

Erev Rosh Hashanah
September 11, 2026/5787

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“In the Year 9/11/250/5787”

This is an auspicious day. It's Erev Rosh Hashanah, the youngest hour of the Jewish New Year 5787. It's also the 25th anniversary of 9/11. It was a devastating beginning to the hope we had for a new century. And we celebrated our country's 250th year. The combination is a trifecta of the senses.

In our minds, we wrestle with the moment we're living in.

In our hearts, we breathe deeply to prepare for what this hour means.

In our souls, we pray that this time is as hopeful as we are.

But we can't speak about the future just yet; we have to begin where we are. In this moment we wrestle, we breathe, and we pray.

In this moment, writing about our nation's 250th year, Dr. David Bernstein of Pardes in Israel, explains, “The American Declaration of Independence closes with representatives of the 13 colonies promising to risk ‘our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor’ for their cause.”

He observes that the rhythm of this three-fold statement resembles another similar command. This one comes from Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5), “You shall love your God with all your heart, [with] all your soul, and [with] all your might.”

And he notes that imbedded in both triads are shared Jewish and American values. He teaches that “they both reject a purely utilitarian view of life.”

Nothing about the foundations of our nation or our faith is about simple practical purposes.

Nothing about them speaks only of our personal wants and needs.

Nothing about them urges us to achieve only individual ambitions. Rather, to live fully is to be bound to something greater than ourselves.

In this moment, which are times of greater personal risk and insecurity, to live --- to choose life, as our tradition commands us --- is to be bound to something greater than ourselves.

As Americans, we bind ourselves to the task of creating a just society. The Founding Fathers assign us to the tasks of civic engagement, the protection of rights, and our focus on the collective good. And Torah assigns us to the tasks of doing acts of kindness, living with integrity, and using our power for the good.

Born in each of us is inherent wisdom about these values and ideals. We can do it because we've done it before. We can do it again because we know it's still the right thing to do. But to do it again and arrive at the same place isn't good enough for these times. In this hour of rabid anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hate and violence, and in this time of American complexity and insecurity, we need to know with greater certainty that, for our part, we are committing ourselves to the best we can offer our country and our people.

We learn from Rabbi Michael Marmur in his book, *Living the Letters*. There he writes about the Hebrew word, *dovev*. The Hebrew word *dovev* appears only once in the entire Hebrew Bible. It means quotation. But without context, it makes it more difficult to understand the word, *dovev*, perfectly. But because it appears in the biblical book, Song of Songs, which is an allegory of God's love for the Israelite people, its meaning reflects a unique relationship between us and God. And that relationship, because we are Jews, is one that we bear differently than others do.

Marmur explains that *dovev*, *to quote*, is a very Jewish thing to do. More than Jewish stories or our favorite Jewish jokes, it's Jewish to quote sacred text and wisdom literature. The best lessons, moral outcomes, and ethical choices begin in Torah, they're quoted in our prayerbooks and sermons, and in our poetry and prose. The Hebrew Bible is cited repeatedly in our prayers. Our people's experiences are steeped in biblical passages because they accompanied our people throughout the ages.

Marmur explains that "knowing the words by heart will not make them flow and come alive; for this to happen, they must be known *in the heart*."

To remember the past well enough to quote from it becomes an essential tool for the present. In any time, but especially when we struggle, we bear up when we remember our Jewish past that's rich in culture, heritage, and wisdom derived from prosperity and adversity. To deny or forget our Jewish past would deny us what we need to know now.

Therefore, the urgent goal for Jews of all ages, Marmur explains, is *to instill in each [of us] the ability to quote from a broad range of sources with confidence and accuracy, the urge to fashion new Jewish expressions [from] ancient materials, and the capacity for moral discernment.*

So, let's test the theory. Can biblical passages that we should know in the heart fill our need for moral discernment? From the prophet Micah, chapter 6, we learn and should be able to quote:

Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

When we can quote Micah 6 by heart, then we're prepared to know it with our heart and live by it. Despite the injustice we see in the public square and in the Middle East, we know in our heart to do justice, anyway. Ironically, in a world we've been told is fluid and non-binary, we've been forced to make binary choices about the world around us. Even so, we're taught to love mercy above all. And when turbulent times create dubious political saviors and false prophets, we should know with our heart to walk humbly only with God. In these times when being Jewish tests our faith and our place, we have to know what we believe and what we must do with that belief.

Likewise, we should know with our heart from Leviticus 19, Love your neighbor as yourself, says the Eternal One.

This familiar verse from the Holiness Code has been interpreted to mean *love your neighbor as you love yourself*. That isn't always easy for us. But another interpretation

teaches us to *love your neighbor who is like you*. Like you? How is our neighbor like you and me?

In Greater Houston, our neighbor is more than likely to be different than us, culturally and ethnically. In Houston, more than 28% of residents are foreign-born and 145 languages are spoken. In his book, “Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America,” Dr. Stephen Kleinberg, renowned sociologist, wrote in 2020 that by 2050, the rest of the country will look like Houston does, today. How can we love our neighbor who is like you, when your neighbor is likely not like you?

Last spring, I attended an *Exodus Over Dinner* program at the Rothko Chapel, now led by Imam Abdullah Antepli. Seated at tables of eight diverse people, between courses served to us, we shared our respective family backgrounds, journeys to work and profession, and hopes for our children’s future. I assumed that at other tables, like mine, conversations were also respectful, interesting, and illuminating. Though the diversity in the room represented our city well and expectations for even greater diversity in the future, there was something so remarkably plain for all to hear and understand. Each story told by a person at the table was unique in the way that it unfolded, detoured, and arrived at some destination. But within each story, including mine, was something that we all recognized as familiar.

Each person, black, white, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, foreign-born, Houston native, younger or older, told an amazingly similar story about opportunity, aspirations, limitations, boundaries, and dreams. It made each bite of food less interesting than the abundance of words we were served as we took turns to speak. As the evening ended, there was a palpable appreciation for the gift of diversity among us. It became palpable to us that we should know with our heart that *Love your neighbor who is like you* depends on stories of shared humanity.

My favorite quote from Torah is from Deuteronomy 21, where we learn, “Lo tuchal l’hitaleim,” you shall not remain indifferent. Every rabbi has a few favorite quotes from Torah, and this one, in particular, is mine.

This one teaches us not to remain indifferent, and also not to hide ourselves. We learn in our hearts that we cannot fail to show up. Joy is a time for us to feel happy for others. Sorrow is a time for us to feel sympathy for others. Love and hate, too, are times to take note and respond. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, explained that the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. His aim was to identify what it means to be human. To love or to hate is to feel something. Such emotions can change, grow, or trade places. But to remain indifferent is to feel nothing. It's inhuman. Indifference and invisibility are contrary to Jewish life. If we can quote this verse, then we can know with our heart that it's always time to show up, to care meaningfully, and to grow from the experience.

In our nation's 250th year, we should also quote from our past and the legacy that we've contributed to as Jews. Some have suggested that Abraham Lincoln was Jewish. I'm doubtful. After all, he was at Ford's Theater on a Friday night in 1865. But he stated in his Gettysburg Address in 1863, that a "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

In addition to making a proclamation about the people's government, he used a reference to the earth. It calls to mind the biblical verse in Deuteronomy 30:19, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you" to choose life. Heaven and earth are called as eternal witnesses. So, it was Lincoln's vision for Americans not to squander their call to bear up against enemies of the union who would erase from the earth this government created, defended, and served by its people. In the course of Jewish history, America has become and should endure as a Golden Land for us and all peoples who call it home.

When our nation was threatened on 9/11, we froze in our places and watched the world as we knew it change forever. President George W. Bush said, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one can keep that light from shining."

His words deepened our faith in the freedom and opportunity this country has afforded us. And for us, his reference to an eternal light should awaken us to the *ner tamid*,

the eternal light that accompanies us wherever we go. We quote with our heart from Proverbs 20:27, “The light of God is the soul of humanity.”

The abundance of quotes is innumerable. Among them are some gems. They are links and strands that unite us as Americans, Jews, and people of the earth.

Without them we are untethered from the past and its heritage.

Without them we are passing through time that we think began when we were born.

But with them we value our inheritance as Americans, Jews, and people of the earth.

With them we embrace our obligation to our inheritance and the duty to build upon it. It's more than a foundation. It's more like a tree, and we're the branches that draw nourishment from its trunk and the roots that feed it from the earth, itself. And though the tree sheds its leaves in fall before new ones emerge in spring, it's also a metaphor for the generations that come and go. Past and present, they emanate from the same source even as the evolution of time brings inevitable change.

But a new challenge has emerged. In this moment, we want to know who is creating new meaning from ancient materials, who is gleaning moral discernment from the past for our times, and who is saying anything worth quoting to make our times, our generation, matter to the future?

Rabbi Michael Marmur teaches, “Tell me who you quote, and I will tell you, fairly accurately, who you are: your cultural [background], your religious affiliation, [and] your age...” But if we can't quote, then we are untethered and potentially lost. This truth is reflected deeply in the conclusion of the award-winning movie *The Brutalist*.

Set in post-WWII America, Laszlo Toth, a renowned architect is commissioned to build a monument to his patron's mother. His brutalist architectural vision is expressed in what he designed. Built into a large hill, tons of cement created a permanent structure that nearly perfectly mirrored concentration camp layouts where he and his family suffered and perished. In the epilogue to the movie, Laszlo Toth's niece quotes her uncle, “It is the destination, not the journey.” In his words, his deep personal suffering and exploitation faced by him and other Jews and victims of the Holocaust had to endure.

His brutalist structure, the 9/11 memorial, and deep scars in the earth's surface after devastating wars, stand as vividly and necessarily as quotes and citations from our past. They are also the enduring legacy of what is forever true and wise. And though it is sometimes hard to look at the past, we have to learn from it. Such truth and wisdom provide clarity. It stimulates and inspires the human heart to envision a future we're obligated to build better.

On this first day of the New Year 5787, let us begin to learn the lessons we need to know. Let us quote what is in our hearts and fill the world with what lives in our hearts. From there, let us find moral discernment for Jewish living, and actions to serve the world that is starving for humanity, starving for moral courage, and starving for greater peace. Amen.