



## SOMETIMES LOVE IS A CALL TO ACTION

*At some point, we will emerge from the acute, multilayered crises of our time. We're not there yet. Before us will be battles great and small. This will be a defining moment, not only for our nation, but for each of us. We must act with fierce determination in the coming months, and even as we confront these challenges with everything we've got, we must plant for tomorrow, holding faith that those seeds will eventually bear fruit.*

### Kol Nidre 5781

It's not lost on me that the last time our community was together was in early March, at Purim, when we put on masks and read the ancient story that reminds us every year that the whole world could turn on its head in an instant. And then, in an instant, the whole world turned on its head. And masks suddenly became our most important wardrobe accessory.

As we've navigated the haze of cascading crises—from this devastating virus to the ferocious climate fires, from the mainstreaming of white nationalism to our democracy barreling off the cliff—I've realized how deeply, as your rabbi, I want to lift your spirits during this holy season. What I really want is to stand by the door and greet every one of you, to hug you and look in your eyes and ask you how you've *really* been, these past many months. I want to say the words that will help you sleep better, even just tonight. Maybe help mend a small corner of your broken hearts. Maybe even make you laugh. Definitely give you permission to weep. I want to tell you that you're beautiful and resilient and stronger than you know. That I'm proud of you, and I love you. And that I support your quarantine beard, 100%.

And I also know that we must use our time judiciously now.

On Rosh Hashanah we called up the ancient Jewish promise of a love-driven reality, in which all human beings live in full dignity, as images of the Divine. We dared to reimagine a world in which the privilege of being human comes with the sacred responsibility to protect and defend those most vulnerable, and our precious earth. A world in which we recognize that all of our liberation is tied up in one another.

But that vision, these days, seems more like distant dream than imminent reality.

So I feel called this year not only to soothe and comfort, but also to fortify and prepare you, to help us develop the heart strength, the spiritual muscle we'll need in the days ahead. This year, Yom Kippur 5781 it is clear to me that a call to action is exactly what love looks like.

It was in his sermon at Riverside Church in 1967, warning about the moral failures of the war in Vietnam, that Dr. King famously spoke about *the fierce urgency of now*. There's a dark image from that sermon that has weighed heavily on me these past several months: "Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations," he said, "are written the pathetic words: 'Too late.'"

In the dark of night, I pray that my children do not one day cast their gaze over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of *our* civilization. I fervently believe that it's not yet too late for us. But I also know that what we do now matters.

We are faced tonight with a pointed question: who are we called to be, when we hover so dangerously close to the edge of the abyss?

Our Jewish tradition cries out to us: in times of crisis, we do not hide, or wait for a miracle. We don't stand on the sidelines and kvetch, and we don't turn religion into a drug that will, as Rabbi Leonard Beerman said, only help blunt the conscience rather than awaken it.

We do not yield to the belief that outcomes are predetermined. We fight, and we fight on two fronts at once:

First, we act—with all our strength, with all our resources. With all our heart and our might, we work to transform our reality. *שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶתְךָ*— (Ex 20:9) Six days a week, do everything you possibly can to engage this world with love. Serve the community. March! Protest! Write op eds. Make resistance art. Vote! Vote! Vote! Sweat and teach and preach and fight with every nonviolent means you've got.

And at the same time, we dream of what comes next. Imagine what might be possible, and plant the seeds for that eventual reality. *וַיֹּם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ*— the seventh day will be a Sabbath, a day for God. The gift of Shabbat is the permission to temporarily suspend our fight, to rediscover our breath. Shabbat's most sacred purpose, though, is its invitation to us to dream. Shabbat is called a taste of the World to Come because on shabbat—a designated time built into the spiritual cycle of every week, we leave the world as it is and enter the dreamscape—where we imagine the world as it could be. As it should be.

That sacred rhythm is the revolutionary impulse that has kept our people alive for millennia, guided us through deeply fractured times and sometimes soul crushing realities. Week after week, generation after generation: invest in the world that is. And dream fiercely of the world that could be. Stretch the Overton Window, defy norms and transcend limitations. Imagine—and prepare—for something better.

Look at how the women of our Exodus narrative model both of these impulses:

The first two chapters of Exodus read like a blueprint for sustained protest against the world as it is. Even after generations of brutality and affliction, of *crushing harshness*, Pharaoh—presiding over an empire built on fear—remains convinced that the enslaved Israelites pose a grave threat to his continued power. He determines that enslavement is insufficient; he needs to erase their future. So he orders the midwives to murder every Israelite newborn boy, but—you may remember—two midwives, Shifra and Puah, defy the king's order and let the babies live (Ex 1:17). They cannot overthrow Pharaoh's regime, but they can upset the machinery of his oppression.

Thwarted by the cunning midwives, a desperate Pharaoh *charged all the Egyptian people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."* (Ex 1:22). An entire nation is now called to rise up against their neighbors in the most abhorrent act of violence: infanticide.

It is in that climate of terror and bloodshed that we meet Pharaoh's daughter, whom the Rabbis call Batya, who happens upon a basket among the reeds while bathing in the Nile. She lunges for it... she must have known what she'd find inside! The Israelite baby is crying, a refugee from her father's harsh decree.

Batya takes the baby in her arms and names him Moses, or Moshe-- כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׁיתָהוּ: - *For I drew him from the water* (Exodus 2:10). His very name reflects Batya's act of rebellion against her father's criminal regime. Every time she calls Moses's name through the palace halls, she flaunts her holy act of defiance.

We will do well to remember these women in the days ahead. And remember that Torah, our source of Divine law, is deeply concerned with communicating to us the conditions under which an unjust law must be broken. Honor your moral intuition, the book is screaming. When there is misalignment between what is legal and what is moral, we lift our voices and place our bodies on the side of what is just and right. Just as they did then, so must we now.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Protestant theologian and outspoken anti-Nazi dissident in Germany in the 1930s, insisted we "not simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke through the wheel itself." In other words, we are called not only to disobey an unjust law, but—in word and deed—to *break the back of a system that promotes injustice as law*.

When you live under a regime that is callous to human suffering, you do whatever is in your power to thwart decrees, smash idols and break wheels. Our rebellion is nonviolent, because our sacred obligation is to save lives, not threaten them. When entrenched power seeks to deny dignity, it is our responsibility to rise up and affirm the holiness all of God's children. Like Shifra, Puah and Batya, we are called to do whatever we can to stop the forward motion of an evil empire, protecting first and foremost the lives and humanity of those most vulnerable.

And there is yet another hero from these early chapters of Exodus, one who models the second form of resistance.

With Pharaoh's decree against the baby boys, terror rippled through the enslaved Israelite community. According to the midrash (Sotah 12a), one man, Amram, divorces his wife, Yohevet, in order to ensure that no babies would be born only to die at the hands of the bloodthirsty regime. Within days, all the Israelite men followed suit. But Amram and Yohevet's daughter, Miriam, who was only 5 yrs old at the time, is enraged. She admonishes her father: You're worse than Pharaoh! Pharaoh punishes only the boys. You doom the girls too. And Pharaoh's decree may be ignored or thwarted. But yours, surely it will be fulfilled!

Miriam's parents know she's right. The greatest victory they could hand the tyrant would be to stop living. To stop loving. They remarry, and soon after, baby Moses is conceived. Let the full force of this midrash sink in: had it not been for the foresight of Miriam, a small girl, Moses would never have been born and the Jewish people would not have been redeemed. For this, Miriam is considered a *neviah*, a prophet. But hers is more than an act of prophesy—it is an act of resistance. She is planting the seeds for the future.

I don't know if Justice Ginsburg knew this midrash, but I imagine she would have loved it. Of all of Justice Ginsburg's jabots, neck collars, she's most well known for the one she wore when delivering dissenting opinions. She got a lot of wear out of that one, because in her twenty seven years on the Court, some of her most defining rulings were not the majority decisions she wrote, but her dissenting opinions.

In an interview with Nina Totenberg in 2002, Ginsburg explained the power of dissent: "Dissents speak to a future age. It's not simply to say, 'My colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way.' But the greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views [become the dominant view](#). So that's the dissenter's hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow."

The dissenter doesn't think: why fight, if you can't be assured an immediate win?

The dissenter thinks: I invest now... so that one day my grandchildren will bear the fruit of this labor.

The most audacious thing we can do, when the walls are closing in on us, is future orient. Because casting our gaze to the future from within the depth of darkness is an audacious act of hope and an expression of human agency. Remember what Midrash Tehillim teaches: *"When is it really dark? Just before dawn! In that hour, God answers world: out of the darkness God brings forth the dawn and gives light to the world.* Even when hungry ourselves, we plant the seeds for the world we want our grandchildren to inherit tomorrow.

Future orienting requires tremendous faith—faith that the world as it is, is not the world as it's intended to be. Faith that love is far more powerful than hatred, that compassion will prevail over cruelty. Faith that each of us has a role in realizing a more just and loving world, and that redemption will come—even if not in our lifetime.

This long view is not a concession to evil—it is a clear-eyed recognition that to achieve the just world we seek, we will need to fight on two fronts simultaneously: in the here and now, with the fierce urgency of now before it's too late. And at the very same time, establishing the foundation for the realization of our dreams in a distant tomorrow, because transformative change takes generations. Justice Ginsburg reminded us of this when she read her dissenting opinion in *Shelby County v Holder*, which essentially struck a fatal blow to the Voting Rights Act, when she went off script and quoted Dr. King, firmly saying to the Court: *"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. [But only] if there is a steadfast commitment to see the task through to completion."*

I want you to understand something: we tell these stories—of Shifra and Puah, of Batya and Miriam—not to entertain, or to keep our children interested in Hebrew school. We tell them because each of us is called, at some time in our lives, to *defy empire* with whatever power we have—whether we are midwives in the quiet of the birthing room, members of the royal court, or activists on the street. And when our efforts cannot topple evil empires, we lay the groundwork so that when the time is right, redemption will come, if not for us then for our children. We lift one another's gaze to the future.

Our tradition insists that in a world of so much uncertainty, with so much at stake and so much unknown, we act anyway. We march. We write. Of course we vote, and we get everyone we know to the polls. We fight with everything we've got, even with no reasonable assurance of success, with faith

in a future unknown. Because there are no guarantees—ever. It’s only when we step forward anyway that the possibility of transformation emerges.

None of us knows what will unfold in the coming days. The scholars, pundits and game theorists offer grave predictions, but there’s simply too much unknown. Because what they cannot predict is what we will do. You and me. All of us.

Some years ago, I met Leymah Gbowee, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her role in ending the many years of brutal civil war that devastated her country, Liberia. Driven by a fierce faith, Leymah, like Queen Esther before her, stood before the president and proclaimed: “The women of Liberia are tired of war... We are now taking this stand to secure the future of our children. Because we believe, as custodians of our society, that tomorrow our children will ask us, ‘Mama, what was your role during the crisis?’

And one day our children, grandchildren, our students will ask us: where were you in 2020? What was *your* role during the crisis?

I really pray that when it really matters, we’ll be like Shifra and Puah and Batya, using whatever influence and connections and resources we have to take a stand even deep within the system, even at great personal risk. Like that brave [nurse](#) who worked in the ICE detention facility in Georgia, who blew the whistle a few weeks ago on the practice of forced hysterectomies of detainees. “The women would ask me—is the uterus collector coming?” she said. I pray that we find courage like hers to stand up and speak the truth when those who seek to do harm come calling.

And I hope we’ll be like Miriam, strengthening our spirits when we want to give up. Seeing that a world choking on human cruelty still needs love. I hope we’ll understand, as she did, that we still need to make art and music and babies if we can, that writing poetry is an act of resistance. I hope we’ll be like the dad in Memphis, whose daughter worked so hard for four years in college, and was devastated to be denied a graduation ceremony. “After all those years, you’re going to walk across somebody’s stage if I have to build you one myself,” he said. So he did. He built her a full stage, invited presenters, and blasted Pomp and Circumstance from the front lawn.

And I pray that we’ll be like every last nurse and doctor, who worked overtime with a recycled N95 and risked their lives to hold up phones so dying COVID patients could say goodbye to their families. And like the hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets around the country, demanding that America make good on its founding promises: justice and equality for all people. And like those who opened their homes to Black Lives Matter protesters being pursued by police in DC, feeding them and giving them a safe place to rest—in the middle of a pandemic!—until they could make it home safely the next morning.

I pray that each of us will find our own way to live into this moment, with courage, faith and love. Because we will need to hear each other’s song and feel each other’s love. We’ll need to be lifted by each other’s faith.

The other night I had a dream. A real, actual dream. I’ll tell you how it went, not because I can promise you that it will be this way, in three or six months or a year, but because I know that future orienting is both an act of resistance, and an act of love:

*Our kids are back in school. We can travel now, to visit family on the east coast, to go to a conference, though we've noticed that most of the time, we prefer staying close to home. We can hear live music again now—and my God there's nothing like a great outdoor concert to make the soul soar. LA has more bike paths now, and an ambitious tree-planting effort has given our city a sweet canvas of shade. Our late night hosts have little to talk about, so they go back to doing comedy and interviewing celebrities. Our nation is healing.*

*Melissa is running to the kitchen to get Patricia a more comfortable chair. Mark is handing out siddurim, and Marty smiles widely. As I get up to give my sermon, Adam is talking too loudly in the back, but I don't care. I'm just so happy we're all back together. Ross laughs his big, hardy laugh right into the mic and Bryna feels very gratified that I've finally given up on wearing heels altogether. Sela is keeping an eye on Baby Noa and Hazel in the pray ground.*

*We sing differently now. It's deeper. A little slower. More intentional. Wendy's tallis bag is still full of lollipops. Enzo and Ilan come up for Ein Keloheinu. They're bigger now, but they still want to dance. Our kids are all getting so big.*

*The air outside is clear. We stand at the pretzel hallah, talking and laughing and catching up for so long, the grape juice is cooking. Roslynd shows me that Alayna can now do a cartwheel. I cry and laugh at the same time.*

*I make it back into the gym. All the good stuff is gone from the salad bar, but Marina, who always notices everything, comes running over with a full, fresh plate for me. Annette's with her grandkids and there's a new couple sitting with Eric... I smile and wave shabbat shalom. I look for a seat in the crowded gym—noticing that my dad has in front of him a plate overflowing with kiddush cookies. I don't even need him to tell me: it's for the whole table. Obviously. I'm so full, my heart almost bursts.*

*We've been through so much. We're war weary, but we're here. We finally get it—every act, large and small, makes a difference. Voting is both a great privilege and a sacred duty. We'll never miss another midterm, or show up ignorant on a ballot proposition or a judicial candidate. We won't be cavalier about climate change, or homelessness, or anything—because our hearts have grown more tender. We've been really brave. There's still so much to be done, and yes, we've taken some hits. But we know we're on the right side of history. And in all of that, we have found great blessing.*

At some point, friends, we will emerge from this. Not only from the pandemic, but from the acute, multilayered crises of our time. We're not there yet. Before us will be battles great and small. This will be a defining moment, not only for our nation, but for each of us. We must act with fierce determination in the coming months, even with no reasonable assurance that we'll win. And even as we confront these challenges with everything we've got, we'll have to plant for tomorrow, imagining the long arc, knowing that those seeds will eventually bear fruit.

Tonight, I give John Lewis the last [word](#):

“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

*G'mar hatimah tovah*—may you be brave, may you be safe, may you stay healthy, may you be blessed.