

Rabbi Chai Levy Kol Nidre 2024 Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA
Finding Our Humanity in Dehumanizing Times

It's been a crushing year, traumatic, exhausting, full of grief and despair.
We just commemorated October 7 and
the war continues, with all of its violence, devastation, fear, uncertainty,
And we hold our breath, as the fighting escalates.
As Jews, we've felt the confusing distress of
our people being both vulnerable and powerful at the same time.
On top of the horrors of the war itself,
Here, there's been relentless shouting and polarization:
In our city council meetings, in school and college campuses,
in protests, on social media,
and even among family and friends, parents and children.
A horrifically painful war, with a complex history, multiple fronts,
and no simple solutions, is reduced to
social media memes and slogans that fit on a poster.

This year, no one was holding up sign and chanting:
What do we want?! NUANCE!
When do we want it?!
OVER AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF IN-DEPTH CONVERSATION!¹

No, we've been agitated, afraid, angry,
and we are worn out from all of it.
And yet here we are on Yom Kippur, this day of
Atonement; confession; compassion and forgiveness;
seeking softness and release as we stand and gently beat our hearts.

The intention of Yom Kippur might feel incongruous
with our current reality:

¹ Thanks to Rabbi Shir Meira Feit who posted this in November 2023

On this Yom Kippur, how can we be our best selves when
 this war brings out the worst in us?
 How can we find the humanity in each other
 in this time that has been so profoundly dehumanizing?
 How can we repair relationships that have suffered when the strife of the past
 year continues and even escalates?

Throughout this day, we will stand before the ark and sing
Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum V'chanun...
 The thirteen Divine attributes of compassion, love, forgiveness...
 We want God to be compassionate, loving and forgiving of us,
 But what about *us*? We've become angry, fearful, punishing -
 And it's completely understandable! It's been an absolutely brutal year.

But the Torah wants us to have a soft heart.
 It tells us to circumcise our hearts. (Deut 10:16). **וּמִלְתֶּם אֶת עֵרְלַת לִבְבְּכֶם**
 Which Rashi understands to mean
 we should have an open and loving heart.
 The Torah understands that the hard heart is the obstacle to transformation,
 freedom, growth. Remember, Pharaoh had a hard heart.

On Yom Kippur, we are meant to soften our hearts.
 Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, taught, when we beat our heart in the confessionals,
 we are freeing the obstacles to allow love to flow.

But what about when we are at war?
 Isn't a soft heart incompatible with war?
 Deuteronomy instructs that if a soldier has a soft heart, he has to go back home²
 because he's unfit for battle and might weaken his army.
 Isn't that the nature of war, anyway?
 whether a war thousands of miles away,

² Deuteronomy 20:8

or a fight in our own city,
or a heated argument at our own dining table?
We gird ourselves for battle!
We are designed, when under threat, for fight or flight.
We are built that way.

What is our spiritual work this Yom Kippur?
How do we do the heart-softening work of apology, confession, teshuva
When we are at war?
How can we express the best in our humanity
in this dangerously dehumanizing time?

The only way I can answer these questions is
by sharing a few real life stories with you.
Stories from this past year that I am holding onto in these painful times.
Stories of humanity, vulnerability, soft-heartedness, teshuva, forgiveness and
compassion.
I encountered each of these stories during this devastating war,
and while none of them will solve the great crisis facing our people,
Each of them reminded me of the possibility of connection in this polarizing time.

The first story is that of Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger.
Some of us met him last month when we co-sponsored a talk with him and his
Palestinian colleague, Noor Awad,
who were here in town representing the organization Roots.³
Different from other peace/dialogue groups, this group is made up of Palestinians
and *settlers from the West Bank*. As Rav Schlesinger put it,
Not lefty peace-activists, but the people who are “the problem.”
How did a rabbi, who introduced himself as “a Jew, a Zionist, and a settler”
become a leader in a dialogue group with Palestinians working towards what he
called “healing from the hubris of exclusivity,”

³ <https://www.friendsofroots.net/>

the dehumanizing illusion that that one's narrative is the only true story?

He shared the story of driving his car through the West Bank with two Christian pastors who were visiting from the US and

How he stopped to pick up a hitchhiker.

When the pastors asked about it - "you pick up hitchhikers here?"

He replied: "It's my policy to pick up everyone."

In that moment, he realized that for him, "everyone" meant of course "only Jews," and he admitted to himself, "I'm a racist."

It sparked a journey for him of realizing that "his whole truth was only a half truth" and that he lived blind to the existence of Palestinians.

It sent him on a journey to understand the narrative of the Palestinians that was in direct contradiction to his own,

and now he's a leader in this group that's about Israelis and Palestinians listening deeply to each other's stories, understanding the other's fears, and working toward a shared future.

Rav Schlesinger's story of teshuva, was sparked by a revelatory moment in the car that day when he realized

he needed to see the humanity in the other.

It reminds me of Rav Kook's teaching about teshuva in his classic, *Orot HaTeshuva*, the Lights of Repentance.

He says that sometimes there's a kind of sudden teshuva.

Teshuva can also be gradual, but sometimes:

It comes in a flash, like lightning,

when a universal, Divine goodness flashes with clarity in us.

My second story has a similar flash of goodness.

As many of you know, I was in Israel this summer, and I had the opportunity to meet with with amazing people who were still, in the middle of the war, doing peace, justice, and coexistence work.

My group had the chance to speak with a pair from the

Parents Circle/Family Forum⁴.

This is an organization of over 700 families, half Israeli and half Palestinian, who have lost an immediate family member to violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The families come together in their shared grief to dialogue.

We met a Palestinian man who spoke to our group, together with an Israeli woman, both of whom had lost loved ones.

The man's name is Arab Aramin.

In 2007, when he was 13 years old, his 10 year old sister, Abir, was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier near her school near Hevron.

The only Israelis he knew at that time were soldiers at checkpoints.

He began a life of taking revenge for the death of his little sister, throwing stones at soldiers.

But his father told him: don't ruin your life through violence.

His father himself had spent 7 years in Israeli jail for violence against soldiers, and didn't want his son to end up in jail too or worse.

But Arab was full of grief and revenge from the killing of his sister.

What happened, I asked him, that made him go from being a young man throwing stones, full of hatred and the desire for revenge, to being a compassionate, gentle, kind man taking part in a bereavement dialogue with an Israeli woman?

The turning point, that lightning flash of revelation, came when he visited Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany.

He was brought there by the writer Colum McCann, who wrote a book called *Apeirogon*, about Arab's family's story.

The way Arab described it, as soon as he stepped foot in Buchenwald,

He began to weep, and for the first time, he saw his enemy, the Jewish people, as human beings.

He said: I didn't want to lose my soul.

He wanted to meet his enemies and try to understand them.

⁴ <https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/homepage-en/>

He has since become an active member and public speaker for the Parents Circle/Family Forum.

He said to our group about Israelis and Palestinians:

“Our enemy is not each other, but the *fear and hatred* we have for each other.”
and “We have to learn to share this land,
or it will be two big graves for both our peoples.”

I want to share one more story, though there are certainly many others.
This is a story that happened right here, to me.

After October 7, I got into some social media battles with friends who were posting anti-Israel messages on Facebook.

I was reeling with the feeling many of us have had this year:

“the left has abandoned us in our time of tragedy.”

“Where are our allies?” “How when our people had been brutally massacred, could ‘friends’ say we deserved it?”

I tried convincing people online that they had an incorrect understanding of history. A few “unfriended” me.

One person, however, didn’t unfriend me and continued to share inflammatory anti-Israel posts.

I sent a few private messages,
trying to explain the errors in their understanding,
but they weren’t interested in engaging with me.

Over the next many months of the war, I continued to read their posts;

It gave me a window into the kinds of things that the “radical left” was saying, so I kept following them, even though it always left me feeling angry, sad, and that my people’s history was misunderstood.

Then about four months ago, this person,

I’ll call them my “facebook enemy,” showed up in my dance class.

Some of you know, I love to dance, and dance class is my happy place where I can get away from the worries of the world and just move and sweat and have a good time - and there was my facebook “enemy.”

My heart sank. It was awkward. And I was angry.
How dare you, with your inflammatory rhetoric that defames my people and misrepresents our history, ruin my happy place?!
And they kept coming, week after week.
Every time I'd go to dance class, I'd hope they wouldn't be there so I could just relax and enjoy myself, but no, there they were.
In the middle of Zumba-ing, I couldn't stop ruminating:
Are they antisemitic?
Do they want all the Jews dead from the river to the sea?
They actually seem like an otherwise nice person.
Maybe I should find a different dance class?

And then something interesting happened.
I went to Israel this summer and posted about my trip,
About the peace activists who were working towards a shared society;
About how in contrast to the polarizing rhetoric in the States,
There in Jerusalem, I heard Jews and Palestinians together at a rally chanting,
"from the river to the sea, TWO peoples shall be free."
And my dance-class, facebook "enemy" started "liking" my posts!

And then something really interesting happened.
A few weeks passed, and my dance-class facebook "enemy" wrote the following in a public post to their several thousand friends:

"This is an apology. I came to the Bay Area to escape the extreme thinking of the evangelical church only to find myself transferring the title of "Judge" from the conservative church to parts of the radical left of the Bay Area....[They vulnerably wrote about their desire for belonging and approval, and continued:] I am now realizing that my soul hurts with the "you either believe this or you are the enemy" mentality. It also doesn't match the world I want... and has generated a sense of isolation and division for me. ...Because of this, I want to apologize ...The world I envision is one ... that practices patience, compassion and curiosity towards someone who is different vs writing the person off as a hater without

really getting to know their soul.. I ask for forgiveness for the ways my approach...may have caused division in our relationship... I have failed my biggest value if I have ever made you feel less than a child of God and for that, I am really sorry.”

I read this and I was floored. My facebook “enemy” just did teshuva in the most courageous and vulnerable way.

I immediately commented on their post:

“wow. I’m really moved by this.”

Long story short: we went back and forth for a bit and ended up meeting in person.

I listened to their story, their pain, their experience,

And they listened to mine.

It was tearful and heart-opening.

It was also courageous for them to brave the social rejection that came with “normalizing the bad guys.”

We are now friends and are glad to see each other in dance class.

I asked permission to share this story on Yom Kippur.

Because this is what this day is all about.

Softening. Vulnerability. Courage. Reaching out and saying:

The division, pain, anger, is hurting all of us.

Saying: “I’m going to hold a little less tightly to my story so I can understand your story.”

Saying: “I don’t want to make you the enemy. I see the humanity in you, and when I do, I feel the humanity in myself too.”

What do these three stories have in common?

Rabbi Schlesinger, the settler now leading a dialogue program;

Arab Aramin who went from a stone-throwing youth to a leader of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families;

And my facebook enemy who realized their “radical left” rhetoric was creating division and isolation.

These stories can offer us this Yom Kippur, in this time of war and division
(I haven't even mentioned the upcoming election, but yes, that too)
A different kind of story.

We are living in dangerously dehumanizing times, and
Yom Kippur is the time to find the best in our humanity,
in ourselves and in others.

Teshuva is about returning to the original good in each of us,
as Rav Kook describes it:

it's "returning to one's original status, to the source of life and higher being ... in
their highest spiritual character,
as illumined by the simple, radiant, divine light."

Sometimes war and self-defense are necessary, yes, absolutely.

Soldiers in battle can't have soft hearts, the Torah tells us.

But on Yom Kippur, we are meant to soften our hearts.

And Yom Kippur is the time to make amends,
ask for forgiveness, repair relationships.

You may think I'm being naive, that none of this is realistic when our people is at
war and when we are in real danger. I get it.

But I'm not talking about military strategy.

I leave that to the experts and pray that wisdom prevails.

I'm talking about *heart* strategy.

I'm talking about how *we* stay human in this dehumanizing time.

I'm talking about how *we* stay connected in this polarizing time.

I'm talking about how *we*, as humanity, hold on to our vision,
our imagination, and make for the possibility of a different future.

Throughout this day we chant God's Thirteen Attributes of Compassion,
and each time, we say it three times.

There is something about three's on Yom Kippur.

Kol Nidre three times.

The three times the cohen gadol makes atonement.

Teshuva, Tefillah, Tzedakah - another 3.

On Pesach we have 4's (4 children, 4 questions, 4 cups)

On Yom Kippur we have 3's. Why?

Maybe it's because three is the number beyond the binary of two.

It's the three steps of the dialectical process,

where we evolve to a higher middle ground beyond two opposing sides.

Maybe the heart-softening, courageous vulnerability of Yom Kippur can help us transcend the false binaries that we are currently stuck in.

The false binaries that are destroying humanity and human lives.

I had a moment of revelation this past January when I attended an Albany City Council meeting. It was one of many meetings of city councils around the Bay Area where neighbors came to fight with each other and yell at their local elected leaders about resolutions about the war. When it was my turn at the mic, I had a flash of softening, maybe the kind of lightning flash of goodness that Rav Kook described.

I felt compassion for everyone there -

For the people with Israeli flags, with hostage posters and Jewish stars.

And for the people with Palestinian flags, wearing masks and keffiyehs,

I saw how everyone there was hurting and grieving.

I felt compassion for the bewildered city council members,

good people just trying to serve their local community.

And when I got up to the mic, I said:

"We are all in pain. Let's talk to each other.

To anyone here holding a "Free Palestine" sign, I invite you to coffee.

I want to hear about your pain, and I'll tell you about mine."

No one took me up on the offer, but it didn't matter,

because the feeling of that moment has stayed with me,

It orients me to my humanity;

It's a compass that points me to a non-polarized place in the messy middle

Where I can feel compassion, like singing

God's Thirteen Attributes three times.

We don't yet know what story we will tell about this war in the future.

We are currently creating how the future will remember this time.

You may have heard the phrase "facts on the ground."

It's used to describe how current practices, like settlements, determine the future of the land.

Can't we create "facts on the ground," that are about compassion and humanity, Instead of our current polarization and dehumanization?

Not just about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but here, and in all aspects of our lives?

What facts on the ground can you create?

Has there been a breakthrough moment for you this year -

a flash of goodness, a moment of healing, reconciliation, understanding across the divides?

I've shared these stories with you because I want us to hold a vision for a future that is different from the current awful reality,

And maybe, just maybe,

telling these stories might change how the future story gets told.

Stories of compassion, forgiveness, and the softening of the heart; stories of finding our humanity in the messy middle.

On Yom Kippur, we pray to a forgiving and compassionate God who softens hearts and wants humanity to be our best selves.

Let us find in ourselves the best of what humanity can be.

Let's create our own stories of teshuva, repair, and compassion.

Let's create new facts on the ground and

have the vision to imagine the future story that we'll tell one day.

Gmar Chatima Tova.