

Rabbi Daniel Berman - Temple Reyim
Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 2024/5785

Lshanah tovah. I'm so glad to be here together with you.

This is one of my favorite stories.

Sarah and I raised Elie and Mica in a small house off Washington Street in Brighton Center. For 10 years, it was home, where we experienced all the magic of growing up, together with the typical sicknesses and occasional difficulties in a young family's life. When the time came to move here to Newton to begin at Reyim, we were ready, but it wasn't easy to leave our home.

We sold the home to a Jewish family. Of course the real estate agent wasn't allowed to tell us the religion of the buyers, but we figured it out from their distinctively Jewish last name. It wasn't Maya and Moshe Rabinowitz, but it was as close to that as you can imagine. And in case there was any doubt, we drew on deep investigative skills when they included what otherwise would be a random number \$18 dollars at the end of their offer. Maybe it shouldn't have mattered but the truth is I loved that a Jewish family was moving in. That our house would continue to be a home for Shabbat dinners and havdalah and holiday meals.

Now when you move from a Jewish home, there is a custom of leaving mezuzot on the doors. In fact if you go into older homes - even here in old Jewish Boston neighborhoods of Dorchester and Mattapan, where there was a strong Jewish community- you can still see old mezuzot hanging, sometimes covered in multiple layers of paint. We were a little sad to leave them behind,, so we asked the real estate agent to get in touch with the family and ask if they would like us to keep all of the mezuzot on the doors. They quickly responded they secretly hoped we didn't know the custom because they were excited to hang their own.

Ultimately we decided to leave one. It just made us feel better about moving, and we hoped it offered them even a small sense of continuity. The morning we moved out, we left a note by the mezuzah: "Welcome to your new home. We hope it brings you as much happiness as it brought us." We all signed it. At the time, Elie was 11, Mica was 7.

Ok, that's all just background. Nine years later, late September 2022 - in other words, two years ago - and it was just a few hours before Erev Rosh Hashanah. My cousin's

son was a freshman and in the marching band at the University of Massachusetts, and every year that UMass marching band marches in a parade right down Washington Street in Brighton, passing by our old street.

So we grabbed Elie and Mica and my parents as well, and we drove down to our former neighborhood and stood at the corner until the band came by. We waved and jumped up and down and yelled my cousin's son's name, and when we had sufficiently embarrassed him - I mean, enthusiastically shared our love - we decided to walk up the hill and check out our old house.

"Do you guys want to knock on the door?" I asked the kids. "Maybe you can see your old rooms?" Elie and Mica were a little tentative, but game.

There's a little porch in front of the house, and an older woman was sitting on a rocking chair, just kind of looking out. We stopped where the sidewalk met the stairs to the house and introduced ourselves. A little nervous, I began, "hi, my name is Daniel Berman, these are my parents and my children..."

This woman was clearly struggling to understand. Recognizing something kind of deep about her face, my parents quickly jumped in, and began speaking with her in Yiddish. You can imagine both the excitement and shock - even in Brighton Center,

not far from the Chabad center and Shalom House, it's not typical to have random people standing at your porch and begin speaking to you Yiddish.

Overhearing the voices, a younger woman came out with two small children at one side, and a slightly older daughter at the other. "Can I help you?" she asked us.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I know it's right before Rosh Hashanah. We used to live here for many years, and we were in the neighborhood, and we thought we'd come by to show the kids their old house."

She came down a few steps.

'Oh my goodness," she said.

"Is this Elie?"

"And is this Mica?"

What?

She remembered their names from the note we left them nine years ago. We never met but she kept us in mind for a decade.

We stood at the intersection of the sidewalk and the porch stairs, and of a past life and this one, and talked for maybe 10 minutes before we had to go. It was now less than 2 hours before Rosh Hashanah.

“Wait, wait, before you go,” she said. She ran inside and then brought out cookies.

“Have a sweet year,” she said.

She brought her entire family outside, and they waved to us as we walked down the hill.

As Rosh Hashanah began, it felt like I had just been in this kind of magical setting where everything is right in the world, which is just good, kind, where we were offered this rare gift - the feeling of *klal*, of collectivity - this sense of being a *people* so much larger than your own family or the community inside any particular walls.

This concept of being part of a *klal* is ancient. In his sermon to the Israelites as they stood at the cusp of Eretz Yisrael, Moses declares:

“You stand this day, *all of you*, before God - your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel, *kol Yisrael - the entirety of this people*.

your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water-drawer...

You enter into this special relationship with God.

But not you alone.

Imanu v'et asher ey'ney'nu imanu

With all of you who are standing with us
and with those who are not with us.

Moshe is saying: you are all connected. It doesn't matter which millennium you are born into. This relationship includes everyone here today, everyone who came before you, and everyone who will come after you.

This idea of being part of a *klal Yisrael* that transcends generations, gets picked up in classic rabbinic thought, but shifts from its spiritual origins and becomes, essentially, a sociological matter.

When a person expresses a desire to convert to Judaism, the sages suggests the rabbi should encourage them lovingly - but also ask: "do you know about the persecution, suffering, exile we have experienced?"

The question isn't meant to shock the person about the extent of Jewish suffering, or even necessarily dissuade them from converting. The question is very real - do you understand that you will be throwing your fate in with this people?" This isn't an individual matter. It's not just *your own* life that is at stake here. You are becoming

part of something much greater than you. You will be responsible for the whole - the collective - and you will be *personally* affected by its joy and its sadness.

An even more significant shift was introduced 100 years ago by Mordechai Kaplan, who was the spiritual founder of what became the Reconstructionist Jewish movement. Kaplan wanted to differentiate *Jewish people* from the *religion of Judaism*, and he made this claim - bold at the time - that a person *is still Jewish* even if they rejected traditional faith and religious practice. His work became particularly important following the Second World War. Jews overwhelmingly testified to an experience of the complete absence of God. A religious void where there had been faith. To the question, what's important to you about being Jewish, *feeling part of a people* was now the most common response.

It's not unusual to feel you are part of a collective, when suffering or in crisis.

We felt it on October 7. It was not that people in Israel were attacked - it was that *our people* were attacked, as if it was happening to our own family, even if we didn't know them personally.

We've experienced this before in our own lifetimes - in the weeks leading up to the Six Day War, and on Yom Kippur in 1973, when the existence of Israel was threatened. During the Soviet Jewry movement following the execution of Jews in the early 1960's on false economic criminal charges and the closing of synagogues, publication of antisemitic books and imprisonment of Jewish dissidents. Maybe even this past year in our communities, and in response to the increasingly sharp voices of anti-Semitism. In these moments, the Jewish response tends to be swift and fierce, instinctive and organized, the way we would be when protecting our own children. As if to say: don't you understand? This is family.

But there are also experiences - I've had them, I know you've had them - that threaten our sense of being part of a people.

I remember sitting in the college dorm room of my brother Ben after returning from a year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem when we heard that Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated. Rabin was larger than life. was not only a fierce leader, but had become a symbol of hope for so many of us that there could finally be peace. After he was killed,

as Jews in Israel and across the globe mourned, thousands of ultra-religious nationalists celebrated.

It's hard not to feel isolated by the chief rabbinate, the halachic authorities, in Israel who demean and limit the legitimacy of non-Orthodox Jews.

Or by the religious and ideological extremism of Jews who have caused and continue to cause very serious harm.

Are these my people? I do not recognize them. It doesn't feel like we ever stood together before the same God.

What do we owe Jews with whom we violently disagree? Curiosity? Understanding? Respect? Love? Generosity? Compassion? Because we share a religious or ethnic identity?

When we stand on such radically different moral grounds, at what point do we say they are no longer part of us? And we are no longer part of them?

Our ancient rabbis worked very hard to cultivate a Judaism that would protect and preserve serious differences. We're proud of that inheritance. It is a clear and core value. And - and - when it comes to the broader Jewish community, there also have to be boundaries to what we tolerate, limitations on *whom we will stand with* in order to protect *what we stand for*. There is a painful ambiguity here that we have to live

with and struggle with so that we can build an expansive and inclusive broader Jewish community that we're also proud to be a part of; that makes us feel like we belong somewhere; that helps us feel less alone. I keep asking myself: how close are we?

Maybe these questions feel theoretical. But they impact our own families.

Unfortunately, in recent years, a person's relationship to Israel and Zionism has become the gating factor for Jewish belonging. How do you react when your children or your friends or your classmates are protesting on the other side of the street from you? It has caused families who are close to lose trust in one another. I know many people who didn't invite their own family - some their own children - to Passover seders for fear of conflict around Israel. *This* is not theoretical. This is happening all around us. And it is so painful. Separating from our families can't be where we land.

Fortunately most of us have had experiences that are reassuring, that sustain us, and remind us we're part of something so much bigger.

I'll share one story with you.

Many years ago, I worked with Ethiopian children, who had just come to Israel as part of Operation Solomon in 1991. We lived at a youth Aliyah village in northern Israel called Neve Amiel. Many of the children were there alone. They had lost their parents or siblings in Ethiopia - or en route to Israel. My job was simple: teach the kids modern conversational Hebrew. I wasn't really fluent yet, so I tried my best. I was, however, fluent in baseball, so - over the protests of the senior counselors and village directors - we mostly did that.

At the time, I was starting to experiment with my own Jewish practice and before bed I'd say the shema quietly to myself. About 30 of us slept in bunks in the same room, and one night, the boy on the bunk above mine overheard me. He was about 8 years old. He jumped down and literally stood over me. He seemed a little shaken. Using his best new Hebrew, asked:

"Mah atah omer - what are you saying?"

"The shema."

"Tagid od pa'am" - say it again.

"Here, repeat after me," I said.

Shema. Shema.

Yisrael. Yisrael.

Adonai.

No response. He had been holding my hand. He lets go and falls a step backwards towards his bed as if I had just struck him.

“What?”

“*Ima sheli haytah sharah li et zeh*” - my mother used to sing this to me.

He slept on my back that night - and for the following 3 weeks.

These kinds of memories stay with you - and right beside them is the knowledge that there are so many people in Israel and the global Jewish community working intensively towards the common good: building, tending, serving. Leading with empathy and curiosity.

And there are hundreds of Jewish-led organizations that are setting the groundwork for peace, pushing back against extremism, offering dignity to people. Standing relentlessly *for* civil rights and *against* persecution and injustice.

And this has always been true.

They are not as visible. They are in the quiet, unassuming background of this project of ours. But their impact is very real. Their devotion changes people’s lives.

We're part of something that offers this immediate and significant connection to generations of people, most of whom we have never met and never will meet. *Imanu v'et asher ey'ney'nu imanu* Those who are with us today and those who are not with us today.

The call for a commitment to creating the Jewish community that stays together even in the most difficult times, that responds to each other's needs, that constantly fights for the common good - that call is serious right now, more urgent than it has been in a long time.

The call is to step into your own community with honesty and humility, and to greet and welcome anyone who will meet you in that place. This has been a very lonely time. There is a need for solace, comfort, connection.

And we are very lucky.

Because somewhere and everywhere,

people whom we don't yet know, have never met, are waiting to

hear the voice of their mother in the words of the *shema*;

to be overjoyed by unexpected Yiddish;

to remember the names of the children who grew up in her own children's rooms.

The call right now is to find each other.

To be together.

I believe we will. We always have.

For one reason.

This is family.

Shanah tovah.