

Don't Leave Me On My Own

Last December, during Chanukah, a video started making its way around the Jewish internet. You may have seen it - a large group of young people are crammed into the narrow alleyways of the Jerusalem neighborhood of Nachlaot, surrounded by an ever-growing crowd of Jews of all ages. All around them, chanukiyot burn brightly on windowsills - a beautiful sight to behold. Yet despite its visual power, it is the sound of the video that made it go viral and that compelled me to listen to it on a loop when I first found it.

It seems like every year I learn a new song that helps me set my intention for the next. In 5785 it was Machshavot Tovot, the song from Israel that blended a catchy nigun with profound and simple words reminding us to think good thoughts and speak good words. I shared this song with you last year on Kol Nidre 5786, and I called for us all to take the message and apply it in our lives because I believed it could help us live the last year for the better and to arrive here even more prepared for this day of intimate connection with God.

Now, on Yom Kippur 5787, I again invite you to be inspired as I have been, and to join me on a journey of divine discovery and holy purpose. Let us set our intention for a year in the book of lives well lived...but first let us unpack the words of the song. It is called *Don't Leave Me On My Own*, and it's by the genre-defying

Chasidic band Zusha. it expresses a longing for closeness, for God, and a readiness to connect.

The chorus goes like this:

Ribono Shel Olam, im ani kan hakol kan, hineini muchan umezuman, hineini muchan umezuman. Leis, Yichudo b'ilo'ei, ilo'ei v'sato'ei, bar minoch. I can't, I can't do this without you, we're in this together, don't leave me on my own.

Since that first video of the song resounding through the streets of Jerusalem, hundreds more have followed. These videos feature people of all ages, of all genders, singing these words. There are solo musicians performing covers, and a video of kids singing it at Jewish day school in France. There's one of a Miami DJ creating a club remix. And at least one of a group of reform Rabbis, including myself, singing it in Tel Aviv. Each of these renditions is different but they share the same fervor and the same message. I can't do this without you. We're in this together. Don't leave me on my own.

I believe it is this message, this truth, that in addition to the beautiful melody is why this song has become such a major force and viral hit. There is so much important work to do in the world and in our own communities. We have our personal tasks of supporting and maintaining our families, our work, our education, our friendships, and our passions. We also have the collective task of Tikkun Olam, of repairing the world and preserving it always for the next generation. And though sometimes we may imagine that we can take on all of this work by ourselves, there is a truth that lies beneath. A truth that is sometimes hard to

acknowledge. We can't do it on our own. We're in this together. We don't want to be left alone.

The first time that I sang this song with a group was also the first time that I internalized that message. In January, I spent a week in Israel as part of the third cohort of the Amplify Israel fellowship. My sister, Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin, is also in my fellowship cohort, and so we jumped at the chance to lead Havdallah together after shabbat on our trip. I had thought to start the ceremony with this song by Zusha just because it was popular and beautiful, and so we did. And then it all clicked.

During our weeklong trip, we traveled around the country and met with over 30 people representing the vast diversity of Israeli society. We met with government ministers and Bedouin, and Druze, and Palestinian community leaders, and with members of the kibbutzim that were so viciously targeted on October 7th. We met with Israeli Reform Jews, generals, and journalists- just so many incredible individuals with interminable hope.

The learning that I did that week was profound not only in content, but also from the human connection in each of these meetings. We, this group of rabbis from the United States and Canada, were so thankful to have the opportunity to visit Israel and to learn from the people we met. But that gratitude was turned right back around on us with every encounter. As grateful

as we were to be there, again and again we heard that they were more grateful that we were there. Our presence and our demonstrated desire to deepen our relationship with and support for Israel let them know that we haven't left them on their own. That we still feel we are in this together. That we still know we can't do this on our own.

But we don't have to go all the way to Israel (though I recommend it!) to understand the weight of those feelings or the value in showing up for one another. Right here in our Temple Community we have programs that remind us of this fact and the power of embracing it. Over the past year, I have built a semi-monthly cadence of volunteer events at Operation Nightwatch here in Seattle. Operation Nightwatch is an organization that serves the unhoused community near the Chinatown International District, primarily through serving dinner 7 nights a week, 365 days a year.

When groups from our community go there, we do the full dinner service- we prep, cook, serve, and do the dishes after. In those nights, we truly see that we are in this together and that we can't do it on our own. Truly, it takes about 8 people to make the whole evening run smoothly. Often we have repeat volunteers, but it is always a new configuration of people – and we always get the job done. In those shifts we put our egos aside. We offer and ask for help openly, and we trust each other to share the work to the best of our abilities. And because our group to rely on each other, the around 150 people who show up nightly can rely on us to take care of them every time we are there. These events work because of the way they embody that same message

from the song. We're in this together. We can't do it without each other. And we must not leave each other alone.

There is yet another layer to the song, though. The Aramaic words in the middle of the chorus and the Hebrew at the beginning bring God into the conversation. The third line, recorded by the band in heavily Ashkenazi accented Aramaic, comes to us originally from one of the major Kabbalistic texts from the Middle Ages, the Tikkunei Zohar. Translated, it means: There is no unity in the world above, or on the earth below outside of God. Simple and yet endlessly complex. Simple in that it is a statement that we recognize – God is here on Earth and up in the heavens and God is one. But it also speaks to the unifying force that is God, who brings heaven and Earth together into a singular dominion.

In context, this teaches us that it is Godly when we unite with other human beings. When we are in this together, we are in this with God. And, it also means that we can also reach out to God, too. After all, our covenant is a partnership. Through this song we can learn that to God and to each other we can say, openly: I can't do this without you. Don't leave me on my own!

The first part of the chorus is in Hebrew: Ribono Shel Olam, im ani kan, hakol kan. Master of the universe, If I am here, everyone is here. These words come from the Talmud, and they are credited to Hillel the Elder. Our sages thought about this in

terms of our commandments, but in its most basic meaning this teaches that each person need not wait for others to do what needs to be done. We need not wait for others to tell us they need us. We too, can reach out to show the people around us that they are not alone.

One of the joys of having a sister who is also a rabbi is that I can reach out to her when I need help, especially with sermons! I am grateful that she gave me permission to share this story. When my nephew was born, my sister Rachel struggled, as so many women do, with post-partum depression. She asked me if I would come to spend a week with her and help out with the baby. I know that it was initially hard for her to admit that she was feeling vulnerable and to say she needed help. But she did and I was honored by her trust in me. It was a wonderful week of closeness for us and an incredible opportunity for me to bond with my infant nephew.

A few years later when my niece was born, Rachel didn't even have to ask. Already before the birth, my now wife and I made plans to go down to DC to visit shortly after she arrived. I learned how to show up without waiting for the call. We went and we helped with the baby and with our nephew and made and led a seder for my sister and brother-in-law. We made ourselves part of the village that we know is required to bring up our children. We did not leave them on their own.

The last part of the chorus that we have not yet discussed comes to us from the liturgy. They are words that help us set intention before certain prayers and ritual acts. Hinieni muchan

u'mezuman. Here I am, ready and prepared. Not only should we be ready to help those around us, but we also must prepare ourselves to be vulnerable and to tell others how much we need them. So many of us struggle to ask for help (because it is difficult!) but it is a worthwhile effort. Whether we access it through God, community, or both, our lives are made richer when we open ourselves up to a higher power. We owe it to ourselves to try.

So why not right now? Turn to the people around you in this holy community! Tell them: I can't do this without you. We're in this together. Don't leave me on my own.

And let us also say to each other: Hineini muchan umezuman! I am ready and prepared!

May these words and our actions reflect this intention. Hineini Muchan Umezuman: I am ready to identify where I need help. I am prepared to ask for it. I am ready to hear my neighbors when they say they need me. I am prepared to answer their call. I am ready to connect to something bigger than myself. I am prepared to be a part of it.

In this new year, let us embrace this truth. I can't do this without you. We are in this together. If we remember this, we will never truly be alone. Ken y'hi Kavanateinu. May this be our intention. Ken y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will.

To hear the song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GquoPOIRlrk>

