



SERMON EREV ROSH HASHANAH: WE ARE NOT ALONE

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 22 September 2025
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

*My throat is all inflamed with crying,
my tongue is sticking to my mouth,
my heart is spinning, dizzy
with all this pain and grief,
so far gone in misery,
my eyes refuse to close for sleep.
How long must I hold on to hope?
How long must my anger burn?
Who is there to tell what I've been through,
to whom can I explain my pain?
If there were someone here to comfort me,
to take my hand in pity,
I'd pour my heart out for them to hear.
I'd tell them of my sorrows.
Maybe speaking of my troubles
would bring me some relief from horror.*

[1] That poem,ⁱ by the 11th-century Spanish poet Solomon ibn-Gabirol, speaks to us through time at the end of yet another Hebrew year that has ravaged our emotions with its complex events. Trump, Netanyahu and Putin. Israel and Iran. Starvation and unspeakable suffering in Gaza. Extremism and murder in the West Bank. Deportations from America. Britain the 'island of strangers'. Winter fuel allowance. Wildfires in California. The murders of Ariel and Kfir Bibas z"l. Antisemitism at Glastonbury. Vandals in Palmeira Square. Flags on roundabouts. Images from these events flash through our minds, ghoulishly and uncontrollably, as we look back over the year just gone.

ⁱ Translation adapted from Raymond P Scheindlin, *Vulture in a Cage: poems by Solomon ibn-Gabirol* (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2016): 112-113.

[2] These visions may be interspersed with mental flashes of images portraying good news as well: a beautiful new park in our city, the recovery of some of the hostages safe and well, BHPS's 90th anniversary. But that only makes our reflections even more of an emotional rollercoaster.

[3] One of my biggest tasks over this year has been holding our community together. To achieve this, BHPS has had to do five things: listen, make space, be safe, offer leadership, and provide joy.

[4] It all starts with listening. A synagogue isn't a gym where people pay for something and, if they no longer want, need or like it, go away. We are a קהילה קדושה, a holy community, which means that every one of us has a role to play in building and maintaining our congregation. We have to hear each other's thoughts, hopes and fears without judgement and without hostility, taking pride in our diversity and empathising with those in pain or torment.

[5] Making space, likewise, is vital. We don't just offer a standardised calendar of services without regard to what's going on outside our doors. We provide outlets for people to express their feelings and emotions, including innovative rituals such as our service to commemorate the first anniversary of the October 7th attacks.

[6] Being safe means that we hold everyone regardless of who you are and what you believe. We don't do credos. Those who may not feel comfortable in other parts of the Jewish community – or whose reaction to world events would make them a pariah elsewhere – can find a Jewish home here.

[7] As a קהילה, a community, we are here for everybody without exception. But as a קהילה קדושה, a holy community, we don't just exist as a neutral space. It is BHPS's role to provide leadership. My ordination certificate does not just say I'm a rabbi destined to become an employee of this or that synagogue; I'm a רב ומורה בישראל, a rabbi and teacher in Israel, of the Jewish people. And BHPS is here to take a leading and prophetic role in making the Jewish community's discourse more inclusive, more tolerant, more peace-focussed, less extreme. Rabbi Elli's prayer for peace between Israelis and Palestiniansⁱⁱ – in which *“we fervently pray that a spirit of righteousness*

ⁱⁱ Siddur Shirah Chadashah, draft morning service p 31B.



may prevail” – is a piece of thought leadership of which other communities should be, and are, envious.

[8] And finally, there’s the importance of joy. In these days of 24-hour rolling news and 24-hour scrolling social media, it’s very easy for life to be a ceaseless whirl of doom and gloom. Although, as we’ve said, it would be very wrong for BHPS to ignore the dispiriting reality of our world, it would also be very wrong for us to allow that reality to fester here in this holy space. Our community is, and has to remain, a place where we can gather joyously, where we can feel liberated from the difficulties and terrors of events beyond our four walls.

[9] What all of these factors have in common is the theme articulated by Solomon ibn-Gabirol’s poem: togetherness. *“How long must my anger burn? Who is there to tell what I’ve been through, to whom can I explain my pain?”*

[10] Even Ibn-Gabirol, who was famously a solitary and misanthropic character – his biographer Peter Cole compendiously describes him as “a jerk”ⁱⁱⁱ – even he realised that a problem shared is a problem halved.

[11] Togetherness improves the world. Togetherness, in a world that encourages isolation and balkanisation, is a radical act. As we remember and give thanks for the Creation, how can we forget the stricture: לֹא-טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבָדּוֹ, *It is not good for man to be alone.*^{iv}

[12] That, ultimately, is the facet of Creation for which we should be most thankful: that we are not alone.

[13] We will shortly conclude our service with a final prayer beseeching God that *“the [old] year and its sorrows end now together”* while *“the [new] year and its blessings begin now together”*.^v

[14] But, in fact, whether or not that prayer comes true, we’ll be OK. Because we’re together – and so we shall remain. כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן, may this be God’s will.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Cole, *Selected Poems of Solomon ibn-Gabirol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 20.

^{iv} Genesis 2:18

^v Machzor Ruach Chadashah p 82

