

5778

ROSH HASHANAH SERMON ROUNDUP

Compiled by
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Preface

As with so many things this, it was an unusual year for Rosh HaShanah sermons. As Rabbi Jonathan Freirich of Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo, NY, explained:

“Under normal circumstances I would never present something mostly from another source. These are not normal circumstances.

“The Central Conference of American Rabbis crafted a united message for [rabbis] to adapt and offer, to bring to our congregations in one voice, as a Reform Movement and as Reform rabbis. The events of the last year demand that we come together as American patriots for the sake of our American union and for the sake of the Jewish people.”

The sermons that were part of this joint effort are denoted here with the symbol *. I have only so designated those sermons in which the rabbi makes explicit mention of this unprecedented joint effort.

Of course, many rabbis chose to speak about those same themes. The new/old reality of anti-Semitism was by far the most common sermon topic, with many rabbis expressing their shock at finding themselves speaking on the topic. For example, Rabbi Hara Person noted,

“I’m not an alarmist. In my almost 20 years as a rabbi I have never given a sermon about anti-Semitism. But things have changed so much since we were together here a year ago.”

In addition to (and often together with) concerns about anti-Semitism, a number of rabbis addressed issues of racial justice. Rabbis Barry Block and Steve Moskovitz called for the removal of statues of Confederate leaders. Rabbi Sharon Brous spoke in support of reparations for African-Americans. Rabbi Dusty Klass gave a moving and deeply personal talk about racism. Rabbi Jason Fenster spoke on immigration issues and our Jewish and American commitment to protecting oppressed peoples.

Many rabbis used this year, when many in their congregants are feeling unsettled, to focus on larger themes: hope (Rabbi Marc Katz), compassion (Rabbis Jonathan Blake, Eleanor Steinman, and Ruth Zlotnick), fear (Rabbi Dan Levin), faith (Rabbi Heidi Hoover), truth (Rabbi Michael Satz), love (Rabbis Leah Lewis and Rachel Timoner), and happiness (Rabbi Marci Bellows).

A number of powerful sermons (including those from Rabbis Alison Berry and Rachel Gurevitz) addressed the changing nature of our community and the challenges (and opportunities!) of a larger tent.

As is often the case, some the most memorable sermons were idiosyncratic or touched on less common themes. How does a synagogue become “at home” sharing space with a



church? (Rabbi Elyse Goldstein) Four epistolary sermons (Rabbis Shawna Brynjegard-Bialik, Daniel Gropper, Bethie Miller, and Jill Perlman) offered interesting – and very different – letters to their children. I was also moved by Rabbi Debra Rappaport’s call to focus on the things that really matter.

This collection includes the first (but I hope not the last) sermon sharing a title with a song by The Clash (thanks, Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek). It also includes a sermon that expresses deep appreciation for the music of Pink Floyd (Rabbi Michael Sommers), and one that teaches from Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (Rabbi Don Cashman).

Where to start? The three sermons I will find myself going back to this year defy easy characterization or summary: the remarkable imagery invoked by Rabbi Zoë Klein and the keen intelligence of Rabbi Ken Chasen in explicating the world we find ourselves in this new year, and Rabbi Angela Buchdahl’s beautiful mediation on the lessons we can learn from, and about, brokenness.

I hope you will enjoy all these sermons and find them as meaningful as I did.

A Word about Process

Collecting sermons is more difficult than it looks. Congregations hide sermons in different places on their websites. They post them in different media (text, audio, video). Even those who post texts do so in an impressive variety of formats. Other congregations do not post sermons immediately. I know by picking any deadline, I will miss some great sermons. (I “closed” this compilation late in the day on September 27th, aiming to have it available for those who might have time to read them during Yom Kippur.)

This is, to be clear, an idiosyncratic and personal collection of sermons. Any views expressed are my own. It is by no means representative or comprehensive – but neither is it selective. I have included every sermon I received. My discovery methods (if they can be called that) were simply to post a request on the Reform rabbis email list and to look at those sermons I found in my regular online travels. That means that a rabbi is far more likely to be included in this roundup if, for example, she is a Facebook friend of mine or once worked with me, and that the overwhelming majority of the sermons collected here are from Reform rabbis (although rabbis of other denominations are represented as well). A final consequence of this approach is that this round-up has grown tremendously; this year, it includes more than ever.

I have only included sermons for which I was able to obtain a written text. Many rabbis have made available audio and video of their sermons, and while I’m sure that is a far better way to experience them than reading them, it’s difficult to edit video – especially to do so (as I have done most of this project) while sitting in an Amtrak café car or on an airplane.

Where rabbis have shared more than one sermon, I have selected which one to excerpt here. Typically, I have chosen the one on a less common theme. Rabbi Zack Shapiro, for example, spoke about anti-Semitism and the events in Charlottesville and about what defines humanity as computers become more intelligent. Here, I went with the robots.

To give readers a feel for each sermon, I have selected a paragraph (sometimes more) to include here. In response to feedback on last year's round-up, I have included more extensive excerpts in places. The length of the excerpt is, of course, not a reflection of anything other than how many words I felt I needed to get the rabbi's point across.

I want to be clear that the selections here are mine alone. I am sure that in some cases, the rabbi might take issue with the paragraph(s) I have chosen to represent their sermon. That points to another challenge with this project: Many of the best sermons do not lend themselves well to this format. In some cases, a sermon is so tightly constructed that excerpting one paragraph makes no sense. Rabbi Steve Kushner's elegant sermon about being inspired on a trip to Venice is a great example of that challenge, as are Rabbi Joshua Davidson's remarks on our political culture. That also means that sometimes I have had to choose between selections that really captured the essence of the sermon and those that make sense standing on their own.

Finally, please note that I have not edited the text of the excerpts, although I have removed the footnotes/references (they are there in the original, linked, sermon). That means that some Hebrew words or biblical references which might normally be clarified (and might have been clarified at another point in the sermon) are left to stand on their own. Again, you can – and should – get the full context by reading the linked sermon.

Without further ado.....

Mark J. Pelavin
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Union for Reform Judaism

Time After Time

Rabbi Julie Pelc Adler, Congregation Am Echod (Lindenhurst, IL)

If we commit to being here now, we must admit that can't change the past. Looking backward can prevent us from taking action. If we look back and remember steps taken (or not taken) in the past, we can get stuck in our own patterns. And we can get stuck in our habitual stagnation. If we didn't get involved before, if we didn't speak up, if we didn't commit ourselves to making change, why start now? The inaction of the past becomes the inaction of the present. Our inertia becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy.

And if we commit to being present now, we must also let go of the unknown consequences in the future. We can't know whether speaking up will lead to a positive or negative outcome. We can't know the consequences of staying silent, of what will happen in the future if we try something we've never tried before.

"L'Shanah Tovah – My Hope for 5778"

Rabbi Ruth Adar, CoffeeShopRabbi.com (San Leandro, CA)

We usually translate *tefillah* as prayer. Clever Hebrew scholars will tell you that it is a reflexive form that actually means something like "self-reproach." But let's not complicate things: *tefillah* is speech. If we wish to "avert the severe decree" we must become strategic in our speech. We must use our voices for good: we must appeal to our lawmakers and we must tell the truth. What we must NOT do is use our speech to puff ourselves up, to be "clever" to make points, to stir up hatred for hatred's sake. Sometimes this is a fine line to walk, but if we want to make the world better, we must control our own speech.

"The Mitzvot of Post-Charlottesville America" ❖

Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (Charleston, SC)

If you consider that the goal of the antisemites might not be an explosion, but the erosion of Jewish self-confidence and continuity, then that is the answer to antisemitism: Proud and vibrant Jewish life. No matter how else we might choose to step away from the sidelines and enter the fray, this we can all do. Living loudly and proudly and identifiably as Jews is a positive and essential mitzvah in post-Charlottesville America.

"Do Not Remain Indifferent!"

Rabbi Mona Alfi, Congregation B'nai Israel (Sacramento, CA)

When we come to temple to learn, we are supposed to remember that the whole point of studying Torah is to take those values, ideas, and imperatives, into our daily lives. The Torah isn't meant to simply be studied, but internalized so that it becomes the light that guides our steps.

And just in case we doze off during the year, and don't pay attention to the teachings of our faith the way that we should, we come to synagogue on Rosh HaShanah to

hear the blast of the shofar to stir our souls, to reawaken us to our moral obligations, obligations to ourselves, to each other, and to our God.

"To Build a Future, You Have to Know the Past"

Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert, Temple Etz Chaim (Franklin, MA)

We need to see every human being as ourselves and also as people with a distinct story. "They" must also and always be "we." And this is particularly the case when they are being harassed or mistreated or worse.

"An Ever-Dying, Never-Dying People"

Rabbi Craig Axler, Temple Isaiah (Fulton, MD)

... I believe that the rabbi I am is shaped by a particular pendulum swing, a reaction-formation - one that has likely over-compensated for the understandable emphasis on the horrors of the Holocaust in the forming of Jewish identity in my generation. In a recent conversation with a modern orthodox colleague who is roughly my age, we noted that we are the generation of rabbis who have tried to form and fashion a positivity-based Jewish identity in the communities we are shaping. No more the doom and gloom of Holocaust, anti-Semitism, a long-history of persecution and exile! We want our kids to LOVE being Jewish; to CELEBRATE the joy to be found in prayer and song; to IDENTIFY with the success of the State of Israel, to see it as contributing in outsized and positive ways to all of humanity. Ours is a generation that seeks to inculcate a sense that "It's good to be a Jew!" in contrast to the stock Yiddish phrase: *Es iz schver tsu zein a Yid* - "It's hard to be a Jew."

"After Charlottesville: A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah"

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, Congregation Beth Israel (North Adams, MA)

That white supremacy and Nazism must be condemned and disavowed is something on which I suspect we can all agree. But there's also a subtler kind of racism in which we all partake – an unconscious racism of implicit bias. That's what leads white women to clutch our purses tighter when we see black men on the street; leads police officers to be [2.7 times more likely to shoot and kill black people than white people](#); leads to the belief that [Black people are naturally good at sports](#) or that [Jews are naturally good with money](#). Implicit bias is a lot subtler than Klansmen with Nazi flags and flaming torches. But we need to tackle it, too.

"We Will Not Be Silent" ❖

Rabbi Lisa Sari Bellows, Congregation Beth Am (Buffalo Grove, IL)

The purpose of the call of the Shofar is, to awaken us to our lives, to call us into becoming our best selves, to remind us to turn and return to God. The Shofar calls us to wake up to all that is around us: to the good, to the beautiful, to that which gives us hope. The shofar also calls us to remember our purpose in life—to mend and to fix this broken world. If there has ever been a time to wake up, that time is now. Wake up to the poor, to the suffering, to the trauma of so many recently effected by natural

disaster—by Harvey, by Irma, and the deadly earthquakes in Mexico. Wake up to the despicable rhetoric and hate crimes that are ever increasing all around us. The Shofar calls us to wake up to injustice. And it calls us into action.

"The Pursuit of Happiness"

Rabbi Marci Bellows, Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek (Chester, CT)

Once we feel true gratitude, we often then feel inclined to share our blessings with others. Maimonides, one of our most influential commentators, wrote about happiness, and he said that you can certainly feel happiness by indulging yourself on a holiday, but he pointed that true, sustained happiness is tied to reaching out beyond yourself, inviting the less fortunate to your holiday table.

"The View from Mt. Sinai: Building Our Inclusive Community"

Rabbi Allison Berry, Temple Shalom (Newton, MA)

I am part of a family who does not fit the traditional Jewish mold. When I was four years old, my parents adopted my sister from Korea. Sprinkled throughout my childhood are memories of attending both Jewish and Korean day camp. I learned to appreciate spicy Korean food and wear traditional *Hamboks* – Korean dresses. I also learned to explain to well-meaning members of our Reform synagogue, that yes, my sister, who did not look like other Jews was also a Jew. These early experiences – knowing my family was somehow “different” and that racism can and did exist – continue to shape my vision for Jewish community and my understanding of the world.

I’ve learned from experience there is a tremendous difference between being a welcoming community and being a community that actually includes. We need to allow our perceptions and assumptions to be challenged. We need to be vulnerable and sometimes uncomfortable. We need to be aware that language has the power to include or exclude.

"If"

Rabbi Joe Black, Temple Emanuel (Denver, CO)

My friends, it is only when we see the potential for holiness and greatness in others that we can share in their dreams and make them a reality. We need people to commit to and support the vision of our community. We need to live our lives “as if” the “what if’s” we receive from others are our own. No great change can occur unless and until the majority of community is willing to work alongside one another “as if” the vision for which they are striving is already in place.

"What I Learned from a Lucky Rabbit's Foot on Long Beach Island"

Rabbi Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple (Scarsdale, NY)

We are suffering from a Compassion Deficiency Syndrome of epidemic proportions. As a new year begins, I want to argue for the restoration of compassion—*Hesed* in Hebrew—to its rightful place at the heart of the Jewish tradition.

... [W]ithout *Hesed* at the center, without compassion, without the ability to understand and respond to the needs and feelings of others as our essential message and mandate, our entire religious enterprise collapses. We become rote practitioners of empty ritual, passionate Zionists without *menschlichkeit*, learners of Torah with no Torah deeds.

"The Meaning of the Miracle of You"

Rabbi Richard A. Block, The Temple – Tifereth Israel (Cleveland OH)

From a Jewish perspective, then, the meaning-making choices by which we each define our life can realize their full potential only in relation to other souls, in community. The very first emotion experienced by Adam, our original human parent, was not meaning, but loneliness. Hence, God declared, "It is not good for a person to be alone." As it was in antiquity, so it remains. For us, however, community is more than an antidote to aloneness. It is an incubator of lasting relationships, personal growth and spiritual fulfillment. It is a place to nurture and be nurtured, comfort and be comforted, to live our values and transmit them to younger generations.

"Choosing as a Way of Life"

Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, Congregation Shirat HaYam (Nantucket, MA)

Living a life of choosing is living with ambiguity. We must learn to live with ambiguity: almost to revel in the tensions that the complexities of life present to us. It is these tensions – the very frustrations – in which living truly takes place. The power to choose is power indeed. Sure – it would be easier if all was laid out before us – arrayed in such a way as to make all choices disappear. But wouldn't life be boring, moving from point to point, knowing each and every step of the way.

"A Rosh HaShanah Letter to My College-Bound Daughter"

Rabbi Shawna Brynjegard-Bialik, Temple Ahavat Shalom (Northridge, CA)

The message of [*Unetaneh Tokef*] ... is not that repentance, prayer and charity will keep you safe; it is that those things help make sure that the things that break your heart, don't leave you broken. It is not that tragedy has a reason or higher purpose. I don't believe that everything has a reason; it is that you can choose to find meaning in the things that would otherwise break you. Learning, reflecting and connecting with others is how you will heal.

And yet, don't let fear of failure or hurt stop you from reaching out to others and trying new things. Don't let fear stop you from enjoying life to the fullest. Yes, there

will be heartbreak and disappointment and sadness, at times, but, there will also be love and friendship and awe and gratitude.

"If Ever We Needed a Day of Remembrance"

Rabbi Barry Block, Congregation B'nai Israel (Little Rock, AR)

History is important, and monuments matter, defining and shaping our society. A state that honors Confederate traitors as heroes is one that will replace a Black-majority school board with one white man. States across a region replete with Confederate monuments will enact laws that suppress minority voting in the name of addressing the nonexistent problem of voter fraud. A nation whose parks are filled with shrines to oppressors will incarcerate an unconscionable percentage of young Black men. Removing statues will be empty symbolism if we do not root out racism deep in our own hearts and transform our society. Let us tear down shrines as a step toward healing our nation. Let us transform Charlottesville's tiki-torches into a flame of American passion for educational opportunity, voting rights, criminal justice, residential desegregation, and so much more, burning down slavery's legacy once and for all and reconstructing a nation of righteousness.

"Our Country Was Built on a Stolen Beam: A Call for a National Reckoning"

Rabbi Sharon Brous, IKAR (Los Angeles, CA)

It is the suffering of our past and the privilege of our present that demand that we do what is just and right. Today, I ask you to join me in insisting that this country—where so many Jews from around the world have found freedom, safety and boundless opportunity—extend those blessings to all who live here, including and especially those who built this country with their own blood, sweat and too many tears...

...Our nation has never contended honestly with its past. The point of *teshuvah* is to make it possible for people to move forward, to reconcile and begin to heal. We can't undo the past. But we can name it, take responsibility for it, and do everything in our power to fix what's been broken.

"Nothing More Whole than A Broken Heart"

Rabbi Angela W. Buchdahl, Central Synagogue (New York, NY)

Many have said that religion's goal is "To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." I would put it somewhat differently, though: Judaism's goal is "To make whole what is broken, and to break what feels whole." What other tradition would take what is supposed to be one of the most perfect, joyous days of our lives – our wedding – and end it with the breaking of a glass? Moses never discards the broken fragments of the first set of tablets he had smashed, but carries them alongside the finished tablets in the *Mishkan*, the portable tabernacle. The ark could not be complete without both.

Make whole what is broken. And break what feels whole. And during these Days of Awe, I would say – all the more so.

"For the Sake of Heaven: A Call for Moral Prudence"

Rabbi Joshua Caruso, Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple (Cleveland, OH)

Yet...what if the difference of opinion does not involve hateful behavior? What if the person with whom we disagree has come to her opinions after honest and thoughtful consideration, and those views don't hurt others? It is a very human inclination to believe that our own values and opinions are the only ones that are correct. We can easily fall into the trap of dismissing an individual, a group, an organization or even an entire people all in the service of upholding a personal value or belief. That is why I would suggest that it takes both moral clarity and moral prudence to maintain a civil society that strives to push humanity closer to behavior that is for "the sake of heaven." While moral clarity is concerned with judging what is right and what is wrong, moral prudence requires a different function of the soul: a tempering of judgment with a measure of mercy.

"Summer of Love, Summer of Hate (But It's Getting Better)"

Rabbi Don Cashman, B'nai Sholom Reform Congregation (Albany, NY)

Perhaps the Summer of Hate has kindled a new kind of love.

It's not a "Turn the other cheek" kind of love. That's not the Jewish narrative. Our narratives are these: תעבִיד לֹא לַחֲבֵרְךָ סִנִּי דַעֲלֵךְ "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone." (Hillel; in TB Shab 31a). That means we should not actively go out and do wrong. We should refrain from improper action. The Torah itself has an active, affirmative command: תִּרְדּוּף צֶדֶק צֶדֶק "Justice, yes justice you shall pursue." Sitting around waving the peace sign ("Peace, Love") isn't enough. The Jewish narrative is activist. The Torah's narrative is לֹא עֵל תַּעֲמוּד לֹא "Do not stand around while your neighbor is bleeding." Don't just stand there, says the Torah: Do something.

"The Reductive Seduction"

Rabbi Ken Chasen, Leo Beck Temple (Los Angeles, CA)

Most of us are pretty good at hearkening when we learn of another's bereavement... or we see the victims of a hurricane... or we see a child in pain. Our hearts open, and we don't even think about the sufferer's worldview. In Israel this summer, I visited a hospital wing filled with Syrian fighters having their lives and limbs saved by Jewish caregivers, none of whom pause to consider what these guys were taught to think of Israelis since they were born. A lot of us are even good at hearkening to those facing systemic disadvantage because of their race or status or gender or lot in life.

But when it comes to those who disagree with us – who possess some differences in vision for our society, perhaps informed by a different upbringing or different life circumstances – most of us are less than disinterested in hearkening. We want only to dominate and defeat. So is it any wonder that our ideological opponents want only to dominate and defeat us?

"One Voice for the New Year 5778" ❖

Rabbi Michael S. Churgel, RJE, Temple Sinai (Sarasota, FL)

The shofar service is designed purposefully with a crescendo effect in mind: each subsequent note reverberates with an increased sense of urgency. Our tradition teaches us that the Shofar is not simply an instrument used to announce the New Year. More importantly, the blasts of the Shofar rouse the body and spirit to action! The trumpeting shouts of the ram's horn are the ultimate wakeup call. They direct us to perform the hard work of *Teshuvah* – the idea of returning to oneself – to our core values: to doing *mitzvot*; to *emet*, *tzedek* and *mishpat*: truth, righteousness and justice; to making amends with God and each other through sincerity and a willingness to change our ways. All of this so that we can begin the New Year with a clean conscience and a sense of At-One-Ness – which is the result of Atonement.

We can appreciate the crescendo effect borne through the Shofar service when compared to our recent experiences with Hurricane Irma. As we watched from afar the devastation that Hurricane Harvey wreaked upon communities throughout the northern Gulf coast of Texas, we became aware of another storm far off in the Atlantic. As Irma swelled up east of the Caribbean, a distant *Tekiah* could be heard, representing a first call, a simple warning; the potential for a storm heading our way

.... As the urgency of the nine staccato notes of *T'ruah* resounded clearly like a bugle announcing the beginning of a hunt, we emptied the shelves of grocery and hardware stores; we brought in everything from the outside that was not firmly secured and we put up our shutters; we filled our gas and propane tanks and extra canisters; we tuned up our generators; and we either packed up our cars and drove or flew north, or we prepared to bunker down and confront Irma, as she passed over our homes like an Egyptian plague.

"From Generation to Generation"

Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove, Park Avenue Synagogue (New York, NY)

... [I]n this season of repentance, I think we are meant to focus on the family dynamics of those who came before, because to do so, curiously enough, permits us to judge the flaws and foibles of our present lives more generously. Our families of origin, biblical and actual, are far from perfect, not even close; there is hurt, there is disappointment, there are imperfections for all to see.

There is something cathartic in the realization that you are not the first to struggle with the balancing act of career and family, spouse and children, finances, aging, truth-telling and, well, pretty much everything. It is a realization that allows you to be less hard on yourself and those around you, an emotional lever by which we open up that black box secret that we are all just human, none of us the first to face what we face.

Moreover, to view our present challenges through the prism of our parents is an act that also allows us to be more forgiving of our parents. They, like us, are just trying to do the best they can. Their flaws, whatever they may be or have been, are merely signs of their shared humanity. As a parent of children, I already long for that future day when my kids experience, as I have, that disarming feeling that they are

becoming just like their parents, for maybe on that day they will choose to judge their mother and father a bit more kindly.

"The Rebuilding of the Ship"

Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson, Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York (New York, NY)

What happened to us? What happened to America? What happened that our nation flounders in a sea of intolerance, instability and uncertainty, wrenched from the fundamental anchors of honesty, civility and decency?...

...Those lamenting our nation's current trajectory might suggest the unwinding began last November, but we know that's not true. Yes, the Talmudic adage begins, "just like the leaders, so is the generation;" but it continues, "just like the generation, so are the leaders."

Our elected officials reflect only our own concerns, priorities and values. We are the ones who have languished in the battle for our national soul, who now must reassert our faith in the principles of honesty, civility and decency that inspired Longfellow to proclaim: "humanity with all its fears, with all the hopes of future years, is hanging breathless on [our] fate!"

We as individuals and as a community now must arise to rebuild our "ship of state."

"Move Fast and Break Things: Disruption in our Lives"

Rabbi Denise L. Eger, D.D. Congregation Kol Ami (West Hollywood, CA)

Shabbat is the ultimate gift of our tradition. Part of the covenantal promise made to us and that we affirmed at Mt. Sinai. Shabbat is day of rest and wonder, a day of gratitude and thanksgiving for your life. But unless you take a Shabbat and you make it sacrosanct in your life—you will succumb to these larger forces that run your life without your consent. You will not be free.

Shabbat is the pause for the overwhelm we feel by the pace of the world. Shabbat is the antidote to being online. Put your phone away. Turn it off. Take a Facebook break. Disconnect from the World Wide Web to gather your own ideas, your own thoughts not influenced by the fake news and propaganda. Take the Shabbat challenge—and put your phone down for 24 hrs. Instead, connect in the real world.

Shabbat is a day to love, to be outside, to meditate, pray, give thanks, acknowledge your blessings. Literally a day to restore your breath—restore the God who lives inside of you.

[“By The Light Of The Moon”](#)

Rabbi Joe Eiduson, Congregation Bnai Shalom, (Westborough, MA)

It is only out of our experiences in darkness that we can appreciate light and know life. The month of Elul calls out to us to modify our direction; it is a time of healing, forgiveness and deeper attunement to the soul within. As we approach a new year, we may sometimes doubt our capacity for real change. The eclipse demonstrates that the natural order can be transcended – even if just for a few minutes – and it reminds us that we can also transcend and change. Last month’s new moon of Elul brought the strange daytime darkness of eclipse; last night’s new moon of Tishri brings us today’s dawn of the New Year.

[“America’s Mezuzah”](#)

Rabbi Jason Fenster, Congregation B’nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim (Deerfield, IL)

The mezuzah is affixed to our doorposts, at the threshold of our house, so that we might see it and be reminded of our ongoing responsibility to care for the stranger and the oppressed. To care for all those who might pass through that very threshold. It’s there to remind us to be active agents of freedom and redemption.

And it strikes me that America also has a doorpost. We also have a symbol that sits at the threshold of our nation. A sign we often think delivers a message to the outside world, but, maybe, it is more important as a sign *lachem*, to you, to us. Of our heritage, of who we claim to be, and of who we might yet become.

I believe that the Statue of Liberty is America’s mezuzah.

[“Listening to the Call of the Shofar: Our Planet and Climate Change”](#)

Student Rabbi Avi Fine, Temple Bat Yam (South Lake Tahoe, CA) and North Tahoe Hebrew Congregation (Tahoe Vista, CA)

We gather here to listen to our tradition. Today we celebrate starting a new year. Celebrating this new year means recognizing where it all began, the creation of the world. It means recognizing our duty to protect the fragile world in which we live. As a person who finds God and spirituality in nature, by listening to our planet, I am listening to God.

We read three times on Rosh HaShanah- *Hayom Harat Olam*, today the world is born anew. The world is pregnant with possibilities and potential. In every year and every moment, the world is born anew. Our actions today, this year, create the world in which we live.

"We Are Called to Live with Chutzpah" ❖

Rabbi Jonathan Freirich, Temple Beth Zion (Buffalo, NY)

We are called to live with chutzpah. We must be bold in the face of injustice, and bold in the face of authority. We must even be bolder in the face of our own convictions. When we look inside and with chutzpah say, "You know, they may be right, and I may be wrong", then we may plant the seeds for a better year, and a better future, for us all.

"Anti-Semitism and Our Power Over It"

Rabbi Stacy Friedman, Congregation Rodef Sholom (San Rafael, CA)

Today, on Rosh HaShanah, we humble ourselves as we search our own souls. Because sometimes we know that sometimes, the bias, the prejudice isn't only out in the world, it's inside of us as well. We are all good and kind people who only want to do the right thing but we too harbor internalized or implicit biases.... Today, we are brutally honest with ourselves and with others, and with grace and humility, we ask for forgiveness and the power to grow. And we need to address the internalized anti-Semitism that many experience as well. We need to have conversations with our children and grandchildren, with our friends and neighbors and co-workers. We need to stand up boldly and speak out against anti-Semitism and bigotry wherever we see it or hear it.

"Scapegoats, Rickety Ladders, and Heroes"

Rabbi Wendi Geffen, North Shore Congregation Israel (Glencoe, IL)

If we see something is broken, and we can fix it but we don't, we are accountable. We cannot expect that God will intervene for us; we must not expect that our debate on the matter will somehow alleviate us of our responsibility.

This is why Jewish tradition insists that one who destroys a single life destroys the world in full. But one who saves a single life, they save the world in full. This teaching brings home the incredible power, and therefore responsibility, that each of us possesses, interpersonally, communally, and globally. And today's world really ups the ante on what this power can mean.

Discussion Excerpt

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 6th & I Synagogue (Washington, DC)

The Jewish religion is an ethical religion. That is, we are taught to do right, to love mercy, do justice, not because there's gonna be any reward in heaven or punishment in hell. We live righteously because that's how people should live and not anticipating any award in the hereafter."

["Knowing You Are With Me: Learning to be an Effective Ally"](#)

Rabbi Yosef Goldman, Temple Beth Zion Beth Israel (Philadelphia, PA)

The work of allyship is hard and messy. Like all human relating, this work entails risk and vulnerability. We must have the courage to become uncomfortable, to speak our truths, to be challenged and to be changed by what we learn from others. We must have the courage to be held accountable and to hold others accountable. We must have the courage to make mistakes, to ask for forgiveness and to offer forgiveness.

["A Jew in the Pew... In Church!"](#) *(no link yet available)*

Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, City Shul (Toronto, ON)

In any family and any community, there are actually three change personalities: those who need the unfailing, unchanging and uniform life; those who accept fully that change happens, but they don't like it; and those who are "change-enthusiasts". Rav Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel writes this about such change-enthusiasts in his book, *Orot Hakodesh*, the Holy Lights: "In the world, there exist both gradual development and sudden leaps forward. There are soulful people whose trait of leaping forward is stronger than their gradual growth." None of the types are right or wrong. Your family has each. Our congregation has each.

["Open Doors, Open Hands, Open Hearts"](#)

Rabbi Andy Gordon, Bolton Street Synagogue (Baltimore, MD)

... I keep coming back to the tiki torches. Last night, I began these High Holy Days with a story of how each of us must be a light. We need you to light up a corner of our synagogue and a corner of our world. The tiki torches were used to bring light. They were there to scare us, frighten us, shock us. We will not be scared. We will not be frightened. Instead, I urge us to reclaim the torch, to reclaim the light. We will transform fear into hope. We will transform hatred into love.

["Start With the Sukkah"](#)

Rabbi Jodie Gordon, Hevreh of the Southern Berkshires (Great Barrington, MA)

That is the "big idea" of these Days of Awe: to know that where we are going is a place where pain and fear, love, joy and awe all live side by side. The sukkah – dwelling place we will construct is an apt metaphor: at its core, the sukkah is a place that reminds us that freedom is hard work. The Israelites, encamped in the wilderness constructed the very first Sukkot on the other side of the Red Sea – having escaped slavery, but not yet having arrived in the Promised Land.

["What You Might Confront on Campus: A Letter to My Son"](#)

Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Community Synagogue of Rye (Rye, NY)

...[B]eing Jewish on college is so different today from how it was 30 years ago. In some ways it is much better. Hillel is stronger and even cool. Birthright exists and has become a rite of passage. Jewish studies and Hebrew classes abound. These are vast improvements from when I went to college. At the same time, you may confront

things on campus that neither I, nor your grandparents ever confronted, at least not as they are today. Truth be told, there are parts of this letter that I never thought I'd be writing to you. Who would have thought that in 2017, you may confront rallies led by white supremacists carrying tiki torches and chanting, "You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us?" Who would have thought that a fourth-year Jewish student at UVA – whose dorm room opens to the main campus lawn where the hate groups marched – would remove her *mezuzah* because she was scared they would come back and target her? Who would have ever predicted that the societal norms that kept Nazis and White Supremacists off in the corner may be fraying.

"Hagar and Isaac At The Well Of Resilience: Or #Afterallthosethings"

Rabbi Jen Gubitz Temple Israel (Boston, MA)

We all have moments in our lives here our souls are not whole, where *Be'er L'Chai Roi* – the wells of being seen – run dry. Where the *Be'er*, the well, becomes a *B'or*, the Hebrew word for pit. We have moments in our lives where it seems as if we are in a pit of darkness or emptiness.

While the stories that lead us to find ourselves in the abyss may differ, and in spite of hierarchies of suffering, most of us have some story of personal catastrophe: feelings of failure when we were sure we'd succeed; painful grief over the loss of a loved one; distrust from an experience of betrayal or deception; fear of separation or abandonment; episodes of depression and anxiety; the pain of infertility. The loneliness of being unpartnered; being partnered with one who does not see us; frustration over losing sight of our goals; distress when our commitments no longer evoke passion; wishing things could be different.

And if we don't know those personally, we know them globally. We know the soul breaking that occurs when leaders fail us; when weather patterns drench and soak us; when waters or the eruption of tectonic plates destroy our memories, wreaking havoc on our lives. We know the soul breaking that occurs when the lives of some are prioritized over the lives of others; when those accountable for keeping us safe are not held accountable when they hurt us instead; when White Supremacists march in Charlottesville; when anti-Semitism is embedded and emboldened deep in the roots of hatred. We know the soul breaking that occurs when it becomes normalized to beat another down in 140 characters or less; when trans people suffer because they are not treated as people; when those whose dreams have only ever lived here in the United States are threatened to take their dreams elsewhere or those who dream to make it here at last but cannot – we know the soul breaking that occurs.

"Our Jewish Community in 5778"

Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz, Congregation B'nai Shalom (Westborough, MA)

... [W]e [should not] make conversion the door that one has to go through before one can begin to access and experience the beauty of Jewish tradition. Indeed, it is deeply touching to see a mother who is not of the Jewish faith light Shabbat candles and say the blessings with her partner and her children. Together, they are bringing the light of Shabbat into a Jewish home through the choice to create a holy moment in time together on a Friday night.

When a family attends a service together, we can do more to help anyone, whether Jewish or not, understand what is going on, when to stand and sit, and how to engage in the experience so as to derive deeper meaning from it. When a non-Jewish grandparent dies, if this is your spiritual home then we want all of our members who are mourning to find comfort in our rituals (such as lighting a candle, having a shiva) if that is meaningful for them and they do not have another faith community to turn to for that support.

When parents are invited to a family education morning, we take the time to engage the parents first to give them a shared foundation and grounding in the Jewish values and teachings that underpin that morning's activities. I've learned to take less for granted when I lead these programs, to try and make the learning accessible to everyone.

"Jewish New Optimism"

Rabbi Jordan Helfman, Holy Blossom Temple (Toronto, ON)

As Jews – we must have faith – we must have hope – we must have optimism. But our optimism is different, because for us, Hope requires human action.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this as a statement of faith – a religious statement. He spoke of it in the context of protest against an evil. He spoke those words with the implication that it takes us to bend the arc.

Our Rabbi Eisendrath, who marched with Dr. King, knew that it was us – individually, but especially through our strength as a community, we who keep the Hope alive, we who cause that dawn to break through.

"America First"

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, Stephen Wise Free Synagogue (New York, NY)

Today, as yesterday, “America First,” is a cynical slogan. Now, as then, it confuses dissent with disloyalty. Now, as then, it calls for “total allegiance,” a phrase straight out of George Orwell. Now, as then, it considers disagreement unpatriotic. Now, as then, it conflates unity with uniformity. Now, as then, it disunites; it creates division. It seeks scapegoats, leading to xenophobia, intolerance and anti-Semitism. It pits one group of Americans against another. Someone else must be responsible for what the President called “this American carnage” – those who do not place America first. Who might they be? Mexicans, Muslims, immigrants, non-English speakers, Jews, bankers, liberals, the media, academics, the elites, transgendered? Now, as then, America Firsters incline towards isolationist politics, grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature: The citadel is under attack by marauding mobs. We must build barricades, not bridges, walls, not windows.

"If Not Now, Tell Me When"

Rabbi Neil PG Hirsch, Hevreh of the Southern Berkshires (Great Barrington, MA)

... we must realize that the alt-right did not emerge overnight. We should not fetishize it as a radically new phenomenon or wishing it away as nothing more than a rebranding of fascism. It's a political movement that as of right now is primarily online and amorphous. But a movement has momentum, and that is what I am worried about. The anxiety the alt-right generate feels real. What we saw in Charlottesville is not an afternoon thunderstorm, quick to pass. We need to consider these rallies as serious domestic threats.

The rhetoric and actions that are happening on a Federal level that would limit the freedoms of people living here in our country—whether that be in regard to access to health care, or the ability to access a legal pathway to citizenship, or the order to remove transgender soldiers from their posts based on their gender identification, alone—that too should be taken seriously. Like a large storm heading into a community, these trends and decisions have real impacts on real peoples.

"What if We're Wrong?"

Rabbi Heidi Hoover, Temple Beth Emeth v'Ohr Progressive Shaari Zedek (Brooklyn, NY)

Let us have the courage to believe – in God, whatever that word “God” means to us; in our tradition; in our sense of right and wrong. Let us wrestle with our texts, with our tradition, with our secular world, bringing our experiences and feelings, our sense of justice and compassion, to meet what we have from those who came before. Let us respect our own experiences and use them to inform the way we understand what our tradition and our God want from us. Let us have respect for what came before, but the freedom to interpret differently for today. Our tradition is rich, and full, and worthwhile. The people who came before us gave us interpretations that help us and interpretations that hurt us.

"It's All Interconnected: Intersectionality in Torah and Today's Times"

Rabbi Jocce Hudson, Temple Israel of Hollywood (Hollywood, CA)

Torah understood over 2500 years ago, what Audre Lorde understood over thirty years ago, what we are coming to understand today: We have the power to do real harm to one another. It is so very easy to miss the chance to see each other, to seek to understand each other's experiences and narratives, and to put ourselves in the humbling spaces of imperfectly standing in solidarity with each other. Even when we can name deep commonalities and the issues of the day seem so pressing, we still miss the mark.

For us, members of a justice-minded synagogue trying to engage in real partnership with diverse communities, I would suggest that wrestling with these issues is the most pressing work of communal *teshuvah* we can engage in during these holy days.

"Roll Into Light" ❖

Rabbi Mark Kasierman, The Reform Temple of Forest Hills (Forest Hills, NY)

This is a time of transformational change in our country. In decades ahead, we will look back and our children or great-grandchildren may ask, what did you do in response? How do you stand up? What did you do to bring light into the darkness? History will side with a world of diversity, love, and caring. Were you silent in the face of those who despise difference, hate the other, and think only of themselves? Or did you speak out for people of all races, religions, sexual orientations and identities; for every minority and every person who is being denied their rights for freedom and success?

"If Not Now" ❖

Rabbi Beth Kalish, Beth David Reform Congregation (Gladwyne, PA)

Three years ago on Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about anti-Semitism. I focused mostly on Europe, the terrible violence and disturbing resurgence of hatred that had surfaced there. To be honest, I thought I was done for a little while giving High Holy Day sermons about anti-Semitism. Most American Jews of my generation grew up thinking that anti-Semitism was something that happened to other Jews – in other times, in other places.

Sadly, today, it is harder to be as naïve.

"The Power of Hope"

Rabbi Marc Katz, Congregation Beth Elohim (Brooklyn, NY)

Though important, hope is not easy. It takes courage to hope. True courage is not running into a battle knowing the outcome. It is entering a struggle knowing you could fail but doing it anyway.... Early on with plenty of time before us, it seems our hope is infinite. But when time passes and we have not come closer to our dreams it's much easier to give up.

But even if we fall short, even if we never reach our dream, hope still matters. In the 1990s a group of researchers tracked down nearly 700 nuns who took their vows during the 1930s. These nuns were special, because their mother superior had asked them when entering their service to write an autobiographical statement of their lives. The researchers compared these statements with the health of these nuns, now in their 80s, 90s, and 100s. What they found was the nuns who had fared better were the ones who early on displayed many of the foundational positive emotions of good living: contentment, gratitude, happiness, love and chief among these hope!

In other words, hope doesn't just sustain our dreams, it keeps us healthy, body and soul.

"The Three Advisors"

Rabbi David Kaufman, Temple B'nai Jeshurun (Des Moines, IA)

In spite of the attitudes of some preachers who want to argue that hurricanes are punishment for sin, very few people affected by such events treat anyone they encounter as if they deserved to have their homes flooded, their possessions destroyed, their lives threatened by violent winds. We do not believe that anyone deserves that.

Amid the floodwaters, there are no arguments that someone is homeless or hungry because they'd rather not work or don't have the fortitude to quit drugs or any of the other arguments that people often use to excuse an unwillingness to help. If everyone is endangered, nothing differentiates anyone from anyone else. The winds and floodwaters from hurricanes strike rich and poor, people of all colors and ethnicities.

"Embracing Nuance and Complexity on the River of Life"

Rabbi Paul Kipnes, Congregation Or Ami (Calabasas, California)

Well, if I may be so bold, like Herzl and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I too have a dream... that any two of you, passionate people both, will sit down and talk about the most difficult issues facing our country and you will converse with *kavod* (respect) and *chesed* (kindness), patiently listening to each other to uncover the nuance and complexity of your opinions. Without destroying each other. Without resorting to the "shock and awe" which characterizes the "ridicule and destroy" sloganeering that tries to pass as debate today on both sides of the aisle, and in the middle too. *Im tirtzu* – If we will it, it is no dream.

I have a dream that the content of one's argument – intellectual, logical, even passion if measured – will be more important than the slogans some chant or the vicious names some hurl at those with whom they disagree. *Im tirtzu* – Does it need to remain a dream?

On Race and ReHumanization

Rabbi Dusty Klass, Temple Beth El (Charlotte, NC)

For millennia we have re-told the Passover story. We teach it to our children so that they may teach it to their children. So that each and every generation, we may remember our obligation to free those still enslaved.

This too is the story of black and brown people in America – Kind of.

We tell similar stories, but the stories are not actually the same.

Because the black American story of slavery is barely 400 years old, and it is far from over.

"Building Our Boat"

Rabbi Zoe Klein, Temple Isaiah (Los Angeles, CA)

Make *yourself* an ark.

We are the ark when we build not borders, but bridges. We are the ark when we build not separations, but support. We are the ark when we build not contention, but confidence. We are the ark when we build not sarcasm, but security. We are the ark when we build not towers, but trust. We are the ark when we build not feuds, but friendships. We are the ark when we build more compassion, more kindness, more generosity, more understanding, more patience, more joy, more thoughtfulness, more equality, more love. We are the ark when we build upon our best values, when we reflect on ourselves, adjust our sails, make room for others, support and celebrate each other, practice equanimity so that when the floods do come, our inner waters remain calm.

We are sailing over some choppy seas. Darkness on the face of the deep. We don't always know what lurks beneath, but together we can be prepared for any adventure, until that day when the ark comes to rest, arms linked not to save but to sing, God's Spirit hovering over us with all the colors of the rainbow.

"We Do Not Need to Face this World Alone" ❖

Rabbi Asher Knight, Temple Beth El (Charlotte, NC)

It makes sense to me right now, when the world can feel unsettling and unstable, that our instinct is to isolate and hunker down. With the winds of society pushing in every direction, with uncertainty ahead, we want what anchors us and helps us feel rooted. But, as Amos reminds us, real security doesn't come from the easy fix of an alarm system or a list of services provided in a pay-to-pray world. It comes from being seen, known and loved for who we are and from seeing, knowing and loving others for who they are. It is in our relationships where we will connect with each other and with God. Amos pushed our ancestors to act together in community despite the raging storms – to support each other with intention of establishing a future of hope, meaning, resiliency, justice, and purpose.

"Our Nation's Attic"

Rabbi Audrey Korotkin, Temple Beth Israel (Altoona, PA)

Each of us is here today, welcoming the New Year together, because we have chosen freely to be here. We are not here out of obligation, to carry a burden that has been foisted upon us against our will.

That is what it means to be a Reform Jew in 21st century America. Not to reject what's in our peoples' attic, and not to stuff it into our own homes beyond what we can bear. But to sort carefully, study thoughtfully, and create a Judaism for ourselves that we can live with dignity, share with joy, and save for future generations, who will make their own choices.

"We Will Renew With What There Is"

Rabbi Steven Kushner, Temple Ner Tamid (Bloomfield, NJ)

The potential for renewal and transformation is always at hand. נתחדש של שיש .We will renew *with what there is*. We will not cry over spilt milk. We will not focus on what is or isn't, on what has been lost, on what we no longer have. We will move forward with what we do have. As my mother of blessed memory would always say, "We will make do."

We will renew

"Never Fail to Protest"

Rabbi Michel Adam Latz, Shir Tikvah (Minneapolis, MN)

Protesting, showing up, is a religious response, an Abrahamic response, to injustice in the world. Rising up, engaging in moral resistance is a dynamic act of faith, a theological expression of hope: that our holy Jewish purpose is to close the gap between the way the world exists now from the way the world must be: Overflowing with Divine love and compassion.

Showing up is the expression of our pain in public, it creates holy energy to give us strength, to believe that even as we hold agonizing pain and suffering: we believe in redemption, we believe in the possibility of transformation, we believe in a world of justice, equality, and human dignity.

"Yes... And: Living in the Paradox of Life"

Rabbi Sari Laufer, Stephen Wise Temple (Los Angeles, CA)

We live in a time of byte-sized information. If it cannot fit in a tweet, a text, or a TV soundbite, we do not have the time or space for it. While the left speaks of intersectionality and the right complains of playing identity politics, it all means that we are reduced, in some way, to our adjectives. Our world today assumes a simplistic, unilateral identity—you are Jewish. Or a feminist. Or conservative. Or, or, or. We seem to have left no room for the complexities, for the ands with which all of us live.

To be Progressive AND Zionist.

To be a scientist AND a person of faith.

To be black and Jewish, queer and Jewish, to find all of the missed connections within ourselves.

"Fear and Vision"

Rabbi Dan Levin, Temple Beth El (Boca Raton, FL)

... Fear need not be the force that destroys our societies from without and our souls from within. Fear can also inspire us to pursue paths that are constructive and healing and holy.

Fear of a Category Five hurricane can prompt us to pack up our cars and flee, to prepare our homes with proper materials and resources to keep ourselves safe, and to reach out to others who are vulnerable and in need. Fear of illness can drive us to get into the gym and get healthy. Fear can inspire the deepest courage and resilience. But more importantly, fear can remind us of what it really means to be a human being.

"Or Zarua, Learning to Love"

Rabbi Leah Lewis, Temple Menorah (Redondo Beach, CA)

We are human beings – children of Abraham, our ancestor who first showed us what it means to take responsibility – and our world is on fire. Who is responsible? Judaism is clear that the responsibility is ours. All of ours. We need not wait for the fire to be on our own property to understand what is going on, and then to do something about it. Both our past and the promise of a new year are speaking to us.

"Defending the Enlightenment"

Rabbi Seth Limmer, Chicago Sinai Congregation (Chicago, IL)

The Shofar sounds to wake us from our slumber, to rouse us from the rut of sleepwalking through inherited ideas and ideologies. The shofar calls us, penetrates our ears as individuals, waking each of us to our clearest capacity. And when I say “calls us”, it is no rhetorical slip from singular to plural. The Shofar’s voice speaks to us as a collective, as collaborators, as the plural community. Awake you sleepers—in Hebrew, *atem*, “you”, second person plural—examine your deeds, all of you who are caught up in the daily routine; return to Divine ways, you, the collective who have lost sight of the truth. The Shofar calls to us as a community; our High Holy Days are about waking up to our possibilities as a community, as a collective. Our repentance starts with inward reflection, but our restorative course is shared with others: our road to recovery on Rosh HaShanah moves from our individual reflections to our communal will to change.

"I Am Becoming Who I Am: Transformation in Our Times of Change"

Rabbi Jill L. Maderer, Congregation Rodeph Shalom (Philadelphia, PA)

Every day of our lives, but especially in this season, we encounter the question: Who am I; and who am I becoming? These Days of Awe challenge us to do repentance. *Tshuvah*, literally meaning turning, is a term of movement. You cannot stand still and turn. And so we join together in these holy days to turn inward to determine a path for who we are becoming, and then to turn in an intentional direction, to become who we are.

"Dear Elijah"

Rabbi Bethie Miller, Larchmont Temple (Larchmont, NY)

The day we came home from the hospital, two women separately showed up at our door – one bearing a small Carvel ice cream cake and one carrying a bag of the softest, nicest, most organic baby goods. But it wasn't what they brought that was so memorable, though the ice cream cake was kind of perfect.

What struck me is that they just came. They didn't ask. They didn't call first. They didn't inquire what we needed. They just showed up at the door. Both women had recently given birth, so they may have been operating with that motherly wisdom that it's impossible to know when a newborn will be sleeping or nursing or whatever, so best to just go. And I am so glad they did. Because it can be hard to just show up at someone's door, even for happy things like babies. It can be so much easier to hide behind decorum or deference. I'm as guilty as most for overasking those often unanswerable questions, like: When would be a good time? Is there anything you need? Sometimes we don't know what we need, and sometimes it feels too hard to ask for what we really want, which is simply company, and the simple yet profound assurance that we are not alone.

"If Not Now, When? Kugel for the Klan"

Rabbi Sydney Mintz, Congregation Emanu-El (San Francisco, CA)

The only way for people in this country to move beyond the us and them is to commit to knowing one another in a radical way. None of us on this Bimah became Rabbis or Cantors to be comfortable or to remain neutral. We were called in different ways but we were all certain that we would be asked to comfort the afflicted and more importantly, to afflict the comfortable. So, I am not sorry this year if I have made you a little uncomfortable.

"Listening Deeply In a Divided Time"

Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh, Temple Israel of Hollywood (Hollywood, CA)

In Judaism, listening is a deeply spiritual act. The word *Shema* appears no less than 92 times in the book of Deuteronomy. Over and over Moses asks us to listen. Blind obedience is not a virtue. God wants us to understand, reflect upon and then respond through action. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, "God wants us to become a 'listening people'."

"5778: Can We Handle the Truth?"

Rabbi Joel M. Mosbacher, Temple Shaaray Tefila (New York, NY)

Our brains are particularly ill-equipped to deal with lies when they come not singly but in a constant stream. When we are overwhelmed with false, or potentially false, statements, our brains pretty quickly become so overworked that we stop trying to sift through everything.

That's the best definition I've found yet of *tafalnu sheker*. Scientists call it cognitive load— a pattern of lies that overburdens our limited cognitive resources. It doesn't matter how implausible the statements are; throw out enough of them, and people will inevitably absorb some. Eventually, without quite realizing it, our brains just give up trying to figure out what is true...

And I submit to you today that, like in George Orwell's *1984*, those pervasive, relentlessly repeated lies can overload our brains until we begin to think that telling the truth doesn't matter, that we can get away with lies, that lying to the people in our lives isn't such a big deal. But unlike with Abraham or Hillel, there is no mercy in these lies, no compassion. These are not "every bride is beautiful" lies. These lies are much more serious, much more weighty.

"Five New Year's Resolutions to Reclaim the Sacred"

Rabbi Dan Moskowitz, Temple Sholom (Vancouver BC)

It is easy to pretend that what we watch and how we speak has no effects on us. But the constant pounding of hatreds and dehumanization that marks so much of our media have consequences for our character. Part of who you are is the sum of the influences you choose: what you watch, who you associate with, how you speak about others both publicly and privately. Life is a continuous journey of soul shaping, and this year, resolve to keep your deeper journey in mind. Turn away from things seductive, but corrosive—Twitter rants full of bile or people who continually insult those around them, or depictions of violence that take savage delight in suffering. You only get one soul; don't squander it on things unworthy of its majesty.

"Lines of Hate"

Rabbi Steve Moskowitz, Congregation L'Dor V'Dor (Oyster Bay, NY)

... There is a direct line, and if this sermon is about one thing it is about making such lines crystal clear, between the Nazi venom we saw on full display in Charlottesville and the adulation heaped on the heroes of the Confederacy. Let us remember that the spark for this gathering was the planned removal of a statute of General Robert E. Lee. Again there is a clear difference between those who owned slaves in the 18th century and those who led the fight to defend slavery in the 19th.

Slavery is an ideology whose premise is that other human beings are property, a belief again that runs counter to Judaism's foundational teaching. In May of this past year, New Orleans took down such a statue. Its mayor gave the most remarkable of speeches on this occasion. He said, "These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments

purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for. The Confederacy was on the wrong side of history and humanity.”

"We Come Here to Cry"

Rabbi Robert Nosenchuk, Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple (Cleveland, OH)

But I do beg of you the following: in the New Year ahead, please please listen for the cries of others. Attend your ears to know that someone is hurting and you can help. Someone may be questioning whether *teshuvah* is even possible or whether life is worth living, and we can respond: if only with a gentle offer of an embrace or a hand on their shoulder to let them know you are present.

Don't wait for God to respond. Be God's response. Remember that one of the most important things God ever did for the Israelites was to listen for our cries and respond to the pain we felt in Egypt. We were able to cry and know God would be there for us. Be God's response, I ask you. When the shofar is blown this holiday make a heartfelt pledge meant to last from generation to generation. Make a pledge to look around you in all your surroundings, so that even the person shopping next to you in the grocery store can feel accepted and safe and whole. Make a pledge so that everyone in this temple and in our Jewish community, no matter you are, you can say *tekiah*, I am here...*shevarim*, I am broken, and *teruah*, one day I will put myself together again.

"The Ben Yachid"

Rabbi Jordan M. Ottenstein, RJE, Congregation Dor Tamid (Johns Creek, GA)

Education has always been a Jewish value. Elementary school learning was regarded as compulsory by Simeon ben Shetah as early as 75 BCE. The education of older boys and men in a *beit midrash* goes back to the Second Temple period. The importance of education is stressed in the Talmud, which states that children should begin school at five. And it wasn't just youth education that has always been stressed.... Each point in our lives, the early rabbis understood, is a time to be growing, learning, and opening ourselves up to new experiences. And every moment, both for children and adults can be a teachable moment

"A Letter to My Children"

Rabbi Jill Perlman, Temple Isaiah (Lexington, MA)

When we feel beaten down by hurricane after hurricane after hurricane... or when hatred marches in our streets... or when our hearts have been broken... we have a choice. We always have a choice. We can stay where life has dropped us, we can stay in the pit, let go of our grip on the cliff side... or... we can remember the sacred purpose that exists within all of us. And I see that purpose in each one of you.

There will be plenty of days ahead when you won't see that spark or feel that purpose inside of you. There will be days when you are tired and not sure if you can go on,

days when you are hanging on to the side of the cliff... but please know that I know that it's there. I believe in you. And others do, too. You are not alone.

"We're all in this Boat Together"

Rabbi Hara Person, Congregation B'nai Olam (Fire Island Pines, NY)

I put it to you that in these precarious times, just to be proudly Jewish is a form of protest. In this new year, even as we work to keep the ship from sinking, fight antisemitism on a personal level by owning your Judaism, by taking pride in it, by being a Jew publicly. Even as we work to help others stay afloat, find a reason and a new way to claim your Jewish identity. Even as we reach out a hand to the drowning, use core Jewish values as a way to frame the choices you make in your life. For that too is a form of resistance.

"In Praise of Public Life"

Rabbi Jonathan Prosnit, Congregation Beth Am (Los Altos Hills, CA)

Personally, I believe it essential that as Jews and as a synagogue we actively engage in the public sphere. We are needed more than ever. With the rise of fanaticism and secularism our role in the civic conversation takes on renewed urgency. Our participation as progressive Jews and allies is necessary in the public world. Certainly Americans' greater detachment from religious activities and institutions, especially those of younger generations, contributes to our national polarization. As Peter Beinart noted in the Atlantic earlier this year, "Maybe it's the values of hierarchy, authority, and tradition that churches instill. Maybe religion builds habits and networks that help people better weather national traumas, and thus retain their faith that the system works. For whatever reason, secularization isn't easing political conflict. It's making American politics even more convulsive and zero-sum."

"What Matters"

Rabbi Debra Rappaport, Shir Tikvah Congregation (Minneapolis, MN)

We are called by this season to reckon with death as a natural part of what we all must experience. But how do we hold it? I imagine I'm not alone in swinging back and forth between overwhelmed, shut-down and simply ignoring it so that I can manage to get my groceries.

How do we do this? By deep listening. To ourselves, to one another. I hope for all of us that the rituals of High Holy Days provide space and inspiration for this deep listening, for our truths. That we turn off the news – we really don't need more information; we simply need to digest, to feel, to hear ourselves into feeling – so that we can call out our authentic prayer like Hannah did.

[“The Jewish Call to Build Bridges” \(no link yet available\)](#)

Rabbi Laura M. Rappaport, Temple B’nai Shalom (Fairfax Station, VA)

It is not only engineers who are called to the life-preserving work of building bridges solidly, responsibly and well. We are Jews, and our history teaches us terrible lessons about times when people do not feel bridged with and connected to others of different religions or cultures. Among our own people, one need only to go back as far as WWII & the Holocaust to see the costs of societies and countries that do not teach and live the key value that every human being is the keeper – the protector – of his or her neighbor. That every one of us is responsible for solidly fastening together our society.

["I'm Sorry"](#)

Rabbi Yoni Regev, Temple Sinai (Oakland, CA)

I’m sorry that I did not speak out more plainly then about what was in my heart and on my mind, and I am sorry that I ultimately confused politics with principles; I shied away from controversy even as my core values compelled me to take a stand. I hope to do better this year and in the future because I believe we should be able to speak about the things that really matter to us as individuals, as a community, and as a people. As Rabbi Dr. Lawrence Hoffman so eloquently taught us just last Shabbat; Judaism at its best is a conversation – a rich conversation between ourselves and our heritage, and a diverse and challenging conversation among ourselves. Nothing could be more Jewish than disagreeing, but at our core we share a rich tradition filled with compelling values.

["This Too Shall Pass"](#)

Rabbi Lisa Rubin, Central Synagogue (New York, NY)

How much time do we waste on realities that don’t exist? The real gift of being educated and experienced is not that we’ve learned how to think, but that we have the choice of what to think about. We have the power to choose healthy perspectives, ones that maximize our ability to enjoy life. Things that are boring, frustrating, and irritating can be reframed. We shouldn’t let impatience or resentment ruin the moments of right now, which we will never get back. The choice of how we view things is our greatest asset in taking full advantage of time.

["Jews Will Not Replace Us!"](#)

Rabbi Jeff Salkin, Temple Solel (Hollywood, FL)

But, what I cannot get out of my mind is what the thugs were screaming in Charlottesville: “Jews will not replace us!”

We have never wanted to replace anyone. Quite the opposite.

The history of Western civilization is the history of the attempt to replace Judaism – and it has not worked

"Keep Your Eye on the Ball: Our Words Matter"

Rabbi Maurice A. Salth, Central Synagogue (New York, NY)

Hillel reminds us, no matter the situation, we need to take care of each other. We need to be the *mensch* – especially when others are not.

When we take this position, we can encourage others around us to follow our lead, to be influenced by us. With regard to our elected officials, we should write to them and let them know we expect them to be civil; to stop being hostile; to dedicate their efforts to creating a dignified city, state and nation where we can live in peace and thrive among one another. This is how they should be spending their time.

"Truth"

Rabbi Michael Satz, Holy Blossom Temple (Toronto, ON)

Forcing ourselves to tell the truth is not the same thing as “speaking our mind,” especially when it might be hurtful to others. We think that people who are overly honest and say what actually pops into their heads are telling the truth, being honest and refreshing, but I think, Jewish thought has a different take. Speech between individuals should not be hurtful. The famous classical example is “The Beautiful Bride.” Our ancient sage Hillel states that all brides should be praised as “beautiful and gracious.” His intellectual sparring partner Shammai asks, “What if a bride limps or is blind, should one praise her as being ‘beautiful and gracious’? Has not the Torah told us, “Keep your distance from falsehood?”“

"Not Alone"

Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin, Congregation Beth Israel, Charlottesville, VA

As Jews, and as people who live in Charlottesville, we know a thing or two about hate and terror. On August 11th and 12th, and the days that followed, I asked myself, “Where is God in all of this?” I knew I had experienced moments of light even in the midst of great darkness, but God still felt hidden from me, from us, from our town. I wonder if you felt the same, or if you still do...

...As I process the events of that horrible weekend, and reflect on the weeks leading up to it, I see that God was there all along, showing up through the acts of righteous people- through the Shifras, Puah’s, and Bittiah’s, of our day, through wonderful human beings, who were created in the image of God, and who act as God’s partners.

God’s protection came through clergy who offered to surround our synagogue during Shabbat morning services. God’s compassion and generosity showed up in letters, artwork, sheet cakes, and hundreds of donations that people from around the continent sent to CBI. God’s healing came through nurses, doctors, and EMTs who treated the injured victims of the car attack, some even rushing to the scene itself. God’s loving-kindness showed up in therapists and trauma specialists who offered and continue to offer free counseling for members of the Charlottesville community. God’s embrace enveloped us as we held hands with strangers, hugged one another, walked across a room to hand someone a tissue, and dry their tears.

"Interfaith Dialogue: Is *Tikkun Olam* Repairing The World and That Is 'Doing Jewish'?"

Rabbi Jeremy Schneider, Temple Kol Ami (Scottsdale, AZ)

Tikkun Olam or “repairing the world” is practically the watchwords of our faith. Tonight, I want to talk about *tikkun* as it relates to repairing the relationships between us and our fellow human beings. And this is through interfaith dialogue. We can find meaning in this New Year in our lives, our families’ lives and at Temple Kol Ami when we pursue our mission of *Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world through interfaith dialogue. This is our task as voices of religious moderates.

In order to begin, we must face our fears, acknowledge our ignorances and tendencies toward stereotypes. We must learn what their faith tradition truly stands for, not from Politicians, not from email “forwards,” and not from the Media, but from Muslims themselves by engaging in dialogue.

On Rosh HaShanah, our Jewish New Year, we take personal inventory of our thoughts and actions. Judaism encourages us, no, actually, Judaism demands that we take stock of our ignorance as well. We need accurate information. We cannot afford to remain in a state of ignorance and fear because the stakes are too high.

"What is Humanity?"

Rabbi Zach Shapiro, Temple Akiba (Culver City, CA)

Darwinism teaches survival of the fittest. But Judaism, in a way, teaches “anti-social Darwinism.” We ensure that the most vulnerable are embraced. Central to who we are is the responsibility to be there for those in need. It’s beyond Jewish values. This is a human truth. The Dalai Lama put it simply: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

"Breaking the Silence"

Rabbi Suzanne Singer, Temple Beth El (Riverside, CA)

...[A] country or a regime that discriminates against Latinos, and African Americans, and transgender people, and Muslims, is also a country that discriminates against Jews. And no one is immune, even those who are in the government. Remember the story of Esther? She married King Ahashuerus of Persia without telling him that she was Jewish. When the Prime Minister, Haman, planned a pogrom to kill the Jews, she was afraid to speak up in defense of her people. Her uncle Mordechai reminded her that she was not protected, despite being the queen.

No matter how safe we may feel as Jews at this juncture in America, so did our parents and grandparents in the Germany of the 1930s. They were so well integrated into the society; they were sure the Nazis would leave them be. That is what my own French grandfather believed, so when he had a chance to leave, he chose to stay. My mother was the only member of her family to survive Auschwitz.

"Becoming Who We Are"

Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman, Larchmont Temple (Larchmont, NY)

We are here, today and every day, to be upstanders for human understanding. To defend the dignity of difference. Which means every faith system, any potential neighbor, That Muslim mosque, that Evangelist church, that Hindi Shrine... affirmatively contributing to the conversation is valuable & vital... In navigating the landscape of 21st century American life. We need one another, divergent—at times, diametrically opposed, to survive and thrive....

"Rock and Roll Anti-Semitism"

Rabbi Michael Sommers, Har-Shalom (Highland Park, IL)

Today, even rock and roll isn't sacred anymore. It is painful to watch A handful of famous, aging rockers show their true inner beliefs, revealing their anti-Semitism. We can't blame drugs and psychedelics for this one when we all know that baseless hatred has the power to make people believe any lie they want to believe.

I thought Rock and Roll was always meant to unite people. When we crossed the Red Sea on dry land Miriam took up her tumbrel, took all the woman to dance and celebrate the great miracle they had all witnessed. We sing her rock lyrics in every service.

King David remains known as one of the earliest and greatest Jewish rock heroes. He wrote poems and songs we still read and sing to this very day. "Sing us a song all the world unto God, Sing us a song unto God." His son, King Solomon wrote a love song so incredible that Brides and Grooms everywhere still quote it on their *ketubahs* and have pieces of it read during their ceremonies. "*Dodi Li v'ani lo ha-row-eh bashoshanim*. My beloved is mine and I am his. He feedeth among the lilies."

Music and words have been powerful tools since first put to song, to parchment, sent as time travelers into the future for us to learn from and find peace in them.

"What Jews Can Do to Blot Out White Supremacy"

Rabbi Joshua Stanton, East End Temple (New York, NY)

Because white supremacists can only succeed if they attack the notion of history itself and convince enough people to adopt their twisted and ahistorical views. White supremacists rally around confederate statues in Charlottesville, because they are trying to cling to a terrible misunderstanding of the past in order to make a power grab at the future. They lie about history in order to seize as much influence and control as they can.

They curse us as Jews, but misunderstand what gives us power. As a 5,000-year-old people, our power lies in our perspective on human life and human history. We have a wealth of historical reference points for any new event that we encounter – which help us approach new situations with wisdom and determination and moral clarity and optimism.

"Living as Pursuers of Peace"

Rabbi Peter Stein, Temple B'rith Kodesh (Rochester, NY)

In this new year, then, I ask: how can we create sacred interference? How can we counter so much of what is broken in our world? Let us interfere, in the words of the Psalms, as *rofei lishvurei lev*, healers of the brokenhearted, and *u'mchabaysh l'atzvotahm*, binders of their wounds."

... We must live mindful of the needs of others. We must live with open hearts and open minds, recognizing and accepting the perspectives of others. We must live as *rofei lishvurei lev* and *rodfei shalom*...loving our fellow human beings with sacred ferocity.

"Be Kind"

Rabbi Eleanor Steinman, Temple Beth Hillel (Valley Village, CA)

In this New Year we all need to work on fostering compassion for other people. We must increase our tolerance for ideas that challenge us. We must separate the person from their ideas. We must develop ways to listen and learn about another person so that we can see the fullness of their humanity. This is our task in this New Year.

And on this first night, the first of the New Year, we also are working on our relationship with the Eternal One. God, the Force, our Higher Power, the Ultimate Being, whatever your name for and understanding of God, now is the time to look to God for kindness and to pray for it in return. God is kind. We can be, too.

"The Shofar Call" ❖

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple (St. Paul, MN)

We seek a measure of leniency in how we are judged by God. We plead for *chesed*/loving kindness. And this is what we must reflect in the world as well. The Psalmist tells us that the world is built with one attribute and that is *chesed*, "*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*," [Ps. 89:3]. "The world will be built from love." The world will be built on words that heal, by hands that care, by eyes that smile. The world will be built by sharing these gifts God has given us.

"When They Kick In Your Front Door. How You Gonna Come?"

Rabbi Brent Spodek, Beacon Hebrew Alliance (Beacon, NY)

If they kick in my front door, I'm planning to come in my *tallis* and *tefillin* holding hands with the bad hombres from Mexico, the transgender soldiers, the women who've bene grabbed, the queers, the Arabs, the undocumented workers. Perhaps it will be time to fight, and perhaps it will be time to sing and laugh and pray.

It will never be time to stop being human.

"Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day: A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5778"

Rabbi Micah Streiffer, Kol Ami (Thornhill, ON)

In a sense, *tzedakah* results from *t'shuvah* and *t'fillah* – when we clarify our values, when we come together with others who share our vision for a better world, then we are equipped to do things to actualize that vision. The haftarah for Yom Kippur afternoon teaches just that – that the High Holy Days aren't only about what we do in this sanctuary. The real point is what happens after we leave these seats.

Prepare Me to Be A Sanctuary

Rabbi Elliott Tepperman, Bnai Keshet (Montclair, NJ)

The Torah offers a unique theology of immigration.

First, Torah teaches that the experience of immigration, whether “voluntary” like Abraham or “involuntary” like the Hebrews, is an important path to knowing God.

Then it teaches that loving the stranger is not only about fairness but also about increasing our proximity to God.

Finally, when we ourselves are not immigrants Torah commands us to get closer to this spiritual access point, by being close to immigrants. Loving the stranger.

Caring for the stranger is a path to finding God.

“On Love”

Rabbi Rachel Timoner, Congregation Beth Elohim (Brooklyn, NY)

In an environment of overwhelming stress, an environment characterized by cruelty, our tendency is to shut down and close our hearts. This is personally dangerous and it is dangerous for our democracy. We need a strategy that keeps our hearts awake. I suggest to you that this strategy is love. We can create a refuge for our hearts by noticing what is good and trustworthy, and by spending time in physical sanctuaries such as this one, where we bring our attention to all that is worthy of gratitude and awe and love.

“Shining Brighter Together”

Rabbi Heath Watenmaker, Congregation Beth Am (Los Altos Hills, CA)

Each of us carries a lamp, and indeed our synagogue community only shines at its brightest when all of us are present. Our lives today are complicated, and we all have many demands pulling us in a thousand different directions.

But what if we took the time - just a couple of hours every couple of weeks, or once a month, even - to do something for ourselves and our souls. To bring our light into others' homes, to bring their light into ours; to really connect with each other, to share our warmth and our light in a sacred community.

As part of the “top secret” blessings I give to bar and bat mitzvah students, I often tell them that the Jewish people need them. Well, the Jewish people - and this community - needs you. Each of you. All of you. In all your messy glory. Not for the

sake of “Jewish continuity” or out of a concern for numbers or demographics, but because without you, Beth Am is not quite whole. Without you, our light doesn’t shine as brightly as it could.

“From Tzedakah to Tzedek” (no link yet available)

Rabbi Greg Weisman, Temple Beth El of Boca Raton (Boca Raton, FL)

Our tradition challenges us to engage deeply with the issues of our day and using our best wisdom and our best moral compass find the answer for ourselves. That was true 2000 years ago, and remains true today. Answers to the questions facing us in 2017 will not jump off a page of Talmud or come out of the words of a prophet. The Talmud does not tell us what we should do about DACA and the DREAMers; nowhere in the *midrashim* does it say how to limit the rise of our oceans. What those texts do tell us, though, is what our values are, like dignity and equality for all. Like responsibility for taking care of the earth and its natural resources. Like pursuing peace in our homes and in our communities. We must decide how best to fulfill those values. We must decide how to navigate when those values conflict, as they often do.

“Change: Crossing the River Together”

Rabbi David S. Widzer, Temple Beth El of Northern Valley (Closter, NJ)

We draw strength from the example of Abraham. He made his way across that river with faith in what he believed: and the ability to see past the difficulties. We must have faith in our future as a congregation. And our vision of what that future can be helps us see through the obstacles: the fear: the anxiety: the unease: and the concern that we share. That vision helps us keep focused on what lies ahead. Whether it is Abraham’s stream: or our congregational river of transition: change will mean obstacles to overcome. Abraham knew he could make it to the other side. We can, too.

“Of Courage and Chesed (Loving-Kindness)”

Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick, Temple Beth Am (Seattle, WA)

Judaism teaches that the power of *chesed* can transform lives. *Acher hadevarim haelah*, after Abraham lifted his knife, and Isaac was released from the altar, Isaac had a choice to make. No one would have faulted Isaac had he become filled with bitterness. Yet, Isaac did not. Instead, the next time we see Isaac, he’s meditating in the fields at twilight. Perhaps he was seeking ways to overcome his anger and fear from the ordeal upon the altar. And he succeeded. Isaac gives us hope – like the mourners of Mother Emanuel Church – that it’s possible to cultivate compassion no matter what tests we encounter. Isaac alone among the patriarchs had a long-lasting, loving marriage and committed himself, day by day, to caring for his family, his people, his land. Act by compassionate act, Isaac transformed the trauma of his youth into a lifetime of *chesed*.
