

RH morning sermon 2026

Find your soul friend

Have you ever wondered how you would describe what it feels like to be Jewish? Not what our values are, or what we believe, or even our observance, as there is certainly no uniform way to practice Judaism. Not how to describe the Torah if you had to *al regel achat*, as we say, on one foot. Our sages already took care of that one. Not Jewish guilt or Jewish arguments or even Jewish food, though I could write this whole sermon on how central food is to our identity.

I mean, what does it *feel* like to be a Jew? In your cells. In your bones. There will obviously never be one answer to this question—I mean, we are Jews after all—but I want us to try anyway. For me at least, a person who has been called to this sacred path of service to the Jewish community, being Jewish feels like a deep yearning, a longing, an ache in my body and soul. It feels like an urgent pull towards God, an almost painful but also intimately beautiful desire for union with the holy. There's a fire in there too, a Jewish furnace within me, that burns for justice and righteousness, that calls me to wrestle with our sacred texts and with my fellow seekers, in an attempt to quench this spiritual thirst. And of course there is also tremendous joy, and profound gratitude that I am Jewish.

There is something very special and unique about walking a Jewish path in life, the way that our souls carry within them this mix of deep longing punctuated by ecstatic joy. There are plenty of Jewish jokes that make light of the ache, the 'meh' and the 'oy' of

being a Jew, followed by laughter. But underneath it all is something ancient, a primal part of the Jewish identity, this steady drumbeat of yearning that pulls us Jews towards one another. It's the idea behind the Yiddish word 'landsman', originally used by immigrants in the diaspora to greet or describe a fellow Jew who came from the same European village or district. It's feeling kinship with another who is far from home, whose soul longs to return. *Hashiveinu Adonai v'nashuvah*, return us Oh God, to you, and we will return, we say over these holy days. Take us back home.

We see this foundational Jewish longing come to life in a beautiful midrash in the Otzar Midrashim, a famous 20th-century Hebrew reference work. In this midrash, it is the end of Moses's life and we find him pleading with God to allow him to enter the land of Israel before he dies:

Moses stood in prayer before the Holy Blessed One, the midrash begins. He said before God: "Sovereign of the Universe, if I need to die so that Joshua, my student, can bring the Israelites into the land, then he can be the leader, and I'll be his student. He can be like the High Priest and I'll be like a regular priest. He can be like the king and I'll be like a servant, and I will go and see the Land of Israel." The Holy Blessed One said: "I have sworn by My Great Name that you shall not cross the Jordan."

Moses replied and said before God: "Sovereign of the Universe, give me permission to be a bird of the skies through the power of Your Name, and I will make my two arms like the wings of dawn, and I will spread them in the air of the world above the Jordan, and I

will go and see the land!” The Holy Blessed One said to him, “If you do so, you will consider yourself to have crossed the Jordan, and my oath will be void.”

Moses tries again: “Sovereign of the Universe, I will be like a fish through the power of Your Name, and I will make my two arms like two fins and all the hairs of my body like scales, and I will jump into the Jordan and pass through the depths, and I will go and see the Land of Israel.” But The Holy Blessed One said to him: “If you do so, it will be as if you crossed and my oath will be void. Furthermore, the depths are Jonah’s, not yours.”

Moses then gets more desperate and says before God: “Sovereign of the Universe, cut me limb by limb and throw me above the Jordan in the hand of the angel Gabriel, and afterward let me live and stand me on my feet so that I will go and see the land.” Can you hear the primal Jewish ache?

But The Holy Blessed One responds once again: “If you do so, it will be as if you crossed and my oath will be void.”

Moses, defeated, tries one more time: “Sovereign of the Universe, show it to me as an image.” And finally God relents: “In this matter I will listen to you,” as it is said, ‘You will see the land from the other side’ (Devarim 32:52).” At that time, the Holy Blessed One showed Moses all the Land of Israel, four hundred spans by four hundred spans. God gave him power in his eyes so that he could see it all in one look from top to bottom, the lowest and the highest, the hidden and the revealed, the far and the near. At that

time, the Holy Blessed One said to Moses: “This is the land that I swore to Abraham...”
(Devarim 34:4)

When I read this text I thought, no wonder my heart hurts all the time! It isn’t just me who was made this way. We all were! This is what it feels like to be Jewish, to feel our longing fervently, passionately, and to spend our lives trying to fulfill it. It’s the holy and the broken hallelujah.

When I was in cantorial school, I was taught that the secret to becoming a true chazzan—a true cantor—someone who could bring a congregation to both spiritual heights and depths, was mastering the art of the *krechitz*. The *krechitz* is a mournful wail, a Jewish sigh, an essential sound that sits at the center of *chazzanut*, of cantorial music. Those of us who could learn to use the *krechitz* at just the right time when leading prayer knew what it felt like to hold the souls of a congregation in our hands. It’s the difference between an aria and a prayer, between a song and a plea, the sound that breaks up a line of music to allow the broken heart of the Jewish people to come through. It’s this (model a minor scale) versus this (model a minor scale with a *krechitz*). The *krechitz*, writes rabbi and cantor Angela Buchdahl in her memoir, *Heart of a Stranger*, “sits somewhere between a howl and a hiccup. It is the sometimes-pleading, sometimes-weeping, often-wistful sound that emanates from deep in your kishkes. It’s raw, a little jagged. The person hearing it should feel something breaking, entreating, lamenting...it is the sound of pain, passion, and heartache—the fullness of Jewish experience. It’s a quintessentially Jewish sound—the way our people have expressed sorrow and the way we’ve survived it. Jews are not a people who repress pain; we let it out...Perhaps it was

the *krechitz* that saved a people through millenia of pain. Today, it might just save us again.” (*Heart of a Stranger*, page 174-175)

That small but mighty sound symbolizes something essential to our nature as Jews. Once you go looking for it, you find it everywhere in our texts and rituals. It’s the soundtrack to the mystical shattering that began all of creation, when God’s Divine light could not be contained and was scattered as holy sparks across the cosmos; it’s the broken glass at a Jewish wedding, a physical embodiment of the *krechitz* that we take with us into our marriages; and it’s the tablets that Moses smashed on the ground when the Israelites betrayed the Holy One at the foot of Mount Sinai. This ache is core to our Jewish DNA, an inheritance claimed by those of us born as Jews as well as those who have chosen into our people.

But as essential as this longing is, it’s not our whole story. We are not a sad people. And we are definitely not a broken people, despite the cracked sound that lives in our souls. To the contrary. This intimacy with longing and brokenness is why we have survived, why we thrive, why we know joy and humor, and have a deep understanding of just how whole we can be when we invite the shattered pieces to live within us.

One of my favorite passages from the Talmud, from Bava Batra 14a, illustrates this teaching beautifully. After Moses smashes the first set of tablets, after *chet ha’egel*, the sin of the golden calf, God says to him, “I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark.” (Deuteronomy 10:2) But the verse is ambiguous. What shall be placed in the ark? The

second tablets? The first tablets that were smashed? The Talmud weighs in: “From where do we know that the fragments of the first tablets were deposited in the ark? From R. Yosef who learned: “the tablets that you smashed and you shall deposit them in the ark” [Deut. 10:2] teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the ark.” (Bava Batra 14s)

In other words, explains Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler, “the Talmudic consensus, indeed its very starting point, is that the remains of the first tablets had to be preserved. The broken pieces, remnants of a broken relationship, had to live side-by-side with the whole, reconstituted one. The Jewish people had to contend, in perpetuity, with the reality of rupture that lay at the heart of their very existence. And yet we must note that it was not just shards that stood in that ark, but the second tablets themselves, emblems of what is possible on the other side of brokenness. The Israelites needed to carry with them the memory of breakdown, the price paid--in relational terms--for their errant ways, but also the lesson learned about the profound possibility of second chances. In preserving the pieces together with the complete whole, the people would always be reminded that relationships can be repaired; that people can start over, even with God. And yet they need not overlook or ignore the scars that they bear from that very process. They take those with them too in their arks.”¹

I love this image, Moses reverently placing the two stone tablets into the ark, crafted in partnership between God and humanity. Our sacred covenant. And then gingerly taking another bundle, the shards of the original tablets, maybe they are wrapped in a beautiful cloth, I see something velvet and jewel-toned, this sacred offering of our heartbreak and

¹ <https://voices.sefaria.org/sheets/414329.20?lang=bi>

disappointment and loss. It all gets carried together, it's all witnessed and blessed by God, the complete package of our humanity.

This is why the krechtz is our soul's cry. It's the vocal expression of the union between our brokenness and our perfection. But the krechtz also serves another essential purpose. It lets people into your pain. If you go to a concert, say, of an accomplished singer, someone who blows you away with the perfection of their instrument and the mastery of their craft, the experience is incredible, it's awe-inspiring, but it's sometimes so perfect that it feels untouchable. How do they do that? I can't relate to that experience at all, much as it inspires me. But when you hear a cantor praying, and they allow their voice to break, they allow their wail to come through, it is an invitation into their experience, to hold their pain with them. A krechtz says, my longing, my grief, my yearning is so great that I cannot carry it by myself. I offer you my shards with a big red sticker on the box: Please handle with care.

Because here's the thing. We Jews—the people of the book that begins not with aleph, but with bet, **B**'reishit, with companionship—we Jews are not meant to survive this life alone. We don't advocate for solo Jewish experiences. We pray in a minyan, we study in pairs, we mourn together, we belong to Jewish community because we are, at our core, a 'bet' kind of people, a people that believes that two is stronger than one. God reassures Moses and the Israelites over and over again in the desert, I promise, I will not abandon you, I will guide you in a pillar of clouds by day and fire by night, you will never be alone. And you, made in My image, must do the same. You will ache, you will rejoice,

you will grieve, and none of it should be done in solitude. You must carry each other's souls just as I carry yours.

Perhaps this is why three of the four biblical texts that we read on Rosh Hashanah— if you observe two days of the holidays—involve weeping. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the Torah reading tells of the expulsion of Hagar and her wailing in the desert. In the *haftarah* on the first day, we read of Hannah, who cried so deeply that she appeared drunk to Eli the priest. In the *haftarah* on the second day, we read of Rachel mourning over her children. All of these women are bereft until their cries are heard and they are no longer alone in their suffering. Remarkably, the only one of the four Rosh Hashanah readings that does not include crying is the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, which we read this morning. That text, which perhaps should have deeper weeping than any other, depicts very stoic patriarchs (and absent matriarchs). When these texts are read in close succession, the lack of emotion is that much more obvious in the *Akedah*. Perhaps there is no weeping in Abraham and Isaac's march to the top of Mount Moriah because though they walk side by side, they do not allow each other to see the pain or fear they are each carrying. The texts assigned to these holy days remind us that we are not meant to walk through life reserved and alone.

The Irish Gaelic concept of *anam cara*, a soul friend, comes to mind here, the person to whom you can reveal the hidden and unspoken parts of your being. It speaks to something every person longs for, to be truly known by another and accepted entirely. The old Irish believed such a friendship was a gift of the spirit, not a thing you could

force or find on demand. To have an anam cara was to be no longer alone in the deepest part of yourself.

We find this relationship in many cultures and traditions. In Hindu culture, there's an idea that you have a karmic connection with certain souls. In the Gujarati language, it's called *lehnu*: the link with another soul that causes you to keep crossing paths, positively impacting each other. It describes someone who helps you lead a life that serves a higher purpose.

Buddhists believe that we're reborn an infinite number of times, and that relationships can carry over from one lifetime to the next. The closest word for it is *pratitya-samutpada*: the idea that all beings are interrelated. Often someone walks into the room and we feel like we've known them forever. And it may be that we have.

In our own tradition, Maimonides teaches that there are three categories of friendship. A *chaver to'elet*, a friend of utility, is someone you can count on to be there when you need them, to bring you soup when you are sick, to pick your kids up from school, someone you can rely on because you feel responsible for each other. You reveal when you have the flu but probably not when you are having an anxiety attack or when your marriage is in trouble.

The *chaver nachat* is a friend of satisfaction and joy. This is your girlfriend with bottles of wine and laughter late into the night, the friend who will say the slightly offensive

thing at just the right time to lift your spirits when you need it. This friend knows your coffee order and exactly which chocolate to bring when you are down.

And then there's the *chaver ma'alah*, the friend for higher purpose. This is the friend with whom you share your most awful, embarrassing parts, the friend who will hold you when you fall apart and will always tell you the truth. This friend—the *chaver ma'alah*, the *anam cara*, the soul friend—this friend does not just accept and love all of your parts; this friend *becomes* your ark, holding their arms open wide enough to hold all the pieces, your gorgeous, glorious perfection and the tiniest slivers of your brokenness. This friend says I see your longing and I love you even more for it. I see your shame and I'll sit with you in it. The only thing I will never do is walk away from you.

We are in danger, friends, in our increasingly digital world, of fooling ourselves into thinking that we can survive without soul friends. We have stepped into the very risky territory of thinking that texts are just as good as phone calls, that zoom is just as good as in-person contact, that AI therapists can take the place of human to human connection, that we will all soon be out of jobs because AI can do anything we humans can. I don't believe the hype. The moment we are born, we long to be held and protected by the flesh and blood of our families. For months after my boys were born, the only place they were calm was when they were in the arms of someone who loved them, smelling them, feeling their breath and hearing the steady beat of their hearts. Call me old-fashioned, call me a rabbi who reads ancient texts for comfort and fun, but I don't believe your computer will ever be your soul friend, as crafty and human-sounding as it is. Claude may be programmed to respond to human emotion, but it will never be able to

feel the crack in your voice as you cry, or respond with a broken heart in return. Only we can do that for each other.

When Moses reaches the end of his life, the Torah says,

“וַיָּמָת לָשֵׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד-יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל-פִּי יְהוָה:”

So Moses the servant of God died there, in the land of Moab, *al pi Adonai*. This last phrase is usually translated as “at the command of God.” But *al pi Adonai* literally means “by the mouth of God” which the midrash imagines to mean that God reached down onto the earth, placed God’s own holy mouth upon Moses’s, and inhaled his last breath for him. Just as God breathed life into the first human in the story of creation, so too does God relieve Moses of his last breath. Can you just see it? Those two, Moses and God, that was a soul friendship if ever there was one. From the very beginning of the Torah until the very end, when God’s mouth is the last touch that Moses receives, we are reminded that we are meant to do the hard, messy, melancholy, glorious, imperfect work of being humans together.

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After Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, the midrash imagines what their life looked like as they lived together, east of Eden, tilling the earth and raising children, and struggling to stay alive. After years of struggle, when their children were grown, they decided to see the world. They journeyed from one corner of the world to the other. In the course of their journeys, wandering from place to place, they found the

entrance to the Garden of Eden, now guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. They were frightened and they began to flee when God spoke to them:

"Adam, you have lived in exile these many years. Your exile is finished. Return to the Garden."

Suddenly the angel disappeared, and the way to the Garden opened.

"Come in, My children, welcome to Paradise!"

But Adam had grown wary these many years.

"Wait," he replied, "It's been so many years. Remind me what it's like in the Garden."

"The Garden is paradise!" God responded. "In the Garden there is no work. You need never struggle or toil again. In the Garden there is no pain, no suffering. In the Garden there is no death. Day after day, life goes on for eternity. Come my children, return to the Garden!"

Adam listened to God's words -- no work, no struggle, no pain, no death. An endless life of ease. And then he turned and looked at Eve. He looked at the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home. He thought of the tragedies they had overcome and the joys they cherished, the suffering they endured and the love they had found.

And Adam shook his head, "No, thank you, not now ... Come on Eve, let's go home." And hand in hand, Adam and Eve turned their backs on Paradise and continued their journey. So may we all.²

² Edward Feinstein. Capturing the Moon: Classic and Modern Jewish Tales. Kindle Edition.