**Affirming the Blessing of our Differences Even When it is Difficult**

Rabbi David Glanzberg-Krainin Rosh Hashanah 5786

As we gather on this Rosh Hashanah, we stand at a threshold. Behind us lies a year that has tested our faith, our resilience, and our very identity as Jews. Before us stretches a new year filled with possibility and hope, but also uncertainty. In this liminal time—between a past we no longer recognize and a future we cannot fully conceive—I want to speak about something at the very heart of who we are: what makes us different, and the courage it takes to embrace those differences.

The Talmud teaches us that on Rosh Hashanah, *kol ba'ei olam ovrin lifanav kivnei maron*—all who enter the world pass before God— *kivnei maron*—usually translated to mean “like sheep before a shepherd” (Rosh Hashanah 18a). But the Rabbis tell us that the phrase *kiv’nei maron* might also be understood to mean those who ascend Mt. Horon—a narrow mountain pass near the ancient city of Maron—on which the path so narrow that people were forced to ascend in a single file. In this interpretation, each person passes before the Divine individually, uniquely, and irreplaceably separate and distinct from every other soul in God's Creation.

In this understanding, are not meant to be **identical**, but rather, God intends for us to be distinct individuals, each bearing our own unique divine spark. Our differences are not *accidents to be overcome*, but *blessings to be cherished*. This year, I want to ask us to consider how our Jewish differences in this country have started to become a source of fear as antisemitism rises, and how we might find the courage to live our Jewish differences proudly—and to advocate for all who seek the common good to affirm their unique differences as well.

Let me share with you the wisdom of Simon Rawidowicz, a Polish-born Jewish philosopher who understood this truth with painful clarity. Born at the end of the 19th Century in Poland, Rawidowicz fled to Germany, then fled to England as Hitler rose to power. It was while in London that Rawidowicz heard then-U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt deliver his famous “Four Freedoms” address to Congress on January 6, 1941.

At that time, Roosevelt was speaking to an America gripped by isolationism, a nation unprepared to send its young men into distant battles. He needed to explain why the Second World War wasn't just Europe's war, but America's as well. “The future and the safety of our country, and of our democracy are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders,” Roosevelt declared, before outlining **four** human freedoms worth fighting for, worth defending, “everywhere in the world.” These **four freedoms** included 1) freedom of speech,2) freedom of worship, 3) freedom from want, and 4) freedom from fear. When Rawidowicz heard this list, he found it inspiring but incomplete. He believed FDR had overlooked a Fifth Freedom, without which the others could not be preserved: He called it *Libertas Differendi*—the freedom to be **different**.

Rawidowicz wrote: “The Jewish people are the most outstanding example of what it means to be Different in the world—the greatest non-conformists history has ever known. For thousands of years, we have stubbornly refused to submit to other gods, to abandon our practices, to convert to other faiths, or to fully assimilate. And the world has never forgiven us for our insistence on being different.”

This year, his words feel chillingly prophetic. The antisemitism that has surged since October 7th is not just about politics, nor is it only about anti-Israel sentiment. It is about our fundamental right to exist as Jews, to be visibly and unapologetically different. When Jewish students are harassed for attending Hillel events; when Jews choose **not** to wear visible Jewish symbols; when synagogues require security guards at any—and all—public events—we are witnessing an assault on *Libertas Differendi* itself.

Over this past year, we witnessed high-profile acts of antisemitic violence. Our Governor and First Lady found their home in the Governor’s Mansion firebombed on the 1st night of Passover. Sarah Milgrim, a peace activist, and Yaron Lischinsky, a diplomat—both young Israeli embassy staffers—were murdered outside the Capital Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C. In Boulder, Colorado, during a peaceful event advocating for the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, a man threw Molotov cocktails at a crowd of Jews, burning a dozen, including an 88 year-old Holocaust survivor.

As Jews, it's natural to feel afraid. But we must distinguish between reasonable caution and paralyzing fear. Fear whispers that we should make ourselves smaller, quieter, less visible. Courage responds that we should make ourselves more authentically who we are. Increasingly Jews who identify themselves outwardly as Jews and who walk to synagogue in cities across the country have been harassed by passing strangers in cars who yell “Free Palestine.”

Yossi Klein Ha'Levi, who is a journalist and a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, describes spending three weeks this past year touring American college campuses in the aftermath of the October 7th attacks. He writes: “I found that Jewish students who felt in any way connected to Israel were traumatized. Many of the Jewish students were huddling. It was a kind of re-ghettoization. They felt that they were losing their non-Jewish friends, they didn't trust anyone outside their circles.”

Klein Ha-Levi goes on to ask: “What has happened to Jews on campus in the last year and a half? Remember, it didn't happen to **all** Jews. It didn't even happen to **most** Jews. You could **get by** on campus—as long as you weren't ***visibly with Israel***—or if you were prepared to repudiate Israel among your friends. And that's the return of a phenomenon my parents experienced as first-generation immigrants to America. It is the return of **conditionality** by way of **conditional acceptance**. Many college campuses have restored the phenomenon of **conditional acceptance**. “’We will accept you in our spaces,’ they are saying, ‘provided that you repudiate this problematic part of your Jewish identity, which is Israel.’”

The pressure to hide our distinctiveness is nothing new. Rawidowicz witnessed this firsthand during his years in Weimar Germany, where educated Jews concealed their heritage so that they would appear more modern, more rational, more acceptable. Some even embraced conversion, hoping it would be their ticket to safety and acceptance. But the Holocaust revealed the tragic futility of that hope. As Rawidowicz learned painfully: it is impossible to erase one's own difference, and we shouldn't try to. History shows us that appeasement through **invisibility** is both morally hollow and practically ineffective.

The Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah (1:2) teaches us that on this day, *kol ba'ei olam nidonim*—all who come into the world are judged. But the word *nidonim*—which comes from the same root as *dayan* or judge—and can also be translated as **distinguished** or **made distinct**. In this second reading, Rosh Hashanah is not only about judgment, but also about affirming our distinctiveness, celebrating the ways we are different, and recognizing our differences as divine gifts rather than burdens to bear.

Since October 7th, the cost of visible Jewish difference has felt heavier. Many in our community have wrestled with whether to wear Jewish symbols, whether to gather publicly in Jewish spaces, whether to speak up about our support for Israel. Some have chosen to lower their profiles, to minimize their Jewish visibility. I understand this impulse—safety is not a luxury but a necessity.

But Rawidowicz's message to us is clear: “Do not try to hide what makes you different. Carry it with open pride to yourself and to the world.” This doesn't mean being reckless or unnecessarily provocative. It means refusing to let fear rob us of our identity, refusing to let hatred succeed in making us invisible. It means choosing courage over comfort, authenticity over acceptance.

And here is what makes Rawidowicz's vision so powerful: It is a universal one—not only a message for his fellow Jews. Rawidowicz understood that the freedom to be different was not just a Jewish concern. It belonged to everyone. His advocacy for Jewish distinctiveness led him to champion the rights of Arabs in the new state of Israel. He recognized that a world safe for Jewish difference must be a world safe for **all** difference. Here in this country, our struggles are connected with other minority groups because the forces that seek to erase differences are also the same forces that threaten democracy itself.

We are living at a time in which transgender adults face legislation aimed at erasing their existence; at a time when legal immigrants live in fear that their accents or customs might make them targets; at a time when Muslim families worry about their children wearing hijab to school. These are not abstract political ideas—these are our neighbors, struggling with the same fundamental questions we face: How do we live authentically in a world that can punish those outside the mainstream?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that “the opposite of good is not *evil*, but *indifference*.” In our context, we might say that the opposite of difference is not **sameness**, but **invisibility**. When we make ourselves invisible, when we hide our distinctiveness out of fear, we rob the world of our unique contribution. Moreover, we diminish the divine presence by limiting the full symphony of God's creation.

Fear tells us to blend in, to keep our heads down. But courage calls us to stand tall in our difference, to model authentic living despite social pressure. When we choose visibility over invisibility, we give permission to others to do the same.

The shofar doesn't apologize for being different from other instruments. It doesn't try to sound like a violin or piano. It is unapologetically itself—a ram's horn transformed into sacred sound, its uniqueness becoming holiness.

The shofar calls us to be courageous. Not the warrior's courage, but the courage of **authenticity**—the courage to keep kosher in a non-kosher world, to observe Shabbat in a society that never stops, to hang *mezuzot* where they can be seen, and to raise Jewish children who understand that they have distinct customs and traditions.

In the year ahead, may we learn from the shofar's example. May we stop apologizing for who we are and start celebrating it. May we teach our children that Jewish identity is not a burden but a gift. May we show the world that difference is not a threat but a blessing—the source of creativity, innovation, and meaning.

May we find the strength to move from fear to courage, from hiding to visibility, from apologizing to celebrating. May we recognize that our own freedom to be different is bound up with everyone else's freedom to be different provided that each group affirms the dignity of all who are different from them. And may we help build an America where the dignity of difference is not just **tolerated**, but **treasured**—where every people, every community, every individual can stand tall in their uniqueness without fear.

This is our gift to the world: the courage to be different. This is our responsibility to future generations: to preserve our differences and to fight for the right of others to preserve theirs. Let this be our prayer for the year ahead: that *Libertas Differendi*—that the freedom to be different—shall not perish from the earth, but shall flourish for all peoples in the year, and in the years, to come.

*Kein yehi ratzon*—so may it be.

*Shanah Tovah Tikateivu*—may each of us merit to be inscribed for a year of blessing, meaning, and the courage to be beautifully, proudly different. Amen.