

I grew up singing in choirs. Shocking information, I know.

Junior choir, senior choir, synagogue choir, concert choir, chamber choir, madrigal choir, jazz choir, The Amadeus Choir, the Zamir Chorale, the North London Chorus. If there was a choir around, chances were pretty good that I was going to find my way into it.

And hearing a choir from the inside is a very different experience from hearing one from the audience. The audience hears the whole piece. When you're standing in the choir, you mostly hear your part. You hear the people immediately around you. You hear the tenor behind you who came in half a beat early. You see the conductor suddenly making very intense eye contact with your section and realize that something has gone wrong. And then every once in a while, you catch the whole thing. You hear the chord underneath you and the line moving above you and something happening on the other side of the choir that you hadn't really noticed before, and for a moment you hear the piece of music you are a part of.

Because a choir requires you to do two things that are harder to hold together than they sound. You have to know your own part, and you have to listen to everyone else.

When a choir is first learning its music, you'll often see singers blocking one ear. It helps you hear yourself more clearly. You can check whether you actually know the notes, whether you're singing the right rhythm, whether you're holding your own part instead of getting pulled onto somebody else's. But you will never, ever see a good choral singer do that in performance. Once you know your part, hearing yourself clearly is no longer

enough. Now you need to hear everyone else. You need to know where your voice sits inside the chord, whether you're matching the people around you, whether another line needs to come forward. The thing that helped you learn your part would actually get in the way of singing it well.

You really do have to know your part. You can't spend an entire performance tentatively following the person beside you, hoping that they know where the F-sharp is. You need enough confidence in your own voice to come in when you are supposed to come in and sing the note that belongs to you. You also need enough awareness to know when you're wrong and need to spend more time learning your notes. And knowing your part is only the beginning. You are constantly adjusting. You listen for balance. You back off when another line needs to come through. You match vowels. You breathe together. You can be singing exactly what is written on the page, exactly the way you think it should be sung, and the conductor still asks you for something else.

And you may be right. You may be completely accurate to what is on the page. But the conductor is hearing something you can't hear from where you are standing. The conductor can hear the whole piece.

There's an expression that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A choir doesn't work that way. In a choir, the singers affect one another. The strongest singers can't simply sing louder and carry everybody else; then you have a few soloists surrounded by backup singers. And a singer who is struggling doesn't have to struggle alone. The people around them can help them find an entrance, hold a difficult line, or sing with more confidence. So in a way, a choir is only as strong as its average link: the stronger singers

help raise the level of the whole group, and everyone becomes part of the sound the choir is able to make.

That can happen in all sorts of quiet ways. You sing an entrance with enough confidence that the person beside you comes in confidently too. You breathe together. You listen across the section. You give an uncertain voice something secure to sing beside. And when you do that well, nobody in the audience knows it happened. They don't hear individual voices. They just hear a better choir.

There is a growing body of research suggesting that singing with other people can be good for us in ways that go beyond making music. Studies have associated choral singing with psychological well-being, and recent research has found associations between singing in a choir, and fewer depressive symptoms and, over a lifetime of singing, with some increased measures of memory and verbal fluency. I don't think we need a scientific study to tell us that it feels good to sing with other people, but I am interested that researchers keep finding reasons to study what happens to us when we do. There seems to be something powerful about making music while paying attention to other human beings.

I've been thinking about all of this because we live in a time when we have more opportunities than ever to use our voices. We can respond instantly to almost anything. We can share an article, correct a fact, explain a history, challenge someone's language, tell hundreds or even thousands of people what we think before we've even finished thinking it.

There is real power in that. People whose voices were historically excluded from public conversation have ways of speaking and organizing and telling their own stories that didn't exist before. Raising our voices can be necessary, courageous, even transformative. I am a woman, a cantor, a progressive Jewish leader. I know how important it is that people who have had to fight to be heard claim their voices.

But having a voice and always centring my voice are not the same thing.

I think we see that distinction collapse all the time, especially online. So much of our public discourse takes the form of people asserting "truth" at one another. "Let me educate you." "Here is what is really happening." "This is the history you don't know." "These are the facts." "I'm going to tell you what this word actually means." And my personal favourite: "I am showing you evidence why any informed or decent person should understand this the way I do."

And honestly, I sometimes agree with what is being posted. The facts may be correct. The moral argument may be one I share. And still I find myself wondering: who is this really for? Who is being persuaded? Are we actually being invited into a conversation? Or are the people who already agree nodding and sharing while the people who don't agree become even more convinced that there is no point in talking to us?

So much of our public discourse feels like we're singing with one ear... or maybe both ears blocked. We can hear our own argument with incredible clarity. We know our facts, our language, our position. We may know our

part extremely well. But we're behaving as though hearing our own part clearly is the goal, rather than listening for what is happening around us.

There is a difference between communication and declaration. In choir terms, you can be singing the right note and still be making the music worse. When our own voice becomes the only thing we listen to, it becomes harder to hear what is happening around us. And the more certain we are that our note is right, the more other voices tend to fade into the background.

That feels especially familiar in the conversations many of us have been having since October 7, 2023. For nearly three years now, Jews have been living with grief, fear, anger, horror, and exhaustion around Israel and Gaza. Palestinians and those who love them have been living with grief, fear, anger, horror, and exhaustion too. We have watched things that are unbearable to watch. We have seen suffering that demands a response. We have argued about history and language and responsibility, about antisemitism and occupation and Zionism and genocide and terrorism, about which words are accurate and which words are dangerous, about what can be said and what cannot.

By now, many of us know our parts extremely well. We have been practising them for a long time. We know which facts we reach for. We know which articles we send. We know which words make us recoil and which ones we insist are necessary. We know the argument that is coming toward us before the other person has finished making it. It becomes very easy to stop listening because we think we already know what the other person is going to say. Often, we do. But I wonder what happens to us when listening starts to feel like a concession, when hearing someone out feels as

though we are giving ground, when curiosity about another person's experience feels somehow disloyal to our own.

There are things I believe very strongly. There are things I am not neutral about, and things I don't think we should be neutral about. We can listen without pretending that every claim is equally true or every action equally defensible. I don't want certainty, even moral certainty, to cost me my capacity to hear another human being.

And I can't stand here and talk about all of this as though I'm only observing something that other people do.

Last year, from this bimah, I used the word genocide for the first time in the congregation. I also said clearly that we didn't have to agree with one another, but that we did have to keep talking. Some of you took me up on that invitation. I've had some beautiful conversations over this past year that went far beyond arguments over language and semantics. We talked about feelings and fears, about Israel and Jewish identity, about suffering, about what people were frightened of losing, and about the very real concerns underneath positions that can look completely incomprehensible from a distance.

And some people left. For some members of our community, hearing me use that word, even once, changed the way they experienced this congregation. They felt that I had created an environment in which they were no longer safe.

There is a part of me that immediately wants to interrogate that. Is feeling uncomfortable the same thing as feeling unsafe? What does it mean for a

community to be safe when people in that community profoundly disagree? What responsibilities do we have to tolerate discomfort in order to remain in relationship with one another? We could spend hours on those questions, and they are important questions. I can also recognize what happened without resolving them.

My words, regardless of their intention, had an impact on other people. It breaks my heart when people leave this community. I also understand it.

I can explain what I meant. I can tell you why I chose the word I chose. I can point to everything else I said that day and to all the places where I tried to leave room for complexity. But if I'm asking other people to listen beyond their own certainty, then I have to be willing to do that too. I have to be able to hear that something I said landed differently from the way I intended it to land without immediately turning the conversation into an argument about whether it should have landed that way or not.

Having the microphone means that my voice carries farther. It doesn't mean that my perspective is more complete. And in fact, the more power my voice has in this community, the more responsibility I have to pay attention to its impact.

Most of us don't have a microphone, but we all have places where our voices carry a particular weight. In our families, our friendships, our workplaces and our communities, there are people who listen to us, people whose opinions we shape, people who care deeply about what we think. There are also rooms where we struggle to be heard at all. Part of knowing our own voice is learning to recognize the difference.

So what is our voice doing in the room? Is it helping another person understand something we need them to understand? Are we leaving room for them to tell us something we don't already know? Do we know this part as well as we think we do? And even when we are certain that we have the right note, can we still hear what is happening around us?

Jewish tradition gives us a phrase for the way our lives are bound up with one another: כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה — *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* — **all Israel is responsible for one another.**

I believe deeply in that responsibility to one another as Jews. And I also believe that responsibility must extend beyond us. The world we live in doesn't divide itself neatly into people who are ours and people who aren't. Our choices affect people we will never meet. Our safety can be connected to someone else's vulnerability. The food we eat, the things we buy, the way we vote, the causes we support, the words we put into the world can all ripple outward into lives very far from our own.

Sacred interconnectedness asks us to take that seriously. *Arevim zeh bazeh* begins with the responsibility Jews have for one another. The interconnected world we actually inhabit keeps widening the circle. We live among and alongside other human beings whose lives matter, whose well-being is connected to ours, and whose voices are part of the world we are making together.

There is another piece of our liturgy that I've found quite poignant this year. On *Shabbat Mevarechim*, the Shabbat immediately before a new month, we bless and announce the new month by saying:

מי שַׁעֲשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבֹּתֵינוּ וּלְאִמֹתֵינוּ וְגָאֵל אוֹתָם מֵעֲבָדוֹת לְחֵרוֹת, הוּא יִגָּאֵל אוֹתָנוּ בְּקָרוֹב,
חֲבֵרִים כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Mi she'asah nisim la'avoteinu ul'imoteinu, v'ga'al otam mei'avdut l'cheirut.
Hu yig'al otanu b'karov, chaveirim kol Yisrael.

The translation in our siddur says: “O wondrous God who in ancient days led our people from bondage to freedom, redeem us now out of our exile from one another, making all Israel one united people.”

It is the phrase *chaveirim kol Yisrael* that I keep getting stuck on. *Chaveirim*. Friends. Companions. People who are in relationship with one another. And then there is that extraordinary translation: “redeem us now out of our exile from one another.”

This is an old prayer. We have been acknowledging for centuries that Jews are not a united people, that we are in exile from one another. And that exile from one another feels even more acute right now. We have become very good at deciding which voices we can no longer bear to hear, which people are beyond conversation, which disagreement tells us everything we need to know about someone else. There are relationships from which we genuinely need to step away; I understand that more clearly this year than I did before. But I don't want estrangement to become our first instinct, or our answer to every dissonant note to be that somebody has to leave the choir.

Maybe redemption from our exile from one another begins more modestly: with the willingness to stay curious a little longer, to ask one more question, to hear the fear underneath an argument we dislike, or to let someone tell us how our own words affected them without immediately explaining what we

meant. None of those things require agreement. *Chaveirim* means that somehow, through all of this, we are still trying to be in relationship.

Last Yom Kippur, I spoke about asking for help. I talked about the courage it takes to admit that we cannot carry everything ourselves, and about allowing other people to be there for us when we need them. I've kept thinking about that sermon this year because underneath it, I was really talking about the limits of self-sufficiency. None of us gets through life entirely on our own strength, our own wisdom, or our own resources.

This year I've found myself coming at that same truth from another direction, with a question I want to offer all of us: **Where can I be of help?**

What is needed from me in this particular moment? There will be times when the answer is my voice, clearly and courageously raised. Someone whose voice is being ignored may need us to add ours to theirs. In another conversation, being helpful may mean getting curious about something we don't understand, allowing another person's experience to remain complicated, or noticing that we're already preparing our answer instead of listening. Knowing our part includes paying attention to what the moment asks of us.

Throughout these High Holy Days, we've been using the phrase sacred interconnectedness. We've talked about the people who shaped us, the paths other people opened for us, and the ways our lives ripple outward into lives we may never even know. This is another part of that interconnectedness: what happens between us matters. Our words have effects beyond their intention, and the way we listen can change what happens next.

We cannot control how everyone receives what we say. There will be things worth saying that make people angry or uncomfortable. And yet we still remain connected to the people who hear us.

We've been returning throughout these High Holy Days to the words of Psalm 133:

הִנֵּה מַה־טוֹב וּמַה־נָּעִים שְׁכַת כָּלָנוּ גַּם־יַחַד

Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet kulanu gam yachad.

How good and how beautiful it is when people dwell together.

We sing those words so easily. And it really is good to be together. But actually dwelling together asks more of us. We live alongside people who don't always hear what we hear. The note that seems obvious from where I am standing may sound different from somewhere else in the room. We need enough confidence to sing and enough humility to listen. None of us, however knowledgeable or passionate or certain, can hear the whole piece from where we are standing.

So as we move from this Yom Kippur into another year, we can pay a little more attention to what our voices are doing in the rooms we enter. There will be places where we need the courage to sing more confidently, and places where another voice needs more air. We can know our parts and still listen across the section. We can help the people beside us find their notes. We can ask, again and again: **Where can I be of help? What is needed from me here?**

Last year we asked whether we could allow ourselves to need one another. We still do. This year we can add the other side of that question: what does another person need from me? A voice willing to speak can be an enormous gift. So can the confidence of the singer beside us helping us find our own note. So can someone who listens long enough to hear the music we are actually singing.

Every once in a while, standing in a choir, you get one of those moments when you can suddenly hear beyond your own part. When you unblock your ear, and you can hear the chord underneath you, another line above you, voices coming from across the room, and for just a moment you hear the music all of you are making together.

Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet kulanu gam yachad.

How good and how beautiful it is when we dwell together.

As I've been preparing this sermon over the past months, one song has been quietly echoing in my mind: "One Voice," by the Wailin' Jennys.

The song begins, quite literally, with one voice. Another voice joins it, and then another. The first voice doesn't disappear as the others enter; the music gets richer. And the lyrics move outward in the same way, until what began with one person singing alone becomes all of us singing with one voice.

You can still hear the individual voices. They remain distinct, each singing its own part, while listening closely enough to find one another. And together they create something that none of those voices could create alone.

Maybe that's another way to hear *Hinei mah tov* this year. Dwelling together means learning how to make music while other people are singing their parts too.

So listen now to what happens as one voice becomes many, and many voices find a way to sing as one.

I'll invite the ensemble forward, Liz to the piano, and invite everyone to follow along on page 26 of your supplement.