

Confetti in Your Pocket

Yom Kippur 5785, *Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles*

How do you write a high holy day sermon? You gather all the notes you've taken throughout the year, from webinars and conferences, from articles, blogposts, podcasts, essays... notes from listening to experts, leading thinkers, rabbis, correspondents, political commentators... and you sit, with all these scraps of paper around you, trying to make sense of it all.

When Temple Isaiah traveled to Israel this March, the first person we officially met with was Israeli poet Eliaz Cohen. He told us that years ago, when he was in the IDF, he would sometimes write bits of poetry on scraps of paper and put them in the pockets of his uniform. One day, he came home from *miluim*, and his wife went through his pockets before throwing his uniform in the wash. She found that he'd written a new version of the *v'ahavta* prayer. Instead of *You shall love the Lord your God*, it started with the words:

And You shall love Israel Your people

With all Your heart

And with all Your soul

And with all Your might

And these sons who are being killed for You daily shall be upon your heart...

And You shall bind them as a sign upon

Your hand (phosphorescent blue numbers) and they shall be as frontlets

Between Your eyes (like the sniper's shot)

And You shall write them (in blood) on the doorposts of Your house

And on Your gates

And his wife was shocked when she looked at this scribbling. The words were irreverent, audacious, they shook a fist at God. The scraps of poetry scared her. She almost threw them away. They became his most famous poem.

His story made me think about the scraps of poetry in the pockets of the uniforms of soldiers, or the pockets of dungarees of farm workers, or in the apron pocket of a grandparent picking mint in the garden, of biker shorts of the student out for a ride, the fanny pack of someone on an early morning walk, the pockets of the fringed tunic of a young person dancing to euphoric, atmospheric tempos and hypnotic harmonics, under a canopy of conifer trees readying to welcome sunrise.

And all the scraps of poetry tucked away in the pockets of our personalities, words we've been rehearsing, ideas we've been forming, half-baked plans, concepts we've been questioning, hopes, dreams, promises, song lyrics, recipes we want to try, to-do lists, bucket lists, notes-to-self.

And how many pocketfuls of poems, stories, novel ways of thinking, epoch adventures, libraries of wisdom and folly, lives have been lost.

Yitzchak Rabin had had a poem folded up in his pocket, a poem he had read just minutes before he was assassinated in 1995. *Just sing a song of peace* – were the words of the poem – *Nobody will bring us back from a dead and darkened pit, neither the victory cheer, nor songs of praise. So just sing a song for peace.* Perhaps you've seen pictures of that poem, splattered with his blood.

How do you write a high holy days sermon *this* year?

Remember that project many of us did as children, when the teacher gave us scraps of newspaper to dip in watery glue? We pasted the strips over a balloon, layer after layer, and then once it dried, you got to pop the balloon, and you're left with a papier-mâché globe to paint. A fragile world made of all the news that's fit to shred.

There were so many times this year, as clergy, we were asked to speak. In December I was invited to be on a panel at Loyola High School, with a Palestinian speaker, a history teacher, and a journalist, to model respectful dialogue for a few hundred students, and at the end of the thoughtful discussion, the moderator asked, is there any last thing you'd like us to remember?

And I had seconds to think of what is the one thing I'd want them to remember? One scrap they could take in their pocket. We had each already shared so many words. I had spoken about the importance of bearing witness to each other's stories, and how when we bear witness, we become part of each other's stories. I had talked about how much Judaism and Islam had in common, as law-based religions, and Fadi spoke of us being Abrahamic cousins, even our languages are close cousins, *hag* and *haj*, *shalom aleichem* and *salaam aleikoom*. I had spoken about Zionism as a big-tent movement, that included those who believe in a two-state solution, and those who oppose the Israeli government.

When Fadi spoke of the exhaustion of having to prove your base humanity, I empathized. We had recently had the brother of one of the hostages speak at our temple, and the first thing the brother said was, "I stand before you as a human being," and how astonishing that we have to remind people of that.

We'd already spoken so many words to these high school boys about trauma, about hope, about walls, about bridges. And there were so many things we didn't have time for. I had a dozen pages of notes I hadn't gotten to. With four people on a panel for one hour, you don't get so much time.

What's one last thing you want us to remember?

I said, "I guess, when you hear people say that the Jewish people are white oppressors, know that millions of Jewish people have been murdered on the accusation that Jewish people contaminate the white race."

And I threw out all these words like scraps of information on an evidence board, clues and crumbs connecting to a crime, as they gathered their snacks and backpacks to go on with their lives.

There were some of you who arranged for clergy to speak with university presidents when your children were experiencing Jew-hatred at their schools. Being on Zooms with presidents, provosts, deans of faculty, having precious moments of their full attention, I spoke about the difference between misinformation and disinformation. I spoke about the three D's of differentiating antisemitism from protesting Israel: Demonization, Delegitimization and Double Standards. I spoke about how antisemitism morphs. To the capitalist, the Jew is a communist. To the communist, the Jew is a capitalist. And how in horseshoe anttsemitism, the antisemitism of the left and the antisemitism of the right almost touch. I reminded them that October 7 was a human catastrophe, that it was the fourth deadliest terrorist attack worldwide in modern human history, that it was about all of us.

I sorted through my scraps and notes, organizing them in ways that might be helpful, impactful, inspiring, arranging them into a vision board that they might be able to see a path forward.

In February, I was invited to speak to Whish Academy about antisemitism. I would have about ten minutes with the fourth graders, then ten minutes with the fifth graders, then the sixth. I tried to think how to help them to hear me. I remember being in assemblies as a middle schooler myself. No one listens.

I gathered all my notes from webinars, conferences, articles, blogposts, podcasts, essays, experts, educators, piecing together the scraps of paper like a detective piecing together recovered shreadings that could prove innocence.

I started by saying, "Did you know that in Alaska, wildfires can move underground, and continue to burn, hidden, feeding on roots, buried logs and forest debris, for weeks,

months, even years. So sometimes, what looks like a new wildfire is actually a subterranean fire popping up. And that is exactly like antisemitism.”

I said, “You might be surprised to know is that antisemitism is considered by many to be the oldest hatred in the world. The word ‘race’ was hardly used before the 1500s. Antisemitism is much, much older, tracing to more than a thousand years earlier, to the 5th century, to the early church. Antisemitism is a fire that has been burning for thousands of years, from the time the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, through the crusades, the pogroms, the Inquisition, the holocaust.

“Hate groups tap into antisemitism to fuel their beliefs. Jewish people are the original scapegoats, being blamed for a lot of society’s problems. Some say that antisemitism is actually the blueprint for all other hatreds, and if we could somehow get to the root of this hatred, and put out this fire burning beneath everything, we could put out all the fires.

“Antisemitism is not just hurtful to Jewish people. It is hurtful to everyone. just like a wildfire. it pollutes the air for everyone. it damages our hearts.

“And you know what we can do to stop that fire? Stop giving it fuel. You know how little things can start a big fire? A match, a spark from a campfire, a little bit of oxygen, and that underground hatred can just explode. and historically, it has. Words are like those loose sparks that can, eventually, under the right conditions, set the world on fire.”

And then I said, “I want to talk about a different kind of fire. a different kind of light. Candlelight.” And I spoke about Shabbat, and showed them the candles. And I said that Judaism is an ethno-religion meaning that Jewish people share history, ancestry, geographic and language origin. but Jewish people practice and express their Judaism in lots of different ways. some light shabbat candles, some have never even heard of shabbat candles. They are infinitely varied in terms of physical features, traditions, beliefs, interpretations of Jewish texts, types of observances, nationalities, political affiliations, socioeconomic status and other characteristics. and that includes their relationship with Israel.

“So, we can all be firefighters, fighting the fires of hate by being allies, by protecting that beautiful holy spark that is in every one of you.”

I desperately tried to layer all these notes and scraps on the balloon, so that when it all pops, there’s something left, our fragile, papier-mâché world.

And one student raised his hand, and asked, “Why are we talking about fires?”

Rachel Goldberg Polin, whose son Hersh was one of the six hostages murdered last month, said, “In an article I read by Nicholas Kristof, it was so eloquently stated that if you only get

outraged when one side's babies are killed, then your moral compass is broken. And your humanity is broken. We human beings have been blessed with the gift of intellect, creativity, insight, and perception. Why are we not using it to solve global conflicts all over our world? Because doing this is hard and it takes fortitude, imagination, grit, risk, and hope. So instead, we opt for hatred because it is so comfortable, familiar, and it is so very, very easy."

It's so easy. The way after years of drought, all that green vegetation becomes tinder and kindling. The world is filled with so much kindling. So many scraps. The torn hostage posters, flakes of ash settling over kibbutzim, leaflets fluttering from airplanes over Gaza, over South Lebanon, torn black shiva ribbons, yellow hostage ribbons, words scrawled on torn cardboard and held up at protests: From the 'River to the Sea', 'Go Back to Poland' – to the place where they told us to go back to Palestine, 'Al-Qassam's next targets' – a sign held in front of Jewish students here at UCLA.

How to write a sermon this year? I remember the UN security council session in May, focusing on the hostages, and how during the session, South Korea's Ambassador Sanjin Kim had two minutes to speak... *if you could say one last thing...* and he started by saying, "Last month the world was saddened by the video release by Hamas of the young Israeli American hostage Hersh Goldberg Polin, with his left arm amputated, as his mother said..." and then he became so emotional that he couldn't go on. He could only manage to faintly say, "I'm sorry, I can't," before returning his time. And I thought about that. Maybe that's the sermon this year. Just tears, and the words, "I'm sorry. I can't."

I just want to be like a mouse or a house sparrow and take all the scraps and fray, and broken twigs and twine, and make a fluffy nest, and burrow deep inside, a place of comfort, a place to hide.

I started collecting Israeli poetry written after October 7th.

Agi Mishol described trying to take shelter in the letters, but even there the semicolon "dripped tears like a captive."

"For weeks I've been bleeding poems," wrote Iris Eliya Cohen.

Roni Eldad wrote. "Jackals bare their teeth in our fields, all the children are wide-eyed. We will never sleep again."

Elchanan Nir wrote, "They are coming, You can hear their power, they've breached everything – the fences, the wall, the towers. They desecrated the oil. Tell us, when are You coming?"

And I collect these scraps of poetry, catching them like frail, fluttering autumn leaves, drifting from October trees.

Yaara Cohen wrote in memory of her elementary school choir teacher and his wife who'd been murdered, "Memories fly in the wind... you and she holding hands deep in the ground.. the sky is crying because some people should not die."

Avital Nadler wrote, "When you return... I will tell you about the moon that shone so many nights when you weren't here...."

I gathered up scraps of poetry, and not only Jewish-Israeli poetry, but Palestinian poetry as well. Many Gazan poets were killed, along with their whole families. Twenty-seven year old Nour al-din Hajjaj was a poet, and in his final message to the world he wrote:

"One of my dreams is for my books and my writings to travel the world, for my pen to have wings so that no unstamped passport or visa rejection can hold it back. Another dream of mine is to have a small family, to have a little son who looks like me and to tell him a bedtime story as I rock him in my arms. I am not a number and I do not consent to my death being passing news. Say, too, that I love life, happiness, freedom, children's laughter, the sea, coffee, writing... everything that is joyful—though these things will all disappear in the space of a moment."

and a few days later, it did all disappear.

I collected all this poetry, these scraps tumbling over the wreckage, and bunched it together like packing material, to cushion something so fragile, so delicate.

How do you write a high holiday sermon this year, in the midst of so much rage, heart-shattering grief, confusion, pain, fear? I wanted to look at all the pages I'd written and tear them up into little scraps. I could stuff them in my pockets and toss them out onto the waters at *Tashlich*, along with all the poetry in the pockets of uniforms and aprons and overalls, all the bloodied scraps of this year drowned in a sea of tears.

Then I found this poem by Hanna Yerushalmi wrote a poem this year called "In His Pocket." It reads:

The rabbis
advised:
keep two truths
in your pocket,
one should read:
I am but dust and ashes
and the other should read:

The entire world was created for me.

An 8-year-old
has something else
in his pocket.

Confetti.

Why?

It's his emergency confetti,
he says,
during these raw days
he carries it with him
everywhere
just in case
there is good news.

Our world is filled with brokenness, and it is ultimately going to be up to us to papier mâché it back together with whatever fragments we can find, scraps of wisdom and poetry, tissues and flower petals, verses of Torah and song lyrics, traditions, moments, meals, silences, stories, the quilted comfort of community, sacred snippets, a smile, a shoulder. There's no other material to work with. There are no other builders. It's just us and all these scraps, and our intellect, creativity, insight, perception, fortitude, imagination, grit, risk, and hope.

There are no magic words to resurrect the dead, no formula that magically transforms hate to understanding, fear to compassion, grief to joy. But we can take this brokenness and make a mosaic. We can collage scraps into a vision board. We can take the remnants and

hold onto them until a day filled with simcha, celebration, nachas and gratitude comes, and turn them into confetti.

When you leave here today, we have a little pill bottle for you to take, to put in your pocket. It is Temple Isaiah's prescription for the new year. And the prescription is hope. A tender hope that we've managed to sustain, that despite the darkness, despite the pain, and the fear, as the survivors of the Nova festival have said over and over, we *will* dance again.

How do you write a high holy day sermon this year? You gather all the notes, and you tear them up and make emergency confetti.

The directions on the sticker say: Throw when there is good news. Because our hope is not lost that there will be good news.

May it be soon and in our time. May we, one scrap at a time, make it so.

Amen.

