

Rosh Hashanah 2025-5786

In a letter written to me on the occasion of my ordination, my childhood rabbi, Max Hausen, gifted me a piece of advice I have followed each week of my rabbinate. *“Every sermon you preach,”* he instructed, *“must be a sermon you preach to yourself.”*

His wisdom has guided me to this the-36th-High-Holy-Day Season I have shared with our community. Many of you know me well, but anyone who would like to learn more about me, can simply look back on my sermons. In them, are the questions with which I have struggled, the themes that lifted me up, and the pain and joy in my heart. You see, weekly on shabbat and on these, our most sacred holidays, while I may appear to be speaking to you, every word of every sermon is one I am actually preaching to myself.

I realized the message I needed to hear this year while reading Psalm 27, which Jewish tradition instructs us to read every day during the month of Elul in preparation for Rosh Hashanah. It's only 14 verses, so it's not a big lift. It speaks of faith in God and provides encouragement as we anticipate the heavy themes of renewal and repentance.

Each day, I found myself transfixed by the last verse. And it is this last verse, I realize, that called out to me saying – *this line is for you, Amy Schwartzman. This is the one you need to hear.* Maybe others will listen and take something helpful or valuable away. But first, preach this to yourself.

קוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזַק וַיֵּאמֶץ לַבָּרָא קוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה:

While not the literal translation, I understand this verse to mean:

Connect yourself to that which is Sacred, חֲזַק וַיֵּאמֶץ לַבָּרָא and be brave, Very Brave!

We, members of the Jewish community, are living through tremendously challenging times – for many of us, the most difficult and painful of our entire lives. Angst, anxiety, anger, worry, sadness are emotions we frequently feel as we navigate so many new realities of our world: rising antisemitism, our complex relationship with Israel, and the real and profound impact of the

changing landscape of our nation. I know that for many there have been more personal struggles too. Jobs have been lost along with the recognition of years of devoted work. Marriages have ended. Illnesses have emerged. Relationships with friends and even family have been weakened by conflict and disagreement. There certainly have been moments of joy and times of success, but there is no doubt that these days have wrenched our hearts, stressed our bodies and twisted our minds. They have tested us.

More often than I wish to admit, I have felt afraid. Fearful about my future and the future my children will have to endure. Scared for our Jewish people. Frightened for everyone who lives in our beloved land of Israel. Afraid that I will not rise to respond to this moment as my best, most authentic, most moral self.

And you? Might you share these feelings too? And might you know somewhere deep inside that this is a time to **יִצְחָק וְאַמֵּץ לְבָבְךָ** *be brave, very brave*.

For the next 10 holy days, through our liturgy and music and the special atmosphere of this time, Jewish tradition asks us: How might we be different in the coming year? How can we be kinder? Healthier? More thoughtful? More patient? More focused? More forgiving? And this year, it also asks: What is the bravery that this moment demands of us? What is the bravery we need to realize in our world? What is the bravery called for by our own personal and private lives?

Reading **יִצְחָק וְאַמֵּץ לְבָבְךָ** day-in and day-out for this past month, made me wonder, how the Hebrew might illuminate this theme. How might these 3 words help us to *be Brave, Very Brave*? In truth, most often we see this phrase translated not with the word bravery but with the word courage. **יִצְחָק וְאַמֵּץ לְבָבְךָ** is usually read as, “be strong and courageous.”

But courage and bravery, in my mind, are not exactly the same thing; and I believe that exploring the difference may give us a deeper understanding of what is required of us. It certainly has caused me to look hard at my own bravery as well as its absence, at times.

In Hebrew courage is usually translated as **אַמֵּץ לֵב**. (Similar phrase to **יִצְחָק וְאַמֵּץ לְבָבְךָ** from the psalm.) **אַמֵּץ** means strength; **לֵב** means heart. So, we might call courage “heart strength.” I visualize my own heart, imagining this muscle not only pumping away inside of me, but

metaphorically bolstering my resolve to take on each new day. Courage then is an internal quality; like our hearts it's embedded within us. As each of us has a heart, so too each of us has **לב ימץ**. We use it, practice it and cultivate it daily while making significant decisions and upholding our most fundamental commitments - raising children, taking on a new project at work, facing illness, caring for our aging parents, simply living in a world filled with contradiction and turmoil. From the moment we are capable of making meaningful and personal decisions, we accumulate the raw material of courage. You and I have plenty of **לב ימץ** – plenty of heart strength.

If courage is an internal quality, bravery is the external actualization of that quality. If courage is the muscle we have built over the many seasons of our lives, bravery happens when we flex that muscle in a decisive moment, when we grab agency – at times to act, at times to hold back, at times to speak out or speak up – even when our voice shakes.ⁱ Whether through small or large gestures, public or private moments, brave acts affirm that we are not paralyzed. They assert that we do have power, power that can be very hard to feel especially these days when parts of our world are so very upended and it seems overwhelmingly hard to affect the change we crave.

A few weeks ago, I asked a group of teens about bravery – wondering how it plays out in their lives. They immediately launched into descriptions of famous figures, names we all know – Rosa Parks, Oscar Schindler, Greta Thunberg. A few shouted out to their great grandparents who left their lives in Europe facing an unknown future. One person said Queen Esther! Another said Eve explaining the huge risk she took in biting the apple and the even huger risk in what it revealed – a truth that smashed her idyllic world; a truth that was accompanied by pain. (wow!- that kid is going to be a rabbi!)

Then they asked me about when I have been brave. (*I should have seen that coming..*) My earliest memory of bravery is from 6th grade. We had a bully in our class, Trina. I remember on the last day of school, which was Field Day, she was being really mean to this boy...whom I *may have* secretly liked. In front of lots of kids, I called her out for what she was doing. I may even have used the “b” word! She came at me, and this was the only physical fight I have ever had in my life. No surprise, I lost. But, the experience changed me, and I learned that I could stand up for someone else. Our teens got this. They understood that our brave moments may not look like those of

Martin Luther King or Salman Rushdie or Golda Meir. The importance of a brave moment is not only determined by its impact on the outside world. It is also determined by what we learn about ourselves and our values and how that knowledge alters our lives. We see our actions as brave not only because they change what is happening around us. But because they change us.

Then one teen asked the most obvious question – what took you so long to face Trina? Why did it take an entire year for you to *be brave, very brave*? I can't really recall much of 6th grade although I imagine that at 12 I was pretty aware of the impact of having friends and being liked. I'd like to say I was driven to finally confront the bully by my moral compass, but I'm sure the delay related to my fear of rejection by my classmates. Maybe by what our kids experience today – being judged or labeled or ghosted or canceled.

What about you? Can you recall a time when you missed the chance to step up, to intervene, or take an unpopular stand, or risk being embarrassed or shunned? What held you back? Do you still think about that moment? Do you ever try to change the ending of the story in your mind?

Fear is the most common and most insidious barrier to flexing our **לֵב אֱמֶנֶץ**, our heart strength, in order to act bravely. Our brains have little tolerance for fear. They are hard wired to be risk averse. Their default mode is to keep us safe. But the brain doesn't know what the heart understands. That every time you take action in the presence of your fears, you reclaim the power that your fears have over you. More than that, psychologists believe that when we act despite feeling scared, we develop new neural pathways that enable us to be more comfortable with being uncomfortable. This is called 'affect tolerance.' In other words, we have the ability to 'train the brave' within us.

It turns out that this is a long-standing Jewish idea. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (18th century) captured it with his famous quote that has become a popular song. It's called **זִנְּרֵי זֶרַח** (*sing a bit!*)

Our kids love to sing this, and they understand what it means.

The text of the song says: *“The entire world is a narrow bridge; the important thing is not to be afraid.”* Essentially, when you face that scary moment, don’t be frightened. But in truth, the song misquotes Rebbe Nachman. Instead of **לֹא לִפְחַד כָּלֵל** the original text is different. It says:

לֹא לִי־תִפְחַד כָּלֵל Here, the verb ‘to be afraid’ is written the reflexive form not in the plain form. Not ‘don’t be afraid’ rather, don’t let yourself be overcome by fear. Fear is real, but don’t let that paralyze you. **וְיִאֲמַץ לְבָבְךָ** *Be brave, very brave.*

Right now, the world feels like a very narrow bridge to me. I know that the only way across it is to walk forward. I cannot let my fears overtake me. With clear eyes, on this night/day of our New Year, I must listen to the sermon I need to hear and the question of the hour: What is the bravery that this moment demands of me? What is the bravery I need to realize in our world? What is the bravery called for by my own personal and private life?

To speak about the State of Israel, to support it and to struggle with it, to try to explain it, to continuously affirm my own passionate, progressive Zionism, to talk about my deep love for the land and its people, as well as my shame and my anger and frustration with the actions of the current ruling government, all of this has demanded my bravery.

Flexing my **לֵב אֲמָץ**, I stand with many Israelis who protest a government that seems deaf to the calls for the return of the hostages and the end of the war above other aims, a government that seems deaf to the pain of innocent Palestinians, living in the shadow of war and hunger, a government that distorts and misrepresents what I believe is the sacred, moral voice of Judaism.

There is so much at stake, not only the lives of the innocent, including the hostages, Palestinians and Israelis, but also the very idea of Israel itself and the question of what will remain of the fragile vision of a liberal, albeit imperfect, democracy that once defined the country. I have had to consult my inner courageous heart and summon my brave to affirm how treasured Israel is to me. And also, to explain how painful it is to love and criticize, to hold close, to push away, and even to mourn, all at the same time.

I know you live with this challenge too. No matter whether you lean right or left or sit squarely in the middle, you are as I am, in pain. I know I am not alone.

And yet, I also know that many of you feel I haven't been brave enough. And I'm sure there are times when that has been true. There have been times when I have silenced myself, worried that sharing my authentic voice would compromise my commitment to honor the diversity of this community. Was it that? Or was I לִתְפַחֵד - overcome by my own fear... of being rejected, judged, canceled.

Sometimes the risks of our moral courage are too great to endure. At the very least we must be aware of what is at stake when we silence the call to be brave. Eleanor Roosevelt warned that we are all at risk of *"tiptoeing gently through life only to make it safely to death."* At the same time, bravery often makes no sound. Our most profound moments of courage are often ones no one sees or hears. How valiant to accept what we did not choose and cannot change. How many times, have our most audacious decisions been not to act or to go, but to stay. - To make a lasting difference by tending our small corner of the world, which may include a sacrifice of love – giving others stability, playing a supporting role, nurturing the hidden treasure of endurance and longevity.

One of the great privileges of being a rabbi is to witness all of this, to be exposed to bravery, your bravery. To see so many people stepping up; to see the muscle of courage flexed before my very eyes. I see you and admire your ability to *be brave, very brave*.

- Courage – admitting to ourselves that we were wrong, we behaved badly, we transgressed.
- Bravery – admitting that to the person we hurt
- Courage – recognizing that you are in an unhealthy relationship
- Bravery – canceling the wedding 2 months before the event
- Bravery – calling your estranged brother
- Bravery – joining the Jewish people, formally converting, during one of the most difficult times in our history
- Bravery – leaving a job before compromising your personal morals
- Bravery – transitioning from a boy to a girl during middle school as did my niece. "To thine own self be true." ⁱⁱ

- Bravery – continuing to talk to one another – despite our differences. Listening, engaging, disagreeing with each other and with me and coming on Yom Kippur to pray as one community.
- Bravery – being willing to stand alone. In the Talmud, when one disagrees with the majority opinion, one says *Ipcha Mistabra*. I am a minority voice. I disagree. If I must, I will stand alone. I will be *brave, very brave!*

The practice of reading Psalm 27 throughout the month of Elul doesn't end today, even though Elul has just ended. The custom is to read the psalm through Yom Kippur. For another 10 days we affirm the bravery required to look honestly at ourselves, to commit to being better, to listen, to be curious, to accept, to apologize, to forgive, to change and change again, and to answer the question: where in this one and only precious life that God has given us, do we need to be *brave, very brave*.

All of this, I am preaching to myself, but I am strengthened by your presence here, so, thank you. Perhaps you will join me as together we breathe in courage and breathe out fear, breathe in courage and grasp your moment to be brave.

A muscle gets stronger with every repetition; it grows when it struggles with a heavy lift. So, breathe in courage and breathe out fear; breathe in courage and embrace your brave and then – repeat and repeat and repeat and all year long.

Shana tova!

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ⁱ Adapted from a quote by social activist Maggie Kuhn (1905-1955)

ⁱⁱ William Shakespeare