

Good morning. Shanah Tovah.

I want to return to where we started, at the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, with something I said then. I will quote myself at length:

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 feelings 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 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.”

Returning now to the present, to Yom Kippur, I want to return to the call of hesed that I have felt on these High Holidays, and that I want to raise again for us.

There is much horror and fear in our world. There is much that disturbs and destroys.

We cannot let that be our lives. We must take a path of building. Of a constructive response to the world around us.

On Rosh Hashanah, over its two days, I spoke about how, even in a world where history seems out of control, we can exert control in our behavior, in our “four cubits of halakhah,” by practicing some of the eternal virtues of the Torah.

Last night, I spoke about how it is we, and only we, who can do this work, and that we must turn away from an approach to this world that is fundamentally avoidant: an approach of performance and projection, and instead that we must embrace an approach wherein we actually become the exemplars of hesed – love and empathy – that God demands.

This morning, I want to talk about conflict. Some of this will be about conflict in the Israel conversation, but some of it will be about conflict in our lives in general. Because the lessons are the same.

I want to start by saying something obvious but which I think is not often said. The Israel situation, particularly the war in Gaza, is inherently conflictual. On Rosh Hashanah I said that we often go through life with this unarticulated but very real expectation that everyone agrees with us, and that this expectation is actually totally irrational and we have to grow out of it to become fully functioning people. For my part, I said, I appreciate the presence of people I disagree with in my community because real emotional maturity requires understanding that not everyone agrees with you.

But we are much better off to recognize the fact that an issue is conflictual than to pretend that it is not. That does not serve us well for living in the real world. And I want to remind you of what I taught last night. Last night, I urged us to own our problems, our ill-feelings, as our own. The conflicts are ones that we have, and I think for each of us, the conflicts exist even in our own hearts. We all feel pulled in different directions.

This isn't just about Israel. Our lives are filled with conflict. Any time we encounter another person, a conflict exists, because no two people are the same. Even married couples – especially married couples – have conflict, because the fact that people are connected to each other and love each other does not mean that conflict disappears. In relationships, it is actually normal for there to be disagreement and conflict around various issues. What is important is that couples engage in conflict constructively, rather than destructively. This means that they learn to listen to each other, even when they disagree; that they recognize that the marital unit is more important than being right; and that they do not brow-beat, berate, or silence each other.

Synagogue conflict is the same. With hundreds of people, not only is it normal that there is disagreement and conflict around various issues, but it is actually unjustifiable to think that there should not be conflict. What is important is that disagreement occurs constructively, rather than destructively. It's the same as with a couple: we must learn to listen to each other, even when we disagree; we must value the relationship over being right; we must not brow-beat, berate, or silence each other.

This is easier said than done. For one thing, a synagogue seems like it is a more voluntary relationship than a marriage. You don't like something at shul, you can just leave. Second, in a synagogue, it's harder to have a "date night" – that is, it's harder to say, "let's focus on where we connect." Third, with regard to many synagogue disagreements, we think the stakes are literally life-and-death for people we care about, and marital fights about the dishwasher don't rise to that level.

Yet I would argue that our synagogue is a bit more like a marriage than you think. Many of us are here out of a sense of Jewish obligation that is not voluntary, but that comes from the Torah. We do have date nights as a community – Yom Kippur, kiddush, moments of

gathering. Last, even though synagogue stakes are high, we are capable of talking about things that are challenging. And we don't have in-laws, so that's easier.

To put it a little differently: for many decades, Israel and antisemitism were seen as broadly unanimous topics in the Jewish community. That probably was not true in the past; it's definitely not true now.

Our community is not unanimous on Israel, Palestine, what is antisemitism, or American politics. We also are not unanimous on whether we include the imahot when we davven, whether we believe in God, whether we fast on Yom Kippur, whether we can hear the rabbi, whether we like tefilah, whether we are introverted or extroverted, and all sorts of other things. I think that is all okay. Because there is a core place of connection. Namely – look around. All of us here, right now, are invested enough in the Jewish project to be here at this moment. That's a pretty good starting point for growth. And I think, what's more, that in one-on-one conversations, even people on opposite sides of issues tend to have smaller disagreements than they might at first think. As my teacher said, sometimes we fight with a person because we think we disagree about the whole kitchen, when actually, we're just disagreeing about the sink.

When we face challenges, we come out stronger. I think we can find ways to look at our commitment to the Jewish project in a ways that makes us conflict-resilient; I believe we can indeed find ways to focus on where we connect; and I know that even across profound and painful disagreements, we can still hear each other.

In the Talmud, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai – two great rabbinic schools of thought named for their leaders, Rabbis Hillel and Shammai – constantly disagreed with each other. On hundreds of important issues these houses disagreed, such that, according to the Tosefta (Chagigah 2:4) and the Talmud (Sanhedrin 88b), there were so many disagreements that it was like there were two Torahs. And yet, we read in Yevamot 14a, **לֹא נִמְנְעוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי מִלִּישָׂא וְנָשִׁים מִבֵּית הַלֵּל, וְלֹא בֵּית הַלֵּל מִבֵּית שְׁמַאי**:

The students of Beit Hillel never refrained from marrying the women of Beit Shammai, and the students of Beit Shammai never refrained from marrying the women of Beit Hillel. Even though, I will add, they disagreed on issues that had to do with whether such marriages were kosher!

This is to say: the disagreements did not preclude relationship.

We read this elsewhere in the Mishnah in Pirke Avot 5:17

כָּל מַחֲלָקָה שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוּפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחֲלָקָה שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקָה הַלֵּל וְשְׁמַאי. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקָה קֶרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his congregation.

The controversies of Hillel and Shammai – that seemed to be so divisive that they were like having two Torahs in the land – are considered to be “enduring,” which is the Mishnah’s way of saying, “they do not impede the relationships between humans and God.”

Let’s bring this down to us.

We have to be able to relate to the Israel conversation like this, too. We have to be able to hear each other and remain in relationship. We have to be able to be in relationship even when it is uncomfortable.

Listening to a person whose opinions differ with you, and whose opinions cause you fear, pain, or anger, is hard. But those opinions are not going away, and we have to face the reality of our diversity.

Over the next months, I plan to facilitate a number of small conversations among selected congregants to practice listening to each other around Israel topics. These will not be easy conversations. But they are important. They will not be places for advocacy or talking points; they will not be for persuasion; they will be spaces for listening and being with each other.

Likewise, I want us to begin a conscious project of relationship-building in our community among people who disagree with each other. This project will put good feelings in the bank, as it were, so that people can draw on that bank in times of relationship stress over disagreement. Much of this we naturally do in the synagogue; congregants who disagree with each other routinely attend minyan and shul together, they cook with each other, they serve on committees together. But we need to be explicit about this work. This is going to be a long-term venture, so if you’d like to be involved in helping make it happen, let me know.

And while I know that it would be easy to check out from the Jewish project altogether – this project of our synagogue, our community – the loss there is that doing so gives voice only to the destructive impulse I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. It is easy to destroy, to break, to leave. But to live a life of *chesed*, of love, in all of its messy reality, as we are actually called to do in the Torah and in our halakhic tradition, is the real task.

For we are told in Pirke Avot, *al tifrosh min hatzibbur*, do not separate yourself from the community, and who taught that? None other than Hillel, who knew what it was to be in *machloket*, in disagreement. Those conflicts that were “enduring” between Hillel and Shammai, those issues that were “inherently conflictual,” like ones I described earlier, prompt Hillel to *turn toward* rather than *turn away*.

The people you are in conflict with – we need to *turn toward* each other. That does not mean go rogue and have it out with someone about Israel after shul today; it means to say, when you encounter a person who expresses something or even epitomizes something that is wrong, “this is a chance for connection.”

This is a core aspect of Jewish theology. The Baal Shem Tov repeatedly says *leit atar panui minei* -- there is no place devoid of God. What this means, the Baal Shem Tov says, is that

when something difficult appears to you, it's there because God wants you to deal with that difficulty, not avoid it.

The Talmud in Yoma, talking about teshuvah, tells us that teshuvah, repentance, is beautiful, because the distance between two people actually makes their reunion across it that much sweeter. As Rav Joseph Soloveitchik writes about this, "in accordance with the split, the union."

What I need, what the community needs, what Judaism needs, is your buy-in for this project. We need your voluntary participation. Do not become hard-hearted: and hard-hearted means saying, "I refuse to even open the door to learning or listening."

You're not going to be on your own for this. But I want to give you some tips on navigating conflict. For one thing, don't try to change people. Every person is coming at this topic from their own background and particularity. Relate to them with listening energy, not with advocacy energy. Talk to them with curiosity, not with talking points. Engage them with humility, not with a sense that you are right and they are wrong. For we need to value the relationship over our own right-ness. You don't have to agree. You shouldn't. Empathy does not mean endorsement. Understanding does not mean assent.

But listening means respect. Hearing means honor. And seeing means seeing past the small ways we impede each other, and into a better understanding of our Jewish project.

The truth is, nobody is happy with our world now. Not on the left, not on the right. That's a starting point: that is, disappointment, anger, and fear, even if they are about different issues, are emotions that you likely share with your opposite number. Another starting point is your buy-in to the Jewish project. Another starting point is your buy-in to having such a conversation. Those are three points of connection – *hachut hameshulash lo bimhera yinatek*, a threefold cord is not easily broken, Kohelet tells us.

One other way to build connection is with vulnerability, and it is with this that I'll close today. You might notice, if you look back on all of these sermons, that they started from a global perspective on Rosh Hashanah – what will the world be like and how can we affect it – and we have arrived in a place of the deeply local, the intensely personal. That is an intentional move. I want to bring our gaze down from afar to the place we now inhabit – our city, our synagogue, our home, our very own heart. We spend a lot of time consumed in the news, in our world, but we spend *all* of our time in our own hearts. As I said: this is not a shrinking of our purview, but is rather a proper assessment of it.

Yom Kippur is a day for opening your heart. I have seen that, when staunch ideological opponents open their hearts in vulnerability, they are able to encounter the other person. As the Talmud in tractate Chagigah says, In seeing, one comes to be seen. That is – when we allow ourselves to see the other person, they are able to see us.

Yom Kippur is the day for opening our hearts. The gates are open – and we are open. May you take from today an experience of openness to possibility and relationship. May the forthcoming prayers point you to divine openness to receive sinners. And may your own open heart prompt you to connection.