



Rosh Hashanah 5785: From Out of the Depths, Finding Hope
Min HaMetzar – From Constriction to Soulful Expansion
Rabbi Jason Nevarez

Shana Tova! My friends, as we gather this morning to welcome 5785, our Jewish community is navigating profound grief and uncertainty. The tragic events since October 7th confront us with life's fragility, the pain of loss, and the resilience needed to endure. On that day, Israel (and much of the Jewish world) was shaken by an unprecedented and brutal attack launched by Hamas, leaving a deep wound in the heart of the Jewish people. Thousands of rockets were fired, and militants infiltrated Israeli towns, resulting in devastating loss of life, kidnappings, and widespread terror. The aftermath saw Israel declare war on Hamas, leading to a fierce and ongoing military conflict in Gaza, subsequent loss of life, and now pending war in the north with Hezbollah.

As we approach almost one year since that time, the war has continued, having a profound impact on Israeli society and the global Jewish community. The pain of that day and its consequences continue to reverberate around the world. The heaviness and psychological and emotional burden of this rupture - significant.

This morning, while holding all these truths, we celebrate the potential joy and light that a new year brings, while many of us feel the weight of narrowness— *tzar*, from *Mitzrayim* (*the Hebrew name of Egypt*) —the tight space of grief and ambiguity. Like our ancestors enslaved in Egypt, so many have shared, and I see that so many experience the feeling of limitation. And as I reflect on it all, I continue to return to one word that powerfully encapsulates the countless conversations, articles, podcasts and newsfeeds regarding our current lived, Jewish experience: constriction.

“Constriction”, according to Rabbi google, is defined as “the act of making something narrower by pressure; a tightening.”¹ It can be applied to physical objects, societal or political contexts, creative or intellectual fields, emotional or mental states. It is a place of contraction, held breath, an inability to see the other and grow ourselves. Allow me to share two personal experiences which, I believe, exhibit the weight of constriction’s presence in real-time:

Since October 7th, I have had the privilege to travel to Israel with San Diego Jewish leaders and with some of you – to bear witness; to lend support; to serve as a messenger of stories - to bring back to our community the humanity of this moment in time – a moment seemingly inconceivable just one year ago.

During one of my trips, I encountered a young man, no older than 30. A resident of *Kibbutz Nahal Oz* in Sha’ar HaNegev, the Gaza Envelope who found himself in *Mishmar Emek*, a temporary dwelling space for many displaced from his kibbutz. I first encountered him pushing a

¹ Google.com

beautiful little boy in a stroller. I soon came to learn that Yuri is the boy's uncle, and the boy's parents had been murdered on October 7th. He spoke of the unbearable loss of his brother and sister-in-law, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead for him and his nephew, for whom he has now assumed responsibility. Yuri's words were robotic, as if the weight of his grief had numbed him. As he shared, tears streamed down my face, as I bore witness to his unimaginable burden.

After our farewell embrace, I felt a tightening around my own chest, experiencing the young man's grief paralyzing his ability to express the full depth of his own pain. A new narrowness of uncertainty about his own future, suddenly a parent, both his and the child's lives fundamentally altered. Yuri's physical and emotional world, confined by the devastating loss and the weight of what lies ahead.

And for the others I encountered, their once peaceful and vibrant communities, tragically constricted by fear, loss, and the consequences of *sinat hinam* (the purest of evil), with lives disrupted and horizons narrowed by grief and trauma.

Fast forward to this past summer. My family and I were enjoying one of our annual getaways to our home away from home: Martha's Vineyard. For over 20 years, this has been a place where we recharge as a family.

As we turned a corner onto the main thoroughfare of one of the island's quieter towns one day, I was genuinely surprised to come across what appeared to be an anti-Israel rally. Curious, I told my family that I wanted to visit the gathering. Nicole, ever cautious and knowing me too well, warned me to "be careful and listen."

As I approached and spoke with a few of the peaceful protestors, we identified some shared realities and hopes: the pain of October 7th and the desire for a ceasefire along with the return of hostages. We respectfully exchanged differences of opinion. However, after a few minutes, the discussion took a turn as one protestor began to share her perspective—that the events of October 7th were fabricated and the narrative - fake.

In that moment, again I felt a tightening, a constriction around my heart – an echo of the moments with Yuri in Israel. Still, I pressed on, engaging respectfully. I offered photos: of the destruction I had personally witnessed, of families who had shared their harrowing accounts of that day, of the heroes who had saved lives on the kibbutzim. I believed that these images, these undeniable truths, would surely move anyone.

But her response shook me: "These are lies. This is propaganda. The IDF destroyed those homes and killed those people. Nothing you show me will convince me otherwise."

Last year, I had the opportunity to hear my colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brous, present at the JFS Annual Luncheon on Mental Health. She referenced a section in her book coming out at the time, [The Amen Effect](#) (which I highly recommend). She shared an ancient practice buried deep in the Mishnah, a Jewish legal compendium from around the third century.

The text describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Second Temple nearly 2500 years ago. Several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem. There, they would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right in masse, circling counterclockwise.²

Concurrently, the brokenhearted, the mourners, those lonely and those sick, would make this same ritual walk, however, they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction.³ Each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?"

"My father died," a person might say. "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps: "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or, translated in our modern times: "My mother is sick. We're awaiting the test results. My saba (grandfather), my child, is still being held in Gaza."

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

The ancient practice reflects a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit: When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the greater community.

The timeless wisdom of this ancient ritual speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain. This year, you walk the path of the suffering. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine. What a profoundly beautiful way for community to enforce its care and concern of the other, to share in the ebb and flow of human suffering which comes and goes for each of us in its time.

As I reflect on the wisdom our tradition offers with this teaching, I am also immediately pulled to awareness of the circle that has not been present in this past year's tragedy and heartache. As a community, we have been waiting to hear from those people circling the right on approach, to offer their blessing to us – to acknowledge our individual and collective pain; to share the words: you are not alone. Yet often, that person approaching on the right looked down or away. As Jews, in our pain, we have felt unseen. The woman I encountered at the protest – her narrowness, her intense anger and fury, was a constriction so tight that it rendered her incapable of even acknowledging my personal pain and loss or even simply holding space for words of comfort. This has added further constriction for many of us, layering pain upon pain. How remarkable to know our ancient ancestors knew how to take constriction and alchemize it into the expansive energy of connection and communal care.

² Brous, Sharon. *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World* (pp. 3-4). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ Middot 2:2.

The malady of spiritual constriction manifests when people turn away from the suffering of others, particularly in moments of deep collective pain. In the wake of October 7th, we in the Jewish community have faced not only physical harassment and violence but also the silent wound of being ignored or misunderstood. This constriction of spirit is not just the refusal to empathize, but the inability to hold space for the grief and trauma of others. It reflects a narrowing of the soul, where fear, indifference, or discomfort choke off the flow of compassion.

I want to be clear this morning that my intentional focus on us as a Jewish community, in no way, dilutes the suffering of Palestinians or the many others who have and continue to grieve their own painful circumstances around the globe. On the contrary, our tradition compels us to move beyond the identity of the persecuted and sufferer and offer the exact opposite: to open our hearts, to bear witness to and acknowledge the suffering of others, Jew and non-Jew alike.

Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, known as the *Sfat Emet*, taught that each of us carries a divine spark, a *nekudat elohut*. This eternal spark can feel constricted, especially in moments of tightness or struggle, evoking the linguistic and symbolic connection between *meitzar* (narrow places) and *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), a place of constriction and slavery. Our task is to expand and nurture this spark, even when we feel the victim.

Expanding that spark is the work we are called to throughout these High Holy Days. It requires work and the work I speak of this morning is one that demands *Tikvah* - hope—an active, creative force that shapes our response to adversity.

Tikvah is not naïve optimism. Rather, *Tikvah*, hope, in its deepest wanting is active creation. It's a deliberate, defiant act of crafting meaning and connection in dire circumstances. It involves rebuilding communities, relationships, and identities post-crisis.

Tikvah is witnessed throughout Jewish civilization: from the Exodus from Egypt to expulsion after expulsion from various homelands to the Holocaust to October 7th. Throughout the entirety of our history the Jewish people have brought faith to an uncertain future, rooted in a covenant and drive to create a more just world.

Tikvah, hope, is the ability to flex our resilience muscles through meaning. Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, teaches that in the face of suffering, even the most painful experiences contain the potential for purpose. We don't deny pain nor lean into the clichéd energy of "everything happens for a reason". Rather, we insist on cultivating growth, empathy, and connection in the aftermath of our distress.

Rabbi Brous' unearthing of this ancient pilgrimage ritual has deepened my own belief in the strength of community. It has reminded me of the power of showing up when we want to withdraw even when we fear we may be speechless or incapable of connection or action. In chaos, *Tikvah*—hope emerges not only from coming together but from actively seeking the light in dark moments.

Communities in Israel have found meaning and healing through solidarity, shared rituals, and collective memory. Grassroots organizations and volunteers, embodying hope and resilience, quickly stepped in to support those affected by the violence, providing food, shelter, and emotional support for displaced families. Communities have opened their homes to host survivors, while countless others contribute to relief efforts through crowdfunding, donation drives, and organizing support networks. This outpouring of solidarity has helped heal wounds and reminded many that the strength of a united community can spark hope.

Throughout my own time in Israel, I bore witness to incredible acts of moral beauty that sprang forth with urgency from everyone we met. Acts of selflessness and kindness and generosity – social workers, trauma specialists, yoga teachers, massage therapists, all volunteering – leaving their own families to support those who were suffering most acutely.

Tikvah, hope, is defiance against chaos. It pushes us to ask ourselves: *What can we build? How can we make meaning of this?* Hope, becomes a sacred rebellion against the forces of chaos, akin to lighting Shabbat candles and Chanukiyot in a darkened world.

Israeli artists, poets, and musicians have been producing works that grapple with the pain of the tragedy while offering messages of healing and unity. New prayers and songs have become sources of individual and communal solace; educational initiatives have been reimagined, focused on fostering dialogue and rebuilding trust across divides. These actions reflect the deep-rooted belief in the possibility of healing, showing that even in the face of great suffering, hope is sustained through collective action and creativity.

In one of the most powerful acts of defiance against chaos: since October 7th, many newborns in Israel have been given the name *Be'eri*—a name now associated with the site of profound devastation, but which also means "my wellspring." Could there be a more powerful symbol of the spiritual resilience of our people? By choosing the name of a place marked by immense devastation for their children, they reclaim the life-giving essence of *Be'eri*, "my wellspring," which has nourished our people since ancient times.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I invite you, our beloved Beth Israel family, to know that whether it's the prayers we share with one another, the beauty and power of the music that fills our sanctuary, the joy of being with loved ones and community - our blessings are not merely for good fortune to happen. Rather, they are a call to be partners in creating that future.

In the wake of October 7th, moving forward requires a conscious commitment to soulful expansion. This means: keeping our hearts open, even when the world feels heavy with loss, allowing ourselves to feel deeply so that we don't become numb to the suffering around us.

It means living in the present and finding gratitude in small moments – making meaningful contributions today rather than waiting for a perfect future.

Soulful expansion means living out loud—expressing our love for life and amplifying Jewish joy – openly, unapologetically, and with pride.

It means practicing kindness and empathy in our daily interactions. When we model the best of the Jewish people, we show the world a community rooted in love, justice, and the relentless pursuit of hope.

And yes, there are also concrete, tangible actions: supporting Israel and global Jewish Communities; seeking opportunities to engage in Interfaith and Cross-Cultural solidarity-building; continuing to advocate for justice and human rights; investing in the next generation by supporting programs for youth and young adults that foster strong Jewish identity, resilience, and leadership.

During Passover, when we reach the *Magid*, the storytelling section of the Seder, we lift the matzah and declare *ha lahma anya*— “this is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in Egypt”. But isn’t matzah also the bread of freedom, made in haste as they fled to the Promised Land? So, which is it - bread of affliction or liberation? It's both. We learn that this bread symbolizes both material poverty and redemption. What changes is not the matzah, but our orientation to its source. And in the words of Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, "What transforms the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom is the willingness to share it."

On this Rosh Hashanah, as the sounds of the Shofar awaken us from the depths, depths that take on new levels of meaning for so many of us this year, we are called to respond to the world around us. Each blast is a reminder that hope is our moral and spiritual imperative—it’s the sound of awakening to the brokenness of the world, followed by the charge to repair it. We are recommitting to hearing that call with our ears and responding with our hearts and deeds. We acknowledge the suffering and challenges in the world while affirming that despair is not an option.

The constriction we feel—the weight of grief and uncertainty and profound loss—is not where our story ends. Our tradition teaches us that it is in the narrowest of spaces, that the potential for liberation and expansion begins to form. Just as the Israelites found their way out of *Mitzrayim*, we can transform our affliction into freedom, our grief into meaning, and our loss into renewed purpose.

As we dwell amongst one another this morning, I invite each of you to be the one who turns not to the right, but to the left— to face those in pain, to hold another in their struggle, and to offer them blessing. We are not alone.

May this be the year we elevate the call of the shofar, and may our hope and resolve transform our constrictions into boundless, expansive possibility. *Shana Tova!*