

In memory of Oded Lipschitz, Kfir and Ariel Bibas (z'l)
Rabbi Dara Frimmer

Note: This sermon was delivered on Friday, February 21, 2025 at 7PM before Israeli officials identified the body of Shiri Bibas (z'l).

I remember growing up in the 1980s in New Jersey, and, at some point, my father gifting me a silver, or maybe it was stainless steel, bracelet. It was rigid and not particularly stylish. No matter how I tried to shape it to my wrist, it was uncomfortable to wear. But I knew it was important that I did, so I did my best to keep it on.

During the Soviet era, those silver bracelets, engraved with the names of "refuseniks" Soviet Jews denied permission to emigrate, became one of the many symbols of their struggle for freedom. They were a daily reminder of those who were denied the opportunity to practice their Judaism and unjustly held back from moving somewhere they could. Wearing the bracelets was an act of solidarity. It was a way for Diaspora Jews to stay connected and to raise awareness about the sufferings of our people thousands of miles away.

Giving me that bracelet was my father's way of saying, "Your family is bigger than the three of us, and your grandparents in Florida. You're part of the Jewish people and that comes with responsibilities; to care for one another and to stand up for another. As it says in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shevuot 39a, Kol yisrael aravaim zeh bazeh*: All of Israel is responsible for one another.

The bracelet was one of many global Jewish efforts to draw attention to Russian Jews - and they worked. Beginning in 1987, refusenik cases were reviewed and exit visas issued. In 1986, only 904 Jews had been given these visas—by 1987, the number had jumped to 8155.

Between 1989 and 1991 close to a half million Jews left Russia (of these about 70% went to Israel), with another million Jews joining them in the decade after.

My bat mitzvah was in 1989. I'm pretty sure I mentioned the name of the Refusnik on my bracelet, though I didn't keep a record, or the bracelet. But I have the memory.

I found myself thinking about that bracelet this week, as I was holding onto my silver necklace. (Or, maybe it's stainless steel.) The text in English says: **Bring them home**

now. The text in Hebrew says: **Our hearts are held captive in Gaza.** I think about those two messages, and how someone decided, in two languages, to articulate both an emotion and an action.

I think about what it means to wear this piece of jewelry day in and day out. To take it to work, and to Trader Joe's, and to the swimming pool and the sanctuary. To carry the captives close to my heart, wherever I go; and, over these past few weeks, since the ceasefire began, to watch them come home.

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I was so proud when my girls first noticed the solidarity necklace Carla, our K12 Director, was wearing. They immediately wanted to know what it was, what the Hebrew said, where she got it, and (of course) if they could have one, too. Carla happened to have a few extras that she had picked up during her most recent trip to Israel and, with a nod from me, she gave my then 8-year olds their very own solidarity necklace.

*Kol yisrael aravaim zeh bazeh.*

Eventually, we relieved Eleanor of hers after she placed the tag in her mouth and absent-mindedly chewed on it one too many times while engrossed in a book. Soon after, Madeline, who decorated her chain with more beads to zuzz it up, stopped wearing hers, as well.

And that's how I got my necklace. After a thorough cleaning, I put on Eleanor's - and I have worn it ever since. It was technically *handed-up* not down and now my girls proudly say, "We gave it to Mama."

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It's a strange thing to wear a necklace that speaks to the heartbreak and brutality of October 7, and see it as a symbol of strength and endurance. Months ago, at Overland Elementary's morning drop-off, a parent saw my necklace, did a double take, and then said, "Amen! Bring them home now." I shouldn't have been caught off guard, but I was. For a split second, a time that I'm usually on auto-pilot, became a moment of deep connection. A moment in which the tragic gap between humanity and depravity was bridged.

I think about what it means for Israelis living in LA, to see the silver dog tag, engraved in Hebrew, and perhaps, for just a minute, feel seen and understood.

I think about the people who have inquired about the necklace, and the chance to share a part of the story since October 7.

I am in awe of this one, small piece of silver, filled with emotion and bent on action, keeping us all connected.

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Also, it's not just the necklaces holding us together.

Since the start of the ceasefire, many of you have written to us, reminding us about the cards we handed out during the High Holy Days, each with the image and name of an Israeli hostage. You told us that you took your card home and placed "your" person on the fridge, or next to the Shabbat candles each week. How you explained to your children and family that you would keep the photo up until they were set free. Some of you wrote that you'd reached such a moment in the last few weeks when "your" person had finally come home.

Tomorrow, Tal Shoham, Omer Shem-Tov, Omer Wenkert, and Eliya Cohen who were taken hostage as well as Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, who have been held by Hamas since they entered the Strip on their own in 2014 and 2015, will feel the embrace of their loved ones. Finally free from captivity.

Maybe some of them are on your fridge. Or next to your Shabbat candles.

Then there is Oded (z'l) and Kfir (z'l) and Ariel (z'l). The first three bodies to be returned. And we wait to learn the fate of Shiri. We brought them into our homes, too, and introduced them to our families. We bought orange balloons for Kfir's first birthday and dressed our children in orange t-shirts as another sign of solidarity, protecting our youngest from the details of who and why, but the older kids knew and understood.

As Reform Diaspora Jews, who often declare our atheism or at least agnosticism with pride, even **we** stretched our faith beyond capacity, praying they would come home to us alive.

But this week, the boys returned in caskets and Oded's wife, Yocheved, became a widow; and we felt devastated. Maybe more than we imagined we would feel. After all, they're not **our** children. He isn't **our** partner. Except when it feels like they are.

Diaspora Jews, who by nature of our location, have been forced to learn how to draw close to one another from thousands of miles away. We have learned how to bring complete strangers into our home and into our lives.

You might remember the picture of Romi Gonen from the Times of Israel website that featured her holding a sloth; a very memorable image for my kids. They'd sifted through piles of the cards looking at all the names and faces and took home several *Romi cards* for safekeeping. When Romi was announced as one of the hostages to be freed, they knew exactly who she was. "She's the one with the sloth, Mama."

By the way, it turns out one of our members is from her home community in Israel. He had gone through the pile of cards, looking for her, as well. I wrote to him on the day she was released saying: *I wanted to connect over the miracle of her coming home.* And he wrote back: It's such a miracle. **I pray that the rest of them return and we can start healing.**

Please God, may that day come soon and speedily.

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Someday, I know, I'll take off my necklace. Likely, I'll do it when all the hostages come home. (Or, when Eleanor demands hers back.) Someday, the action will be done. **But when does the healing begin?** When will our hearts, held captive for so many days, finally begin to heal? How do we return to a world in which Kfir and Ariel's story ends with their burial instead of their redemption?

Where is the bracelet that signals us to turn away from despair? And what words will we find engraved upon it?

The traditional words to comfort a mourner are "*Hamakom yinachem etchem b'toch shaar avalei Tziyon ve'Yerushlayim*: "May we be comforted along with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. " It's a mouthful. I remember trying to learn it years ago when I worked in a more traditional synagogue and at some point, someone said, "It's okay to just shorten it and say: '*Hamakom yinachem.*' Everyone will know what you mean."

But the **full** phrase is instructive: May **you** find comfort in community, amidst all those who nurture broken hearts, and walk the path of grief and mourning. From ancient times until now. May **you** find you are not alone as you now walk this path, surrounded by family and friends, local and global, maybe even complete strangers. You are not alone, no matter how lonely you feel.

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It is so very Jewish to pull us into the embrace of community *just at the moment we want to hide*, refusing to emerge until the pain dissipates and the promissory note that says *you have suffered enough* is notarized. Because to belong to our tribe is to belong to a global family. With global care and with global responsibilities that ensure we do not surrender to the darkness.

**Where is the necklace that gives us permission to have faith in the world again?  
And what words will we find upon it?**

Maybe it's here, in this community tonight, as we grieve together. It's in the words of our prayer book, guiding us to the words of Shalom Rav and Oseh Shalom even when we hesitate or falter in our faith. Our commitment to search for wholeness in spite of all that's broken.

Maybe it's in our deep desire to turn away from the darkness and despair that threatens to consume us all and instead, look for the moments where light is still being kindled...just like these Shabbat candles tonight.

Maybe it's in the Jewish instruction to make our loved ones' memories a blessing: *Zichronam Livracha*. Even after death, their memories help us to live and to share their blessings with the world.

I wish it was easier, but hope isn't always comfortable. Just like that damn bracelet from the '80s. The bracelet that my father, of blessed memory, thought I was old enough to wear. And maybe I was. Or, maybe it's the memory of him and his faith in me that is the enduring lesson.

*Kol yisrael aravaim zeh bazeh.*

So, tonight, light a *yahrzeit* candle for your family. Tonight, mourn the deaths of those you made your own, holding them close for so many months.

And also, light the Shabbat candles. And force yourself, if needed, to bring in the light. With intention. And, please God, in the light that we knowingly kindle, may it illuminate the path forward as we find our way.

Shabbat Shalom.