

## RH 5782

### “We Are Each Other’s Business”

I'm waiting in line at my favorite falafel place in Los Angeles. The counter smells exactly like Israel, with lamb roasting on vertical spits, and steel bins of hummus and red and green zhug, tons of salads and pickles, and that incredible fried eggplant that you can tell yourself is sort of healthy because eggplant is a vegetable, but it's a total lie.

It's early August, and Delta is raging wild and hot across the country, with LA once again as an epicenter of the pandemic. Every day I'm hearing about another friend or acquaintance with a breakthrough case. I can feel the old anxiety that had started to recede in the months after the vaccine coming surging back. It's disheartening and exhausting, and I'm so tired.

In front of me in line are two young men, possibly still teenagers, with black velvet yarmulkes on their heads and tzitzit hanging down low. They had walked into the store without masks, and when the woman behind the counter told them they needed to wear one, they scowled at her and snatched at the paper masks she handed them and hung them low around their necks, and continued talking and laughing.

And for whatever reason – and if I'm being honest I know exactly the reason - I decided I just couldn't be quiet. So I stepped forward and, in my best dad voice, said: "You need to put those on." And the restaurant got momentarily quiet. And one of the boys looked at me fiercely and said: "Mind your own business. It's none of your concern what I do."

And, I looked back, at this religious kid, this kid who I'm sure learns Torah every day, and I said: "In our religion, there's no such thing as mind your own business. We are each other's business."

Now, I'd like to tell you that the heavens opened up, and he put on his mask properly and emerged from the encounter with a pretty good shwarma plate and a changed attitude on social responsibility. That didn't happen, of course. It never does when you snap at a stranger in a sandwich shop. As satisfying as it is, it's not really the way that meaningful change gets made. But I haven't stopped thinking about it, and a small part of me hopes that maybe he does too.

The Pico-Robertson neighborhood, where this little drama took place, is the Jewish hub of Los Angeles. It's an area of about a dozen blocks packed with kosher restaurants and markets, and bookshops. All different kinds of Jews live crowded together – elderly Persians and big Israeli families and ultra-Orthodox black hatters and progressive rabbinical students. There are shuls of every size and stripe. During the week it is noisy and chaotic, but on Shabbat there are practically no cars on the streets, and you can walk by and hear zemirot wafting from nearly every building. We all affectionately refer to it as the chood, and for seven lovely years, it was my home.

Part of the particular appeal of this neighborhood for religious Jews is that it is entirely within an eruv. For those who are less familiar with the concept of eruv, let me try to explain. In Exodus 16, the Torah says that on Shabbat no person should go out from their dwelling. Not willing to live under a permanent Shabbat stay-at-home order, the Rabbis interpret the law to mean not that one can't leave their house, but that they can't take anything with them. On Shabbat, they say, we are prohibited from carrying any item across a threshold, from inside one's private space out into the public domain, or from the street back inside. Anything. Like even your house keys. Or your tallis bag. Or a stroller. Or your baby.

The Rabbis' solution is to live within an eruv, an area of a city enclosed by a continuous barrier, which can thus be considered for legal purposes like one, giant shared private domain. In that way, if I carry something outside of my house and down the block, it's as if I'm just walking it from one room to another. The eruv is often composed of a simple wire or fishing line strung between light poles. Naturally, in Los Angeles, the eruv takes advantage of the freeway system and uses the ever-present walls of the 10, 101, and 405 to carve out our consecrated space.

And, if all of this sounds a bit strange to you, you aren't alone. This is one of those concepts that usually gets my Intro to Judaism students sort of scratching their heads and exchanging sideways glances with each other. I remember having a similar reaction when studying the concept as a rabbinical student.

But over the past few months, I've been finding myself thinking quite a lot about eruv and the imagined reality it creates: For one day a week, let's pretend that the rigid boundaries between what I think of as my space and yours don't really exist. For one day a week, let's imagine we are not actually so separate at all, that our lives take place in a domain that is connected and ultimately shared. For one day a week, let's act from the assumption that we are all just down the hall from each other.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a giant of modern Orthodox thought, teaches that the laws of Shabbat don't just provide us with an alternate reality for one day a week but point to a deeper reality which is true also for the other six days. Perhaps the eruv is not just another example of the rabbinic genius for legal fictions and threading loopholes so big you can literally push your baby's stroller through them. Perhaps the eruv teaches us that our sense of separation from one another is actually the fiction, not the other way around.

Certainly, there's nothing like a global pandemic to remind us that while borders may serve their purpose politically, they are meaningless in many other ways. We'll probably never know the name of the person who first got sick with a new virus in Wuhan, China – a place that I never even knew existed before Winter 2020. But within weeks, copies of the virus they had incubated inside that anonymous individual's cells had hitchhiked around the planet, traveling by airplane and cruise ship to impact every human being no matter where we live. The virus doesn't need a passport, and even if the last guy had managed to build that big, beautiful wall that he was always on about, it would have happily ignored it. If we harbored any illusions that what happened down the block or even around the world is none of our concern, the past eighteen months have shattered that naivete.

Of course, the pandemic is not our only global challenge. As I write these words, families are preparing to bury loved ones who drowned in their apartments under torrential storms in the East. Firefighters are battling some of the most enormous wildfires ever recorded in the West. It is eerily as if we are living the opening words of unetaneh tokef, *who by water and who by fire*, and we know that as climate change continues to intensify, we and our children and grandchildren will only face more of these destructive events with even greater regularity. The only solution is a moral awakening, a recognition that the choices we make today have impacts far beyond ourselves. Our very survival as a species on our common home, this perfect and beautiful blue-green planet, hinges on our ability to transcend our culture's message that we are only responsible for ourselves and embrace an ethos of collective responsibility. Not yours and mine, but ours.

The root of the word eruv means "to be mixed up." It's the same root as in the word erev, evening, the time when darkness and light intermix in twilight. It's the same root as the word in the Talmud's famous phrase kol yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh, we are all responsible for, or more literally, all mixed up with, one another. Our fate – as a community, as a country, even as a species – is tied up in the recognition that your welfare is mixed up in mine, that we are each other's business.

Nearly every year, I find myself re-reading the greatest moral essay of the last century, Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. The essay was written in response to an open letter published by eight white Alabama clergymen, including one rabbi, who bemoaned the fact that their community had been, in their words, "confronted by a series of demonstrations directed and led by outsiders." King responded to their criticism with words that ring every bit as prophetic as those of Isaiah or Jeremiah two thousand years earlier: "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

The past year has stretched and frayed that already threadbare garment of mutuality almost to its tearing point. A year ago, my wife and I would walk in our neighborhood and see countless handwritten signs in windows praising essential workers and chalk messages on sidewalks to comfort scared children, all invariably including the phrase "We're in this Together."

Somehow, over the past year, those signs and messages started to disappear or remain tattered and sunbleached, and nearly forgotten. It's a sad mirror of the way that American flags bloomed overnight in the aftermath of 9-11, twenty years ago next week if you can believe it, then faded away again into partisan discord. It seems we can only sustain solidarity for so long, and then exhaustion sets in, and we return to our narrow spheres of particular concern.

Our task, then, is to figure out how to sustain a sense of empathy and shared responsibility for the long road.

To my mind, this is the single most crucial role that religion can play in the contemporary world. For all its many sins, no force on earth has consistently proven more powerful for weaving together what Dr. King called the beloved community than religion. All of the world's great spiritual traditions teach a common message that we are individually bit players in a drama that is far beyond our imagination. That our responsibility is not first and foremost to ourselves, but to shared dreams and collective visions. For all the ways that religion can be perverted to drive us apart, at its best, it can open our eyes to one another in kinship, to see ourselves as all made in the image of God.

Sixteen years ago, I sat at the end of a long table for my rabbinical school admission interview. An imposing collection of rabbis sat at that table with me – Brad Artson, Naomi Levy, Elliot Dorff. For over an hour, they asked me questions about my beliefs and practices, how I envisioned my rabbinate and what being Jewish meant to me. I can remember almost word for word the questions they asked and the answers I gave – and nearly every one of them I would answer differently today, with a decade and a half of actual living to draw from — all of the questions, but one.

The very first question the panel asked me came from Rabbi Aaron Alexander: "If you could teach one text for the rest of your life, what would it be?" Funny enough, after all of these years of learning, I would still give the same answer I did then. It's the Mishneh, from the fourth chapter of tractate Sanhedrin, in which the Rabbis ask: "Why was it that God started with one single person at the beginning?"

They offer three, interconnected answers:

First, to teach us of the infinite preciousness of every life, that out of one can emerge an entire world, and therefore we are all obligated to protect each other's lives at all costs.

Second, since we all share a common ancestor, we are all family to one another. Family doesn't mean we'll always get along or see eye to eye; but, family has each other's backs when the going gets tough. We watch out for each other. We are each other's safety nets, each other's backstops.

And, finally, so that each unique human being should be able to say *b'shvili nvrach haolam* – for my sake, the world was created. Not that the world was created *for my benefit*, but for my sake - that each of us is to play an irreplaceable role in the human drama, that we each bring something special to a shared table, that without our light, the world is a lot less bright. I need you and you need me in order to be truly complete.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, wrote the following lines:

we are each other's  
harvest:  
we are each other's

business:

we are each other's magnitude and bond.

As we embark together on a new year, let's recommit that vision. We are in this together. We are mixed up in one another. Your safety, your thriving, your joy is my responsibility – and mine, yours. There's no more necessary and urgent Torah than that.

Shanah Tovah to this beloved community.

Until we can be together in person again, know that we are never far apart.