

Let Oneness Reign: A Sermon on Interconnectedness
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For most of the last ten days, we here in Seattle have been waking up to strangeness. The sky has been alternately orange and yellow, gray and thick. Smoke has choked the whole west coast. This is smoke from wildfires - hundreds, and in some cases, even thousands of miles away. The smoke is teaching us lessons that we already know deep down, but really seem to have a hard time internalizing and holding onto: lessons like the fact that we are **connected** beyond what we can immediately see; that our **fate** is bound up in the fate of those who live far from us, those who look like us and those who don't; that we are part of a great **interconnected** world; that there is a **oneness** that transcends. This is the theme I want to talk about with my Kavana community on this Rosh Hashanah holiday, as we enter into 5781 together: **the theme of connection, interconnection and oneness.**

Of course, it doesn't take weeks of smoke to arrive at these themes of unity and interconnectedness. These are all front and center in our Jewish tradition too, and especially in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. And I want to get us there, but by way of another theme first.

As you might know, there are many different names for this holiday that speak to different aspects of it. Rosh Hashanah is alternately known as *Yom HaZikaron* (a day of remembrance), *Yom HaDin* (a day of judgment), and *Yom Harat Olam* (the birthday of the world). It is also called *Yom Teruah*, the day of the sounding the shofar, because it is a coronation day. On this day, we declare that God is *Melech* – sovereign of the world. This language of *Melech / malchuyot* (sovereignty) is embedded in all of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, and it's everywhere. We begin shacharit, our morning service, with a grand *HaMelech*. In the Amidah, we change the language of one of our regular blessings from *ha-el hakadosh*, the holy God to ***hamelech hakadosh*** – the holy **sovereign**. Even Kiddush for Rosh Hashanah – ends with *Melech al kol ha-aretz* (sovereign of the universe).

Malchuyot -- together with its sibling sections, *Zichronot* and *Shofarot* -- constitutes one of the big sections within our Musaf prayers. In the traditional liturgy of Musaf, there are ten biblical verses that relate to each of the three key

themes. For *Malchuyot*, as you'd expect, most of these verses contain some form of the Hebrew word for sovereign and sovereignty, *Melech/malach*. Listen for it. So, for example: *Adonai yimloch l'olam vaed; vayehi bishurun melech; ki ladonai ha-melucha; Adonai malach ge'ut lavesh, v'haya Adonai l'melech al kol ha'aretz*. In fact, this root – Hebrew letters *mem-lamed-chaf* -- for sovereignty appears in 9 of the 10 *malchuyot* verses! And last but not least, in the ten verses ostensibly about sovereignty - comes the one outlier, where the root *melech* is missing. Can you guess what it is?

If you guessed *Shema yisrael*, you are correct. (And if you didn't guess it, don't feel bad.) The whole verse is *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad*. We usually translate it: "Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One." Obviously, there's no *mem-lamed-chaf* language in there at all. So, you may wonder, what is *Shema* doing inside *Malchuyot* at all?

Oneness is precisely the key to Rosh Hashanah as coronation. The declaration of sovereignty in the universe is actually a statement of faith, a statement in the belief that everything is interconnected and interdependent, that all is one.

I'm going to leave that liturgical thread hanging there for a few minutes, and I promise to come back to it a little later.

First, I want to tell you about a Netflix show that I saw this summer. The show is, appropriately, called "Connected." Perhaps you've seen it – it's a science show, a docu-series, hosted by Latif Nasser. And one day, when (I admit) we were bored in quarantine and had already finished all nine seasons of *The Office*, Noam and I sat down to watch the episode of *Connected* entitled "Dust."

It was an amazing episode, and if you're ever looking for a diversion sometime that's interesting in a quirky sort of way and also has deep theological significance, I recommend you check it out. At the beginning of the episode, Latif Nasser is standing in the middle of the Sahara Desert in Northern Africa. What was once upon a time a sea floor is now dried out desert land, and as winds pick up in Africa, we watch as the dust of the desert being blown up into the air in a swirl. As Nasser says in his narration, "Things that happen over Africa don't stay over Africa." The Saharan dust blows up, suspending in a huge dust cloud, and then travels all the way across the Atlantic. Next, we see Nasser interviewing

scientists and fishermen in Florida, about how the red tides there that kill fish and manatees are actually caused by this dust from the Sahara Desert. And then he goes south to a rainforest in South America, where we learn how the millions of tons of Saharan dust that annually land in the Amazon rainforest act as nutrition or fertilizer for the Amazon basin in ways that scientists are only just beginning to understand. Latif Nasser concludes the episode with this quote: **“Wherever you take a breath, you’re breathing in somewhere else. For better or worse, we’re all connected.”**

As we turned off the TV, that quote stuck with me, and I’ve been thinking about it again over the past couple of weeks, every time my eyes water or my throat burns from the wildfire smoke. “Whenever you take a breath, you’re breathing in somewhere else. For better or worse, we’re all connected.” The smoke that we’ve been breathing for these last couple of weeks here in the Pacific Northwest – contains bits of pines, fir, cedar, oak, poplar, ash, aspen and redwoods, not to mention animals, vehicles, homes, and even people – from Washington, Oregon and California.

It’s no longer possible to think that what happens here only matters here, and what happens there only matters there. We now know that the dust of Africa can cause fish to die and also trees to flourish halfway around the world. We know that when climate change causes hotter, drier seasons, and human beings have overbuilt in ways that don’t allow forests to move through their smaller natural burn cycles, tremendous wild fires can result, and people far away will be breathing in their ashes for weeks to come. We also know that when some candidate chooses to hold an indoor rally with more than 5 thousand people inside a room Las Vegas, we can no longer say “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Front-line medical workers all over will be feeling the impact in a couple more weeks, and the amount of time my kids are attending school from their bedrooms will invariably be extended by decisions made elsewhere.

In this universe, all life, all being is so very interconnected. And so, on this holiday, we proclaim: *Shema yisrael*, Hear O Israel... *Adonai echad*. God is one. Or translating a little more literally, and in a theology I like a little better, the yod-heh-vav-heh root of God’s official name, which comes from the word “to be” – we might say: all being is one. Listen up, people of Israel: All being is one. All is oneness.

This message feels almost too obvious for a sermon. Like, we all know Shema already, and we all understand this principle of connectedness on some level, right? And yet, I felt drawn to talk about this on this Rosh Hashanah because I believe this is a message we all need to be reminded of right now, and bring to the forefront of our consciousness, at this moment. As much as we may feel it to be deeply true, this is not a message that's embraced widely within our broader American society.

American society puts independence and individualism on a pedestal. The founding myths of this country include the idea that this is the land of the free and a place where individual liberty reigns. We were all taught the American myth that every man must pull himself up by his own bootstraps. Land in the so-called "Wild West" was claimed by homesteaders (mostly white men) on horseback who staked their claim, literally. Immigrants coming to this country were encouraged to shed multigenerational family structures and to strike out on their own, with goals of financial independence and social independence too.

Today, we live in an American society where capitalism is king, where competition and profit reign. "Stand your ground" laws allow people to take up arms to defend their homes as though they were castles. America in 2020 has turned on immigrants in a xenophobic rage, and the alleged atrocities happening inside ICE detentions centers are unspeakable.

These trends are all bound up in one another, too. The independence on steroids becomes a radical individualism, capitalism taken to an extreme, xenophobia and racism, patriarchy and toxic masculinity. And all of this, wildly, comes together in the caricature figure – the epitome of greed and callousness who now resides in the White House, the one who wants to see his face carved into the stone face of Mount Rushmore. These make up the poisonous waters that brew the storms of the layered crises of our year.

Judaism has always been counter-cultural to these trends, and it is because of the way oneness and interconnectedness and community thread through our tradition.

You cannot be Jewish alone. Even in pandemic times, when face-to-face interaction is limited, we need each other: a minyan to daven with, a group to celebrate and grieve with, a *chevruta* with whom to study torah, a *chevra kadisha* (burial society) to care for our bodies after we die. Our most important life cycle ceremonies require witnesses. The Torah calls on us to care for each other, even and especially for those on the margins.

This year, we have felt all of this – the selfish impulses swirling around outside, the cult of individual power, the callous disregard for life of those who refuse to wear masks and endanger others.

We have all been inside the isolating experience that has been this Covid time – in and out of waves of more and less restricted movement, confined to our homes, anxious about shopping for groceries, unable to gather in places of worship or other public spaces.

And yet, our creative impulse has helped us to overcome. During this time, the Kavana community has stepped up and come together as one in some of the most beautiful of ways. Some of this, you've no doubt witnessed... people connecting on Friday nights to light candles together, or meeting up on Zoom to hear Shofar every day during the month of Elul, or learning in cohorts. In many ways, these Zoom experiences feel even more intimate... all of a sudden we're in each others' homes, looking at faces and names together, and connections have happened quite organically. Some of this togetherness, you may or may not have been privy to... because some of it has happened behind the scenes, but there are dozens and dozens of examples of kindnesses so beautiful it's almost hard to believe. There were volunteers driving boxes of matzah around town before Passover to be sure that everyone had what they needed for their first-in-a-lifetime stay-at-home, solo seder experience. People in our community who buddied up to check in with each other weekly for general support. There were who had meals delivered to others who were going through hard times. Older kids who babysat for younger kids, to cut working parents a little slack during the weirdest summer. People who gathered online to write letters to voters to encourage turnout in the November election. People who raised money and collected items – from kids' clothing to commuting bikes – to be able to support and give to those who are in even harder straits right now than we are.

Given how many weeks it's now been since most of our public spaces and public events shut down, you might expect that we would all be lonelier than ever. At least, that's what everyone thought would happen, back in the spring. And yet, research over the last couple of months has shown the opposite: that people are feeling more connected than you might expect, in ways that are right in line with what we've witnessed here at Kavana.

On NPR in late July, I heard a social psychologist describe that the widely expected spike in loneliness didn't occur because, as the pandemic shuttered many stores and businesses, neighbors began to rely on each other more. Another research psychologist was quoted as saying: "That sense of solidarity that people are feeling when they are collectively under some threat together — when they are collectively going through a challenge together — seems to be a real strong protective factor, and I don't think we fully appreciated that months ago when all this started."

In other words, even in this very isolating time, we have found ways to realize that we are in fact sharing an experience, deeply — with each other, and with other humans around the globe. The crises of this year have helped us to feel even more of that sense of unity, more “oneness,” than ever before.

And so we gather together on this holiday to say the words we know so well: *Shema yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad*. — Listen up, people of Israel, the God we believe in is the God of being, and all being is one. We say it in the evening, and we say it in the morning. We say it when we take the Torah out of the ark, and we will say it again when we conclude our Yom Kippur day at the end of the Neilah service.

We also declare this notion of *echad* at so many other times, like when we say: “*bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai echad ushemo echad*,” “On that day, all being will be one and God’s name unified.” Our vision for the future — for the redeemed world — has to do with being aligned, with understanding that collective action helps to unify people as one, and when that happens, our religious vocabulary for it is that God’s name too — and truly, all being itself — is also unified, as one.

This belief in interconnectedness and interdependence is an essential piece of what it is to be human, and what it is to be a Jew. A statement of oneness, is, in fact a statement of faith. It is an act of faith to believe that the dust of the Sahara Desert matters in the ecosystems of North and South America. It is a kind of faith to believe that whether I wear a mask should matter to you, and vice versa.

Rabbinic Judaism has a term for a non-believer – someone who doesn't have faith – and that term, in the Talmud, is *Apikoros*. This word is most likely derived from the name of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who believed that there were no connections between the isolated particles in the universe. To deny connection between isolated particles is the definition of denying God and denying Judaism. And the flip is true too: that to be a believer – a person of faith – is to affirm interconnection.

There's a famous Jewish folk tale I want to tell you. Perhaps you have heard it before. It's called the allegory of the long spoons, and it's also told in a number of other cultural traditions. In our Jewish lore, it was told by Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, an itinerant preacher in Lithuania in the 1800s. He would travel from town to town delivering religious sermons, and he often began his talks with the following story:

"I once ascended to the firmaments. I first went to see Hell and the sight was horrifying. Row after row of tables were laden with platters of sumptuous food, yet the people seated around the tables were pale and emaciated, moaning in hunger. As I came closer, I understood their predicament.

"Every person held a full spoon, but both arms were splinted with wooden slats so they could not bend either elbow to bring the food to their mouths. It broke my heart to hear the tortured groans of these poor people as they held their food so near but could not consume it.

"Next I went to visit Heaven. I was surprised to see the same setting I had witnessed in Hell – row after row of long tables laden with food. But in contrast to Hell, the people here in Heaven were sitting contentedly talking with each other, obviously sated from their sumptuous meal.

"As I came closer, I was amazed to discover that here, too, each person had their arms splinted on wooden slats that prevented them from bending their elbows. How, then, did they manage to eat?

"As I watched, a man picked up his spoon and dug it into the dish before him. Then he stretched across the table and fed the person across from him! The recipient of this kindness thanked him and returned the favor by leaning across the table to feed his benefactor.

I suddenly understood. Heaven and Hell offer the same circumstances and conditions. The critical difference is in the way the people treat each other."

It's quite a story. Now, I do not believe in either heaven or hell in literal sense, but as an allegory, I find this an incredibly powerful tale.

This is it. Our lives, our society, and our world are all in crisis right now. We are seated at the table. And the key questions are: how will we treat each other? Will we use the resources at our disposal, collaboratively? Will we be able to act together as a collective, to understand that our fate is inextricably linked, that we are bound up with each other, that we are part of the same oneness?

In fact, this Rosh Hashanah, we find ourselves in the midst of not one but at least four layered crises, which compound each other: 1) the Covid pandemic which has taken nearly a million human lives around the globe, 2) economic downturn, with some 30 million Americans currently unemployed, and many millions more struggling to get by, 3) the threat that our political system, our democracy, may be crumbling under the weight of lies and unethical behavior, selfishness and leaning toward fascism, and finally 4) climate change – the existential threats to the sustainability of our planet itself. None of these problems are simple. But, as this story reminds us, we are in it together and we have the power to take care of one another and make a difference, if we can just figure out how to work together, in a coordinated way.

Some of you doubtless remember Nigel Savage, the President and CEO of the Jewish environmental organization called Hazon; he was out here early in 2020, for Tu B'Shevat, for our first Jewish Climate Festival. He recently wrote the following:

“Every single thing we do to help create a more sustainable world is arithmetically close to meaningless. One change in behavior. One fewer plane trip... One vote for the more sustainable candidate. Individually our actions are so negligible, that I do believe we have to face this sense of futility, of overwhelmedness. I feel it myself, very strongly. I imagine that Bill Gates feels it, and Greta Thunberg, and Michael Bloomberg. Even those who have punched a thousand-fold above their weight, a million-fold, nevertheless go to bed at night knowing that the world is, as yet, headed in the wrong direction, and that not one of us has sufficient of anything to fix it. The wildfires – the worst in history – are yet one more example of this, if further example were needed, which of course it is not.

But this of course, (Nigel continues) all of it, is only half the story. Because the line about “all our behaviors are arithmetically close to meaningless” is true also of voting. Yet we vote – hundreds of millions of us. And when we do so it is not because we believe our own vote will make a difference. We know that, statistically, it will not. Has your one vote ever been the difference between a winning and a losing candidate? And yet we vote not merely because it is a civic duty but, more than that, ***it reflects our implicit understanding of the commons.*** To vote – and, by extension, to take *any* action which is individually insignificant, but which in aggregate, as part of the wider whole, is vitally vitally necessary – is to attest, almost theologically, to our ultimate significance, and to the moral force of **choosing to be part of that larger whole.**”

That, my friends, is the bottom line, in this gruelingly challenging year. As we gather to celebrate these High Holidays and to welcome the New Year – in whatever unfamiliar form that takes – we put ourselves inside a coronation ceremony. One that values the kind of sovereignty that is NOT made up of ego or human delusion about the power of any one individual, but rather the kind of *malchuyot*, the kind of sovereignty, that starts from the principle of the *Shema Yisrael* statement, the sovereignty of unity, of interconnectedness, of oneness. This is the sovereignty that values the power of the collective.

I challenge you to look for this kind of sovereignty in the words of the *machzor*, and also in the news stories of the coming weeks. If you do, I hope you will find that our liturgy orients us towards this one-ness, as part of our vision of the future. We anticipate a time when all shall unite as one fellowship, one embracing community, to carry out the divine will wholeheartedly – that is literally the language of Musaf: *v'yeiasu chulam agudah achad la'asot r'tzoncha b'leivav shalem*.

And meanwhile, this Rosh Hashanah, let us re-commit to joining together, even more strongly, as a force for good in the world. Independently, we know that none of us can make a huge dent in the face of the tremendous crises we are starting down. Individually, as the liturgy reminds us, we are as small as specks of dust, *u'ch'avak poreiach*, we are like the dust that scatters. However, together, we are not just specks... we are actually more like a dust storm, able to create change all around the world, powerful enough to fertilize rainforests of justice, freedom, and sustainability. We are able to band together through our collective votes and voices and actions; able to make the world a more compassionate place. This is what it is to live inside *malchuyot* – the sovereignty – of oneness.

In the words of the liturgy, we pray: *Shomer yisrael*, Guardian of Israel, *sh'mor sh'eirit yisrael*, protect us, this remnant of the Jewish people, *v'al yovad yisrael*, and do not abandon us, as terrifying as the world may feel. *Hameyachadim shimcha* - After all, we are the ones who proclaim oneness and interconnectness, when we say the words: *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad*. Hear O Israel... we subscribe to the core belief that all being is One. We have faith in the power of our interconnectedness. We are in this together.

Shana tova.