

Rosh Hashanah 5784  
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Do you know what no one wants to hear today? A sermon about the state of the Jewish people.

Do you know what I have to give today? A sermon about the state of the Jewish people.

Let's start with imagination—the very best imagination of being a Jew in the 21st century.

Imagine a full repentance for antisemitism by the entire world. Leaders and citizens alike see that their craving for power and wealth is not about Jews. That their religious doubts are not about Judaism. That their anxieties about change can be managed without blaming Jews. That stereotypes and scapegoating are no longer useful. And they stop. Imagine living our lives without internalized notions about Jews and money, power, greed, lust, control, intellect, secrecy, dishonesty, weakness, cowardice, conspiracy, trustworthiness, loyalty, faith or lack thereof. Imagine total freedom from those ideas.

Imagine Israel. Imagine a safe home for the Jewish people in the land where we began. Imagine an Israel unmolested by neighbors, accepted as a legitimate nation. Imagine a teshuva process in which all relevant European countries take responsibility for the Holocaust, for colonizing the Levant, and for exacerbating conflict between Jews and Arabs. Imagine all relevant Middle Eastern countries apologizing for aggression against Israel and for perpetuating the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Imagine an Israeli government with the strength and courage to pull our people inside its own borders. Imagine a public teshuva process in Israel,

in which all of the sins committed against the Palestinian people are enumerated and recounted. Theft of land, seizure of homes, forced marches, massacres, and the many additional crimes of occupation. Imagine the nationwide *al cheyt* as leaders and citizens atone and make a formal apology to the Palestinian people. Imagine American Jews participating in a parallel public teshuva, confessing our funding, support of, and silence about the occupation. Imagine a reciprocal apology by the Palestinian people, atoning for every act of violence against Jews, and finally accepting that Israel and the Jewish people will be their neighbors forever.

Imagine the Jewish people healing our trauma, laying down the burdens of our past, no longer living in fear that the next wave of violence is coming.

Imagine the whole Jewish people embracing religious diversity among us, respecting the minority who live according to strict traditional law. Imagine strict traditionalists equally recognizing reformers of all kinds, acknowledging that change has always been part of our tradition, and none of us knows God's mind.

Imagine flourishing pluralistic Jewish life, with diversity of ritual, culture, and community. Imagine all the Jews who left – people who felt it was better to blend in because it wasn't safe to be Jewish, or who were told there was only one way to be Jewish, and didn't find meaning or couldn't be themselves in that one way, finding now that it's safe and the doors are all open, that you can be any way you are. Imagine that great homecoming, when all Jews discover our inheritance of wisdom and belonging.

Imagine that Jews in all walks of life – business, the arts, government, technology, science, health, journalism, law, service – find insights from Judaism to fulfill their avocation. Torah's 613 mitzvot multiply, as they are freely adapted to all settings, and Jews can choose practices that elevate their lives. Imagine the song, art, laughter, storytelling, problem-solving that emerge from that Jewish world.

And Judaism itself becomes a great collective imagination for the world that could be, as the Jewish people articulate dreams that give hope to humanity, just as our ancestors did when they crossed that sea.

Perhaps your imagination is a little different than mine, perhaps it's similar. Where we are today is both near and very far from that dream.

If you take the 2017 Women's March, all the people in all the cities in the US, double it, and repeat it for 36 weeks—proportionately, that's what's been going on in Israel since January.

The Israelis in the streets are a broad coalition – for democracy, gender equality, LGBT rights, the right to be liberal or secular Jews as opposed to Orthodox, for equity, and against the occupation of the Palestinian people.

On the other side, the Israeli government is taking democracy apart with the goal of permanent Jewish control of Palestinians in the West Bank and permanent Orthodox control of all Israeli Jews. This coalition is made up of ultra-Orthodox and right-wing religious nationalist parties, including violently racist parties and one whose main goal is to oppose gay people. These religious Jews are being used by a cynical political leader who's hungry to stay in power and out of jail just like a figure in our country.

Democratic v. autocratic

Pluralistic v. theocratic

Liberal v illiberal

Equity v. Jewish supremacy

Egalitarian v. patriarchal

LGBT-positive v. Gay-bashing

Antiracist v. racist

Identifying with the stranger v. xenophobia

Two coalitions. Two versions of Judaism. Two visions for the Jewish people in direct conflict with each other. A divide parallel to what's happening in

American Jewry, and right here in New York. The struggle of Israelis is our struggle.

Meanwhile, in this same year, antisemitic incidents in the US increased by 36%. Anti-Jewish propaganda by white supremacists doubled.

Unprecedented numbers of anti-Jewish incidents took place at K-12 schools. More than ever before, CBE children faced swastikas, hate speech, and misinformation about Israel in their schools.

So while hate against us is proliferating, Jews are struggling over the most fundamental questions: What is Judaism about? Who are the Jewish people going to be?

For years, I've been silent about the wrongs of Ultra-Orthodox/Haredi leadership, focusing instead on the value of *klal Yisrael*, Jewish unity. Because there's widespread bias against Ultra-Orthodox Jews for looking different and being different, and that's wrong. When antisemitism becomes violent, as it has here in Brooklyn, Haredi Jews are often the target. Imagine how frightening it would be to walk through this antisemitic world so visibly Jewish, how vulnerable we'd feel.

I don't want to criticize fellow Jews, but I have no choice. Haredi leaders are trying to divide and conquer our tiny people while antisemitism is on the rise. In New York, they are making the false claim that they speak for all Jews in their retrograde public agenda. In Israel, they are explicitly attacking and seeking to eliminate Reform Judaism. Further, the coalition between ultra-Orthodox leadership and the Jewish right is defining Judaism and the Jewish people to the world in ways that we reject, and we are some of the most important voices to make that clear.

Can we finally acknowledge that it is not more loyal to Israel or the Jewish people to ally with the Christian right, and it does not make us more safe? It is not more loyal to degrade Palestinians, and it has not made us more safe. Loyalty is standing up for both safety and values. Loyalty is holding up Israel's own Declaration of Independence and insisting that it be lived. But

we have allowed ourselves to be cowed, convinced that our voice is less legitimate.

Here we sit in the largest liberal synagogue in Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, the most visible Jewish place in America, we – CBE – are the most visible face of diverse, liberal, pluralistic, feminist, justice-focused Judaism. Ultra-Orthodox leaders are fighting to define us out of Judaism. But most of us are not aware of our role in this struggle to shape Jewish history.

In New York, Ultra-Orthodox leaders deliver votes as a block, convincing elected officials that their will is *the* Jewish will, whether on issues like funding yeshivas, defunding public education, policing, criminal justice, abortion, gay rights, or Israel. They are defining the Jewish agenda as right-wing and only self-interested. That is why we created an organization called New York Jewish Agenda to represent the liberal majority, because our voices otherwise aren't heard.

An example: our mayor hired two Jewish liaisons, both Haredi, despite the fact that more than 70% of New York Jews are non-Orthodox. It's not just him – Mayor DeBlasio also had only a Haredi liaison and wouldn't meet with the Reform movement. Mayor Adams's Haredi liaisons planned for him to meet Netanyahu and not the protesters in Israel, which is out of line with what most NY Jews would want; and they tried to establish a Jewish advisory council in which 90% of the rabbis were Orthodox men, despite the fact that I organized 55 women rabbis to meet with the mayor last year. Thanks to intervention from New York Jewish Agenda, the council is now slightly more diverse and Adams met with protesters in Israel. We've had some wins. Governor Hochul has the first non-Orthodox Jewish liaison ever. And when there was a mask-burning riot in the streets of Borough Park in 2020, with leaders demanding repeal of covid restrictions in the name of Judaism, New York Jewish Agenda got 500 rabbis, including Orthodox rabbis, to sign a letter to the governor clearly stating that *pikuach nefesh*, saving human life, is the most important mitzvah.

The rampant Trumpism amongst ultra-Orthodox and right-wing Jews is but one obvious measure that they have lost their way. There is no chance that Joseph Caro, Rashi, Maimonides, Akiva, or Moses, if they lived today, would support Trump or Netanyahu and their moral turpitude, law-breaking, greed, crushing of human dignity, and cynical use of racism.

It is galling enough that ultra-Orthodox leadership and the Jewish right condone this behavior as visible representatives of the Jewish people, but it is even more galling that they do so with the claim that they are the only real Jews, that we don't count, that we're not really Jewish.

To be sure, many of us have loved ones in the Haredi world who cherish and respect us. There are movements for change inside Orthodoxy and leaders who are allies with us and don't seek to demean us.

And let's be honest. We have problems too. Our liberal movements are destabilized, and while some of our synagogues are thriving, others are shrinking. Many progressive Jews lack knowledge of Jewish tradition, aren't interested in learning more, and don't have a relationship with Israel. New York's liberal Jews generally don't present ourselves as Jews in the public arena, voting like generic NY Times readers or NPR listeners, making it difficult for electeds to recognize our vote as Jewish.

We know that the claim is being made that we're not real Jews, and many of us kind of believe it. If I ask you to close your eyes and picture a Jew, what do you see? If we ask AI or Google to show us a Jew, they'll bring up dozens of pictures of white men in black hats. As if there are no women, and as if we, the vast majority, don't exist. How many people in this room have said at one time or another, "I'm a bad Jew" or "I'm not *really* Jewish," or the worst "I'm just Reformed," as if you've been bad but are improving? It's "Reform" meaning we are changing Judaism.

In the Haredi version, Judaism stopped developing in the shtetl, and because of the threat they perceive in modernity, Haredi rabbis have made it even more patriarchal and insular than it was. But history tells us that

from the Rabbinic era, to the Medieval and Modern eras, Judaism has been changing all along.

In Haredi Judaism, Haredi rabbis are the sole possessors of Torah truth. But we know that Jewish tradition has always allowed for multiple valid interpretations of Torah. That's what Midrash is.

In Haredi Judaism, the focus is inward on our own people, in creating a tight-knit unit that fulfills mitzvot to bring the Messiah. We say to be Jewish is to care not only about Jews but also everyone else. These two Jewish values, *gevurah* and *chesed*, strength through boundaries and lovingkindness through connection, are understood in the tradition as a continuum. The goal is not to choose one, but to find balance.

Rising antisemitism during economic and political instability is never good for Jews. Like a turtle in a shell, the oldest part of our nervous system tells us that pulling inward is the safest response to threat. But our more evolved nervous system, the mammalian system, tells us that the best strategy for safety is interconnection with others.

In the Book of Exodus, after we cross the sea as an *erev rav*, a great mixed multitude on our way to Mount Sinai, God says we will be a *גוי קדוש*, a holy people. *Kadosh* has been understood to mean separate, but it also implies the opposite. The 19th chapter of Leviticus, which begins: “קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם You shall be holy, for I Adonai your God am holy,” proceeds with mitzvot about interconnection, among them – leave food for the hungry, be fair in judgment, and most famously, “love your fellow as yourself.” Given that we're also told that God is everywhere and in everything, as in Psalm 72: *וַיִּמְלֵא כְבוֹדוֹ אֶת-כָּל הָאָרֶץ* the whole earth is filled with God's presence, to be *kadosh*, to strive to be like God, is to invest oneself in the wellbeing of all the earth.

Our ultra-Orthodox siblings contend that non-Jewish culture will corrupt us, that if we're too open our people will leave, that non-Jewish people will turn against us, that we can only be safe by closing ranks and defending our

own. The dominant culture *is* often corrupt, and people *do* leave Judaism, and assimilation did *not* save us from 20th century genocide. But we know that closed systems *also* become corrupt, and that Jewish supremacy is its *own* danger, and that keeping to ourselves *also* didn't save us from genocide. The truth is we don't know what will keep us safe. We must remember our distinctiveness *and* our shared humanity, we must look out for our own people *and* others, we must continue to balance between *gevurah* and *chesed*, boundaries and connection.

We in this room don't want to practice Orthodox Judaism, but we often define ourselves in the negative by Orthodox standards. "I'm not *religious*," some might say, even as you sit here. It's time to articulate our Judaism by our own standards, in the positive.

Our Judaism is represented gloriously today, as we hold eight services using seven different machzors for thousands of people, including 20s and 30s, children, teens, and adults, in liberal, traditional/Egalitarian, Mizrahi/Sefardi, and a special Israeli service conducted entirely in Hebrew.

We are diverse and proud of it. Here at CBE we have members who themselves or whose families come from all around the world, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Syria, Thailand, Uruguay, Vietnam and many places closer to Brooklyn, like Alabama, Louisiana, Montana, Oklahoma, Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Texas, and even Florida. No matter where we're from we are living the Judaism of our time.

We do not have one kind of look. We do not have one kind of name. We come from every race and myriad cultures. You may meet a white Ashkenazi or Sephardi Jew, a Black Jew, an Asian Jew, a Latino Jew, an

Arab Jew, and no matter what we look like we might know a lot about Judaism or a little. We also include a lot of people who aren't Jewish. The only thing you can assume – the only thing you *should* assume – is that *every single person you meet at CBE belongs here exactly as much as you do.*

Our community includes many intermarried families. Jews have been intermarrying forever. We're the children of Moses AND Tsippora. We're the children of Ruth the Moabite who was the ancestor of King David who is the ancestor of the messiah. Some of the most dedicated and outstanding Jewish teens of this community have been children of intermarried families. There is no such thing as a half-Jew. Jewish children of intermarriage are Jews, full stop. When we embrace the diverse families of our community, intermarriage makes us stronger.

This year we are inviting groups who might feel that they're on the margins into the center. On Sukkot, in addition to our collective celebration of the holiday, we will have a special event for Jews of color and multiracial families, a special event for Mizrachi and Sefardi Jews, a special event for LGBT Jews, a special event for interfaith families, and a special event for neurodiverse families, and that's just the beginning. Because if we are the face of thriving 21st century Judaism, let us be the face of thriving 21st century Judaism.

Some say, "I'm not really Jewish, I'm just a cultural Jew." Our claim is that cultural Judaism *is* Judaism. As we begin to program the Center for New Jewish Culture at Union Temple House this year, we will develop a rich, robust Jewish cultural life saturated with meaning that binds Jews together who may never come into this room to pray, but are fully and equally Jewish.

What is a bad Jew? How many Jews who are working to make the world better think they're bad Jews because they don't pray three times a day or at all? But they know that Jews don't oppress the stranger, every human being is created in the image of God, justice, justice shall you pursue,

questions are more important answers, a life of righteous deeds is the goal, and learning is equal to them all. Sound like good Jews to me.

From the beginning there's been tension between Judaism's elite and folk. The elite tradition was written by men in authority – chieftains, priests, scribes, rabbis – in contrast with the folk traditions – home-based culture often shaped by women – centered around food, the moon, cycles of life and the earth. Always the men in charge have asserted that their way is the only way. Always they've been anxious that the folk are not behaving properly, not coming to the Jerusalem Temple, not coming to synagogue. Always the fear that people are leaving, that Judaism is dying. But always the folk culture has thrived. The wall between religious and cultural Judaism, between synagogue and home, between traditional and secular needs to come down.

If you stopped feeling like a second-rate Jew based on how Orthodox Jews judge you, what is the imagination you could have for your Jewish life? If you made a list of all the Jewish things you did this year, defined as broadly as possible, how long would it be? If you could define what counts as Jewish, what would be on the list?

What if you learn something new in 5784? Even if you already know a lot, there's so much more treasure in our tradition. Dig just a little, and you'll find wisdom beyond measure.

The truth is we don't know how to live. None of us do. Or else our world wouldn't be on fire, there'd be no chasm between rich and poor, we would do so much less harm with our words and actions, and have so much less to repent for on this day. So given that we don't know how to live, and our tradition has some of the most brilliant minds on that very question, why not get curious?

It's the single best way to ensure that your great-grandkids will be Jewish. We've got to trust our kids. We don't have to lock them in yeshivas with no access to secular education so they can never leave. We've got to trust that

if we give them a foundation, and they see us delighting in it, most of them will choose to be Jewish in their own way, in their own time. Our people's story is incredible – our resilience, our creativity. Who wouldn't want to be part of that?

Orthodox leaders claim that Reform synagogues are ushering people out of Judaism. 866 adults joined CBE in the last 5 years, not counting people who came from Union Temple. More than 80 percent of those who joined had been unaffiliated. We're not a stop on the way out. We're a way in.

Over the next month, we'll all be stopped on the street by our friends in Chabad who will ask us if we're Jewish. That moment encapsulates this uncomfortable question of authenticity. If we say yes we get schooled, as if our Judaism isn't real. To avoid the conversation, some say they're not Jewish – that doesn't feel good. Some of us say "actually I'm a rabbi." Today on your way out we invite you to take stickers to wear proudly that say, "Why Yes, I am Jewish. I heard the shofar at CBE" or "I shook the lulav at CBE."

It is time for diverse, pluralistic, feminist, cultural, liberal, progressive, justice-focused Jews to assert our Jewishness, our majority, our legitimate place in setting the agenda for the Jewish people. We care about antisemitism, and we also care about climate, racism, reproductive rights, refugees, LGBT rights, and democracy. We care about Israel, and loyalty to Israel looks like standing with Israelis against this government. Our Judaism is invested in healing the world, in giving hope to the hopeless, in imagining the future that should be, aware that our well-being is interconnected with all the earth.

I want to be perfectly clear. Our vision of Judaism includes Haredi Jews. It's a vision of a people who unite across our differences to fight antisemitism and make the world more whole. But a black hat does not make a person more Jewish, just like being a man does not make a person more Jewish.

If you are a Jew, there is no one on earth more Jewish than you. No one.

Whatever kind of Jew you are, Own it. Step up into it. Fall in love with it. Our history depends on it.

We are the Jewish people. CBE and the entire flowering of progressive Jewish life. And yes, Orthodox Jews too. People who come together to celebrate, mourn, be cared for, raise children, learn, grow, imagine, and change the world. All races, all genders, all sexualities, all ages, pluralistic, cultural, spiritual, justice-focused, creative, alive.

We are the face of thriving 21st century Judaism. Be that face. Someday when the world pictures a Jew they'll know, this is what Jewish looks like.

Avinu Malkeinu, Imeinu Malkateinu, rid your people of all forms of hate, war, and violence. Save the remnant of your people from ourselves. We have sinned before you. Give us the courage to atone. Cause us to care for ourselves and the other. Grant us the humility to see that we are safer, stronger, and more vibrant in our diversity, with all of your people included. Bring to life our best imaginations so that we can be the blessing and the hope that we were always meant to be.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.