

Rabbi Elana Ackerman Hirsch
Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5785
Congregation Beth Israel

“Don’t Let This Darkness Fool You; All Lights Turned Off Can Be Turned On”¹

For those who may not know me yet, my name is Rabbi Elana Ackerman Hirsch. I’m honored to be the newest rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel. In the few short months since I began working as your Assistant Rabbi, I’ve been fortunate to meet kind, welcoming, and thoughtful people in this community. It’s exciting to be sharing my first High Holy Days with you. As you may have heard, our theme this year for these High Holy Days is “Out of the depths, finding hope.” Since the last Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it has been easy to feel overwhelmed by a sense of darkness and stuck in the depths. The world feels chaotic and at times out of control. We’ve experienced tremendous loss and pain as a Jewish people and, for many of us, in our personal lives, as well.

And yet, our tradition wisely demands that during each High Holy Day season we face the events of the past year and take stock of our lives, no matter what has happened. Through the cycle of the Jewish calendar, from Tisha B’Av through Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur, our tradition asks us to go from the depths of pain and loss through the process of renewal of the world and ourselves. We reflect upon and identify what we need to do teshuvah for, holding onto the hope that we will be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year. Each year, we practice renewal and new beginnings, and we practice finding hope, even in dark times. Some years, like this year, that task might feel more difficult and yet we are called to do so.

According to a Hasidic tale, our job in the world is to be a lamplighter, someone who looks for the good and the light within ourselves and others. In this story, the lamplighter looks for light in the bleak desert and at the bottom of the ocean, places where it might not be obvious

¹ Noah Kahan, “Call Your Mom, *Stick Season*, 2022. Republic Records.

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that there's light to be found. And yet, our tradition compels us to look for light in the world, even when it seems hopeless.

Tonight, as we enter Rosh Hashanah, the day the world was created, we have the opportunity to try to shift ourselves from whatever grief or sadness we've felt this past year, into a new year and moment where we can both acknowledge our pain and also look for the light in that painful darkness. We are entering a period of creation and creativity, a time of possibility and of making room to change and grow. During these next ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we can imagine possibilities and imagine the kind of life that we want to live in the coming year. As we will read Friday morning in Genesis Chapter 1 verses 1-2, God's first act of creation was to create light. Light exists alongside darkness, and we have to choose to look for it. Just as the Sun continues to shine even though we see darkness at night, and just as the eternal light of the Ner Tamid reminds us that God's light is always with us, we can also start to look for light in our personal moments of darkness. We can be lamplighters, looking for light in unlikely places.

As we've approached these High Holy Days, I've been thinking about a time of personal loss and grief when I was able to see light amidst darkness following the sudden death of my father in 2017. I affectionately call this time right after his death the "couch days." For months after my dad died, my family would sit on the couch together and watch tv for hours, sometimes until well after midnight. We sat because we couldn't bear to get up off the couch, but despite that pain, there are moments during the couch days that I remember fondly.

There weren't very many moments of light in those first few months following my dad's death, but slowly, over time, light began to get through the darkness a little bit more each day. And to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, it became easier to see the cracks where the light could come

in. My family started to laugh again, remembering the time my dad accidentally let our family dog eat his apple and then, forgetting that the dog had taken a bite of the apple, took another bite with dog slobber. We laughed at the memories of the terrible school lunches he'd packed for us-- jelly dripping out of folded bread and mushy fruit in waxed paper bags. Despite the pain of his death, the laughter and memories I shared with my siblings and mom allowed me to consider the possibility that life might not always seem so dark. I began to appreciate moments of joy and could begin to imagine a time of **hopefulness**.

At first, I felt guilty for laughing or having fun. If you've ever been in a place of deep grief before, you might recognize this feeling. You'll suddenly laugh, or make a joke, or realize you're enjoying the meal that you're having at your loved one's favorite restaurant. You'll see a speck of light--and then all the lightness and joy you felt in that moment of laughter or memory will disappear. Feelings of guilt, shame, or sadness might come up when we start to enjoy something when we are in the depths. It might feel like we shouldn't find light or look for moments of hope. It might feel like we ought to sit with our grief and stay in the depths longer to give our pain the recognition we feel it deserves.

Of course, we must acknowledge and face the reality of our situation, no matter how painful. We must accept the world as it is so that we can know how to respond wisely and move forward. In many forms of therapy, the first step to processing and moving through difficult emotions is to name them: "I'm sad." "I'm feeling pain." "I'm angry." PAUSE Research shows that it is powerful to embrace our emotions and name them.^{2,3} It is important that we do not

² Ford BQ, Lam P, John OP, Mauss IB. The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: Laboratory, diary, and longitudinal evidence. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 2018 Dec;115(6):1075-1092. doi: 10.1037/pspp0000157. Epub 2017 Jul 13. PMID: 28703602; PMCID: PMC5767148.

³ Gross, James, PhD. "The Case for Embracing Our Emotions." *Psychology Today*. Accessed on 9/18/24. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/feel-better/202402/the-case-for-embracing-our-emotions>

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ignore our feelings or rush to move past our emotions without fully understanding them. But it is equally important to not let ourselves get stuck in those emotional depths. We have to find the balance, and be comfortable holding two different truths at the same time: the truth that the Sun continues to shine even when we cannot see its light and that we must seek hope even in difficult moments.

Another one of my other favorite Hasidic stories illustrates the Jewish wisdom of being able to hold different truths at the same time. It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem, a Hasidic leader from 18th century Poland, that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—“for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote: *V'anokhi afar v'efer*—“I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself that we are both created in the image of God and are only human. On this eve of Rosh Hashanah as we think about how we've missed the mark, we have to keep these two truths in mind. On the one hand, we think of something terrible we've done that makes us feel like we're mired in darkness. So we feel like dust and ashes. On the other hand, the world was made for each of us. We have this capacity to grow and change. We have the capacity to see the light in ourselves and in other people. This story reminds us that we are capable of holding onto both the acceptance of reality, however dark it may seem, and the possibility of finding joy. PAUSE.

Recently, I taught a series of classes about Elul, and in one of these sessions, a congregant shared that in the past, when something bad happened to her, it was hard for her to get out of the depths. She had trouble seeing past the pain. One day, she realized that, while these darker moments were still difficult and painful, she could also begin to see possibilities in her life that she had previously been closed off from. She shared that those painful moments in her

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life provided new opportunities for her once she let herself see past the darkness. I was so moved by her reflection because it perfectly illustrated the importance of looking for the light and finding hope in Jewish tradition even when things seem dark. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, a famous Hasidic master, teaches us that, “It is forbidden to despair.”⁴ PAUSE. Which, on its surface, might seem like Rebbe Nachman is suggesting that we should ignore negative emotions. But Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, a contemporary Reform rabbi known for her beautiful poetry, offers another interpretation. She says that Rebbe Nachman reminds us that “despair is giving up on the possibility of change, the possibility of hope, the possibility of anything ever being better than this.”⁵ That is what we are not allowed to do. When we look for the light of possibilities, we help ourselves grow and change from our mistakes, we move from the depths towards hope.

We can look for these sparks of light in whatever difficult moments of personal darkness, loss, or change we experience, from a disappointing interaction, to the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or the need to accept that our current reality is different from what we'd envisioned for ourselves. After graduating college with a degree in Biology, I imagined that I would work in medicine. I tentatively decided to pursue becoming a nurse practitioner and took a job working at a medical technology startup where I would get the needed clinical experience to apply to graduate school. But as I worked in a clinical setting, I came to realize that that work wasn't for me. This life-long dream of mine, to work in medicine, wasn't something that I wanted to pursue any further and I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life instead.

That realization caused a great deal of sadness and loss; it is painful to realize that a goal that you've worked toward for years isn't something you want anymore. When you're honest

⁴ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, accessed on Sefaria. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/465990?lang=bi>

⁵ Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/depression/>

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with yourself and listen to your authentic desires, it might mean that you have to change course. I then found myself teaching preschool at the JCC in San Francisco, and I realized how much joy I felt in helping others feel connected to their Judaism. This new work was meaningful and I loved it. After soul-searching and careful thought, and especially after watching my synagogue's clergy care for my family following my dad's sudden death, I decided to become a rabbi. From the moment I made that internal decision, everything fell into place. Out of this painful realization that I needed a career change, and the feelings of loss it created, came the possibility of something different: the possibility to become a rabbi. PAUSE.

We all have these pivots and experience these times when we feel like we are in the depths. Out of our pain, beautiful things can grow, and we eventually can see light again. Sometimes we just need to give ourselves permission to see the light and be open to how we can move forward after a painful experience.

Also, we must remember the two pieces of paper that we hold, metaphorically, in our pockets. Of course, there is suffering in the world and sometimes we are in the depths, and we are reminded of our human-ness. Sometimes our grief can overwhelm us. And yet the world was also made for us, for our uniqueness, and we have the capacity to find purpose and meaning in our darker moments.

Our collective task, then, in these next ten days and beyond, is to try to notice the light in our lives, even as we acknowledge our grief, pain, and the moments for which we need and want to do teshuvah. We must acknowledge both our pain and the light in the world around us, so we do not get so stuck in the depths that we forget that there is light. There is light always around us, in our Jewish spaces, in the universe, and even in our darker moments. We are imperfect, and showing compassion to ourselves and others creates the space to see new opportunities, to see

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the light, and to allow our hearts to grow. It can be difficult to find balance, to find hope in dark times. And yet, our tradition asks us to take on this challenge of holding multiple truths at once.

Out of the depths of darkness, there is hope. Shana Tova!