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In the Face of Hatred, Choosing Love

Ten years ago this fall, I started the process of applying to rabbinical school.

If you had asked me then what I thought it would be like one day to be a rabbi, I would have gotten a lot of it right!

I would have told you that Judaism has immense wisdom about how we can live lives of meaning and connection, and rabbis get to spend time exploring that wisdom and helping people apply it to their lives. I would have told you that I love teaching and learning, and find it so meaningful to talk with people about their lives, and rabbis get to do all of that, too.

There's also a lot I never could have fully imagined – like how amazing it is to stand with a couple under the chuppah, or with a family welcoming a new child, or with a person of any age who is embracing their Jewish identity through conversion. I could not have guessed how fun it would be to learn Talmud, or what it's like to be at Temple Rodef Shalom at 8:15 on a Sunday morning when what feels like the world's longest religious school carpool line descends on the synagogue.

There's so much that's wonderful about being a rabbi, because there's so much that's wonderful about being part of the Jewish community.

But here's one *other* thing I never could have imagined: how much time so many of us spend grappling with antisemitism.

I don't know if any of us could have imagined this, ten years ago.

In the past decade, we have witnessed a number of life threatening anti-Jewish attacks, both here and abroad. So many of these have left us shaken, even when, thank God, everyone survived.

Many of these attacks were very close to home for some of us – we had friends or family who were present, or we ourselves were there, or we weren't, but could have been.

Many of us are also having more and more uncomfortable interpersonal interactions. People around us – or, it goes without saying, online – sometimes react to our Judaism, or the Judaism of our families, in strange ways.

For some of us, these experiences are very new. For others, they are not so new – maybe they remind us of how Jewish people were treated when we were growing up, or how people have interacted with us in the past because of some other aspect of our identity. But new, or not so new – it's not easy.

How do we navigate all that we are experiencing?

That's the big question I'd like to explore with you tonight, primarily through a personal spiritual lens. When we talk about antisemitism, there's often an urge to jump immediately to the tactical: how do we respond? How do we keep ourselves and others safe?

These are both crucial questions, and I'm so grateful to the many people in our community and in our world who focus on answering them. But in the spirit of introspection that the high holy days invite us to, I'd love to spend a little time tonight in the space that comes before the tactical questions: how do we navigate what it *feels like* to be living in this moment?

One group of people who might have a *lot* to say to us about how to navigate this moment, *especially* internally, are the ancient rabbis whose teachings were compiled thousands of years ago, in the wake of the destruction of the second Temple.

Like us, many of the ancient rabbis were asking: *how do I navigate a world that has rapidly shifted, where I lost something important I once took for granted? How do I live a life of meaning, connection, and joy, even in the face of violence and hatred?*

The rabbis responded to the challenges of their day by doing three things:

- making space for their grief, and all they were feeling;
- working hard to keep believing in lovingkindness for themselves and for other people;
- and by reminding themselves, again and again, of the possibility and power of renewal.

I believe that we can follow in their footsteps.

Let's start with **grief**, or more broadly, the idea of making space for however we are feeling. The ancient rabbis set aside time to mourn the destruction of the Temple, and everything that had been lost along with it. They created an annual memorial day, Tisha B'Av, and they talked a lot with each other about what they had lost, and what it meant to them.

Here's what is so remarkable about this. If you know anything about the rabbis, you know that they did not always walk around in perfect agreement with each other. They argued, a lot, about all sorts of things! And one of the things they really didn't agree on (in fact, they filled pages and pages of the Talmud with their debates) ... was why the Temple had been destroyed, and what they should do about it.

This debate had an important place in their lives – it was how they ultimately figured out how they wanted to move forward. But if debating had been the only thing they were doing, they probably wouldn't have been able to support each other. They also needed to have experiences of just being with each other.

I think we need these kinds of experiences too. As was true for the rabbis, there *is* a purpose to the debates that are happening in the Jewish community today about why antisemitism is rising, and how we should respond. But the rabbis might encourage us to *also* make time, before reacting or trying to explain – or argue – just to notice and be curious about what we are experiencing internally, and what others are experiencing internally. Maybe we feel sad, or angry, or confused, or frustrated, or numb, or tired. Maybe we feel something else! Even when

we disagree about what to do next, sharing with each other about how we are doing can help us all feel a little bit less alone.

The second thing the ancient rabbis did, after making time and space to grieve together and listen compassionately to each other, was that they worked hard to **keep believing in the power of lovingkindness for themselves and for other people.**

Many of us are familiar with a variety of pithy teachings from the rabbis about the importance of treating oneself and others with compassion, fairness, and loving-kindness. For example, there's the famous teaching of Hillel the Elder:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי?

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”¹

Though it is pithy, this is actually a really complex – and challenging – moral philosophy. It could be easy to imagine that Hillel came up with it during a moment in history when it was *easy* for everyone to figure out how to take care of themselves, and others, at the same time.

But that's sort of the opposite of Hillel's story. Hillel lived under Roman rule in one of the last generations for whom the Temple still stood. In his time, Jewish religious leaders were frequently executed by the authorities, and the Jewish community as a whole faced violence from the government that ruled them.

It would be easy to imagine Hillel becoming embittered, in such a context. Maybe he had days where he wanted to wake up and say, “These people around me are being really awful. Why shouldn't I be awful to them?”

But that's not what he said! Instead, he taught that we should care for ourselves and others, and that we can do both at the same time. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”²

A generation after Hillel, Yohanan ben Zakkai and his students were standing outside of Jerusalem, looking at the ruins of the Temple, and their home. *What are we going to do?* His students worried. Yohanan ben Zakkai replied that they could rebuild their lives, and the world, through *gimilut chassadim*, acts of lovingkindness.³

It kind of takes your breath away.

A few decades after Yohanan ben Zakkai and his students gazed upon the ruins of their home and recommitted themselves to loving-kindness, Rabbi Akiva was gathering people to study

¹ Pirkei Avot 1:14

² ibid

³ Avot D'Rabbi Natan 4:5

Torah even though Torah study was prohibited by the authorities. He taught⁴ his students that the most important verse of Torah was וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ – “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵

One day, he was asked by one of his contemporaries, “Akiva, aren’t you afraid of the empire?” *Akiva, don’t you want to stop putting yourself in danger? Akiva, why don’t you just stop planning Torah study?* Akiva replied that to turn away from Torah – to turn away from his Judaism, and that core principle וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ, love your neighbor as yourself – would be like if fish tried to escape a net by jumping onto dry land. *Torah is our water*, he said. *It gives us life.*⁶

As different as our world is from Rabbi Akiva’s, I believe that Torah is our water too.

I have conversations, a lot, with people who are feeling conflicted about how to act these days. Maybe you feel this way sometimes too: conflicted about whether you or your kids or grandkids should be Jewish in public, conflicted about whether standing up for other people is worthwhile when you don’t feel like anyone is standing up for you.

The ancient rabbis would empathize with these conflicts (deeply). They would recognize that same voice that we sometimes hear, calling us to leave behind our Jewishness or leaving behind the ethics that are inextricable from Jewish tradition. And they would probably say, as they did say, to themselves, and to each other, that that voice calling us away from who we are doesn’t promise safety, or wholeness. It’s like the voice inviting fish to flee the water in order to escape a net. They would remind us: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”⁷

Last summer, seeking out wisdom on how to live up to this core teaching from the rabbis, I read the remarkable memoir *See No Stranger*, by Valarie Kaur.⁸ Valarie is part of the American Sikh community, and her memoir chronicles her experiences as a college student and young adult in the wake of September 11. Like many of us, Valarie watched the attacks on September 11, 2001 with horror and grief, and deep feelings of solidarity with her fellow Americans. But a few days after that, her experiences diverged, at least from mine, and maybe from yours too, because one of her dear family friends was killed in a hate crime.

In the weeks and months after September 11, there was an unprecedented wave of hate crimes against the Sikh community in the United States, part of a larger wave of hate crimes against Muslims and others, like the Sikhs, conflated with them, by people who suddenly saw them as culpable for something that they had nothing to do with. In the early months after 9/11, there were hundreds of recorded hate crimes against Muslim Americans and those perceived to be Muslim. People were harassed or attacked as they went about their daily routines. Houses of worship were burned to the ground. 19 people were killed.⁹ The first of these 19 was Valarie’s family friend, Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was murdered in Mesa, Arizona, on September 15, 2001.

⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 24

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ BT Berakhot 61b

⁷ Pirkei Avot 1:14

⁸ Kaur, Valarie. *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*. One World, 2020.

⁹ Kaur, p. 35.

She writes¹⁰ of this time that she desperately wanted to grieve at vigils for the victims of 9/11 with other Americans, but she and her family were afraid to leave their homes. They worried that they would be killed like her family friend had been killed.

How many of us have had moments like this? Moments where our grief and desire for connection, and our feelings of needing to hide, to stay safe, battled with each other?

Valarie did eventually overcome her fear, heeding the words of her grandfather, who had taught her, “Sikhs do not hide.”¹¹ She traveled around the country interviewing the survivors of hate crimes, hoping that if nothing else, documentation of the violence might one day galvanize people to try to stop it.

Valarie’s journey of documentation ended up transforming the way she saw the world. Like the rabbis of old, she grieved with the people she spoke with, and heard from them about how in many cases, their neighbors had also shown up for them. She came to believe in the importance of sharing pain as a way of transforming it, practicing empathy, and being curious about the experiences of others as a window into connecting with them. She embraced a principle from her own religion, “see no stranger,” which for her meant approaching others with curiosity, wonder, and an openness to connection.¹² And not just some others – *all others*. From a place of deep pain and isolation, Valarie Kaur came to believe in the transformative power of working to connect, in love, with all human beings.

See no stranger. Or as we say in *our* tradition – *v’ahavtem et hager*. (וְאַהַבְתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר.) Love the stranger.¹³

When I read Valarie Kaur’s story, I wondered if Hillel, Yochanan ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Akiva went through similar journeys. Their deep faith in lovingkindness and in human connection, and their ability to stand tall in their own identities and traditions, was also very hard-won. Hard-won, and worthwhile.

Above all else, lovingkindness, human connection, and rootedness in one’s own identity are three important agents of one last force that the ancient rabbis believed in deeply, and leaned on heavily as they navigated hatred and violence in their world. This force is the essence of Rosh Hashanah. We call it **renewal**.

The rabbis taught that every morning, when we wake up from sleep, our soul returns to us renewed. Every day can be a new start – for us, and for everyone around us.¹⁴ The rabbis also gave us the core lens through which Jewish communities still to this day see Rosh Hashanah, the start of a new year: as an opportunity to *begin again*, not in spite of what has happened to us or what we have done in the past year, but because we believe in, and can embark upon, a process

¹⁰ Kaur, pp. 33-37

¹¹ This teaching from Kaur’s grandfather is repeated at a few different moments in her book. In relation to her decision to begin traveling the country and interviewing survivors of hate crimes and their families, it is on p. 35.

¹² Kaur, pp. 9-13, p. 27, p. 92, p. 299, pp. 311-313.

¹³ Deuteronomy 10:19

¹⁴ Lamentations 3:22-23, as interpreted by a few different classical midrashim, especially Midrash Tehillim 25:2.

of repair and renewal. In the words of the poet Adrienne Rich, they had faith that all of us are so much “more than the sum of the damages done” to us.¹⁵

We are not the worst things that have happened to us, or to people we love. We are people with souls that return to us renewed every morning, and we are the inheritors of a tradition that emphasizes that healing and repair are always possible - for us as individuals, and if we work at it, for the communities we are part of, too.

So I think if the ancient rabbis could see us now, they would want us to believe in ourselves, and embrace all of who we are. They would want us to know that we are so much more than the violence that has been done to our community. They would want us to reach out to each other, and embrace lovingkindness. They would want us to open ourselves up, just as they did, to the possibility of radical personal and collective renewal.

They would join us in saying, as we will throughout this High Holy Day season: *avinu malkeinu, hadeish aleinu shana tova*. Avinu malkeinu, renew us for a year of goodness. And justice. And mercy. And peace.

Shana Tova.

¹⁵ Rich, Adrienne. "Sources (15)." *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1986, p. 17.