

Good evening - shana tova and thank you Cantor Wunch for inviting me once again to share some of my reflections at this year's high holy day Kol Nidrey service.

One of the most thought provoking narratives of our tradition is the legend of the *lamed vov* - the 36 Just or Righteous Individuals. Since its earliest mention in the Babylonian Talmud at the end of the 6th century, this legendary tale, this *aggadah* has developed and evolved.

To paraphrase Andre Schwartz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just*, the world reposes upon thirty six just individuals, who we call the *lamed vov* - the 36. Indistinguishable from simple mortals, often unaware of their status as *lamed vov* they live their regular lives on this earth. But, if one of them were lacking, the suffering of humanity would poison even the souls of the newborn with a single cry. For the *lamed vov*, as Schwartz-Bart writes, are the hearts of the world multiplied and into them as into one receptacle pour all our griefs. According to a Hasidic story "when an unknown Just rises to heaven they are so frozen that the Divine must warm them between its fingers for a thousand years before their soul can enter into paradise - and some, they say, remain forever inconsolable at human woe and the Divine itself cannot warm them - so from time to time the Creator sets forward the clock of the last Judgement by one minute."

Today, I think that the agony of the world is too great for a mere 36 Just individuals to bear, for their tears would overflow all the lakes and oceans of this planet. Today, we are witness to the devastating wildfires in Europe and our own country, the flooding, landslides and melting ice bergs and glaciers in Nepal and the Arctic, and the ceaseless heat waves of this past summer. We are witness to the destruction wrought 25 years ago on 911 in Manhattan. We are witness to the horrors Hamas wielded on October 7 and

the ruthless retribution sought by Israel in Gaza. We are witness to the inexorable exhausting destruction of democracy in the United States and in Israel. We are witness and cry out as settlers wreak havoc upon Palestinians in the West Bank. We are witness to soldiers looking away, hardened to the suffering of their Arab neighbours. We are witness to too large a portion of the Israeli population, poisoned by what one Israeli academic calls the boomerang effect of the pulverizing brutality of colonizers. They too stand back silently purposefully oblivious to the suffering their government has inflicted in the region. We are witness to the rise of antisemitism throughout this world - the devastating terrorist mass shooting on December 14, 2025, when two gunmen opened fire at a Hanukkah celebration on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia killing 15 people. The Hezbollah inspired terrorist incident this past March in Michigan where a man rammed a truck into a synagogue building and school. The Golders Green stabbings in London England where two Orthodox Jewish men were seriously injured in a double stabbing outside a synagogue. The shootings and vandalism here in Toronto of Jewish schools, synagogues and Jewish owned businesses - where only random luck prevented any deaths or injuries.

Each violent anti semitic act couched in anti Zionist rhetoric. How has it come to be that for some to criticize the actions of the present government in Israel must equal a call for the death of all Jews. Have there been similar threats and attacks on Russian communities for the Russian government's unjust war in the Ukraine? Have there been similar threats and attacks on Chinese communities for their government's actions against the Uyghurs? Why is it that a war thousands of miles away makes

us as Jews culpable? How is it that less than a century after the Holocaust we diaspora Jews still must live in a heightened state of caution and fear?

Yes I have no doubt that 36 righteous Just individuals cannot contain the sorrows of our present world. And so I would suggest that we must add to their numbers and take on the mantle of the *lamed vov*. Like those people in the legend we too may be unaware of the place we hold on this planet or the mission of our lives. For often, as novelist Elizabeth Strout writes, “we travel through life unsighted”- each of us a victim of the human condition, of the existential angst of loneliness, impotence and alienation from one another, alienation from our inner selves and from the Divine image that is part of us all. Each of us is a potential *lamed vov*. For whether we wish to acknowledge or not the depth of human suffering, whether we prefer to remain blind to the reality all around us, whether we try to refuse to bear witness and want to run from what in Hebrew is called the, *ol*, the burden, the yoke of this existence, we are still witnesses. And as such we must take to heart the teachings of our tradition *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, every Jew, every human being is responsible to their fellow human being.

But how do we sustain ourselves knowing deep within our souls that though we are surrounded by people, we are still alone. How do we find hope when as psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote, “Our loneliness comes not from having no people around us, but from our inability to share our true inner self with others.” And in the context of the world we inhabit today, our inability to speak up is exacerbated by an environment that perpetuates an atmosphere of fear, making some of us unable to talk freely and furthering our sense of alienation. Disagreement and diverse opinions conducted in an atmosphere of humility and mutual strength with the goal of a shared commitment to the greater community were once viewed as the strength of

our tradition but alas they have fallen to the wayside. We live in a world where compromise is seen as weakness. Aggression and name calling are the acceptable political norm.

We do not need to go to the United States and read the memes and watch the AI videos of a pompous, prideful, pitiful president and his minions - we do not need to listen to the unconscionable remarks of so many in Netanyahu's government who call all Arabs, all Muslims, wild beasts, inhuman animals or worse. Words once used to describe and dehumanize us as Jews. We need only look in our own back yards, and read the vitriolic online comments in the facebook group Everything Jewish Toronto. Comments, which granted are made by a loud minority, nonetheless reflect disrespect and at times hatred to fellow Jews whose crime is that they oppose the policies and actions of the State of Israel. Comments which are often horrifyingly racist, and Islamaphobic - forcing the majority of the 50 000 members of this group to cower in silence lest they become fodder for the minority's disrespect and vile criticism.

Truly, how can the world survive this pain and evil without having more *lamed vov*?

We must simultaneously bear testimony to the heartache of the world and work towards its alleviation. We must take our tears and transform them to tasks. Our tradition emphasizes that *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, leads to humanity's downfall. Our tradition also emphasizes that we are never truly alone because at all times the *schechina*, the divine presence is with us. If this is so, then it is incumbent upon each of us to see that *shechina* in one another. And to harness her strength in our actions.

I refuse to be overcome with sorrow - I refuse to be overcome with stagnating sadness, or impotent rage. And I refuse to shiver in silence.

I believe in the self determination of a people be they Ukrainian or Tibetan, Palestinian or Israeli. I stand with and support those who are working for such organizations as A Land for All: Two States, One Homeland - founded by Israelis and Palestinians over twenty years ago as a joint movement with a vision they call both simple and transformative. To quote their literature "We envision two democratic, sovereign states - Israel and Palestine - linked together in a confederation with gradual steps toward freedom of movement and residence for all Israelis and Palestinians across our shared homeland. Our model offers national self-determination without domination, shared governance without erasing identity, and security without subjugation."

I stand with those individuals like the late Canadian pugilist George Chuvalo, yes George Chuvalo, who survived the most difficult fight of his life - not the 90 bouts where he was neither knocked down nor floored to the canvas, but rather the much more difficult battle he had to fight to survive the loss of his three sons to drug overdoses and the loss of his wife to death by suicide. He took those heartbreaking losses and rather than throw in the towel started an anti-drug advocacy and educational campaign called Fight Against Drugs. He personally travelled to over 1000 schools and community assemblies telling his story to help urge young people to avoid drugs. I stand with and support organizations like Distress Centres of Greater Toronto that provide 24 hour crisis and suicide support for individuals and as well peer based survivor groups to families coping with the loss of loved ones to death by suicide. I stand and support those who signed Petition E-7531 calling on our government to formally declare US ambassador Pete Heksra persona non grata, requesting his removal from office and demanding that our government review alleged US diplomatic interference in our domestic affairs. I stand with those Canadians who

refuse to travel to the United States and when possible refuse to buy goods from the United States whilst our sovereignty is threatened.

I know that I am guilty of being an existential idealist and dreamer. If I were not, then I and four other like minded women would not have created Shir Libeynu thirty years ago at a time when there were no synagogues in Canada that were completely inclusive! If I were not an existential idealist and dreamer I would not have been able to build a proud lesbian life close to forty years ago notwithstanding the real fear of losing my children and my employment. If I were not an existential idealist I would not be able to live today more or less intact with some sense of humour and hope notwithstanding my own family's tragedies and heartache.

And if I were not an existential idealist and dreamer I would not have been brave enough or perhaps foolish enough to stand here tonight sharing my thoughts with you.

In her incredible novel *The History of Love*, Nicole Krauss writes that the first language of human beings was not words but gestures. These gestures were complex and subtle, she writes, a delicacy of motion. Naturally she explains there were misunderstandings of gestures. A finger scratching a nose might accidentally be taken as the gesture for I was wrong to love you. These mistakes were often heartbreaking. Because people understood how easy it was to not understand perfectly the things other people gestured, they were used to interrupting each other to ask with gestures if they'd understood correctly. But because of the frequency of these mistakes over time the gesture for asking forgiveness evolved into the simplest form, just to open your palms was to say - forgive me.

And so it is appropriate for me on this the eve of the day of atonement to state the following. If indeed I have insulted you. If indeed I have angered

you. If indeed you think I have been *chutzpadik* to suggest that we all must be one of the *lamed vov*, or if indeed my words have been misunderstood or misconstrued *open my palms in the sign of **forgive me-***