

If you remove one stone, the archway of community collapses.

Kol Nidre Drasha 5779

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Nehar Shalom

Shana Tova! Praying and singing with you tonight has felt so wonderful and deep. Thank you for journeying and creating community in this room together.

The incredible Kol Nidre prayer that we just sang is a formula that says all the promises and vows we make with G-d between this Yom Kippur and next Yom Kippur shall be completely nullified and cleared-- *before we even make them!* And I say 'we' because actually, Kol Nidre and many of the prayers throughout Yom Kippur refer to the collective promises we make between us as a people, and G-d.

But then, we learn from the Talmud that "Yom Kippur atones for the transgressions between a person and G-d, but for transgressions against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone until that person speaks to their neighbor." This teaches us that we have opportunities to grow and change from year to year, in our connection with G-d on Yom Kippur *and* in our connections with people. It means that that according to our tradition, we are responsible for doing deep work with each other both individually and collectively.

Breishit Rabbah tells us,

חֲבוּרָה וּמִשְׁפָּחָה כֶּהֱיוּ דוֹמִים לְכֶפֶת אַבְנִים,
אֵת נוֹטֵל מִמֶּנָּה אָבֵן אַחַת וְכוּלָהּ מִתְרוֹצְעֵת,
אֵת נוֹתֵן עָלֶיהָ אָבֵן אַחַת וְכוּלָהּ עוֹמֶדֶת

Which means, "It is taught that a community and a family are like a stone archway. If you remove one stone, the whole archway collapses. And If you ADD one stone, the archway will continue standing."

What a beautiful teaching about building community. But my question is, why are community and family compared to a stone archway?

Last February 10th, I marched with 4,000 people in the center of Jerusalem against the potential mass deportation of African refugees, of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum-seekers. We were a mixture of religious and non-religious Jewish Israelis and internationals, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Mizrachim, Israeli Palestinians, people all across the political spectrum-- with Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers leading the way. We arrived at Kikar Tzion, the main gathering square for protests at the bottom of Ben Yehuda street, and heard powerful testimonies from asylum seekers, activists, and rabbis. There was a group of about 50 counter protestors, mostly modern orthodox men, who were on the edge of the protest trying to disrupt the speakers, but our voices

and microphones drowned them out. People were holding signs with the faces of multiple African asylum seekers who had been deported from Israel, and killed once they arrived to Rwanda or Sudan.

At the end of the 'march against mass deportation', I saw my friend Monim, who is a Sudanese asylum seeker my age, and I ran towards him to say hello. I caught up and walked with him as he approached the area where the counter protestors were standing. I saw Monim smile and put his hand out towards the counter protestors, welcoming them to shake his hand. The ushers of the rally tried summoning us away from the counter protestors, but Monim told them that he was alright staying there-- and that he actually wanted to be there. Even though I really wanted to go, I decided to follow his lead, and stood right next to him with my sign that read "ki gerim hayitem-- HaTorah neged gerush". My sign quoted one of the 36 times we are reminded to protect the gerim, strangers, in our midst-- because we too were once strangers. Under this verse, I wrote in Hebrew, "the Torah is against deportation".

Instead of the counter protestors shaking his outstretched hand or smiling back, or even engaging with him at all, they started pummeling *me* with questions. "Oh, so you're quoting the Torah now?", they said in Hebrew. "Do you keep Kosher?" "Yes", I responded. A woman came up to me and slapped the sign out of my hands. I bent down to pick it up, and asked Monim, "are you sure you don't want to leave?" He said, "You can leave if you want".

"What about shabbat? Do you keep shabbat?", they asked me. "Yes, I am shomer shabbat", I responded. "Aval at loveshet beged Ish!-- but you are wearing men's clothing, which is prohibited by the Torah!" Wanting to avoid this *very fun* halachic debate, I said, "mi omer she'ani lo ish?-- Who says that I'm not a man?"

Looking back at this scenario now, I think it's absolutely hilarious that people tried convincing me I wasn't allowed to quote the Torah on a cardboard sign because they believed I wasn't kosher enough.

But at the time, I honestly felt pretty unsafe as a trans and queer person. The man who questioned my appearance started pointing and speaking loudly about how all protestors are gay and dress like me. I turned to my friend Monim and asked, "are you *sure* you don't want to leave?" He responded again, "you can leave if you want."

I flashed to the time I heard Monim share his story of survival-- that he had witnessed the massacre of family and community members of his home village in Sudan as a young child. Monim so miraculously survived this masacre because he happened to be wearing a girl's shirt, and was placed with the other women and girls, while the men and boys were all murdered before his eyes, which is an unimaginable trauma. And here he was, so generously offering his hand and smile to people who hate him. To people who don't even want to hear his story. To people who want him to be deported potentially to his death, because he is a Black African, and he is not Jewish. How could I just walk away now because I feel unsafe facing off protestors?

(pause)

I just could not believe his strength.

I took a deep breath and remained standing next to him. I continued responding to the counter- protesters. Was my presence making this whole situation more tense? I couldn't tell, but I decided I wouldn't leave that spot without him. I used my specific understanding of Judaism and Torah, *which by the way is clearly correct*, as my grounding stone and shield. I wouldn't let the sign be slapped out of my hand again because I was clinging to it so tightly.

Then, a 12-year-old orthodox boy on his bike came up to us and started asking me questions about my sign. "How do you *know* the Torah is talking about African refugees when it speaks of *gerim*, of strangers?", he asked. Both Monim and I answered his questions, and debunked some of the racist myths he had been taught about asylum seekers. Monim told him that he was in Israel seeking refuge because he wants to remain alive. He said that he wished he could return home, but he can't because he would be killed. After about ten minutes of speaking with this young person, whose curiosity had allowed him to approach us, we both shook his hand and walked away. Monim smiled at me and said to me in English, "See, he's on our side now."

(pause)

In her book *Emergent Strategy*, Adrienne Maree Brown says, "Emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems-- patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe... [and] how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."

My friend Monim taught me about patience and steadfastness. That our ten minute interaction planted the seeds of intentional change in the mind of this young person so that he might someday ask more questions of his teachers and community. That standing and feeling uncomfortable and unsafe for that period of time was worth it just for the sake of this one young person still forming his identity, with his questions and hand shake. Monim believed that we gained an ally and accomplice in the fight for African asylum seekers to feel safe and settle into refuge, so hopefully Monim, and other African asylum seekers will not need to fear deportation. Maybe this young person could be another stone to add to our strong archway.

Breishit Rabbah notices how stone archways are only able to remain suspended in the air gracefully with the snug compression of each stone side by side. It tells us that if one of the stones that are clinging tightly to its neighbor were to be removed, the entire connected link would be broken. It would collapse immediately. But the suspended archway can still remain intact when stones are added on top of the differently- sized bottom base stones. Breishit Rabbah tells us to learn from stones that support each

other through tight connections, and to build community this way, at the entrances and gates.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, zichrona Livracha, said that in Jewish community, "...we should expect to experience the simultaneity of home and strangeness. If we are at an event that claims to be for the whole Jewish community, at any given moment something must feel unfamiliar to someone, it just shouldn't be the same people."

I think we can easily expand this idea to community building in general. To create a truly inclusive community, maybe we need to accept that it is near impossible for everyone to feel comfortable all of the time at every moment. Instead, everyone can expect to share the burden of feeling uncomfortable some of the time so that the same people don't have to keep shouldering their discomfort over and over again.

(pause)

When the Torah tells us to 'love the ger, the stranger, because we too were once strangers', I think it is telling us that community is incomplete without them. Gerim make up some of the stones of each community's archway, and to take away those stones would cause the entire archway to crumble. To remember that we all were once gerim, and all people have the potential to become gerim again, at any moment. If we believe that discomfort can be a generative and growthful experience, each of us can then take turns feeling held, taking risks, and also feeling pushed to grow. I know I learned this when I struggled with discomfort, and stuck with my friend Monim as he challenged counter protesters to shake his hand.

We currently live in a country that does not value the stones of undocumented immigrants, and we have been witness to many crumbling community stone archways as stones are being taken away, and families split apart. And unfortunately, it's not only happening here, but many different countries are splitting families, and being harsh to gerim.

Every year, I wrestle with the collective 'we' that we pray on Yom Kippur. We sing, "Al chet she'Khatanu lifanekha-- we have transgressed before you willingly and unwillingly" for so many different things! What if I *don't* want to be associated with transgressions that I didn't personally do? Why can't I just focus on my own individual wrongdoings for once, rather than having to own the responsibility of transgressions that belong to other people I am completely morally opposed to?!

And then, I hear about the JP/West Roxbury Sanctuary cluster of nine congregations that Nehar Shalom is a part of. Right before Rosh Hashana last year, an undocumented immigrant was taken into sanctuary at the Bethel AME Church as a guest so there could be more time to work on his legal case, and to protect him against deportation. Members of Nehar Shalom and eight other congregations are supporting every aspect of his life, from coordinating food, to ESL classes, to taking one of the 70 weekly shifts so that witnesses can be present and ready if I.C.E ever arrives. Nine

congregations of different faiths are stretching and bridging their stone archways around one person, one whole world, who is a father to four children, so that his stone archway will not collapse. Now, this is a collective 'we' I feel ok getting behind.

(pause)

I wonder if Yom Kippur joins everyone's transgressions together to remind us of accountability. At this moment in time, I happen to be a white Jew and a U.S citizen who is not facing deportation, yet, I can use my power to engage and push the collective 'we' to make teshuva, reconciliation, and change their policies so that asylum seekers can someday feel safe and focus on healing. I can join in with collective 'we's like the JP/West Roxbury Sanctuary Cluster, adding and expanding stone archways to be a protective shield along with other stone archways. We need communities to come together and organize to change systems, and we also need individuals like Monim who notices how small actions and connections are crucial as well. *I and we* can join in with efforts all over the world, fighting for our communities to stay intact, for families to not be split apart.

May this year of 5779 be a year where all gerim, asylum seekers, immigrants, and Native and Indigenous communities find solid and grounding refuge. May it be a year of courage, risk-taking, accountability, and action. May we be open to the intentional change that helps us "grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for." And, may we continue adding stone upon stone to our community archway, and not allow any stones to be taken away.

Gmar Chatima Tova!