

Shabbat Shalom and Gut Yontif.

Last year, at this very service, I told you a story about this building where we are tonight. About my hopes for launching the Center for New Jewish Culture right here in these historic floors, and about the vagaries of sitting in the “not yet” of any project still unfinished. Tonight, at the risk of repeating myself, or milking this building for one too many lessons or metaphors, I want to pick up where I left off in that story. Because there’s more to say! And because it is in this space, more than any other, that I have interrogated my soul in the past year, which is of course, what we’re here, ostensibly to do together, tonight and tomorrow.

Between September and December of last year, 7,000 people came in and out of this room, and the rooms upstairs. Where I’m standing now, last October, Paul Rudd joked about bar mitzvahs with Paul Giamatti. A week later, Julian Casablancas transformed the building into a haunted house for four nights. And in December, Rufus Wainwright hosted his annual Christmas concert on this very bimah. For better or worse. In those months, here, we listened to bootleg cantorial music from the last century and paid tribute to Leonard Cohen on his yahrtzeit. Rabbi Shaul Magid launched his new book, *The Necessity of Exile*, upstairs in the ballroom. And on many Friday nights, different minyanim from different streams of Jewish practice observed Shabbat.

It was literally a dream come true. A dream that I’ve been talking about for years. To you all. A Jewish space where definitions felt expansive, at a time when Jewish life was otherwise constricting all around us. The building still looked destroyed, as you see, and the swimming pool upstairs was still empty, so it wasn’t the best possible version of the dream. But it was proof that a thriving Jewish cultural center could exist right here in the 21st century. People delighting together, and grieving together, probing big questions, creating and consuming new works of culture. In some cases reaffirming their commitment to Jewish life. And in others, questioning...how is *this* Jewish? Which is, perhaps, the most Jewish question of all.

But then, come January, it was clear that this building was not quite ready for prime time. Who would’ve guessed? Turns out that when you open a new building, especially when that building is actually an old building...challenges arise, which you could never anticipate. And by wintertime, it was clear that I’d have to return to the “not yet,” at least as it related to much of what I wanted to do here, as we dealt with those setbacks.

Now...you’re all here tonight. And don’t worry, this gathering is kosher. It may not look like it, but this building has already come a long way since last Yom Kippur and we’re

back in business. Baruch Hashem. But it would take many months before we could fully realize once again the vision that we'd started to see come to life last fall.

In those months, you can imagine, my team and I were beside ourselves. So much that we'd worked toward, and hustled to see happen, was called off. But as we pressed pause on a dozen events, or worked to find other homes for them, I didn't allow myself a moment to think that maybe I should press pause, too. I thought in January that it was only going to be a few weeks until we sorted everything out, but that effort was only completed in June. Every week in each of those months, I acted against all the signs that the space just wasn't ready for the kinds of things I wanted to do, because I was afraid that they might never be. I made more promises to artists and to producing partners, which I then had to break, because I was holding so tightly to the idea that I could make it all happen. But holding that tightly suffocated me.

In Ecclesiastes we read the very human truth that "it is better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill."¹ And that was a lesson I learned the hard way this year. I made promise after promise that I failed to keep, because I wanted to keep going, despite having no power to do so.

In the leadup to tonight, I was reminded of all this. Because of the great achievement it is that we're able to gather again in this way in this room. And because I remembered the lessons I preached last year, but didn't fully practice. Another Kol Nidre of introspection when I didn't quite live up to the person I wanted to be, nor to the vows I wanted to fulfill. In this case, because I convinced myself over and over again that I could fix things, but I was nowhere near powerful enough.

Again in the words of Ecclesiastes, "Just as you don't know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in the womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things."²

In other words, "man plans, and God laughs."

I knew this wisdom. But this past year, so many times, I resisted listening to it. I refused to accept the limitations of the space and the timeline for changing them, which were, ultimately, out of my control. I really wanted something to hold onto, in the midst of the intensity of this past year, the avalanche of trauma pervading in the world more broadly. But instead of pausing or rerouting temporarily, I tried everything I could to change the facts before me, perseverating and talking about it all the time.

¹ Ecclesiastes 5:4

² Ecclesiastes 11:5

My guess is that many of you can relate to this experience. Feeling accustomed to making things happen, and when they don't go as planned or don't work according to a foreseen timeline...railing against reality. Wasting so much energy resisting the truth because of an illusion that we are in control. Choosing to spin our gears and act out, trying anything to mask our sadness or anger or pain because we'd rather not feel those things.

As I looked around me this year, I saw versions of this experience everywhere I looked. People who had visions of the world as it should be, or of projects that they strove to see come to life, but who felt stymied at every turn, like all their efforts were in vain.

I thought about a writer I know who was completing her first book. She could sense in her bones what she wanted to say, intuiting its shape, but was hamstrung by doubt if it was any good, or valuable. Or if there was any point in writing a fictional story when the reality of the news was more urgent or what people actually wanted to read. Looking ahead at her next book, which was already underway, she became nervous that its explicitly Jewish themes might be misunderstood by readers or publishers. And her ability to put thoughts into words, she told me, was hampered by a new self-consciousness about being Jewish.

I also spent a lot of time this year with a journalist who shared that his work covering the Jewish community felt unrelenting, like a daily impossibility. Seeking to portray an object that was always moving, and never having a high enough word limit to describe what's going on in a way that was plain and true. "My job is to hold up a mirror to the people," he told me, "but when I do that, they stop reading." If ever there were a time that called for serious wrestling, it would be this one. But each time he tried to give people the space to do that, it either backfired or simply didn't get very far.

And along these lines, I thought of my colleagues, my rabbi friends, on whom I relied this year. Who really just wanted to inspire people to find meaning in Jewish practice. But found themselves, instead, trying to address the daily headlines. They painstakingly wordsmithed sermons and invented programs that were designed to bring people together in a year when people needed that. But often they had to scrap a plan or a sermon because the day's newscycle demanded something more of the moment, and no matter what they did, they wound up replying to angry emails thereafter.

In each of these scenarios, the process, however painful, was inevitable. And at a remove, maybe we can say that the process was helpful, insofar as it was true and generative, addressing the moment on any given day. There was no other way to make

sense of things this year than to pass through the struggle. And at some point, I want to believe, *that* struggle for all of us will have yielded some kind of insight or depth.

But often we may wonder, as Ecclesiastes did: “What does a person get for all the toil and striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is grief and pain.” *Gam zeh hevel hu*, This, too, is futile.³

Ecclesiastes can be pretty dark. But I came back to it again and again this year, for reasons that are now obvious. Traditionally, we read it on Sukkot, when we dwell in impermanent structures, and focus on the forces beyond us that we can't control. It invites us to accept limits, to find truth and do good within those bounds, even when our impulse is to reject them. But man, that impulse is strong.

When you're caught up in a wave that is bigger than you expected, and you really don't know its force, or where you will land, nothing is more nauseating. All you want is to find your footing, and you flail about trying to find some balance. But it's really only by the grace of nature that any of us are able to return to shore.

In general, when we face a struggle as human beings, we want to make ourselves feel better, or more secure, so it is natural to try to do everything we can instead of sitting in the pain of the present.

Even though, we also know that the only real release in times like these comes from accepting that the situation is beyond you, trying instead to find what actually exists within you to achieve. Doing this doesn't relieve the underlying pain. But it does allow us all to breathe more freely, and live more joyfully within the world we inhabit.

Looking out at the American Jewish community, as I often do on Kol Nidre, I wish we could all embody some version of that release. That we would recognize our own impotence in the face of extraordinary pain, and within the confines of our limited power, that we could find some way to live in this world together. As decent people, who value life and justice and freedom and dignity for all peoples, especially Israelis and Palestinians. And then, from *that* place, figure out what we can actually do to foster what we want in this world.

I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about Israeli and Palestinian suffering and the importance of saying something even if the words available to us feel limited. And if that's the sermon you need to hear right now, I encourage you to listen to it when you go home. But as I think about our failings in response to horrors of October 7th and the manifold atrocities

³ Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

in Gaza, it's hard not to see the ways in which we have also acted in vain...in some cases against each other...because with a war very far away, it was all too easy to focus our energy on the people closest to us. Castigating each other. Fighting with our parents and judging our friends. Canceling one another because of something they said or signed or posted. As if that was somehow helping Israelis or Palestinians.

In the world of culture, we saw this happen so many times in the past year. Institutions canceling events with artists and thinkers because of their worldview, even when it had nothing to do with a scheduled program. Jewish organizations doing the same. I understand the need to work within a philosophical or curatorial frame, but collectively we went too far this year, because, as a trauma response we tried to control the conversation. And I want to see a Jewish landscape in which we choose, instead, to allow that conversation to unfold, especially because it is **the** conversation of our time. The mishna teaches that synagogues are supposed to have windows.⁴ Walls might be necessary for a synagogue to stand, but it wouldn't be a synagogue without windows through which to see the outside world.

Havel Havalim, Ecclesiastes says in its introduction. Utter futility. *Hakol Havel* Everything is futile.⁵ Those words echoed in my mind so many times this year as I watched all of this happen, and as I participated in it. Not because everything we did was actually pointless, but because it often felt as though it were. *Havel Havalim*.

Our tradition attributes the book of Ecclesiastes to King Solomon, reflecting on his life and imparting some kind of wisdom at the end of his days. Scholars mostly don't believe that he wrote it. But I think it's powerful to imagine the king who built the first temple in Jerusalem looking inward and asking vulnerable questions like: "what real value is there for a person in all the gain they make beneath the sun?"⁶ If a king might consider his own powerlessness in that way, then surely everyone else should, too.

One can easily read Ecclesiastes as a full throated expression of nihilism. And for this reason, some of the early rabbis who rose to prominence a millennium after Solomon died, tried to remove Ecclesiastes from the Hebrew Bible. They thought it was a dangerous set of texts, contradicting *their* conviction that we can change the course of our lives by studying Torah, and so they tried to cancel it. In what was probably not the first, and definitely not the last Jewish effort at canceling an idea.

⁴ BT Berakhot 31a, based on a reading of Daniel

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:2

⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:3

The Talmud says that, “**The Sages sought to suppress the book of Ecclesiastes** and declare it apocryphal **because its statements contradict each other.**”⁷ It was heresy, they said, because it suggested that divine justice did not exist. Elsewhere in the Talmud, the rabbis claim that Ecclesiastes is unnecessarily lenient. And they wanted it far away from their communities.⁸

But why, then, did Ecclesiastes survive? For one thing, not all the rabbis wanted to cancel it. And the Talmudic default was to retain minority opinions, even if some other opinion ruled the day. But also, we can guess, because the text spoke to people. Because given its realism, the Jewish people felt something real when they read it. Heretical, maybe, but also oddly comforting.

That “to everything there is a season...a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted.”⁹ The question is not how to *control* time, but how to discern which time it is we’re living in. That was true poetry. Unvarnished and beautiful. And if that’s what our people needed 2,000 years ago, we need it just as much right now. The poetry of real life, within the confines of all we can’t control.

If there were ever something I wanted to create in this Center for New Jewish Culture, it would be that. The creative expression of something new and true and Jewish, in spite of the strictures and demands of 21st century American life. Or maybe because of them. And in any case, inside of them. A space where we can have a conversation inclusive of new ideas and difficult truths without the presumption of control. A space where artists, intellectuals, and the rest of us, could come together and create some bit of newness, within the realities of our bodies, and life as it is.

And as you know I can’t resist saying about these broken open walls, there could be no better metaphor for the conversation we need to have here – raw and messy and true.

I don’t know what shape this year will take, in this room, in this country, for us as a people, or for Israelis and Palestinians. But here is what I can tell you, as you come in and out of this room, and more importantly as you leave it tonight and live your lives over the course of 5785.

Once we acknowledge the limits of our control, we can reside within those bounds in a way that is healthier, more honest, and more joyful because we’re no longer straining to manufacture what we can’t. In that effort, that struggle, which will inevitably fail, we

⁷ BT Shabbat 30b

⁸ BT Megillah 7a, also see Lockshin on “Kohelet”

⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:2

become miserable. The attempt to control blocks us from the truth, but also restrains us from being happy within the boundaries of our lives.

That is the lesson I want to take into this year, even though we're back to hosting events in this building, and the tsuris of this past spring is slowly fading away. But as things move forward again, I am desperate to hold onto that truth, today, and in the year that follows.

Yom Kippur is our annual reminder of the frailties of being human. The things we've done wrong. The people whom we've hurt. All in the forced exercise of confronting our own mortality, the ultimate constraint beyond our control. May these 25 hours of Yom Kippur give us the spaciousness to consider how we can work within the inherent limit of finite lives, to live as kindly, as justly, as joyfully, and as meaningfully as we possibly can.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.