

Rosh Hashanah 5786
September 23, 2025
Rabbi Rachel Timoner

Thank you. You gave me a beautiful gift. In the mountains of South America, I got perspective. On my life, on life itself, on the extraordinary blessing of being your rabbi, on the challenges we're living through. On the absolute miracle of being a Jew. On the unbelievable luck of being an American Jew in the 21st century. I know it seems impossibly difficult right now, but hear me out.

Deep in the wilderness of Patagonia, on the remote shores of Easter Island, and in the highlands of Peru, I met people who didn't know what a Jew was.

"Que haces en Nueva York? What do you in New York?"

"Soy una rabina.....it's like a Jewish priest....ah, the Jewish people are... oiste de Moises en el Biblio? Moses's people in the Bible? Yeah, that's us....we *are* still alive... No, there are not many of us. .2% of the world population. I know, we're very small and we've lived a very long time. And we have beautiful traditions and teachings."

After weeks so far away, I began to ache for our voices singing our ancient words. It brought tears to my eyes to marvel at the wonder of us in scattered, little clusters around the world, in all the different ways of being us, rising and bowing, singing the same words, chanting and studying the same portion of the same scroll at the same time, turning our bodies toward the same center. So small we could easily disappear, yet we come back to one another again and again.

Just get a little distance and you see how amazing we are. Take the Inca civilization, so impressive and so old, but started in the 13th century CE. We started at least 23 centuries before that. And, more than almost any other group, we've been exiled and kicked around the earth, and we keep

adapting to new conditions, new places, new times, and we're still here. We are a miracle.

It's not just that we're still alive; we carry a message that has inspired the world, calling humanity to a higher purpose. We are bearers of the idea that every human being has inherent dignity and worth – created in the image of G-d. This led to the idea of human rights and equality. The idea that people deserve freedom, that slavery and oppression are wrong, that there's such a thing as justice on the earth, and people are supposed to live up to it. That's from the Exodus story. The idea that G-d is primarily concerned with vulnerable people and we're supposed to care about them – the widow, the orphan, the poor, and even people who aren't from our own tribe – the stranger – that was new and radical 3,000 years ago. The idea that human beings are not just passive and subject to fate, but actors in history, with a role and responsibility. The idea of covenant, that people could be partners with G-d in shaping history toward a future of justice and peace, that came from us. Every culture on the earth has had its own genius and made its own contributions. Ours are something to be proud of.

We're living in a country whose founders were influenced by our Torah to articulate a vision for a society inspired by inalienable human dignity. It was deeply flawed in application, but in America, Torah's ideas led to freedom of speech and assembly, separation of church and state and freedom of religion, with life, liberty, and property protected by due process of the law, and eventually with equal protection under the law. It's not surprising that we've been embraced here. We've flourished here. And then you and I landed in this particular place and time, when an expansive, inclusive, egalitarian, bold, creative, and vibrant Jewish community is thriving.

When you think that the human species is 300,000 years old, and the idea of universal human dignity and equality is roughly 3,000 years old (the most recent one percent of the history of our species), consider how rapidly humanity has developed in such a short time, and then look at this room, where we are entirely equal by gender, where people of all backgrounds and identities belong, where we believe in relating to the diverse

communities around us, and where together we get to authentically live out our deepest values inside and outside these walls, to be bearers of our people's trailblazing message through our actions individually and collectively, and you see that a thousand years ago (which is a blink of an eye), even fifty years ago, this would be unthinkable. And here we are. Peak Jewish experience. Peak human experience.

So yes, it's all being challenged right now. That's not so surprising. We know from the field of child development that big leaps are followed by periods of regression. What we cherish is being challenged from inside and outside the Jewish people, from inside and outside the American people. But let's stop and realize for a second how incredible it is that we have this *at all*.

And we have Torah. Torah was made for moments just like this.

The Torah that bears our message for the world, it was not created to be a heavenly ideal. It was created because *we need it*. In the Talmud (Shabbat 88b), **Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi** taught **When Moses ascended on High** to receive the Torah, **the ...angels said to G-d: Master of the Universe, what is [a human] doing here among us? G-d, said to the angels: He came to receive the Torah.** [Now they were really unhappy.] The angels **said to G-d: The Torah? The Torah is a hidden treasure and you want to give it to flesh and blood? "What are humans that You are mindful of them ...?"** (Psalms 8:5). No. The rightful place for Torah is in the heavens [with us].

G-d...said to Moses: Give them an answer...

Moses said to G-d: Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it? God said: "I am Adonai your God Who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

Moses said to the angels: "Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours? And Moses asked G-d: What else is written in it? God said to Moses: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal"

(Exodus 20:13) Moses asked the angels: Is there jealousy among you,

or is there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant? Immediately [the angels] agreed ...G-d made the right decision to give the Torah to humans. [Because we need it.]

When masked agents of the government snatch people off the street because they came from another country, we need Leviticus 19:34: "The stranger who resides with you in your land shall be to you as one of your citizens: you shall love each one as yourself..."

When immigrants are imprisoned with no due process indefinitely, we need Exodus 22:20 "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him."

When people are disappeared to other countries where they might be executed, we need Exodus 23:7: "Do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer."

When global aid to the most destitute is defunded, we need Deuteronomy 15:7 "Be neither hard hearted nor tight fisted."

When food and healthcare are stripped from the hungriest, sickest, and poorest in our country for tax cuts for the richest, we need Proverbs 14:31: "He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker," and Isaiah 3:14-15 "That which was robbed from the poor is in your houses. How dare you crush My people and grind the faces of the poor?"

When the President punishes enemies and silences critics, and political violence grows on the right and the left, we need Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen."

When the Supreme Court bows to the president's will, we need Deuteronomy 1:17: "You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike." And Leviticus 19:15: "You shall not render an unfair decision...judge your countrymen fairly."

When the military is deployed in our cities, we need Jeremiah 29:7 “Seek the welfare of the city...and pray to the Lord on its behalf,” and Psalm 34:15 “Seek peace and pursue it.”

...When a *Jewish* government dehumanizes another people, calling for the deaths of even children and their removal from their land, and when that government refuses to bring home the hostages and refuses to end the war against the advice of its own military, and when that government blocks food and water from 2 million people until they are *starving to death* and then brings in more tanks and bombs, and when that government does not punish its citizens who kill and steal land from their neighbors and plan to annex their territory, we need Hillel in Talmud Shabbat (31a): “What is hateful to you do not do to another.” and Maimonides in Mishneh Torah “There is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives.” And Proverbs 25:21: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” and Leviticus 25:23: “The land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.” and Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5 “He who destroys a single life destroys an entire world.”

And for those of us who are watching this, feeling powerless, we need Talmud Shabbat 54b “Whoever can protest to his household and does not, is accountable [for the sins] of his household; ... whoever could protest to the whole world and does not, is accountable for the whole world.”

Just like they're not meant to be shiny objects in heaven for the angels to sit around and admire, teachings of Torah are not meant to be slogans we hear from the bima.

They're meant to be lived.

The Jewish people were made to be better than this.

Our people's trauma is real and profound. Can we not find within our history the deep desire to prevent trauma for others?

This is our question: When the ultimate inhumanity has been done to you, do you let it make you less humane? Or do you convert it into the commitment to become even more humane?

“The one thing you can’t take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one’s freedoms is to choose one’s inner attitude in any given circumstance.” That’s Viktor Frankl about living through Auschwitz. No one else can destroy our inner attitude, dismantle our inner compass, corrupt our morality, silence our conscience. Hitler couldn’t do that. Hamas cannot do that. Only we can do that to ourselves. Only we could decide that Judaism countenances dehumanization. It does not. Alternatively, only we can determine that no hate, no brutality, no inhumanity will make us inhumane, will alter our moral compass, our Torah, our conscience.

The Kahanist, messianic, hate-filled settler movement that is now in power in Israel is a minority that once was banned. It is acting in the name of Judaism, but it is a distortion and a desecration of Judaism. Our people must choose between texts that justify Jewish supremacy and the foundations of Torah of which we are most proud. *The very integrity of Judaism is at stake right now. Who we are as a people is at stake right now.* All Jews who believe that Judaism is fundamentally about compassion and justice must fully live that Judaism now.

In this country, too, the way we behave in response to antisemitism is up to us. There is real and dangerous hatred toward Jews on the left and right, which is never, ever justified. When we feel threatened, do we want to be people who are nasty and vicious to our own and to others, attacking them, doxxing them, calling them names? Does it help? Does it make us more safe? Is it Torah?

When our government uses antisemitism to justify harming other people, extorting universities, diverting humanities funding, violating the first amendment, imprisoning and deporting people, does supporting such actions align with Torah? And does it make us more safe, or less? Frankl

again, “It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to ... think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist...in right action and in right conduct.”

We do not know what will keep us safe or get us through this time, but we do know that harming the people around us never helps. Also, history shows that acquiescence with authoritarianism never helps. It doesn't slow it, it doesn't reverse it, it doesn't end it. Only non-violent non-cooperation does. Experts who've studied hundreds of examples around the world say that sustained non-violent non-cooperation succeeds at not only restoring democracy but renewing it.

We were made for this.

What if we have arrived at our positions in life – no matter where we stand, no matter how old or young you are – for just this moment?

We do not choose the conditions in which we live but we do choose how we live in them. The first best thing would be to live in a time of peace and prosperity, freedom, compassion and justice for all. That time has not yet come to the earth. The *next best thing* is to live in a time that calls upon you to rise to your highest self, that invites you to dig deep and find your strength of conviction, that summons you into action for something greater than yourself. A time that is not confusing or muddy but clear as day. We are living in such a time and we are being called. You are being called.

This is a time when no one needs to ask whether our lives have meaning. We are obviously needed. Hillel famously said If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when.

(Mishnah Avot 1:14) But perhaps most relevant to us right now he also said: *בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנְשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ*

In a place where no one is being human, strive to be human. (Mishnah Avot 2:5)

Where there is so much inhumanity, do not play it safe, do not wait and watch, do not think that maybe if you just ignore it, it will disappear. It will not. Seize the opportunity to define what it means to be human. Rise to be the human you always wanted to be.

It is not ours to formulate the entire strategy, nor to build the entire movement. It is ours to form the hyper-local conditions that increase our ability to keep each other safe, stand with the vulnerable, nurture nonviolence, demonstrate noncooperation, and articulate our vision for the future.

It was never supposed to be easy. No one promised it would be easy. The struggle for our humanity is not easy, but it is our purpose. It is actually Judaism. When the dangers have been less obvious, we believed it could be a side project. To be a Jew is never actually a side project. To be an American is not a side project. To be human is not a side project. The question of how to live, how to best be us, is the question that forms the meaning of our existence. That is why Torah was written. It is not in the heavens that you need to go up to the heavens to find it. It is in your mouth and in your heart to do it. We literally were born for this. For what other reason are you here?

Here's Frankl one more time: "Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself," He continues, "I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it."

We are now one of those generations that is defined by how we responded to the test of history. What measure of success is there other than whether and how we rose to the call?

So many of you have asked, “Rabbi, we need guidance about how to live in this time.”

Well, hey, that’s perfect, because that’s what Judaism is: guidance for how to live our whole lives – not just what we do in the synagogue, but our whole lives.

In our version of expansive, inclusive, life-affirming, loving, justice-filled Judaism, it might look like this:

We wake in the morning, go to sleep at night and fill our days with gratitude on our lips.

We speak words of poetry that remind us of who we are and what our mission is. We call that *tefilah*.

We kiss these words on the doorposts of our house, and speak of them when we are at home and on our way. We teach our children that we’re part of a mission to heal the world. We study wisdom every day about how.

We call that *talmud Torah*.

We see the web of relationships and potential relationships around us as what will make us strong and keep us safe. We grow that web and fill it with care. Every day we look for opportunities to connect. A kindness to a neighbor or a vulnerable person. A loving gesture at home. A word of support at work. An act for humanity in the public square. We call that *mitzvot*.

We argue respectfully with people we don’t agree with, listening, looking for the good, finding what we can learn. We call that *makhloket*.

We seek out play, humor, joy, inspiration so that we can be lifted up. We redirect our thoughts, speech, reading, watching, listening away from that which discourages us, toward that which gives us the qualities we need for our mission. We call that *mussar*.

We show up regularly to be in the company of a wider circle than our family. With others, we create a miniature of the world we want to live in. We sing, learn, mourn, celebrate. We take care of one another. We take action together to defend life, love, and fairness in our society. We call that *kehilah*.

We rest and refresh ourselves one day every week to keep our spirits strong. We call that *Shabbat*.

We operate within our human limits. Nothing more is asked of us, nor is it useful for us to exceed them. We do not try to complete the task, nor do we desist from it.

In other words, we open the book of life and write our own names with our own hands.

Maybe you already do a few of these things. Maybe you'll choose to add more. Maybe you'll find that they give you balance or perspective, strength or direction. Join me in conversation this year about how we, each in our own way, can use Judaism as the structure and guidance we need to live in this time. I'm teaching in the fall and spring.

Here, there'll be many opportunities to live our mission: some are accompanying asylum seekers at court, some are preparing for dialogue with MAGA supporters, some of you are providing food for refugees, some are standing vigil in the streets. Together we will learn the deeply spiritual practice of non-violence, to keep our protests peaceful and purposeful. The next No Kings March is October 18. What if every person in this sanctuary decided to show up?

We will stand for our values.

We will stand by our people.

We will stand with the vulnerable.

We will stand for Torah.

We will find the courage to be human.

We are Jews. We are Americans.

We know that *this* is the Judaism of our time – inclusive, principled, egalitarian, justice-seeking, loving, creative, bold, joyful, inspired, visionary.

We have lifted up our heads. We have put on our stars.

Now we are ready to live it.

Shanah Tovah.

There is a gift for you under your seats. Let's be brave.