From Grief to Imagination:
Loving the World as It Is Becoming
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Rosh Hashanah 5786

It's been a hard year. And here we are again, with the possibility to begin anew. But how do we do that? How do we allow ourselves to believe in new beginnings when, year after year, the new beginning brings neither relief nor an end to these chaotic and painful times?

I want to begin by acknowledging the grief many of us carry. For me, much of it is grief for what humanity — and our world — has become. Please don't misunderstand me: I still believe in human beauty and sweetness. I see it right here, right now. And yet, there are days when cruelty and loss make despair feel overwhelming.

Some of us mourn what we once hoped for — visions for our children, for ourselves, for this planet. Some of us grieve for this country, founded on ideals of liberty and equality, with checks and balances to safeguard rights and restrain power, a country that imagined itself as a land of immigrants and refuge. Some of us are broken-hearted for Israel, led today by extremists whose dangerous messianic vision has fueled the current reality in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel itself. Some of us carry the weight of being Jewish in this moment — the fear that rises when antisemitism shows up, and the longing to feel safe and at home. And some of us ache for a world in which violence, war, terror, hatred, and fear have become guiding principles for so many leaders.

And all of this grief and uncertainty — it doesn't just live in the news. It lives in our minds and bodies.

Neuroscience teaches us that when the future feels uncertain, the amygdala — the brain's danger center — takes over. Our bodies brace for fight, flight, or freeze, while the prefrontal cortex — the part that plans and imagines — shuts down. That is why we feel exhausted, why our thoughts race at night, why it is so hard to concentrate, to hope, to dream[1].

[1] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-good-sex-matters/202504/the-neuroscience-of-uncertainty

And it is not only us. The data is sobering[2]: nearly three-quarters of Americans say current events are their greatest source of stress. Among young people, anxiety has more than doubled since the pandemic. We are living in an age of uncertainty, and it is in our bodies, our minds, and our spirits.

And into this grief, into this storm, comes Rosh Hashanah.

Last November, through both teaching and writing, I shared with you a story from the Talmud about survival tactics in stormy waters. This teaching has been an anchor for me this past year. Some of you may remember it, but it is worth telling again.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot[3], we read about sinking ships, rabbis caught in turbulent waters, and the unexpected ways they survived to teach Torah again. It is a two-part story.

In the first part, Rabban Gamliel tells that once he saw a ship break apart at sea. Among those aboard was Rabbi Akiva. Certain that he had drowned, Rabban Gamliel was astonished when, upon reaching shore, he found Rabbi Akiva alive, already teaching Torah. When he asked how he had survived, Rabbi Akiva explained:

דַּף שֶׁל סְפִינָה נִזְדַּמֵּן לִי, וְכָל גַּל וְגַל שֶׁבָּא עָלַי — נִעְנַעְתִּי לוֹ רֹאשִׁי.

"A plank from the boat came to me, and for every wave that crashed upon me, I bowed my head."

In the second part, Rabbi Akiva himself recounts that once he saw a boat sink, this one with Rabbi Meir aboard. Again, he despaired, only to later find Rabbi Meir alive, teaching Torah. Rabbi Akiva then asked how he had survived, and Rabbi Meir explained:

גַּל טָרַדְנִי לַחֲבֵרוֹ, וַחֲבֵרוֹ לַחֲבֵרוֹ, עַד שֶׁהֶקִיאַנִי לַיַּבָּשָׁה.

"One wave carried me to another, and that wave to another, until I reached the shore, until a wave cast me safely onto dry land."

[2] https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/news-releases/annual-poll-adults-express-increasing-anxiousness
[3] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate of Yevamot 121a

We can see these stories as two paradigms of survival. Rabbi Akiva clings to the *daf* — a plank of wood — that keeps him afloat. *Daf* can also mean a page, like a page of Talmud, a page of learning. Rabbi Akiva clings to Torah, to the desire to learn and to teach, and to never give up on its wisdom. He holds fast to purpose and to the values that sustain him even as the waves crash over his head. He allows himself to go under each wave, embracing the unknown beneath the water, yet trusting the plank to carry him through.

Rabbi Meir's survival is different. He does not cling to a plank, but rides the waves, carried from one to the next, like a surfer. As Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor of medicine and mindfulness teacher, has said, "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." The Talmud calls these waves *ḥavero l'ḥavero* — "from friend to friend." Rabbi Meir's safety comes not from holding onto something, but from being held — carried through relationships, sustained by connection after connection, until he reaches the shore.

This message is powerful and simple: when times feel turbulent and uncertain, we are reminded that we are not alone. We hold onto what anchors us, and we hold one another. That is what we have been doing — with our loved ones and here at TBZ.

As this new year begins, I find myself returning to the following questions: What sustains us when the storm does not pass? Who do we want to be and how do we want to show up in the midst of chaos?

The story of the people of Israel in the wilderness offers one answer. Moshe sends twelve messengers to scout the land before entering. Ten of the twelve scouts return with fear in their hearts and despair in their words. They doubt their ability to conquer the land, and perhaps more importantly, they doubt God's presence with them.

God is furious. At first, God considers wiping them all out, but after Moses intervenes, God settles instead on a different punishment: the people will wander in the desert for forty years, ensuring that this generation will never enter the land. They will live out their days in the wilderness, with no promised future of their own. Only their children will enter the Promised Land.

The wilderness generation is condemned to wander, carrying the weight of deferred hope.

And yet, the story does not end there. A few verses later, God's promise echoes:

"כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ מוֹשְׁבֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם

When you enter the land that I am giving you to settle in."[4]

Even amid despair, the future remains possible — their children will enter.

These realities can be true for us as well: We can hold the despair of wandering without answers. And we can hold the promise of a better world yet to come.

Mariann Edgar Budde, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington — known to many of us for her courageous words to President Trump in her sermon at the National Cathedral after the inauguration — speaks about the decisive moments in life and faith in her book *How We Learn to Be Brave.*

In this book, she shares a conversation between Krista Tippett, host of *On Being,* and Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a marine biologist dedicated to addressing the global climate crisis. Johnson reflects:

> "I am not a fan of hope as a guiding principle, because it assumes that the outcome will be good, which is not given. But I am completely enamored with the amount of possibility that's available to us."[5]

Bishop Budde interprets Johnson's words as a rejection of simplistic hope based on wishful thinking. Instead, she describes hope as the capacity to face reality — no matter how difficult — and still seek whatever good is possible.

As a person of faith, she dares to trust God at work amid the most challenging realities of our lives, and believes that, by grace and acceptance, we can join God in the holy work of transforming the world.

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[4] Bamidbar 15:2

[5] Mariann Edgar Budde: How We Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith, page 182

Today, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the painful story of Hagar and Ishmael's exile. Cast out into the wilderness with only bread and water, Hagar watches their resources run out. Unable to bear her child's death, she places him under a bush and weeps from a distance: "I cannot see my child die."[6] In that moment of despair, God hears Ishmael's cry and opens Hagar's eyes.

וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרֶא בְּאֵר מָיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ

וַתְּמַלֵּא אֶת־הַחֵמֶת מַיִם וַתַּשְׁקְ אֶת־הַנָּעַר׃

God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.[7]

Suddenly, she sees a well of water — life-giving, sustaining, already there, though hidden from her before.

The midrash teaches that this well was no ordinary one, but the miraculous well created at twilight[8], the same well that later sustained Miriam[9] and the Israelites in the desert. In the wilderness, in the moments of deepest despair, there is a well. Sometimes we cannot see it until our eyes are opened. Sometimes it takes faith, trust, or imagination to recognize that possibility — the source of life already present before us.

Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, one of the great Jewish mystics of the 20th century, who died in 1935 in the Land of Israel, teaches:

> In order to love well the world as it is,
> You must invest deeply in loving the world as it is becoming.
> The improvements you make,
> Whether for the world in general or for an individual,
> Should be made with the most expansive vision,

[6] Genesis 21:16
[7] Genesis 21:19
[8] Pirkei Avot 5:6
[9] Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 30

A broad foundation for the world as it is becoming.
Only then can culture develop safely.[10]

At first glance, we might hear Rav Kook as teaching about *tikkun olam* — making the world better, as we often say in contemporary Judaism. But he is pointing to something deeper.

Life — whether individual or collective — is not a project on a to-do list. The world (*olam*) is not a broken object to be fixed (*tikkun*). Rav Kook calls us to treat the world as a subject, not an object — to be in relationship with it, to love it.

So the question is not: How do I fix it?
The question is: How do I love it better?

Rabbi Ebn Leader[11] — my spouse — in teaching this text, offers a somehow different translation of two familiar Hebrew terms. *Olam hazeh* — usually "this world" — becomes "the world as it is." *Olam haba* — often "the world to come," either after redemption or after death — becomes "the world as it is becoming."

The Zohar already hints at this reading, describing *olam haba* as "the world that is always coming, every day."

Through this lens, Rav Kook is not asking us to love a fantasy of a perfected future in contrast to the flawed present. He is asking us to love the unfolding of life itself, the process of becoming. And that love, in turn, reflects back into every moment — since each moment belongs to the process.

Rav Kook continues:

חכמה גדולה זאת יודעת היא, האמונה

Faith knows this wisdom…

The Hebrew word *emunah,* often translated "faith," does not mean belief but trust. It means the willingness to lean into life's unfolding rather than controlling it.

[10] Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, Orot HaKodesh, vol. 3, p. 178) translated by Rabbi Ebn Leader

[11] This teaching is inspired on Rabbi Ebn Lader's piece https://substack.com/@ebnleader/p-167836102

And so, Rav Kook's teaching reminds us: the improvements we make — whether personal, communal, or global — must always be guided by a broad, expansive vision. If our vision is too narrow, focused on one need, one success, or one specific outcome, we risk causing damage even to what we care most about. Rav Kook does not dismiss small actions. On the contrary, they matter deeply. But behind those small actions must stand a vision as wide as the world itself.

Leaning into life's unfolding instead of controlling it. That requires something big. It requires trust and it requires imagination.

Imagination allows us to perceive possibility even in moments of despair — to see what is not yet visible, to sense a well beneath the sand, to see the wells in front of us.

So, that is what I want to do today[12]. If you are new to TBZ, this may feel radical. If you are here often, you know this invitation is familiar — perhaps not delivered in the midst of a High Holiday sermon, but we are going to give it a try: In a moment, I will invite you to sit in silence and dare to imagine.

But before that, I want to share a nugget of wisdom from a Sesame Street song[13], sung by Elmo. This song was my family's favorite when the kids were little:

Elmo sings:

> It's incredible where you can go
> In your imagination
> Hitch a ride on a cloud
> And go sailing off into the blue
> Ask the high flying birdies
> To come with you on your vacation
> There's a rainbow of beautiful colors
> Waiting for you…
>
> You can see what you wanna see
> Be what you wanna be

[12] Grateful to my dear friend Rabbi Oded Mazor for inspiring me to do this exercise
[13] Sesame Street: Imagination With Elmo

Feel what you're longing to feel
Just look in your mind
There's a place you will find
Where the things that you dream of- seem real

So I invite you now to take a deep breath and close your eyes, if that feels comfortable. Let yourself settle into this moment. Feel the weight of the world, the storm, the desert, the grief you carry. Acknowledge it without judgment.

And now, imagine. Imagine the world as it could be. Imagine the people you love, your community, the children, the neighbors — living in safety, in dignity, in peace. Imagine the possibilities hidden even in the present, like the well Hagar saw in front of her. See it. Feel it. Let your heart touch it.

You don't have to know how it will happen. You don't have to fix it. Just allow yourself to see it, to inhabit it, to let it awaken something in you.

And as you breathe, notice that even in the storm, even in the grief, there is a place of possibility. Let that vision feed you. Let it give you courage. Let it remind you why you hold fast, why you carry others, why you refuse to give up.

When you're ready, gently open your eyes, carrying a piece of that imagined world with you as we continue this journey together.

This Rosh Hashanah, we do not ask, "What will happen this year?" but, "Who will I be?" We cannot control the waves, but we can choose the plank we cling to, the friends who carry us, and the imagination that sustains us.

Psalm 27 reminds us: Do not hand me over to the narrowness of those who besiege me… Seek My Face… Place your hope in Adonai; be strong and let your heart take courage. These words invite us to not let fear define us, to see the wells that appear even in moments of despair, and to let imagination guide us toward the world as it can become. Even when the storm does not pass, we can anchor ourselves in courage and hold one another.

May we hold fast, carry one another, honor our grief, shelter each other in the storm, keep our eyes open to what is possible, and step into this new year ready to imagine boldly.

Shana Tova.