



## BUILDING A NEW AMERICA

*These are trying times, but we must not let exhaustion or cynicism dull our senses. Our history has taught us: either you work to dismantle oppressive systems, or your inaction becomes the mortar that sustains them. Together we must build America anew: fierce, fair, and full of promise, equipped to hold us in all our diversity, complexity and beauty.*

### Rosh Hashanah I, 5779

Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, tells the story of being summoned to meet Rosa Parks for the first time. She turns to him sweetly and asks, 'Now, Bryan, tell me who you are and what you're doing.' ...'Yes, ma'am,' he says, and he goes on to explain that he has a project called the Equal Justice Initiative, that he's trying to help people on death row. Actually, that he's trying to stop the death penalty. And he's trying to address prison conditions. And he's trying to free people who've been wrongly convicted. And he's trying to end unfair sentencing and stop racial bias in the criminal justice system.

Ms. Parks leans back smiling. 'Oooh, honey, all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired.' They laugh. Then she leans forward and puts her finger on his face and talks to him just like his grandmother used to talk to him. She says, 'That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave.'"<sup>1</sup>

Look, folks. We're not even Bryan Stevenson, and we're tired, tired, tired.

A Pew study over the summer showed that seven of ten Americans are simply worn out by the influx of news every day. I honestly don't know who those other three people are. *Everyone* I know is worn out. We've rode shock to fury to frustration and bewilderment and back again, and that was just this weekend.

What can we do to prepare our hearts so that the blast of the shofar doesn't just make us want to roll over and hit snooze, but instead wakes us and shakes us and fuels us for the chapter ahead?

Over the past several years, historians have been writing with newfound urgency, trying to awaken us to the patterns of political behavior and cultural shifts that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked the turn to fascism. Timothy Snyder, Yale professor of history, writes of the Holocaust not only as history, but also as precedent, warning that its eternal lessons have not yet been learned. Snyder and others warn that the vicious, corrupt and bloodthirsty regimes of the last century all operated under a similar playbook, in which the fatiguing and ultimately numbing of decent people is an essential chapter.

In the spring, Mika Almog, the granddaughter of Shimon Peres, came to speak at IKAR. She taught me a new Hebrew term: *lehishtab'el*, to snail. Snailing is when we're so tired and numb and the power is so entrenched that we just want to curl up inside our shells—where it's cozy, safe and comfortable—and turn on the TV.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

The problem with snailing is that when you hide inside your shell, you're likely to get stepped on, without even seeing it coming. You're also no good to anyone else.

Maybe you know the Talmudic story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Shabbat 33b), who so detested the Roman occupiers of the land, seeing all their innovations as a reflection of their crass materialism, spiritual corruption and innate evil. He and his son, R' Elazar b'Rabbi Shimon, flee to a cave, where they sequester themselves from the world for twelve years. Even R' Shimon's wife doesn't know where to find them. In the cave, they bury themselves, naked, up to their necks, and they study Torah all day long, rising only to clothe themselves and pray, then returning to the sand. They are snailing—in a pietistic dreamscape—completely isolated, free of the distractions of the everyday, immersed only in holiness.

After twelve years, R' Shimon and R' Elazar receive a prophecy that the emperor has died and it's time for them to leave the cave and return to the world. But as they emerge, they are so outraged by the lack of piety and purity around them that everything they cast their eyes upon burns to the ground. Until a *bat kol*, the voice of God shouts at them from the heavens, "Have you emerged from hiding only to destroy my world? *Hizru limaratkhem*—go back to your cave!"

All their devotion and study failed to open their hearts to the world. Instead, the seclusion made them feel bigger, better, more important and holier. As our teacher Rabbi Harold Schulweis once said, "For twelve years you lived in a cave of moral irresponsibility. What right do you have to judge [the world], let alone burn the place down, when you have done nothing to fight for it?"

I recently gave an address to a group of young philanthropists. I shared that the dominant question for IKAR has expanded over the years from *what does our Jewish inheritance offer us toward living a life of purpose and meaning* to *what does our Jewish inheritance demand of us in a time of moral crisis?*

Several folks in the crowd became agitated. One stood up and said: I honestly have no idea what you're talking about! What moral crisis? My kids are all in private schools. I have a gorgeous new house. And look at my hot wife!

I'm sure that man does have a very good life. And I know he's doing good with his money. But I wonder what happened to the Jewish soul that all that really matters is that we're fine? I think often about Archbishop Desmond Tutu's teaching on Ubuntu: "A person is a person through other persons."

In Africa when you ask someone "How are you?" the reply you get is in the plural even when you are speaking to one person. A man would say, "We are well" or "We are not well." He himself may be quite well, but his grandmother is not well and so he is not well either...

Ubuntu... is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours...<sup>2</sup>

"We are well," they say, or "we are not well."

Well, we are not well. I mean, maybe that guy is well. But we are not well.

We are not well when the moment we step out of our cave, we hear of a young mother who fled violence in El Salvador only to arrive at the US border and be given 5 minutes to say goodbye to her two

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<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, p. 25-26.

small boys, who are then ripped from her arms. More than six weeks after the court mandated deadline for reuniting parents with their babies, there remain nearly 500 children still separated from their families by force of the US government, acting out of wanton cruelty and gross incompetence. Did you see the video from the Houston airport? A small, curly haired boy, squirming to escape his mother's arms after their reunification, clearly doesn't recognize her after months of forced separation. She desperately cries, "Mi amor! I am your mommy! What's wrong with my son? What's wrong with my son?" We're not well when we confront the reality that even those who are reunited—the lucky ones—will be traumatized for many years to come.

We are not well when racist dog whistles today sound more like bull horns, when Black athletes are scorned and penalized for engaging in non-violent protests against police violence. When the justice department actively works to roll back civil rights achievements of previous administrations, and a black candidate for governor is mocked in robo-calls that call him a monkey living in a mud-hut, and when seven of nine polling places in poor and Black neighborhoods in Georgia are threatened to be shuttered only months before the election. We're not well when 23 of 50 states have adopted harsh voter suppression laws in the last eight years alone, like the racist gerrymandering in North Carolina that the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals found to "target African Americans with almost surgical precision."<sup>3</sup>

Yes, it's a victory that only a dozen pathetic Nazis showed up to march in DC on the anniversary of Charlottesville, but friends—they've moved from the streets to the ballots! There are now several avowed white nationalists, Holocaust deniers and Nazis on the ballot in state and federal races this fall. Organizations that monitor hate groups say it's clear that white nationalists feel emboldened when the president himself advances their agenda every time he discharges an insult about Muslims, Mexicans, African Americans. No, we are not well.

We are not well when Callie Greer from Alabama—whom I marched with in DC at the Poor People's Campaign—wails in agony as she describes her daughter, Venus, dying in her arms from a cancer that could have been treated had they been able to afford health care. In Alabama, the governor and state legislature refused to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, so Venus became one of the quarter of million Americans to die from poverty related issues in the US each year.

We are not well.

We are not well when there are one or two shooting incidents in American schools every single week. When middle schoolers report being afraid to return to the classroom because they're scared they might get shot. And when the Secretary of Education toys with the idea of allowing states to siphon federal funding intended for the arts and music, mental health and technology programs instead to the purchase of guns for teachers. We are not well.

When, just in the course of just my lifetime, the prison population has grown from 200,000 to 2.2 million, we are not well. When Puerto Rico is abandoned. When our highest court allows the perversion of democracy by allowing unlimited and unaccountable funds to corrupt our elections. When our planet aches under the weight of fossil fuels and the horror they are wreaking on our environment, and even still, our government obsessively and furiously prioritizes deregulation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/new-voting-restrictions-america>

We are not well.

Yes, we're in a moral crisis.

The question is, what are we going to do about it? Will we recede to our caves? Hide up to our necks in sand? Bother only with our private schools and beautiful homes and hot wives? Focus on our own nourishment, body and soul, while the world burns outside?

Or will we reject that model? Will we say to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, and all the other snails, *either you work to dismantle oppressive systems, or your inaction becomes the mortar that sustains them.*

Oh, keep your politics off the pulpit! they say.

As if our Torah is not an inherently political document. As if the story of slaves rising up before most powerful ruler of ancient world to demand freedom and dignity is not a political message.

This I know: our Torah did not survive thousands of years only to be muted precisely the moment its eternal message matters most. We make a mockery of our tradition when we suggest that the way we live in human society, the way we treat one another, the way we care for—or neglect to care for—the least among us is outside the scope of religion.

As if I would dare tell you who to vote for. You don't need me for that.

But what you may need me for is to remind you that prayer and ritual, religion itself means nothing if it's not a response to the great moral crises of our day. If it's not a reminder for us in tumultuous times that we are called to lead with love. To bring a commitment to equity, equality, justice and dignity to the forefront of every conversation not only in our homes and classrooms and shuls, but in our society, which today is profoundly unwell.

Rebuked by God, R' Shimon and R' Elazar return to the cave, one must imagine with a mix of dread and relief. (Who wants to be enmeshed in the world with all its impurities and failings?) Another twelve months pass with father and son again buried to their necks in sand, cloistered from the world. When the *bat kol* finally calls them to emerge a second time-- *צאו ממערותכם get up now, leave your cave!*, the son, R' Elazar b' Rabbi Shimon, once again begins to incinerate the world with his judgment and indignation. But the father, R' Shimon, has been transformed. He is now a healer, not a destroyer. And it's not enough for him to put out his son's rageful fires. "Since I have been the beneficiary of a great miracle," he says, "let me go out and bring some healing to someone else in need."

Remember Noah and the ark? It was said of Noah that he was a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, but even a cursory read of the story shows how deeply flawed he was. When God instructs him to build an ark because a flood was coming that would destroy all human civilization—every man, woman, child and living being with the exception of those he brings onto the ark—the Torah tells us two terrifying words: *ken asah* (Gen 6:22). Just as God asks, Noah does. How many decks, and where shall I place the window? No moral objection, no challenge. He turns to his family and says, "Don't worry, my loves... we'll be ok. We have this great house, and you're all in private schools and wow, Mrs. Noah, you're looking really good. Come, friends, let's jump onto this boat and save ourselves."

It's because of that, that the Rabbis teach that even though Noah was indeed a *tzaddik*, a righteous guy, there are really two kinds of *tzaddikim*: one, like Noah, who is a generally menschy guy, but when he's cold, puts on a warm coat (he's called a *tzaddik* in peltz), and one who, when he's cold, lights a fire, and thereby warms not only himself but others too.

We are not well, friends... and it's no longer enough to be the first kind of *tzaddik*. The kind that only looks out for himself, his family, his sweet life. The times we're living in demand more of us than that. I'm sorry, folks, but we don't have the luxury of snailing through this era.

In the language of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who never could have imagined an American president equivocating on evil of Nazis on American soil, "This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or an engagement for service... This is no time for neutrality. We Jews cannot remain aloof or indifferent. We, too, are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil."<sup>4</sup> Or, in the language of my friend Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews, every one of us must choose: Will I be a chaplain to the Empire or a prophet of the Resistance?

We are not well. We enter this new year knowing that whatever else is going on in our lives, whatever dreams, grief or aspirations we hold, our country—home to 325 million people, among them half of the world's Jewish population, the place that blessedly gave refuge to most of our ancestors who came fleeing Cossacks, Nazis, poverty or discrimination—that nation is profoundly unwell.

But this story is not yet over.

My friend, an African-American Zen Buddhist priest named Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, declares that it's time to build a new America. In all the talk of the grandeur of America and its exceptionalism, we often fail to acknowledge that America was not built for many of the people who now call it home. It was not built for black and brown folks, for Muslims, Asians or Latinos, or, frankly for Jews. It wasn't built for LGBTQ folks, for feminists, for radical African-American Zen Buddhist priests or women rabbis. It wasn't built for so many of us.

What we need is not to return to a time of mythical greatness. We need to build America anew, equipped to hold us in all our diversity and complexity.

Yes, we are unwell, but we can—and we must—build a new America.

And it's already happening. This year we witnessed the beginning of a nonviolent revolution—as a million students walked out of their classrooms and took to the streets. This army is led by 16-year olds who, while hiding under desks and behind file cabinets, saw their friends shot. Who texted their parents final words of goodbye while a gun-wielding murderer rampaged through their school. Who saw the sickening inaction, the hypocrisy and complacency of our elected officials and stood up to insist that if the grownups wouldn't do it, they would bend the arc of history themselves.

To be honest, many of us had essentially given up. We mocked the thoughts and prayers of our legislators, but we did little more than think and pray on the travesty of gun violence in America. After Sandy Hook, grief was paired with fierce determination. But after six years of failure to move Congress from the grip of the gun lobby, even for the sake of the little ones, each new shooting paired grief with

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur*, p. 76

despair. We, Americans, the most empowered people on the planet, had become convinced that there was simply nothing we could do. We were living the tragedy of perceived powerlessness. We felt we were banging our heads against a brick wall, and we were tired of walking away bruised.

But not these kids. What we saw this spring was a new generation saying they are no longer willing to risk their lives waiting for someone else to take action to stop the epidemic of mass shootings.<sup>5</sup>

Emma Gonzales, David Hogg, Cameron Kasky, Mei-Ling Ho-Shing—these have become the voices of moral clarity in America. It's Naomi Wadler, 11 years old, who stood up at March for our Lives, reminding the nation that gun violence disproportionately affects women and people of color. "My friends and I might be still be 11," she said, "and we might still be in elementary school, but... we know what is right and wrong. We also know that... we have seven short years until we too have the right to vote."

My own Sami, 11 years old, grabbed a bull horn at a rally—unprompted—and shouted, "HELP US UNDERSTAND... HOW MANY KIDS NEED TO DIE BEFORE OUR GOVERNMENT DECIDES TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT? ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!"

These kids have seen their friends pay with their lives as elected officials have actively thwarted progress on this issue. They are standing up to remind us that 'neutrality' is not a moral category when human lives are on the line.

Here's something astonishing I recently learned: When we're reading from the Torah on Shabbat morning, or on the holiday, and we come across a smudge or a missing letter in the scroll, do you know what we're supposed to do? The Rabbis teach that we summon a child and ask her if she can read the letter or not. If she can read it, we may continue. If she cannot, we must retire that *sefer Torah* until it is repaired.<sup>6</sup>

Think of what that means! A child, not even old enough to read from the Torah herself, is called to determine if our most sacred object is kosher, or if its *pasul*, not viable for use. A child!

Why do we ask a child? Because a child's fidelity is only to the truth. He doesn't live in the pocket of the corporate interests; he doesn't care who he's offending. She doesn't say what she thinks will make people happy—she calls BS and because she's a kid, she's not worried about being polite and measured. And our system, the halakhic system, is wise enough to recognize that sometimes, the grownups need to stand down and look at the situation through a child's eyes. Let the purity of their outrage and their imagination be the driving force not only of their generation, but of the community practice.

Once a child renders judgment on a *sefer Torah*, no matter how important the Torah reading is that day—whether it's in the middle of a bar mitzvah or it's Rosh Hashanah morning and 2000 people are waiting to hear the sacred words—when that child renders judgment, the adult community listens. If the child says *pasul*, the scroll is removed.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://marchforourlives.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Shulchan Aruch OC 32:16

Our children are in the streets shouting *pasul! Pasul!* it's not *kosher!* This old America, the America of greed, corruption and hatred, of systems built to protect and sustain white supremacy, to entrench power in the hands of the few and keep guns in the hands of the many, this system that requires for its sustenance the suppression of the votes of millions of black people and poor people... this system is *PASUL*. It is foul and corrupted. And unlike us, the grownups, these kids won't even consider that change is impossible.

It is their passion that will lead the way to a new America. It's their moral clarity. Their fidelity to the truth. Their chemical allergy to hypocrisy. They are leading, and we need to stand behind them now, with the full force of our political, spiritual, intellectual and material resources. To do anything less would be a gross abdication of moral responsibility.

Victoria Gonzalez's boyfriend Joaquin Oliver, a senior at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, was shot and killed in the hallway of the third floor of his high school. "I feel like my whole life was taken away from me in an instant," Victoria said. "I feel him laughing when I laugh. I feel he is living through me, in a way. We loved like there was no tomorrow. Until there was no tomorrow." On graduation day, when Joaquin's name was called, his mother walked the stage to accept his diploma, along with a medal and a tasseled cap. She wore a shirt that screamed, in big black letters: THIS SHOULD BE MY SON.

The victims' families and the survivors will hold this trauma for the rest of their lives. But they won't allow us to let them hold it alone. Their bold and unequivocal assertion that America is profoundly unwell has shaken us out of our exhaustion.

There may be a time when it really is too late to redeem America. Thank God, we are not there yet. Every day is an opportunity for us to stand up, to refuse to capitulate. To refuse to hide in the sand and instead to insist that there is a better way.

Yes, we are tired, tired, tired. But in our story the *bat kol*—the prophetic voice—is the voice of our children, calling: *צאו ממערתכם* *get up now, leave your cave!* This is no time for neutrality. No time for exhaustion. The new America won't come easily; we're going to have to fight for it. Many in this room are already on the front lines of this battle. We must continue to fight with love. With creativity and imagination and guts beyond what we think we can muster. Resilience. Heart. This will demand of us a kind of spiritual strength we might not believe we have, but I know we do.

We will rebuild this nation with love. Together, we will become well. And that wellness will shine a new light of hope and possibility across this nation.

There is a new America being born, and it is fierce, gorgeous and fair. It is built on justice and mercy, and it makes room for everyone.

To usher this new America into the world, we—every one of us—will need to be brave, brave, brave.

Shanah tovah—