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How are you?

My God, what a loaded question.

A few days after that cataclysmic October day, now three years ago, I dragged myself to a social gathering with acquaintances. I needed something to save me...from myself. I could not stop scrolling through the images of devastation on my phone. These acquaintances innocently asked the question. "How are you?"

How am I? Shellshocked. Disoriented. Devastated. Something just happened that is painful in ways I cannot describe that I think will alter the reality in which I raise my children and my own sense of place in the world. But of course, I what I actually replied was... "I'm okay."

I've found that we've collectively gotten better at asking that loaded question in recent years. Particularly here in D.C. How ARE you? In a city built upon a foundation of civil service that has been radically transformed, many of us have asked or were asked this with great sincerity since those early days of 2025. I have witnessed such tenderness at school drop off, at the start of Friday night services and kiddish lunches, at playground benches filled with parents. The answers became a bit more vulnerable and real but still guarded. "Okay, all things considered." "Getting by." Behind the words, you could hear. "My job was not just a job. Something in me broke that I cannot explain. It was my career, my expression of civic duty, an extension of my identity, a declaration of my faith and my love of country. So much of what I have dedicated my life to just stopped existing. There are so many people whose lives are upended from these changes and I don't know how to make sense of it."

Like some of you, I have witnessed things I could not have imagined a short while ago in my work at HIAS – the oldest refugee organization in the world. My work is a fusion of a faith in the American story of welcome and the Jewish commitment

to universal human dignity. I operated with these values as self-evident truths. I still believe them to be true – but I am chastened from the assumption that they are self-evident.

Many core parts of how we walk in the world feel so much less certain in recent years. Statements once made with a kind of faithful clarity have somehow morphed into questions. Frankly – that’s true regardless of where we sit politically or religiously.

Is there a place for me as a proud Jew in progressive spaces?

Will growing Christian nationalism crowd out my place as a Jew on the right?

Do I even belong in the Jewish community with my political views?

Maybe you’ve felt compelled to reimagine your relationship with Israel- seeing yourself and your values reflected less and less in its leadership and actions.

Maybe what you’re rethinking is your safety and security in your American identity.

Your faith in democracy? Your place in a world with AI?

So much of what we assumed to be given, true, and real... has been exposed as fragile, tentative, and conditional.

As the Israeli poet Zelda offered.... “When I was little, I wanted to live in a house made of iron.... Later I understood that even houses made of iron – or bronze or stone, for that matter, are still built on stony earth, that stand atop reservoirs of water, at a great distance from the great furnace at the heart of the world... For the earth moves.” Even the earth itself is not stable.

Sometimes, the ground quakes or erupts or floods. And even houses of iron collapse. Sure, intellectually, we know that is always a possibility, but we do not live our lives like that. Until it happens. And when it does, we are left staring at the rubble that was once the rock-solid reality we constructed for ourselves.

What, then? What now?

We sit in this room connected to a tradition not wanting for responses to such rupture. The Jewish people have built a communal resume around weathering disaster over thousands of years.

Early in our story, the prophet Jeremiah gave us a humble, but meaningful response. During exile from our home and our community, he simply declared:

בְּנוּ בָתִּים וּשְׁבוּ

“Build houses and live in them.

וְנָטְעוּ גִּזְזִים וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־פְּרִיָּהֶן:

Plant gardens and eat their fruit.” Marry. Have children and have your children do the same...Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you. (Jeremiah 29:5.... 6-7 synopsis)

In other words. Survive. Don’t give up. Through family or through your contribution to community, keep going. You may not find the strength to envision a whole new reality of what comes next. But do not let go of the hope that something else is possible.

How are you? Of course, you’re not okay... but hold on. Hold on.

Even our ultimate story of redemption was built upon this modest premise. When we left Egypt.... It took forty years and a new generation to be ready for what was to come next. That time spent wandering in the desert... it was not for naught. We used that time to regain our sense of self and purpose. To find strength. That generation that wandered in the desert -- that did not lead us into the promised land-- what a gift they gave to those who came after through their resilience.

This kind of slow rebuilding redemption.... It echoes over and over in our text and our history. It is quite literally contained within the DNA of many of us who sit in this room.

A few years ago, I came upon a study that almost half of Ashkenazi women today trace their lineage back to just four women who lived more than 1000 years ago. Four. Four mothers who essentially carried forward what must have been a

broken people. We know nothing about them aside from their genetic imprint that remains with many of us. But I find myself thinking about these four women a lot now. I think about the world they likely endured. What traumas they must have seen... what conditions could have possibly led to such a genetic bottleneck.

I think about the strength it took for them simply to survive. For them to choose a faith in the future.... and in so doing... giving our people the chance to endure. To grow. To evolve. Create generations of new torah.

That... is not nothing. You could see these four mothers as historic placeholders – bystanders in a tumultuous time with little agency. Who were defined by accidental luck. Or you could see them as courage incarnate. Facing tragedy with a flicker of hope that today's reality is not forever. How are you? I'm not okay. But I know that this is not all there is.

When the stories that we tell to make sense of the world begin to crumble, we become painfully aware of what we do not control. And yet.... From the wisdom of experience, our tradition does not allow us to dwell in our powerlessness.

A dear friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Claudia Kreiman lost her mother in a terrorist attack on the Argentinian Jewish community in 1994.

Like many mourners, she searched not for an explanation but for the resilience to carry forward with her grief. She found one companion in a particularly brief but challenging passage from the Talmud:

אִם רָאָה אָדָם שִׁסּוּרִין בָּאִין עָלָיו – יִפְתְּשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו

“If a person sees that suffering has befallen them, they should examine their actions” ([Berakhot 5a](#)).

If a person is suffering, they should examine their actions.

Yes. You heard that right. If you suffer, look within. I would imagine that it is shocking to you that she found comfort in such a stark passage. It was to me. The world that we inhabit rarely offers a neat equation of sin leading to suffering and righteousness to reward. But within Rabbi Kreiman's interpretation of this text

lies perhaps the most grounded, realistic, girded form of faith I have ever encountered. Here's what she says:

"If a person sees suffering has befallen them, they should examine their actions. Many have understood these words to mean that suffering is a consequence of sin. I could never believe that my mother's murder—or the murder of the other 84 people killed alongside her, or any other kind of suffering—was God's punishment for anyone's actions. Over time, I came to hear the text differently. *Lefashpesh bema'asav*—"examine your actions"—came to mean not looking backward in search of blame, but looking forward in search of responsibility. The question became: *Who do I want to become because this happened?*"

Even in a world this broken. This ruptured. How do I want to walk through this world? What, in spite of everything, do I want to be... to do... to assert is still true?

Who do I want to become because this happened?

It is not a proclamation to save the world. It is a defiant claim of resilience that the world will not destroy me.

Holocaust survivor Vasily Grossman wrote that "Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is the battle fought by a great evil, struggling to crush the small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer."

When our realities crumble, our tradition pushes us to survive. And as part of this survival, it demands that we hold on to a core commitment to the goodness and kindness that feels absent in a world scarred by devastation. It asks us to embody what it is we want the world to reflect. Even and especially when it feels like that goodness and kindness are nowhere to be found.

We become its source.

As a mother, I have been subjected to many films in the Disney cannon in recent years. Frozen II (hear me out) has a shockingly poignant depiction of exactly this

theological response to devastation. As the hero Anna is consumed by grief and her world collapsed – she can barely find the strength to crawl out of a dark cave. She cannot see five steps in front of her, let alone what any possible future could be. But she musters a way forward inch by inch with a simple mantra: “Do the next right thing.” She does not know the outcome or whether she will make a difference... but she knows who she wants to be in the face of a shattered reality. And she refuses to relinquish her sense of purpose and morality in the world. “Do the next right thing.” Thank you, Disney – for that beautiful encapsulation of the essence of Jewish endurance and resilience. I needed that.

In these difficult recent years, there have been moments when I have lived this commitment to “do the next right thing” and moments when I have failed. But I want to be reminded of what this looks like at its most beautiful. So I come back over and over and over to one story from my own experience.

In the days after October 7th... in my deepest grief and at my most disoriented, a Muslim friend texted. This is a friend with a deep commitment to Palestinians and their right to self-determination. “Can we talk?” the text read. I did not wait. I called her immediately and could feel the tears welling up even before she answered. When I mustered a broken “Hi.” She said simply, “I need to see your face.” And so I turned on the video... unable to utter another word. She spoke first. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what happened. And I’m sorry for all the people who cannot say I’m sorry.”

That phone call changed everything for me. All of the toxicity I witnessed and experienced in the public discourse – the darkness, the dehumanization, the anti-Semitism. It’s not that I didn’t see it, or experience it. But Sumaya’s goodness, her kindness, her humanity – it steadied me as the ground shifted under my feet.

A few months later.... I was on a panel for International Women’s Day with a Muslim community leader I did not know. The zoom session was something vague about women and humanitarian work. This Muslim leader – Hadia -- spoke in detail of the tragedy and pain in Gaza. I could feel her voice tremble with fear. And when it was my turn to speak.... I felt Sumaya with me. The next right thing was clear. I acknowledged her pain and that the devastation was real. No context

or excuses. I affirmed that the lives taken in Gaza mattered. That I feel that loss too.

After the panel, she reached out to connect one on one. She shared that she was afraid to speak when she knew that a fellow panelist was a rabbi. The week before, she said, she had shared the same thing in a public forum and was shouted down by a Jewish leader. My ability to see her and hear her, was so moving, she wrote an article about the transformative power of that moment. What Sumaya did for me, I apparently did for her. We found that small kernel of human kindness that Vasily Grossman says can never be conquered.

If I'm honest, I have a fantasy of some cosmic algorithm in which these acts of love and humanity continue to multiply and amplify and redefine our discourse – that they will construct the foundation for a new reality that centers humanity and dignity. I do. I have that fantasy. I desperately want these small gestures of kindness and acts of goodwill to crowd out the fear and the anger and the hate and push them back to the margins of society. I haven't let go of that hope, but I know that cosmic morality lacks the predictability and order of the physical laws that guide our cosmos.

I'm not so naïve as to think that every interaction on such painful issues will be this beautiful and affirming. I have had many that aren't. But I also know that our commitment to goodness cannot depend on the outcome. That kernel of kindness that cannot be killed has become my compass. It is the thing I return to when the world is overwhelming and consuming. When my faith is feeling frail.

It is a drop of goodness in what feels like a sea of awful. And.... that drop is enough.

Our acts may not translate into anything more than an affirmation of the goodness we refuse to relinquish. And perhaps... that is enough.

To respond to acts of dehumanization with humanity,
to humiliation with dignity,
to aggression with kindness,

to evil with love.

It is a redemption of resilience that is both modest and radical at the same time – to hold on to dignity and humanity and goodness in a world that does not affirm them. It is a redemption repeated in Jewish text and history.

I want you to take a moment now to think silently to yourself... think about a moment of goodness or kindness... think about a small redemption you've experienced in the past couple of years. An act you did... or that was done for you... something that let you hold on in a moment you may have been wavering. What moment can you come back to ground yourself? A way you witnessed the community come together? An unexpected phone call of support? A heroic act you saw on the news? A hard conversation you handled with love? In a minute, I'm going to ask you to turn to a neighbor ... and share with them. But for now- just take a second to think of a moment that can ground you in who you want to become in this troubled world.

Each of you take 1 minute to share with each other. I'll let you know when you should switch. If you need to find a group of 3, don't be shy about jumping in to someone else's conversation. This is a moment for us to find connection and inspiration from the people around us. To draw from their wisdom.

Thank you for being willing to open up a bit... maybe even to a stranger. I hope that you each brought a touch of inspiration to each other. God knows – we need it in a moment like this.

We may have hoped that our era would be the one unburdened by the trials our predecessors shouldered. That our houses of iron would stand. But here we are in the midst of rubble. And so it becomes our moment to add our piece of the story to the tradition.

To show future generations one more version of resilience. That we did not let the toxicity of the world envelop and consume us too. That we survived. Built houses. Planted gardens. Held dear to that kernel of goodness and kindness that cannot be conquered. Did the next right thing.

How are you? Devastated and disoriented. Confused and in pain. Broken and grieving... but I know who I want to become. G'mar chatimah tova.