



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

### **“Kinship of the Soul” Kol Nidre, Erev Yom Kippur Sermon, 5785/2024 Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman**

Gut Shabbes, gut Yontiff! Tonight, unlike most Friday nights, we won't be singing L'kha Dodi. However, I want to bring our attention to an intriguing line from that beloved piyut; *sof ma'aseh b'machshava techila*- the end is embedded in the beginning. This concept appears as well in the Yigdal poem where God is described as *mabit l'sof davar b'kadmato*: God sees the ending in the beginning. While this appears to be an esoteric statement, it also contains a very practical and useful idea. In my previous career as a psychotherapist I was taught that one must take special care in noting all the details of the first session with a client. Why? Because every issue that will eventually arise in the course of treatment will be expressed in some form, in that very first meeting. With that in mind, tonight as we begin our 25 hours of reflection, fasting and prayer, I turn our attention to the end of the holiday, to the book of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow afternoon as we count the final hours of our fast. The end is embedded in the beginning.

Jonah is a remarkably consistent fellow; some might say, rather rigid. His attitudes and judgements do not shift despite his direct encounters with God, with a whale and even with a near death experience. He does not



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

believe that a sinner is entitled to forgiveness despite honest and sincere repentance. His judgments of others' wrongdoings are fixed. In his worldview, there is no room for forgiveness.

Throughout the narrative it appears that God is trying to school him in the complexities of Truth and the quality of Compassion. Interestingly, Jonah's full name is Yonah ben Amitai which translates as: Jonah the son of Truth. But Jonah is not interested in the complexities of truth. He sees the world in black and white terms and he desires swift and uncompromising judgment.

Yom Kippur, however, is about softening the heart. It is one full day devoted entirely to forgiveness. We engage in confession, prayer and self reflection in order to facilitate real changes in ourselves. We fast in order to weaken our defenses and create the kind of emotional softening that supports honesty, vulnerability and the healing of relationships. This is the kind of soul-work that is so terribly needed today. This work begins at a personal level, but carries implications for the most deeply dividing conflicts in our community, in our society and in our world.

In a commencement speech at Brandeis this year Ken Burns, noted historian and documentarian said the following:

*I've been struggling for most of my life.. to try to tell good, complex,*



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

*sometimes contradictory stories, appreciating nuance and subtlety and undertow, sharing the confusion and consternation of unreconciled opposites. But it's clear as individuals and as a nation, we are dialectically preoccupied. Everything is either right or wrong, red state or blue state, young or old, gay or straight, rich or poor, Palestinian or Israeli, my way or the highway. Everywhere we are trapped by these old, tired, binary reactions, assumptions, and certainties...*

*...And if I have learned anything over those years, it's that there's only us. There is no them.*

Burns expands his point by referencing the work of nobel prize winning author, Isaac Bashevis Singer. He tells this story:

*Toward the end of his long and prolific life, Isaac Bashevis Singer expressed wonder at why so many of his books written in this obscure and some said useless language (yiddish) would be so widely translated, something like 56 countries all around the world. "Why," he would wonder with his characteristic playfulness, "Why would the Japanese care about his simple stories of life in the shtetls of Eastern Europe (1,000 years ago?)" "Unless," Singer paused, twinkle in his eye, "Unless the story spoke of the kinship of the soul." I think what Singer was talking about was that indefinable something that connects all of us together, that which we all share as part of organic life on this planet, **the kinship of the soul.***



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

Tonight I want to share with you the hope-filled work of “The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF)”. It is a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization of over 700 families, who share “a kinship of the soul.” All of these families have lost a family member to the ongoing conflict since 1995. They come together to share their stories, their grief, and their dedication to ending the conflict that has taken countless lives.

I recently listened to a podcast by NY Times Best-Selling author and social worker, Brene Brown in which she interviewed two Parent Circle spokespersons: a bereaved mother, Robi Damelin, and Ali Abu Awwad, a bereaved brother and founding leader of Taghyeer, a nonviolent Palestinian movement for social and political change.

When asked, what is forgiveness? Robi Damelin shared a quote from another Parents’ Circle mother who said “Forgiving is giving up your just right to revenge.” (repeat) What a powerful statement from a parent whose child was killed in the conflict. And another bereaved parent added, “Forgiveness releases the other from their inhumanity.”

Parents Circle creates the space for the families of Jewish, Arab and Palestinian victims of violence to come together in a kinship of the soul, sparked by their shared grief. As Ali stated:





## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

*We both suffer the same consequences of this madness. We are not equal in our life conditions, but we are all victims. We can't share what is on the ground, because we have different life circumstances, but we share what is **underground**, the (lost) lives of our loved ones.*

As I mentioned before, Ali is the founder of the National Palestinian non-violence movement called Taghyeer. He explains that real peace and reconciliation require the courage to face the truth of both sides. It takes courage to see someone else's humanity. It requires strength and the need to divest from the competition over suffering and victimhood.

Indeed, we all surely understand that anger and violence are endlessly, self-perpetuating. The work of the Parents' Circle disrupts that cycle, by supporting victims on both sides of the conflict to face each others' pain. "This" Ali says, "is the foundation for any peace process... Non-violence, is the art of our humanity."

When asked what is the most helpful thing we can do to contribute to a lasting peace both Roby and Ali said that we must work not for a cease-fire but for a cease-conflict. We should invest our resources in the peace movements that continue to operate in Israel today and put pressure on our own gov't to support strategic peace-building efforts.



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

Both peoples are suffering deep trauma. We all understand that aggression leads to more aggression, to more broken hearts, to more anger, and more vengeance. Over the course of this terrible year we have grown accustomed to reading the numbers of those wounded and killed each day, but each number is a priceless human being, a parent, a child, a sister, a brother. And let us remember too, that all the children suffering through this war in Israel, in Gaza, in the West Bank, and in Lebanon are being formed by these experiences. We have to ask the question, what kind of adults will they become?

On this Yom Kippur I am asking us all to soften our hearts, to acknowledge the pain and grief that exists on both sides of this conflict. I am asking us to take a courageous step toward peace by acknowledging our shared humanity, our kinship of the soul.

It is tempting to climb a hill, like Jonah, to look down at our enemies from a distance and pray for their destruction- yes- that is the path of Jonah. But at the end of the story, God calls us to a different path, essentially reminding us that all human beings are worthy of compassion.

And so the end is embedded in the beginning. As we start our Yom Kippur journey, let us be courageous in our loving, in our relationships, in our



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

attitudes. Let us begin the work of softening the heart and pursuing real peace within ourselves, and hopefully by extension, in our fractured world.

Ashamnu, Bagadnu- we have sinned, we have concealed. Dear God, let us uncover Your truth, reveal Your love, embody Your forgiveness.

May we all be inscribed for a good year and may our world be inscribed for peace.



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785