

In Our Hands
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Two minutes after I stepped off the bimah after Rosh Hashanah services, someone pulled me aside and said, "Thank you for not talking about Israel." Then another person approached me and asked, "Rabbi, why didn't you talk about Israel tonight?" This pretty much sums up the last two years of my life, and the lives of rabbis around the country. And it reflects our growing divide as a nation and as a Jewish people. And so it is with some trepidation and deep humility that I stand here tonight to speak to you about Israel and that deep divide.

I love Israel, and a piece of my heart is always there, crying alongside Israelis whose families, lives, and homes have been destroyed. I am heartbroken that today, nearly two years since the brutal and inhumane attack on Israel, 48 hostages still remain in captivity, as Hamas continues its reign of terror against Israelis, and against its own people. And as Israelis struggle to rebuild their lives and restore security, they have never felt more alone. I am also anguished by the ongoing devastation in Gaza- homes destroyed, lives and families shattered. Good people can argue about who is at fault and what is the truth, but the reality is that people are dying, children are starving and they need to be fed. And they need to be safe.

I believe that our hearts are expansive enough to hold the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians, and that one does not negate or diminish the other. This is what our tradition teaches when we are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, **וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ** And yet, for saying these things, I have been called unfeeling, disloyal, not a real Zionist, too pro-Israel, a traitor, and a Nazi.

I certainly do not expect that everyone will agree with me on all things, that is simply not Jewish, nor is it healthy for a community, a people, or a nation. It's not so good for the rabbi either. But we must be able to speak and to listen to each other with respect and simple human decency, for this is the Jewish way. We are frightened for the future and dispirited by the present. But with so much at stake for the Jewish people, for Israel, and for the United States, this is exactly when we need to come together. Ours is a time of such extreme polarization; we are either left or right, right or wrong, for or against. And social media only serves to flatten the complexity, distort the truth, and drive people further apart. Tragically, we have all seen what happens when ideological difference turns deadly, with attacks on politicians, houses of worship, college campuses, and on our streets as well.

We know that both our actions and our words possess real power-, both to destroy and heal. And this is our task for the New Year, to find and to elevate the voice of repair, of righteousness and of love. After all, it was with words alone that God created the universe saying, “let there be light,” and there was light. Yet so too can our world be destroyed by our words. In fact, according to the rabbis of the time, the Second Temple was destroyed on account of hateful speech. The Talmud explains; there was a certain man who had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. This man prepared a large feast and said to his assistant “Bring me my friend Kamtza.” Instead, his assistant mistakenly brought his enemy, Bar Kamtza. When the host came and found Bar Kamtza at his feast he asked, “Why are you here? You are my enemy, you must leave at once.” Bar Kamtza replied, “I’m already here, just let me stay and I’ll give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just don’t embarrass me by sending me out.” “No, you must leave at once,” said the host. Bar Kamtza replied. “I will give you money for half of the feast; just don’t send me away.” “No, you must leave,” reiterated the host. Bar Kamtza then said: “I’ll pay for the entire feast; just let me stay and don’t humiliate me.” “No, you have to leave,” the host insisted, as he grabbed Bar Kamtza by the hand and ejected him from his home.

With that, Bar Kamtza decided; “the sages were content to sit there and did nothing to protest the actions of the host, so I will go and inform against them to the emperor of Rome.” And that is just what he did, when he lied and told the emperor, “the Jews have rebelled against you.”¹ As a result, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and burned the holy Temple. Yet, according the rabbis, it was on account of baseless hatred among the Jews, *sinat chinam*, that the Second Temple was destroyed.

And we don’t have to go back 2,000 years to see the lethal effects of *sinat chinam*. Just one month from now, on November 4th, we will mark the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin. That night, over 100,000 people gathered in support of the Oslo Accords. These were last words Rabin said before he left the stage and the bullets entered his body, “Let’s not just sing about peace- let’s make peace.” He was then shot by a right-wing extremist Jew who opposed his plan for peace. The Jewish world was shattered when that bullet was shot, and we are still working to recover all that was destroyed.

¹ Talmud Gittin 55b-56a

During one of my trips to Israel, I visited the National Archives. We were ushered into a small room. In the center of the room stood a table covered with historical documents, photographs, and artifacts. "Look at anything you want," said the docent. I held in my hands signed peace treaties and the original drawings for the flag of Israel. And then I noticed a small, dark object among the papers. It was a bullet, the bullet that pierced Rabin's body. I picked it up, and held it in my hand. It was one of the most consequential moments of my life, and I've never been able to unfeel it since that day. It is a constant reminder to me of how fragile life can be, and we must always hold on to the promise of peace, especially today, when God willing, we are on the brink of an end to this war. We know, particularly on this holiest day of the year, that both life and death are in our hands and in our mouths, our words. Let us choose life. Let us choose peace. Let us choose each other, and never let go.

On Yom Kippur, we collectively recite the *Al Chet* prayer, a litany of transgressions. The Israelites recited this prayer 2,000 years ago in the wake of the destruction of Temple. We have been reciting these very same words since, because the message is still vital and timely. *Al chet she'chatanu lifanecha*, for the sin of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, the very sin that caused the destruction of the Temple. *Al chet she chatanu lifanecha*, for hardening our hearts, *Al chet she chatanu lifanecha*, for judging others. Tonight, we engage in *teshuva*, self reflection and forgiveness. We ask ourselves, how have we missed the mark this year? How have we turned away from those we love, and from the hard conversations? How can we be more patient and understanding of others? Because at the end of the day, we know that repairing our broken world starts with us, and in the healing of our souls, our relationships, and our own families. And I know this is deeply personal and painful for some here tonight whose relationships with family and friends, even our own children and siblings, have been strained by the deep divisions and differences of our time. Our *teshuva* is an invitation to turn toward healing, toward empathy and back toward each other.

This is exactly what a woman in our community did when she came to see me recently. She told me that she was troubled by some of the ways I talked about Israel. She was frustrated by what I didn't say as well. She said, "I don't agree with some of the things you said, and I want to know if it's okay if I don't believe what you believe. I love this synagogue so much and want to stay and be part of this community." I am so grateful that she came to speak with me that day, and I learned so much from her. I will tell you tonight what I told her that day; that you belong here. I do not expect everyone to agree with me or anybody else. Your beliefs and your views are holy. What I do is teach Torah, and I am guided by its values. And I base my views of the conflicts in Israel and in this nation, on my best understanding of these values. Each of us has within our hands the power to interpret and to live these teachings in our own unique ways. This is the Jewish way, when we hold multiple views, with curiosity, respect, and kindness.

The talmudic story of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is a well-known example of this. For three years, they disagreed over a particular legal decision. One said, “the ruling is in accordance with our opinion.” The other claimed “no, the ruling is in accordance with our opinion.” They went on like this until ultimately, a divine voice emerged and proclaimed, “both these and those, *eilu v’euli*, are the words of the living God. But the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.”² And even though Hillel’s opinion prevailed, Shammai’s ruling was forever more included in the Talmud, and taught alongside Hillel’s. And what is most remarkable, is that Shammai’s opinion is prioritized over Hillel’s and taught first. “This,” the Holy One said, “is an argument for the sake of heaven, *makhlochet l’shem Shammayim*. By the way, the two rivals not only debated one another, they also married into each other’s families, celebrated holidays together, and stood side by side as they buried their dead and mourned.

The Torah portion for Yom Kippur, Nitzavim, calls upon us to stand together.

אַתֶּם נִצְבִּים הַיּוֹם כָּלְכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם... כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל. “You stand here this day, all of you, before your God,...your elders, leaders, women, the woodchopper and the one who draws water, all of the households of Israel.” The entire people stood together before God just as we do tonight. Klal Yisrael, means the entire people, because each of us matters, every voice and every act of love, because for the Jewish people, and those who stand alongside the Jewish people, unity has never meant uniformity.

We have always valued our differences and our diversity, and have held on to one another even when we disagree. And instead of demonizing and denigrating others, there is a different way, a very Jewish way. Judaism views debate and discussion not as a war to be won, but as an opportunity to connect more deeply and to understand more clearly. It is a chance to hear the story of another human being, and to expand and refine our own thinking as well. A conversation that makes room for divergent opinions and curiosity, also allows for a lack of certainty as well. Because today, so many of us just don’t know what to believe or what to say. And that is holy too. And that is an argument *l’shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven. As the Dalai Lama has said, “Don’t just argue with reason, argue with love.”

² Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b:10.

I must say this as well- in this time of toxic polarization and rising authoritarianism, both here and in Israel, this is the time not only for love, but for moral courage and moral clarity. We must raise our voices and uphold the values we hold dear, justice, respect, dignity, and loving-kindness for those in need. For the erosion of our democracy threatens the most vulnerable among us- our elders, our children, minorities, immigrants, the queer community, and those with limited resources. And we know that a strong and robust democracy safeguards minorities, and it is better for the Jews as well. That is why hundreds of thousands of Israelis take to the streets each week to fight for Israel's democracy, and to demand the release of the hostages and an end to this war. They know, as do we, that we can disagree with our leaders and abhor their policies while still maintaining our deep love and support for our nation and its people, all the people, both here and in Israel. And I want you to know that I will never stop fighting for the Israel I love, an Israel that is at peace with our neighbors, safe and secure within its borders, and a democracy with equality for all of its inhabitants, regardless of faith, ethnicity, gender, or beliefs.

I have seen this holy community uphold these values for decades, and stand together even with our differences. In this new year, we will engage in a community-wide effort to deepen and strengthen our ability to speak and to listen and to debate with care and curiosity. We are offering a six-part series with experts in civil discourse, and I invite you to our Listening Circle later in the month. Even our youngest members are focusing on kind speech, as this year's theme for religious school is, *Dibarti, Shamati*, I have spoken, and I have listened. Imagine what the world can become when the seeds of respect are planted in children who will then spend their lives sowing love and compassion.

On Shabbat just two and a half weeks ago, while walking up the stairs toward the sanctuary, a man stopped me and asked, "How long are services?" I answered, "How long do you want them to be?" He looked at me quizzically and asked, "Are you the rabbi?" We both introduced ourselves. Nick explained to me that he lives in the neighborhood, is Christian, but not part of a church community. He came to synagogue that night and brought his two children with him, because, as he said, "I am so troubled by what is happening in Israel, and to the Jewish people here in America. And I am ashamed by the way the world has turned against Israel and against the Jews. I came tonight because I want you to know that you, my Jewish neighbors, are not alone. That there are people standing behind you and with you. And I want my children to see that we are really all the same. And that it's important to be a good neighbor." Then he said to me, and really to us all, "I know we may not agree on everything, but it doesn't matter. We all just need to love one another." *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ* How would the world look, if we all loved like that? (*"If We Loved Like That" song and lyrics by Elana Arian and Abigail Pogrebin, is played here.*) It is all in our hands. We need to hold on to our neighbors. Hold on to hope. Hold on to peace. And we need to hold on to each other and never let go.