

Shanah Tovah.

You are here. I often begin at least one sermon throughout the holidays by reminding you of that. You could be in any number of places right now – at work, at home, at another synagogue. You could be with a different constellation of family or friends in another city. But you are here. And I'm happy about that.

We are all here not just to check a box, hopefully. Or to please our parents. But also to locate ourselves within time, marking the transition into another year. Measuring our growth against where we were at this time *last* year. And amidst it all, we may not *fully* be here in some sense.

When Moses ascended the mountain to receive the ten commandments, Exodus explains that God said to him, “Come up to me on the mountain *veyehesh sham*, and be there.” Which begs the question: if Moses is already on the mountain, where else would he be? But the great Hasidic master, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, taught that it is possible to put a great effort into arriving somewhere, maybe even climbing a mountain, and still not be present to that fact.¹ And boy, do we know that's true.

As we enter these days, when so many of us do *not* primarily live according to the Jewish calendar, and when Rosh Hashanah therefore feels like something other than a *real* new year, it is certainly possible to climb this mountain of holidays and somehow miss the sacred renewal of this season. Especially this year when the national Jewish conversation has been stuck on repeat, speaking of *newness* requires an extra bit of emotional and mental gymnastics.

Sitting in this Jewish space right now, my suspicion is that some of us find ourselves dissociating somewhat. Here we are, as we were last year, when we thought that the war in Gaza couldn't possibly continue through another set of holidays, resisting the impulse to become numb to the daily atrocities of Palestinian life in Gaza, and the plight of Israelis still held hostage. Here we are, with the past year's communal and ideological fissures all the more entrenched, anxiously curious perhaps if the Jews beside us share our precise beliefs. And here we are, one push notification away from some shocking headline closer to home, or another executive action that we will call “unprecedented.” Given that context, it is no easy thing to believe that the new year will actually *feel* new, or that it will be sweeter than the last.

And I can't convince you that it will be. But today, as we try to locate ourselves in time, on this Rosh Hashanah, I want to try also to locate us within a Jewish and American

¹ As quoted in *Putting God on the Guest List*, Salkin, xix

history that is more expansive than just this year, because if we are to grapple with the intensity of these days of days, in this year of years, grounding us in where we are feels like the best place to start.

On the cover of your programs, you will see the word, Ayeka: the biblical Hebrew word meaning, “where are you?” Because over the past year, it’s been especially challenging to find ourselves as Jews who can hardly recognize the conditions of today’s Jewish world. Ayeka is the first question our tradition posed. In Genesis 3, at the very beginning, after Adam and Eve followed the snake’s advice to eat the fruit in the garden of Eden...after becoming lost, God called out “where are you?”

In that question, the 20th century rabbi Rav Kook, understood the foundational question of teshuva, of sin and return. “The sin of Adam,” he says, “...was that he became estranged from himself, that he yielded to the snake's opinion, and lost himself. He failed to answer a clear response to the question of Ayeka, ‘where are you?’ because he didn't recognize his own soul, because the real sense of self was lost from him.”²

I reflected on that same notion last Rosh Hashanah, about our loss of Jewish selfhood, and I ask us here, one year later: Where are we now, as American Jews?

Grasping for an answer I turn, as always, to this building. Where we literally are right now. A space that helped Jews find themselves over the span of the last century. A space about which you’ve heard me speak for four years now. Because, as you know, I’m obsessed with it.

On the ceiling above us, though it’s really hard to see from where you’re sitting...are painted panels depicting the various places where Jews have found themselves. And where they attempted to find God. On the two longitudinal beams, the original murals from 1926 depict the mishkan in the wilderness, the first temple of Solomon, the second temple rebuilt by Hezekiah and expanded by Herod. From there, you can see the old European synagogues, also now destroyed, of Berlin, Amsterdam, London, and Frankfurt. You can see the old Temple Beth El, on the Upper East Side, destroyed in that case to make way for an apartment building. And finally you can see a rendering of this building, the Union Temple House, and the sanctuary next door which was never built.

The Jews who founded this place were trying to locate themselves in the sweep of history, and they believed in their ability to do so. Which you can tell from the chutzpah it

² Orot HaKodesh 3, 97

takes to paint on their ceiling a building that they hadn't yet built...so sure of themselves that they were here to stay.

In a 1926 interview, Rabbi Louis Gross, who became the founding rabbi of the newly merged Union Temple, explained that the premise of this brand new Union Temple House was, in his words: "to revere the oldest traditions of our people and of religion, and at the same time, to cope with the conditions of modern life in America." Hence, the past, present, and future, represented above us.³

In the heady days of the 1920s, the Jews of Union Temple really believed that that's what they were doing. Finding the perfect balance of Americanness and Jewishness. And they knew, even then, that it was a moonshot.

As we enter 5786, consider for a moment that this building was built in 5686. A literal century ago.

The 1920s may conjure images of flappers and speakeasies set to the sound of Rhapsody In Blue. But when we hear in that famous song the confidence of Gershwin's klezmer clarinet, we could just as easily forget that America was an uncertain place for our people in the first third of the 20th century. When the Jew was still very much the other. And the question animating conversation among Jewish elites was *if* they could ever really be both Jewish and American, wondering *how* they could be *both*, as fully as possible.

Consider, as well, that in 1920, Henry Ford began publishing antisemitic screeds to a circulation of nearly a million American subscribers. That same year, Warren Harding won the presidential election with the campaign slogan, "America First." And only a few years before, in 1915, a Jew named Leo Frank, garnered national attention when he was lynched by a mob in Georgia.

Lest we think that that history was far away from where we are right now, I'll add that Leo Frank grew up in a brownstone three blocks from here on Underhill Avenue between Sterling and Park Pl. And that his funeral was held in the sanctuary of Congregation Beth Elohim, where his parents were members.

That, my friends, was the world in which the Brooklyn Jews of the 1920s lived. And against that backdrop they built this building, insisting that what they needed – and what they *deserved* – was a place. Where they could, in community, *find* their place...in this goldene medinah of America.

³ *American Hebrew*, 1926

It turns out that they were not alone. Across North America, that was the time, and the context, in which so many Jewish institutions emerged. The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the birth of the Jewish Theological Seminary, UJA, the American Jewish Congress, Hadassah, the Joint Distribution Committee, the ADL, and the American Jewish Committee.

Proving the old adage that when a Jew feels threatened...he forms a committee.

All of those organizations still exist, of course. And the thriving of our people over the last century is, largely, thanks to them. As American Jews became expert at being here – and being ourselves – and as the decades passed beyond the ravages of both European and American anti-Semitism, those institutions fulfilled their founding missions, to their everlasting credit. But it is an urgent and value-neutral observation that not one of those institutions was purpose-built to meet this moment. And a time such as this will require that we tap back into that historic Jewish instinct to found *new* institutions if we are to face the myriad challenges before us *now*.

It may go without saying that this time feels distinct for all of us. September 2025, in the throes of *Project 2025*, amidst an assault on democratic norms and institutions, and a growing scourge of political violence. We now find ourselves almost two years since the atrocities of October 7th, 2023, after which we confronted catastrophe after catastrophe, for Palestinians and Israelis, and during which time, those who care deeply about both peoples have been unable to deescalate the violence or even begin to imagine reconciliation between the two.

We could list all the reasons why this time is excruciating. But you know them already. And though the verdict is still out on all that this era will have wrought, many Jewish leaders have come to think of the present moment as indicative of an existential crash, akin to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. When our perceived Jewish consensus – about our politics, about our role in the world, our relationships, and even what it means to be Jewish – has come undone. And if some temple of Jewish American modernity is indeed crashing before our eyes, the natural question must be: what are we going to do next? If we're going to survive and thrive in the future, what is the project that is going to galvanize us? What is the place or institution that could hold us? All of us? Or at least enough of us?

As we consider those questions, I want to draw our attention to one peculiar feature of the Jewish relationship to placemaking in early exile.

In the centuries after the second Temple was destroyed, after which our people literally had no place in the world, some Jews began to refer to God as HaMakom, which literally means “the place.” An early midrash explains it this way: Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Ami: Why do they change the name of the Holy One of blessing to HaMakom? It is because God is the place of the world, and the world is not God’s place.”⁴

In other words, say the commentaries, when the world feels empty, when we barely recognize ourselves amidst a cascade of loss, we insist that there is still a *place* in our imaginations or our souls, which grounds us.

You can see this meaning in the traditional script for when we lose a loved one: HaMakom yenchem etchem b’toch shaar avlei Tzion v’Yirushalayim, may God console you, among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. That phrase alludes to an earlier midrash, in Eicha Rabbah, where God is referred to as HaMakom, consoling the people after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.⁵ We hear it also in the text of Acheinu, the medieval prayer for Jews in captivity, which many of us have come to say regularly on behalf of those held hostage: HaMakom Yerachem Aleinu. May God have mercy on us, as we consider a living person who is somewhere else against their will.

Again and again, when there is a hole in our lives, or a lack in the world, our tradition insists that there is a *conceptual* place we can make real. A place of comfort, a place of hope, a place of meeting, and a place of meaning.

Over the millennia, across the world, Jews have built lots of places. Some elegant, some garish. Some with swimming pools on the seventh floor, and some with walls that collapse to fit the crowds on days like today.

But the places we have built, the institutions we have built, self-consciously as Jews, religious or secular, have followed that same pattern of what we once sought in the name of God as HaMakom. A place of comfort, hope, meeting, and meaning in the face of loss and confusion. It is now our time to build new institutions, and to hold them to precisely that standard. Institutions formed from the ties that bind us together as human beings who are able to *feel* loss and confusion – recognizing the humanity that we share – and from there, insisting on building a world of wholeness...together.

Somehow in 2025, what I just said is actually countercultural. We live in a fragmented society that does not generally prioritize relationships, especially not with people who

⁴ Breishit Rabbah 68:9

⁵ Eicha Rabbah 24

are unlike us in any given way. We're stuck behind screens, for one thing, we've retreated into familiar corners and algorithms and echo chambers. And all the more so, we've allowed our schools, our movements, our unions, and our synagogues to languish without people or funds to sustain them. It's those institutions that form the bedrock of not only Jewish community, but also democracy.

That's an easy platitude to just say, so I want to repeat that clearly and expand on it. Both Jewish communal life and democracy depend on institutions, because it's in those institutions where we find the ties that bind us together.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, understood this a century ago. Addressing the rising tide of authoritarianism in the 1930s, he saw a lack of institutions as a gateway to fascism. He wrote that “[autocratic rulers] know they can gain control of the masses by instilling in them hate and fears of some common enemy...for their purposes, mankind must be treated as broken up into classes or nations or tribes that are engaged in a mutual life and death struggle.”⁶ By contrast, institutions, like schools or shuls, when they're well-crafted, draw a broad array of people from across lines of difference.

Rabbi Manny Goldsmith, another Reconstructionist thinker, put it this way: “the idea underlying democracy is that the interests uniting human beings, if they become truly aware of those interests, are strong enough to ward off the divisive influence of people's differences. The crucial problem of freedom is how to guard our individuality and the capacity to think for ourselves and yet cooperate with those whose backgrounds, upbringings and outlooks are different from our own.” “This,” Kaplan said, “is an art that people are slow to learn.” And institutions are what help people hone that artform.⁷

Over the past four years, as I've come to work on building out a new kind of community center here in this space, the Center for New Jewish Culture, thinking about the values underpinning any successful institution, I've come to understand what Kaplan meant. At the end of the day, it really is about relationships. And about a sense of responsibility for each other, upon which both Judaism and democracy rely. Part of me wants to tell you that when the Center is up and running, that the program will tickle your senses. That you'll find Haim performing on this stage, a comedy show upstairs, Talmud classes and Yiddish classes and pottery classes. Where you can swim, yes! Upstairs. Where you can do Torah yoga and see an arthouse film and educate your children.

⁶ Kaplan diary entry, Aug 10, 1939

⁷ Rabbi Manny Goldsmith, *Reconstructionism Today*, Spring 2003

All of that, friends, is actually what you *should* expect...at some point in the next 1 to 14 years.

And that matters! But what matters much more, genuinely, is whether or not this space becomes a place in which we can find ourselves, find others, and together build lives of purpose. *That* is the shared goal of Jewish communal life and democracy. And you, literally you, have a vital role to play in achieving that.

If you aren't interested in getting more involved here, in this building, or if you've come in from out of town, I will begrudgingly accept that. But please take note on this Rosh Hashanah, that both the future of American Jews and that of American democracy are bound together not only because we are safest in a participatory democracy...but also because both democracy and Judaism require a communal muscle that we have got to get better at flexing.

It probably doesn't surprise you that the rabbi is telling you on Rosh Hashanah to get more involved in Jewish life. That's always my agenda. But as we move into this next Jewish year, getting involved is actually more urgent than it might otherwise be. Because when the world feels as unmoored as it does right now...following the example of our forebears, we are best served when we plant ourselves somewhere, committing to be fully present for ourselves and for other people.

In tomorrow morning's Torah portion, God will call out to Abraham and he will offer the famous reply, Hineni, "here I am." Nevermind the painful second act of that portion...in saying those words, Abraham declares that he is ready to fulfill his role in his people's history. We might not envy what that role almost led him to do, but we can aspire nonetheless to his sense of sacred purpose. To be present, and to do something important with his life. For us, friends, if we're going to say Hineni in the next year with any integrity, and I hope we will, we first have to pass through the question of Ayeka.

During these ten days of awe, may we search our souls for answers to that question. May we commit to locating ourselves in the grand scheme of our people's history, creating and tending to real connections. And wherever we find ourselves to be in the coming year, may we be there fully.

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