# Where there is struggle there is hope

### Congregation Shir Libenyu Rosh Hashanah Sermon

### Toronto, Canada

### October 3, 2024

Good morning, and Shana Tova.

My name is Jon Medow. And I’ve been part of Congregation Shir Libeynu for about eight years now.

I’m here today with Elysse Schlein, my wife.

We have a three year old son named Gil. He’s in daycare this morning, and is looking forward to hearing the shofar later.

Cantor Wunch asked me to speak today about hope.

…This is not an easy assignment.

For many of us, the year 5784 was more bereft of hope than any in our lifetime.

…This year, many of us have lived split-screen realities.

We are experiencing the cadence of our personal and professional lives here in Canada. With the highs and lows, the joys and sorrows that punctuate any human life.

Yet at the same time, there is an **invisible thread** that pulls us to a different reality.

This thread is likely **known** to a close circle and community that surrounds us.

Yet it is likely **invisible** to most colleagues, fellow students, teachers, or other parents at the park.

While going about our daily lives, it pulls our minds somewhere else.

To a land that many of us hold close in our hearts, to which many of us have family, social, cultural, or religious ties.

…And to the terror, death, and destruction playing out at a regular pace in our feeds.

It tugs toward raw and contradictory emotions: shock, fear, rage, shame.

And toward contradictory but interwoven identities: That of **victim**. That of **perpetrator**.

It tugs toward what feels increasingly like the abyss. That we are on the precipice, or even well over the edge.

And the abyss can feel as though it is coming closer to home.

**T’Shuvah**

A core theme of Rosh Hashanah, and of the days of awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is **T’shuvah**.

Return.

Repentance.

In our beautiful rainbow congregation, we likely hold different conceptions of T’shuvah.

For some, T’shuvah evokes the opportunity to return to the path of the mitzvot and proper relationships to the divine.

For others, the concept is centered on interpersonal relationships, or focused on practices and habits for the year ahead.

The tradition sees these approaches as intertwined.

What is essential is the collective framework with which we approach T’shuvah as Jews.

When we say the Viddui, the core confessional of the Yom Kippur liturgy – also included in regular prayers throughout the month of Elul – we speak in the first person plural with the word: **“We”**.

In the traditional conception, we as a people speak as a collectivity to ask forgiveness, to recommit, and to set a new path.

This is frankly audacious.

…That any group of people could simply stand up and address the divine. Not as an individual pleading, but as an organized bloc.

Regardless of how we connect to this framework at a religious level today, that this approach is embedded in our tradition means something amazing.

…In a wider culture framed by individual conceptions of sin and redemption, it is something of a revelation.

It means that built into our core cultural DNA is a framework for collective action… and an ability to reach beyond the self.

**Standing Together Movement**

I first encountered Standing Together Movement in 2019 in Tel Aviv.

This was at the same time that I first met Cantor Wunch, who later that year went on to co-officiate Elysse and my wedding.

In 2019, Cantor Wunch and and I were both Naomi Chazan Fellows with the New Israel Fund of Canada, an organization that supports projects and programs in Israel that fight for social and economic justice, religious freedom, civil and human rights, shared society and anti-racism, for Palestinian citizens, and for democracy itself.

Through this program, we were in the midst of a 10-day marathon of site-visits and tours throughout Israel-Palestine with New Israel Fund grantees, when we had the opportunity to meet with Sally Abed.

Sally is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, a member of the National Leadership of Standing Together Movement, and now, as of February 2024, an elected member of the City Council of Haifa for the newly created [joint Jewish-Arab “Haifa Majority](https://www.ukfost.co.uk/standing-together-activists-elected-as-local-councillors-in-haifa-and-tel-aviv)” slate.

At that time, in 2019, I had never heard of Standing Together Movement before.

But what I heard from Sally that day deeply resonated.

What stuck out to me about Standing Together, and has stayed with me since, is its path-breaking approach to building authentic partnership between Jewish and Palestinian citizens.

**Where there is struggle, there is hope**.

That is Standing Together Movement’s guiding message.

And it brings me back to what Cantor Wunch asked me to discuss today: Hope.

[Standing Together](https://www.standing-together.org/en) is a progressive grassroots movement mobilizing Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel against the occupation and for peace, equality, and social justice.

As the largest Jewish-Arab grassroots movement in Israel, Standing Together is committed to creating an alternative to the existing reality and building the political strength to make transformation possible.

When we met Sally back in 2019 and heard her vision for shared, democratic citizenship… for building authentic partnership between Jewish and Palestinian citizens, based on shared interests, **it gave me hope then**.

As I have seen Standing Together Movement emerge as a leading voice in the months that followed October 7th… **it gives me hope now.**

In the [words of Movement](https://www.standing-together.org/2023war):

“The months following October 7th have been one never-ending nightmare. All of us, Palestinians and Jews across Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank, have endured unprecedented violence, loss, and trauma. We have been deeply hurt by the loss of life across the country, both from Hamas' horrific October 7th attack and Israel's harsh and indiscriminate retaliation on Gaza in the months following the attack. Every person killed and taken hostage in this horrific reality is a tragedy, and the highest prices for this deadly war have been paid by ordinary civilians.”

In the face of this desperate reality, Standing Together’s message is simple: **There is another way.**

Standing Together’s response to the War has been multi-pronged. And these are just a few examples:

* In the first few weeks of the war, organizing **solidarity conventions** across Israel bringing together hundreds of Jewish and Palestinian citizens to discuss shared grief, the war's impact on society, and how to generate hope and solidarity.
* The movement has also organized the **biggest demonstrations** calling for a ceasefire agreement and hostage deal since October 7th, drawing tens of thousands to the streets across the country.
* As extremist settlers began to attack aid trucks in May, Standing Together formed the **Humanitarian Guard**, showing up on the ground in the movement’s signature colour purple to protect the trucks, pressure the police to act, and raise awareness of the attacks in Israeli society - pushing people to fight for collective humanity.
* The Movement recently organized a major campaign to **collect humanitarian aid** for Gaza from among Palestinian Citizens of Israel. The campaign [exceeded expectations](https://www.jta.org/2024/08/26/ideas/jews-and-arabs-hoped-to-fill-a-truck-with-aid-for-gaza-civilians-we-ended-up-filling-300) with over 300 trucks of aid filled in Palestinian towns and villages. This was one of the largest jointly organized civic projects between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel ever.

Underlying all of these actions is an essential feature: **hope**.

A space, even if narrow, exists to imagine and fight for a better future. That space can widen. There is capacity for change. And that is a sourceof **hope**.

When I hear the leaders of Standing Together speak, both Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, I hear a powerful vision for the present and the future.

At its core, this vision attempts to redefine the meaning of the word **“We”** …working from within Israeli society to imagine a shared future.

This year, the Movement has also launched the global **Friends of Standing Together** initiative.

# Friends of Standing Together is the Movement’s global community of partners, fundraising as monthly donors, as well as spreading the Standing Together message in our communities abroad, including here in Canada.

I’m proud to be part of a group focused upon building Friends of Standing Together in Canada.

We are an emerging group of Canadians committed to using our collective resources to support Standing Together’s mission in Israel-Palestine.

We are lucky to count Shir Libeynu’s own Jamie Flagel as one of our organizers, with many other supporters here in this room, including Cantor Wunch.

In March we were thrilled to welcome Standing Together National Co-Directors Itamar Avneri and Rula Daood to Toronto, packing a New Israel Fund of Canada event at the Reference Library with 450 people, and holding numerous meetings with community and political leaders here.

I was drawn to Standing Together post October 7th out of a need to find both a moral centre rooted in the humanity of Israelis and Palestinians, and a practical plan.

When Itamar and Rula were here in the Spring, I had an opportunity to sit in on some of their meetings. The power of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel working together for change was palpable in each one.

And something Itamar, a recently elected Tel Aviv City Councillor, said several times to leaders here in Canada, landed everytime.

What he said:

**“We are not finding the middle ground. We are creating entirely new ground.”**

In the face of a catastrophe, that is the only practical plan forward. And it is a plan rooted in **hope**.

Since last winter, Friends of Standing Together members in Toronto have begun to organize rallies, hold learning events, raise funds, and build relationships.

This entirely volunteer effort squeezed out of our limited time is driven by one thing: **hope**.

In an initiative started by Palestinian Canadian business leader and Toronto Friend of Standing Together, Yaffa Sakkejha, Friends of Standing Together Toronto released a statement on October 1, 2024 titled [“**Reflecting on one year of heartbreak, and one year of hope”**](https://torontofriendsofstandingtogether.myshopify.com/blogs/news/october-1-2024-statement-from-the-toronto-friends-of-standing-together)**.**

This statement concludes with the following calls to action as we approach this sad anniversary moment and enter this next season:

1. Amplify the voices of Jews and Palestinians on the ground, demanding a ceasefire agreement, hostage deal, end to the military occupation, and Israeli-Palestinian peace.
2. When you see dehumanization, racism, or extremism happening, please find your courage to call it in or address it directly.
3. Join the Friends of Standing Together.
4. Believe us – Canadian Jews, Palestinians, Israelis, and Arabs – when we say that our fates are intertwined and that we refuse to be enemies.
5. Believe us when we say that we are stronger together, in solidarity.

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Standing Together’s vision has inspired millions around the world.

People are hungry not only for a message of hope, but in practical steps that can be taken to build a new majority for peace and equality.

I am hungry for this… I’m sure many of you feel the same way.

As we think about the year to come, we must remember we have the capacity for collective action… what we may even choose to see as a collective path of **T’Shuvah**.

And we have the capacity to redefine what we mean we say the world, **“we”**.

We must believe there is a path back from the abyss. And that the threads that bind us to a land far away can be used for good.

In the [words Standing Together Movement](https://x.com/omdimbeyachad/status/1830239498187178069):

We must turn heartbreak into rage. We must turn rage into action. And through action we must create hope. Because despair is a privilege, and **hope is our lifeline**.

As I have learned this year, in spite of all else, **where there is struggle, there is hope**.

Thank you Cantor Wunch for the invitation to speak today.

L’Shana Yoter Tova - To a better year.

**Actions & Resources**

* Become a [Friend of Standing Together](https://www.standing-together.org/friends) and join the global community as monthly donor
* Join the [Canada Friends of Standing Together WhatsApp Announcement Group](https://chat.whatsapp.com/BwNCMzZLwexEb3MEzm3NaA)
* Join the [Toronto Friends of Standing Together WhatsApp Announcement Group](https://chat.whatsapp.com/CNhApTBiKzCJ08Bt6p8Wyn)
* Follow the Standing Together [English Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/standing.together.english/)
* Check out the Standing Together [English website](https://www.standing-together.org/en)
* Read Standing Together’s [Theory of Change](https://www.standing-together.org/about-us) guiding the movement’s values, strategy, and goals
* Listen to the [Groundwork podcast](https://groundworkpodcast.com/) profiling activists working in Israel and Palestine (co-hosted by Sally Abed)
* Support [New Israel Fund of Canada](https://nifcan.org/) and read about its [Rabbinical and Cantorial Cabinet](https://nifcan.org/why-18-jewish-clergy-like-me-joined-nifc/) (Cantor Wunch is a member)
* Buy a [Purple Standing Together T-Shirt](https://torontofriendsofstandingtogether.myshopify.com/)
* Share the above with your family and friends ⬆️