WE BELONG TO ONE ANOTHER: LIVING IN THE PLURAL

In this time of us vs them, tribalism and violence,
dehumanization and cruelty, we must remember: we belong to each other.

Yom Kippur 5782

In the spring, while we were still deep in our cocoons, there was an exhibit at the MOMA called "Making Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration," an exploration of creativity in confinement. It featured works from incarcerated artists who, with limited material, limited space, and limited freedom, somehow created beauty. Reviewing the exhibit, Leslie Jameson wrote in the Atlantic, that this work "testifies to the stirring possibilities of generative constraint."

It made me wonder: *What other new, audacious imaginings about our lives, this country, the world could emerge from all this pain, all this constriction?*

In the dizzying cacophony of our time, I feel compelled to lift up a daring, dangerous, counter-intuitive idea: the idea that *we belong to each other.*

This is not a new idea, in fact people have struggled with it for thousands of years. On this Yom Kippur, I want to take us on a journey deep into our collective past, so that we can reclaim an ancient wisdom to help us navigate who and what we are called to be in our time.

This journey starts with a murder mystery in the Book of Deuteronomy (21:1-9).

A corpse is found in the wilderness-- a man has been killed, but nobody knows by whom, or under what circumstances. In another text, in another time, this would be an invisible loss—a John Doe held at the morgue for the requisite time until he's eventually buried in an unmarked grave.

But for the Israelites, this single anonymous death presents a profound moral crisis. You see, this passage comes near the end of Deuteronomy. The Israelite people were enslaved for hundreds of years and have walked another 40 years on the long road to freedom. They are finally poised to enter the Promised Land, where they'll have to build a society that stands in counter-testimony to the barbarism and brutality they experienced in Egypt. A social order worthy of the descendants of enslaved people: a society rooted in human dignity and equal justice. In such a society, people don't just die, faceless and nameless. *Someone* must be responsible.

And so, when this corpse is found, no less than the Justices of the High Court, the Sanhedrin, are called in from Jerusalem. They take out their measuring sticks and calculate the distance from the dead body to each of the surrounding towns. The political and religious leaders of the town closest to the body are then called out into the rugged, untamed wilderness. It's dangerous for them there, and not easy to get to. Yet they must go, bringing with them an *eglah arufah*– a young heifer whose neck they will break in ritual sacrifice.

The animal is slaughtered, and the leaders wash their hands and recite a mantra: *Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done.* כַּפֵּר֙ לְעַמְּךָ֤ יִשְׂרָאֵל – *Let this be an atonement for your people Israel* (Deut. 21:7-8).

And only then are they relieved of responsibility for the murder of this man.

But wait! Why are these leaders be implicated in the death of a person they didn't even know, just because they happen to live nearby? Why must they go to such great lengths to unburden themselves from a murder they had nothing to do with?

Our Rabbis explain: They're not guilty, but they're not really innocent either. By engaging this ritual, they're essentially admitting: the man who died, maybe he made his way through our town, but he never explicitly asked for our help, so we ignored him. He didn't ask—for food, for lodging, for an escort to help keep him safe—and so we didn't go out of our way for him. לֹא רְאִינוּהוּ – In fact, we didn't even see him![1]

But had we treated him like a brother, had we not turned away as he walked down our streets, had we trained our eyes to see the unseen, this man would still be alive today.

Imagine for a moment a society bound by that kind of social contract, when accountability, one person to another, is taken that seriously. Last week, as I was walking here on Rosh Hashanah morning, I saw a man buried beneath a blanket outside Starbucks. For a moment, I couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. I thought of that corpse found in the wilderness in Deuteronomy. The man asked nothing of me. But I was sick to think that we live in a world in which good people either avert their eyes, or at best leave a bit of food by his side so he'll have some nourishment when he wakes up. That man is someone's child, I kept thinking. If that were my child, God forbid, how would I want a stranger to act, seeing her body on the street? *What needs to happen for us to see each other as our own?*

This story, the *eglah arufah,* challenges us with the ideal. You who have been through hell, you who have been demeaned, dehumanized, degraded, turned into a number, treated like a nuisance—it is the most basic assumption of your survival that you now live differently.

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[1] Mishnah Sotah 9:6. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3,40 argues that this ritual is performed in this way because the spectacle of the leadership going out to offer the sacrifice will surely attract the attention of the inhabitants of the town, which will hopefully lead to information disclosing the identity of the true culprit. Rabbeynu Bahya Deut. 21:1 indicates that when the Priests speak of כפרה, atonement (as in *Yom Kippur*)-- it indicates that what they really want is for the murderer will be found and can be held accountable. I find the Mishnah's read more compelling.

But is that just a fantasy? Could *any* society live up to that standard of care and concern? Fast forward now more than a thousand years, to the second Temple period, when the Talmud offers a glimpse of how completely and tragically we missed the mark.

Crowds of onlookers in Jerusalem have gathered as two young priests, *kohanim*, make their way up the ramp to the altar for their Temple service. Everything is fine… until one sees that the other is one step ahead of him, and he starts to quicken his pace so he'll get there first. Soon they're both running, each trying to take the lead.

Finally, just as one arrives at the altar, with the whole community of Jerusalem bearing witness, the other pulls out his sacrificial knife-- and *drives it right into his friend's back.*

The crowd gasps. The boy falls to the ground, bleeding. A great scholar named Rabbi Tsadok (the other Rabbi Tsadok) rushes forward: Hey! Listen up, Jews! he shouts. Don't you remember what is says in Deuteronomy: when a corpse is found in the wilderness-- *someone* is responsible. Well, what about us? What about now? Clearly this is *someone's* responsibility! But whose?

Is it the *kohanim*, the priests? he asks, pointing to the priests. You—who disguise your quest for power and glory as religiosity? You have poisoned this holy place!

Or is it YOU? he asks, now pointing to the crowd. Residents of Jerusalem—you come here every day to cheer this callous culture. You allow violence to fester in your name.

You tell me! he shouts. Who is responsible?

Of course it's clear who is responsible. They all just witnessed a murder as one priest thrust a knife into another's back!

But R' Tsadok is not trying to make a legal argument-- he's trying to break their hearts. He wants the people to cry, to wake up, to understand: this kind of violence does not emerge ex nihilo. It emerges in the culture that permits it, that normalizes it. Those young priests inherited a spirit of corruption and competition. They've been programmed to battle.

And of course Rabbi Tsadok is right… These boys were not the exception, but the norm: whenever two priests wished to fulfill the same sacred task at the Temple, they would race each other up the ramp. And, not surprisingly, it often led to violence.[2]

The people hear Rabbi Tsadok, and they burst into tears. *You're right… What have we done?*

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[2] Mishnah Yoma 2:1.

I want to dwell in this climactic moment for a moment, for here we see the possibility of a course correct. Their society had gone down a dangerous path, one that normalized zealotry and human cruelty. One in which people were instrumentalized, dehumanized.

But with strong moral leadership, with Rabbi Tsadok speaking the hard truths, there could be an awakening. *This is their Sandy Hook moment*—a moment horrific enough that the people finally stop and ask: how could we have allowed this to happen? We can do better… we must!

If only the story ended there.

The people are weeping. The boy is bleeding out on the ground, writhing and convulsing, when his father runs up the ramp to his child. The father turns to the wailing crowds and says perhaps the most chilling words imaginable: הֲרֵי הוּא כַּפָּרַתְכֶם – Don't worry: *my son's death will be an atonement for your sins*. We can pull out the knife now, before his last breath, so it remains ritually pure and can be used again for sacrifice tomorrow.

This final, fateful twist in the narrative is horrifying. The Rabbis, our storytellers, are unforgiving: *This comes to teach that in those times, they took more seriously the sanctity of their utensils than the spilling of blood.* In our time it would be something like: they loved their guns more than their children.

But the people are placated by the father's words. *What a relief,* they probably said to one another on their way home that night: *it's not actually our fault. I'm so tired of Rabbi Tsadok--always trying to make us feel responsible for all the problems of the world.*

This terrible story is remarkable for many reasons, not the least of which is that it's a religious text that is a polemic against fundamentalist religious practice.[3]

But at its heart, this is the story of a society in freefall. Just a few years later, in Rabbi Tsadok's own lifetime, the Roman legions lay siege to Jerusalem and those same holy sites, already desecrated by the priests' fanaticism and bloodshed, are now decimated by Vespasian Caesar. It was the end of Jewish sovereignty in the land for nearly 2000 years.

This story was recorded and told by the remnant that survived the *hurban*, the destruction, as a desperate warning shot into the future: either we understand that we are bound to each other, or we'll soon find ourselves stabbing one another in the back. The price of failing to honor our basic covenantal commitment, the Torah's call to the ethic of mutual responsibility, is total societal collapse.

I hope you understand why this story matters so much for us today.

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[3] I believe this is also a Rabbinic polemic against early Christianity: what kind of father would let his son die as atonement for the sins of the people?!

Last month, a professor with Type 2 diabetes and other underlying health conditions resigned in the middle of class when a student refused his numerous requests that she wear a mask to protect his life.[4] Another at-risk professor pleaded with students to mask to protect him and his family. He was stunned when only five of 45 students put on a mask.[5] Your health, your *life*, they seem to be saying—that's just not my problem.

I'm asking you to consider that at the heart of those school board meetings, with parents threatening doctors who testify about how to keep kids safe, at the heart of our broken, contentious, violent political culture—is a disagreement not over science or medicine or politics.

The fault line at heart of this culture war is one fundamental question: Are we ultimately responsible for one another?

We're standing, today, at the nexus of multiple dangerous global trends: our planet is becoming increasingly uninhabitable, as autocratic, anti-science, anti-democratic, neo-fundamentalist movements have been awakened in this country and around the world, fueled by our collective inability to take seriously the sacred, timeless call to be our brothers' keeper.

The intoxicating allure of profit and power has nearly eviscerated the ethic of collective responsibility. This is more than a political problem, it's a spiritual sickness that has allowed us to believe the lie that we live singularly, and not in the plural. The lie that our destiny is not all wrapped up in one another. That ideologies of racial supremacy and religious hegemony, that the desire for power, profit, or popularity—that any or all of these take precedence over human life itself. The lie that *freedom* means the right to dump toxins and pollutants into our waterways with no care, to eat and burn and destroy as though what I do is none of your damn business.

On this Yom Kippur, our planet is crying out for a shift in the collective consciousness. We will only survive when we recognize that we're really bound up in one another!

I've been talking about this idea with Valarie Kaur, my friend, a Sikh American activist who just published the stunning and important *See No Stranger*. She says that:

> "Our minds are primed to see the world in terms of *us* and *them*-- we can't help it. The moment we look upon another's face, our minds discern in an instant whether or not they are one of us—part of our family or community or country—or one of *them*. This happens before conscious thought… [And] who we see as one of us determines who we let inside our circle of care and concern."[6]

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[4] https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/ny-coronavirus-university-georgia-professor-irwin-bernstein-resigns-student-mask-20210830-mpcaj66rpjaztilwmrlrkej7ba-story.html

[5] https://www.newsweek.com/students-repeatedly-ignore-georgia-professors-pleas-wear-masks-class-1625041

[6] Valarie Kaur, See No Stranger, 17.

It's 2021. The way of *us* vs. *them*, of power over people, of profit over responsible stewardship of the planet—this way has failed us. It has led to discovery and advances, yes, but also to exploitation and devastation. And now it has led us to the very edge.

You know this. We can feel things falling apart. We need a better way.

It's said that illness, more than anything else, awakens in us an awareness of our interconnectedness. Our vulnerability has the potential to inspire greater compassion toward others who also suffer. This time of pandemic *could* awaken us to the truth that we're all part of one grand, complex living organism, that in the language of R' Alan Lew[7]:

> "…We all share the same heart… Physically we can see where one of us begins and another of us ends, but emotionally, spiritually, it simply isn't this way. Our feelings and our spiritual impulses flow freely beyond the boundaries of the self, and this is something that each of us knows intuitively for a certainty."

And yet, when we speak of these things in a Jewish context, we tend to praise the lofty aspirations—*love your neighbor as yourself*!—but then quickly get to work limiting their practical application. OK, but to whom am I *really* responsible? That's a testament to how seriously our tradition takes these prescriptions… if you're responsible for *everyone*, you risk falling into a kind of moral void in which you're responsible for *no one*.

But that halakhic (legal) negotiation trains our hearts toward narrowing the scope of our moral concern, working to exclude rather than include.

Obviously, my love and care for my own children is foremost in my heart. And it's precisely that love that opens my heart to the needs of other children. Loving our own people does not preclude our loving other people. And of course the inverse is also true: to love the other we need not abandon our own.

The hour demands that we expand our locus of moral concern. As Achinoam Nini (Noa) wrote in 2014:

> "If we refuse to recognize each other's rights and embrace our obligations, if we continue to each cling to [our] own narrative with contempt and disregard for that of the other, if we again and again choose swords over words, if we sanctify land and not the lives of our children, we shall soon be forced to… seek a colony on the moon, for our land will be so drenched in blood and so cluttered with tomb stones there will be nothing left for the living."

Today, we must summon our higher wisdom and our fiercest imagination. Not because we're halakhically mandated to do so, but because anything less makes a mockery of our Jewish history and our Torah.

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[7] R' Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared,* p. 81.

In the United States, in Israel/ Palestine, and around the world, the confluence of crises—pandemic, poverty, racism, climate devastation—*demand* that we leave *no one* outside our circle of care. Our hearts are capacious enough to hold not only our own families and our Jewish community, but also the man beneath the blanket at Starbucks, the Afghan refugee, and yes, the Palestinian child. That this is even a question of controversy in our time is repugnant and shameful.

This is the challenge of our time: to reclaim an ethic of shared responsibility.

Once we recognize how connected we are, we're left with two imperatives: First, to love. To be tender and careful with one another's bodies and hearts. To recognize that there is no greater priority than keeping each other healthy in body and spirit. I've been so moved by the way this community continues to do that for one another, especially in this time.

And second, to work to build a just society and a healthy ecosystem. So that even as we do whatever is in our power to prevent human suffering in the immediate, we are also planting the seeds for a vibrant, healthy, sustainable future.

None of us can do everything, but each of us, in these fraught times, must consider: What is the brave thing that I can do to move closer to this ideal in my lifetime?

This is our first Yom Kippur without Hanne Mintz, who died last month from cancer. I feel her presence in this room—I know I'm not alone. Marina and Chad, we loved your mother very much.

I want to lift up Hanne's memory today by sharing with you one final story. About ten years ago, Hanne was out with her dog in the park, when she saw a young man, homeless, lying on a bench. Hanne started to chat with him and found out his name was Ryan. He was struggling. He was alone. She took him out for breakfast, and by the end of the meal, she had *insisted* that Ryan come home with her. Not just to shower and do his laundry, but to stay in her spare bedroom, so that he'd have a safe place to rest and begin to heal.

Ryan lived in Hanne's house *for a year*, until he got back on his feet. He's thriving now, with a career and a partner. We asked if him if we could share this story today. He said of course: "I owe my life to Hanne Mintz."

Hanne understood that her locus of moral concern needed to extend to this guy. Many people would not have even seen him there that day. And those who would have stopped, I suspect, might have said hello and smiled, maybe given him something to eat or some cash.

Not Hanne—Hanne saved his life. Maybe it's because she had tragically lost her own son, Adam—beloved to many in our community—a few years before. I believe that when she looked at that boy on the bench—when she saw that he, like Adam, was also a red head—she naturally thought: how can I not see you as my son? She treated him as though he was her responsibility.

Hanne was a *tzadeket*, one of the righteous ones. I was hesitant to even share this story because I worry that the bar she set might be too high for you and for me. But I am asking us, on this Yom Kippur, to try to embody her torah. Surely we can do better, each one of us.

We belong to one another.

This is a daring, dangerous idea because it calls us to imagine a fundamentally different reality: a world in which we give without being asked, in which our eyes are trained to see even those others might treat as invisible, in which the love of our own only expands our sense of connection and obligation. A world in which we recognize that we are all bound up in the bond of life with one another.

I pray that this Yom Kippur—in an era of so much constriction—we remember that ours is a story of a people, having suffered terribly, called to build a society rooted in love and dedicated to justice, living in full awareness of our shared humanity and interconnectedness.

May we walk through this time with love, with grace and with conviction.

G'mar hatimah tovah--