

Erev Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5786
September 4, 2026

This week, a person I know had to appear before a judge at 26 Federal Plaza to defend his case for asylum in this country. This is a truly good person, kind, warm. He works hard, doing work that benefits the community and society. He is genuinely in need of asylum – his life is truly in danger in his home country. His story is harrowing. He has followed all of the rules.

A friend of mine accompanied this person to his hearing and described to me the fear, the tension, the desperation. The judge who heard the case is new – she has heard only 26 cases so far, 100% of which she has denied. This asylum seeker was informed just a couple of days ago that his case was also denied. He will appeal, but the prospects of him staying in this country are slim, even though his is a life and death situation.

We are one week from Rosh Hashanah tonight. We are well into the month of Elul, in which we examine our lives and our actions from the past year, and in which we judge them with a combination of compassion and strict honesty. We look at all of our relationships – family, friends, coworkers, colleagues, neighbors. Where did we do harm? Where did we fall short? What can we repair, what can we apologize for? This attention to the connective tissue of our lives is essential for our well-being and the well-being of our society.

And sometimes I worry that our attention to interpersonal dynamics hides from view a set of shortcomings that are equally consequential, which play out within our relationship to society as a whole.

In this regard, I think about the first time Donald Trump was elected and what it felt like here at CBE. We had to dedicate the entire next day to holding space in our sanctuary. We had tissue boxes in every pew. People were weeping, sobbing. People were speaking with trembling voices about their fear of what was going to happen to our neighbors and whether we would put our bodies on the line. CBE became a center for resistance for all of Brooklyn. Every few weeks, our sanctuary would fill to standing, sometimes with a line around the block, as people gathered to try to formulate an effective response. Forty working groups were created engaging thousands of people to take a moral stand.

Now, the things we cried about in 2016 are happening every day. And most of us are just going about our lives. There are lots of good explanations for this that we can see when we look with compassion – it's overwhelming, the things we tried back in the first term didn't work, we don't know what to do, we don't know how to stop it, and for the Jewish people there have been a lot of other things going on. But if we were to look back 20, 50, or 100 years from now, we'd see a population largely quiet, largely acquiescent, while our neighbors are routinely rounded up and sent to dangerous and life-threatening conditions.

It matters if we spoke harshly to our friend and hurt their feelings this year. We should use these days to apologize. It matters at least as much if we've been relatively inactive and silent while terrible cruelty is being enacted upon our neighbors.

I'm not saying that everyone who crosses the border should be allowed to stay. That's a larger conversation we could have. The person I'm speaking about followed the law and has real grounds for asylum. But such cases are not being considered, because it became clear to Donald Trump's people back in 2015 that xenophobia is an effective way to win elections. This person I'm speaking about, and so many others, are being scapegoated for political ends.

I'm also not suggesting that you or I have a moral obligation to stop everything in our lives in order to protest this full time. That's not possible. But I am asking myself, and you, whether we have done enough. Whether, as we approach these Days of Awe, we have a clear conscience about how we've used our voices, our resources, our time. I do not.

In our parasha this week, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, the Israelites stand with Moses at the edge of the Promised Land. Moses tells them that the covenant with G-d is for everyone – all parts of the community are included, even all of the generations yet to be born. And as he sets forth the basis of the covenant, he adds one of my favorite lines in all of Torah:

הַעֲלֹתִי בְכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשְּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת
נִתַּנְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְלָלָה וּבְחֵרָתְךָ בֵּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּבְחַר
אֹתָהּ וְזָרַעְךָ:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live."

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, a Hasidic master who lived at the end of the 19th century, asks, What does it mean for heaven and earth to be called as witnesses, given that they have no freedom of choice? Rashi says of the verse, “Just as heaven and earth have not betrayed their nature,you... how much more so!” The point is, according to the Sefat Emet, that everything in nature follows G-d’s will. Everything behaves according to its imprinted way. Even though humans have a choice, this is also possible for us. Doing good is in our essence, lovingkindness is our natural way. All we have to do is clear influences toward wrongdoing out of the way. All we have to do is wake up to our true nature. He says, “The inner self G-d has implanted within us is aroused to do good.”

According to the Sefat Emet, there’s not a blank slate in us upon which good and evil battle it out, as some Jewish thinkers have posited. No, he insists, our nature is goodness. He says, “This is the real answer to the question raised by Maimonides as to how there can be a commandment to love, and for other matters that depend upon the heart. The love of G-d is impressed upon the heart of every Jew [he was only speaking to Jews, but let’s say “of every person”].” The evil of our world can hide, or cloud, what he calls “our true inner point.” But when we clear that away, he says, “we will be wholly drawn after G-d, in heart and soul.” Or we could say, we will be pulled to do good.

That’s why what’s happening right now hurts so much. We don’t want anyone to be terrorized or traumatized or tortured for political gain. We don’t want to be complicit in any way. That’s painful. There’s some strange way that a society can become lulled into compliance, or resignation, with what we know to be wrong. That’s why the shofar sounds all this month and on Rosh Hashanah – to wake us up. In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides tells us that the shofar announces. “Awaken, you sleepers, from your sleep, you slumberers from your slumber – search your actions, repent, and remember your Creator!”

You and I cannot stop the cruelty of our time. But we can find some small thing to do, on the regular, to make clear where we stand, and to show our loving nature to the people who are being hurt. What a gift this season is to move us to conscience and to action. May we use these Holy Days to their fullest potential.

Shabbat Shalom. Shanah Tovah.