

A REFLECTION BY SHAEI POLAKOW-SURANSKY ON RECENT EVENTS

St John's parishioner, Dr Ian Thomson writes: 'Shael Polakow Suransky was born in South Africa but is and has been an American citizen for many years. He is a distinguished academic based at Bank Graduate School of Education, Rhode Island. 51 years ago, I was asked by his father and dear friend Leonard Suransky, to assist at his Bris and so be godfather to this wee Jewish baby boy!! His letter to his colleagues makes me proud of him and his role and leadership of this multi-ethnic university in New York:



The past week's events in Israel and Gaza have shaken me and I'm sure many of you too. I'm Jewish and I have family who live in Israel, including a cousin who recently joined the Israeli army. The brutality of the Hamas attack last Saturday is hard to make sense of, so many innocent people including young children murdered in ways designed to inspire terror and rage. For Jews in our community and around the world this evokes the history of pogroms, the Nazi genocide, and other terrible acts of terrorism against civilians. As I've talked with Jewish friends and family, there is a sense of grief, fear, tremendous anger, and a need for support in response to this horrifying attack.

Tragically, both Israelis and Palestinians are living with leaders that have no respect for human rights, eager to use violence

to maintain power, and with little interest in solving the root issues that drive this conflict.

We must denounce Hamas for their brutality - nothing about the injustices imposed on Palestinians can justify massacring and kidnapping innocent people as a political strategy.

But if we believe in the sanctity of human life, this can't only be true for the victims of Hamas—we must also speak out clearly against the massacre and humanitarian crisis unfolding now in Gaza. Nicholas Kristof put it well in an essay this week, writing, "If your moral compass is attuned to the suffering of only one side, your compass is broken."

The Israeli government has now unleashed a massive military operation that in the space of a week has already dropped more bombs than most conventional wars would see in a year - flattening whole neighbourhoods, killing both Hamas fighters and innocent civilians including hundreds of young children. These bombings for Palestinians evoke a history of oppression and violence that stretches back many decades. If the price of using overwhelming military force to destroy Hamas is thousands of innocent lives, that is too high a price.

Thursday evening when I left Bank Street there were helicopters overhead and police cars streaming up Broadway in response to duelling student protests at Columbia supporting Palestinians and Israelis. This reminded me that for many in our community and our city these events are not far away at all—they are immediate and traumatic.

So what can we do? We have a community at Bank Street defined by a shared set of values. We teach young people to take perspective, to truly understand those who disagree with you, to think critically and look beyond the rhetoric to understand the larger forces and interests at play. We prepare educators and children to stand up for humanity and justice even when it's hard and unpopular. In moments like this we need to exercise these values, we need to recognize the pain of those in our community with personal connections to Israel and Palestine and offer them support. Where we disagree with one another, we need to make space for authentic dialogue, always honouring our shared humanity. With this in mind, our Office of Social Justice, Equity and Inclusion will be organizing a meeting for members of our community to talk together, support one another and make sense of what these events mean to us.

When I was fourteen years old, I spent the summer at a remarkable place in Israel called Neve Shalom/Wahat-al Salam which means Oasis of Peace. It's an Arab Jewish village founded fifty years ago to prove it's possible for Arab and Jewish Israelis to coexist. Neve Shalom also has a school for peace where they bring groups of Arab and Jewish high school students together for week-long workshops designed to teach them to engage in dialogue and to understand each other's histories. Neve Shalom still thrives today as a beacon of what's possible when we step back from violence and hatred and do the hard work of listening and learning about each other's humanity. That's our work too here at Bank Street—hopeful work that imagines and builds a different future. Let's keep our eye on that prize in the midst of all this horror.

Best, Shael