A Soul at Rest in an Unquiet World

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

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Rosh Hashanah 5787 Day Two

It's 2:17 in the morning. The room is dark except for the light of a phone. Maybe you picked it up only to check the time. But there was a notification. Then a headline. Then another article explaining why the first headline was even worse than it appeared. Then a video you didn't intend to watch and in the comments section you find yourself fixated on argument among strangers you don't even know. Your body is lying in bed, but it's no longer resting. Your jaw tightens. Your heart beats a little faster. Your mind begins composing responses to problems you can't solve at 2:17 in the morning. Eventually, you put the phone facedown. The news has not improved. Nothing's been resolved. But now you are more awake, more anxious, and less prepared for the day that will begin in a few hours.

Maybe the hour is different for you. Maybe it happens over breakfast, in the car, between meetings, or in the few minutes before services begin. But many of us know the feeling: the world reaches into what should have been a quiet moment and recruits our bodies into its emergency. And lately, the emergency never seems to end.

I hear it in the exhaustion in people's voices. I see it when a conversation turns angry almost before it's begun, or when someone tells me that they no longer speak to a friend or family member because every interaction has become a political argument.

I notice it in how difficult it has become simply to be present. Present at a meal, in a conversation, in prayer without part of the mind reaching toward whatever crisis may have developed in the last five minutes. Is this how we want to live?

Of course, the world can be frightening and there are real reasons to be angry. And I'm not saying we should we stop paying attention, retreat into comfort, or become indifferent to the suffering around us? Our Judaism prevents us from considering that.

What I really want us to wrestle with is whether permanent anxiety, permanent outrage, and permanent tension are the only faithful ways to inhabit a difficult world. Because many of us are tired. Not the kind of tired that can be cured by one good night of sleep. We are tired in our souls.

We're tired of feeling that every headline brings a new emergency. Tired of bracing ourselves before opening our phones. Tired of conversations in which everyone seems ready to be offended, and no one seems ready to be surprised. Tired of being told that if we aren't furious every moment of every day, we must not care enough.

Some of us carry it in our shoulders, our stomachs, our sleep, and our blood pressure. Some of us live with a low hum of dread that never completely goes away. Some of us have become so accustomed to tension that we no longer remember what it feels like to move through the world without clenching. And perhaps most troubling, we have begun to treat this state as virtuous.

We confuse being informed with being continually activated. We confuse anger with moral seriousness. We worry that if we let ourselves rest, laugh, or experience joy, we're somehow betraying the people who are suffering. But we're not made to live like this.

The human nervous system is remarkably good at responding to immediate danger. A threat appears. Our heart beats faster. Our breathing changes. Energy rushes to our muscles. Our field of attention narrows. We become ready to fight or flee.

That response can save a life. But the body can't remain in emergency mode forever without paying a price. And neither can the soul. An alarm is meant to wake us. It's not meant to become the music by which we live.

Yesterday, we spoke about refusing to let antisemitism define Jewish life. I said that fear may warn us, but it cannot become the foundation of who we are. This morning, I want to widen that teaching. We can't allow this amped-up lifestyle to become the foundation of how we live.

We don't need to care less. We need to learn how to carry what we care about differently. Jewish tradition has a name for the inner quality we need: *menuchat hanefesh*, rest or settledness of the soul. *Menuchat hanefesh* doesn't mean passivity. It doesn't mean that nothing upsets us or that we withdraw from the world's pain. It means cultivating an inner steadiness from which we can respond to life rather than being controlled by every provocation. Jewish tradition gives us a figure who reaches precisely this point: the prophet Elijah.

If you know Elijah, then you know he isn't indifferent. He isn't detached. He has devoted himself completely to confronting injustice and idolatry. He has challenged King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He has stood alone against the prophets of Baal. He has poured everything he has into the struggle.

And then, after yet another threat against his life, Elijah runs. He flees into the wilderness, sits down beneath a broom tree, and says, *"Rav atah, Adonai*, It is too much now, God." The Bible is startlingly honest about his despair. Elijah, the fierce prophet who has faced down kings, has reached the point where he cannot imagine taking another step.

And what does God say to him? At first, nothing. There is no lecture about courage. No reminder of his responsibilities. No rebuke for insufficient faith. An angel touches Elijah and says, "*Kum echol*—Rise and eat." Beside him is a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. Elijah eats. He drinks. And then he goes back to sleep. The angel returns a second time and again says, "Rise and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Only after Elijah has slept, eaten, and regained his strength does God ask him to continue the journey.

I love the spiritual wisdom of that sequence. God doesn't treat Elijah's exhaustion as a moral failure. God recognizes that a depleted person may need care before instruction, nourishment before revelation, rest before deciding what comes next. Elijah travels to Mount Horeb. There he encounters a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire. But the text tells us that God is not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire. Then comes *kol demamah dakah,* a still, small voice, or perhaps, as another translation has it, the sound of sheer silence. Only in that quiet can Elijah hear again.

That is *menuchat hanefesh.* It is not refusing to name what is dangerous or unjust. It's creating enough quiet within ourselves to discern what the moment actually asks of us. So much of modern life is designed to keep us in the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. Always alert, always reacting, never quiet enough to discern. The technology we carry in our pockets has learned that outrage holds our attention. The more frightened or furious we are, the longer we remain engaged. The longer we remain engaged, the more profitable our attention becomes.

We tell ourselves that we're checking the news. But often the news is checking us and testing which fear, insult, or provocation will keep us from looking away. This isn't a failure of individual willpower. Enormous systems are built to reach into our nervous systems. But Judaism has always understood that spiritual freedom requires limits.

The most obvious example is Shabbat. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is Shabbat." The rabbis notice the impossibility of the phrase "do all your work." Who among us has ever reached Friday evening with every task completed? There is always another email. Another errand. Another article we should read. Another problem that remains unsolved. Shabbat doesn't arrive when the work is finished. Shabbat arrives because the work will never be finished. For twenty-five hours, we practice living as though the world can continue without our constant management. We stop not because nothing matters, but because we are more than what we produce, fix, monitor, and fear.

In the biblical story, Pharaoh can't understand this. Pharaoh believes that any pause in labor is laziness. He responds to Moses' request for worship by increasing the people's workload. Pharaoh's world has no Shabbat because Pharaoh's power depends upon people believing that they may never stop. When we can't put down our work, our news, our anxiety, or our outrage, Pharaoh has followed us out of Egypt.

Shabbat isn't merely rest. It is resistance to every force that tells us we must remain useful, vigilant, and agitated at every moment. The High Holy Days offer a similar interruption. We step outside the ordinary flow of time. We sit for longer than is comfortable. We hear melodies that slow us down. We repeat prayers whose wisdom can't be absorbed at the speed of a scroll.

And perhaps, somewhere in this spaciousness, we can hear the question: Is this how I want to live? Do I want the loudest voices in society to determine the quality of my inner life? Do I want people I don't respect to have the power to ruin my day with a single post? Do I want every meal

to become a debate, every relationship to become a referendum, and every quiet moment to be filled by a screen? Do I want my children to remember me as someone who was always worried about the world but rarely present in the room? These aren't questions about caring less. They're questions about whether our way of caring is sustainable.

The Torah repeatedly describes God as "*erekh apayim*." We translate the phrase as "slow to anger," but its literal image is more physical. It suggests lengthened breath and creating space between provocation and response. God's greatness isn't that God never becomes angry. The Bible contains plenty of divine anger. The greatness is that anger doesn't always get the first or final word.

We, too, need to recover the space between what happens and what we do next. Before sending the message. Before sharing the article. Before deciding what another person's worst sentence tells us about their entire character. Before allowing someone else's anger to recruit our own. A breath isn't surrender. A pause isn't moral cowardice. Sometimes the most courageous act is refusing to let another person determine who we will become in the next moment.

Jewish spiritual tradition teaches that a broken heart and a joyful heart are not opposites. A mature heart can contain both. This is another expression of a heart with many rooms. One room holds grief. One holds outrage. One holds gratitude. One holds wonder. One holds fear. One holds hope. The goal isn't to lock the painful rooms and pretend they aren't there. It's to refuse to let any single room become the whole house.

For some of us, this will require more than a sermon or a spiritual practice. Anxiety and depression are real medical conditions. Therapy and medication aren't evidence of insufficient faith. They are among the ways we care for the bodies and minds that God has given us. But all of us can ask whether we have developed habits that continually feed agitation.

Perhaps the teshuvah we need this year is a teshuvah of attention. Teshuvah means return. Can we return our attention to the people actually in front of us? Can we create boundaries around when and how we take in the news? Can we allow a meal to be only a meal? Can we reclaim Shabbat as a real sanctuary in time? Can we begin or end the day with a blessing rather than a notification? Can we take a walk without turning it into an opportunity to consume more information? Can we listen to someone without preparing our response while they're still speaking? Can we experience joy without first proving that we've earned it? Joy is not betrayal. Rest is not indifference. Beauty is not denial. We don't honor the dead by refusing to live. We don't help the suffering by destroying our own capacity to help. We don't repair the world by allowing everything broken in the world to break us.

Tomorrow, the crises will still be there. There will still be injustice that demands our action. There will still be people who need us to speak, organize, give, protest, comfort, and show up. But the world doesn't need us perpetually furious. It needs us courageous. It needs us discerning. It needs us capable of listening. It needs us able to distinguish the urgent from the merely loud. It

needs us strong enough to remain in the work for years, not only for the duration of one burst of outrage.

And the people we love need more than our concern for the world. They need our presence. They need our laughter. They need to know that their lives are not interruptions to whatever is happening on our phones. They need us to help create homes in which the world's pain is acknowledged, but the world's beauty is still allowed to enter.

As I said yesterday, the shofar we hear on Rosh Hashanah is a piercing sound. It resembles an alarm. But notice what happens after each blast. Silence and then singing. The blast awakens us. The silence allows us to hear what the awakening is for and enables us to sing with joy.

This year, may the shofar awaken us not only to everything that is wrong, but to everything that is still ours to love. May we cultivate *menuchat hanefesh*, a soul steady enough to face an unsteady world. May we learn that a single heart can contain grief and joy, urgency and patience, moral courage and deep rest. And when the question comes, "Is this how we want to live?" may we have the courage to answer: no! We can live with greater intention. We can live with more room to breathe. We can care deeply without surrendering our souls to fear. We can carry the world without imagining that we must carry it alone. We can live differently. And in this new year, with God's help, may we begin anew.

Amen.