

Occupying the Space Between
Rosh Hashanah 5787
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In New York, the giant crystal ball drops and a ton and a half of confetti is released on the crowd. In Spain, the custom is to eat twelve small green grapes in the first minute of the year, one during each clock chime at midnight. They are known as the Grapes of Luck. In Denmark, people jump off chairs, couches, or anything elevated, to literally leap into the coming year. In Brazil, people wade into the ocean, and in the Netherlands, they run into the freezing sea.

There are a lot of fun ways to observe the new year, and some of them are pretty weird. But I think Rosh Hashanah is uniquely strange. When we read those words that declare the beginning of 5787, it's a quiet moment. Can I be honest? It's kind of disappointing. We don't feel a transition taking place. The last year is over at that moment, and the gates of the new year open before us, but it will be a while before we step through those gates. It is unlike any other New Years across the world. We don't go from one year to another. There is pause, perhaps a leap that happens in slow motion from the opening of the gates to the closing of them. Our quirky version of that second it takes to jump off a couch is a long period, from Day of Judgment to Day of Atonement, a contemplative, beautiful, even if also uncomfortable stretch of time. This is when Jews believe our transition happens. Not on Rosh Hashanah, or on Yom Kippur, but in the space between.

As I prepared for this new year, I found myself wondering if the same is true about much of Jewish tradition, no matter whether we are talking about time, people, choices, or ideas. We believe our holiest work, our most important and potent work, happens in the spaces between. There's a story about a rabbi and a congregant who comes to speak with the rabbi at his home. This congregant is one of the leaders of a faction of the synagogue, and she complains about the other faction and their terrible ideas. "You're right," the rabbi says. Then the woman leaves, and the leader of the opposing faction comes in. "You're right," the rabbi says. Finally, the rabbi is alone with his wife. What are you doing, she asks? They can't both be right! And the rabbi turns to her and says, "You're right."

I think we can all relate to this, because we all have felt stuck in between. Between is a hard place to be. The fight that lingers most now that my kids are teens, and can get along in almost any other situation, happens on the jetway. Who will have to sit in that middle seat on the plane? There's no space for your arms, or legs, nowhere to stretch or turn and not be breathing another person's air. Some of us will pay extra money or even choose another flight – just to avoid being in between. But I believe our tradition keeps leading us back there. Having the courage to occupy the space between is one of Judaism's hidden themes. The in-between is a key to gaining awareness, bringing people together, protecting ourselves and others, and clarifying who we are. The Hebrew word for between is *bein*, and when we look for that word in our texts, we see how much Torah thinks this way. That stretch of between time we just entered – after the year ends and before we walk through the gates – has a parallel every day, during twilight. It is called *bein hash'mashot*, between the positions of the sun, and it's an important moment of suspension and doubt. The rabbis disagree – some believe it's just the blink of an eye, and some say it's the time

you'd need to take a short walk. It is taught that during the last twilight of the last day of creation, just before the first Shabbat, ten of the most important things in the world were formed during those seconds or minutes, including the rainbow that represented God's covenant with Noah to never again flood the earth; the manna that sustained the people in the wilderness; and Moses's staff, which was used to part the sea and bring the people to freedom. The sages are showing us the beautiful things that can happen in the moments between.

During the High Holy Days, we seek forgiveness for wrongs we have committed *bein adam l'Makom*, between a person and God, and *bein adam l'chavero*, between one person and another. Teshuvah, repentance or return, requires us not to focus just on ourselves or others, but on the dynamics that dwell between us. Then there is the Talmud, the great rabbinic document filled with *kushyot*, holes poked in interpretations from a place situated at the center of each controversy around almost every verse of Torah. The sages do not seek a simple moderation of being in the middle. They are willing to stay in that space between differing positions, long enough to come to a considered ruling.

My favorite thing about the Hebrew word, *bein*, is that it shares its root with *binah*, wisdom. And, *tovanah* means insight. It is from being willing to embrace that space between that we achieve the greatest understanding and that we act with the most authentic intention. The person in the Torah who most embodies the in-between is someone we should talk about more. Few people know that Hillel called him a pursuer of peace, *rodef shalom*, giving our synagogue its name. My wife and I named one of our sons after him. It is Aaron, Moses's loyal brother and partner, and the first head priest of the Israelites.

Aaron has another, quieter role that earned him the title of *rodef shalom*. According to legend, he would walk back and forth between two people in deep conflict, offering each of them words of hope. As these two people avoided each other, their anger and hate festering, Aaron would gently tell each that the other regretted their breach and longed to rekindle the relationship. He would do this over and over, with undying patience, until reconciliation became possible. This is a peacemaking role that doesn't gloss over differences or minimize the injuries we suffer, but it seeks to heal and strengthen relationships by leaning into the desire we feel to be close.

As we sit here, who are the people from whom you feel distant? What words could be said between you, what hurts acknowledged, what insults or resentments explained and understood? Who or what might help you bridge this gap, and what would it take to step into that space? Some of us find ourselves often in the place of Aaron, listening to and helping others who are in conflict. Being in the middle like this is a hard place. But we can do so much good. Our most important work happens in between.

When we think about our world today, there is another aspect of being caught in the middle. There are times when we are bounced between polarized and opposing sides. There are even times when that position can be dangerous and other times when we are called to step into that space to protect ourselves and others. Here again, we turn to Aaron, whose courage to step into the middle, at one point in the people's story, saves lives. In a rebellion narrated in the Book of Numbers, Korach, another priestly leader, rises up against Moses. Korach is judged by God to be

malicious and out for only himself, and he and hundreds of his followers are killed. But then, many more join this rebellion, and God strikes back with a plague. Thousands are dying. Urged by Moses, Aaron takes his firepan with incense and runs into the midst of the congregation. The Torah tells us, “Aaron stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was checked.” I imagine the peril Aaron would have felt as he stepped between that last dying Israelite and the first to be spared. I wonder, why did Moses not go himself? Why Aaron, the *Rodef Shalom*? I believe there is something about being able to dwell in the midst of *bein* and *binah*, that in-between place of wisdom and insight, that is both a burden and a blessing. It is part of Aaron’s story, and it is part of our story.

In our generation’s chapter for the Jewish people, it is worth stepping back to see how profoundly we have been shaped by the experience of living between. Throughout our history, Jews have grappled with the line that distinguishes our beliefs, our customs, and our communal ties from those of the nations where we have lived. Our survival has depended on negotiating the gray areas surrounding that line. Perhaps because of our differentness, over the centuries, antisemitism repeatedly exploited that vulnerable position in the context of political struggles. Jews have served as a “buffer between the ruling class and marginalized communities.”¹ Again and again, we have been pushed into an uneasy and dangerous place between, by those who sought to redirect fear, anger, and blame away from themselves and onto us. We have been made into the space where other people’s conflicts are fought.

In 21st Century America, our circumstances are different. We remain vulnerable in some ways, yet we also possess security and influence unprecedented in Jewish history. The question is no longer only what it means to survive in the space between. The question is how to use the wisdom that space has given us.

A few months ago, I was called on to play such a role on that subject of subjects for American Jews, the conflict surrounding the State of Israel. I was invited to speak at a national conference on a topic they were calling “uniting against oppression in Israel/Palestine.” If I didn’t know already from this title, I quickly figured out, from speaking with the organizers, that I would be the only rabbi and probably the only Zionist at this entire conference. Suddenly, that middle seat on the plane – on a flight to almost anywhere – was looking pretty good. At the same time, if I didn’t go, who else would offer a Jewish communal voice in this conversation? Essentially, the question I was called there to answer was, what would it take for the mainstream Jewish community to join this group in their work?

I entered the auditorium. I listened to each speaker recount the continuing suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, stories full of pain and grief. I heard the way so many of the speakers seemed to view the State of Israel – not just the current government but the whole country from its origin to the present. As I waited my turn, I felt the pressure rising. I was more in the middle than I have ever been before. I felt there was no audience I could satisfy. Some would think I was betraying Israel simply by being there. Others would reject anything I said because I am a Zionist. I

¹ Dr. Eric Ward

wondered whether I belonged in the room at all. And then I remembered Aaron. His calling was not to escape the place between. It was to stand there – to protect life.

I took a breath as I accepted the microphone. I described to this group how many Reform Jews there are who share their concerns for Palestinian lives, and Palestinian rights, alongside their concern for the lives of Israeli Jews. I told them I believe many of these Jews would want to work alongside them for this cause. I called their attention to the joint work being done today, the courageous, cooperative activism by Israeli Jews and Palestinians together. Leaders who risk being shunned and ostracized by their own communities for their choice to acknowledge and work with each other. I shared my view that their example offers a different path than the one we see so much of in America today, a path that would require them to change the way they talk about this conflict. These Israeli and Palestinian partners speak inclusively about a shared future for both peoples. They avoid the language of blame; they focus on moving forward. I did not ask for a sense of “balance” or moderation or ask anyone to refrain from naming the injustices they see. But I argued, there is much we can do together if we center our advocacy on safety, dignity and sovereignty today, on affirming the right of both peoples to self-determination, and not advocating the erasure of either people’s presence on the land.

I braced myself for the hostility I felt sure would come. I know from speaking to progressive Jews and to students in our local schools how isolated many in our community have been made to feel for having any association with Israel or its people. But when the session ended, I was approached by many attendees, appreciative of my different perspective. Some asked me about my Zionism, perhaps expanding their understanding of what that word could mean. Some gently pushed back. Others enthusiastically agreed with me. Not one expressed anger. I was embraced by interfaith colleagues I know, who are themselves between: drawn by their empathy into the struggle of the Palestinian people, and also deeply attached to their relationships with Jews. I left, not knowing how many views I had changed. But I felt I had stood where my tradition had called me to stand—not outside the conflict, not swallowed by one side or the other, but in that difficult space between. Knowing that in a polarized world, being someone who can hold the in-between space is what helps us stay connected to people. Trusting that sometimes the holiest thing we can do is stand there with humility, honesty, and hope.

All of us will spend far more of this coming year not at conferences or protests, but at kitchen tables. You might sit with a parent who is aging and a sibling who disagrees about what they need. Or with two people you love who no longer speak to one another. You might be sitting with a teenager who needs independence, and, still needs you. Or you might be in a relationship that is strained by something left unsaid. What would it mean for you to step into the space between? Standing between doesn't necessarily mean fixing anything. Sometimes it means listening to people who aren't listening to each other, or helping someone find words. It could mean recognizing that two apparently contradictory things can both contain truth, or that a view you hold is incomplete.

Being a *Rodef Shalom* is knowing when to do all these things.

Today is Rosh Hashanah. In ten days it will be Yom Kippur. And here we are, standing between them. Between judgment and atonement. Between ourselves and the people we love. Between certainty and understanding. Between the person we were last year and the person we might yet become.

We are in the twilight of the Jewish year. Many things can still be repaired and created. As we begin this unique holy day, we remember that our most important work is about to happen. It happens in the path between the gates, the slow leap between what is and what will be. It happens in the space between.