

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5786  
Rabbi Dara Frimmer  
**You Are Not Excused.<sup>1</sup>**

On Monday August 25, the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Elul, Los Angeles clergy gathered outside the Israeli consulate in West LA. I was one of many to arrive with prayers for Israel and Gaza.

There were no signs or banners. No marching or chanting pithy phrases. The media set up their cameras. The clergy put on their prayer shawls.

We had come to plead, petition and pray. Not so different from today.

Today marks 718 days since our brothers and sisters were attacked in their homes and over 200 taken hostage. Hundreds of thousands of reserve soldiers have been repeatedly called back to the frontlines.

In Gaza, two years later, tens of thousands of people (including Hamas fighters) have been killed. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced.

The stories are devastating. The losses are heartbreaking.

The numbers are unfathomable.

And while war often unites an army and country, we can see the fractures here and abroad:

Israeli society is divided on if, how and when to end the war. Each week, the rage intensifies. The rhetoric gets sharper. The protests grow larger and more disruptive.

Here in the United States, the level of contempt between those who think differently about the war feels dangerously high.

Our patience for listening is at an all-time low. We would sooner cut off friends and family than tolerate the discomfort of disagreement.

I don't know about you, but I'm starting the New Year on edge:

Last High Holy Days, one year after October 7, we worried about **external** threats: that the Jewish people might not survive because of antisemitism or the possibility that Hamas, Hizballah, the Houthis, and a nuclear Iran might destroy Israel.

This year, to quote a classic horror-movie line: *the call is coming from inside the house*. Now, the greater danger may be **internal**: Our anger is breaking families apart.

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Rabbi Asher Knight, my ride-or-die HHD writing partner and Michele Lowe, editor extraordinaire.

Suspicion is driving wedges between neighbors. Our Jewish community is in crisis, and I fear we might destroy ourselves before our enemy has a chance to defeat us.

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The strength of the Jewish people is that we are *Am Yisrael* - we are the People Israel. However, that has never meant that we are one people with a single, unified voice.

**Unity does not mean uniformity.**

Our strength has always come from our many voices. That's been the secret to our endurance over the millennia.

In spite of our differences, we are committed to living together.

But I think we've forgotten how.

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I know it's Rosh Hashanah and we hold a machzor in our hands, but I want to make a pitch for **Passover and the Haggadah** as a way to reconnect and hold us together in the New Year.

So dust off the stale matza crumbs.

We're turning our apples and honey into charoset.

Friends, we're inviting the Four Children for Rosh Hashanah lunch, and they've got a few questions for us.

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To review: The *Original Four Children*, all seated at the Passover table, are identified by the content of their questions: One wise, one wicked, one simple, and one who does not even know how to ask.

Each one has a different reaction to the story of our Exodus from Egypt, arguably one of the most important and foundational stories in our tradition.

Of Note: Each voice is welcome at the table right off the bat.

Moreover, according to halacha, Jewish law, we are required to read each voice aloud in order to fulfill the mitzvah of telling the story of our redemption and our dream of reaching the Promised Land. So, more than welcome, according to the rabbis, each voice is necessary.

Right now, the voices in our community are reacting to *another important and foundational story of our tradition* - the story of *Am Yisrael* and *Midinat Yisrael*, the Jewish people and the State of Israel - and no one seems happy to be at the table. Even worse, some people have already left.

This cannot be the way we begin our New Year.

This morning, I want to invite four *new children* to join us. Four voices reacting to Israel and Gaza that we already hear in our families, synagogues and in public life. Four perspectives that might help us to reconnect, find renewed strength in joining together, and move forward as one people.

If we hope to have a better New Year, we will need to set our Rosh Hashanah table with room for all four.

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The First Child: **The Shomrim — The Guardians.**

You know them: The Guardians of Israel.

They have a go-bag under their bed. They are suspicious of alliances with outsiders, knowing that allies can change sides if the price is right. They remind you what they learned from their parents and grandparents, not about the world as you want it to be, but how the world actually works.

Today, the voices of the Shomrim are still fiercely guarding and protecting Israel. They hold deep existential fear, born out of experiences in which past Jewish communities have been threatened, expelled, or wiped out. At the end of the day, the only people who will protect, defend and guard the Jewish people will be other Jews. So, that, they will tell you, is their job.

Shomrim can and will be critical of Israel. Theirs is not a blind loyalty. However, their assessments are often shared in private, for fear that any public exposure can and will be used by our enemies.

We need the Shomrim. In a world that platforms hatred and stokes the fire of antisemitism, their loyalty is an expression of love and faith.

However, in their passion to protect and defend, tradition has always cautioned the Shomrim to balance the sacred obligation of self-defense with the spiritual and moral injuries war can cause to the defenders.

At some point, in their drive to defend, they may end up destroying themselves.

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The second child: **The Nevi'im -- The Prophets.**

If it's been a while since you've read the Hebrew Bible, let me summarize: Our ancestors were a hot mess who regularly abandoned God's *mitzvot*. The job of the Nevi'im, beginning with Moses and continuing through and beyond our namesake, Isaiah, was to warn the people that without change, Israel was destined for moral and political ruin.

You know them.

Our modern-day Nevi'im forward you emails and op-eds that reflect their concerns about a never-ending war with no vision of the day after, the abandonment of the hostages in order to secure more land and power, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, forced displacement, and unchecked settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank.

The Nevi'im are unafraid to be critical of Israel in the town square (both in Tel Aviv and on social media) because they know how history works: We have a limited amount of time for our people to change their ways before it's too late. Like the Shomrim, they also see their roles as protectors, and they fear for Israel's future if she does not change course.

We need the Nevi'im. They are the early-warning system for when there is a moral emergency. They lay down our options with clarity and conviction: If we do not act, we die.

However, to be for the Nevi'im is to choose a historically losing team. In all of the books that record the prophets stirring speeches and heartfelt pleas, the people never listen.<sup>2</sup> It always ends poorly, with our ancestors in Exile, dreaming of a return to Israel, someday after reparations have been made.

Consequently, the Nevi'im need to seek a balance between their role and their intended results. If prophetic voices are so often ignored, what role do words ultimately play in the story of our people? *If words are intended to change minds and impact behaviors, is there a different way we should be talking to one another?*

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The third child: **The Rabbanim -- The Rabbis.**

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<sup>2</sup> Except for Jonah!

A child of the Rabbanim is not just a clergy-kid in need of therapy, but anyone who loves questions that have no answer, or maybe a question that has too many answers.

You know them.

On brand, it's your clergy, trying to hold together the many views and voices within the Jewish community. It's your friends and family who listen to podcasts from across the political spectrum, filling their Kindles or bookshelves with ideas that conflict. The salon conveners, inviting friends and family to engage and react.

Like the Shomrim and the Nevi'im, the Rabbanim worry about the Jewish future. They are pained by the deterioration of discourse in public and private spaces. By the punditry and online provocations that lack nuance. By the congregants who cannot tolerate one another's views.

The critique from the Rabbanim, delivered gently but urgently, is that we tend to choose certainty over curiosity. Rather than sit with agitation and discomfort, we prefer to erase or mute differences. The Rabbanim have spent their lives studying and reveling in the tension of Talmud. However, like the Nevi'im, the words of the Rabbanim are often ignored. (And, yes, I see the painful irony in sharing that during a sermon.)

We need the Rabbanim. They remind us that new ideas and outcomes might emerge if we were less certain and more open to the experience of not knowing.

However, we would do well to caution the Rabbanim to also find their balance: How will we know when to stop debating and take action, especially when lives are at stake?

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### **The 4th Child...is Missing.**

#### **Let's call them the Ne'edarim — The Ones Who Have Left the Table.**

You know them.

This is the child who is so deeply disappointed in their clergy, their counselors, their parents, their elders...all of whom continue to support or stay connected to Israel...that it's easier for them to opt out of gatherings than sit with the pain and heartbreak.

Israel has become intolerable to them, too entangled with violence and hypocrisy. They can't bear the sight of the Israeli flag or hearing Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah.

This is the child who feels Israel and Judaism are now conflated and cannot walk into Jewish spaces without feeling betrayed.

The Ones Who Are Missing have left the Jewish community ironically and painfully, in order to preserve their Jewish identity...to hold onto their Jewish values, and to practice them with others who have also left the table.

And, to be clear, these are not just our kids and 20-somethings which I know have captured our attention for many years...these are adults, parents and grandparents, who feel their voices and questions are no longer welcome at the table and so we have lost both their critique and contribution.

We need them to come back. Their Judaism is founded on “do not stand idly by” and “love your neighbor as you love yourself” and “we were all created in the image of God” -- and they hold these truths in every fiber of their body and being. They aren’t giving up on their Judaism; *they’ve just given up on us.*

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As your clergy, we can tell you, these four children are ALL represented at Temple Isaiah and many of us identify a bit with some if not all of them.

This year, can we welcome the four children to our Rosh Hashanah tables and see what conversations emerge? What might we learn from their questions? What might be revealed about our personal and particular identities and proclivities?

Rather than seek singularity, the four children may be the best reminder that we are not just one voice or identity. We contain multitudes.

And more than self-discovery, these kids may help us recognize others, those in our family and community whose posts and proclamations make our shoulders tense and our minds race as we stop listening and instead prepare to launch our counter-attack.

Learning to recognize ourselves and one another and seeing a place at the table for us all, could begin to repair some of the fractures. More patience and curiosity, more understanding and trust, more dreaming and imagining together.

That would be an incredible start to the New Year.

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Over time, we’ve seen examples of when the Jewish people fell apart due to internal discord. When they literally could not sit together for a meal. That doesn’t have to be the ending of our story. There’s still time to change our course. But we’re not starting with the town square. We’re starting here, with all of you.

We need to reset the table.

The irony of that image is that we set the table with intentionality, placing every napkin just so, polishing the silver, choosing the centerpieces...all of it done so that people can sit down and stain the tablecloth, spill the wine, dirty the dishes, and move the flower arrangement.

But then the outcome is that we can actually see one another, engage with one another, forgive one another for seating the left-handed guest on the right side of the table, and stay at the table until our host says it's time to go home.

*Which feels like a good reminder to begin sending you home, as well.*

In another hour or two, many of us will be sitting down at a table for Rosh Hashanah lunch. Familiar faces, familiar dishes. Wherever we are: the city or the valley, Hillcrest or Brentwood, with your family or friends...I'm willing to bet, "tea" will be served as to what we liked or didn't like about this morning's service, and what we *think* the rabbi said.

If you're lucky, your meal will include folks from other synagogues...let the competition begin!

Tell your friends and family about the four children: **The Guardians, The Prophets, The Rabbis, and The Ones Who Have Left the Table.**

- Ask people who they identify with this year.
- Listen to what they say.
- Does it spark conversation? Does it help with understanding?

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We are going to need one another, not only to endure the end of this war, which please God will happen soon, but during the reckoning and the aftermath and the rebuilding and the reflection, which may be equally if not more strenuous on our community and our identity.

As critical as it is to ask, today, "where do we stand?" it is as important to answer the question, "And where will we stand, *or sit*, in the next moment, and the moment after that?"

Because there is no way we will be able to reckon and rebuild if everyone has left the table. We will lack the strength for truth and reconciliation, the power to repair harm, and the imagination to write the next chapter of Jewish existence.

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So this afternoon, or tonight as you sit down for dinner, possibly with a seat directly in front of the brisket or *zaboon*, **the Number One Rule is that Nobody Leaves the Table.**

You're feeling uncomfortable? You are still not excused. Better yet, tell someone you're uncomfortable. Tell everyone. And see where that takes the table.

**Rule Number Two: Once you're at the table, do not attempt to convince anyone that you are right and they are wrong.** The goal is not to arrive at dessert with uniformity.

The goal...is to listen to each other like the rabbis of the Talmud did. With respect. With grace. With an attempt at understanding.

**Rule Number Three: Suspend your certainty. Leave room to be surprised.**

Sometimes, we don't know the ending, and that's okay.

We don't always have to know "the way" that will get us there.

Sometimes, we make the road by walking it together.

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Let me tell you a story. In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed us. Everything we had built in Israel collapsed. We were exiled. Dislocated. Disoriented. And we were devastated.

We were also angry. And quick to blame. How could we not?

The old paradigm was gone and there was no alternative to turn to.

And in that space of accusation and suspicion, in the ruins of trust, the first draft of the Haggadah emerged. *Within a hundred years of destruction*, with the fires of fury and grief still burning, a new story was written that brought everyone back to the table.

That's a Vision for Jewish life that's worth keeping.

It's time to gather all the children.

It's time to tell our story.

It's time to imagine a new way forward together.

Shana Tova.