

Being Uncomfortable

Rosh Hashanah Morning Day 1 – Makom NY

Thursday, October 3, 2024 at 10:00am

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Good morning. Shanah Tovah. How have you been? All of these greetings are typical for a Rosh Hashanah morning, and yet, they make us feel uncomfortable this particular year.

Good morning? It's not a good morning. There are still 101 hostages being held in Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of IDF soldiers are fighting on multiple fronts to protect the state of Israel. Our beloved, precious Jewish State is under attack with Hamas, with Hezbollah, with Iran, and with so many more of its neighbors. The entire region is in shambles. And the world is a mess.

Shanah Tovah? Will it be a good year? We never imagined we would still be talking about hostages one year later. We have no idea what tomorrow will bring. Even in the home front, the amount of antisemitism and hatred is on the rise, and we no longer need to live in the middle of the country to feel it. Our hearts are broken. Our minds are striving to comprehend the unimaginable. A good year? How could it be?

How have you been? Typically, we asked that question in any circumstance, and it works. I've been good; the kids are good, busy, but good. No, not this year. It seems we would have to be somewhat oblivious to ask a question such as this. How have I been? How could I be? I feel like the world is falling apart around me. I never imagined I would live during such times. I think about the hostages every day. I'm worried about my Israeli friends, those fighting in the army and those who have to live with the reality of their new lives. I worry about the college students, my own and all of yours. When will we hear about the next crazy protest or antisemitic acts? I worry about our children. What kind of world will they have to live in? to thrive in? What will they tell their children?

And so, the typical greetings make me uncomfortable. And sometimes I forget. Just for a moment. I get on the phone with someone I haven't spoken with for a while, and I say how are you? And then I immediately realize, what a foolish question. How could they be? How many emails have I begun and deleted because, because - just for a moment - I thought the world was somewhat normal. And then I was brought back to the reality of today.

So many of us have reminders, reminders to ourselves and for others, of the world we are living in. These reminders are pinned to our lapels, worn around our necks, posted on our lawns, replaced in our cover photos and profile pictures. For me, the biggest reminder – the one I didn't really need – is on my nails. If ever, for just a moment, I forget the pain of the world today, I glance down at my hands and see the flag of Israel painted on my nails, and I am connected. I can't forget.

How are we **feeling**? We feel angry, sad, frustrated, devastated. We are worried about today, and we are terrified about tomorrow. And it is not just about Israel, it's about antisemitism. It's the feeling we have as Jews, balancing pride, with fear, wondering when it will stop, when will this tiny minority of people no longer be the focal point for so much of the world.

We of course know when to ‘turn it on’. We are able to put on a smile in front of the children. We can set aside our sorrows while supporting friends and family with difficult personal moments in their lives. We can walk the grocery store and run into an acquaintance, and offer a casual ‘how are you?’ We can see a neighbor on the street and admire the weather and the beautiful sky. And for a moment, life is good, the world is calm, and we have no worries.

But once we are past the niceties, once the initial greetings have been set aside, the reality of the world, of our feelings, of our being, is just sitting there, to fully understand. And we become uncomfortable. Just this week I was at Family Bagel, placing our order for break-fast, and after Neal, the owner, and I chatted about nothing for 20 seconds, we then had a 10-minute conversation about the crazy world we find ourselves in. How could we not? It IS our reality. Ignoring that reality feels wrong; it feels dishonest.

I think often to an experience I had during rabbinic school, which reminds me of the moment we find ourselves in today. On the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College, there is a large classroom building. We would move from class to class, room to room, as per our schedule. And at 11:00 AM, most people would make their way to the chapel for our morning t’fillah, our worship services. Every Monday and Thursday morning, we would read from the Torah, and we would lift the Torah up, just as we do in our community, and we would say the words: “*zot haTorah asher sam Moshe* - this is the Torah that Moses put before the people of Israel, at the command of God, by the hand of Moses”. Literally, God’s Torah.

And then... in my first year in Cincinnati, my next class was Jewish history. And our textbook: The Hebrew Bible. My professor required us to tear apart the text chapter by chapter, word by word. In that 75-minutes, it was no longer the Torah that God gave to the Jewish people through Moses. It was just a textbook. I literally grappled with this concept for the rest of my years in rabbinic school. How could I walk in the chapel and talk about the holiness of the Torah and our God, and then walk into the history class and tear those same words apart?

At first, I separated them. In the chapel, I was one kind of Jew, and I clung to the prayers and the *kavanot*, the intentions. In the classroom, I was another kind of Jew, one with intellectual curiosity and lots of questions. For some time, that worked. And then I realized – it wasn’t REAL to compartmentalize. It wasn’t honest, nor true, nor right. I had to learn to hold both of those truths at the same time.

I believe this is the world we find ourselves in today – figuring out how to live, how to function, in our day-to-day, while balancing the meta questions and challenges of our time. How to live with the uncomfortable, not setting it aside, nor abandoning it, but owning it, and finding ways to be true to ourselves, finding ways to simply breathe.

I want to speak for a moment about breath, with thanks to a colleague for a beautiful insight. Today is Rosh Hashanah – the anniversary of the Creation of the World. The main mitzvah that we observe on this day? The blowing of the shofar, an act of breath. Simple, yet powerful. Calming, yet awakening. What is it about breath that is so powerful? The Hebrew word for breath is *neshama*, also the Hebrew word for soul. When we exert so much breath to blow the shofar, to wake up our soul, we let go of some of the ‘soul’ to make room – for what is to come in this New Year. We also read the story of creation, and in the very beginning of the Book of Beresheit, of Genesis, God does three things: God creates, God separates and God names.

Quickly it becomes clear that human beings are meant to imitate God by doing these three things. We are commanded to create life. We are meant to distinguish right from wrong – think back to the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. And, we are presented with the opportunity to name, both literally and more importantly, by making sure we lead our lives by making a good name for ourselves, a שם טוב.

In many ways, on October 7th, these basic values were taken away. Life was destroyed, disregarded, negated. The ability to see and understand right and wrong was clearly ignored. And living our lives by making a good name, that was taken away too, from so many innocent victims who didn't get a chance to create their *shem tov*. Our job today, and tomorrow, and next week and next month is to restore these basic values.

How do we imitate God? We think back to Genesis. First, we must create. We must create beauty, beautiful relationships, moments of Tzedek, of righteousness and moments of tzedakah. We must create dialogue, and opportunity, and learning. We must create sacred moments – Jewish moments – not just in response to those who hate us, but also because of those who love us. We must create life, through living.

Then, we must be able to distinguish right from wrong. The Garden of Eden – that seems so obvious – simply don't eat the fruit from the Tree. But it was not so easy. Temptation is very powerful. We are tempted to use words in ways that are not helpful. Words can be powerful tools to create dialogue, conversation, and understanding. We are tempted to meet violence with violence. We simply cannot. We are tempted to defend ourselves, our people, our Israel through hatred, but we cannot. We know the difference between right and wrong – we just need to remind ourselves, and those around us. We need to hold ourselves and others accountable for actions and for thoughts. Isn't that the point of these High Holy Days?

And finally, we must remember that when we die, it is our Shem Tov, our good name, that lives on for all eternity. I say those words at almost every funeral where I officiate. What does it mean to have a Shem Tov, a good name? This is not judged by how much money we have, not even by how much we give. It isn't judged simply by how much schooling we gain, nor by the number of letters next to our name. Perhaps Rabbi Simeon in the Mishnah said it best: *“There are three crowns: the crown of the law, the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of royalty. But the crown of a good name, to which anyone can aspire, is greater than them all.”*¹

So how do we gain that Shem Tov, that good name? We find our way to truth. And I don't mean truth in the political sense. I mean truth in the spiritual sense, in the ethical sense. The study of Mussar, the moralistic movement developed in Eastern European Judaism, has much to say about truth from a more ethical perspective. Mussar acknowledges that a person can obey all the laws and still be a bad person, and so it focuses instead on rectifying the middot, or character traits, from within. How do we do this? Exactly in the ways we are meant to prepare and act in these High Holy Days – through introspection and self-accounting, or *cheshbon ha'nefesh*. The simple goal of Mussar is to determine where one is falling short, and to discover how to improve one's behavior.

What does Mussar say about truth, as explained by Alan Morinis in his book *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*? Mussar says that “truth is not something we discover at one time. That is how

¹ Talmud Pirke Avot 4:17

things are for God, but not for us. For Judaism, truth—as understood and internalized by humanity—is a developmental process.

Truth is delicate. Its fabric is so easily stretched and torn. Truth is versatile. Truth can be simple, but more often it is deceptively complex, and not always singular. And as a great rabbi teaches, we are easily confused about truth, because truth can appear before us in the guise of falsehood, just as falsehood can show up in the trappings of truth.²

There are great debates in our Jewish texts about truth, always presenting multiple sides – no surprise. Hillel and Shammai, who always argued over everything, debated what one says to a bride at a wedding, how one greets her, even if she is not so beautiful.³ Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya shares the story of what to do when one is given a meal by a hostess that is not so tasty.⁴ And Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach in later years grapples with how to answer publicly a difficult question.⁵

None of these scenarios are black and white – there are multiple ways, according to Mussar, to respond in these circumstances, but there is a clear path of how one must grapple with truth – it is never simple, it is not direct, and it certainly isn't easy. As Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel of the Talmud used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace, as it is said: “execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates” (Zechariah 8:16).⁶

How else do we find our way to that Shem Tov? We seek *chesed*, acts of kindness. At a time when our world is filled with brokenness and woundedness, we see *chesed* acts all around us – we must remember to open our eyes and look.

A few quick reminders of *chesed* this past year:

- A friend was visiting Israel a few months after October 7th. He visited a tent in the Gaza Envelope, not far from where the soldiers were based. He met the coordinator of this respite area, and he saw the incredible work they were doing. He saw a pile of books, simple everyday books, sitting there, that were donated so the soldiers could escape the horrors of war for just a few minutes. The man showing him around said – you know the donor. My friend thought – how do you know I know the donor – I just met you. And the man explained – remember the grandmother who was held in captivity and released in the first group of hostages? On the very next day, she brought over books for the soldiers, as a way to say thank you for something for which there was no way to thank.
- Or the story I heard from a couple of weeks ago about a man named Zvika Gringlik, who by accident hit a car. He exchanged details with the owner of the car and said to the owner: “I'm to blame; I'll pay for the damages.” They arranged to meet together at the garage on Wednesday.

² Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, page 170-171.

³ Talmud Ketubot 16b:12-17a:1

⁴ Talmud Eruvin 53b:18-19

⁵ Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, page 164.

⁶ Talmud Pirke Avot 1:18

On Wednesday the woman arrives at the garage and Zvika Gringlik is nowhere to be found. She tries to call him and he does not answer his phone. Thursday the woman sends him a message: “I’m really disappointed, your behavior is not nice, we arranged for Wednesday and you didn’t come.”

Tzvika sees the message and immediately sends her a message back: “I’m very sorry. On Tuesday my son Shaul was killed in Gaza, so I couldn’t come.” The woman immediately apologizes. She herself had been at the funeral but she did not make the connection between the fallen soldier and his father. Later that day, she arrived at the shiva home to comfort the grieving family.

During the shiva, Zvika told her: ‘When the shiva is over, I will transfer the amount of the repair to your account.’ She told him: “Don’t worry about it, I don’t want the money.”

At the first opportunity he had, he sent her the 2,000 NIS. She rejected the payment and sent the following message: “There is no need. The owner of the garage heard that the person who hit the car was the father of a soldier who fell in Gaza, so he fixed the car without taking any money.”

- And of course, the story that many of you know – the story of Peter, the owner of Golden Globe Diner in Huntington, the story of a man who, from October 8th, put up signs of support for Israel, and signs for the hostages being held in Gaza, and he had no idea how it would impact his business negatively, but he continued, and the Jewish community came out in droves, and continues to do so, to support him for supporting us. I hope you will come back on Yom Kippur Afternoon at 5pm and hear Peter’s full story in his own words.

Friends, this year has been difficult, painful, exhausting. We are allowed to feel that. Actually, we must be truthful with ourselves and with others about the challenges. We must embrace the uncomfortable. We must acknowledge the pain. We must live between the *kodesh* and the *chol*, the holy and the mundane.

AND, we must realize that there is *chesed*, there is kindness and goodness in the world. It doesn’t replace the horror – but the two must live together in our *neshamot*, in our souls, and when we hear the blast of the shofar today, let them both find space in our hearts.

My final thoughts of truth, *chesed* and prayer in this most uncomfortable of times:

- May we seek truth that isn’t right but is just and fair.
- May we open our eyes to see the *chesed* around us, and may we bring *chesed* to others.
- May we all go from darkness to light.
- May we know that we are not alone.
- May Israel, the Jewish state, have the right to exist peacefully among her neighbors.
- May all those living or wanting to live peacefully in the Middle East soon know peace in their lands.
- May the soldiers be protected from harm’s way.
- **And may the hostages be released and brought home NOW.**

Amen v’ Amen!

Sermon Anthem: Acheinu - From the Darkness to the Light

Acheinu - our brothers – acheinu
Achoteinu - our sisters – achoteinu
Acheinu - our brothers – acheinu
Achoteinu - our sisters - achoteinu

Wherever you are
Whatever we must do
We are always, always there with you...
We are with you

Our brothers - acheinu
We are with you - Our sisters - achoteinu
HaMakom - Shechina, m'kor ha'rachamim
Racheim na, rachami na aleihem
V'hotzi'eem Mee'tzara lee'r'va'cha
Mei'a'fei'la l'ora
Mee'shee'bud lee'g'ulah, v'hotzee'eim lee'g'ulah

Our brothers - acheinu lee'g'ulah –
Our sisters - achoteinu

From the darkness to the light
From the darkness to the light
Make everything alright
From the darkness to the light
From the darkness to the light
Make everything alright
We are with you

Composed by Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback and Dr. Tali Tadmor