

YOM KIPPUR 2026
“Sirens, Scars and Secrets”
Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio

I read a poignant article by Israeli Gila Zarbiv titled: “The Sirens Only we can Hear” and I have not been able to stop thinking about it. She describes two days of her life during the last five years. The first, during the covid pandemic lockdowns. Gila, a midwife, had been on another night shift where she did not stop, eat, drink, sit, she moved from one crisis to another. Then she returned home, set her children up for their zoom classes, put a load of washing on, stacked the dishwasher, turned it on and sat for a moment and she fell asleep. She awoke to the sound of a foetal heartbeat in distress, before she even realised what had happened, she was on her feet, ready to tackle the crisis. But there was no crisis. She was in her living room and the water in the dishwasher was moving at the same rate as a dangerously low foetal heartbeat. She writes: “I had not consciously decided to stand up but there I was, heart pounding, head cocked towards the sound.”¹

Fast forward to this year. Gila was in Jerusalem on her morning run and suddenly a siren sounded. She immediately began looking for shelter, she settled on the stone walls around the Old City, her brain calculated how long it would take to reach them and she sprinted. But then she realised nobody else was running: cars continued driving, nobody was looking at their phones, they were simply going about their day. Then Gila realised that Spotify was playing a song into her earphones which had an air raid siren as the first 7 seconds. “Nobody else reacted,” she writes, “because nobody else could hear the siren.”²

Gila then reflects on Israel: the people living in a perpetual state of crisis for three years, bodies permanently in fight or flight mode. No matter what is happening in their day, even when there is no immediate danger, part of each person remains tense, ready, just in case. She describes living in a constant pressure cooker, just waiting for it to go off. “But,” she writes, “while we may all be living in the same pressure cooker, we are not all hearing the same sirens... All around us, people are reacting to sirens the rest of us cannot hear and because we cannot hear them, we assume the reaction began with us. We are yelled at in the supermarket, honked at in the street, spoken to with an anger that seems completely disproportionate to the situation. We respond in kind...one exhausted nervous system activates the next until we are all responding to one another as though we are each a threat.”³

¹ Gila Zarbiv “The Sirens Only we can Hear” Times of Israel Aug 2, 2026

² ibid

³ ibid

I do not wish to suggest that we are living in a situation nearly as challenging as Israelis are but does some of what she says ring true to you too? Does it sound familiar? Since October 7, we have been living with an intensity that we don't notice or recognise until we hear a siren. We are emotionally raw and tired and depleted and then came Bondi. Our already frayed and frazzled edges were pulled and tugged. Our hearts broke. The fear, distress and pain, already so close to the surface, erupted. We were shattered, robbed of our sense of safety, security. We felt vulnerable: an open wound, raw and weeping.

And the grief and loss gave way to anger, anger which needed a place to rest. The emotions wrestled inside us, a pressure cooker of feelings which came after we were already depleted. We have found ourselves reacting in ways we would never have imagined, the smallest of moments can lead us to respond in the myriad of ways Gila spoke about. Our community feels divided. We are pushed to extremes, challenged: you are either for us or against us, you are with us or you are not. It seems we have lost the shades of grey, we are struggling to hold onto the middle space, to have the opening to say: "I don't know," or "both these things are true" or as Tevyeh, in *Fiddler on the Roof* says: "you are right and you are right." Our sirens are blaring and we are trying to drown out the noise by holding our ground, setting ourselves firmly in one space or another.

But Judaism has never been about the extremes, it is always calling us to look at the grey, to wrestle and grapple and struggle with ideas and to try and see the spectrum. We are not asked to agree. We all know the saying, that when there are two Jews in a room, there will be three opinions. And difference is important, it is healthy, it is needed, but when the words we speak become sirens, we react, and the space for debate and conversation is made smaller and smaller. We are pushed to our corners and we look at one another with suspicion. Relationships are fractured, sharing space is more and more difficult and we find we can no longer be in conversation with one another. Our sirens are drowning out the other sounds: the love, the respect, the compassion and care which are also there.

And we are all so tired. A bone wearying exhaustion which has invaded our being. We don't want to fight any more, we don't want to debate and discuss every decision with ourselves and others. Things which were once simple, have become complex, complicated minefields. And we are walking in a state of constant hypervigilance, ready at any moment to need to defend ourselves against an onslaught of words or speech or worse. Sirens are sounding all around us. We feel a lack of control over ourselves and our destinies and the cycle seems to go around and around and around with no end in sight. We cannot change the triggers, the sirens, we cannot stop what is outside, so what

do we do? Where can we turn? How can we soothe our wounded souls and quiet the noise?

Gila writes: “in medicine we learn that when the body’s alarm system takes over, the first thing we need to do is slow down, breathe, take a moment, look around...work out where the siren is coming from. And we need to give that same pause to the person standing opposite us.”⁴ When those sirens sound, when we are pushed to our corners, we need to pause and consider what the other person is hearing. What sirens are sounding for them and what are sounding for us? Can we find the space to see that we are all hurting and we are all struggling.

Our congregation is perhaps the most diverse in Sydney. We gather together with people from one end of the political spectrum to the other and everything in between, with ages from the first breaths of life, to the last, families who are as rainbow magnificent as the ones smiling in the sky. We are a rich mosaic of people with an infinite diversity of human experience. Our synagogue is one of the few places in our lives where we are brought together in all of our complexity and difference. In a world of algorithms and AI, working to push us into silos of people who are exactly like us, or to even replace people in our lives all together, the synagogue, this sanctuary, is a place where we encounter each other, real, raw humanity.

And the prayer we say when we see a large gathering of people is: *Baruch Ata Adonai, Hacham ha'razim*, “Blessed is God, knower of secrets.” Each one of us has our secrets, the parts which are seen and known only by us. We each have our joys and our sorrows, and we carry them all within us. Our experiences which have shaped who we are and our sirens, and we bring them here when we enter.

There is a beautiful reading in our Progressive siddur which begins by saying that each of us enter this sanctuary with a different need. Perhaps you can find yourself in the words of this poem from Mishkan Tefilah:

Each of us enters this sanctuary with a different need
Some hearts are full of peace and gratitude,
Overflowing with love and joy
They are eager to confront the day, make the world a better place
They are recovering from illness or have escaped misfortune
We rejoice with them

⁴ ibid

Some hearts ache with sorrow
Disappointments weigh heavily upon them
Families have been broken, loved ones lie on a bed of pain
Death has taken those they cherished
May our presence and caring bring them comfort

Some hearts are embittered
Ideals are betrayed and mocked, answers sought in vain
Life has lost its meaning and value
May the knowledge that we too are searching
Restore our hope and renew our faith⁵

Tonight we have all entered this sanctuary with a different need, our own unique life path and we come together, here in this sacred space. The central prayer of Judaism is the *shema*, meaning listen. We are called to listen. Listen for one another's pain, listen for one another's joys, listen to what is not being spoken, listen for what each of us are carrying, and listen to hear the echoes of the eternal in each one of us. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*, listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one, unity, connection, the oneness of all created being. When we *shema*, we listen and then hear that *echad*, the beautiful song of unity and oneness in each other, we will know deep in our souls that what unites us, is far greater than what divides, and healing will come when we are together, and feel the power of our gathering. Even when it is hard, even when it is uncomfortable, we need to be here because what we are together is far greater than what we are apart and we need every single one of you. You matter. You are needed.

Because every unique complicated soul gathered here, in person or online, is part of the story we are called to tell, and by gathering in community your story becomes my story becomes our story and we write it together. We cannot be Jewish alone. As Rabbi Kamins always teaches us, we are not a religion, we are a people, and all of the most powerful moments of our history, have occurred when we are together.

Sinai, the most pivotal and transformative, was all of us together. We, every single one, heard the voice of God, we were brushed by the sacred, the holiness within, the spark of the Divine was ignited. And tradition teaches that we were all there, every single Jewish soul which ever was or would be. We know the magic, we had the Divine light shining into us and now, whenever we gather, we have the opportunity to bring that same light into the world. We can heal each other. We can soothe the wounds of the past years, we can become a place

⁵ Mishkan Tefilah pg. 184

where we have robust debate, we search for our truths, we grapple and wrestle with respect and with love. And that can only happen when we look at each other with compassion and grace, when we speak about ideas and not when we break apart our already aching wounds. We need to notice the sirens that others are hearing.

When God came to create the world, God filled all space, so to build a home God needed to *tzimtzum*, to contract a little in order to make room. God placed the pieces of God's holy self into a vessel and brought the world into existence. But the vessel was unable to contain God's light and it shattered, sprinkling the shards through the corners of the earth. Our challenge now is to *tikkun*, to repair, to gather the light and rebuild the vessel, to make what was broken, whole once more.

We are broken, cracked and wounded vessels of light and we need to gather the shards together and rebuild what has been broken these last years. If we do, we can create something more resilient, more strong, more compassionate and more beautiful than before. In the Japanese art of kintsugi, the places where broken vessels are repaired are even stronger. They are reshaped, different but more than they once were. We are created holy, beautiful, imperfect beings. We have cracks and brokenness, but as Leonard Cohen reminds us, the cracks are where the light gets in, and it is also where our light shines out.

The first time the Torah says something is “not good,” is in relation to human beings: it says it is “not good” for humans to be alone. We are created to be in relationship. As much as the tradition teaches the world was created for each of us, it also reminds us that we are not islands: *al tifros min hatzibur*, do not separate yourselves from the community.

But to be in community, in relationship we need to *tzimtzum*, to contract, like God, to make space for the other. And that can be difficult and uncomfortable, especially now, as we are hearing different sirens, raw and vigilant and a little broken. But the brokenness is where we can let the light in and out, and we can build something even more beautiful than before.

When the Jews left Egypt, the first act they engaged in together was to build the *mishkan*, a sanctuary, a holy space. To celebrate their freedom and to heal themselves from slavery, they joined together in a sacred task: to build, create and shape a spiritual home. They were wounded, they were, the Torah reminds us, a mixed multitude, they carried all their secrets, their sirens and their scars and they focused on a shared task. They gave each other grace, the space to hold different views and opinions, and goodness knows, we hear *all* of those views as they traverse the desert for the next 40 years. And through it all, they hold onto

what is most important: the community, building and creating, shaping who they are becoming and the first act, is to create a *mishkan*, to come together to build a holy place.

And that is what we are called to do: build a holy place, a sanctuary where we are seen and known. We can only achieve this together, our congregation, our Emanuel family, joined in this most sacred task. And if we work together to build our *mishkan*, our holy sanctuary, it will help us heal, quiet the sirens, and we will be shape the future we want to build and the people we want to become. And we have already begun. It is happening here, every single day: we are shaping, creating, dreaming and building.

Every day, sparks of light fly up from this holy, sacred community. They are in the sounds of animated voices, learning, challenging, discussing, growing. Hands holding hands in distress and struggle, the same hands joining in a circle of joyful dance. Music, song, poetry, acts of kindness, compassion, care. We all bring our gifts from the heart to build our *mishkan*, our sanctuary, for the sacred and holy work of community. Shaping a building into a home, healing the world and each other, prayers and supplications floating into the walls so they pulse with the energy of our souls. Sparks of light flooding the world as we build together.

And we are engaged in holy work, each one of us. I am so grateful for every single soul who has chosen to be part of what we are building. Every single one of you is a gift, a blessing and an integral part of our sacred journey. Thank you. Thank you for your hearts, your vulnerability, your passion, your care, your unique soul and all each one of you bring to shape our *mishkan*, our home. I pray that we will continue to build our imaginings, meet one another with grace, kindness and compassion, that we will see the Divine light shining from within ourselves and others, our cracks becoming spaces where light gets in and the light flows out, and that we shape our congregation to be a beacon of light in a darkening world, a place of embrace, where we can all find our home, celebrated for our uniqueness and our diversity, as well as united in our quest to heal and care for each other and shape the Jewish future of which we dream.