

Rosh Hashanah 5787

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If you ever meet me in my study behind this bima, you'll find a mobile in the window made by three-year-olds. Guided by their teacher, the kids learned fine motor skills by threading beads onto wires and attached plastic prisms shaped like chandelier crystals. When I first placed it in the window, sunlight would shine through each prism, sending little rainbows dancing along the wall. Sometimes this was delightful, sometimes distracting. One day, before an intense conversation, I lowered the blinds to block the rainbows. And I didn't remember to lift them again.

It's understandable that I forgot. Trump had just been elected for the first time. We weren't yet accustomed to the barrage of lies, theft, cruelty. CBE became an organizing center of resistance. And then there was the pandemic. And then October 7th, and who could think of rainbows? Then the hate-filled, supremacist settler agenda became Israeli government policy in the West Bank and Gaza, and the Palestinian people became the central cause of our time. Netanyahu and Trump went to war in Iran. The infighting among the Jewish people reached a fever pitch, and antisemitism spiked everywhere.

That antisemitism is frightening. Any student of history sees the concomitant forces as ominous: massive global disruption, economic anxiety, new technologies that spread hate and conspiracy theories, the rise of populist strongmen who traffic in hate and conspiracy theories, a right and a left for whom antisemitism is useful, enough distance from the Holocaust to make it palatable. If your epigenetic tripwires are firing, that's appropriate. Apparently messages were encoded in our genes so we would be alert to a moment like this. Some of us are children or grandchildren of survivors. It's difficult to be clear-eyed, and to know: How bad is this? How frightened should we be?

They say that history rhymes, but it doesn't repeat exactly. Though we're experiencing shocking and escalating acts of hate and violence, this is not

the same as 1930s Germany. It's not 15th-century Spain. It's not Jerusalem in 70 or Beitar in 135. It's not 1903 Kishinev. It's not 1648 Ukraine. It's not the Bubonic Plague. It is not the Farhud of 1941 Baghdad. It is different from all of those times, and each of those calamities had distinct conditions from each other, from the other 100 or so pogroms and expulsions of our history, and from other times when we were not expelled or massacred but lived among our neighbors within the reality of virulent antisemitism. Every moment is its own moment; we do not know what this moment will bring.

It is essential to listen to our alarm bells; it is equally essential to calibrate our response to those warnings. Regulating the amygdala – the part of the brain responsible for responding to threat – is now an essential 21st century Jewish skill. When there is not immediate physical danger but our fear overrides our critical thinking, we are likely to make things worse. We are likely to make ourselves less safe – by attacking each other and potential allies, and siding with forces that are using us. We do not have the luxury to thrash about. We need to be smart.

Antisemitism is never OK. Like everyone, we deserve to be safe and understood. We need to believe that there will be a day when all forms of hatred will end. In the meantime, we should expect that we are in a new reality, swimming in a sea of antisemitism, just as we are immersed in racism and sexism and all the other biases that shape humanity. That's part of what it is to live in a diverse and unredeemed world.

If we lash out whenever we see antisemitism, if we shame people, seek to destroy them, call them our enemies, as the Jewish establishment has consistently done, if we justify the federal government attacking other minorities and defunding universities – in our name – it makes things worse. It feeds into stereotypes about Jewish power and misanthropy, the idea that Jews wield outsized control and use it for our own interests against all others. 97.6% of Americans are not Jewish. If we want to be safer, we need as many of those 97.6% as possible to want us to be safer, too. Attacking them so readily that they can't see a path to be on good terms with the Jewish people is not conducive to that goal. It's also myopic. ICE just got electrified gloves to subdue people; immigrants are being

ripped from their families. Gazans are still living in hell; settlers are rampaging through the West Bank. We're not the only people facing danger.

To be clear, nothing justifies antisemitism. In the name of Palestinian freedom, some people express a hatred of Israelis and Zionists that is unquestionably eliminationist. We know about Nazis and are obviously terrified of them. Equally destabilizing is the Jew-hatred now chic on the left that posits Jews as *the* obstacle to the liberation of all humanity. This message echoes 2,000 years of Christian doctrine which claimed that if only the Jews would disappear, humanity would be redeemed. Enlightenment philosophers secularized this idea, and now we see it on both the left and the right. All populism is dangerous for Jews, and for democracy, as it looks for someone to blame, flattening a many-hued reality into black and white, good and bad, us and them.

But when people stand against what's happening to Palestinians, it doesn't necessarily mean they're antisemitic. *We're* against what's happening to Palestinians. It often means they're trying to advocate for bereaved, homeless, and crying children. Even when they don't show empathy for Israelis, it doesn't necessarily mean they're antisemitic. Think about it in reverse—when some parts of our community don't show empathy for Palestinians, it doesn't necessarily make them anti-Palestinian racists. It means they're caught up in the pain of one side and can't see the other.

The American Jewish community is divided in this very way. The left is ashamed, and the right is afraid, and they're taking it out on each other and on anyone who expresses care for both Israelis and Palestinians. Many of you know that I have spoken repeatedly and extensively about the horrific sins of the Israeli government and of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Iranian government. From the right, the charge is that Jews like me are traitors to our people because of the way we advocate for both Palestinians and Israelis to be free. From the left, the charge is that we're traitors to our values because of the way we advocate for both Israelis and Palestinians to be safe.

Both the left and the right can be brutal, but they don't have equal resources or power. When establishment Jewish institutions insult and shame other Jews – calling them kapos and the like – they uniquely have the power to claim they're speaking on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole. The damage of such reckless speech is immeasurable. Imagine being a 20-something Jew who feels ashamed of Israel's behavior. Imagine being called a traitor or self-hating because you're expressing what you understand to be Jewish values. Imagine whether you'd ever again feel that you had a place among your people.

This is an important reason why regulating our amygdalae matters so much. One day, the Jewish people are going to look back at this time and see that out of fear some of the most visible and resourced of our leaders rejected the children of their people, defended the indefensible in Israel, made enemies out of former allies, trafficked in anti-Muslim bigotry, and supported authoritarianism, truly believing that they were making us safer.

To make matters worse, our society is moving past polarization to atomization, splintering into ever-narrower bands intolerant of the smallest distinctions. A Times op/Ed recently called it “us vs them and them and them.” In her new book, *The Art of Fighting*, Priya Parker argues that because many people see conflict as bad and lack the skills to fight well, we're giving up on each other: walking away from communities, ending friendships, losing what she calls “relational longing,” the desire to be in society with one another at all.

In Torah, the rainbow is a symbol of covenant not just with the Jewish people, but all people and all life. In Genesis 9, G-d tells Noah, “I have set my bow in the clouds ... when I see the bow..., I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature...” The Prophet Ezekiel says that the rainbow is more than a symbol; it is the very likeness of G-d. Quoting him, the Talmud (Chagigah 16a) warns that when we glimpse a rainbow we are seeing none other than G-d's essence. In other words, the symbol of G-d's covenant with the diversity of life is G-d's very face.

Here we are, a minority in a diverse city, country, world. Many of us love the kaleidoscope of culture, language, cuisine, tradition. Part of the deal is that people have different worldviews. Other communities are not thinking about us all the time. Not everyone knows the ins and outs of Jewish history. Or that we're not all Hasidim or that AIPAC doesn't speak for all of us. Not everyone can recognize an antisemitic trope or understands our varied relationships with the State of Israel. When people see Israeli settlers do something ugly, or Palestinians in agony, they might form inaccurate or biased opinions about all of us.

The best way to change that, the surest path to safety, is building relationships. Jews, it's time to go back to first principles of Jewish communal relations. To revert to what we used to do very well: work hard to make more friends than enemies.

Three years ago many of us felt shocked, abandoned, betrayed by how the people around us responded to October 7th. Many Jews felt that our neighbors couldn't see our pain. Many people, maybe you, lost friendships.

It's time now for all elected officials and all leaders throughout our country to make crystal clear that taking out one's anger at the Israeli government on American Jews is unacceptable and morally wrong, just like it is unacceptable and wrong to take out one's anger about September 11th on Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs.

*And* it's time for *us* to repair the relationships that can and should be repaired and to forge new ones. Not by sweeping our pain under the rug, but by being fully ourselves and finding our way back to each other. In order to do so, we have to care as much about others and what they're going through as we hope they'll care about us. We must not shy away from listening and truth-telling.

At CBE we've got experience with this. There's even a movie about it! We built a partnership with Antioch Baptist Church over many years. We broke bread, told each other about our lives, worshipped together. We disagree about a long list of things. We fought about antisemitism, racism, Christianity, Judaism. It has been sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes

painful, often frustrating, and worth it. We grew to love each other. We know without a doubt that if either of our communities is in need, we're showing up. In a diverse society, that's how it's done.

Not every relationship is worth pursuing. There are those who are truly not our friends. There are people who are self-righteous, rigid, certain, closed. But more people out there care about us than we think. I'm a board member of Brooklyn Org, a community foundation serving all of Brooklyn, especially Black and Brown communities. Recently, at my suggestion, Brooklyn Org convened sixty leaders across the rainbow of grassroots Brooklyn for a conversation about the proposition that, even though we don't agree on Israel/Palestine and other things, we do agree that every one of our communities – Jewish, Muslim, Black, Asian, Latino, etc. – deserves to be safe. All sixty leaders pledged to stand up for each other's safety.

We are launching an Antisemitism Initiative here based on this approach. It's rooted in two mitzvot — *tokhekha* and *teshuva*—values at the very center of these Holy Days. *Tokhekha* means rebuke—telling people when they're doing something wrong. *Tokhekha* is actually commanded in Torah. Bereishit Rabba (54:3) teaches, “Love unaccompanied by *tokhekha* is not love. Peace unaccompanied by *tokhekha* is not peace.” But unlike the word “rebuke” in English, *tokhekha* is humble, gentle, careful, privately delivered, judiciously applied. About *tokhekha*, Maimonides teaches: “Speak calmly, employing soft language.” The Talmud teaches that we are not to deliver *tokhekha* from anger or hatred, and never, ever to shame. Mesilat Yesharim teaches that if it's not a time or place when a person can receive our message, we must remain silent. The only reason to offer *tokhekha* is if you believe that the person is capable of learning and change. Judaism holds that everyone is capable of learning and change, everyone including us. *Tokhekha* is to be approached with the humble awareness that we also make mistakes, that we also have learning to do. Everyone does. This is the idea of *teshuva*, the central work of these days.

We can take this same approach with other Jews. The Jewish people have never agreed with each other; we're not going to magically start doing that

now. Look at our family dynamics in the Book of Genesis, or our behavior in the wilderness. Look at the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, who broke apart less than 70 years after David established a united Israel. We're not going to suddenly mind-meld, and we don't have to. But we can stop calling each other names. We can stop kicking each other out of the tent. Let's argue better. Our tradition is brilliant at this. It's supposed to be our superpower.

One of our biggest contributions to humanity, I think, is the tenet that multiple conflicting truths can co-exist. Rabbi Yohanan taught in Shemot Rabba that at Mount Sinai, G-d's voice split into 70 different voices and 70 different languages. At the moment we received the Torah, G-d's truth sounded like different things to different people. "Eilu v'eilu," the Talmud famously teaches, the words of Hillel and the words of Shammai, who were in intractable dispute with one another, are both "the words of the living God." (Talmud Eruvin 13b).

Midrash is about finding ever-more creative, conflicting readings of the Torah that could be simultaneously true. One of the most common devices in Rabbinic hermeneutics is *al tikra*: "Don't read it that way, read it this way." The Talmud is a celebration of *makhlokhet*, the art of arguing, something the Rabbis believed in as a way of life. Arguing expands one's vision and sharpens one's understanding if done "*l'shem shamayim*/for the sake of heaven," not for personal gain, or G-d forbid to destroy. Arguing well was considered essential work. According to the Rabbis, the Second Temple fell because we sank into *sinat chinam*, hatred of one another. *Tokhekha*, the Torah teaches, is how we prevent this hatred, but failing to cultivate the humility to do it well leads to hatred. Does that not describe our time? *Makhlokhet*, the art of fighting well, is the glue of society.

Here at CBE we've been striving for this. We've decided to be a congregation that can make room for each other and listen even when it's uncomfortable. For more than a decade, we've been practicing how to disagree while staying in relationship. We hold listening circles and dialogues when emotions run high. Next month, (as you just heard) we're taking a trip to Israel/Palestine with a group that's half under 40 and half

over 40, where we will be equally with Israelis and Palestinians, equally in Israel and the West Bank, and then we'll use that experience to launch a whole new set of home-based dialogues here.

We want to be a place that models inclusion, not exclusion. We want to be a place where families who have members with very different views, and have strife and heartache, can learn to have conversations where they begin to heal even while they disagree. This is how we protect our sacred community and the Jewish community writ large.

Today, right now, people here do not agree with me or each other. In fact, if you feel the urge to applaud this sermon, please don't. If you're moved, you can shout out *yasher koach*! But don't applaud, because the person next to you might feel differently. Honoring our diversity means avoiding the semblance of unanimity when we don't have it. At CBE there are many ways to see the world, and we keep sticking together across our differences.

What's at stake is nothing less than Judaism and the Jewish people. We do not need more Jewish spaces that are gated communities secured by loyalty tests or vicious battlegrounds over false binaries. Who wants to be around that? It's tired and reductive. These are difficult days. We cannot let our varied responses to antisemitism and Israel/Palestine divide or destroy us. They are vital, but not the sum total of who we are. We are about something so much bigger.

In Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim asks how could the rainbow not have existed before Noah, given that it comes from sunlight and water? He answered that before Noah, nobody needed the rainbow so they didn't look for it. G-d showed Noah that rainbow after the flood to promise that even when the world seems utterly destroyed, there will be a future. Only in generations like Noah's, generations rife with corruption, violence, wrongdoing – generations like ours – do we doubt whether there will be a

future worth living for. Only in times like Noah's and ours do we need the rainbow and its promise.

Judaism has never been primarily about the past. It has always been about the future. It has always been about living lives today that will redeem the world.

That is the Judaism we need now. A Judaism that begins by asking what is a future worth living toward? What kind of lives would bring that future? What wisdom from our ancestors could help us craft those lives?

Because the rainbow isn't our only covenant. The covenant of Sinai says: every one of you has a role. You are not spectators in this great drama of life on earth. At Sinai, G-d reaches out to say, "I need you." *Chukim u'mishpatim, mitzvot* – the laws, ordinances, commandments – what are they but the idea that your actions, ordinary human actions that fill every day of every life, these collectively make a world, these collectively bring a future. You are to live in such a way as to make a microcosm of the world that should be.

The Judaism we need now calls us to imagine our version of Amos's justice rolling down like waters; our version of Isaiah's vine and fig tree, swords into plowshares – and to believe, to decide, that that future is possible.

Be part of imagining that future through CBE's New Futures Project. Be part of living toward that future through CBE's Meet the Moment campaigns, or our Climate Team, or our Antisemitism Initiative, or Chesed, or our Israel/Palestine Dialogues or Action Team, or the literally one hundred other ways you can get involved. Be part of the Judaism we need now.

That's why we sing together on Friday nights, not to recite liturgy by rote, but to sing into being the future of justice and peace described in our prayers. That's why we bring care packages to someone who is sad, alone, injured: to bring a future where no sad or injured person is alone. That's

why we have classes day and night for ages 2 to 102: to bring a future in which everyone is always learning. That's why we stand vigil outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center: to bring a future where every stranger is loved. That's why we rest and play on Shabbat: to bring a future where all people have ample rest for their bodies, their minds, their spirits, and the earth can rest too.

The Judaism we need now is not uniform, lockstep. The Judaism we need now refracts the single light of Oneness into a synesthetic spectrum of voices and faces, imaginations and ways of living. That Judaism guides us to live in such a way that we bring the future that must be – in which all humanity can thrive, in which we make peace with all life.

No one gets to define us, but us. Not the Jew-haters on the right or the left, not Netanyahu and his settler cronies. No one can make us ugly. Because we are beautiful. So beautiful. Singing in the glow of candles. Dancing in circles of celebration, lifting a chair. Marching for democracy, for justice. Filling homes for shiva, building furniture for refugees. Children and elders around seder tables telling the story of freedom. Thirteen-year-olds with Torah, showing us what they see, from their conscience, about how we should live. Us right here, right now, honestly facing our failures, striving to do better. All of us listening and arguing across our differences in order to grow. Flourishing communities – inclusive, principled, pluralistic, multiracial, LGBT-embracing, feminist, justice-seeking, loving, joyful, bold, inspired. We are of the rainbow – G-d's very face.

We have a future to bring, with our lives, our days, our choices. There is a rainbow out there beckoning us to be that future.

Shanah Tovah.