L'shanah tovah tikateivu!
May you be written for a good new year!
I'm opening with this blessing because I think it's going to be a hard year.
How many conversations have I had in the last year, where a person compares our situation to 1933 Germany. Or to the fall of the Roman Empire. Or to 1860 just before the Civil War. America is deeply ill.
This Rosh Hashanah, I feel pulled in two directions.
One: I feel a need to voice feelings of pain, worry, and despair. Feelings of anger at injustice, at fear for the future, at mourning for the present. The core text for that is Psalm 94, the Psalm we read on Wednesdays:
"El nekamot, God of vengeance – Adonai, God of vengeance, appear!
Judge of the earth, punish the arrogant as they deserve.
Ad matai, How long, Adonai, how long?"
This feeling – I will call it a destructive feeling, but it has constructive aspects – is parallel to what we describe in our tradition as din, judgement. Today is called Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement, a day when we experience God's strict judgement of the world, when all pass before God like sheep, when we stand before God in fear and trembling.
And yet, I am pulled in the opposite direction, too. I find myself more than ever pulled in what I will call a constructive direction. I say this seriously, not as a platitude: I feel more than ever drawn toward hesed, lovingkindness or mercy, as core to a constructive response to my darkest inclinations about our world today.
When I turn off my angry heart, when I step away from fear, when I try to approach the world with mercy and care and hope, and try to think about how to build something in our world, I think of Psalm 23:
"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
For Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."
That is: we do not have to be without enemies, or stress, in order to build lives of holiness. We can eat even in their presence.
We are living in the midst of chaotic and fearful times. These High Holidays come not during a pause in such times, but in their midst.
Today, and over the next ten days, I want to invite you to reflect on the themes and topics I suggest as important for the year. But I also want to affirm that our work is ongoing; history marches on as we live; and these themes we will revisit, taking threads of them like a bird going back and forth to build its nest to make it through winter. May we find some threads of thought in these sermons that allow us to build our nests for the winter to come, and to find some comfort in our new-built nests, made out of old fibers.

I want to start with a story about a coat. Not Joseph's coat. The coat of a young Jewish child named Otto Hutter. This coat hangs in the Imperial War Museum in London, as part of its

Holocaust exhibit, and I saw it this summer when my family went on a vacation to England. Otto grew up in Vienna, but in December, 1938, he was saved from the Nazis by being sent to England on the kindertransport. The kindertransport was an organized program by the British government to bring Jewish refugees out of danger in Nazi Germany and to resettle them in locations around Britain. 10,000 Jewish children were saved this way.

The coat, a large, wool overcoat, was given to him by his father, Izak, and mother, Elizabeth. They purchased it over-sized for him, because, and this detail strikes me – they knew they would probably never be able to buy him another coat. They knew they would never see him again – and they didn't – so they gave him a coat that could substitute for his parents' presence in his life. Otto eventually grew up and became a professor of medicine in Glasgow.

The obligation to care for refugees and immigrants – gerim, or strangers, in the langauge of the Torah – is repeated 36 times in the Torah, according to Rabbi Eliezer the Great in the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b).

Often, we are told to love the stranger, because we know the feelings of the stranger. It's because we know about Otto and his coat from our own biographies. But not just Otto. It's talking about Jews who fled Iran in the 1980s and Jews who fled Baghdad in the Farhud in 1948, and Jews who Russia in the 1905, and Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492, and Jews who were expelled from England in 1290, and Jews who were expelled from Jerusalem in 125, and Jews who fled Egypt 3000 years ago, and yes, even Joseph, who didn't even have his coat.

We Jews know what it is like to be refugees, and what it is to be a stranger in a land and hounded by one's own government.

There are many Jewish prooftexts about this topic. Such as:

Exodus 23:9, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt,"

Or

Leviticus 19:33-34

"(33) When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. (34) The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God."

Or Deuteronomy 27:19

"Cursed be he who subverts the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.—And all the people shall say, Amen."

But I'm just going to highlight what we read in the Torah this morning.

This morning we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The story is as follows: Abraham is married to Sarah; she isn't getting pregnant, despite God's promise, so she gives Abraham her slave, Hagar, and Hagar becomes pregnant with Abraham's child. The child is named Yishmael – it means "God will hear" – but eventually, Sarah becomes jealous, and Hagar and Ishmael are kicked out of their home and sent into the desert to die of thirst. At the last

minute, when they are close to death, God sends an angel to save them, who proclaims that God will be there for Ishmael as well as Isaac.

This story really is an odd choice to read for Rosh Hashanah. Why not pick the creation of the world? We do say that the world was created on Rosh Hashanah.

But when you look at it, it's actually very clear. The thrust of the story of Hagar and Ishmael is that even people who are rejected in life, still receive God's mercy. Hagar and Ishmael are kicked out by Abraham, and yet God shows them mercy and grants them blessing. We read it on Rosh Hashanah because the clear implication is that: even you, yes, you, who thinks you are so undeserving of God's mercy, who has experienced rejection, even you deserve God's mercy. And then the next move for us is to say: maybe we can show that mercy to others as well.

I think mercy is an important word to use here and the best translation of the concept of "love" in the text. When we say, "love the stranger," or love your parent, we do not command a feeling. Rather, God is commanding a type of relationship that is characterized by kindness and mercy. You don't have to be loved back to be required by God to show mercy. You show mercy by dint of your relationship.

Mercy is showing kindness despite not feeling it, despite a power differential, and despite a lack of reciprocity.

And I think our country has strayed far from mercy in its treatment of immigrants. Recently, the President and Stephen Miller tasked ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, with deporting 3000 people a day. There is no way to make that number without deporting huge numbers of non-criminals – that is, normal people trying to live their lives. Miller even rebuked ICE for its early low numbers, saying that they needed to be at 7-Eleven and Home Depot. ICE is getting another $75 billion dollars over the next four years, becoming better funded than the FBI, to hire 10,000 new ICE employees.

There's more. According to the CATO Institute (not a left-wing group) – "New nonpublic data from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) indicate that the government is primarily detaining individuals with no criminal convictions of any kind. Also, among those with criminal convictions, they are overwhelmingly not the violent offenses that ICE continuously uses to justify its deportation agenda. ICE has shared this data with people outside the agency, who shared the numbers with the Cato Institute."

I'm going to leave aside the civil liberties pieces – even though politically I think the issues around civil liberties and dismantling of democracy are the most important things going on, they're not the theological topic I want to talk about today. Today I want to talk about mercy.

Children and parents are being separated. Many are sent to brutal, overcrowded prison camps. Immigration violations are considered civil, not criminal matters. Administrative detention for immigration violations is legally not supposed to be punitive. People who are immigrants, by both American law and Jewish law, do not deserve to be rounded up and sent to Alligator Alcatraz in the Everglades.

I'm not against enforcing immigration laws. I'm in favor of their reform. Many immigrants who come to this country from Mexico, Central America, and South America, go through an onerous process of seeking asylum. It takes years, and so they often try to find illegal ways to enter the country – walking across empty deserts and flooding rivers. Why is the process of seeking asylum the main way in today? Well, there was a series of great bipartisan compromise bills by Senators McCain and Kennedy in 2005-7 that would have fixed this, and greatly diminished the amount of illegal immigration, and they would have created pathways to citizenship for people here, and would have made an immigration system that was faster and more modern. It was rejected by radical republicans – and the far left never liked it, because it wasn't open borders – and now we sit with nothing. And as our country fails to deal with decades of non-functional government on this issue, people keep coming here, because that's who an economic jobs vacuum works: people will come to fill the jobs, like picking fruit in the heat, that white Americans don't want to fill.

And all I can think about is Otto Hutter, the immigrant, the stranger, separated from his family and given his coat, who was welcomed into Britain on the kindertransport – at a time, I must point out, when so many other thousands of Jewish refugees were rejected and sent to their deaths.

As the people of Otto Hutter, as the people of the exodus from Egypt, who are commanded to protect the stranger because we know the feelings of the stranger, we must open our hearts. Even if you don't agree with me on the American politics aspect of this, the fact that these rules are on the books in Judaism means that you still have to practice opening your heart to the stranger. We can't shirk that or simply pretend like it's not an obligation. If you want to disagree about immigration policy or my take on ICE, that's fine, but you are still obligated to find ways to apply love of the stranger in your life and to think about how it applies to immigration policy.

But I'll be honest that I am not sure what to do about this. Because I think that there is a bigger problem we are dealing with, of which immigration is only one example.

That problem is as follows: our religious and moral values point in one direction. Our government walks in the other direction. And I don't know how to make our values actually affect our government's behavior anymore.

I've spoken and written about this before. We face, in our country, what I call a crisis of good government. Of effective government. On so many matters, from guns, to immigration, to climate, to vaccines, it feels like we have very clear information about what to do, and why we should do it, and yet nothing changes in our society. It feels like we are on an out-of-control train, and we're in a cabin, and just shouting into the air.

It has been nearly 13 years since Sandy Hook. It has been decades since we began to worry about the climate. It has been a century that we have benefitted from vaccines. And yet progress feels farther and more removed on all of these fronts.

And I don't mean this as a democratic party plank, even if these sound like "democratic" flavored issues. I'd love a political realignment where both parties took these things

seriously. Even though I am throwing a lot of anger at President Trump and his administration, the Democratic party has functioned without a leader or vision for the last nine years, and that's on them.

But this is not why you come to synagogue, to hear me gripe about politics.

What I want to give you, as you come to synagogue on these High Holidays this year, these Days of Awe, is a way to respond to the feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness that seem to characterize so much of our lives right now. Because these feelings are pervasive. Today is only step one. Naming the problem. Which is: it feels like our world is falling apart in very many ways, and yet we seem less able than ever to face our real challenges. This creates tremendous negative energy in people, which comes out in political violence, but also communal discord, anxiety, and anger. How to relate to these problems in a way that is constructive for our world, rather than destructive, is the theme for my sermons, and one that will be a theme for the year, revisited again and again.

But as a prelude for tomorrow, though, I'll begin to approach an answer. Just because we don't have the ability to perform a specific mitzvah, doesn't mean that we can't connect to the middah, the virtue, behind it. We can't fully perform the mitzvah of loving and protecting the stranger in our country today. But we can practice the virtue that inspires it – the virtue of mercy – rachamim or hesed. We can relate with mercy to people weaker than us.

Who is weaker than us? A server at a restaurant. A child. An employee who answers to us. A person who is coming to us in penitence, apologizing. A person with their own struggles and challenges. We can show mercy in all of these situations.

And in that spirit of mercy, I want to share a positive thing that I learn from our Republican and politically conservative congregants. I know there aren't a lot of you out there, and I imagine it's sometimes hard being in this congregation, which is pretty blue. Here it is: It's actually really wonderful to know that when I am speaking, that not everyone agrees with me. There's spiritual meaning in that. Because I think often we go through our lives with this unsaid but very real expectation that, "of course everyone agrees with me." And we have to unlearn that in order to be an emotionally mature, functioning human. Being in community where we face diversity actually helps us to grow. Siloing ourselves off from difference, avoiding it, makes us less able to deal with the real world in which diversity is the baseline.

The fact that we Jews – we humans – are able to come together to pray and reflect and learn is a source of hope for me.

And I will end with a text of hope. I began with psalms 94 and 23, but now I want to turn to Psalm 27, which we read a lot this time of year.

Lule he-emanti lirot b-tuv Adonai be-eretz hayim.

Kaveh el Adonai – hazak ve-yaametz libekha, v'kaveh el Adonai.

Truly mine is the hope that we can see God in the land of the living.

Hope in the Lord – be strong and steadfast, and hope in the Lord.

I still dare to hope that this world really can become a better one. That it is not too late, that it is not too broken, that it is not too divided.

I believe this because I have seen real redemption and change in people, infinity in a wildflower, eternity in an hour – and it can happen out there, too. If you have seen teshuvah or growth in an individual, you know it is possible in the world.

The shofar, which we will hear many more times this holiday, is the great sound of "yes" in Judaism. With all our sins enumerated, with all our vices spread plain before us like a child spreads out their toys, to count and regard each one, we still say: Yes. Yes I will. For truly mine is the hope that we can see God in the land of the living.

Shanah Tovah.