

What's the first letter of Rabbi? [people will say R, resh]

Okay, let's try again. What's the first letter of Rosh Hashanah? [R, resh]

[put on pirate hat]

No – it's ARRRRR.

Avast, me hardies, this be the place if you be seeking adventure. But ken me well, rough seas lie ahead for us. Hold fast, and dinnae face the seas alone.

[take off hat]

Okay. Sermon time.

Stormy seas lie ahead for us.

Every year at BEKI, for high holidays, I've given sermons that have connected to each other – not four one-off teachings, but sermons that are connected to each other as one overarching educational project for the holidays and the year.

The hat, the pirate voice, and other shtick aren't what I want you to take away from this – if you all leave here talking like pirates, that's not my spiritual goal, although I'll admit it would be pretty cool. They're educational tools, like the foods at the seder, to remind us of what we are learning, memory tricks that will keep our goals front and center for a long year. The pirate hat, I imagine, will make reappearances throughout the year when I want to jog your memory toward what we spoke of this season.

But these four sermons all build on each other, in a process that won't really be complete until Yom Kippur. Kind of like the holidays. One of the things I love about BEKI is that people really do show up – I know most of you will be here for all of these holidays. But I'll also send out my Rosh Hashanah sermons over email after this holiday, because I want you to take them in.

I think that we face stormy waters ahead for the Jews. I also think that we have the spiritual resources to navigate these waters, but it will not be easy, and it will take work from each one of us. Over these high holidays, I want to help us uncover the resources in our tradition for dealing with this.

To start, I want to take you back 25 years and one day.

25 years and 1 day ago, September 11, 2001, changed my life and probably yours.

Let's take a minute just to remember. Think back to that Tuesday morning.

I was a junior in college. I had just been in New York, dropping off my brother for his freshman year at Columbia. It was perfect weather in the Berkshires.

I learned the news of the attacks from my email. A high school friend of mine at NYU, whom I had lost touch with, responded out of nowhere to an email of mine, saying that two planes had just crashed into the World Trade Center.

I think this was before I had a cell phone. Anyway, we hadn't set up a TV in our dorm yet, so I ran to the Jewish Center, and managed to turn on CNN just in time to watch the second tower fall. I remember saying kaddish in that moment. I didn't know what else to say.

That day was full of chaos. There was another plane somewhere – or two, or three, we weren't sure. There was an attack in DC, a crash in Pennsylvania. There was a van tracked to a Boston parking garage.

Over time we learned more. There were lists of names from the planes compiled first. Todd Beamer I still

remember. Jeremy Glick. These names, they stick in your head. And the heroism, and the fear, and the loss. And so many from the FDNY. And Cantor Fitzgerald.

I remember in the days after, walking over to Katharine's dorm to talk to her. We weren't dating at the time, but we spent a lot of time together. I remember each of us saying: how are you doing? Like, really doing? There was this need to connect.

Twenty-five years, a quarter of a century, is a long time. Who were you in 2001? What was going on in your life?

It strikes me that we did not always think we would make it. I am superstitious enough, or perhaps aware enough of the twists and turns of history, to say puh-puh-puh here, but 25 years after September 11, we here in this room, all of us, are alive. We incurred losses, some of us very personal ones, but we are alive.

Today we are navigating new storms. They appear as political storms, but I think we experience their effects in ways that are psychological, spiritual, and communal. If we handle them poorly – and I think that, as Jews, we have been handling them poorly – we will do more harm to ourselves. But I truly believe that we can navigate them successfully. This is what I am describing for the next two weeks.

Immediately following the congressional midterm elections of Nov. 3, the presidential primaries for Democrats and Republicans will begin. The Jewish Question will loom large in each.

The Jewish Question. The Jewish Question is not the Israel question. It is not, "What should be America's policy toward Israel?" It is, "What is the place of Jews in a modern society? What is the place of the Jews in various factions' hopes and dreams?" This is an old question and a dangerous one.

I am worried about how various politicians will answer and demagogue around the Jewish Question. I think that on each side, in the presidential primary elections, we will see a tremendous amount of energy around the Jewish Question. Our primary elections tend to elevate extremist voices; even if they don't go on to win, they slide over the median opinion.

I am worried about the physical consequences for Jewish safety.

But I am even more worried about what the constant stress of this will do to our Jewish communities and relationships with each other. I am worried about the effect of living in a state of heightened fear and stress for three years.

The main effect of being in a state of constant fear is the fanning of our most destructive impulses. We feel a constant fight-or-flight impulse, anger, insecurity. We have to discourage that. Often times, and we all know this, when we are angry, we try to make the world angry. We take it out on other people. And it makes the world worse. It's like when we wake up in the middle of the night, and we decide — that person next to me, they should be awake, too!

We have to discourage our worst impulses.

I don't want to see three years of each side saying to the other, "See! I always said that the real anti-Semites were the fill-in-the-blank."

I don't want to see three years of rabbis and Jewish leaders writing think-pieces about, "It's those Jews who support the other side who are the real problem." Or, "Those Jews who don't see it my way are the worst." And make no mistake -- I see this from the left and the right.

I don't want to see three years of people saying, "Those Jews agonizing about their voting decision in the other party – they made their bed, now sleep in it."

Because I'll tell you something. There are more than enough Jew-haters to go around. Calling out your fellows with the language of, "see, I was always right, you're terrible," is incredibly destructive to relationships. It also doesn't work, and just causes people to dig in and double-down. "If I be waspish, best beware my sting." When you declare someone demonic, you beget demonic behavior.

There are about one hundred thousand Michigan Jews. Tens of thousands of them are going to vote in the Senate election in a way that will mean millions of other Jews will look at them and say – they are terrible people and terrible Jews for voting that way. There will be think-pieces published by rabbis and so-called Jewish leaders that declare fifty percent of Michigan Jews to be "the real problem." That is not okay. People are complicated and cast their votes for many reasons. I don't want us naming "bad Jews" or "bad Americans" or "bad people." You know what I feel for other Jews facing these hard political questions? Rachmones. Compassion. That's what you should feel, too.

We can't do this to ourselves for the next three years. We can't teach these behaviors to our children. Instead, we have to teach them to survive calmly even as their ship is tossed about. We do this by cultivating gratitude. Specifically, by becoming aware that we are alive, that despite all the stress in the world, we are present and here. This gives us the foundation to realize that we are capable of making choices about our emotions and our response to the world.

There's a story in the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva getting lost at sea. In this story on Yevamot 121, which is in the context of talking about people lost at sea, we read the following: Rabban Gamliel said: Once I was traveling on a boat, and from a distance I saw a boat that shattered and sank. And I was grieved over the apparent death of the Torah scholar who was on board. And who was it? Rabbi Akiva. But when I disembarked onto dry land, he came, and sat, and deliberated before me about halakha. I said to him: My son, who brought you up from the water? He said to me: A plank from the boat came to me, and I nodded my head before each and every wave that came toward me. The waves did not wash me off of the board, and I reached the shore.

How does he do that? How does Rabbi Akiva maintain the emotional composure, when he could be flailing in the water, to calmly nod at each wave. To be present and calm. In a practical sense, having composure in a moment like this can help you survive the rough seas. But how does he do it?

There's a little Jewish practice that I want to draw your attention to. Every time we start the Torah service, when the reader is up at the table and the gabbai is in the process of calling the first aliyah, there's a line that everyone mumbles through. "Ve-atem ha-devekim bAdonai Eloheichem, chayim kulchem hayom." Maybe you can mumble it with me. Let's do it. Ve-atem ha-devekim bAdonai Eloheichem, chayim kulchem hayom.

It's a quotation from the Torah, Deuteronomy 4:4. "You who are cleaving to the Lord your God, all of you are alive today."

We don't only say it at the Torah service, though. It will make a reappearance today, at the very end of the Rosh Hashanah service. After all of the prayers, when we are nearly complete, the Mussaf leader will say, Ve-atem ha-devekim bAdonai Eloheichem, chayim kulchem hayom. You who are cleaving to the Lord your God, all of you are alive today.

That is: you, with all you have been through in the last year, in your whole life, with all of the spiritual reflection you have done today: today, you are alive.

I want you to feel it. You are alive. You, who navigated through the trauma of Sept. 11 and of the pandemic and of Oct. 7, and of all the other traumas and losses in your life. You, who even in all of your imperfect ways of relating to Israel and Jews today, you are alive. You, all of you, who are all cleaving to God or to each other – you are alive. You are alive, even in the face of all the stormy seas you have faced, the cataracts and hurricanes, the private losses you have each endured, the wounds and the sadnesses and the hurts. You are still alive.

I want to share a midrash about this verse, from Avot deRabbi Natan 34:11:

Ten things are characterized by the expression 'living': the Holy One, blessed be He, [as it is stated], The Lord God is the true God, He is the living God. The Torah is termed living, as it is stated, She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her. Israel are described as living, as it is stated, But ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day. The righteous are termed living, as it is stated, The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life. The Garden of Eden is described by the term living, as it is stated, I will walk before the Lord in the lands of the living. A tree is described as living, as it is stated, The tree of life also in the midst of the garden. [31a] The land of Israel is designated living, as it is stated, And I will set glory in the land of the living. Jerusalem is described by the expression living, as it is stated, Every one that is written unto life in Jerusalem. The practice of lovingkindness is termed living, as it is stated, For Thy lovingkindness is better than life; my lips shall praise Thee. The wise are termed living, as it is stated, The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life. Waters are described as living, as it is stated, And it shall come to pass on that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem.

God. Torah. Israel. The righteous. Gan Eden, the garden of Eden. A tree. The land of Israel. Jerusalem. Hesed, that is, love. Wise people. And water.

These things, we read, are alive. And not just alive, but truly alive. The Talmud in Sanhedrin and Brachot says this – "living" in that verse of Deuteronomy means not only being alive, but truly living.

This reminds us that we can face the stormy seas. We can face whatever comes. I have seen, in my role as a rabbi, people face tremendous losses. So often I look at the yahrzeit list, and see a name, and think – wow, that person lost their parent way too young. And I also see – wow, that person is alive, is truly living, and it is beautiful.

We are so resilient, but we have a tendency to talk ourselves out of that. We are strong, but we talk ourselves into feeling weak. We are brave, but we talk ourselves into feeling scared. We are kind, but we talk ourselves into being spiteful.

We are all so much better than we think.

In Judaism, we believe that teshuvah, the work of these holidays, is not the creation of a new individual – it is a return to our true self. Our true self is strong, brave, and kind, and teshuvah is about returning to that, pushing aside all of the dirtiness of sin that accrues over the year. We are capable of such holiness, and I have seen it, and I know I can see it. Because not only are you all alive – you are truly living. When you are davvening, when you are praying, you are truly living. Those ten things that are alive – God and the Torah and Jerusalem and the righteous and the wise and the land of Israel and love and a tree and water – when we are connected to them, we are truly alive.

And when we are truly alive, and when we know that we are truly alive, and my goal for these holidays in

shul is that we come to know that we are truly alive, when we know that we are truly alive, we know we can face the stormy seas.

Let's go back to the storm. We are on a stormy voyage. We cannot spend the next three years metaphorically vomiting on each other in response to it. We have to keep our bile to ourselves. Or cast it over the edge of the ship, not into each other's faces. The primaries will extend more than a year – at next year's High Holidays, we'll still be in the midst of the primaries, four or five months from the first elections. What's more, including today, we have three whole high holiday cycles before the 2028 presidential election. There will be many times in the next three years that we will want to express our seasickness – I'm trying not to lose you by being gross, but it's important – and we have to not fill the bottom of our ship with our sick, we have to not ruin the places where we eat, where we learn, where we pray. We have to learn to live together with the fact of our diversity.

I want to go back to the Rabbi Akiva story. In that story, we find that he has cultivated enough presence, enough calm, that he can nod at waves, that he can acknowledge them but survive them. The story continues with the following comment: From here the Sages stated: If wicked people come before a person, he should nod his head before them.

That is – we should treat the wicked people and the constant experience of chaos in the news, like the waves crashing upon us. And we don't apologize, and we don't give up, but we don't let the waves drag us under, either. We let them crash upon us, in the calm realization that we are alive, and that we have faced this before. That despite all we have faced, we are alive, cleaving to each other and God. Ve-atem ha-devekim bAdonai Eloheichem, chayim kulchem hayom. We are alive. Tomorrow, let's say this slowly and fully.

Rosh Hashanah is both an ending and a beginning.

I want us to end some behaviors this year. And I want us to begin some other ones.

You who are cleaving to the Lord your God, all of you are alive today.

You have been through hard things. You will go through hard things. We will go through them together. Because today, we are truly living.