

We Need Each Other Now

Sermon ~Yom Kippur 5783

Four years passed between the completion of my first album and my newest collection. Over that time: I became a rabbi, I became a husband, I became a father, I moved across the country with my family to join the Temple Sinai and greater DC communities, and I lived through a pandemic. Through all those life transforming gains and losses—all the growth and all the pain, all the joy and all the suffering—I wrote music.

I must have written dozens of songs, some explicitly Jewish and many more that were not. Most I wrote alone and initially recorded alone, but thankfully Temple Sinai, gave me the funds to work with other brilliant artists and a world-class Nashville engineer to create the new album called “My Whole Heart,” a collection of Jewish music, released in four parts (the four chambers of my heart).

Here’s the thing: I played almost all the instruments myself in my home “studio,” if you could even call it that, and when somebody else contributed a part, they recorded it alone in their own space. The new

album is, then, the artistic embodiment of these last 3 years—its hallmark is isolation.

The “Nashville” style of making music is to record each instrument and vocal part track by track, then layer and adjust and blend the tracks until the seams and bumps are no longer noticeable. The final perfected release masks just how lonely this process felt at times. “My Whole Heart” was meant to embody my soul’s yearning for closeness with others, but **it did not make me feel close to others**. If anything, it highlighted just how separated we all still were from each other—and just how badly we need each other now.

One of my greatest teachers and role models, a Jewish prayer leader, educator and prolific songwriter named Joey Weisenberg was the guest on the Identity/Crisis podcast with Yehuda Kurtzer not too long ago. Every album he’s recorded or contributed to, and there have been many to this point, has been recorded live—the full band playing all together all at once, either in a studio or in a synagogue. Joey explained: “We tend to play it live and we assume that there’s going to be all kinds of mistakes—and also, because we’re doing that, there’s going to be all these moments

of unscripted beauty that come out that we didn't expect. So we take the uncompressed version of existence.”

It's that uncompressed existence that the pandemic stole from me and from all of us. Every gathering started exactly on time because we got to choose when to let folks in from the waiting room. You only spoke when spoken to or when invited to press the unmute button. It was nice to have a filter to smooth over our pores and blur out our backgrounds. I doubt there's a single person who didn't see even some of that as a positive, yet even as we appreciated those little conveniences, they pale in comparison to what was lost.

Yom Kippur demands uncompressed existence. Our tradition imagines Yom Kippur as a day where we don't show up in our nicest finery and at our most manicured, but rather we wear non-leather soles, and our stomachs rumble and many don't even bathe until after break-the-fast—and it isn't just our physical beings that feel “uncompressed:” we beat our chests and accept our failures and lay our souls bare for the judging. We are meant to be at our most raw on this day. But Yom Kippur also provides us with a huge safety net: we never do this alone.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, these “we” suffixes suffuse the confession liturgy.

We’re all in this together. We need each other now.

The Talmud discusses how the world will be punished for sinful behavior. Referencing a verse from Leviticus, the sages ask: “But isn’t it written: “And they shall stumble one upon another” (Leviticus 26:37)?”

The answer of our sages is that this verse means **that we will stumble spiritually, one person over the iniquity of another.** We’re all **tripping over one another** trying to be our best selves. But wouldn’t that lead us to believe that we should all separate from each other? Stay out of each other’s way? Our tradition concludes the opposite. “**ישראל שכל מלמד בזה זה ערבים**” the Talmud says: “This teaches that all Israel is responsible for one another.” Now—in this season of teshuvah, but more broadly in this particular moment of humanity’s existence—we need to be together. We need each other.

I don’t mean to say that even if you are immunocompromised you should put yourself in danger by irresponsibly showing up somewhere without your needed safety precautions in place. There is a teaching from

Pirkei Avot: “Avtalion used to say: Sages be careful with your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be carried off to a place of evil waters, and the disciples who follow you drink and die, and thus the name of heaven becomes profaned.” I don’t wish to be such a sage that leads my people into those doomed waters. With that disclaimer in place, however, I feel secure in saying the following:

Avtalion was the last sage of his generation mentioned in Pirkei Avot, and he represents for us a pandemic mindset. The famous Rabbis Hillel and Shammai are the sages that came next, and their first teachings to us in Pirkei Avot remain remarkably relevant. In the following line, we learn: “Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humankind and drawing them close to the Torah.” Yes that closeness **could** be metaphorical, but it **can not ONLY** be metaphorical. We need to get up close and personal with the holy. During the early pandemic we brought Torah scrolls to your b’nei mitzvah houses. Now, we need you to come where the Torah scrolls are. I have not yet grown numb to the bittersweet feeling I get when someone

tells me it's their first time seeing the renovations in our sanctuary that are now over a year old. **Make the sanctuary YOUR sanctuary again.**

Just two lines of Pirkei avot after this one, Hillel gives us his most famous teaching: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Your Temple is a place wherein you can practice self-care. You can learn, you can take spiritual counsel from your clergy, you can sit in a quiet library or sanctuary and breathe, you can sing your heart out. **Be for yourself with us. We will be here for you every time you need to. Now is the time.**

And Shammai? Shammai's message is the profoundly simple core of what Temple Sinai is all about: "Shammai used to say: make your study of Torah a regular practice; let your actions speak louder than your words; and show kindness to every human being."

So what is the message here? **Come back. Come back to Temple more than you used to come.** Yes, I'm really going to be that rabbi who says this on the bimah. **Bring yourself, on Zoom if that's all you can safely do but in person if you can! Take a class, join a protest, find a committee, get involved with Religious school, sing with us at Shabbat services, learn**

about the capital campaign and why it's so important right now—Jewish communal life is the single greatest part of being Jewish. Double down on making this community one where you can live uncompressed, a community where we're constantly tripping over each other in our efforts to be the best version of ourselves.

In a moment we'll read from parashat Nitzavim. At the start of the Torah portion the people stand before Moses in much the same way they did at Mount Sinai. Not just the regulars who would always be called upon, but **EVERYONE**. The **ENTIRE** community: “your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, and every Israelite; your young ones, your wives, the stranger in your gate; from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer.” Rashi, in commenting on the nature of our gathering at Mt. Sinai, said that our whole community was as one person, with one heart. This moment, this day and the days to come call us to stand together again as one. In my time at Sinai I've moved from the loneliness of the making of “My Whole Heart” into the possibility of finally learning the fullness of what this community can mean to a person. Bring your whole heart, and I'll bring mine. We need each other now.

TEXTS

[Shevuot 39a:22](#)

The Gemara asks: **And** with regard to **all of the** other **transgressions in the Torah**, is punishment **not** exacted **from the entire world**? **But isn't it written: "And they shall stumble one upon another"** (Leviticus 26:37)? This verse is homiletically interpreted to mean that they shall stumble spiritually, **one due to the iniquity of another**, which **teaches that the entire Jewish people are considered guarantors for one another**. Apparently, any transgression makes the entire world liable to be punished.

Pirkei Avot 1:11-15

שׁמֵא, בְּדַבְרֵיכֶם הִזְהָרוּ, חֲכָמִים, אֲמַר אַבְטַלְיֹן
וְיִשְׁתְּרוּ, הֲרַעִים מִיָּם לִמְקוֹם וְתִגְלוּ גֵּלוֹת חוֹבֵת תְּחוּבוֹ
שׁוֹנְמֵצִא, וְיָמוּתוּ אַחֲרֵיכֶם הַבְּאִים הַתְּלִמִּידִים
מתלמידי אבטליון: Abtalion used to say: Sages be careful with your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be carried off to a place of evil waters, and the disciples who follow you drink and die, and thus the name of heaven becomes profaned.

מתלמידי יהוה, אומר הלל, למהם קב לך ושמאיה לך
את אוהב, ש' לך ורודף ש' לך אוהב, אהרן ש'
לתורה ומקרבן בהב' ר' יות: Hillel and Shammai received [the oral tradition] from them. Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.

יִסַּף, מוֹסִיף וְדָלָא שׁמֵה אַבְדָּא, שׁמֵה אַבְדָּא, אֲמַר הִיהוּא
חֵלֵף, בְּתַגְאוּדָא שׁתֵּמֵשׁ חֵיבֵק טַלְא, יִלְיָפוּדָלָא
[also] used to say: one who makes his name great causes his name to be destroyed; one who does not add [to his knowledge] causes [it] to cease; one who does not study [the Torah] deserves death; one who makes [unworthy] use of the crown [of learning] shall pass away.

לְעַצְמִיּוֹכֵּשׁ אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי אֲנִי אֵין אִם, אוֹמֵר הִי הוּא
אֵם אֲנִי מֵה: He [also] used to say: If I am
not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what
am I? And if not now, when?

וְעָשָׂה מְעַט אֶמְרָה קְבֵעַ תּוֹרַתְךָ עֲשֵׂה, אוֹמֵר שֶׁמֶי
וַיְפֹת פְּנִים בְּסִבְרָה אֲדָם כִּלְאֵת מְקַבֵּל לֹהֵוִי, הַרְבֵּה
Shammai used to say: make your [study of the] Torah a fixed practice;
speak little, but do much; and receive all men with a pleasant
countenance.

ב'-'א': י"ט שמות

מֵאֶרְץ מִצְרַיִם לֵישׁ בְּיַבְחֵדֶשׁ (א)
וַיִּסְעוּ (ב). סִינַי מִדְּבָר בְּרֵאֵה הַזֶּה בְּיּוֹם מִצְרַיִם
וַיִּחַנּוּ בְּמִדְבַּר רֹנִי חֲנוּ סִינַי מִדְּבָר רֹנִי בְּאוֹמֵר פִּידִים
הַהָרְנֶגְדִּי שֶׁרָא לְשָׁם

- (1) In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai.
- (2) And when they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness; and there Israel encamped before the mount.

ב': ב' י"ט שמות על י"רש

... אחד בלב אחד כאיש - "ישראל שם ויחן

- (2) 2 "Israel camped there" - Like one person with one heart.