

On October 7, Sinai Temple will mourn, then we will dance again

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“Rabbi, where should my child go to college?” This is a question we did not learn how to answer in rabbinical school. This is a question for college counselors, not religious leaders. But, after the fifth time we received that question during this past admissions season, we recognized what they were really asking: “Rabbi, where will my child feel safe to be a Jew?”

October 7th transformed our lives as Jews in Los Angeles. That Saturday, we changed the sermon on the spot. Instead of our prepared remarks, we read text messages we had received from our former executive director, who was trapped in a bomb shelter outside of Tel Aviv not knowing if the terrorists were heading toward him.

Hundreds of our community members spent the day checking in on relatives in Israel in similar conditions. One congregant’s cousin, Niv Raviv, was murdered in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. We soon learned that Amiram Cooper, whose niece is a member of our synagogue, was kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Oz. Amiram’s great-nephew’s bar mitzvah had been held at Sinai Temple just a few years ago. Amiram became our family and stayed in our hearts this year. We had a chair for him at the Passover table, and we prayed for his safe return. In June, Amiram was declared dead. His body still has not been returned to his family.

Here in Los Angeles, our synagogue physically changed. On October 14th, we took 240 seats in our sanctuary, usually filled each Shabbat, and placed pieces of paper on each with a name and with an age. As the year progressed, as some hostages returned alive and other hostages returned dead, we removed those names as we learned each story in real time.

As the days turned into months, anti-Zionism and antisemitism became indistinguishable, especially on college campuses. Students and their parents began to tell us about their fears.

One mile from our synagogue’s doorstep, protesters [physically blocked Jewish students from attending classes on the UCLA campus](#) while hundreds of students encamped on the main university quad and called for divestment from Israel. An occupational therapy graduate student at USC told us she walked into her art therapy class to find a Palestinian flag on the wall bearing the words, “From the river to the sea.” [Congress overwhelmingly deems the slogan antisemitic](#) because of its “[goal of the eradication of the State of Israel](#)” and “[calls for the removal of the Jewish people from their ancestral homeland](#).”

As we entered the winter months, President Joe Biden arrived in our neighborhood for a fundraiser. In a local park just a block from our synagogue, [a large, intimidating crowd](#) gathered from the Palestinian Youth Movement – young people in keffiyehs with signs calling the president “genocide Joe.”

As the protest dispersed, throngs of people walked towards our synagogue. With heavy armed security, our synagogue was spared. But the church across the street was [tagged with graffiti](#) like “F**K The IDF” and “from the river to the sea.” That night after Shabbat services, fearful for our own physical safety, we were personally escorted to our home with two armed guards by our sides.

It was Chanukah, a time when usually we would light the menorah candles and place them in the window for their light to shine to the park outside. That evening, for the first time in our lives, we lit the candles and closed the curtains. Our children asked, “Why are we doing this?” And we had to answer, “There are people outside that do not like us.”

Days later, Sinai Temple received bomb threats, disrupting the workday for our synagogue and our schools. Earlier in the year when a [“day of rage”](#) was declared, students were afraid to attend our religious school; only 30 percent of our student body showed up. A non-Jewish employee in our synagogue informed us that his non-Jewish roommate told him he needed to quit because he was working for Zionists.

Now we are about to commemorate the one-year anniversary of October 7th. We will mourn, but we will also dance. In commemoration of Amiram Cooper and Niv Raviv we will dedicate two new covers for our sacred Torah scrolls in their honors, and we will dance with them.

Sinai Temple continues to demonstrate our resiliency through our support each other and Israel. Each Shabbat, we have welcomed guest speakers to educate our community. We have hosted October 7th survivors, IDF soldiers, American volunteers, hostage families, Christian allies and the CEO of the Nova Festival exhibition, all of whom give us hope and strength.

We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on security, ensuring our community is physically safe from hate, to make sure that our sanctuary will be just that – a sanctuary from hate and evil.

We often think of that question: “Where should I go to school?” Our answer is different from what it was last year. We tell those who ask us, “Go to a place where you wish to be a Jewish leader by desire, and not by need.”

Sinai Temple is a place that produces those leaders. Through our newly launched Beren Scholars Program, our 11th and 12th graders will meet with renowned national leaders who will teach how to combat antisemitism as they enter the college campus, workforce and beyond.

October 7th changed how we live our lives as Jews. But October 7th did not change our resiliency, our courage and our light that we as a Jewish people have to offer the world. As the survivors of the Nova festival often say, “We will dance again.” This is not a motto; it is our truth.

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