

“Cultivating a Steadfast Heart”

(or: “Yes, the World is Unsettling, but It’s Time to Emerge from Under the Covers!”)

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum

High Holiday Sermon 5783 (2022)

Last week, I received an email from another Jewish organization that didn’t sit very well with me. The opening paragraph of the email read like this:

“If you’re like me, this Rosh Hashanah feels very different – and in the best way possible. After almost three years of Covid-induced uncertainty and anxiety, this is the first Rosh Hashanah where I feel much more confident and optimistic about making plans for the new year. Gone is the persistent feeling that we should “wait and see what the next couple of months bring”; I am looking forward to the new year with excitement – and without all the hedging!”

I sat in front of my computer screen for a minute and shook my head. Seriously? “Confident and optimistic”? Gone is the persistent feeling of wait and see? Excitement, without all the hedging? I wish, but I’m just not there...

I’m not sure that we’re still *in* the pandemic exactly, but we’re also not *not* in it. Like almost everyone I know, I’m still struggling to figure out what the new normal – of day to day routines, and priorities, and work and life – will feel like. To be honest, it’s a bit unsettling. Even more, though, the landscape around me, when I pick my head up to take in the world, feels tenuous and volatile. As we watch rivers dry up in Europe and hurricanes gain in intensity, climate change feels like a ticking time bomb. With Putin in Ukraine and the last election cycle here still casting a long shadow over our upcoming midterm elections, I worry about the state of democracy and the return of fascism, both here in the U.S. and around the world. As a woman, watching what’s happening to women in Iran and Afghanistan under repressive patriarchal religious regimes and considering the implications of the overturning of Roe v. Wade closer to home, I am fearful for our collective future. Come to think of it, I’m feeling more than a little bit scared right now... and almost everyone I know is too, when we so much as scratch the surface in conversation. While I would love to embrace straight-up optimism and excitement, that wouldn’t feel entirely honest for this moment, as we enter into the Jewish year.

It took me a long time to settle on what Torah I wanted to share with you this year, maybe because it’s hard to put a finger on what our *world* is this year. It’s messy, and nothing about it

feels easy or clean. It's incredibly tempting – when I think about any of these topics and feel overwhelmed – to want to crawl into bed and pull the covers up over my head and just hide from the world. Perhaps you can relate.

This summer, I traveled to Israel with a group from Kavana here in Seattle and some of our counterparts from Mishkan in Chicago. It was a trip that Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann and I had been dreaming about for years, literally... this was the rescheduled 2020 trip, finally, in 2022. Our hope was to expose members of our emergent Jewish communities here in the United States to many brilliant Israelis and Palestinians... their lives and cultures, their beliefs, hopes and dreams, their realities and their challenges. It was an incredible trip. We ate amazing food, basked in the beauty of the country – the landscape, the revitalized Hebrew language, vibrant Israeli culture – and spent Shabbat with our counterpart rabbis and emergent communities in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. But, it was also a hard and painful trip. Weaving back and forth between Israel proper – that is, the Israel that exists inside the “green line” of the pre-1967 border – and the West Bank, we heard many different perspectives from both Jews and Palestinians about the Occupation. The trip was aptly named a Multiple Narratives tour, and indeed, we heard stories from secular Jews and from religious Jews, from an IDF spokesperson and a global security expert, from Palestinians who reside in West Bank areas A, B, and C, from Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, from Christians and Muslims and Druze. Most of all, as we toured, we were guided by two incredible tour-guides, one Israeli and one Palestinian. Getting to know Karmit and Emili in a deep way – visiting their hometowns and meeting their family members, hearing their takes – often very different from one another – on every place we went, underscored the uniqueness of this particular trip.

The further we got into our journey, the more complicated and weighty it all felt. By about five days in, we had already toured the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, visited the Aida Refugee camp, toured some of the contested neighborhoods on the outskirts of Jerusalem that seem like the roadblocks to a two-state solution, and explored both Palestinian and Jewish trauma at the Banksy Museum in Bethlehem and at Yad Vashem, respectively. And so, we found ourselves, one evening, at a bookshop in East Jerusalem, listening in on an intense conversation between bookshop owner Mahmoud Muna, a champion of Palestinian culture, and Daniel Seidemann, an Israeli attorney and expert in the geopolitics of Jerusalem. Our group was hungry for some hope, by this point, but unfortunately for us, both speakers agreed with one

another that they saw no immediate openings for peace, no prospect for change to happen tomorrow. Mahmoud talked about the daily affronts to Palestinians, the ways in which the Israeli legal and military establishment functions as oppressors. Daniel talked about the horror of understanding that as an Israeli Jew, he is one of Mahmoud's occupiers. But, both men did have some hope. Mahmoud talked of the work he was doing within Palestinian society, to create cultural change and lay the groundwork for a radically different future. And then Daniel said something like this:

"Good luck imagining what will happen in the Middle East in 5 years. As a student of history, I know that sometimes change happens more quickly than anyone expects. **Rest assured, there will be a moment. If the internal work has already happened, we can catch it. My great fear is that the moment will come and we will miss it.**"

Mahmoud's persistence and Daniel's comment spoke to me then, and this may have been the only thing that got me through the horrible situation we witnessed the next day when we visited Hebron and saw a Palestinian city with nearly 800,000 Palestinian residents under Israeli military control, with streets that our Palestinian guide Emili wasn't even allowed to join the rest of the group in walking down. We met Issa, a Palestinian activist who had been repeatedly harassed by his Jewish neighbors and arrested by the military who police the West Bank, who was essentially living in a cage within a cage. It felt like there was no hope to end this oppressive situation, but Daniel's words rang in my ears, and I found myself wondering, **what am I doing now to make sure that when the moment for peace and justice does arise – when there is an opening, as one is sure to come – that we will be poised to catch it and not miss the moment. How do we stay ready, alert, open for such opportunities? How do we maintain faith?**

This, finally, felt like the right Torah to share with all of you, as we begin our New Year in a moment of tremendous messiness and unsettledness, on so many levels. Because again, the temptation in the face of such overwhelm is to burrow down into a safe place... a bed, a hole, a cave, and wait for the situation to pass. But as Mahmoud and Daniel both taught, we don't have that luxury... **we must do the work – the internal, spiritual work, and the actual work in our communities – to pave the way for future change when the right moments do come along.**

Ever since that conversation in the book-shop in East Jerusalem, **I've been thinking about the theme of readiness... about what it means to be prepared and awake, not hiding, not waiting, but steadfastly standing and resolutely doing the groundwork**, such that we will be ready to catch those moments of opportunity that arise when they do. I started talking through the idea with some of my key conversation partners – with my husband Noam, with Rabbi Jay, with my longtime friend Rabbi Jonah Steinberg, and I'm grateful to each of them for listening and helping to build on these ideas. Jonah, in particular, gave me a great gift, directing me to a couple of lines of Psalm 57, and I'd love to share that text with you now.

Psalm 57 definitely relates to the feeling of being up against an overwhelming situation, with terrible odds. This Psalm is designated as a Psalm of David, "*b'vorcho mipnei shaul bam'arah*," "as he fled from before Saul into the cave." David isn't king yet, but at this point in the story, he knows that he has been tapped by God to become Israel's next king. Unfortunately, Saul, the current king, also knows this and he is filled with rage and goes on a rampage to try to murder David and eliminate his competitor. That's the context in which David finds himself hiding in a cave as the Psalm begins.

David says: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for I seek refuge in You, I seek refuge in the shadow of Your wings, until danger passes." It's awfully easy to imagine him cowering in his cave, curled up into a ball, covers drawn up to his chin, hiding from what's just outside. But, David doesn't stay in that posture for long. By the 8th verse, the Psalm has begun to shift and it's these next two lines, verses 8 and 9, that I want to dig into. Verse 8 begins:

נִכּוֹן לְבִי אֱלֹהִים נִכּוֹן לְבִי . "Nachon libi elohim, nachon libi "

"My heart is steadfast, God, my heart is steadfast." *Nachon* means steadfast, or ready. This is **faith as preparedness**... rather than looking up and out, to God, for protection, David begins instructing his own heart, commanding it to be ready, preparing it, steeling himself for whatever will come next.

And after declaring - twice for emphasis - to God "my heart is steadfast," the Psalmist says **אֲשִׁירָה וְאֶזְמָרָה: "ashira v'azameira," "I will sing and I will chant."** It's not lost on me that this is precisely what we're doing in the Kavana community when we come together in these Days of Awe. In different services with different styles, we sing and chant together, over and over and over again. Each of us individually brings our own readied heart and contributes our voice to a greater song, and in doing so, we give ourselves and one another the gift of fortitude. None of it

can magically make the overwhelm of the world go away; it doesn't eradicate Covid or end climate change or defeat tyrants when we sing together. However, **it also isn't nothing, to be together and let our hearts be in sync.** *Nachon libi, elohim, nachon libi* - my heart is steadfast, God, my heart is steadfast. *Ashira v'azameira* - I will sing and I will chant.

The next line begins with a phrase that's quite hard to translate:

עוֹרָה כְּבוֹדִי *Ura ch'vodi.*

"I will rouse my *kavod* - my glory." Usually we talk about God's *kavod* - as in, You are enthroned "*al kisei k'vodecha*" - "on your throne of glory." But now, through my own readiness, my faith, my song, **I find that I have within myself some *kavod*, some capacity that corresponds to what I've been praying for, my own godliness within.** Do I conceal myself until a better day comes along?, wonders David. Do I wait here in my cave for God to do something?. No, I say to my own *kavod*, my own godly capacity: get up, arise, kick in. Rather than praying up and out, rather than waiting, I pray inward, to myself, to my own capacity.

עוֹרָה כְּבוֹדִי *Ura ch'vodi* is followed by the phrase **עוֹרָה הַנְּבִיל וְכִנּוֹר *ura ha-neivel v'chinor* - "Awake, o harp and lyre."** Once again, music enters the picture here. These are Temple instruments, holy music that necessarily puts the Psalmist in community with other people. Again, I arouse within myself some spiritual force and channel it through song and prayer and community in order to unleash its force.

And finally, we come to the kicker of these two lines:

After "*ura ch'vodi, ura ha-neivel v'chinor,*" the text says: **אֶעֱרֶה שָׁחַר "I will arouse the dawn."** David, who just a handful of verses ago could only hide out in a cave - a dark hole - now emerges... not just to see the dawn but to awaken it, to bring it about, to make it happen, to light up the world.

This is the Torah we need as we face this New Year. As was true for David, for us too, the world really is unsettling, and there is truly reason for us to be afraid. The situations we perceive around us are hard and messy, and they won't be resolved immediately, no matter what we do. It's unlikely that peace in the Middle East will come tomorrow, nor an end to climate change, nor perfect democracy, nor freedom from oppression. And yet, we are not permitted to give into the temptation to burrow into a cave or under the covers and stay there. Maybe we can do it for a few verses, but not forever.

Instead, especially during these Days of Awe, our job is to try to replenish within ourselves the resolve, the faith, the steadfastness we need to keep on keeping on. The Psalmist gives us the recipe card - the formula - for one great way to do so. Instead of hiding in our cave and praying up and out for protection from above, we are directed to look inward, starting within ourselves, with instruction to our own hearts. Next we sing and pray, individually. This, in turn, awakens our capacity to unlock our own godly qualities, which then enables us to take up instruments and make holy music with one another. The end of the chain reaction is so powerful that we arrive at *a'ira shachar*, I will arouse the dawn.

Here at Kavana, these High Holidays - this year, in particular - which is the most “together” we’ve been in quite a few years - we are reminded that we have an amazing capacity to create moments like this and to replenish ourselves in them. **We begin with each of us doing our own individual work, cultivating our own readiness.** And then **we join together in prayer and song**, in the Hall and the Tent and the Grove and the Meadow, and even on Zoom. Doing so does not fix all the problems of the world go away; there’s no magic wand. However, when we start by looking within and then join together with one another, we create something that’s truly beautiful. **It’s not everything but it is also not nothing, for we have the capacity to arouse the dawn, to bring new light into the world.**

The rest of our Israel trip was filled with moments of beauty, and - in fact - many moments of hope. There are so many Israelis and Palestinians who are working together to create grassroots change, who live side by side, who share a vision of a more just and equitable future for all the residents of the tiny strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. There are plenty of incredible people whose hearts are steadfast and ready, who are just waiting for the kind of opening that Daniel Seidemann promised will inevitably come, maybe not today, but certainly sometime soon.

What about us? As we stand at the beginning of our New Year, in these first days of Tishrei, with the moon dark but growing, are we ready? Are we steadfast? Do we have faith?

With the long-range perspective that these holidays give to us, as we feel ourselves in the context of the broad sweep of human history, hopefully we too can believe that there will indeed be openings in the future, opportunities for healing and repair... in Rabbi Jay’s language, messianic cracks that will open up in the world.

Will each of us be ready to catch them, so we are assured that we won't miss these moments of opportunity? I hope so, because our planet, our society and our democracy all desperately need fixing. This year, perhaps my mood isn't bright and sunshiny – that email I received still feels off, somehow – but I am filled with resolve, preparedness, steadfastness and faith. Let us not hide away, but rather, **let's use these holy days to summon within ourselves the resolve we need to face the world with ready hearts.** Let's do it together, with song and prayer so deep that we can feel our own godly abilities summoned from within. Let's do it with musical instruments too, with the joy and power of community. **And then, truly, we will be face this year with determination and excitement; for we have the power to awaken the dawn.**

End-Notes / Texts for Further Study & Reflection:

- Psalm 57 - I invite you to [click here to read the Psalm in its entirety](#), courtesy of Sefaria, focusing especially on verses 8 and 9.
- Billy Collins' poem "[Aristotle](#)". Although it isn't directly quoted here, I have been thinking a lot about the middle stanza, in particular the lines: "This is the middle. Things have had time to get complicated, messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore."
- [The Leper Messiah at the Gates of Rome](#) - a story from the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a, translated by my teacher Rabbi Steve Sager z"l. I didn't end up citing this text either, but it certainly relates to the idea of needing to cultivate spiritual readiness in order not to miss opportunities for redemption.
- Exodus 34 is the source-text for the Thirteen Attributes of God, a core text of the season (and especially Yom Kippur). In [Ex. 34:2](#), God commands Moses, "*Heyei nachon la-boker*," "Be ready by morning" (or maybe "Be ready for the morning"). I can't help but hear echos of Psalm 57:8, and I wonder how Moses's spiritual readiness and steadfastness, as he prepared to ascend Mount Sinai for the second time, relates to our own need for spiritual readiness and steadfastness as we try to manage through our own messy middle of things?