

Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5787/2026

Siegel Sanctuary

Rabbi David Ebstein

Shabbat Shalom.

My name is David and I am here for the year from Israel, serving as the transitional Rabbi between my esteemed colleagues Rabbis Michael Siegel and Michel Schlesinger. I hope I will have an opportunity to meet you after services this afternoon.

You have all heard of the city, Tel Aviv, commonly translated as, Hill of Spring. Tel Aviv first appears in the book of Ezekiel, and is brought out of the Bible into common parlance in 1902, when Nahum Sokolow chooses the name Tel Aviv for his translation of Theodor Herzl's epic utopian novel, Altneuland. Altneuland literally translates into "Old New Land". Why then, did Sokolow, often referred to as the Father of modern Hebrew Journalism, think that Tel Aviv (Hill of Spring) is an appropriate translation for "Old New Land"? The answer? Because Tel doesn't just mean a hill. A tel is an archaeological mound: layer built on layer, civilization on civilization, none of them cleared away before the next one built on top. Aviv means spring, conjuring up images of new growth, eager green shoots pushing through the soil. Together it means "the old buried thing that is experiencing renewal." The people who founded Tel Aviv thought this was a perfect name for the first Jewish city in Israel.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the world, creation. Every generation has the opportunity to start over, to fashion the kind of world they wish to live in. But no generation is lucky enough to begin from a

tabula rasa; everyone brings layers of their families of origin to the table. Like in the Tel, the new layers are always woven into what came before them.

We all experience the circle of life; birth, childhood, adulthood, illness, recovery, God-willing; old age, death, mourning, and then it begins all over again. We know intuitively that in order to survive, we need to be resilient. Our souls are like organisms, at once fragile, courageous and strong. Resilience is a real thing. It's a clinical term, borrowed from engineering before psychology ever got hold of it, it means: "the capacity of a material to absorb a shock and return to its original shape".

Jewish resilience is something different. Much can be learned from the Hebrew translation of psychological resilience, which is Chosen Nafshi. Chosen, meaning resilience of any kind, but with the added adjective of nafshi, from the word nefesh, soul. It is our soul that needs to be strengthened and equipped to withstand trauma.

Since October 7th, we have been asked to develop unprecedented wellsprings of resilience, inner strength, resolve, steadfastness. Indeed, this is the story of Jewish history. And we always survive. And I am proud of our resilience, standing strong, whatever the cost, against THIS wave of antisemitism/ anti-Zionism/anti Jewish peoplehood, which is fundamentally different from any other era in Jewish history. In fact, the security costs for American Jewish institutions this year

exceeds a billion dollars, and we see it here this morning at Anshe Emet.

Speaking as an Israeli, I can share with you that we are often complimented about how resilient we are, in the face of everything that is thrown at us. And that's true, we are. Just think about the incredible October 7th stories you all know about average Israelis transforming into superhumans of civic responsibility in the vacuum of governmental leadership etc etc. But the truth is I am **sick and tired** of being resilient. Dayenu, genug, enough. Being endlessly resilient sometimes feels like being told to just keep taking it on the chin.

Could it be that if we keep “behaving” and demonstrating resilience we will never break out of the escape room called “being Jewish after October 7th?

A brilliant, mission-driven entrepreneur and Israeli civil society activist named Ariel Beery, contended the following: “in the current, seemingly permanent state of siege, over-reliance on resilience is no longer a virtue but a threat to the continued existence of Jewish peoplehood as we know it.” Take 5 seconds to let that wash over you. It’s important enough that I’ll say it again.

“Resilience is no longer a virtue but a threat to the continued existence of Jewish peoplehood as we know it.”

Beery continues: "Zionism was, and is, a rejection of resilience, not an example of it. When Theodor Herzl called forth lovers of Zion from across the world to the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, he

orchestrated a public declaration that the Jews would no longer bend to rising antisemitism; no longer depend on the Jewish ability to adapt to ill circumstance, to absorb the abuse of those who ruled over them." The Zionist movement developed a concept, a word, to describe its rejection of resilience, its unwillingness to bend and shelter together until the storm passes: that word? chalutziyut-which translates into "pioneering spirit."

It is time for us to move beyond survivalism and resilience, and develop a narrative about Jewish peoplehood combining resilience, a pioneering spirit, and enough self knowledge that allows us to proudly tell our story. This is a massive responsibility we bear individually and collectively.

Some of you might agree with me when I say that one of the Jewish people's superpowers is storytelling, both on a national and personal level.

Everyone in this sanctuary has their own way of telling what happened to them. We all have our own cadence, we all choose what to include and what to edit out.

During the whole month of Elul, now on Rosh Hashanah, and clear through to Yom Kippur, our liturgy is urging us to perform an accounting (Cheshbon) of the soul and its many layers, which is its own kind of storytelling. And I want to linger on that word cheshbon, because I think it has lost some of its meaning. Akavia ben Mahalalel, in Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of the Fathers), says: da mei-ayin bata,

u-le'an atah holech, ve-lifnei mi atah atid liten din v'cheshbon. "Know where you came from, where you're going, and before whom you will one day give judgment and accounting."

A cheshbon, an accounting, comes from the world of ledgers, with line items. And it has debits and credits with your name next to them. We can either take a casual, wistful look on the past year; or, we can say "what, specifically, did I do, and what, specifically, do I now owe." That is the moment reflection stops being passive and becomes responsibility.

The Hebrew word for responsibility is achrayut. You can hear in its etymology acher, other, consideration of the other. And I want to offer that if unending resilience is a dead end, cultivating achrayut is a way out.

Everyone has a story of some kid saying "it's not my fault!" Growing up means knowing that you can and must take responsibility for certain things no matter whose fault they are. It means acknowledging mistakes, demonstrating accountability, and asking for forgiveness.

And halacha, Jewish law, requires this to be public. The Rambam is explicit that teshuva is not complete with only a private change of heart, acknowledging our regret only to ourselves. It requires viduy, a spoken confession.

Achrayut, taking responsibility, has as its root, caring for others. We read in the Torah, God said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

We start out in life by saying "I didn't know, am I my brother's keeper." But by the end of Genesis we hear Yehuda approaching Joseph and saying, look, I'm going to give you an answer to the question of, "am I my brother's keeper." The answer is yes!

The Talmud Tractate called Shavuot, deals with vows and promises, and states something almost uncomfortable in how far it reaches: *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*, ALL of Israel are guarantors for one another.

We live in a world in which our leaders have created a mockery of caring for others. We have become adept, brazen and shameless at shirking responsibility. We might not be guilty for terrible things that happen, but we are responsible to make sure they don't happen again. If things happen on **your** watch, you bear some if not all of the responsibility. After the Israeli intelligence debacle that led to the surprise attack in 1973 on Yom Kippur, Israeli leaders felt like they needed to be held accountable, and launched a State inquiry. Because, when you don't do an accounting, disasters can and will occur again.

Tragically, almost 50 years to the day after Israel was taken by surprise, the same thing happened. But today, there's no Va'adat Chakira, no State Commission of Inquiry, because our leaders' arrogance blinds them to their accountability.

I feel like I have an *achrayut*, responsibility, to tell my story and help other Jews tell theirs.

In this time of siege, we are all responsible to tell our stories as Jews. That's one of the main needs right now, and it's actually not optional.

Our aforementioned superpower of story telling must be reclaimed, because we *don't actually KNOW how to tell our story*.

But we have no choice. We must learn and tell our story even if it means having to refute the BIG LIES too many believe.

Perhaps for some of you, this requirement to tell our story rings a bell, about another major Jewish storytelling ritual, the Passover Seder.

The centerpiece of the Seder is called the Maggid, translating literally into "the Telling". And the Haggadah makes a claim about itself: "kol ha-marbeh le-saper bi-yetzi'at Mitzrayim harei zeh meshubach",

whoever TELLS more is praised, not whoever KNOWS more. We are **literally** commanded in Exodus 13:8 to tell our children the story of our people. **"Ve-higadeta le-vincha, "you shall tell your child".**

No shortage of stories for our people...The Nova survivor relearning how to sleep. The Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Bondi Beach. The Israeli reserve soldier who has done four rotations and doesn't know how to re-enter his family that has learned to function without him. The Jew by choice, the Jew who has become more religious, or even the disaffiliated grandchild who may be sitting right next to you right now. And of course, the Hersh Goldberg-Polin story.

Contained within the Book of Life is actually a ledger that has each of our names on it, that has each of our stories in it, because we are

accountable. I'm not simply asking you, "what is your story?", but rather, "what will you take responsibility for in your Cheshbon haNefesh?", and "what will you choose to own out loud, rather than carry it silently?" That means you have to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, exactly as hard as it was and is. That is our covenant, our brit, that is not handed to us, but something we acknowledge and own.

5 years ago, the renowned author and scholar Dara Horn wrote a best selling book called People Love Dead Jews. She was then inundated with stories from people who have been the subject of antisemitism (this was **before** October 7th!), and they asked her what to do. Several years later after having a front row seat at Harvard, and testifying at the December 2023 Congressional hearings about antisemitism at American universities, she said **Dayenu!**. Resilience is not enough. We **need** to know our story as a people, and we need to refute the BIG LIES that are told about us. So she founded an educational initiative called, The Tell Institute, to combat the ignorance she believes to be the real engine of antisemitism. Her argument is that people don't hate what they know; rather, they fear and attempt to destroy what they have never been taught.

In conclusion, none of us get to choose what's buried beneath our feet. We inherit the layer under us, parents, the shul, the text, the wounds, the wars we didn't ask for. During the coming year, we have the responsibility (achrayut) to own our story, and to learn how to better tell it.

Rambam wrote that the true penitent, someone who has truly repented, becomes Adam Acher, a different person. As I mentioned earlier, the word acher, other, is embedded within the word achrayut. That linguistic connection offers us a profound Jewish response to the limitations of resilience.

Resilience asks: How will I withstand what has happened to me?

Achrayut asks: Given what has happened, what am I now responsible for doing?

- Resilience is about endurance.
- Achrayut is about obligation.
- Resilience allows us to survive the world as it is.
- Achrayut demands that we help create the world as it ought to be.

My friends, tomorrow, we will hear the haunting, primal sounds of the shofar. Those blasts are only the beginning of the story. The rest is up to us. שנה טובה