Rabbi Berman/Rosh Hashanah Day One 2025/5786

L'shanah tovah. I'm grateful to be here with you on this Rosh Hashanah.

Several years ago, a dear friend of mine here in the Boston area had a terrible loss. A few months later, she told me there are mornings when she wakes up and in that fraction of a second between the semi-consciousness of sleep and the full awareness of self, she doesn't remember the loss. She described it as a feeling of *lightness*.

It doesn't happen every morning. It depends on the rhythm of waking up. Sometimes the shift into self-awareness is too quick. So every night, she says a prayer that the process of waking up happens slowly, so the feeling of lightness stays with her as long as possible.

Over time, the weight of her tragedy has become lighter. She is happy. She is positive and hopeful, even as the loss remains in the background of her life.

I've been thinking a lot about my friend this past year, and what she taught me about the *weight of loss* and the *lightness of being.*

That image of waking up with the weight of grief continues to feel so resonant, as it has for Jews every morning since October 7.

We feel it again this Rosh Hashanah, knowing the torture the Israeli hostages are enduring, and the anguish their families are suffering.
Knowing that when Israeli parents say bye to their children who are serving in the war after a Shabbat visit at home, they can barely let go.
This Rosh Hashanah they are like all of us, cooking, laying out meals, getting together with family, but they are terrified that their next gathering will be to prepare food for shiva as they sit low to the ground and begin saying *yitgadal v'yitkadash shmeh rabb*a.

Our relationship with Israel is very personal. Of course, many of us are from there, and have family, including children, and our dearest friends who live there.

Or we've had experiences and memories there that shaped our identities and influenced important choices we have made in our lives.

But our connection to Israel is not based on personal formative experiences alone. It is the *Jewish character* of Medinat Yisrael that is the heart of it. When Israel was established, it was explicitly linked to the Jewish historical experience and communal identity shaped over thousands of years, and the aspirations of Judaism as a religious and spiritual tradition. We care about Israel because, historically, it has stood for values embedded within the tradition that we hold dearly.

We are attached to Israel because we are part of it - part of an *am* - the Jewish people - and a *klal*, a historic collective consciousness. It's not just an idea. It's tangible. As a Jewish people, we are committed to Israel's success and the well-being and safety of everyone who lives there. Unconditionally.

Which also means we feel its pains. It was not that *people in Israel* were attacked on October 7- it was that we were attacked, as if it was happening to our own *family*, even if we didn't know them personally.

Two years now since that day. There has been just so much grief, touching all of us in different ways. But for so many Jews, in Israel and globally, this past year has brought on a new kind of very personal loss: it comes from the fear that this Israel is no longer the Israel we knew and loved.

Let me tell you what I know politically. It's quite short. Politically, the challenges Israel has to relentlessly confront, facing existential threats from all sides, are real and for most of us, beyond our abilities to even truly understand. And I know that rational people can debate the merits of different approaches to this conflict and war.

But my role is different. It is to *witness* and *reflect* through a Jewish lens. What I see is so many Jews feeling sad, angry, alienated and ashamed because of an ideology that is in sharp conflict with the ethical voice Judaism has embodied since the time of the ancient prophets - and with the core Jewish religious and moral values that are at the center of the tradition. Values that Israel and its leaders - David Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Yitzchak Rabin and so many others - stood for, even as they had *very different* political perspectives, ideas and goals.

It is an ideology that is placing Israelis at risk, leaving Israeli hostages behind and their families in agony, and inflicting unprecedented suffering on innocent Palestinians.

And these ideological claims are being made - intentionally and explicitly - in the name of Judaism - that is, on Jewish historical, moral and religious grounds.

As if somehow this can all be understood as *mitzvah*, as an embodiment of our religious tradition, or the fulfillment of some greater Jewish truth, or the inherited and intended trajectory of the collective history of the Jewish people.

From a Jewish perspective, at least any version of Judaism I know, their claims are *unrecognizable*.

Our central *mitzvah* is to treat every innocent human being justly; and whenever possible, we are *required* to exercise *mercy* and *compassion*.

On Yom Kippur, our ancient rabbis gave us the words of Isaiah as our central text. Isaiah, who rebukes the people for their morally- and spiritually-empty fast while they are oppressing and striking others. "What God wants from you," he tells them, "is to offer your compassion to the hungry. To satisfy the famished.

Then shall your light shine in darkness. Then, when you call, God will answer. Then when you cry, God will say, *hineni*, here I am."

For *so many* reasons - historical, religious, psychological, philosophical, moral - Judaism insists there is no greater *mitzvah* than returning those who are held captive. The failure to bring hostages home to their families subverts the Jewish character of the state and demoralizes the spirit of people who are willing to take ultimate risks *because* their sense of *am*, the people, and of *klal*, the collective, is stronger than their sense of self.

That spirit isn't rooted in a sense of patriotism alone. It also comes from a Jewish spiritual heritage. "Wherever you go, I will go," the biblical Ruth says to her mother-in-law Naomi. "Wherever you stay I will stay. *Imech Ami.* Your people are my people. *V'Elohayich Elohai.* And your God my God."

So when the Jewish community witnesses the harm being caused by this kind of ideology, it's not surprising it evokes feelings of sadness, anger and dislocation.

I don't think we feel hopeless. Our hope is way too fierce, ancient, embedded, hardened - and our faith way too strong. But more than any time in my life, I'm worried about the Jewish character of the state. I'm worried about people turning away from Israel as a Jewish and spiritual home. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people who tell me they are right on the edge. What a loss. I am worried about the weight we are carrying, how heavy it is, and its impact on all of us.

This is where my friend's reflection feels so wise. The lightness she felt *began* as the fraction of a second between sleeping and awareness. But, she told me, that was just a starting point. Even against the backdrop of grief, in time, the fractions of lightness became full seconds, which turned into minutes and into hours and into days.

עשה לבך חדרי חדרים

Aseh libcha chadrei chadarim, the ancient rabbis instruct.

Make for yourself a heart of many rooms.

It's going to have to contain it all.

What feels hopeful to me is that even with the depth of loss we are holding in one heart-room these past two years, we also have paid close attention to the rooms that hold lightness and joy.

In Jewish thought, joy - *simcha* in Hebrew - is different from an experience of personal contentment, or happiness. We can each feel happy as individuals or families. That's not quite *simcha*. *Simcha* is about the actualization of our shared values. In a world of *simcha*, the community's sense of purpose and meaning is our north star. We cannot be in a state of *simcha* without each other.

Here at Reyim, we've had so many spiritually alive, uplifting celebrations. We have had births, *b'nei mitzvah*, engagements, and weddings that we celebrate as a community- real *simcha* - which reminds and reassures us there is so much goodness and so much love.

Against a backdrop of war, our lightness and our joy can feel like we're leaving others' suffering behind. But against a backdrop of war, simcha is also an act of spiritual resilience.

So, as a people, we live with these wild fluctuations of the heart between the *weight of loss* and the *lightness of being*. They don't cancel each other out. They're just together.

It is hard to keep up these days; heartbreak and happiness keep trading places. To be Jewish means to be full, layered, and confused. As if we're ancient Israelites crossing the Sea of Reeds from slavery in Egypt - hearts distraught and free at the same time; feeling some rest, but acutely, dangerously, on edge.

This same tension between the weight of loss and the lightness of being is embedded throughout the rabbinic tradition.

Its most animated version comes to life with a story in the Talmud about the distinguished rabbi known as Mar, who lived in the late 4th century in Babylonia, where much of the Jewish community lived at the time. He was one of the great rabbis of his generation. He was a wealthy man, and threw a lavish wedding party for his son. Legends say there was no expense spared, food, dancing, music.

Now, he saw that the guests were exceedingly joyful, eating, dancing, singing so he stepped away from the celebration to get a goblet made of extremely valuable white glass and smashed it on the ground, shattering it into thousands of shards. Everyone stopped and looked at him.

End of story.

Except for one more word: *Ee-ah-tzi-vu.* Their hearts became heavy. Sad.

Later commentators suggest he chanted psalm 137 at that moment.

עַל־נַהֲרוֹת בָּבֶל, שָׁם יָשַׁבְנוּ, גַּם־בָּכִינוּ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן׃

By the rivers of Babylon,

there we sat,

and we wept,

as we remembered Zion.

By the way, yes, this is the source for the custom at Jewish weddings for breaking the glass.

Why did Mar shatter a goblet made of expensive, valuable glass at the marriage celebration of his child? The rabbis of the Talmud state it clearly:

בִּמְקוֹם גִּילָה שָׁם תְּהֵא רְעָדָה

Where there is joy, there should also be trembling.

I look back at this year and that teaching is almost all I can think about.

Joy and trembling.

Aseh libcha chadrei chaderim.

Make for ourselves a heart of many rooms, one that trembles, one that feels joy, one that is in pain, one that is in love.

But in a world on fire, they don't all feel equal. It feels like trembling has so much more staying power and a much stronger hold over us.

One of Israel's greatest, most celebrated modern Hebrew poets, Yehuda Amichai, exposes the tension in his poem, *The Precision of Pain.* It goes like this:

The precision of pain and the blurriness of joy. I'm thinking

how precise people are when they describe their pain in a doctor's office.

Even those who haven't learned to read and write are precise:

"This one's a throbbing pain, that one's a wrenching pain,

this one gnaws, that one burns, this is a sharp pain

and that––a dull one. Right here. Precisely here,

yes, yes." Joy blurs everything, I've heard people say

after night of love and feasting, "It was great,

I was in seventh heaven." Even the spaceman who floated

in outer space, tethered to a spaceship, could say only, "Great,

wonderful, I have no words."

The blurriness of joy and the precision of pain.

I want to describe, with a sharp pain's precision,

Happiness and blurry joy.

I learned to speak among the pains.

I love Amichai.

We know how to speak a language of pain. That's how we Jews have *learned* to speak.

I have always believed it has a purpose: that the precision in the language of pain not only allows us to get the right kind of help, it also creates empathy. If someone says,

"this hurts me, precisely, right here," we're moved to support and even protect them. We see the pained person as humbled, human.

A mentor used to say to me: when someone is speaking harshly, listen to them as if they are speaking to you from a hospital bed. You'll hear them differently. You'll realize that the gown they're wearing is just a thin veil, you'll see the IVs connected to bags of fluid, you'll hear the pace of their heartbeat on the monitor. With that person, you will be able to empathize.

I really believe this is a core Jewish value and impulse, *especially* because we have been raised among the pains. We see it all the time. Shoah survivors and their children, for example, disproportionately tend towards professions in fields of medicine, social work, clinical psychology, and educational and scientific research, fields that are marked by concern for the wellbeing of others. In interviews, they talk about an innate desire to prevent others from suffering the way they did. They see others' pain, and they lean *towards* it.

Not always, of course. There are times we are not ready or capable of reaching out this way; when our own pain limits our ability to see and respond to the pains of others. That's not unexpected or uncommon. It's part of a recovery process.

But it is scary and tragic to witness those with power in Israel driven by an ideology that lacks compassion. That is a thought that makes me tremble to my core. I can't stop thinking about it.

Here we are on Rosh Hashanah, when we are called on to reflect on this complicated and emotional time in our lives. And the shofar is the center of the whole experience. Together with the delights of getting together with family and eating favorite foods, Rosh Hashanah offers us the shofar as an instrument for spiritual and moral awakening.

There are three notes. *Tekyiah, teruah, shevarim. They're all part of the shofar composition, but they're very different.*

Teruah and *shevarim* - those are broken, fragmented notes. Our ancient sages teach that they are the sounds of wailing. They are the sounds of prayer by parents

anywhere and everywhere mourning their children or crying for their return. They are sharp, staccato, precise. They are Amichai's sounds of pain. This one's wrenching, this one's sharp.

But *tekiyah,* that first solid, long note, that is a note of *wholeness.* It is unbroken. It is Amichai's sound of joy. When we hear the *tekiyah gedolah,* we literally gasp and clap. It is the spaceman's response - it is "great, wonderful, words can't describe it." It is the sound of hope and faith that *yihiyeh tov,* that if we stretch our lens wide enough, we believe it will be ok.

It makes me realize, in a world on fire, when we feel broken or lost, we need to keep working on a *far more precise language of joy*.

We're still in the midst of trembling, so its development becomes both our work and our prayer - that we discover how to say with *great precision* and *long-lasting impact*: look at this - this is joy, this is lightness, this is hope, this peace.
Shanah tovah and may this coming year be *lighter* and *full of light.*