

## **Remarks by Rabbi Paula Feldstein, Hebrew Tabernacle**

### **Vigil for Israel in Bennett Park Oct. 8, 2023**

I want to thank Congressman Espaillat, Manhattan Borough President, Mark Levine, the JCRC and AJC for organizing this critically important event. I also want to give a heartfelt thanks to the members of the New York City police department who came to our synagogue as we celebrated Simchat Torah last night to make sure that we were able to celebrate our holiday in safety and peace. Isn't that after all what every human being wants? To live their lives in safety, free from harm, to have the freedom to be whoever they are regardless of race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, sexual preference and gender. The attack by Hamas on Israel, the deliberate murder of civilians, including the elderly, disabled and children, the taking of civilian hostages, is a violation of this most basic of human rights.

For 2000 years Jews have lived in exile from their homeland – wandering from country to country often persecuted, killed or exiled again. My congregation, Hebrew Tabernacle, was built by German Jews who either got out of Germany before the Holocaust or who survived the Holocaust and came to this country as refugees. 75 years ago when the State of Israel was founded – built on the backs

of Jews who came out of the Concentration camps and the ashes of the Holocaust – Jews were finally home again, in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. We finally had a place where any Jew could go and live in safety. Something that every human being, every person, created in the image of God, has the right to have. And yet, while we were finally back in our Jewish home, safety has been elusive at best. Israel has been attacked from every direction at many different times during the last 75 years.

Hamas, a terrorist organization, has made it clear, verbally and in their charter that it has one goal – the destruction of the Jewish State and the elimination of the Jews who live there. When they say that they are fighting “the occupation” what they mean is that they are fighting to drive the Jewish People out of the entire land of Israel. For them there is absolutely no compromise.

The terror and trauma that Israelis have experienced in the last day and a half is incomprehensible. Elderly Israelis and children kidnapped and now in the hands of those who will not hesitate to torture or kill them.....Civilians hunted down in their homes and killed or taken hostage. Can you imagine having to have a bomb shelter in your home so you have a place to go when the sirens go off?

My friend Daphne, who lives in Israel, told me the story of a woman with two young children who were taken from their home and dragged to the Gaza border. At the border the terrorists took the woman hostage and just left her one year old and 4 year old alone at the border. Fortunately, the children were found and at least now they are in safe hands. There are so many incredibly terrifying and painful stories of what has happened to Israelis over the past couple of days. The conflict is still going on right now. There are still Palestinian terrorists in southern Israel invading homes, killing and taking hostages.

My father, who is 90, was able to leave Poland with his family in 1938. That was a very good year for a Jew to leave Poland. What was miraculous was that the gates of this country were closed for most immigrants. It was only because of an uncle who was a veteran of WW I and had a connection to his congressman that my family was able to get visas to come to America. If that had not happened, I would not be standing here today. We were the lucky ones. The State of Israel did not exist at the time that my father and other Jews were trying to get out of Europe and out of the hands of the Nazis. Had the State of Israel existed then, it is possible that thousands, if not millions of Jews could have been saved. The State of Israel has the right to exist. The State of Israel NEEDS to exist. The Jewish people have the right to a home. A safe, peaceful

home. Humanity failed the Jewish people and allowed the Holocaust to happen. I pray with every fiber of my being that humanity will not fail the Jewish people once again.

I would like to close with a prayer written by Rabbi Karyn Kedar:

We gather together,  
In faith and with hope  
To pray for peace  
And for the safety of the people of Israel

Help us, O Holy One  
and protect us in our hour of need.  
Touch our hearts  
lest they are hardened with despair.  
Guide our thoughts  
lest they are overcome with fear.

Bring healing to the wounded,  
strength to those in mourning,  
courage to those in fear,  
wisdom to those who lead.

Yedid nefesh, Beloved One,  
reveal Yourself and fill the world with Your light.  
Spread over us the shelter of Your peace.

Be quick, God of love, for the time has come.  
Have mercy upon us, Eternal One of peace.

In the words of the prophet Micah:

“And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. And each one shall sit under the vine and under the fig tree and none shall be afraid.” Amen