Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5786: The Rehumanizing Effect

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Shanah Tova! Have you seen those memes about dads at the airport? The ones where his family is still going through TSA, but dad is already halfway to the gate, blazing a trail with his carry-on like he's on a solo mission? My family calls it *airplane dad mode*. And apparently, I have it. The second we step into the airport, my nervous system decides we are in a survival situation. My pulse quickens, my walking pace triples, and suddenly I'm convinced that unless we get to the gate in record time (well, in my case, if you know me well, the lounge), the plane will leave without us — even though we're not even close to boarding time.

That's the thing about our nervous systems: they can never really tell the difference. They only have two settings - safe or danger - the same survival system that once kept our ancestors alive, now firing off alarms over everyday moments. So even when there's no real threat, like when someone cuts in front of me on the 5 with no signal – my heart races, my blood pressure spikes, and suddenly my body is convinced we may not survive…these San Diego drivers!

Back in July, I joined an inaugural retreat for multifaith leaders. One of our very first activities was to pick stickers with phrases that named our insecurities—things like: I'm not enough; I'm overworked, I feel invisible, I'm afraid of failing. Once we chose our labels, we stuck them on our bodies. We then stood face-to-face, looking into another participant's eyes for 10 seconds before reading their labels, and stared back, again into their eyes, seven times over. By the end, my nervous system was screaming: "*Get me out of here! Too much eye contact! Abort mission!*" But underneath the panic was something truer: *"This is hard because it matters. This is hard because I'm seeing another person and being seen myself."*

But here's the thing: once my system settled, something remarkable happened. Looking into another person's eyes - not just their surface but the labels they carry, their self-doubt, their humanity – yes, it was overwhelming, but it was also holy. It was a crash course in what these High Holy Days are really about.

And I know it stands in stark contrast to what we see around us every day. Something in our world feels broken. Violence unfolds before our very eyes. A person is attacked, killed, surrounded by onlookers. And what happens? Phones are lifted. People record it, as if it were another tutorial, another clip to share. The videos spread, watched repeatedly. And instead of recoiling, we scroll past - barely pausing. As though this has become ordinary. As though this is just what life is now. In these instances, our *collective nervous system* has become numb in the face of atrocity.

And if our nervous systems, whether individual or collective, are left unchecked, they can trap us in constant defense — shrinking us into fear, blame, and reactivity. The work of these High Holy Days is to demand that survival alone is not enough, to rise above instinct and reclaim our humanity.

There are countless subjects I could have taken up today—Israel, antisemitism, the crises that press on us daily, the issues I regularly address from this pulpit. But what I chose to lift up this morning comes out of what I have heard and witnessed in countless conversations - with many of you, and beyond these walls. Repeatedly, I have seen that what we most need right now is not only another reckoning with our challenges, but the deeper work of rehumanizing.

Now, let me be clear: this doesn't mean excusing harm or pretending danger isn't real. The threats we face are real — from antisemitism to violence to the relentless churn of a fractured world. But the sacred task is not to mirror that dehumanization back. It is to respond without losing our own humanity in the process.

Rehumanizing (or The Rehumanizing Effect as I've coined it) is the practice of noticing how quick we shrink into fear, to defend, to dehumanize—and then choosing instead to really see the other. It's not easy. In fact, it can feel hard and costly. But that is exactly why these days are a gift. They train us, year after year, in the holy practice of rehumanizing. Rehumanizing means alchemizing our instinct to retreat, be suspect or self-protect into a practice of holiness—where

we look with compassion upon others, not just those who might find easier to love.

Because at its core, holiness is not withdrawal, it is connection. It is daring to say: I won't let fear or pain have the last word. Instead, I'll let them become the material for courage and growth.

Several months ago, I was walking in downtown San Diego, wearing my kippah, headed to a meeting. A man spat on the ground in front of me, and only seconds after I realized that he was muttering words (f'ing Jew) that reduced me, and our people, to less than human. For a moment, I froze. My instinct was to shrink.

But then, almost like a shofar blast, another thought arose: I will not let him take away my humanity. I stood taller, looked him right in the eye as I passed him—not with hate, but with conviction that my Jewishness is not a liability but a sacred inheritance.

And here is where rehumanizing stretches even further. Because it wasn't only about standing strong in my own dignity - it was also about refusing to let his hate define the moment. His words came from a soul cut off from its source. And that is the radical work of re-humanizing: not allowing someone else's wounds to make us smaller but choosing instead to respond with even greater expansiveness of spirit.

At the heart of it all are sacred beings in human form—real, breathing, loving and hurting souls, created *b'tzelem Elohim*– in the image of God[1]. And these past few years have shown us just how deeply bound we have expressed this as a Jewish family: when rockets fell, many of us felt the shockwaves; when antisemitism rose on campuses, parents trembled with memory; when hostages were freed, we all exhaled as one. That is not a cliché—it is the lived truth that our nervous systems, our humanizing, are deeply interwoven.

And though our story as Jews feels singular, we are not the only ones aching. Children — in Israel and Gaza, in Ukraine, in Sudan — as one example, deserve to

[1]The Hebrew Bible / Tanakh. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. (Genesis 1:27; 2:7).

be seen not as statistics or slogans but as real, breathing, human. Rehumanizing doesn't mean diminishing our pain; it means insisting that humanity itself never be lost, no matter whose child, no matter whose tears.

This means that our work, spiritually and communally, is to notice when our systems are hijacked, to breathe, to ground, and to help bring first ourselves and then one another back to humanity.

Our tradition grounds us with daily practices: saying *Modeh Ani* upon waking; lighting Shabbat candles in the chaos; a deep breath before reacting. *Tzedakah* (charity) like supporting our campaign 😊, interrupts self-focus. Acts of *chesed* (kindness) - checking on a friend, bringing food, holding space—remind us of shared humanity. Welcoming a stranger trains us to make room in our hearts. *Lashon tov*—words of kindness—anchor us in compassion.

These aren't small gestures — they are spiritual resets. They are daily ways of choosing presence over panic, connection over isolation, and holiness over hurry.

This summer, I had a meal with one of our college students. She told me about a protest where Jewish students were screamed at, told they didn't belong. She felt invisible. Nervous system overload. A week later, a small group gathered—Jews and allies—to light Shabbat candles. Nervous at first, they sang together. In that fragile circle, they reminded each other: we are human. We are still here. It doesn't erase pain. But it restores dignity and gives hope room to breathe.

In Genesis, we learn: *"Vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim"*—God breathed life into the human being[2]. I truly believe: to be human is to carry a Divine spark. Our rabbis expand this understanding in the Talmudic teaching: "Each person should say: The world was created for my sake"[3]. Not arrogance, but responsibility. And the shofar we will hear today is our call to wake up—to the humanity of those around us, and to our own.

The shofar's sounds guide us here: *Tekiah* — the strong, whole note — reminds us of the steadiness we long for, those moments when life feels unbroken and we

[2] The Hebrew Bible / Tanakh. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. (Genesis 2:7).
[3] The Babylonian Talmud. Translated by Isidore Epstein, Soncino Press, 1935. (Berakhot 17a).

recognize ourselves clearly. *Shevarim* — the three broken notes — carry the weight of our grief, our losses, the cracks in our lives that we would often rather hide. *Teruah* — the staccato sobs — pierces our hearts with the rawness of anguish, the times when pain overwhelms and words fail us.

And yet, the shofar never ends there. Always it closes with *Tekiah Gedolah* — the long, unbroken blast that carries us forward, insisting that wholeness is still possible. That pattern itself is a theology: we are not meant to stay only in our strength, nor only in our brokenness, nor only in our tears. We are meant to move through them, to let each sound teach us, and then to arrive at renewal.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov gave this concept a powerful expression: *"There is nothing so whole as a broken heart."*[4] He taught that our cracks are the very conditions that make us open to God, to compassion, to one another. Wholeness is not the absence of brokenness, rather what emerges when we carry our broken pieces with courage.

Leonard Cohen, in his own poetic theology, offered: *"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."*[5] Cohen reminds us that brokenness can serve not as an obstacle to faith — but rather a doorway to faith. It is the place where healing, wisdom, and divine presence seep through.

Yet, we can take it one step further. Cracks don't only let light in; they also let light out. Our fractures are also our openings, the places where our resilience, our compassion, and our deepest humanity shine into the world. To hear the shofar is to remember that being human is not about hiding our brokenness, but about letting it become the very channel for hope and a beacon of compassion for others' pain, as we all share the same.

One of these channels was accessed this summer when our own Jewish community raised an appeal to San Diego Pride. We asked that the entertainer they insisted on headlining - someone whose language and speech had included hatred directed at Jews - not be given that platform. Our appeal was denied. And

[4] Nachman of Breslov. Likutei Moharan. Early 19th century.
[5] Cohen, Leonard. "Anthem." The Future, Columbia Records, 1992.

so, for the first time in years, we were absent from the Pride Parade. For many, that absence felt like a gut punch. It wasn't just about a parade—it was about belonging. But we refused to disappear. Instead, we created JPride Weekend. On that Friday night, Pride Shabbat filled this sanctuary—hundreds singing, praying, crying. Our queer community felt fully seen. We declared: *You are a blessing. You belong.* And the ripple effects spread beyond these walls—into workplaces, schools, neighborhoods. People told us later: *"I didn't know a synagogue could be like this."* Others said: *"For the first time, I believe I belong in Jewish community."* What began as an experience of rejection alchemized that pain into radical belonging.

If the piercing resonance of the shofar teaches anything, it's that renewal does not happen to us; it happens through us. Every *Tekiah Gedolah* is an invitation to act. This year, I invite us to rehumanize in three ways.

First, rehumanize ourselves.
Slow down when the heart races.
Breathe when the body tenses.
Pray when the spirit feels empty.
Study when the mind is restless.
Reach out when the soul feels alone.
Practice gratitude when the world feels heavy.

This is how we return to our humanity.
This is how we stand tall in our Judaism—
not just wearing it with pride,
but living it with presence, resilience, and heart.

Second, rehumanize one another. In a world of outrage, dare to be curious. Don't flatten people into caricatures. Meet them as souls, *b'tzelem Elohim*.

Many of you may have seen Mel Robbins' "Let Them Theory"[6] that went viral this past year. She gave us a catchy, modern phrase for something ancient: the

[6] Robbins M. *The Let Them Theory: How to Stop Controlling Other People and Start Living Your Life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2024.

wisdom that we cannot control others, only how we respond. "Let Them" is about releasing the urge to fix or judge what we cannot change. "Let Me" is about reclaiming our own agency, aligning our choices with our values and peace of mind.

This concept isn't new - our tradition has always taught it. The rabbis spoke of *tzimtzum*, stepping back to make room for another. The Prophet Micah urged us to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."[7] Robbins simply gave us new language for an eternal truth: we dehumanize less and heal more when we stop trying to control others and instead choose compassion, humility, and justice.

Through this work—through seeing one another fully, resisting fear with compassion, and practicing rehumanizing in our daily lives—we build the community we are meant to be.

Lastly, a vision and hope I hold for us as a Beth Israel community in 5786:
That no one sits alone.
That our children, when they face antisemitism, know we will walk the path of resilience with them.
That honoring our marginalized communities is not the exception, but the expectation.
That every stranger who enters here is met not with suspicion, but with welcome.
That this campus becomes a workshop for rehumanizing—where we practice what it means to live as people of hope.

And being people of hope means this: not turning away from the world's pain but daring to answer it with courage. Not shrinking from fear but standing for dignity. Not waiting for someone else but choosing – together - to build a future rooted in the best of us.

[7] The Hebrew Bible / Tanakh. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. (Micah 6:8).

We are not the first generation to face our humanity denied. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai reimagined Jewish life[8]. Centuries later, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., saying he felt as though he was "praying with [his] feet"[9]. Each act rehumanized Judaism in its time.

As we enter 5786, may we choose hope - not shallow, but fierce. The kind that looks at fractures and wounds and brokenness and says: we can build again. The kind that insists on shared humanity, even when it feels hard, even when it feels costly. Hope is not a prediction; it is a practice.

And practice means this: not avoiding our pain but staying with it until it can be transformed. The same nervous systems that once told us to run can, with time and intention, be retrained to see and welcome and embrace. This is the holy work of rehumanizing. And this is how we live as people of hope - not just in word but in action.

Just weeks ago, I sat with Sophie, playing guitar. We laughed, we sang, and for a moment, there were no headlines - just joy. For a moment, my nervous system wasn't in fight-or-flight - it was in song. And I thought: this, too, is activism. Joy is activism.

Whether it's airplane dad mode, confronting a signal-less driver, or staring uncomfortably into someone else's eyes for too long — they serve as reminders, inviting us into something more this Rosh Hashanah:

Not just to survive, but to see.
Not just to react, but to respond.
Not just to harden, but to open.
Not just to protect, but to rehumanize.

[8] The Babylonian Talmud. Tractate Gittin 56b. Story of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Yavneh.
[9] Heschel, Abraham Joshua. The Prophets. Harper & Row, 1962.

Tekiah—remember who you are. *Shevarim*—remember what has been broken. *Teruah*—remember the urgency of now. And *Tekiah Gedolah* - the promise that we are not finished yet.

May this be the year we take up that sacred work, and may we do it with courage, and an unshakable hope that our world is worth redeeming.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah. May it be a sweet and humanizing new year.