

Yom Kippur Sermon 5785
By Rabbi Cantor Jeremy Gimbel

Chatima tovah.

Just a few days ago, we commemorated the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. As I stood with my fellow Cantor's, Rabbi's, and other leaders of the San Diego Jewish community and we looked out at the thousands of people who were still viscerally hurting from the traumatic events of October 7, I could not help but feel how similar this event was to the unveiling of a tombstone. At an unveiling, the moment of death and loss has passed by about a year; and so, instead of focusing on the person who has died, we shift our attention to ourselves and our relationships. How have we changed in the year since we lost so many? How has our relationship changed with God, with those in our community, our friends, and even ourselves?

Yom Kippur is a time of introspection and renewal, and so I invite you to reflect on those questions as well: **in the past year, has your relationship to God changed? How have your relationships with others changed and I don't just mean person to person - how have you changed your relationship to your surroundings? Have you changed how you look inward and how you act on that reflection?** In Hebrew, we refer to these relationships as bein adam l'makom, bein adam l'chaveiro, and bein adam l'atzmo - between a person and God, between one person and another, and between a person and themselves. These relationships come even more into focus on Yom Kippur. Bein Adam l'Makom, the relationship between a person and the Divine, generally refers to the religious or ritual mitzvot, or sacred obligations. The Mishnah teaches that the spiritual work we do on Yom Kippur helps atone for sins between each of us and our Creator. Bein Adam L'chaveiro, the relationship between people generally refers to ethical, moral, or social mitzvot that govern relationships between and among people. The Mishnah continues that Yom Kippur only works when we have done the work of asking for and offering forgiveness. Bein Adam L'atzmo, the relationship between a person and themselves, generally refers to the thought processes that lead to personal character development, the cheshbon hanefesh we engage in on this sacred day, which is for ourselves and ourselves alone.

On this day, at this moment, with this community, I would like to offer some reflections on this past year as they relate to these three relationships in hopes that they may be a guide for us all to find hope from out of the depths.

Throughout these High Holy Days, we have offered a phrase from Psalms as a textual grounding for this idea: "Min hameitzar, karati ya, annani vamerchav ya. From the straits and constrictions, I called out to God; God answered me with a wide expanse." (Psalm 118:5) Rabbi Nevarez provided a beautiful teaching on this text on Rosh Hashanah, which I hope you heard. In our afternoon Haftarah, we have a similar sentiment from Jonah. We read in Chapter 2 that after Jonah had been in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, "Jonah prayed to Adonai, his God...I called from my distress to Adonai, and God answered me; From the shadows of the Sheol, I shouted for help, and You surely heard my voice." Here, Jonah, like the Psalmist, engages his relationship with God as a way of finding a way out of a seemingly hopeless situation.

Of course, I know that many of you do not share the same faith or Divine relationship of Jonah or the Psalmists. I, too, wrestle with the notion of how God could have let those 1200 beautiful souls die, not to mention the countless innocents that have died in the past year. On October 7, 2023, Sarah and I were on our way to Iceland. During that week, we would step off the busses and marvel at the incredible beauty of God's natural creation, and then get back on the bus, doom-scrolling through the immense pogrom of humanity's creation. Nearly every day since 10/7, I find these moments of juxtaposition and I wrestle with my relationship with God. However, I also see Divinity in the response of the Jewish community. I see it in the man who stood by the airline flight counter with a credit card, asking if people were going to Israel to serve in the IDF and paying for their flight. I see it in how this community mobilized dozens of times throughout the year to offer much needed support to our friends in Sha'ar Hanegev. I see it in your tear-filled eyes when we sing Katonti, Bein Kodesh L'chol, or K'shehalev Boche.

And so, I invite you to engage in your own cheshbon hanefesh, soulful accounting. How has your relationship with the divine, however you understand it, changed in the past year? Perhaps this year has driven you further away, or maybe it has inspired you to draw closer. Either way, consider this: has it worked? Is your soul more at peace? If not, perhaps it is time to try something different. Maybe it is time to draw that much closer and lean further into Jewish tradition, even though we know that being visibly, proudly Jewish comes with its risks.

Trust me, I have experience with this. When the San Diego Jewish Federation and the Padres invited me to sing the national anthem at Jewish Heritage day, I was very intentional to wear a kippah, and to be introduced as Rabbi Cantor. I knew that being visibly, proudly Jewish could have led people to jeer, to yell, to protest in some way. But instead of words of challenge, many of you reached out and offered words of pride that I was publicly affirming my Jewish American identity.

Some years ago, my mother-in-law gifted me a book of Yiddish songs. The book included the usual songs you would expect: almonds and raisins, chiribim chiribam, but there was one that made me laugh out loud when I read the title: it's hard to be a Jew. I think I mostly laughed because of how incredibly honest the title is, but I also know that that song could have been written in the past year. The challenges facing Jewish students on college campuses are well-documented, but it is the circumstances in other public arenas that concern me even more. It's the fear behind someone asking, "is that middle eastern restaurant an okay one for us to visit?" or the hurt caused when one of our students loses a close friend because she is Jewish and her friend is Arab; or the intimidation of graffiti throughout public places around town from a school basketball court to Balboa park. The radical normalization of anti-Israel sentiment and outright antisemitism is meant to inspire fear, meant to repeat the idea that we should give up, meant to convince us that we are no longer welcome to be in relationship with others.

Misinformation is rampant and is too easily consumed by those who will repeat it even more easily, and each of us has likely been hurt through actions and words, however, well intentioned. Calling for a cease-fire is easy when all you see on the news is how Israel's targeted missiles have killed thousands of innocent people Hamas uses as human shields. But it is easy to sidestep the reality of 13,200 rockets fired from Gaza, 12,400 rockets from Lebanon, 400 missiles from Iran, 180 from Yemen, 60 from

Syria, and I probably have to update those numbers, because they were only from Monday this past week. Cease-fire means these actors, too... Right? It's easy to chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." And it is even easier to sidestep the reality that the chant in Arabic is far more racist: "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be Arab."

I am not just hearing this in random posts on social media, or from people who I can blow off and say, "they don't know what they're talking about." I am hearing it from interfaith colleagues who, again, with good intentions, sign onto one-sided "ceasefire" petitions that don't even acknowledge Israeli death and suffering. I see it in Kristallnacht style moments of intimidation at public restaurants, and other Jewish owned businesses. And I even see how this terrorizing culture affects our amazing security guards.

Shortly after October 7, I walked down the stairs into the parking lot, and Roman stopped me. "Going home, Rabbi?" "No, not yet - I'm just going to get a sandwich." "Alone?" "Yes..." "Are you sure? Should I go with you?" "Thank you, but I think I'll be okay." "Hang on a sec," he says as he goes to the guard shack, returning with a slip of paper - "Okay, but in case something happens, call the guard cell phone and we'll be there right away."

Since then, fortunately things have calmed down. Roman doesn't give me a hard time when I get a sandwich anymore. But these feelings of unease continue to fester in how we relate to the world around us. Earlier this week, one of our congregants, Rachel Wegner, shared her frustration in feeling isolated: "Do I even have a story to tell anymore? I have not experienced the firsthand trauma of war or of loss. I have not lost tens of thousands of lives in my community. I am not an innocent civilian caught in the crossfire of evil. And then I remember - I believe it is our stories that bring us together and that lift us out from the depths. I believe it is our stories that guide us to peace. My story has to matter. Right?"

Yes - your story matters. Our task in the year ahead is figuring out how to navigate our relationships with these new lenses of perspective. Which relationships are a lost cause that we can surrender? Which relationships are worth the effort? Which relationships need tikkun, teshuva, and chesed - repair, reconciliation, and respectful compassion? And while I get that the silence from some can be deafening — trust me, I have felt it as well — I encourage you to focus on the friends who *have* shown up.

This cheshbon is not limited to interpersonal relationships. Consider how our relationships to organizations have changed over the past year. On one hand, there are certain relationships, which became fraught and more tenuous over the past year. Whether you lean left, right, or center, there probably was an organization that made a public statement about the situation in Israel, which made you feel uneasy, and caused you to rethink your relationship with that organization in a negative way. On the other, some of our relationships got that much stronger. Although we had a close relationship with our sister city Sha'ar Hanegev before October 7, the outsized impact on Sha'ar Hanegev has led to an even closer connection. Although we had a good relationship with the San Diego Jewish Federation, under Heidi Gantwerk's leadership, the San Diego Jewish community has never felt closer.

And then, there is the relationship with ourselves: Bein Adam l'Atzmo. In speaking with many of you, in many different settings, one thing is clear: we have experienced a secondhand trauma equivalent to a first hand loss. You have shared stories of walking into benign spaces, and noticing where the exits are in case, something horrific happens. You have shared stories of losing sleep, thinking about the hostages. And you have shared stories of feeling guilty for forgetting to think about the hostages. You have shared your experiences visiting the nova festival exhibit and memorial in New York or LA. You have traveled to Israel, you have walked the exhibits at the JCC, and you have borne witness and shared countless stories. There is something that draws us to these memorials and moments where, in a way, we relive the experience through storytelling.

As I was reflecting on how we have engaged with October 7th since that horrific day, I noticed a parallel to the development of rituals throughout our Jewish calendar. One of the hallmarks of Jewish ritual is the reenactment of an experience through storytelling, to remind ourselves of our journey, our collective trauma, and the hope that we have maintained throughout the millenia. We do this at our Passover seders, we recreate the miraculous Chanukah lights, and we even do this today. Yom Kippur can be seen as a rehearsal for our death, which is why we wear white and don't eat. We do this all as a way of processing our trauma.

I share all of this as a reminder that you are not alone. Our hearts break together. And, just as importantly, self-compassion and forgiveness are essential steps towards healing.

We know that navigating loss and grief is not a linear process. Yet, our Jewish tradition provides tools to help us. As Rabbi Ackerman Hirsch noted on Erev Rosh Hashanah, it is often helpful to merely name our feelings. Jonah and the Psalmist remind us that from a narrow, constricted, dark place, we can call out and cry out through the frames of our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. The blessing of this community is that none of us are alone in our struggle, and each of us -- your clergy, your staff, your lay-leaders, your chavurah members, your friends, your family -- are all here to provide comfort and strength.

Yesterday, I watched Heidi's powerful speech at the Sha'ar Hanegev Commemoration, and again, I had feelings of attending an unveiling. Seeing the faces of the Cherry family, whom we hosted months ago, seeing the Sha'ar Hanegev community, and imagining what our future trips to Israel will look and feel like has given me hope that there will be a tomorrow - it is just going to look very different than October 6, 2023.

None of us could have imagined how this Yom Kippur would feel at this point last year. And none of us can predict how next Yom Kippur will feel. Yet, our rituals offer a way to reflect on our relationships bein adam l'makom, bein adam lachaveiro, bein adam l'atzmo, so that whatever losses we experience in the year ahead, we can find hope from the depths of our despair.

Wishing each of us chazak v'ematz, strength and courage, so that we may be sealed for goodness.

Chatima tova.