

Reset, Renew, Return: What The Moment Requires

If you close your eyes, I am sure that many of you can picture that famous scene from Fiddler on the Roof, when Tevya, played by actor Chaim Topol, has had one piece of “bad news” too many. And so Tevya cries out: *Dear God. Did you have to send me news like that **today**, of all days? I know, I know we are the chosen people, but once and a while, can't you choose someone else?!*”

Over these past couple of years, since October 7th, 2023, I must admit that many days have felt like that. I know that I am not alone.

I started to write this sermon late this summer on Tisha B'Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, the day in which we mourn for the innumerable tragedies that have befallen our people throughout our history. Somehow, even though Tisha B'Av always falls seven weeks prior to Rosh Hashanah, my brain switches to High Holiday mode right around this time each year. It's not something I plan, but it happens, reliably, as one season rolls into another. Perhaps this year, more than most, it is appropriate that the saddest day of the year was when I began putting together my thoughts about what it means to be Jewish at this moment in our history.

We are living in a very sad, and overwhelming period of Jewish history, nearly two years post October 7th. Israeli-American journalist and writer Sarah Tuttle-Singer recently shared the following on social media:

“It’s literally impossible to be Jewish.

You have to be proud of your Jewish heritage, but don’t be too loud about it because you don’t want to draw too much attention.

You have to embrace your culture and traditions, but don’t act too different from everyone else....

You have to support Israel because it’s your homeland, but be careful how you talk about it—you don’t want to seem too political or offend anyone...

You have to stand against antisemitism, but don’t play the victim because people will say you’re exaggerating or that other groups have it worse...

You have to teach your children to be proud Jews, but also make sure they fit in with their non-Jewish friends. Pass down the stories and traditions, but don’t let them feel like they’re different or isolated...

You have to be knowledgeable about your religion, but don’t be too religious, because that’s old-fashioned...

You have to be successful, because Jews are supposed to excel, but don’t be too successful, because then people will accuse you of having too much power or privilege.

You have to be strong in the face of adversity, but don’t let it harden you.

Be kind and forgiving, but don’t let people walk all over you.

You have to be a light unto the nations, but don’t outshine anyone.

And if all of this sounds exhausting, it’s because it is.

We’re expected to be everything, to everyone, at all times.

We are holding quite a bit as a people these days. The anti-Semitism that seems to be found around every corner is not just in our imagination. In 2024, the ADL recorded 9,354 anti-Semitic incidents across the U.S., an increase of 344% over the past five years and 893% over the past ten. We know the stories, we read about them regularly, and I don't need to spend our time today reviewing the terrible details. But maybe it seems that many of our hypervigilant, anxious parents and grandparents were right. Maybe we really cannot and should not get too comfortable in any one place as Jews. It seems that we will always be blamed for something; a reason will always be found to justify the irrational hate.

The fear is real. And the sense of loss is real. As we come up on nearly two years since October 7th, we are, many of us, completely drained when it comes to the toll that this war has taken on Israel, and in Gaza. Even if we want to, it's impossible to look away from the scenes of hunger; impossible to ignore the questions of what it means to fight a moral war with an enemy, Hamas, who has no morals; impossible to fathom the numbers of people who have been injured and killed; heartbreaking to consider what the hostages in Gaza have been through; and unbelievable to acknowledge that the missiles or drones still being fired by the Houthis at Israel so regularly that it doesn't even make the American news anymore. And everywhere we look, we see isolation and the complete loss of international support, even from those who have historically supported Israel.

What should we do? How should we respond? I am not a political analyst, I am a rabbi. My job is to help us frame the moment that we are living in through the lens of our tradition, our values, our shared, inherited wisdom. Or, to put it differently, to help us consider the following question:

What does Judaism require of us at this moment?

My friends, being overwhelmed and burying our heads in the sand is not a strategy for dealing with much of anything. I want us all to stop and consider something quite astonishing. The Jewish people are still here. *Am Yisrael Chai*- the Jewish people is still very much alive. We have faced challenges, persecutions, expulsions, mass extermination- you name it, we've faced it; throughout our entire history- and we are still here. That is astonishing.

Why is that?

In part, it is because we have never stopped being Jews. Sarah Tuttle-Singer concluded her reflection about how hard it is to be Jewish with the recognition that *"It's impossible, but somehow, we keep going. We find strength in our traditions, in our community, in our faith. We carry the weight of our history, and we still stand tall. Because we are Jewish. And that is enough."*

That is our secret, our super power- being Jewish. And it really is **enough**. Indeed the real danger lies in forgetting this. Quick story. During our daughter Aviva's year in Israel, she and some friends travelled for a week to France (rough life).

The way she describes it:

It was soon after the Amsterdam attacks so we were really on edge about antisemitism. We got out of the airport and before ordering an uber we agreed on a few things: first we would take the El Al Israel tags off of all our luggage. Second, we would use alias names (since she and two of her friends, Sigal and Liat, had noticeably Hebrew names) when talking to each other in public. Third, we would not openly talk about Jewish/Israeli things when taking Ubers.

The only problem was that Aviva and her friends somehow kept bringing up Jewish things unintentionally, things that just came out naturally. For young adults who are so deeply connected to their Judaism and Israel, it was unrealistic for them to totally avoid these topics. In other words, there was no escape from their Judaism. It was, quite literally, a part of who they are.

While I understood her concerns about France, this story made me very proud when she shared it - because the real danger happens when fatigue or apathy set in. The real danger happens, when we forget who we are, as Jewish individuals and as a Jewish people.

Eventually, we will all get past this moment. We will get past this war. God willing the hostages will come home, most of them likely for burial. At some point, the

haters will die down a bit. As it says in Hatikvah, “*Od Lo Avdah Tikvahteinu-*” we have not, we cannot, lose hope. We are not that people. If we were, we would have given up long ago.

But that hope is not enough. It comes along with a responsibility. A responsibility towards our people, towards our heritage, towards our commitments as Jews. And so, this morning I want us to consider just what it means to do teshuvah - coming from the verb *la-shuv*, to return. What does it mean to return to this place, this building, this community, your heritage, each and every year? What responsibility do we have to those who came before us and to those who will come after us? This is not a sermon about discovering the beauty that is living a life of Jewish spiritual practice, though that is something that is true. No – this is about what it means to do the work, to double down, to be a “light unto the nations;” to inspire others; and to re-inspire ourselves as we re-discover the spiritual strength that is found in living our lives as Jews. This is a sermon about how, at a time when so much of what we may have believed or experienced in the past seems uprooted, it is so essential that we re-root ourselves in the very thing that has sustained us for millenia: Judaism.

So where to begin? We start by getting back to basics- by committing ourselves to being students of Judaism, day in and day out. Now, I am not asking this to shame anyone (so no raising hands!). How many people feel like you really

know the Torah and the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) – and not just the familiar stories from the garden of Eden to the Exodus from Egypt? How many know more than the basics about our holidays and rituals? How many feel like you have a deep understanding of the prayers in our siddur? How many have spent time really delving into the deep well of Jewish texts, from rabbinic texts like the Mishna and Talmud, to more contemporary texts from the scholars of our time like Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, or Rabbi Judith Hauptman? Jewish learning goes well beyond what kids learn in Hebrew School, or even in Jewish day school. It goes well beyond the prayers and rituals that go along with preparing for a bar or bat mitzvah. It goes well beyond a course here or there in college, and well beyond basic familiarity with the Bible. I have been a student of Judaism for my entire life – 7 years in a Jewish day school, 4 years in my synagogue's "Hebrew high school," 4 years studying Jewish history and texts and language during college, including a full year living and learning in Israel, and then 6 years of rabbinical school. Even with all of these years of learning, I still sometimes feel like I have barely scratched the surface. I still study Jewish texts every single day, and I learn new things every day - whether it be new content or even just a new perspective on something I learned in the past. That's not because I am a rabbi, it is because I am a student of Judaism.

Our sages teach, *Talmud Torah k'neged kulam*, the study of Torah, Jewish learning, is equivalent to the performance of all of the mitzvot. What do they mean? That the basis, the foundation, for **everything** that we do, is found in learning. And why is that so critical? First, it is hard to hold onto something, to gain wisdom and insight and meaning from something, if we know very little about it. Just think about your professional lives for a moment. You gain meaning from your work (hopefully) because you know a lot about it. The more you know, the deeper your connection to the work, and the better you can perform.

I once had a study partner when I was first in rabbinical school who couldn't believe that we were "wasting our time," studying about oxen goring people. What does any of this have to do with being a rabbi- he wondered impatiently? I thought back then, and remain convinced, that even though some topics or texts may on the surface seem irrelevant to our lives today, the study of these ancient texts helps us "think" like Jews. We study these texts – not only because they are beautiful, and wise, and sometimes even funny- but because they help us learn how to think critically. They help us learn how to hold onto complexity and how to be analytical and thoughtful when confronting questions and challenges. There is a reason for the joke "two Jews, three opinions." Because Jewish tradition is not monolithic or straightforward - it's complex, but in the most amazing ways. Jewish learning helps us sharpen our ability to understand complex and nuanced issues. As more and more people get information from

two minute videos online, as we scroll by information that is curated to our online habits by algorithms and trapping us in an echo chamber, as we are bombarded by half-truths and bias reporting, we, **as Jewish learners**, can use the skills borne from Jewish study so that we can avoid binary thinking and not be afraid of complexity.

Where to begin? I'm not expecting anyone here to dedicate every day to Jewish learning. I'm not expecting you to go to rabbinical school. But I am expecting and challenging everyone here to make the time to just learn on a regular basis. The key is not how much you learn, or even *what* topics you focus on. It's just about getting *started*, and then finding a way to make your learning habitual. Maybe daily, but minimally, weekly. Come to a class at the synagogue, find a podcast, take an online class, read a book. (And as always, if you send me an email or give me a call, I would love to help you get started, or "re-started," with your Jewish learning.)

If you're distressed by the state of the world around us, and the way Jews and Israel are struggling, and you want to "do something" to channel your Jewish anxiety, pride, and connection into something meaningful: start learning. Because knowledge, and the life that comes from living that knowledge, is something that no one can ever take away from you.

Now while education is necessary, it is not sufficient. There is a well-known discussion in the Talmud between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva as to what was considered more important, study or action. Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: "Action is greater." Rabbi Akiva answered saying: "Study is greater." And then the entire group of elders and students that were studying together concluded (surprise) that they were *both* right- study is greater, but only because it leads to practice.¹

Learning is critical, but one of the most basic things that this moment requires of us is that we live our lives, proudly, and actively, as Jews. And we cannot just “phone it in” and expect to get anything worthwhile out of it. It takes work, and while that work starts with learning, it also requires embracing the opportunity to live “Jewishly.”

I am not talking about “bagels and lox” Judaism. Our inheritance cannot be reduced to cultural and ethnic markers of identity alone (even if they are delicious!). No – I mean that we must each commit ourselves to living our daily lives as Jews. This can and will mean different things for every person in this room.

Truly living as Jews means more than wearing a Jewish star necklace, more than exchanging gifts on Hanukkah, and even more than coming to synagogue on

¹ Kiddushin 40b

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Living Jewishly impacts every bite of food we put in our mouths. Living Jewishly dictates the rhythm of every week of the year. Living Jewishly requires us to be mindful on a daily basis, to recognize and express gratitude, to live by a code of ethics, and to treat everyone around us with kindness and compassion.

Listen, I know that practicing Judaism takes work. I know that it is not always meaningful at each moment, and maybe some traditions you grew up with or have seen others practice feel irrelevant to your life today. But I also know that living Jewishly is the key to holding onto our identity and our heritage, and the only thing that will ultimately sustain us as a people.

Despite the unimaginable trauma and pain they experienced, it's been inspiring to hear the ways some of the Israeli hostages maintained hope and faith while in captivity. Daniella Gilboa and four of her fellow captives learned how to recite Shalom Aleichem in Arabic, so they could chant it without being overheard. Eliya Cohen would recite the prayer for wearing tefillin every day and recite Kiddush on Friday night over a cup of water. Agam Berger got her hands on a siddur in captivity, and tried to keep Jewish observances including fasting on Tisha b'Av.

This past summer, Agam explained why. She reflected:

*"One year ago, I was underground in a Hamas tunnel—and I chose to fast," she said. "Even there, I connected to our collective memory of destruction and resilience...We've never surrendered to despair. Even after Auschwitz, we built a nation...I held onto my identity. They could take my freedom, but not my soul."*²

Former Knesset member Dov Lipman shared the following story about another former hostage, Keith Siegel, who was held by Hamas for 484 days:

"[he] searched for his Jewish identity while in captivity, and he found it in small prayers. He started saying blessings over food which he had never said before, and the 'Shema' prayer which he had never recited in his life...

"He said that amidst all that hell, he wanted to remember that he was Jewish, that there was meaning to his people and to the place from which he came, and that strengthened him greatly...

"After he returned, [his daughter] asked him what he wanted to do for [their] first Shabbat meal together. I imagined he'd want some dish he loves or a good challah. He replied, 'You know what I want most of all? A kippah and a Kiddush cup.'"

It is mind boggling when you stop to think about it- reminiscent of the stories we've heard from the Holocaust, of people who in some hard to imagine way held onto their faith and their Jewish practices. And these stories certainly challenge all of us, who are free and safe and privileged by our basic ability to choose to live Jewishly.

²<https://vinnews.com/2025/08/03/former-hostage-agam-berger-i-chose-to-fast-in-the-tunnels-on-tisha-bav/>

None of these suggestions are meant to pass judgment or make anyone feel guilty. But they are meant to challenge us all to engage in the work necessary to develop thick, rich, and emotionally significant attachments to our Judaism. Attachments that can help us remain steady and grounded during these impossible times.

I often sit with congregants who are worried about the Jewish future, worried about their children and their grandchildren and their connection to Judaism. But worrying is not a strategy. IF we want our children and grandchildren to know where they come from, if we want them to have the knowledge to make choices about their own Jewish practice as parents, and grandparents- then **we** must know enough, and practice enough, to serve as resources for them. The old metaphor of being a “link in the chain of Jewish tradition” is powerful. And if we don’t work on strengthening *our own link in the chain*, if we allow it to rust or get worn down, then the entire chain is weaker for it, and the other links will have less or nothing to hold onto.

A few more thoughts: In addition to Jewish education and Jewish practice; we must speak out, forcefully and regularly, against the anti-Semitism that has exploded around us once again. I cannot emphasize this enough- it is not about one party versus the other, it is not about one “side” versus the other. It is about us, as Jews, understanding that we are small and often put in the middle in an attempt to divide our loyalties and create disunity. But we must be smarter than

that. We must remember that we are a part of a people, who certainly do not always agree, but that must always strive to stick together.

We cannot and must not only be reactive in this moment. Many of us are in pain, we are afraid, we are disoriented, filled with questions and angst as Jews. But we have plenty of love in our hearts to share. We have plenty of goodness to bring to our people, to our neighbors, to our world. Goodness, love, and chesed that stem from the Torah that we study and the Judaism that we practice.

Israeli actress Gal Gadot, also known as Wonder Woman, said at ADL's "Never Is Now" conference last year: *"We will confront antisemitism, we will call it out, but we will never let it defeat us—or define us. Because our love is stronger than their hate."*

We must respond to the hate with love- love of our heritage, love of our fellow Jew, and love of our fellow human beings.

Finally, I want to invite you to take a moment to look around. Stand up if you want- look at the faces of people you haven't seen in a while, of people who you don't know, of people who you recognize, but whose names you may have forgotten.

These are your people.

We are **a people**. We are **a tribe**.

We are all different, we all have our own opinions and proclivities, our own likes and dislikes. We don't all agree, whether we're talking about American politics, Israeli politics, Mets vs. Yankees, Jets vs. Giants, soft Matzah balls or sinkers (!)...but surely we can learn to accept our differences without creating division or disengagement. Because the beautiful people in this room, and the beautiful people in synagogues around the country, and around the world are all our people. They are our family. We are, as Israeli singer and songwriter Yishai Ribo sings, *shayakh la'am*, forever connected to this nation and people, to this tribe, our tribe. That's why you can't do certain things without a mini tribe – a minyan – and that's why the Hasidim teach that each one of us is represented by a letter in the Torah. None of us are entirely complete without the others.

Though I began writing this on Tisha b'Av, the saddest day of the year, I am sharing these words on Rosh Hashanah, the day of renewal and rebirth. We are not fatalistic as Jews. While we know that there is so much beyond our control, we are also taught, as the Sefat Emet once said in reference to the Unetaneh Tokef, *Chotam Yad Kol Adam Bo*, it is our own signature in the Book of Life. We may not have total control over our fate, but we do have some control over our story.

So, my friends, it is time to pick ourselves up, to dust ourselves off, *and to live, proudly as Jews*. As our liturgy says each morning, *v'lo nevosh le'olam va'ed*, we must not be embarrassed, or made to feel ashamed – ever. Find something to learn, commit to a new Jewish practice, stand up against the hatred directed at our people- lean in, loud and proud to live as Jews- even if you are uncertain, especially if you are afraid. You **will** discover meaning. You **will** discover purpose. You **will** discover wisdom. And you **will discover** what it means to be rooted, to the tree of life, that has kept us together for thousands of years. As we begin this New Year together, it is time to reset, renew, and return, not just to synagogue- but to our practice, and our people. L'Shanah Tovah.