WHAT BINDS US IN 5780
Moving beyond our differences

Featuring reflections by:
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
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How can we accept and transcend differences in order to create a stronger shared Jewish community?
On Rosh Hashanah, the blast of the shofar is meant to awaken our souls, drowning out the noise of everyday life — at least momentarily.

In these days marked by ever-increasing polarization and incivility, that noise can feel especially deafening. It takes courage today to eschew divisiveness, to actively join others with whom we may disagree, to come together across the political divide to address our community’s greatest challenges.

And while the Jewish community in America has so much to be grateful for, our challenges are too great to stand divided. Growing anti-Semitism across the country — and in our own backyards — requires a concerted response. The need of the many among us living in poverty and despair demands collective action. Jews searching for meaning and purpose deserve access to a more welcoming, inclusive community.

With so much to do, I hope you’ll join us.

For more than a century, UJA has been the backbone of the New York Jewish community. We bring together people of every type and background to address our most pressing challenges, and work to foster a greater sense of Jewish connection — in New York, in Israel, and around the world.

“What binds us?” we ask in these pages. The answers are complicated, and beautiful.

For me, “binding” brings to mind the mitzvah of wearing tefillin — an important daily ritual in my life for over 46 years. In the biblical verse familiar to many of us as the source of the Shema, we’re instructed to love God and to teach the words of the Torah to our children. The text goes on to command us, in an allusion to tefillin, to “bind them [i.e. the words of the Torah] as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 6:8) — all designed to draw us closer to God and God’s teachings.
In a similar vein, the prayer we recite when putting on the tefillin commits us to God — and, by extension, to each other — *b’tzedek u’v’mishpat u’v’chesed u’v’rachamim*, “in righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and mercy.”

In these times, this prayer powerfully resonates as a personal challenge to all of us. Can we begin the New Year committed to treating everyone — those we agree with and particularly those we do not — with righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and mercy?

As you read the essays that follow, we invite you to consider for yourself what binds us to one another — and what we might each do in 5780 to bring our community closer together.

*L’shanah tovah u’metukah. May it be a sweet and peaceful new year for all.*

Eric S. Goldstein  
*Chief Executive Officer, UJA-Federation*
A New Year Message from

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

What a powerful time of year the High Holidays are, defined by renewal, introspection, community, spirituality. On these days we are, each and all, invited to experience our deepest vulnerabilities and shortcomings. What a gift it can be to know that we made it this far and are blessed to begin again, to own our limitations and to reach higher in the new year.

It is fascinating to note that the rabbis who crafted the rituals of these days chose some of the hardest sections of the Hebrew Bible for public recitation. The very first day of Rosh Hashanah features the haunting verses of perhaps the most painful image in all of Jewish text: the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac. Why do we revisit this story, one even Rembrandt’s dark brush could barely render? Certainly less challenging texts could have been chosen.

So what might we learn from the choice of the Akeidah for one of our holiest days? What questions arise? Do we dare question the God who commands the unthinkable? Do we see Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son as admirable? Do we acknowledge Sarah’s absence from the narrative? Do we discuss God never speaking to Abraham again after the Akeidah? Do we hear the raw sound of the shofar, the horn of the ram whose sacrifice replaced Abraham’s child’s, as a commitment to a world where children are not sacrificed?

Our sacred text calls out these questions, and so many more. And perhaps that is the point. Perhaps the impossibility of truly answering the complexity of the narrative is precisely the point. Perhaps we are called by tradition in our communal experience of renewal to join the artists and rabbis, philosophers and poets across the centuries who have struggled to find meaning in an often-shaky world, where answers are rare, and questions abound. Maybe the very purpose of this reading is to provoke a creative communal response within a vulnerable world.
And, as the French, Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once suggested, what makes the Torah holy is its infinite possible meanings. No two people will experience the sacred in precisely the same way, and therefore each of us, as individuals, is crucial if we are to truly be a Kehillah Kedosha, a sacred community. UJA-Federation’s creative response to our vulnerable world is premised upon the conviction that each of us embodies a vital part of the whole. Diversity is holiness embodied.

We are truly blessed to feature in this publication diverse visions of our beautiful and intertwined Jewish community, a global family that eludes easy answers and embraces sacred questions. May our New York Jewish community, Israel, and the entire world be renewed through our loving, passionate work.

Shanah Tovah,

Rabbi Menachem Creditor
Pearl and Ira Meyer Scholar-in-Residence, UJA-Federation
Seven Principles for Maintaining Jewish Peoplehood

Jews are an argumentative people. We say “The Lord is my shepherd” but no Jew was ever a sheep. I remember once having a dialogue with the late and great Israeli novelist Amos Oz who began by saying, “I’m not sure I’m going to agree with Rabbi Sacks on everything, but then, on most things, I don’t agree with myself.”

Ours is the only civilization I know whose canonical texts are anthologies of arguments. The prophets argued with God; the rabbis argued with one another. We are a people with strong views — it is part of who we are. Our ability to argue, our sheer diversity, culturally, religiously, and in every other way, is not a weakness but a strength. However, when it causes us to split apart, it becomes terribly dangerous because whilst no empire on earth has ever been able to defeat us, we have, on occasions, been able to defeat ourselves.

It happened three times. The first was in the days of Joseph and his brothers when the Torah says, “They could no longer speak peaceably together.” The brothers sold Joseph as a slave and yet eventually they all, as well as their grandchildren, ended up in slavery. The second followed the completion of the first Temple. Solomon dies, his son takes over, the kingdom splits in two. That was the beginning of the end of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms. The third was during the Roman siege of Jerusalem when the Jews besieged inside were more focused on fighting one another than the enemy outside. Those three splits within the Jewish people caused the three great exiles of the Jewish people.

How then do we contain that diversity within a single people, bound together in fate and in destiny? I think there are seven principles.

1. Keep talking. Remember what the Torah says about Joseph and his brothers: Lo yachlu dabro leshalom. “They couldn’t speak to him in peace.” In other words Reb Yonason Eybeschutz says, had they kept speaking, eventually they would have made peace. So, keep talking to one another.

2. Listen to one another. There is good news about the Jewish people and bad news. The good news is we are amongst the greatest speakers in the world. The bad news is we are among the world’s worst listeners. “Shema Yisrael” calls on us to listen to one another in a way that we can actually hear what our opponent is saying. If we do this, we discover it is not just a powerful way to avoid conflict, but profoundly therapeutic as well.
3. **Work to understand those with whom you disagree.** Remember why the law follows Hillel as against Shammai. According to the Talmud, Hillel was humble and modest; he taught the views of his opponents even before his own. He labored to understand the point of view with which he disagreed.

4. **Never seek victory.** Never ever seek to inflict defeat on your opponents. If you seek to inflict defeat on your opponent, they must, by human psychology, seek to retaliate and inflict defeat on you. The end result is though you win today, you lose tomorrow, and in the end everyone loses. Do not think in terms of victory or defeat. Think in terms of the good of the Jewish people.

5. **If you seek respect, give respect.** Remember the principle of the Book of Proverbs: “As water reflects face to face, so does the heart of man to man.” As you behave to others, they will behave to you. If you show contempt for other Jews, they will show contempt to you. If you respect other Jews, they will show respect to you.

6. **I do not need you to agree with me, I just need you to care about me.** Jews will never agree on anything, but we remain one extended family. If you disagree with a friend, tomorrow he may no longer be your friend. But if you disagree with your family, tomorrow they are still your family. In the end, family is what keeps us together, and that is expressed best in the principle *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, All Jews are responsible for one another.

7. **Remember that God chose us as a people.** He did not choose only the righteous, He chose all of us. We stand before God as a people, and it is as a people that we stand before the world. The world does not make distinctions. Anti-Semites do not make distinctions. We are still united by a covenant of shared memory, of shared identity, of shared fate, even if we do not share the exact same faith.

So the next time you are tempted to criticize another Jew, or walk away from a group of Jews that you think have offended you, make that extra effort to stay together, to forgive, to listen, to try and unite, because if God loves each of us, can we try to do anything less?

*Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is an international religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author, and respected moral voice. Rabbi Sacks served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013.*
How to Fight Anti-Semitism

“All Jews must die.”

Those words, uttered by an anti-Semite as he gunned down eleven of my neighbors at Tree of Life on October 27, 2018, are the words that marked my before and after.

That line — the one that had been uttered in a different tongue by Amalek, the villain who stalked the weakest of the ancient Israelites in the desert on their way to the Promised Land; the one that had been echoed by Amalek’s ilk down through the generations; and the one that was now being shouted in ours — was my alarm bell. That line woke me up to the fact that I had spent much of my life on a holiday from history. And history, in a hail of bullets, had made its unequivocal return.

But the truth — a truth I had largely avoided as a member of the luckiest diaspora — is that there has not been a single moment in Jewish history in which there weren’t anti-Semites determined to eradicate Judaism and the Jews.

The other truth, the sweeter truth, is that they have never prevailed.

Think for a moment about the fact that no one in the world says “Hail, Caesar” anymore. There is not “one single Hittite” on the planet, as Walker Percy once observed, “even though the Hittites had a flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people.” And yet millions of Jews all over the world still recite the Shema in the same language.

What explains this earthly miracle?

One answer: The Jews did not sustain our magnificent civilization by being anti-anti-Semites. They sustained Judaism because they knew who they were and why they were. They were lit up not by fires from without but by the unquenchable fires in their souls.

Today we face a rising tide of anti-Semitism around the world that American Jewry has not escaped. But the right response is the same now as it has been for Jews of so many other times and places. The only sustainable way we can fight anti-Semitism is by
waging an affirmative battle for who we are. By entering the fray for our values. For our world-changing ideas. For our communities here and abroad. For the generations that gave us our lives — and for the generations that will come after us.

*Da lifnei mi atah omed.* Know before whom you stand. That phrase is inscribed over the ark in many synagogues around the world. Maybe you are looking at it right now.

Who do you stand before? I stand before the valor and the sacrifices of my ancestors. I stand before the iconoclasm of Abraham and Sarah. I stand before the faith of Rabbi Akiva. I stand before the courage of Hannah Senesh. I stand before the bravery of the Maccabees and the optimism of Anne Frank and the resilience of Natan Sharansky and the audaciousness of Theodor Herzl.

That is my proud legacy. That is the epic story I want to be part of, however tiny my role. Crucially, it is not a line of blood. The biblical Ruth, after all, was a convert from the Moabite people, one of the most hated groups in the Torah. She left her tribe and followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to the land of Israel. And it is Ruth’s line that Jews believe would give the world King David and, ultimately, the Messiah.

In other words, the line is not and has never been a simple matter of inheritance. It is a line of choice — and each one has to make it. I believe there is no greater honor.

*Bari Weiss is an op-ed writer and editor for The New York Times.*

*Her first book, How to Fight Anti-Semitism, was just published by Crown.*
In an Era of Online Rage — Prayer May Be the Answer

I was raised to pray daily. Judaism values routine above all — there are specific times for morning, afternoon, and evening prayers, and there are restrictions on each, in order to ensure consistency. Growing up, I loved this ritual dearly; it gave my day structure, purpose, focus.

But in recent years, I’ve been praying less. Adulthood sucked me into the relentless churn of modern life. I became a rabbi’s wife, I had two babies in two years, while working full-time throughout, in American Jewish media in the era of Charlottesville and Pittsburgh. Life quickly became an indecipherable blur, a daily marathon of survival and logistics, of keeping up with emails and tweets. I became a slave to my inbox, to my need to be “up to date,” to my group texts. And the first thing to go was my daily prayers. My main priority right now is my family, my work, and my community, I would console myself. God understands.

But what I learned was that God wasn’t the one who needed my prayers. It was I who needed them more.

As an adult, as a millennial, as a working mother, making time to whisper ancient words has taken on a whole other nature. It feels like a radical act of resistance.

Prayer is the ability to say no to the demands of technology; to turn off devices, close the door, and recite the afternoon service. It is a brief taste of Sabbath, slipped into the frenzy of the day-to-day; it allows one to put everything aside and turn away from screens to paper.

But even more than that — prayer is the ability to say no to the rages of the internet, to the way that online chatter and its algorithms pit us, increasingly, against one another. Taking part in a service allows one to share an experience with flesh and blood human beings, without the separation of a screen, without the ability to mute others when they bother you.
As we enter the Days of Awe, we are offered an annual moment to truly disconnect, to momentarily remove ourselves from the debates that consume and divide us. The Kol Nidrei prayer even grants us “permission to pray with the transgressors” — let us learn to pray alongside even those who “transgress” our political and religious views, those who vote and think differently. Let prayer do its magic, forcing us to stop for a moment and wonder: What am I actually doing to improve this world? Do I embody the values in the words I am reciting? Do I comport myself with kindness and humility, with the knowledge that there is Something Greater Than Me?

May it be God’s will that we merit to answer those questions with resounding confidence.

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A version of this essay appeared in Vox.
Acting with Urgency: Returning to Our Best Selves

Growing up I’d get questions like “Is that your nanny?” “Are you adopted?” “Is your mom from Ethiopia?” Because I had the lightest pigmentation in my family, I saw myself as an “undercover brother,” privy to conversations in the broader Jewish (and non-Jewish) community that may have otherwise never been uttered in front of a Jew of Color. With sidelocks and a black kippah, curiosity and a tinge of sadness, I grew up knowing my family had been slaves in America. I learned young that there was sometimes a disconnect between Jews and Judaism; between how people thought of themselves and what people actually did. It became clear to me that as human beings, one of our oldest primal instincts is to resist that which is hardest to do, and to ignore people who are hardest for us to identify with.

As rabbi-in-residence at Hazon and as a Jew of Color who grew up in Monsey, New York, I can attest that changing our habits and our prejudices as individuals and as a community is easier said than done. We sometimes say that we are bound to one another as a Jewish people in the 21st century. But the human condition, as we know, is complex. We are subject to, and sometimes capable of aggression, isolation, and tribalism. It is easy to forget about the climate crisis, or the lives of people on the margins.

It is well known that the Torah in thirty-six places (and some say in forty-six places) adjures us to not put pressure on the stranger. Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol (Bavli, Bava Metzia, 59b) suggests that this mitzvah had to be repeated so many times “because humanity has a disposition toward negative tendencies.” Jewish tradition understands this pull to the particularism of our own lives, and it goes out of its way, by repetition, to challenge us to think more deeply about others.

This period from the start of Elul to the end of Simchat Torah is, as we know, about teshuva. This is not just repentance, narrowly constructed. In a deeper sense it means a return — to being our best selves; to holding ourselves to higher standards.

And so this is the time of the year that my identity and my professional work align tightest of all.

As a Jew of Color — and with all that has happened in America, this year, and in the world — this is a moment that I call on you, and me, and all of us to build vibrant healthy
communities in which we care for those who are like us (however we understand that) and go the extra mile to welcome those who in whatever way might so easily feel themselves not part of the whole.

As rabbi-in-residence at Hazon, I see that it is shaping up to be — again — the hottest year in measured human history, and I believe this is also a time for “environmental teshuva.” It is on all of us — and on our institutions — to learn about the consequences of our behaviors, and to change our ways. Industrial meat and dairy, for instance, account for more than 15% of anthropogenic climate change. And that includes most of our kosher meat and kosher dairy. So we need to develop food policies in which we think more carefully about how we teach about the world, and how our commitment to kashrut — to eating what is fit for us to eat — is manifested in our communities.

Rosh Hashanah and the Jewish month of Tishrei are the ultimate social equalizers of the year (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:2). Flattening hierarchies between all peoples and binding us to all of humanity and planet earth, these times mark a distinct opportunity for all citizens to see themselves as an Adam and Eve: stewards of planet earth and the marginalized, building a legacy for a better tomorrow, year, and generation. What I find most remarkable about this time of year is that it ushers in a sense of collective urgency to reflect deeply on what we say; what we eat; what we use; how we interact with others; and how, who, and what we love or hate. A time to self-actualize, purify and humble, grow and change. A nation of movers becomes a nation of seekers, seeking out what binds us to ourselves, our communities, and the Divine.

My blessing is that this time of year lift your spirits to see this moment in human history as one that binds us to one another and also calls for our unique voice — and for deliberate and sustainable choices and actions. May we be blessed with the resilience needed to make steady change in our behaviors. May this be a time when we ask what sacred truths we hold to be self-evident, what spiritual choices we can make to help our planet heal. And may we act with urgency to think well about protecting our planet — for ourselves and our communities, and for our grandchildren ...

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Precisely Because We Are So Different, We Have Much to Learn from Each Other

What binds us — or at least ought to — is the fact that we are both new, successful far beyond anyone’s expectation, and vulnerable. Though the Jewish communities in America and in Israel think of themselves — quite rightly — as very different, perhaps the time has come to focus on the deep similarities between us.

Not all that long ago, in 1880, the combined Jewish population of the United States and Israel was 275,000, which then accounted for a mere 3% of the world’s Jews. But as it became clear to many Jews that Europe would become ever more hostile to them, millions left and went, among other places, to the United States and to the Land of Israel. Those two groups gave rise to today’s two great massive Jewish communities; some 85% of the world’s Jews now live in these two countries.

So we are both new — and we have both been exceedingly successful. In 1948, there were more Jews in New York City than there were in the entire State of Israel, but Israel is now the world’s largest Jewish community. A nation that once almost collapsed under the financial weight of a steady stream of immigrants is now an economic powerhouse. A ragtag army that barely held on during parts of the War of Independence is now a formidable force. A country with the population of Los Angeles wins Nobel prizes and other awards for excellence at an astounding pace. A nation with seemingly no natural resources turned human intellectual capital into its main resource, and now provides its citizens first-rate medical care, world-class universities, and technology that is changing the world. A country that took in millions of immigrants, mostly from places that were not democracies, turned those immigrants into citizens of a democracy that has never missed a beat. Those swamp-draining pioneers of old could hardly have expected this.

Yet those Jews who lined up at Ellis Island just over a century ago could not have imagined what American Judaism has wrought. Jews became part of the fabric of American life in a way they never had in any other diaspora land. From politics to the judiciary, from business to entertainment, from culture to education, Jews have contributed to America, and benefited from it, in ways that outstrip anyone’s expectations. America has been home to profound Jewish religious creativity, Jewish literature in a language not Jewish, and unprecedented experiences in Jewish pluralism and tolerance.
How different would our world be if, despite our differences, we began our conversations by recognizing what is extraordinary about the other.

But we are also both deeply vulnerable. In America, thousands of young Jews see no compelling reason to engage with Judaism. For many of them, it is an encounter with Israel — with the magnitude of Jewish history and the thickness of Jewish life — that makes peoplehood come alive. It is often in Israel that they suddenly see themselves as part of a glorious history, one of which they want to be a part. They learn that Jewishness is deeper than politics, that Jewish connections are more powerful than our divisions, and they emerge from their encounter with Israel’s success as ever more committed American Jews.

At the same time, the underbelly of Israel’s success is that self-sufficiency can lead to closemindedness. The culture of the Middle East can be less open or equal than we might like Israel to be. That’s why it’s worth noting that many of the institutions that have pushed the envelope on Israel’s thinking have been infused with American founders, teachers, and ideas. In my Jerusalem neighborhood alone reside Pardes, the Hartman Institute, Shalem College, the Israel Democracy Institute, Kehillat Zion, and more, each of which is pushing the envelopes of religious pluralism, intellectual openness, and civic equality and coexistence that have the potential to profoundly shape the still emerging Jewish state.

The United States is a liberal democracy, devoted to taking in the “tired ... poor ... huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” without regard to race, religion, or ethnicity. Israel is an ethnic democracy, created for a very different purpose — the saving of the Jewish people. That is why we will often see challenges differently and arrive at different conclusions about how we each ought to behave.

We can bridge that gap, though, if we recognize that we are both courageous, creative, and successful experiments in reimagining Jewish life, and that even in our success, we face vulnerabilities we can address more effectively if we learn from the accomplishments of our fellow Jews across the ocean.

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OUR DIVERSITY MAKES US STRONGER
Our tent is wide open to all. And in highly polarized times, that’s more important than ever. UJA is the place that welcomes voices across our community. We’re Jews of every denomination. Every color. Every ability. Every sexual orientation. What do we have in common? A desire to do good in our neighborhoods and in our world. And the conviction that **when Jews of all backgrounds come together, we’re at our strongest.**

Every day, we nurture Jewish communities, neighborhood by neighborhood, region by region. From Harlem to Fort Greene. From Kew Gardens to Riverdale. From Midwood to Mamaroneck. From Long Island to Staten Island.
We’re Jewish New Yorkers — audacious, creative, and proud of what makes each one of us unique.

We rally Jews of every background together around issues of common cause, like standing against anti-Semitism and responding to crises around the world. We’re fighting poverty in our community and breaking down barriers for people with disabilities. Strengthening identity and belonging for all Jews. Promoting religious, economic, and social inclusion for all Israelis — and building bridges between Israelis and world Jewry.

And we’re not just reinforcing the bonds between Jews of every stripe — we’re also building stronger coalitions with other faith-based communities here in New York, working to reject hate in all its forms and lift up the city we share.

OUR DOORS ARE WIDE OPEN. JOIN US.
Our collective action can change countless lives in profound ways.
We make it easy for you to get involved in the causes you care about.

Are you ready to get things done? In a time of widespread need and divisiveness, we offer a way forward. When you give to UJA's annual campaign, you’re touching a whole range of issues and impacting millions of people. You’re joining a community of innovators and problem-solvers, committed to changing the world.

Choose to give. Volunteer with us. Attend events. Advocate about the issues you care about. Or travel the world (or city!) and see your impact up close. Pick one way to get involved — or all of them — and you can make UJA yours and change lives while you do it.

As we come together in 5780, every one of us has a role to play in making the world a better place.

To learn more about UJA-Federation and how you can get involved, please contact community@ujafedny.org.
UJA-Federation of New York cares for Jews everywhere and New Yorkers of all backgrounds, responds to crises close to home and far away, and shapes our Jewish future.