

Choosing Each Other in the Chaos

There's something about being here together tonight, at the start of a new year, that always fills me with gratitude. It is definitely the familiar faces, and it is also the simple act of gathering because that, in itself, is sacred.

Rosh Hashanah always begins with presence. With people making the choice to walk through those doors, to sit in these chairs, to log in from home, to say: *Yes, being Jewish still matters to me. Yes, I want to be counted here.*

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to belong to the Jewish people. Not in some abstract way, but in the most real, personal sense. What does it mean to be part of this family, especially now? Especially after these past two years?

Since October 7, our community—like Jewish communities everywhere—has felt the strain. We've felt it from outside, as hatred against Jews and Israel has surged in ways many of us have never experienced. And we've felt it inside too, among ourselves. We've disagreed. We've hurt each other with words. I know that, at times, I have contributed to that pain. My deep love for Israel has meant that I have not spoken much about Palestinian suffering. I have consciously chosen to center the Jewish narrative. And I imagine some of you have felt that. I want to name that honestly, tonight. I am aware that my remarks, or lack thereof, have been unsettling for some.

Last year, my Rosh Hashanah sermons were heavy. They had to be. We were reeling. But this year, I want us to do something different, at least for this evening. I don't want to ignore the messiness of our world or the fractures within our own people. But I also don't want us to lose sight of what's most essential: that even in the chaos, we are called to hold on to one another. To build something sacred out of the mess.

For several months I have been thinking about how the atmosphere we find ourselves in has ties to the creation story, both the one we learn in science class and the one we learn in shul. According to the former, the universe as we understand it began with a “Big Bang.” Moments after that initial cosmic explosion elementary particles cooled and expanded over time. As this chaos of particles scattered across space and time, the formation of increasingly complex structures began to take form as temperatures dropped. Over hundreds of millions of years gravity pulled together cooling gases to form the solid structures that became the stars we see in the sky. Out of the initial chaos came magnificently beautiful order.

The Torah begins in exactly the same manner. *Bereshit*, the beginning, was anything but calm. It was initially filled with chaos. We like to imagine creation as orderly: God says “Let there be,” and so there is. Cue light, cue land, cue life. But Genesis doesn’t open that way. It begins: “And the earth was unformed and void, *tohu vavohu*, and darkness was on the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2).

Tohu vavohu is a phrase Torah commentators have tried to unpack for generations. In essence it means chaos, wildness, darkness, a great howling waste.

And then comes something remarkable. God doesn’t erase the chaos. God doesn’t sweep it aside. God creates within it. God fashions all things from it. Creation happens by separating and clarifying: light from darkness, land from sea, evening from morning. Judaism calls this *havdalah*—the act of making distinctions. That’s how we make meaning. And the first distinction of all?

“*Vayomer Elohim: Yehi or.* And God said: Let there be light.”

Not: Let there be perfection. Not: Let there be world peace. Not: Let there be answers. Just light. A little clarity in the dark. And then another act of separation. And another. And another. Until the mess becomes the world we inhabit. Still messy, but not a mess.

And just like God, we begin our year not by waiting for perfection, but by starting within the mess.

I love that the Torah starts this way because it's honest and it's not unlike the Big Bang theory. It doesn't pretend that creation was smooth. It doesn't try to present the world as something polished. It tells us: beginnings are messy and they take time.

That's true cosmically, but it's also true personally. We don't get to start our years from scratch. Whether it's Rosh Hashanah or January 1, we start with the griefs we haven't yet processed, the relationships still unsettled, the questions unanswered. The old simply rolls into the new.

This past year has been a kind of *tohu vavohu* for us as Jews.

The war in Gaza has fractured our people. Antisemitism has surged worldwide. (More on this tomorrow morning.) Political disagreements have strained friendships, broken conversations, and left many asking, "Where do I belong?"

Some of you have told me, "I don't know if I belong at Beth Israel anymore." I've heard it. And it breaks my heart.

Because yes, the world is chaotic. And yes, our Jewish world feels like it's on the edge of snapping apart. But we cannot let that be our story.

So how do we do this? By focusing on what Jews do best: showing up for each other. If there's one thing we know how to do, it's celebrate and mourn together. Jews do life-cycles beautifully.

When there is a bar or bat mitzvah, even if you do not know the student or the family, you come. You clap, you celebrate, you show up. When there is a baby naming, you are here to shower the family with love. When there is a new conversion ceremony, you welcome the new Jew with warmth. And when there is a funeral, you bring food, you come to the shiva, and you comfort the mourners. Politics do not matter in these moments. What

matters is that these congregants are part of our Jewish family, and we take care of each other. That's who we are at our best. That's what we need to reclaim in all aspects of our community.

There's a story about Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, who lived through pogroms, exile, and personal illness. He once said: "*It is a great mitzvah to always be joyful.*" His students asked him how he could say that when so much suffering surrounded them. And Rabbi Nachman answered:

"Because despair is not from heaven. Despair is a trap of the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. But joy—that is how we remind ourselves that God still dwells with us. When we dance, when we sing, when we laugh, we resist the darkness. We push it back, even for a moment. And in that moment, holiness returns."¹

For Rabbi Nachman, joy was not frivolous. It was survival. It was theology. It was an act of courage.

But here's where we've struggled: sometimes, we confuse community with conformity and we let our differences in worldview get in the way.

Friends, if that's where we are, then we need to ask ourselves: am I letting one disagreement outweigh the sacred bonds of community? We need to remember why we are here, and what holds us together. Congregation Beth Israel is bigger than any one sermon, any one disagreement, any one moment of anger. We are so much more than that.

To belong here is to accept that we won't always see things the same way—but we will still sing together, study together, pray together, and hold each other when it matters most.

¹ *Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, Likutei Moharan II:24*

This summer, I officiated a wedding. It was one of those perfect Bellingham evenings—the sun lingering in the sky, the air just cool enough to make you forget the heat of the day. There was love, laughter, food, drink. But the moment that stays with me is the hora. There we were: a circle of Jews, Reform, Conservative, secular, traditional, left, right, center. Some who see the world through opposite lenses. And yet, we danced. We pulled each other into the circle. We clapped, we sang, we lifted chairs. For those few minutes, we were being Jewish together. We were celebrating a new marriage.

One week ago our community came together, along with what seemed to be the whole city, to honor the life of Emil Hecht and to support his family who is part of our family. People showed up because Emil was a mensch, a pillar of this community, and someone we loved. We came to mourn, to comfort, to honor an incredible life. No one cared where he stood on this issue or that. No. Everyone saw this man for the mensch that he was, not for the positions he held.

And I thought: this is it. This is how we resist the chaos. Not by fixing everything, or by insisting on hearing our own views reflected back to us, but by refusing to let go of each other. This is what community looks like. Our ancestors knew this feeling too.

The Golden Calf nearly broke the people in the wilderness. Leadership faltered, trust collapsed, and it could have ended right there. But it didn't. Moses interceded, the people rebuilt, and Torah carried them forward.

Centuries later, the kingdom itself shattered. Judah and Israel were in utter upheaval. And still, Jewish life endured. Prophets rose to call people back. Communities regrouped. Our story continued.

The destruction of the Second Temple was not only Rome's doing. Our sages tell us it was caused by *sinat chinam*—baseless hatred among Jews themselves. Jews denouncing Jews, treating each other as enemies. It nearly ended us. But not quite. From the ashes of Jerusalem, the rabbis

created something entirely new: rabbinic Judaism. The Judaism we live today. They chose to transform chaos into order.

Yes, our people fractured. Sometimes bitterly. But the miracle of Jewish history is that the fractures were never the final word. Again and again, Jews chose to rebuild, to reconnect, to create something new out of the chaos.

And so we stand here, two thousand years later. Alive. Still arguing, yes, but also still praying, still gathering, still building community.

We are here tonight because generation after generation, Jews chose resilience and showing up over rupture. They chose to light candles, to sing, to learn, to raise their children as Jews. They knew better than to give up on each other, even when the fractures seemed unfixable.

And that, friends, is our inheritance.

So what do we do this year?

I want to be clear: I am not saying our disagreements don't matter. They do. They are real. For some of you, they have caused sleepless nights, strained friendships, maybe even made you question if this is still your community. I know that. I see that.

But I am also saying: they cannot be the only thing that defines us. If the only lens through which we view each other is political or partisan, then we will lose something far more precious than an argument, we will lose each other. And that, I cannot accept.

So this year, I am asking us to reactivate something deeper: our Judaism. Our joy. Our compassion. Our yearning to be in community. Our ability to see one another as whole people, not just as positions in a debate.

That doesn't mean ignoring the hard conversations. We should still wrestle with them. Torah is, after all, a tradition of argument. But when we walk into

this sanctuary, or a shiva house, or a simcha, let's remember: the essence of Jewish life has never been consensus. It has always been connection. So let's reactivate that. Let's choose to dance the hora. To lift a bar or bat mitzvah kid in a chair. To sit at shiva for someone we barely knew. To study Torah with someone we don't agree with. The act of choosing each other is the healthiest, holiest, and most necessary thing we can do in this fractured time.

If you remember nothing else from tonight, remember this: Even in times of chaos and deep disagreement, the truest strength of Jewish life is choosing one another—showing up with joy, compassion, and resilience, and building sacred community together.

Rosh Hashanah is not a perfect reset. We enter it with all of our baggage and memories. The *tohu vavohu* will always be there, in our world and in our hearts. But so will the chance to create, to sanctify, and to begin again.

We have to remember that when the world feels like too much, we don't retreat—we lean into each other. We form a circle, we grab a hand, we sing with abandon. We step on each other's toes and laugh, because that's what it means to belong. And together we say: *Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu*—how fortunate we are, how good is our portion.

This is our charge for the year ahead: to keep choosing one another, even in the chaos.

Shanah Tovah.