There are many expressions in Hebrew that don’t really have an English equivalent. One of my favourites is ‘*bli neder*.’ The word *b’li* means without, and *neder* – is a vow. Like *Kol Nidre* – all vows. So literally, this expression means “without a vow.” It’s the kind of thing you say when you want to do something, or you want to tell someone that you will do something, but you don’t want them to count on it, just in case you don’t or can’t do it. The closest thing we have in English would be “no promises” – like… I’m planning on attending that event, but…no promises, I might not go. It’s kind of like a pre-emptive get-out-of-jail-free card… I said I’d do the thing, but I didn’t PROMISE that I would do the thing, so it’s ok if I don’t do the thing.

But unlike “no promises,” *bli neder* has a bit more weight to do it. A vow is more than a promise. There’s an actual halachic – Jewish Law – designation of what counts as a vow, or an oath. Without getting too far into the weeds about the different kinds of promises, vows, and oaths we can make, it suffices to say that a *neder* is a big deal. A binding promise. One that is a sin to break, and breaking such a vow comes with consequences. You don’t make this kind of vow without serious intention of following through. So the expression *b’li neder* has come to mean that, while this is something I really want to do, and I will try very hard to do, I shouldn’t be punished if I’m simply not able.

*Bli neder* – I said I’d do it, but I didn’t vow to… so I’ll do my best, but please forgive me if it’s just impossible to accomplish.

So why this lesson in Hebrew expressions? Well… a few weeks ago, at our September Shabbat service, I asked all of you an important question; what message do you need to hear at the High Holy Days this year? Unsurprisingly, you responded with thoughtful, deep, and intense questions. Questions that you deserve answers to. Profound questions, painful questions, questions crucial to this moment in time. And when I said that I would try to answer them, I should have said… *bli* *neder*. Because, here we are, Yom Kippur morning, the final day of our Days of Awe, and I am not sure that I have any answers. I had hoped, I had planned to write a sermon where I could eloquently and creatively address all of your questions, give you comfort, and hope, find points of connection, and tie it all up in a pretty bow, so that I could send you on your way inspired and ready for a new year. I should have said *bli* *neder*…. but I didn’t…so let’s just jump in.

Here are your questions. Your beautiful, profound, challenging questions:

How can we be brave?

How can we stay hopeful?

How do I, personally look after myself and how can you all look after yourselves?

How can we keep informed without taking in all of the trauma?

How can we keep faith?

How can we hold space for nuance?

How can we balance the jewels of Judaism with the difficulties of our tradition?

How can we support others when we feel helpless?

How can we maintain our relationships when we are so divided?

How can we combine our different identities without betraying parts of ourselves and our community?

How can we stay true to ourselves through the barrage of everyone else’s grief?

Those aren’t even all of the questions you asked… But I will try to answer at least some of them…

The quickest, simplest, most honest and concise answer I can offer is: You just have to. How can we be brave? You just have to be brave. How can we stay hopeful? Just have to stay hopeful. How can we hold space for nuance? Please, you just have to hold space for nuance. I know that sounds like a ridiculous and extremely reductionist answer, and in truth it is, but it’s also a real answer. There are so many things that are beyond our control, and since October 7th it feels like the list of things that are beyond our control has grown exponentially longer. We can not control the war. We can not control the policies. We can not control the death and devastation. We can not control how the wider community responds. We can not control other people. But we can control ourselves. We can control our reactions and our approaches. So stay hopeful, stay open, stay brave, and when you falter, when you get mired in the certitude of your “side,” acknowledge it. Recognize it. Find a way to do better. It is so easy to get swept up in the noise. So easy to get pulled into one camp or another. So easy to find ourselves shutting down and closing ourselves off to thoughts and opinions that don’t align perfectly with our own. Do not fall into that trap… and it is a trap. I know – it’s so easy to say and so hard to do – I know it is, because I have fallen into the trap myself… over and over again. So many times this past year I have allowed myself to be pushed and pulled in directions that didn’t always align with my own heart, and those are the times that I failed you, and failed myself. On Yom Kippur, we speak as a collective in one voice to confess our sins to the Almighty. On this Yom Kippur, I would like to also speak on my own behalf, and confess my sins to all of you:

**Al cheit shechatati lifneichem** – For the sin that I have committed before all of you

For the sin of so often not having the right words to soothe your broken hearts

For the sin of worrying too much about what you EXPECTED to hear from me, instead of what I needed to say

For the sin of burying my head when the news got too grim

For the sin of getting my back up when accused of not doing enough

For the sin of not being Zionist enough for some of you

For the sin of not being anti-Zionist enough for some of you

For the sin of conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, even when I knew better

For the sin of refusing to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism so stridently, that I didn’t recognize real antisemitism when it appeared.

For being too quick to judge

For being too outspoken

For not being outspoken enough

For walling myself off from the pain of others, because it felt like my pain was too great.

I’m speaking only for myself here, but I know that some of these sins resonate with some of you as well. These are the traps that we have fallen into, the traps that I have fallen into.

And the only way I’ve been able to free myself from those traps this year has been to remember that we are all just people. People struggling with our own fears, our own pain, our own anger. We falter, we fail, we hurt. My feelings are no more important than yours, and your feelings are no more important than those of the person on the other side. Take that in… the feelings of the person on the other side, whatever that side is, are just as valid, just as real, as yours. So how do you hold space for nuance? You hold other people’s feelings as tenderly and as gently as you hold your own – whether you agree with them or not.

As many of you know, I have an online calendar where people can make appointments with me. Sometimes it’s to discuss scheduling a B’mitzvah, sometimes it’s to talk about ways to get involved in the synagogue, sometimes it’s for regular check-ins with candidates for conversion, and sometimes it’s for discussing personal matters. Spiritual and Pastoral care, as we call it. Since October 7th, the vast majority of meetings scheduled through my online calendar have been to discuss how to stay in relationship with people whose opinions you find hurtful and enraging. Each and every story that I’ve heard on these calls has been about families or friends whose fear, anger, and pain are causing rifts in their relationships. And each and every time, my advice has been the same – recognize their fear, empathize with their pain, love them despite their anger. You don’t have to agree, you don’t have to fight, but you do have to do everything in your power to see the anguish, and the heartbreak. Now, of course, that doesn’t excuse the hateful language and verbal attacks that some of us have endured – not at all, and none of us should be subject to such attacks, but the fear, the anger, and the pain are coming from deep within all of us, and your fear, anger, and pain are no more or less important than mine. How can we maintain our relationships when we are so divided? How can we support others when we feel helpless? How can we stay true to ourselves through the barrage of everyone else’s grief? Remember that we are just people, processing a world that is so confusing, so complicated, so incomprehensible in the only ways we know how. It is true that feelings are not facts, but feelings are real, they matter, and they are fueling so many of our behaviours… and even when the behaviours feel inexcusable, we can still care for the feelings. As Emma reminded us last night, we need to struggle with each part of ourselves – we are not purely one thing or another – it is the multitudes of our identities that make up who we are. That includes the multiple opinions and identities within our community. We can’t simply remove one identity, or one group of people – we must find ways to acknowledge the whole.

We are just people, trying to navigate our reality in the best way we know how. Compassion and empathy are superpowers.

Now, I said that the vast majority of the pastoral care conversations I’ve had this year have been about managing the war, the conflict, and the divide within our community. The majority, but not all. And that’s because through everything that has happened this year, life has also happened. Joys and sorrows, celebrations and loss. Cognitively, I know this – so do you – and yet I kept finding myself surprised when Isreal, Palestine, or Antisemitism was not the topic at hand. I know how absurd that sounds, of course life continues, of course children grow, and loved ones get sick, and there are promotions, funerals, relationships end, new ones begin… we have all had to find ways to keep living through this terrifying and tragic time.

But I fear that I, and many of us, have neglected those other parts of ourselves, those other parts of our community. The parts that hurt simply because sometimes life hurts. The parts that feel joy, simply because sometimes life is joyful. It’s hard to think about our life, our world, our selves beyond the global mess that we’re in, but while it has been a year like no other, it has also been a year just like every other, and we haven’t always stopped to recognize that.

Throughout our High Holy Day services, we have been offering additional prayers for those held in captivity, for those doing the difficult work of peacemaking, and for those most intimately impacted by the war, but the rest of us, we need prayers, too. So I’d like to pause now to offer a prayer for everything, for everyone. I first heard this prayer at a time when I needed to feel less alone, when I needed to feel seen for the fullness of who I am – for all of my many identities. When I needed to stop being strong, and just be. When I needed to shut out the big stuff “out there” and spend a few minutes focusing on the big stuff “in here.” I hope it speaks to you in a similar way. So, I’ll invite you to close your eyes, or just soften your gaze, and take in the words of Plowshare Prayer by Spencer LaJoye, and artist who “makes queer indie folk music for everyone”. *(Cantor Wunch sang the following song live on Yom Kippur, below is a link to the original song)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhOZv5i7CHY>

Each one of us is deserving of this prayer – this prayer for health, this prayer for peace, this prayer to feel seen and heard and honoured. Each one of us is deserving of the care that comes with it.

Which brings me to the question of taking care of ourselves. First, I want to thank all of you who have reached out to me this year to see how I’m doing. To all of you who have recognized my humanity, who have shown me your love and support as I try to love and support all of you. I can’t tell you how much it means to me and how much I appreciate it. I also need to admit that I don’t always do such a great job of taking care of myself. Like you, I swing between reading far too much news and hiding from the news. I vacillate between trying to do too much and feeling stuck and stymied and not doing enough. I wish that there was a formula, or some prescription for self-care that I could share with you – but there is not enough kale, not enough massages, not enough spa days to make all of this better – and let’s be real. Sometimes potato chips and candy, lying on the couch, and staying in pyjamas all day is just as therapeutic as all of that other stuff. The only thing that I have found to be even the slightest bit helpful, is honesty. Admitting when I am sad, admitting when I am lost, admitting when I don’t know the answers. Being truthful about when I’ve had enough and need to look away, and being truthful about when I’m ready to step back in and join the fight. Letting you all know where I stand, and being honest about my feelings has made me able to hear your feelings, empathize with your positions – even when we didn’t agree. And, being honest about how I feel has helped me to find communities of people who feel similarly, and being in spaces with those people has helped me feel far less alone.

So how can you all take care of yourselves? Try being radically honest. Try admitting what you simply don’t know… simply don’t understand. Step down from any pedestal of certainty, for honesty always includes some level of doubt. There is a freedom in that honesty, a freedom in sharing how you’re really feeling, and chances are you’re not the only one who feels the way you do… so share how you feel. Do it with kindness. Do it with openness. Do it with a willingness to listen, and a willingness to learn. Honesty is self care. You can’t tend to parts of yourself that you don’t admit exist, and we as a community can’t tend to the parts of you that you don’t share with us.

And finally, the biggest question – how can we keep faith? How can we continue, or start, to believe that everything will turn out ok? As Jon reminded us on Rosh HaShanah, there are people, many people, who understand that there is a better way. People who we can look to to be inspired, to show us a more beneficial path. We must remember these people. And we must work with them, together, to continue to create the world that we so desire. As Mr. Rogers taught us, look for the helpers, because the helpers restore our faith.

We have to have faith. I don’t necessarily mean faith in God, although if you have that, please hold on to it as tightly as you can. But faith in cycles, faith in endings, and faith in new beginnings. The worst calamities of history all came to an end, one way or another. This too, will come to an end. We must have faith that, whatever that end looks like, we will rebuild. We will find our way out, perhaps shakily at first, but with commitment, tenacity, and love. Yes – love. It is hard to love when it seems like we are so embroiled in hate, but love is how we will recover. Hate divides, love restores.

We must continue to believe that this pain will end. Believe that peace will come. Believe that people, not politics will prevail. Believe that we will see a brighter, happier, calmer tomorrow. Next year, at this time, when we are all back together, may we be gathering in love, not fear. Just think about how good that will be.

I invite you to join with our choir – who will start heading up to the front, to sing a song of hope, a song of looking forward in love. Next year, oh, how good it will be. *(Our choir sang this song live after the sermon. Below is a link to the original recording for you to listen to)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouUZY04p860>

**BaShanah Haba’ah - בַּשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה**

*Lyrics by Ehud Manor, Music by Nurit Hirsh*

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| --- | --- |
| *Bashanah haba’ah neisheiv al hamirpeset*  *V’nispor tziporim nod’dot*  *Y’ladim b’chufsha y’sachaku tofeset*  *Bein habayit l’veyn hasadot.* | בַּשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה נֵשֵׁב עַל הַמִּרְפֶּסֶת  וְנִסְפֹּר צִפּוֹרִים נוֹדְדוֹת.  יְלָדִים בְּחֻפְשָׁה יְשַׂחֲקוּ תּוֹפֶסֶת  בֵּין הַבַּיִת לְבֵין הַשָּׂדוֹת. |
| *Od tir’eh, od tir’eh kama tov yih’yeh*  *Bashanah, bashanah haba’ah.* | עוֹד תִּרְאֶה, עוֹד תִּרְאֶה כַּמָּה טוֹב יִהְיֶה  בַּשָּׁנָה, בַּשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה. |
| *Anavim adumim yavshilu ad ha’erev*  *V’yugshu tzon’nim lashulchan*  *V’ruchot r’dumim yis’u el im haderech*  *Itonim y’shanim v’anan.* | עֲנָבִים אֲדֻמִּים יַבְשִׁילוּ עַד הָעֶרֶב  וְיֻגְּשׁוּ צוֹנְנִים לַשֻּׁלְחָן.  וְרוּחוֹת רְדוּמִים יִשְּׂאוּ אֶל אִם הַדֶּרֶךְ  עִתּוֹנִים יְשָׁנִים וְעָנָן. |
| *Od tir’eh, od tir’eh…* | עוֹד תִּרְאֶה, עוֹד תִּרְאֶה… |
| *Bashanah haba’ah nifros kapot yadayim*  *Mul ha’or hanigar halavan*  *Anafa l’vana tifros ba’or k’nafayim*  *V’hashemesh tizrach b’tochan.* | בַּשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה נִפְרֹשׂ כַּפּוֹת יָדַיִם  מוּל הָאוֹר הַנִּגָּר הַלָּבָן  אֲנָפָה לְבָנָה תִּפְרֹשׂ בׇּאוֹר כְּנָפַיִם  וְהַשֶּׁמֶשׁ תִּזְרַח בְּתוֹכָן. |
| *Od tir’eh, od tir’eh…* | עוֹד תִּרְאֶה, עוֹד תִּרְאֶה… |

Next year we will sit on the porch and count migrating birds. Kids on vacation will play tag between the house and the fields. You shall see, you shall see how good it will be in the next year. Red grapes will ripe by the evening and will be served chilled to the table. And sleepy breeze will carry to the road old newspapers and a cloud. You shall see, you shall see… Next year we will open our hands in front of the white flowing light. A white egret will spread its wings in the light and the sun will shine through them.