

Day 1 Rosh Hashanah 5785: The Blueprint for Rebuilding

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This year, it matters how you choose to live your Jewish life. It matters to our family, here and in Israel, it matters to our non-Jewish neighbors, our fellow Angelinos and Americans, and throughout the world.

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Once upon a time, many years ago, in a small village called Boca Raton, there was a Jewish Community Center.

And it came to pass, that the leaders of the JCC decided to host a panel of speakers to discuss the future of Israel.

So they began to plan. And, oh, did they plan...and argue. Who would be invited? Whose positions would be represented? Bitter debates ensued. Scathing text messages were sent. People vowed they'd never again *davven* in each other's shuls. Someone shouted at their sister-in-law that she could make *her own damn kugel* for next year's break fast...

All of them believing that this panel could determine the next steps of Israeli foreign policy and practice.

As if the Jews of Boca Raton had this much power.

As if THIS panel, scheduled for a Sunday afternoon, on the hottest day of the year, in Florida, had a shot at impacting the future of Israel.

Listen to me.

Just as the future of Israel will NOT be determined by the Boca JCC, it will also not be determined by the content of one High Holy Day Sermon.



HOWEVER, the future of the **Boca Jewish community**, the future of the **Temple Isaiah Jewish community**, and the future of ALL of our communities here in the Diaspora, will most certainly be determined by **HOW** we choose to talk about Israel and **HOW** we choose to live our Jewish lives in the coming year.

And that starts today, with this New Year.

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This past year was awful. October 7, 2023 was apocalyptic. Events we never imagined in our lifetime, emerged from the depths of hell, and destroyed lives and families, and communities. And our darkest fear was realized: no matter how far we have come, we are still hated, hunted, and reviled. That Israel, no matter how strong, cannot always protect us.

And if that wasn't enough, next came October 8, in which some progressive groups immediately aligned against Israel, and chose to celebrate Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Soon after, social media showed us our friends and colleagues' indifference to our pain. Making our loss invisible.

For years, we told our kids about college, romanticizing late night conversations, fast friendships with people they've only just met and telling them they are going to have the time of their lives. And then, this year, we watched our schools and universities betray us, and them.

This year, we were told our pain didn't matter. We were told to check our privilege. We were unfairly excluded and abandoned.

And here we are, days away from the one year anniversary, sitting in Royce Hall, one of the epicenters of loss and grief... **And we have a choice to make:**

If October 7 destroyed our Jewish family, and shook our confidence in our Jewish identity, then this year, we need to work on repairing and rebuilding both.

If October 7 decimated our Jewish center, and made us question if Judaism and the Jewish people could survive this moment, then this year, we need to double down and ensure that we do.



But October 7 was not the only crash that we experienced. We also lived through October 8 and 9 and the rest of this god-forsaken year.

If this year shattered our conception, that the liberal democracy *which we helped build and sustain*, would stand up for us...then we must return to the drawing board and design a new strategy.

We are not giving up on America or American democracy.

If this year fractured our faith, that our concern for ALL people's well-being, would *always* yield strong relationships with friends and allies...then we need to start new conversations. Because we are not giving up our belief that ALL people deserve dignity, opportunity, and a chance to flourish and grow.

The work of building a **shared society**, here and in Israel, is too important. And we cannot do it alone.

Listen to me. We are not done with antisemitism or attacks. The Jews are a people who remember. We know there will be a next time. This time we were caught off guard, here and in Israel. Next time, we can be ready.

But it takes effort and investment NOW.

This year, I need you to focus on YOU and YOUR ACTIONS: The work of rebuilding will come from two Jewish ideas, **one particular and one universal**, and both will be necessary for us to fortify ourselves for the next time, and push back the tide of uncertainty that threatens to overwhelm us.

## **PARTICULAR + UNIVERSAL**

Jews have always held 2 opposing beliefs: On the one hand, we are deeply **particular** about our identity. We have specific rules about what we eat and drink. We have rules about how to pray. We like being a tribe. We like playing Jewish Geography. *Especially when we travel.*

We have *particular* holidays that remember *particular* moments in our Jewish history. We are a **particular** people, with a **particular** tradition and culture, and a **particular** homeland that is called the Jewish state.



On the other hand, we are also a people that celebrates **Universalism**. We celebrate a Jewish story that connects us to ALL people. Our Torah says humanity emerged from Adam and Eve, and that all of us are created in the image of God. Our liturgy emphasizes our God is a god for all people. Our tradition instructs us to support the poor, and visit the sick and bury the dead and console the mourners *for the Jew and non-Jew in our midst*.

And even as we lived through expulsions and crusades, through pogroms and massacres, through quotas and restricted neighborhoods, and “no-Jews allowed”, **we never surrendered that Universalist lens through which to see a divided and often violent world**. We held onto our dream that Jews could be BOTH/AND. Both particular and passionate about OUR PEOPLE, and also committed to the repair and renewal for ALL.

**And there has been no better home for us to practice our particular and universal identities than in America.**

According to Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute, *American Reform Judaism* (the Judaism that we love and practice here at Temple Isaiah), was shaped by the values of liberal democracy: *egalitarianism, radical hospitality and inclusion, no sacred cows, a celebration of tradition and innovation*.

It was BECAUSE of these values that we turned to welcome interfaith couples and families, seeing these relationships as a blessing not a burden.

It was BECAUSE of these values that we included the matriarchs in the Amidah, alongside the patriarchs; and that Reform Judaism now accepts full Jewishness through either parent.

For thousands of years, we understood the message of Mi Chamocha and the Exodus to be one that celebrated our particular redemption...but then took that story and made it about our commitment to liberate others.

And so it should be no surprise that here in America, American Reform Rabbis chose to center the mitzvah of Tikkun Olam.

As Yehuda Kurtzer joked this summer: Who else, but American JEWS, with exceptionalism running through our tap water, would posture such a chutzpadik belief, that a *tiny* fraction of humanity, is somehow responsible to help heal the wounds and injustices *of the entire world*...



And then, wait for it...we choose to place that belief as the centerpiece of our American Jewish identity and practice.

And then came October 7. And October 8. And now we're not so confident about both/and. It feels like our conception of American Jewish identity is changing. The liberal society in which we live, feels like it's tipping towards illiberal.

And we ask ourselves questions we never imagined we would ever have to ask: About where we belong and which community would want us.

In the wake of October 7, many of us have spent the last year looking back and forth at our options and feeling uncertain of where we should place our bet and where we should invest our personal time.

And in an increasingly binary world, fueled by zero-sum thinking, it feels like we are being asked to choose *what single expression of Judaism to practice and put out into the world.*

**The particular...**an expression of Judaism that centers our people, our family, our tribe and our land; **or, the universal...**a voice that celebrates our ancient Jewish commitment to build a world *for* all people, working side by side *with* all people.

**Some of us may be ready to throw in the towel on universalism and double down on the particular:** *It's time to focus on the Jewish community,* we'll say. It's time to relearn the Jewish story and strengthen our Jewish identity.

**And some of us can't imagine giving up on our American-Jewish faith** which includes not only a love for liberal Judaism but also a liberal, democratic society in which it can thrive.

We don't want to give up on either; and we shouldn't have to.

This year, we need a Jewish Renaissance. This year we need to do two things: **First, we need to revive and renew our particular Jewish identity.**

If the world is going to scream at us for being Jewish, it's time for each of us to reclaim the epithet and determine for ourselves what that actually means.



If the world is going to suggest that *the best kind of Jew* is a Jew who hides, muzzles or suppresses their Jewish identity and convictions, it's time for us to show up.

This year, **I want you to choose one mitzvah** - one commandment - whether as individuals or as a family. Commit to one new Jewish practice and reconnect to Judaism and the Jewish people:

- Study Torah.
- Celebrate Shabbat.
- Say the Bedtime Shema.
- Hang a mezuzah at home and touch it every time you enter or exit.

I want to give a shout out to our Chabad brothers and sisters who truly believe that lighting Shabbos candles or wrapping tefillin have such cosmic significance *that just one new person wrapping or kindling* might tip the balance of the world from darkness to light.

Who knows? Maybe your particular mitzvah will change the world. At the very least, I'm willing to bet, it will change you.

**Second, we ALSO need to revive, renew and reinvest in our universalist Jewish identity.** This is the season of repair. In that spirit, we need to rebuild some of the relationships that have been broken.

We need to show up again at the table where decisions are being made about our shared communities, our schools, our universities, and our nation.

We need to make the effort to champion, once again, why we love our American Jewish identity and why it's worth fighting for a society that makes it possible.

The Jewish response to a shattered dream is to go back to the drawing board and dream of something even bigger.

This year:

- Travel with Rabbi Klein Miles on Isaiah's Civil Rights trip to the South.
- Choose to spend time with our Jewish social justice groups: Temple Isaiah's Voter Engagement, Am Tzedek, the Family Volunteer Club, or our Green Team.
- Reclaim your seat at the table and help to rebuild our local schools and neighborhood associations.

I know it feels like we are supposed to choose. That's the environment we're in: Good/bad. Either/or. One or the other. I'm telling you, it's both/and.

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I want to tell you a story. For the life of me, I cannot remember who told it first. Google has been useless, so, for now, it goes unattributed.

It happened on a Friday afternoon, a Jewish man was driving home and saw, by the side of the road, another man with a kippah kneeling beside a flat tire.

The driver slowed down, got out, and offered to help. The man with the kippah gratefully accepted, confessing he had no idea what to do next.

And as the two men began to fix the car, of course they began to kibbitz.

"I think we can get this fixed before Shabbos," the driver said to the man.

The man nodded and smiled.

"How far away are you from home? I'm not familiar with the shuls in this area? Are they any good?" the driver inquired.

"Shuls?" said the man.

"Synagogues," said the driver. "A beit k'nesset...a temple?"

"Oh, I'm not Jewish," said the man

"But...you're wearing a kippah!?"

"Oh, is that what it's called?" said the stranger, taking the kippah off his head. "My mother gave this to me when I first started driving. She said to keep it in the glove compartment, and if I was ever stranded by the side of the road, I should put it on and wait...and someone would stop to help me."



I love this story. (I love how much you love this story!) It speaks to our fierce loyalty and love for one another. For the Jewish people. For our tribe and family. *Even* if we only come to shul twice a year.

And, I also love that it reveals how we want to live in a world of non-Jews, and how we want to be seen: We are a people who take care of own. And *from that very space of particular loyalty*, we draw out the ability, the capacity, to take care of others. That's the universal. We are a both/and kind of people. This is who we are.

This year, it matters **how you choose to live your Jewish life**. It matters to our family, here and in Israel, it matters to our non-Jewish neighbors, our fellow Angelinos and Americans, and throughout the world.

It matters to the stranger, stranded on the side of the road.

This year, let's show up not just for ourselves, but for one another. This year, let's remind ourselves and the world just how chutzpadik we can be.

Shana Tova.

Thank you to Michele Lowe for her incredible editing. Thank you to Rabbi Asher Knight for another year of sermon collaboration and imagination.