

Rabbi Brett Weisman Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 5786/2025

The prophet Isaiah cried out: Is this the fast I desire? A day to afflict ourselves? No, he answers. The fast God desires is to unlock the chains of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free. A day to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe them, And not to ignore your own kin.

Today, this fast, is not the fast that God desires. This is not the Yom Kippur we should be observing...

Lately, there have been too many horrors. Too many overwhelming headlines. And far, far too many lives lost; blame seems to be only a slight and temporary lift for the heavy burden of moral pain, of powerlessness, and of profound confusion as we watch, knowingly manipulated by images and words meant to shape our hearts and our minds.

And still it goes on. And on. We find ourselves pulled toward sides. We grow suspicious of those who see things differently. We celebrate what feels like our victories and even feel satisfaction when the “other side” stumbles. If we’re honest, there are moments when each new provocation seems to confirm our own sense of being right, of being better than the proverbial “them”.

Who among us can truly say we have said these words and meant it: Ashamnu? We have transgressed. Bagadnu? We have betrayed our better selves. Dibarnu Dofi? We have spoken slander against another...

We are obligated to make these confessions together, as one community, because none of us are innocent in the sins of society. The world has a supremacy problem...Humanity has a supremacy problem.. Supremacy is the belief that one group is better than another. More deserving of life, dignity, or a future. And supremacy is wrong. Even as I stand here, a faith leader in a tradition that knows we are the “Chosen People,” I am telling you that supremacy is always a sin. In fact, perhaps this is what

we have been “chosen” for: to understand that it is our responsibility to be the light that illuminates the darkness.

As Jews, we know too well the dangers of supremacy, because throughout our history we have been its victims. Many of us, I know, are despairing in that feeling of victimhood again today. And yet, we know how easily fear, anger and sadness can pull us into supremacy’s orbit — even losing sight of the humanity of others. I have been feeling that weight for 726 days. Free the hostages now.

At times like this, when freedom and safety feel like a zero-sum game, when our security feels like it must come at another’s expense, too many of us, I fear, have decided to throw up our hands — not in reverence to God, but in surrender to the moment. To say, sympathy is just too hard right now. To say, humanity and justice are best saved for another day.

This is not the fast that God desires.

Our tradition demands that we champion justice and human dignity for all—for ourselves, for them and now. Yes, still. Even now. Always. Without exception. Without delay. Now.

The horrors and inhumanity of this moment are not reasons to abandon this commandment. The opposite is true! The horrors of the moment show us how important the pursuit of justice is, because they remind us what the alternative looks like.

Permit me to admit to you — let this be MY atonement — in this time of moral ambiguity, of existential danger for the Jewish people, I am struggling. In this time of war and upheaval, even my Jewish values feel conscripted into battle. Who’s definition of justice am I to pursue? Each side claims righteousness. Each narrative has its appeal. I feel loyalty to my own people, which if I am not careful can so easily slip into superiority. And I feel sympathy for the other — even as I am heartsick to see many of my fellow Jews twist their sympathies into loathing their Judaism, or worse—purposeful, public hatred against the Jewish people.

A few weeks ago, I had a dream. I was in a tent, filled with countless people. And it was frightening. It was loud. Chaotic. And in my dream, I saw hands reaching out at me from every direction — yearning for someone to hold onto.

And I woke up thinking of the proverbial big tent we talk about in Reform Judaism. Traditionally, this has meant that we make room for a wide range of Jewish beliefs, practices and levels of commitment. But waking from my dream, I understood the tent more broadly — its walls not defined by ideology, but by humanity.

And yet, it did still have walls. It was still a tent. There was still an inside and an outside. And inherent in that is a tension. Because if there is an inside and an outside, then who belongs inside? Put another way: who is “us” and who is “them”?

I have been wrestling with this thought and have found an analogy in Medieval Judaism that provides a solution. Medieval Judaism adopted a philosophy of thought called Negative Theology. God being unknowable, instead of saying what God IS, they tried to understand divinity by naming what G’d is not. For example, God does not have a body, God is not bound by time, God is not limited by human understanding. Negative theology did not weaken faith, it strengthened it by giving people a shared language for the unknowable, building a foundation of commonality based on what they could agree upon.

I want to try to do the same with our big tent — to state what it is not.

Our tent is not supremacist—no one is better than another. Our tent is not hateful—no one should deny another person’s right to exist. Our tent is not bigoted—we cannot afford to be fundamentalist in our beliefs.

I want to make our big tent a Heaven on Earth. A place of true peace, a place of connection and trust. A place of respectful disagreement, for heaven’s sake. A place where people can ask questions, struggle openly, and grow together. Modern religious thinker Rav Shagar, in discussing the relationship between Israel and Palestine, differentiates between

“true peace” and “false peace.” False peace, he says, is where conflict is avoided. True peace is “a friendship founded on difference, and even opposition.”

When we create that friendship in our big tent, then surely only the most extreme, irrational, vile, hateful voices will choose to remain outside. Meanwhile, the rest of us will thrive.

Some may call this is naïveté—but I call it hope. It is the same hopeful spirit that compels us to declare each Passover “B’shanah ha’ba’ah bI’rushalayim Next year in Jerusalem,” the same hopeful spirit that compels Israelis to sing *Od tireh kama tov yihyeh bashanah haba’ah* (“Wait and see how good things will be this coming year”), the same spirit of hope that moved Herzl to declare: “Eem tirtzu ein zo agadah, If you will it, it is no dream.”

No, this is not the fast that God desires from us, no this is not the Yom Kippur our tradition imagines for us, but there is reason to hope. I attended a luncheon recently that provided a sterling example of how we might engage in these conversations. I had the opportunity to sit with and learn from a Palestinian and an Israeli. These young people are rejecting the overwhelming calls to turn on one another, in favor of finding common ground. Together they are creating a safe place to have excruciatingly difficult conversations. They are doing the hard work of building trust and common understanding. They have decided that humanity should come before ideology.

The group is founded on the understanding that — in their words — “the majority of people living in Israel hold a genuine interest in an equal and just society...in which the path toward change requires a new majority...of diverse communities...that grow with every struggle...creating politics of hope.”

They are building the Big Tent I dream of. They are creating a Heaven on Earth.

They are making a space for Jewish Israelis, who are in the streets by the hundreds of thousands, marching to end this war, crying out for a different path forward, for the hostages to be returned, for the end of Hamas, for justice, for a future.

They are creating space for Palestinians in Gaza who are doing the brave work of marching against Hamas — in a place where there is no “freedom of speech”.

And if these young people I met can pursue justice. If they can have difficult conversations. If they can build that tent in hope and faith — even now, in Israel, during a time of war. Then surely, SURELY, we, a reform Jewish congregation in the United States, can join their efforts.

This is the tent I dreamed of. Activist, scholar, lecturer, and author Loretta Ross gives us a name for how to begin to build this tent. She calls it *calling in*. Where the world so often rushes to *call out*—to shame, to exclude, to banish—Ross insists that justice requires something more courageous: to hold people accountable with compassion. Calling in is not about excusing harm; it is about refusing to define someone only by their worst moment; to reject bigotry not people.

And isn't that exactly what I saw in my dream? All those hands, reaching—not to push others away, but to pull them closer. To steady each other in the chaos. To say: “You, too, belong here, so long as you are willing to honor the humanity in front of you.”

In a world dominated by extreme voices that would sooner exclude than include, calling in is an act of holy resistance. It refuses to mirror the cruelty of supremacy. It keeps the tent wide enough for questions, for hard conversations, for the possibility of transformation. For if our tent becomes only another place of fear and exclusion, then we have failed. But if our tent becomes a place where hands meet hands, where disagreement does not cancel dignity, then we have made space—not for false peace, but for the true peace Rav Shagar spoke of: a friendship

built even in difference, a trust forged even across opposition, refusing to let our values be hijacked by extremism. Now we must raise up our voices, our unique perspectives—even in spaces that may feel deeply uncomfortable. We can no longer afford to equivocate, despite knowing full well that pushback will come. Because when we speak clearly about what we believe, we discover that holding tension-filled truths simultaneously is not contradiction but courage: a shared opportunity to recognize humanity in one another and to reject supremacy outright.

This is not a utopian dream; it is the highest aspiration of our tradition. The dream that every person know a peace free from fear.

Our prayer is that Israelis and Palestinians will each safely sit under their own vines and fig trees, in a land of promise where neither fears the other, that humanity will prevail, that dignity will prevail. That Americans can find more in common than what divides, rejecting the extreme and violent voices that would erode the very foundations of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all. That the world may know the wholeness of a shalom we have only yet prayed for. *Od yavo shalom aleinu*, even still, to this very moment, we believe in complete peace... *and we are ready for peace now*. And if we allow the light of this hope we share together to burst forth like the dawn, perhaps this could be the fast God desires: a fast of Justice, of compassion, a fast of hope.

May our tent be wide enough to hold our differences, but not so open that we forget who we are as Jews.

May our tent not be supremacist. May our tent not be hateful. May our tent not be bigoted.

May our tent not mistake silence for peace, nor unity for uniformity.

May our tent not close itself against grief, nor harden its walls against compassion.

And may our tent be spacious enough for honest voices, brave enough for difficult truths, and strong enough for love that crosses boundaries.

Inside this tent, may hands that reach out not be met with fear, but with the warmth of another hand reaching back.

For here, in this tent, we are not “us” and “them,” but seekers together, held beneath the same canopy of heaven.

May you have the fast God desires.