

Rosh Hashana drash 2023 – Esther Takac

Rosh Hashana is a time of soul searching – a time of introspection and self-reckoning. It is a moment when we reconnect with our spiritual roots and seek to improve ourselves, our communities, and our world.

We engage in this deep reflection as individuals – have I been the daughter or son, the mother or father, the life partner, the sister or brother, the friend I hope and wish to be? I know I can't answer yes to My role in all these relationships. Rosh Hashana gives me the space to think how I can do better.

As we engage in this soul searching, our tradition teaches us the importance of Tzedek - justice, Chesed – compassion, and Rahamim - kindness. These values guide us not only in our personal lives but also in our engagement with the broader world.

This year, our observance of Rosh Hashanah takes place amidst a backdrop of profound change, both here in Australia and in our Jewish homeland Israel. In Australia we are divided around the referendum on The Voice - one month from today. In Israel the country is torn around the current government's judicial reforms, its vision for Israeli society.

And so I ask – how do we bring the lens of our Yamim Noraim - the principles of Tzedakka, Teshuva and Tefila to guide us? How do we apply the values of justice, compassion and kindness - to inspire our responses and behaviour?

But this is where things get tricky. Of course, I know there's a convention we don't talk politics in shule. However, these issues go to the heart of who we are as Australian Jews, they Are matters of the Heart.

I'm aware we may not all agree on our vision for Israel, just as we may not all agree on our vision for Australia.

How do we talk about significant issues when we disagree – passionately even?

What does our Jewish tradition say that may guide us?

For me when I look at Israel, I see things that make me feel deeply uncomfortable.

This government, the most extreme in the history of the country, is attempting to change fundamental structures: the judiciary and the Supreme Court, participation in the army, the position of women in society, Jewish – Arab/Palestinian relations, attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, the status of forms of Judaism it doesn't value, the education system and its teaching of democracy.

These policies have sparked strong emotions, heated debates and divisions.

There is Enormous soul searching happening right now in Israel. A massive self reckoning about Zionism and about Judaism has been unleashed.

Israelis are asking themselves – what kind of Israel they want? Values of justice and equality have driven hundreds of thousands Israelis to the streets - week after week, month after long month - to advocate for their vision of a more inclusive and compassionate society.

As Australian Jews we ask ourselves what role should we play in this unfolding frightening situation. Together with our love and care for our Jewish homeland, we also know Israeli policies have a profound impact on our collective identity as Jews.

Many of us believe the only way to support Israel is to support the government of the day. We don't live there. It's not our children who serve in the army. What right do we have to criticize? But Now we are confronted with a government that is deeply opposed to the values many of us hold dear.

If we don't want to criticize, maybe we should stay silent?
disengage? disconnect?

I want to share the reflections on these questions by Israeli deep thinkers – sensible centrist people - Daniel Gordis, Yossi Klein Halevi and Matti Friedman. They write;

To our sisters and brothers in the Diaspora:

We are writing to you from Jerusalem in the weeks before the High Holidays, to tell you of the existential threat to Israeli democracy.

This political crisis is a struggle over the fundamental identity of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

The voice of fundamentalist religion is emboldened. Vital institutions that require social solidarity, and most importantly the military, are splintering.

And then they address us - Diaspora Jews - directly.

This unprecedented threat requires unprecedented changes in the Diaspora's relationship with Israel.

Jews in the Diaspora can no longer support Israel without asking which Israel they are supporting.

With Israelis on the streets fighting for the liberal values they share with so many Jews around the world, this is no time for Diaspora silence or alienation.

To the contrary: when someone you love is in danger, you draw closer.

Strong sentiments and strong words.

My views tend to agree with these writers – but I know I also need to listen to the other side. Those Israelis who argue this democratically elected government can pursue the policies it sees fit. Those who believe the supreme court is not representative, has too much power and disagree with its ruling on issues such as haredim being exempt from the army, preventing the expelling of asylum seekers.

Here in Australia, there is debate and polarisation around The Voice.

As Jewish people, our history has shown us what it's like to be dispossessed of land, to suffer discrimination, to be voiceless. Jewish Australians have a proud record of working together with First Australians to build justice and reconciliation.

On the other hand, based on our own experiences, other Jewish people believe the political creation of ethnic, racial or religious divisions in society is unwise. No other group has an advisory status to parliament and the impact the voice would have is unclear.

I know these issues are dividing us intensely - in Israel where the two sides are literally fighting each other in the streets.

In Australia, where family and friends disagree.

There is hurt and anger and disdain.

I know how in our increasingly polarized world, we often end up living within our own silos – immersing ourselves in news and opinions that tend to confirm our own. When presented with opposing views it's easy to react with anger, to shut out voices that challenge our beliefs.

I'm as guilty of this as the next person – probably moreso – much to my dismay I often have very strong thoughts and feelings about these things.

I'm aware I experience these issues so passionately, in my blood and in my bones, that often I may be too strong, too opinionated in my views.

If I come across like that here is this Dvar Torah, as well as in my conversations with family and friends, I apologise now and ask your tolerance and forgiveness.

But the opposite is problematic too – that we come to shule and avoid talking about these things that matter.

And so I ask myself - Is there a way to talk about these issues - on RH - that is informed by our pivotal Jewish values?

Is there a way of voicing our worries that allows us to speak with each other about our differences – in the spirit of forgiveness?

How can we be a community - and communicate with each other - even when we disagree?

Maybe this could be the real deal – RH and YK in action?

So I've been exploring - what does our Jewish tradition teach us - about finding ways of communicating even when we disagree?

I wonder if we can be guided by the 13 midot – those 13 qualities of God we repeat over and over on YK.

Adonai, Adonai El Rahum v'Hanun Ereh Apayim v'Rav Hesed v'Emet

'God who is Compassionate and Gracious, who is Slow to anger, who is Abundant in Kindness and Truth'

Maybe when talking about difficult intense issues we need to remember to be;

Rahum - Compassionate

Hanun - Gracious

Ereh apayim - Slow to anger

'rav hesed v'emet - Abundant in Kindness and truth

Most of all we need to listen. Those of us on the 'left' and those of us on the 'right.'

We must remember the Jewish people are a diverse community with a wide range of views – that ideally should attest to our vibrant plurality of thought and experience.

So, we need to listen to the views, the stories, the pain of others – even when we disagree, especially when we disagree. As Israel's president Herzog said just two days ago in his RH address 'This act of listening is the first and most crucial step in healing our rifts.'

Our tradition teaches that such deep listening – with openness and compassion - is the path to personal growth and to harmony within our community.

As Pirkei Avot teaches - we must 'judge each person favourably' – respecting the other and seeing the best in them – this creates space for understanding and empathy.

As Rambam reminds us, "Teach thy tongue to say, 'I do not know,' and thou shalt progress." We need to be humble. We need to know we may not be right.

Israel's beloved poet Yehuda Amichai writes about this in one of his best known poems;

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

Our tradition also exemplifies diversity of thought – there are many different ways to think about an issue. This is built into our foundational texts – which tell us there are Shivim Panim laTorah – the Torah has seventy different faces – seventy different ways of understanding.

This applies even to the central story we read in shule today – Akedat Yizchak - The Sacrifice of Isaac which has been interpreted in different and conflicting ways. Some see Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as proof of his faith in and devotion to God. Others believe Abraham should have argued with God, just as he did at Sodom. That was his test – to challenge God saying "I can't do it – its contrary to your law.'

Very different views of the same story – but all within and respected by our tradition

We have been schooled in multidimensionality. We need to apply this deep listening, this openness to various views - to our profound issues today.

Then finally, after we have listened, really listened - we need to find our own voice - the courage to speak our own truth.

Because our tradition teaches that faith without action is incomplete.

I want to end with the prayer we recite over and over on RH and YK

שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ חוּס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ

Hear our voice, God; spare us and have compassion on us

I recently heard a commentary on this prayer I love;

We pray to God to hear our voice.

But God cannot hear our voice - if we are not willing to hear each other's voices.

God cannot forgive us - if we cannot forgive each other.

For me this year, this is the opportunity RH gifts us.

This time to reflect on how we listen and how we find our authentic voice.

Our prayer tells us— 'al takshu levavchem' – 'Harden not your heart.'

In the cacophony of discord, when empathy is often drowned out - this is our challenge - not to harden - or disengage our hearts.

We ALWAYS need to do this in our personal relationships.

And urgently this year, with the crisis in Israel, and the referendum on The Voice – we need to do this also as members of our communities.

Let us hear the piercing sound of the shofar today - and may it remind us that our tradition urges us to - listen with an open heart
- find our voice - and use it –

to nurture Tzedek – Justice, Chesed – Compassion,
Rahmamim – Kindness - and Shalom – Peace

in our personal lives, in our communities and in the world at large