A More Perfect Covenant

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

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Tonight feels like one of those nights where there is something weighty in the air. The sun has set on the final day of 5786. We've entered Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, the beginning of the *yemim noraim*, the ten days of awe devoted to memory, judgment, and return.

And speaking of birthdays, this year our country is celebrating its 250th birthday. Two and a half centuries have passed since a group of deeply imperfect people placed their names beneath a breathtaking promise: that all people are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights.

And tonight is September 11th .

Exactly twenty-five years ago this morning, four airplanes were hijacked. Two struck the World Trade Center. One struck the Pentagon. One crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after its passengers and crew fought back. Nearly three thousand lives were taken. Countless others were changed forever.

Three anniversaries meet tonight: the birthday of the world, the birthday of our nation, and the anniversary of one of the deepest wounds our nation has ever endured.

When I think about that these three moments converging, I am left with a question: What does Judaism ask of us as Americans in this moment? Not: Are we proud of America? Not: Are we disappointed in America? But what is the Jewish way of loving a country? What is the Jewish way of remembering its wounds? What is the Jewish way of living among people who increasingly struggle to recognize one another as members of the same national community?

On a birthday, we celebrate. We sing. We tell stories. We remember what first drew us together. But Rosh Hashanah teaches us that a birthday is also a day of judgment. According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of humanity. And because it is the anniversary of our creation, it becomes the day on which we ask what we've done with the life we were given. A Jewish birthday is not only an occasion for cake. It is an occasion for *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. And so, as America turns two hundred and fifty, perhaps the most patriotic thing we can do is not merely congratulate our country, but help it examine its soul.

The Declaration of Independence announced that all people are created equal. But many of the men who signed it enslaved other human beings. Its promises didn't initially include women,

Native Americans, or Black Americans. Its words reached farther than the moral imagination of many of its authors. And yet those words mattered.

Generations of Americans took that unfinished promise and demanded that it become a reality. Abolitionists invoked it. Suffragists invoked it. Frederick Douglass held America accountable to it. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described it as a promissory note that America had failed to honor. Immigrants arrived believing that those words might make room for them too. America has never fully been the nation described in its founding documents. But at its best, America has been a country capable of being summoned by its own promises.

Judaism understands that kind of relationship. We know that love is not the same as uncritical approval. The prophets loved Israel fiercely. That's why they challenged it so fiercely. Isaiah didn't condemn injustice because he wanted Israel to disappear. Amos didn't rebuke corruption because he despised his people. Jeremiah didn't weep because he'd stopped caring. They spoke because covenantal love refuses to confuse loyalty with silence. The opposite of love isn't criticism. The opposite of love is indifference.

To love America Jewishly is to be grateful for what this nation has made possible while refusing to pretend that gratitude cancels responsibility. It's to cherish America not as a perfect country, but as an unfinished covenant. And if the 250th anniversary asks us to consider the promise of America, the 25th anniversary of September 11th asks us to consider the people who are supposed to fulfill it together.

Many of us remember where we were that morning. We remember the confusion of the first reports. We remember watching the second plane strike and realizing that this was not an accident. We remember the towers falling. We remember the photographs taped to walls and fences: faces of husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and coworkers who had not come home. We also remember what happened afterward.

People lined up to give blood. Firefighters and police officers ran toward danger while others fled from it. Construction workers, clergy, medical professionals, restaurant owners, and volunteers found ways to serve. People gathered in parks, town halls, college campuses, synagogues, churches, mosques, and public squares because grief was too heavy to carry alone. For a time, we recovered a sense that another American's suffering was our concern.

I don't want to romanticize that moment. The unity after September 11th was real, but it wasn't complete. Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, Sikh Americans, and others who were perceived to be Muslim became targets of suspicion and violence. Fear turned quickly into scapegoating. Our government made choices about war, torture, surveillance, and civil liberties whose consequences we continue to carry.

Some people were pulled into the American embrace. Others were pushed outside it. That, too, is part of the accounting. But something sacred was visible in those first days: the recognition that beneath all our differences, our lives were bound together. We didn't suddenly have one mind.

We didn't agree about politics, religion, foreign policy, or what should happen next. But for a brief moment, many Americans remembered that we shared a heart.

Twenty-five years later, that memory can feel almost impossibly distant. Today, tragedy often doesn't unite us. It becomes material for the next argument. Before the facts are clear, before families have been notified, before bodies have been buried, we rush to decide which political narrative the suffering confirms. We ask who can be blamed, which side benefits, which group must apologize.

We've become frighteningly skilled at withholding compassion until we know whether the person suffering belongs to our camp. We don't merely disagree about how to solve our problems. Increasingly, we disagree about whether the people on the other side are worthy of concern. And that isn't only a political crisis. It is a spiritual crisis. Our tradition describes an earlier moment when a fractured people discovered how to stand together.

In the Book of Exodus, Chapter 19, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai. The Torah says: *"Vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar*" "And Israel encamped there before the mountain." Rashi notices something unusual. Throughout the wilderness journey, the Torah describes the Israelites in the plural. They journeyed. They camped. They complained. They argued. But here, suddenly, the verb is singular: *vayichan* "he encamped." Rashi explains: *"K'ish echad b'lev echad"* "like one person with one heart." It is a beautiful image. But it's also easily misunderstood.

We sometimes imagine that the people became one because everyone finally agreed. The arguments stopped. The differences disappeared. For one perfect moment, they all thought the same way. But that can't be what the tradition means.

The people who stood at Sinai were not identical. They had different histories, different fears, different capacities, and different understandings of what they heard. The Judaism that emerged from Sinai would become a civilization of argument, interpretation, minority opinions, and sacred disagreement. Sinai didn't give the Jewish people one mind. Sinai gave a people with many minds one heart. What made them one wasn't agreement. It was covenant. It was the recognition that whatever came next, they would be responsible for carrying it together. That is what America needs now.

America doesn't need us all to think alike. Democracy depends upon disagreement. It depends upon competing ideas, contested elections, a free press, protest, debate, and the ability to challenge those who hold power. But democracy also depends upon something deeper than rules and institutions. It depends upon the conviction that the person with whom I disagree remains part of my moral world. That your vote matters even when I don't like it. That your freedom matters even when you use it to criticize something I love. That your child's safety matters as much as my child's safety. That an attack on your house of worship diminishes my freedom to worship. That your grief doesn't have to pass an ideological test before I'm willing to mourn with you. The problem isn't that America has too many minds. The problem is that we are losing

our shared heart. A country can survive disagreement. However, It can't survive contempt without limit.

To me, there is a reason why we place a hand over our hearts when we pledge allegiance and not over the head. A nation is sustained not only by shared ideas, but by shared affection, shared sacrifice, and shared responsibility. Yet affection for country can't mean pretending that everything done in its name is righteous. Jewish tradition is suspicious of that kind of worship. Pharaoh demanded obedience. The prophets demanded accountability. The Jewish contribution to American patriotism is not blind devotion. It's covenantal loyalty: gratitude joined to responsibility, belonging joined to moral courage, love joined to the possibility of teshuvah.

That's why Rosh Hashanah is such an important night on which to consider America. The liturgy doesn't ask us to declare ourselves irredeemably wicked. Nor does it invite us to announce that we have nothing to change. It asks us to tell the truth. We are more than our failures, and we are responsible for our failures. We are capable of returning.

What would national teshuvah look like? It would begin with memory. Not nostalgia, but honest memory. It would remember the firefighters climbing the stairs on September 11th. It would also remember the Muslim family afraid to leave its home on September 12th. It would remember the soaring language of 1776, and it would also remember the people whom that declaration left in chains. It would remember the generations who fought to widen the circle of American freedom, and it would also recognize that the circle remains unfinished.

National teshuvah would require us to stop treating our fellow Americans as abstractions. It would ask us to become curious again. To listen not merely for the weak point in another person's argument, but for the wound or hope held beneath it.

It would ask us to recover the difference between disagreement and dehumanization. There are ideas that must be challenged. There are policies that cause real harm. There are lies that cannot be allowed to stand. A heart of many rooms doesn't require us to pretend that every idea is equally wise or moral. But moral clarity doesn't require contempt.

We can oppose what another person believes without taking pleasure in their suffering. We can fight for justice without deciding that millions of our neighbors are disposable. We can lose an election without abandoning democracy and win an election without treating victory as permission to humiliate those who lost. This is harder than outrage.

Outrage is fast. Covenant is slow. Outrage tells us that our responsibility ends at the edge of our camp. Covenant tells us that we remain answerable for the whole. Outrage offers the temporary satisfaction of certainty. Covenant demands humility, patience, and the willingness to stay in relationship.  Outrage may drive people to vote, but covenant is how a people survives.

Two hundred and fifty years is an extraordinary achievement. America has endured a civil war, assassinations, depressions, pandemics, terrorist attacks, and periods of profound moral failure. It

has also expanded freedom, welcomed generations of immigrants, nurtured remarkable creativity, and allowed Jewish life to flourish in ways our ancestors could scarcely have imagined.

Our task isn't to decide whether America's story is a story of greatness or a story of failure. It is both. The question is what chapter we will help write next.

Twenty-five years after September 11th, can we recover not the false innocence of that moment, but its truest insight, that we belong to one another? Two hundred and fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, can we renew its promise without denying its unfinished work? At the beginning of 5787, can we become a people capable of honest memory, courageous argument, and shared responsibility?

Tonight, the shofar has marked the beginning of a new year, tomorrow it will call us to wake up. Perhaps it will call out to our nation as well. Wake up from contempt. Wake up from the fantasy that we can secure our future by destroying one another. Wake up from the belief that loving America requires us to lie about it, or that telling the truth about America requires us to stop loving it.

The shofar asks us to return. Return to the promise that all people are created equal. Return to the recognition that freedom is never inherited passively. Return to the knowledge that we can have many minds and still share one heart.

America is 250 years old. It is old enough to know how easily fear can distort its highest ideals, and it is still young enough to change. May this be the year in which we help our country remember its covenant. May we argue fiercely without abandoning one another. May we love our nation enough to demand its teshuvah. And may we become, once again, not one nation of one mind, but one nation capable of a shared heart.

Amen