

The Necklace

Kol Nidre 5787 - September 20, 2026

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A couple years ago, my then-eight-year-old-son and I were sitting on the living room couch watching a Disney movie, just the two of us.

"Mommy ... I have a question for you." He looked up at me with big brown eyes ... sweet, serious, and determined.

And I could sense ... whatever came next would be no small thing.

In the moments before he spoke again, several possibilities of what he might say entered my mind.

Would this be a question about growing up, impending adolescence?

Was he being bullied at school? Was that kid I never quite warmed to still picking on him?

Was he about to tell me it was time to give up sports to focus on music and acting? Which, honestly, would have been thrilling to hear.

I could not possibly have predicted what he said next.

"Mommy ..." he began. *"Will you get me a Jewish star necklace?"*

Caught so off guard by the request, I responded with literally the only thing that came to me in the moment:

"Go ask your father!"

Our son looked at me curiously. *"But mommy ..."* he said. *"You're the rabbi."*

(pause)

As the saying goes, *kids don't come with instructions*. As a parent, every once in a while you arrive at one of those Big Moments ... featuring a Big Question ... from the mind of a Big Kid. This was one of those moments. But ... my full response left something to be desired.

I told him, *"not right now"* and awkwardly pushed us to another topic ... he looked disappointed ... and I felt such guilt ... I thought, *wait, my son wants to share his Jewish pride with the world and that's how I respond?* I didn't ask him a single question. I just ... shut it down. Why?

One need not be a Jewish parent - or rabbi - to know the answer.

Manchester, England. Washington DC. Bondi Beach. Tree of Life. Jew hatred. Antisemitism. Antizionism. White supremacy. All of it ... on the rise in the years leading up to October 7. But then came that horrific day ... and its continued aftermath ... these days and weeks and months and years when it so often feels ... like we're living in a world turned upside down.

How do you explain all that to an eight-year-old? Frankly, how do any of us make sense of it?

(pause)

This year's High Holy Day theme, *People of the Book*, is largely about ... reading. Learning. Growing our intellect, our knowledge.

But it's also about the stories we choose to share. This year's theme encourages us to consider, *what's the story I tell the world about who I am*?

Embedded in that Big Question ... is how ... and under what circumstances ... do I identify myself as a Jew? As part of a *tradition* deeply interwoven with Israel – both Am Yisrael, the people, and Eretz Yisrael, the place?

For many, it's a struggle ... at times a tightrope walk ... not because we don't celebrate or wrestle with or take pride in our Jewishness. Not because we don't care deeply or struggle mightily with our ancestral homeland.

But because especially over these last three years, we've seen just how dangerous, even radical it can be ... to **exist** in this world as a Jew. How much the more so when we have the audacity ... to **share** that Jewishness publicly: a mezuzah on our doorpost. A kippah on our head. A social media post wishing followers a Shana Tova - a good year - in Hebrew.

If I'm being completely honest, when my son made his request, after the initial deflection, what entered my mind was this: "*I cannot let my sweet boy make himself into a target.*" An intrusive but legitimate thought I know many in this room have **also** encountered.

And in that moment, the story I tell of my Jewish identity ... who I am ... became one dominated not by that which I love and treasure, but by that which I **fear**.

(pause)

These days, it is impossible not to feel overcome with anguish or anxiety ... when we learn of yet another attack on a synagogue, a stabbing on the Upper West Side, terror at a Jewish preschool in Michigan. It is impossible not to feel viscerally present at Central Synagogue in New York when someone storms their *bimah* cursing and knocking over Shabbat candles.

It is impossible not to feel heartbroken over what is continuing to happen in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. We who are still **grieving** the **incomprehensible** losses of October 7; we who've been **inundated** with the most vile form of victim blaming imaginable.

It is impossible not to feel discomfort, confusion, even shame ... as the **land** so deeply interwoven with our Jewish story feels further and further away, and as so many of its **political leaders** jettison the values we once thought sacrosanct.

To feel both alienated by ... and held responsible for ... the actions of **some** in a country 7,500 miles away, a place in which the majority of us do not vote, hold residence, or perhaps ever even visited ... is as disorienting as it is depressing.

Talmud Shevuot teaches, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bah zeh* - all Israel is responsible for one another. But, so often these days, the bond feels broken, as it does with many of the relationships we once thought we held. So much of our trust ... violated. So much of our pain ... dismissed, diminished. From the political realm to our social circles to our children's schools to our places of work to concert venues to sources of information we consume, so little feels reliable. Familiar. Secure.

And so, this present chapter of our Jewish story ... is one dominated not just by **fear**, but by **chaos**. The noise is relentless, exhausting. And there are days when it may seem impossible to find that glimmer of light, something to help us navigate a way out of all this.

(pause)

But ... this is not the first time we've endured profound chaos. Nor is it the first time we've needed to look deep into one another's souls to ask, *what now? What comes next?* Just as Judaism has demonstrated for centuries, the lessons of our **past** illuminate a path toward our **future**.

When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in the year 70, they reduced our spiritual home, epicenter of Jewish life, to rubble and ash. All that we'd built. All we held sacred. It forced our ancestors to abandon Jerusalem, spread out to the furthest corners of the Earth. It left us yearning, hoping, for thousands of years, that we would one day return ... home.

Those who watched their city burn ... neither they nor their children said, "*guess we're done here, let's forget all this Judaism stuff and move on.*"

Instead, in the shadow of destruction, **they chose life. Jewish life.** They chose to innovate. To reimagine and reinterpret. To evolve this beloved tradition that ... generations later produced **this** community ... and each and every one of us.

In the absence of their Temple, they created the Mishnah, then the Talmud, our earliest manuals on how to live Jewish lives. They moved away from ritual sacrifice; toward prayer, study, and one's **home** as the **center** of Jewish living. They shifted from Temple priests to rabbis and teachers, which eventually led to ... **me** standing here tonight, delivering this sermon.

The earliest architects of what became modern Judaism grabbed hold of the pen ... and **authored their own story**. They **refused** to let their next chapter become an epilogue, the obituary of a forgotten people. They chose, even amidst the chaos, to center the next chapter in **our** story on reimagining and sustaining Jewish life. And as a result ... here, tonight, in this very room, **we** inheritors of both tradition and innovation are living and breathing that which they set in motion nearly two thousand years ago.

What a legacy. (pause)

Today, in nearly every corner of the Jewish world, something extraordinary is happening in response to the chaos and heaviness, the dread and despair. If you look and listen closely, you too may recognize ... that we are in the midst of a renaissance. One anchored in resilience, responsibility, and one's conscious, deliberate decision ... to **choose a Jewish life**.

Over the last few years, a number of authors have published powerful, vulnerable essays and books exploring post-October 7th Judaism ... and the imperative to dig deeper into one's Jewish identity. American authors like Sarah Hurwitz, Joshua Leifer and Zibby Owens have each made their case. But it's the most recent publication by Dara Horn that gets right to the heart of the matter.

Horn's newest book, published September 1, is, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living*. With its similarly provocative title, it serves as a sort-of sequel to her 2022 book *People Love Dead Jews*. Only this time, her most recent effort "... isn't supposed to be about Jews as perpetual victims. **It's about preserving and strengthening Jewish life**, rather than allowing Jewish history to become synonymous with Jewish death."

Horn's "solution" to the Jewish question? "*Stop making Jewish life [all] about **antisemitism** ... teach [others] to understand Jews as a **living people** with a distinct religion, history, and culture.*"

In other words, **don't just work tirelessly to fight antisemitism**, a noble and necessary endeavor. **Work tirelessly to teach others why Judaism is worth // fighting // for**.

Tomorrow morning, our full Torah reading includes the following verse from *parshat Nitzavim*: "*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose **life**—that you and your offspring would live ... by loving the ETERNAL your God.*"

On Yom Kippur, a solemn day during which we come face-to-face with our mortality – when we rehearse our own death! – Torah **demands** of us, choose life! Celebrate, honor, and dance with

this heritage! Do not turn away - turn **toward** these blessings! Write your next chapter ... teach others why Judaism matters; why it's worth fighting for.

(pause)

Let me be clear: none of this is easy or straightforward. We are living through extraordinarily difficult times ... and if I may borrow a phrase from my **own** sermon last Yom Kippur, we must give ourselves - and one another - some "radical grace" as we make our way through.

What does it mean to "*choose a Jewish life*" today? What does it look like? Well, there's no singular formula, no one "correct" way to do it, and that's actually very Jewish. Your assignment this evening is to define what it means to **you**. You who have chosen to be here on Kol Nidre, swaying along to these melodies. Tapping your heart as we confess our sins. Extending warmth and compassion towards one another. Engaging in these time-honored rituals of Yom Kippur ... even with dozens of security and police stationed within and around Royce so a bunch of Jews can gather for a holiday.

Choosing a Jewish life looks like ... an astonishing number of teens who've chosen to stay engaged beyond B'nei Mitzvah, in our Tuesday night Teen School, our Rishonim leadership program, and ITY, Isaiah Temple Youth. It looks like a record number of folks who've chosen to convert to Judaism this year with Isaiah's clergy. It looks like a staggering number of lay leaders and volunteers, from our Young(ish) Families to our Chai Villagers ... Isaiahs who've said, "count me in. Sign me up. I want to *do* more, I want to *learn* more, I want to *give* more to my community."

In the complex, wider world in which we live, choosing a Jewish life looks like meaningful Jewish stories in film and television, in podcasts and media, in comedy routines and literary circles right alongside - or, dare I say, in spite of - boycotts, threats and smear campaigns from so-called celebrities. It looks like creative, dynamic storytelling that illustrates the beauty, richness, and complexity of being Jewish today.

Choosing a Jewish life looks like Jewish summer camp ... smiles and laughter from hundreds of young people dancing together, singing their hearts out to Israeli pop songs on a blissful Friday evening in July.

Choosing a Jewish life looks like recipes handed down from bubbies and balaboostas ... challahs braided tenderly by smooth and wrinkled hands ... shared over crowded tables ... amid conversation, laughter, and tears between family and friends.

Choosing a Jewish life looks like the crowded linoleum dance floor of a synagogue social hall ... circles of loved ones surrounding (the) bride and groom ... high up in their chairs, held by generations of hands and hearts, Hava Nagila blasting from the speakers.

Choosing a Jewish life looks like the pursuit of a more just and equitable society ... marches and rallies and sit-ins and protests and signs held high, reminding ourselves and everyone we see of our commandment to “love the stranger,” and that Jewish people have resisted tyrants since the time of pharaoh.

And what does choosing a Jewish life look like in Israel? It looks like the growing number of Israelis who’ve said, forcefully, as they prepare for a critical election next month: *this current reality is unsustainable; we can ... and we must ... build something new from these ruins*. Those who somehow, in spite of it all, consider themselves hopeful about Israel’s future ... and, in turn, our collective Jewish future, too.

(pause)

Our ancestors did not reimagine ancient Judaism when everything around them was good and stable. They did not wait for some halcyon era of political or cultural stability. **They chose to write the next chapter of Jewish life even as fires raged around them.** And if they can do it, so can we.

And so, I ask us tonight ... just ten days into a new year: what choices will we make ... and what story will we tell... of 5787?

(pause)

Last December, for his 10th birthday (and the final night of Hanukkah), our son received a silver Jewish star from my parents. As Josh and I, together, fastened it around his neck, the look on his face could only be described as “elated.”

I can’t tell you when, exactly, Josh and I landed on “yes, *it’s time*.” It wasn’t because he kept asking (which he did), or because we felt worn down by the request (we didn’t).

It was because at some point we realized ... that he is the author of his own story. Even at ten years old. The pride this child feels in his Jewish identity is palpable, moving, beautiful. And the world *needs* him to tell his Jewish story, to share his Jewish joy.

Am I afraid? Of course. I’m afraid of many things beyond my control.

But I’m also hopeful. Inspired ... by the power he - *and we* - hold ... as we write our next chapter.

The pen is in hand. The work begins.

G’mar Chatimah Tovah, and may we inscribe our own story in a book of lives well lived.

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And my profound gratitude to the writers, teachers and scholars whose work serves as a beacon of light in a post-October 7th world. The lessons you share of the past are what illuminate our path toward the future. May we all go from strength to strength.