

Let's Make a Little Room
Yom Kippur 2026/5787
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It was ten o'clock on a Saturday night, and I was sitting on the front-row bleacher. It was visiting day at my kids' performing arts camp. The place was full of joyful energy and chaos. A thousand campers and parents were flowing into the outdoor circus pavilion to watch a performance they call Firefly, because the show goes back and forth between campers doing tricks with fire and other campers flying off the trapeze. It's quite the scene to witness and not for the faint of heart.

We waited patiently for the show start so we could see our kids spin fire. As the start time was delayed yet again, and just as one might think all of the possible seating had been taken, a whole new crowd of parents, grandparents, and campers just finishing another show flooded in. Having been at camp last year, we knew to get there early. I had been sitting on the bench for an hour.

And then something happened. A teenage girl came up, and I watched a delicate negotiation begin. In front of me, there was a row of kids sitting on concrete all piled in, kind of like you might see during Purim at TRS. "Can I sit right here between you," the girl asked? Her friends looked up at her and gently, nervously shook their heads. She pleaded with them with a sweet smile. I secretly hoped these girls would stay strong and not let her in – there was simply no room. This exchange lasted a full ten minutes, with the girl leaving four times to search for another spot and then returning. I was impressed at how gentle, but persistent, these teens were in their battle of wills. Her last plea softly broke the stalemate. "It'll be fine, I promise. I'll sit with my knees up." Slowly, the friends shifted a bit. The girl slid into a spot, and all of them went back to talking and laughing. The show started one minute after she sat down in the tiny space they made for her.

There isn't room. Where else do we say that? When my wife Jaimee and I moved here years ago, we were shocked at how big everything was – houses with walk-in closets, eat-in kitchens, garages, dining rooms, guest bedrooms. We were coming from New York City, the world of bedrooms that are converted closets and studios with kitchen tables you might bump into if you stretched too expansively in your sleep. We didn't know how we would ever take up all this space.

Over the years, our frame of reference changed. Our family unit went from two, to three, to five – in the space of 16 months. We became adept at rearranging to make more room. Our daughter moved downstairs to the basement. The guest room moved to a smaller place

when our sons needed their own privacy. For me, the hardest moment might have been admitting my Prius wasn't going to hack it, and I would have to drive a mini-van. We needed to fit three car seats side by side, and years later but soon enough, carpools full of kids and softball bags.

We all know this struggle goes way beyond physical space. How many people's schedules and needs could we handle at once? Have you ever had to be in three places at the same time, or attended a back to school night when there was no way you were ever going to make it to all your kids' classes? It isn't over for us, and it's not unique. We have limits to the people we can accommodate, consider, take care of, listen to, and be in relationship with. It's a question we ask in our personal lives, our communities, and our society. Sometimes we feel there just isn't any more room. When is that a reality, and when is it just our perception? When are we, and the spaces around us, really full, and when is it that we simply don't want to rearrange?

In the stories of the Torah, it feels like there is plenty of space. Picture Moses and the Israelites, standing in the middle of the vast expanse of the desert. But through the Midrash, the rabbis make us see things differently. Right after the people finish building the *Ohel Moed*, or the Tent of Meeting, God instructs Moses to gather the entire community at its entrance. Now, the community is about the number of people at one of the biggest inaugurations on the National Mall. And, the courtyard of the *Ohel Moed* is around the size of four tennis courts. So, the Midrash shows us how the conversation might really have happened. Moses asks God in a panic, "*Ribbono Shel Olam*, Ruler of the World, there are 600,000 adults and 600,000 young people. How am I supposed to stand them at the opening of the Tent of Meeting?" "Are you surprised," God asks? And then, God shares with Moses that at the beginning of time, the heavens occupied a space as minuscule as the pupil of an eye, and God stretched this tiny space to make room for everything from the mountains and the plains to the seas and the sky. Moses sees a space that cannot possibly hold everyone. God asks him not to be quite so certain that he knows its true capacity. To imagine what is possible if some of us are willing to sit with our knees up.

Our tradition affirms the centrality in our lives of questioning our sense of boundaries and who will fit. In the Pesach Seder, we speak about the bread of affliction. We don't say, feed the hungry. We say, let all who are hungry come, here, to our table, and take a place. It's easy to read a declaration from the *Haggadah*, but Maimonides warns us, if we lock our doors and celebrate only with our family, without inviting the stranger, orphan, widow, and poor into our home, our rejoicing is not in fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. It is only to fill our stomachs. But the Talmud pushes back as well. In one passage, Rav Huna proclaims that every time he sits down to eat bread, he opens the doors of his house and announces,

“Whoever needs, let them come and eat.” But then, Rava protests, “I can fulfill all the customs of Rav Huna, except for this one... There are many soldiers in the city of Mehoza, and if I let them all eat, they will take all the food I own.”

I find this admission from Rava of what he cannot do incredibly real, and uncanny in how it brings us from ancient rabbinic teachings about making room at our tables to the conundrum of masses of people in need knocking at our door. Rava’s words could take us in many directions— to hunger, homelessness, and all the places where human need exceeds our capacity. But for me, the question they raise with particular urgency is immigration, the most consequential debate about welcome in our society today.

If we follow the example of the rabbis in their deliberations, we know that we are not asked to pretend it is easy. Managing immigration is genuinely difficult, and we cannot accommodate everyone who desires to move here. But this question is also very close to the Jewish heart. We are the people commanded again and again to welcome the stranger. And in the Torah reading for this very holy day, Moses explicitly includes *gercha asher b’kerv machanecha*— the stranger within your camp—among those entering the covenant.

Whatever the policies should be, the Jewish question reaches deeper: what is our spiritual posture towards the person who comes needing room? When I look at the immigrants in our communities today, I think about my German grandparents, in 1938, when they needed another country to make room for them. Their story shapes the way I want us to see the immigrants who come here today. These Jewish texts challenge us to help our society come closer again to that vision, a vision it has lost in these recent years; to help our country bring back to its deliberations on immigration a Jewish and American spirit of welcome; a desire to make room; a willingness, when we can, to rearrange and create a space at the table for the stranger.

I find making room to be a profoundly resonant theme in Jewish teaching, not only for the stranger, orphan, widow and poor, but also for ourselves as a spiritual practice. The presence of this idea at our intimate family Seder tells us that the message is meant to be deeply personal. This theme is also present on Yom Kippur. One might think the Day of Atonement would be a time of solitary introspection, each of us holding ourselves accountable for our own actions and our own failures. But the place for other people in our work of *Teshuvah* is so central that we are called to spend this day of quiet soul-searching, 5,000 of us crammed into seats with folding chairs, and staggered times, and algorithms and charts and traffic control to make us all fit. Surrounded by people whom we don’t even know and yet who are essential to what we are doing. On this ultimate day of personal responsibility, we can draw this lesson from the very word in Hebrew for responsibility,

Achrayut, which shares its root with the word for other, *Acher*. In fact, the three letters of *Acher*, *aleph*, *chet*, *reish*, sit right there inside *Achrayut*. We must make room for the other, even on a day that demands such intense examination of the self.

But I see another source on Yom Kippur for this theme of making room. In fact, it is the defining action of this Holy Day, the one that at this moment might just be in the back of many of our minds, but by late afternoon tomorrow it will be all we can think about. Whether or not you fast, or fully fast, on Yom Kippur, I trust you will agree that the specter and the symbolism of fasting dominate our experience of the day. What do we get from it? Some find the traditional idea of self-deprivation really does resonate for them. For others, fasting is a way to show their commitment to being Jewish.

But perhaps there is another lesson this ancient practice can teach us. All year long we fill ourselves. Today, deliberately, we don't. We leave something empty. And maybe the question isn't simply what we are willing to go without. Maybe it is what that emptiness allows us to make room for. What fills so much of my attention that I have no room left for someone else's need? What comfort am I protecting? What fear, what grievance, what preoccupation has taken up so much space that another person feels like an intrusion? Who is standing at the edge of my attention? A friend, a partner, a family member. A stranger.

On Yom Kippur, we don't allow the self to occupy every available space. Perhaps we can experience the physical or the symbolic action of fasting as a way to feel the rearrangement happening within us that allows room for others. We can also ask an additional question of ourselves. What if what needs room isn't another person, but a possibility I have crowded out? A new responsibility. A change I know I need to make. A question I have stopped allowing myself to ask. A different understanding of someone or something I have become certain about. *Teshuvah* requires us to believe that the self is not full. There must still be room in us for something that wasn't there yesterday.

In the Second Book of Kings, there is a story about a woman who lives in the town of Shunnam. This wealthy woman notices that the prophet Elisha passes through the town regularly. First, she urges Elisha to stop for a meal, one time, and then another, and soon he is eating in the Shunnamite woman's home every time he passes through. Eventually, the woman says to her husband, "Let us make a small enclosed upper chamber and place a bed, a table, a chair, and a lampstand there for him, so that he can stop there whenever he comes to us." And they make him a little room.

One day Elisha comes there. He retires to this upper chamber and lies down. He and his companion ask the Shunnamite woman, "You have gone through all this trouble for us.

What can we do for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the army commander? The woman asks for nothing, saying, "I live among my people."

In story after story in the Book of Kings, Elisha performs small miracles that save people's lives and rescue them from despair. The Shunnamite woman does her part to help Elisha, asking nothing in return. But what strikes me about this story is how modest an act it is that she has done. Perhaps here is our message on this Yom Kippur. The Shunnamite woman does not turn her life upside down or give away everything she owns. She does not feed the whole army of Mehoza. She sees another person and is willing to create a place, a little room for him to rest on his journeys.

Yom Kippur asks us to leave something unfilled. To loosen our claim on every inch. To leave space for another person's need, another possibility, perhaps even another version of ourselves. This day asks us to notice who is standing at the edge of our attention. As we emerge from these Days of Awe into the coming year, may we learn from Moses that the question is not only, how much space do we have, but how can we stretch it into more. May we be a bit more ready to rearrange, to sit, with our knees up, to welcome those who arrive at our door. May we all find our own ways to make a little room.