

Dear Chavraya,

I write those words, dear chavraya, with humility and hope.

Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue has been a precious place of nourishment, connection, refuge, and inspiration for me since I moved to Jamaica Plain nine years ago. It is a joyful wonder to now be stepping into rabbinic leadership, humbly receiving the role passed to me from Rabbi Victor and Mieke, and joining those who have already been visioning and building this community into its next chapter.

At last Tuesday's transition ritual, as I listened to the gratitude for Rabbi Victor and Mieke and Nehar Shalom's first fifteen years, along with the blessings so many of you expressed for our community going forward, I was filled with excitement and hope. The values and characteristics that make this community what it is were so clear. A place of openness. A place where generations meet - our members who come to know and love one another across generations, as well as past and future generations, the memory or imagination of whom gives us strength. A community that honors deep engagement within as well as with the world. A community that honors both despair and hope; makes space for longing, and inspires action.

A place that feels like a home.

The second parsha of this week's double portion, Balak, contains the famous verse: mah tovu ohalecha ya'akov, mishkenotecha yisrael. How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel. Words which the rabbis heard as a blessing not for individual homes, but for synagogues and places of Torah study, and invited us to say upon entering the synagogue sanctuary. A shift that signifies how much their synagogues and batei midrash felt, to them, like home.

These days, our homes have become our synagogues and batei midrash - as well as our gyms, barbershops, libraries, restaurants. For some of us, our homes have become our places of work. We are suddenly asking so much more of our dwelling-places, and we are left without our communal spaces to hold the important ways we take care of ourselves and one another, the ways we engage with and connect to one another. Our work as a kehilla kedosha, a sacred community, is to preserve the warmth, the welcome, the safety that have been so lovingly cultivated as the essence of Nehar Shalom, what Mieke

beautifully described as the intimacy of the shtibl. When our gatherings are mediated by screens, or six feet of physical space, or masks, let us continue to make Nehar Shalom a place to bring our broken hearts and be met with vulnerability and care. A place to bring our rage and find ancient wisdom that supports our fierce work for transformation. A place to bring our curiosity and encounter courage.

This Thursday is shiva asar b'tammuz, the 17th of Tammuz, the beginning of the three weeks of mourning that lead up to Tisha b'Av, when we commemorate the destruction of the temples in Jerusalem. This year, we have already been in a period of intensified mourning for months now.

In writing beautifully of the inner journey, Rabbi Alan Lew invites us to experience the 17th of Tammuz as a moment of breakthrough into teshuvah, which carries us through Tisha b'Av, Elul, Rosh Hashana, and Yom Kippur. To find hope within our grief because we have an ongoing opportunity for change: for reparations, for healing, for transformation. As we move towards the season of teshuvah, I know we will mourn, together, many layers of loss: loss of lives to sickness, police brutality, racism, and injustice. Loss of so many orienting structures and events. Loss of observing the high holidays as we have been used to observing them. May we also celebrate, and commit to, the opportunity for teshuvah. The opportunity to not return to things as they used to be. The opportunity to learn and build power together, to create a world of racial justice, healing justice, disability justice. A world of peace and freedom.

I so deeply look forward to doing this work with you - the inner work and the communal work.

With excitement and gratitude,

Rabbi Leora