a desolate wasteland due to the hundreds of missiles and drones that have fallen on it since then.

I will not speak at length about the basic uncertainty we have lived in since. The moment the alarm sounds, we have between 0-15 seconds to run to a protected space. Just try to think what it means to live in such a consciousness: how can you go out shopping in such a situation? What does it mean to take children to school? To visit friends? How do you conduct a funeral, or indeed a bar mitzvah or holiday, in such a way? How do you get around on the road when at any moment a missile can fall from Lebanon "in an open area," with no nearby protected space to run to—when all that remains is to lie on the ground, with your hands on your head, and... pray?

It exacts a heavy and terrible price every day: a week ago, on Saturday afternoon, it was 12 children from Majdal Shams—a Druze settlement at the foot of Mount Hermon—who were hit by a "Burkan" missile, a direct-fire missile that gave no chance to anyone within a 30-meter radius of the place it fell, a fall that came along with a siren... The Druze, our siblings and neighbors, lost 10 heroic fighters in this war alone, to which were added with great regret 12 boys and girls and dozens of wounded. Their pain and outcry, and ours, is heard all over the world.

Then came the assassinations, in Lebanon and Tehran, of two senior commanders in the evil forces around us, with the blood of hundreds and thousands by their hands—including the aforementioned children of Majdal Shams. We did not ask for revenge—but for peace and quiet. But this cannot be done when the other side sees our destruction as his life's purpose! And yes, the world is a better and safer place since their elimination. "And for the wicked let there be no hope."

And these assassinations have consequences, and the days are even more difficult when the bad and terrible is unfortunately expected to arrive, perhaps even while you are reading these words. And the tension and uncertainty drove many more of the residents of the north, who had kept their homes until now, southwards.

And in these moments of Erev Shabbat, I raise my eyes to heaven and wonder—where will our help really come from? And what additional terrible price will we pay in the upcoming attack that will harm us? —

Then I breathe, and remember, and breathe again. And I try to focus my spirit and energy on the hopes of generations, on the words of the prophecies, but above all, I know that inner and communal strength, the strength of the togetherness that comes from the strength of concern for each other—that is what stands up for us and brings us relief, hope, and yes, also comfort. As community rabbis, our role is to collect the fragments of faith from the loss, the shards of light from the darkness and the crumbs of comfort and hope from the fear—to hold them together, to carry them up for our families, for our communities, for our country and for our people. It's on us. This is our shift.

During these days “bein hametzarim,” between the straits, which have lasted 47 weeks this year, I remind myself that I am not alone. That all of you pray for us and for the peace of our country and all the inhabitants of the world. And yes, there is a lot of comfort in knowing that your heart is in the right place, that your eyes cry with us over the loss and pain, and that your hands are busy repairing the world and doing acts of chesed, especially during this difficult time.

It is not my place to give military or cosmopolitan assessments, but this I know: despair is not a work plan. It never has been and never will be. And even in these empty and tense moments—our hope has not yet been lost, the two-thousand-year-old hope of being a free people in our country, in the land of Zion and Jerusalem. And with this hope, I will enter Shabbat Matot-Masei, a Shabbat in which we will read another haftarah of calamities, but my eyes will already be on “Comfort, comfort my people”—and my wish is that after the darkness, the light will break, and that after the anxiety, peace and comfort will come.

Friends, we will act and we will succeed. We fell hard on October 7th, and perhaps we will fall again—but our rise will come, and when it comes, it will rise and shine above all the darkness and the shadow of death of this year.

And I will pray, both tonight and tomorrow, and in the days to come, that the words of the prophet Zechariah will be fulfilled in us: “Thus said G-d of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and integrity.” Amen v’amen.

May this month of Av truly be Menachem-Av, and bring with it peace for us and everyone.

Wishing a Shabbat of peace and quiet to those near and far,

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