

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah
September 12, 2026 – 1 Tishri, 5787
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

A few years back, a couple came to meet with me. Judaism was important to both, and they were looking forward to welcoming their first child – a boy. I've known them for years, but they were nervous. "What if," they asked, "we decided not to circumcise our son."

"Hmmm," I said. "I'm curious. What are you thinking?"

"Well," they said, "we are having a hard time with the idea that we will be mutilating our son."

"Mutilating?" I asked. "Well, yes," they said. "God makes us perfect, and then it's like we're ruining what God created."

We spent a lot of time talking that day. Jewish tradition, I explained, does not teach that we are born perfect. Instead, tradition teaches we are born with raw material, filled with potential. It is our mission, as we grow through life, to constantly do all we can to refine the raw material that God gave us.

The Midrash tells a story that an evil Roman Governor, Turnus Rufus, once confronted Rabbi Akiva, "If God wanted circumcision," he asked, "then why aren't babies born circumcised?" Rabbi Akiva brought him stalks of wheat and loaves of bread. He said to him, God provides us with extraordinary gifts, but it is up to us to refine them."¹

This day is called by many names. *Rosh HaShanah*, the Head of the Year; *Yom Truah*, the Day of Loud Blasts; *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. But the rabbis also called it *Yom Harat HaOlam*, the Day of the Earth's foundation.

How did the Universe come to be? Physics and Metaphysics describe the same process. From a massive surge of energy came primordial light, and from that energy was formed all that exists in the universe. The Kabbalah teaches that light was channeled into a mystical spectrum through which holiness could flow into the world – forming vessels of wisdom and understanding, lovingkindness and conviction, tranquility, perseverance, wonder and awe, all culminating in holy presence. And from that sacred foundation was summoned creation.

"And God saw that it was good." Every tree, plant, and shrub; every fish, bird, and beast – all are fully formed, perfect as they are. All except one. Us. We are like that glorious wheat – in desperate need of refinement. We are not born good – we are born with potential.

The gifts we are given are extraordinary – eyes that can see, ears that can hear, smell and taste and touch. We are given minds that can learn and souls that can feel.

¹ Adapted from Midrash Tanhuma Tazria 5:1

Our life's mission is to constantly seek to refine these gifts. We refine our bodies by learning to walk and run and practice skills to utilize our physical gifts. We refine our minds through education and learning, building our intellectual capacities to investigate, to reason, to form thoughts and ideas, opinions and beliefs. We refine our souls by cultivating awareness and gratitude, learning to be awed by the wonders of the natural world, to appreciate great music and art, to grow our capacities for empathy, compassion, and love.

And if we can succeed in refining ourselves, then we can learn to maximize what it can mean to be human – for ourselves, for each other, for our society, and for all the world.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, another universe was founded on the same universal ideals.

Following America's Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the American flag was determined to be "thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation."

Webster's dictionary defines a constellation as "an assemblage, collection, or group of usually related persons, qualities, or things." It can also mean: "the configuration of stars especially at one's birth."

This year we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of an extraordinary assemblage, collection and group of persons and qualities – the United States of America. The Hebrew word נר – Ner means light – and its value in Gematria is also 250. And America sought to be a beacon, calling on the inspiration of the prophet Isaiah, "to be a light to the nations."² Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Continental Congress, explained in 1782 that Red stands for hardiness and valor. White stands for purity and innocence. Blue stands for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. We all can recite our nation's founding values from The Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

After independence was secured, it was clear the new nation needed a stronger government to hold the union together. And so, they crafted a constitution. In its preamble, Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania began: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union..."

What an extraordinary statement – a more perfect union. I am enthralled with this sentiment. Intrinsic to this idea is that we are not perfect, nowhere near perfect, and yet it is

our mission as Americans to constantly engage in a process of perfection, of refinement, of making our country somehow "more perfect."

There is the ideal of what America aspires to be. And there is the reality of what America was and is.

² Isaiah 49:6

I love America. Truly, with every fiber of my being. I cannot express how fortunate I feel to have been born a citizen of this great country. I grew up in our nation's capital, the son of a civil servant and a new immigrant from Canada. For centuries, America has been a beacon of freedom and hope for oppressed people the world over. How blessed I am to enjoy America's guarantees of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religious expression, freedom of assembly, the right to petition my government, and to choose who will occupy seats of power.

It is American ingenuity, innovation, and industrial might that created the world as we know it – telephone, recorded sound, modern electric lighting, the commercial power station, the airplane, the assembly line, the sky-scraper, the air-conditioner, the credit card, the transistor, the microprocessor, the personal computer, the iPod, the iPhone, the iPad, the space shuttle, the internet, GPS, the vaccine for polio, open heart surgery, the MRI, the map of the human genome, the acoustic guitar, the Broadway musical, cinema, jazz, R&B, and Rock and Roll.

But like humanity, America was not born perfect. For centuries for most Americans, those truths were not self-evident. Over the past 250 years, America has committed sins and caused hurt that is hard for the human mind and human heart to fathom. For 246 years, Americans enslaved millions of people in brutal and torturous bondage, and followed it up with decades of dehumanizing segregation and oppression. America, in the name of “Manifest Destiny,” perpetrated a genocidal campaign of slaughter and expulsion against the native peoples of this land. For 143 years following our nation's founding, women were denied the right to full citizenship and the vote – with a legacy of inequality that exists through today. The country that George Washington hoped would become “a safe & agreeable Asylum to the virtuous & persecuted part of mankind,” instead persecuted each successive wave of those who sought to immigrate. We forced LGBTQ people into the closet, and when they came out, we fired them from their jobs, we kicked them out of the military, and threw them in jail. For too many decades antisemitism denied Jews entry into universities, professional associations, hospital staffs, and country clubs.

America is a story of contradiction. As historian Jill Lepore writes, “A nation founded on the idea that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights and offering asylum to anyone suffering from persecution is a beacon to the world. This is America at its best: a nation that welcomes dissent, protects free speech, nurtures invention, and makes possible almost unbelievable growth and prosperity. But a nation founded on ideals, on universal truths, also opens itself up to charges of hypocrisy at every turn. Those charges do not lie outside the plot of the story of America, or underneath it. They are its plot, the history on which any twenty-first century case for the American nation has to rest, a history of struggle and agony and courage and promise.”³

And in most ways, to quote Lin Manuel Miranda – “we are just like our country.” Look within and decide for yourself. Think about how you used the gift of this past year. How closely did you tack toward the holy ideal?

³ Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case For The Nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2019, pp. 45-46.

We consider ourselves to be loving spouses, supportive parents, devoted children, loyal friends, compassionate people, ethical professionals, committed Jews. This is what we tell ourselves we are, and then there is what we've truly shown ourselves to be.

How often did you take your family for granted, showing little to no gratitude for all they are and do? How many friendships did you fail to nurture, and how often did you fail to show up? How often did you hold a grudge, or refuse to ask or grant forgiveness, and instead chose to marinate in a stew of resentment and bitterness? How often did you lose your patience or your temper, jumping to conclusions while ignorant of the facts? How often did you allow your heart to be hardened with arrogant certainty, your mind assuaged by simplistic answers, your soul given over to hate? How often did you close your eyes to injustice, and close your wallet to the needy? How often were you dishonest in business, dishonest with others, dishonest with yourself, sacrificing your integrity for a short-term gain? How often did you blow off the Sabbath or a Festival or deliberately chose to ignore opportunities for learning and to grow in wisdom? How often did you sail through life completely oblivious - too busy loving yourself that you failed to show love for your neighbor, the stranger, or anyone else?

The prophet Kohelet was right when he wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes: כִּי אֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחְטָא – “For there is not a righteous person on earth who does what is good and does not err.”⁴

It's agonizing to sit with one's failures. It's excruciating to be confronted with the awfulness of the deeds we've done. It's humiliating to have our hypocrisy held up before us.

So what are we to do?

One option is to bury our heads in the sand and erect steep walls of denial, explaining away and justifying our failures, condemning those who dare to raise them as dangerous or disloyal.

Another is to throw up our hands and say, “That's the way it is. Nothing is ever going to change.” We can ridicule our ideals as naïve fantasies, our values as quaint notions that cannot stand the pressure of “the real world,” pretending it doesn't matter if we live with integrity, or stand by the courage of our convictions.

Or we can do what God intended us to do. We can change. Who we chose to be yesterday does not have to determine who we will be tomorrow. We can refine ourselves. Rebbe Nachman teaches: אִם אַתָּה מַאֲמִין שְׂכִיבֹלִין לְקַלְקֵל, תִּאֲמִין שְׂכִיבֹלִין לְתַקֵּן - “If you believe that it is possible to damage, believe that it is possible to repair.”⁵

This is the essence of Teshuvah – this is what we've been called here to do. We cannot grow to be who we are meant to be, who we ought to be, who we want to be, unless we are honest with who we have been and what we have done. It is actually when

⁴ Ecclesiastes 7:20

⁵ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov - *Likutei Moharan* II 112:1

we sit with our failure and our shame that we truly realize the glory of the values and principles toward which we should strive.

Sitting with our hypocrisy isn't simply holy – it's patriotic, because it will spur us to recognize that our country, and we, need not remain hopelessly hypocritical and irredeemably broken, but instead we can choose to be hopefully humble and irredeemably aspirational.

A Hasidic parable teaches that there is a ladder planted in our world that rises to very highest vaults of God's realm. The rebbe asked his students, "How long is that ladder?"

"It's infinite," they replied.

"That's correct," the Rebbe said. "Each one of us is somewhere on that ladder. And wherever we find ourselves, there are an infinite number of rungs below us, and an infinite number of rungs above us. So, no matter how righteous a life we live, we will likely never make it all the way to the top. And no matter how badly we fail, we will likely never fall all the way to the bottom. So, then, what is it that God expects us to do?"

And the answer was simply: "Climb."

We need to cultivate the courage to believe that our failures need not have the final word.

I know I have been impatient. But I can strive to become more patient.

I know I have been selfish. But I can choose to be more generous.

I know I am often distracted. But I can choose to be more present and focused.

I know I am not always available to my loved-ones. But I can learn to open my heart.

If I have damaged a relationship, I can seek to repair it.

If I have indulged my resentments, I can choose forgiveness.

If I am not who I aspire to be, then I can continue to reach for my aspirations.

Our nation may not always have been what it promised to be. And we have not always been the people we ought to have been, but our country is not finished becoming what it can be, and we are not finished becoming what we aspire to be.

Langston Hughes in his famous poem "Let America be America again" wrote:

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

...

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.

...
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath —
America will be!

In this New Year 5787, let the sound of the shofar remind us that we are not yet good, but good we can still choose to be. On this 250th anniversary of the founding of this glorious nation, let it call us to return to our founding principles, together build an America that is a light to the nations. Let it call us to refine the holy sacred gifts given to us, that we might grow in this New Year to become ever more refined, and more the partners with God we all hope to be.