



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

### **“Sod Ha-efshar - The Mystery of Possibilities” Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Day 1, 5785/2024 Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman**

A child is born. The seed of possibility is planted. Sarah, a 90 year old woman conceives and gives birth to a son. Her laughter becomes his name- Yitzhak. Every Rosh Hashanah we begin the new year with this story, wherein a path that had been blocked for a lifetime, is opened. Where there was grief, there is now joy, laughter and celebration. Where there seemed to be a dead-end there is now a future of possibilities. This is the text our Rabbis and sages require us to hear at the turning of the year. These are messages of hope and new beginnings that lay the spiritual foundation for the new year.

And yet, this past year has been profoundly difficult and painful for us all. The horror of the atrocities of October 7<sup>th</sup>, the hostage crisis, the ongoing and expanding war, the devastation in Gaza, the killing of tens of thousands of innocent people, countless children and women, the Settler violence and pogroms in the West Bank, the war in Lebanon, the attacks from Iran and the rising antisemitism around the world have been traumatizing, heartbreaking and so difficult to process. I have personally been in a state of anguish all year and I imagine much the same for many



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

of you. And yet, even so, on this Rosh Hashanah, this new year, I am focused on the phenomena of reversals, in the opening of channels of hope, in planting seeds of new possibilities.

We are living through a wildly dynamic time. Every day presents us with a new world. Every morning, we awaken to a shifting landscape of actors and events, tragedies and yet also, reasons for hope. We are both witnesses and participants in the unfolding human story on Planet Earth. And every day carries new potentialities. When we hear the shofar's call today, we will respond with the declaration: Hayom Harat Olam. The makhzor translates these words as, "Today the world stands as at birth", but the word *harat* means pregnant. In other words the literal meaning of this phrase is: the world is pregnant with possibilities. **On this sacred day- Rosh Hashanah- we celebrate possibilities for creating a new world through the changes we make in ourselves.** Our's is a world of light and darkness, and we are all part of that fabric. But Judaism teaches that we have agency. To bear Light is a choice, Joy is a choice and even Love is a choice.

In his new book, "Judaism is About Love", Rabbi Shai Held writes:



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

*We, as individuals are excruciatingly complicated. We are capable of unbridled cruelty and dreadful selfishness- and also of great kindness and immense generosity. We are capable of trampling on the poor and ignoring the weak- and also of fighting for justice and siding with the oppressed... We are capable of murderous hate and also of prodigious love... We are complex beings with contradictory natures, struggling to make our way through an often bewildering world. In the face of all this, Jewish tradition makes a simple but audacious claim: our conflicting impulses notwithstanding, we remain capable of choosing the good- and the height of good is love... Judaism is not Pollyannaish about who and what we are...(it) is not optimistic about human nature but it is stubbornly, insistently possibilistic. It's deeply held conviction is not that we **will** choose the good, but that we **can** do so... We can choose love.*

*(Let's pause here and all take a deep breath.)*

*(pause)*

The 15<sup>th</sup> century sage, Rabbi Dovid ben Zimra offers a beautiful commentary on the law of change that suffuses our world. He reminds us of the adage from Proverbs, "You do not know what the new day will bring" (Prov. 27:1). Truly, we do not know what each day will bring because our world is constantly subject to change and transformation. Everything is in flux, changing in every moment. Our ancient sages acknowledged this universal law but referred



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

to it as a potential for us to create change in the world. They called this principle “*sod ha-efshar*,” the mystery, or the secret of possibilities. This “mystery of possibilities” acknowledges the laws of change that govern our world but includes the idea that these forces can be harnessed and directed through our intentions, through our prayer and through our actions. We are not simply subject to the laws of nature, but rather, we can be purposeful actors in utilizing these forces of change. Simply put, what we do matters.

In 1966, Bobby Kennedy, then Attorney General gave a speech to the young people of South Africa. In it he described the inestimable power of each individual to affect the entire world. He said:

*It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*

Every person, yes, each of us, has the power to send out a small ripple of hope through our attitudes, our spoken words and our interactions. And while our small acts of kindness may seem like insignificant contributions to creating the





## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

world we wish to live in, they are of infinite value and carry infinite potential as they ripple out into a world of infinite relationships and connections.

Now, for many of us, myself included, the pace of change and the volume of tragic news can feel so overwhelming that we may experience a state of numbness and paralysis. At such times, I urge us to focus on what is most important in our lives; to do a kind of teshuvah; a return to the here and now; to caring for ourselves and nurturing essential relationships. These are the things we can do. When we feel ourselves getting dizzy, it's time to shut off our devices and turn off the news. Let us focus instead on calming the inner waves and attending to the care of ourselves, our loved ones and our community. In such overwhelming times, rather than breaking down or going numb, we can focus instead on increasing our own light, our own joy, and giving gifts of love to those in our circle of contact, because if we can, then that light and love will surely ripple and grow.

And so I ask you now, can you identify, right now, an activity or an experience that brings you joy, that increases your light, that puts you in touch with love?

Let's think about that for a moment.

(pause)



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

Blessing: May we all find a quiet space within ourselves every day, to reconnect with what is holy, beautiful and true in our daily lives. And may those moments of peace ripple outward, in ever expanding circles into our precious world.

Ken yehi ratzon, may it be so.

### **Song:** (2x)

Where there is light in the soul, there is beauty in the person

Where there is beauty in the person, there is harmony in the home

Where there is harmony in the home, there is honor in the nation.

Where there is honor in the nation, there is peace in the world.