Erev Rosh Hashanah D'var Torah on "The Surge"

Congregation Netivot Shalom
September 2024

On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, I wish for us all to be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life. This image of the Book of Life has always been a powerful one for me—the idea that, during these Days of Awe, the book is open, and through T'shuvah—repentance and asking for forgiveness—we can hope that by the end of this season, our fate will be sealed for good. Yet, this year, that idea feels particularly hard to grapple with. In fact, I saw a meme on a friend's Facebook page saying that this year, God should be asking for our forgiveness. It's a reminder that we cannot reduce T'shuvah to simply apologizing for our sins. T'shuvah is about much more. It's about returning to our best selves; it's about growth; it's about transformation. This makes our task during this season both more challenging and more inspiring.

This year, in particular, is well positioned to be a moment for profound personal and communal growth, as Jews are still moving through the collective trauma of October 7th and the hard last year since. And as much as trauma creates unwanted pain, it also opens an opportunity for meaning making and change. And our Jewish community has already started to change in some hard, interesting and even at times inspiring ways.

Almost exactly a year ago today, I had just completed the 11 months of saying Kaddish for my mother, who was also one of my very best friends. After spending the past year thinking deeply about her, about how I wanted to integrate her values, her voice, and her beliefs

into my life—including her passion for connecting to and helping others—I felt cautiously ready to enter a new normal.

But on that Saturday morning, like so many of us, I woke up to the harsh reality that "normal" would not be possible. My work WhatsApp, which is usually silent on Shabbat, began buzzing with the news of October 7th, the greatest single trauma for Israel and the Jewish people in our lifetimes.

In the coming days and weeks, I was left grappling with how I could incorporate my learning from this past year of grieving my personal trauma into what was now clear would be a time of holding our collective trauma.

Over this past year, in my work with Jewish Federations of North America, one way I've found purpose is by studying the ways this trauma is impacting Jews across the country, sharing these insights and helping individuals and communities grow to meet this moment. As hard as it's been to experience and report on the ways we're hurting as people, it's also been inspiring to see the ways people are responding.

Shortly after the attacks, we conducted a survey that showed both Jews and non-Jews were closely following the news from Israel, deeply emotionally impacted by what had happened. People showed up in droves for memorials and vigils in their local communities, culminating in the largest gathering of Jews in U.S. history—nearly 300,000 at the March for Israel in Washington, plus many more who joined online.

In the immediate aftermath, our data and experience showed people coming together in grief and mourning. We witnessed a communal "pulling up of more chairs"—literally and figuratively—making space for people to learn, to pray, to be together.

Psychologists call this the "salient heroic phase," where people respond with support and solidarity in the face of trauma.

But soon after, even as the devasting impacts of war continued; divisiveness in American and Israeli politics endured, and antisemitism was on the rise in the United States, another pattern began to emerge—one that surprised me at first.

This was the beginning of what I now call "the Surge" in Jewish engagement.

I started hearing from rabbis and Jewish leaders that people were continuing to fill those extra seats—this time not just for vigils but for regular services. Some rabbis reported that individuals who had been part of our community for years were now seeking conversion, making a formal commitment in this moment of communal pain. Others noticed a rise in grassroots Jewish groups organizing on WhatsApp, connecting Jews around shared concerns and interests.

Our research confirmed these anecdotes: 43% of the Jewish community has shown up more in Jewish life over the past year. This includes both those who were already deeply involved but now seek even deeper connection and those who had not been engaged but are experiencing an awakening.

This Surge is not just about showing up, it's about showing up with a desire for deeper meaning. For example, *Repair the World* has seen twice as many people participate in volunteer work. And the *Sefaria* library has seen a rise of 200,000 people per month searching for Jewish texts of all sorts including on grief, mourning, and meaning. *Moishe House* has recorded the greatest numbers of young adults engaging in Jewish learning in its history. And *Hillel* saw the highest levels of student engagement ever last year—180,000 participants, compared to 160,000 the previous year.

For those who were already part of the core of the community, this moment has been profoundly painful, marked by heartbreak at the rise of antisemitism and the shattering of aspects of their relationship with and understanding of Israel. This group has been showing up in the Jewish community more seeking comfort and offering new levels of leadership.

For those who were less engaged in Jewish community before October 7th, there has been an additional kind of pain—a yearning for connection. Those who are part of this "Surge" are less likely to have established relationships in the Jewish community and may not know how to join in. When they showed up, they sometimes felt even more alone. Here they were finally seeking connection, but they were not always sure how to find it. They might have been invisible to the others in the room who are busy greeting friends, getting immersed in the program or content, or running logistics.

One person described that she showed up for a meeting of Jewish families concerned about their children's experiences in schools. She didn't feel comfortable because she didn't know the group. Everyone got busy with the work. They made a plan, gave out

volunteer roles, and then talked about next steps. She didn't get to share her experience or meet anyone, and nobody gave her a job. She left happy the work was happening but thinking there probably wasn't a place for her here.

As I think about the learnings from our research on what's changed in Jewish life since October 7th and I stand before you on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I wonder what we can learn from this research that can help each of us do the work of T'shuvah. I am reminded of the words of Rabbi Yitzḥak writing about this day:

"A person's sentence is torn up on account of four types of actions: Giving charity, crying out in prayer, a change of one's name, and a change of one's deeds for the better. Some also say: a change of one's place cancels an evil decree."

In the immediate wake of trauma, we often feel disillusioned and broken. But with time, we engage in the work "meaning-making"—rebuilding ourselves, our lives, and our community with purpose. Sometimes, it's not only about doing better but changing our place—showing up where we hadn't before. It's in those moments of movement that we might meet our own needs or someone else's.

In Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove's new book *For Such a Time as This*, he reflects on the fact that a moment of crisis like we're in in the world and the Jewish community today, also potentially positions us to make a difference. The book's title comes from the critical moment when Queen Esther of the Purim Story was called upon by her Uncle Mordecai at a pivotal moment in Jewish history saying, "Who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?" In the Purim story, Esther finds herself in a place to make

a difference in the trajectory of the Jewish people during a moment of brutal antisemitism. Rabbi Cosgrove reflects that he also feels his position in this moment puts him in an important place leading Park Avenue synagogue in New York and its large number of congregants through this tumultuous time in Jewish history.

In a way, I've felt that calling this year in my role as Chief Impact & Growth Officer at Jewish Federations of North America – bringing my team's data work together with the lessons I hold from my mother around connecting to and helping others. I feel a deep sense of purpose through articulating this data in a way that motivates Jewish communities to respond to this moment and especially to respond to this Surge by creating welcoming spaces for those who desire a connection.

Likely each of us in this room has been affected by the changes in our community in the last year. We each have greater needs that need to be filled. And we each have something to offer based on our unique person and position.

While we might not each be the Queen Esther of the moment, we must acknowledge where we are right now, realistically assess our capacity, and respond from that place. Even a small gesture—a coffee date, a text, an invitation to a Shabbat meal—can make all the difference.

In this room tonight, there is someone who is seeking depth and someone who can teach. There is someone who needs a hand and someone who can lend one. There is someone who feels lonely, and someone who can say "hello" or invite them to their dinner table.

This Rosh Hashanah, may we each take the time to reflect on how we can return to ourselves—how we can transform this time of ongoing trauma and turmoil into one of meaning, and create a future that brings us closer to one another and to our best selves.

L’shanah tovah tikatevu v’techatemu (לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכָּתֵבוּ וְתֵחָתֵמוּ). May you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a good year.