

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2025

“The Impossible People, the Eternal Hope”

Shanah Tovah.

Tonight we stand together on the threshold of a new year, and the liturgy dares us to say something astonishing: Hayom harat olam—today the world is born. Not once long ago, not in some mythic past, but *now*. Creation is not finished. It unfolds with every breath. The gates are open. The page is unwritten. The shofar is ready to sound.

And into this moment of trembling possibility, I want you to hear the words of Chloé Simone Valdary, from her poem entitled,

“The Jewish People Are Forever”:

The Babylonians once proclaimed

that one day you would disappear.

Can you hear them now?

Neither can I.

Oh, but you are impossible—

or so they thought

when they tried to choke you

with the ways of the oppressor.

The Roman legion besieged your Masada

and declared that one day

you would disappear.

Can you hear them now?

Neither can I.

Oh, but you are impossible—

or so they thought

when they tried to choke you

with the ways of the oppressor.

Their grief tried to bring about

your utter desolation.

Can you hear them now?

Neither can I.

Neither can eyes nor ears

explain your existence.

So they simply sit back and say:

you are impossible.

But impossible is nothing.

For after Egypt,

after exile,

after six million—

you remain.

You are the definition of rise:

as enduring as rain,

and like the light we all know

will meet us at daybreak.

You exist in the constant,

and the constellations greet you

as though you were their brothers,

treading down the same course

throughout the galaxy,

which recognizes your brotherhood

Though falling stars and meteors

shall occasionally make themselves

your acquaintances—

by way of persecution and oppression—

take comfort.

Rest in knowing

that like the never-ending

circular spinning axis of the earth,

you too are forever.

These words cry out like the shofar itself: urgent, echoing and alive. They remind us that by every measure of history, we should not exist. And yet—we do. Babylon is gone. Rome is gone. The empires of old are whispers. But our prayers, our Torah, our children, our hopes—still rise.

Mark Twain marveled at this mystery in 1899 when he wrote:

“The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose,
filled the planet with sound and splendor,
then faded to dream-stuff and passed away.
... The Jew saw them all, beat them all,
and is now what he always was,
exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts.”

Twain, looking through the cold lens of history, asked what could explain such endurance. Empires measured by power, armies, and territory should have lasted.

A scattered people with none of these should have vanished. And yet—it was the empires that disappeared, and the Jews who remained. Twain called it a marvel. Valdary calls it “impossible.” Our tradition calls it covenant, heritage, and hope.

If we look at the “big picture,” Jewish survival is perhaps the greatest miracle. It defies clear historical patterns. Whenever people move to different countries they gradually integrate, following the beliefs and ideals of the local population. Yet the Jews were different, stubbornly so. On the contrary, it is those who have oppressed the Jews – the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Spanish, and the Nazis (to specify but a few of countless examples) whose ideologies rightly reside in the proverbial dustbin of history.

Facing persecution has often compelled Jewish communities to draw closer, strengthening bonds of solidarity. This interconnectedness became a lifeline in tumultuous times, transcending both geography and generations. Again and again, the persistence of Jewish identity and culture has been cast as an impossible challenge to those who sought to erase us.

And yet—what emerges is not only survival, but a unique strength: the capacity to rise stronger, more resilient than before. Some call this antifragility—the paradox of a system that does not merely withstand shocks and stresses, but grows from

them, gaining strength with each disruption. It is the alchemy of turning pain into purpose. Nowhere is this more evident than in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

In Leviticus, God promises: “Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor spurn them to destroy them—for I am the Eternal their God.” Jeremiah deepens the vision: “Only if the fixed order of sun and moon were to disappear from before Me, would Israel cease from being a nation before Me—forever.” And the rabbis expanded the point: exile itself was never meant as erasure, but as a mission—to scatter sparks, and to gather them back into holiness.

In the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, there is a story about how the Jewish people came to be spread across the world. The Baal Shem Tov explained: *“Why are Jews exiled from place to place, wandering through lands and nations? It is because in each place there are sparks of holiness waiting to be uplifted. When a Jew arrives in a distant land, prays there, does a mitzvah there, acts with kindness there, those sparks are raised back toward their Source.”*

In this way, exile is not punishment but a sacred mission. Each Jewish soul carries within it a fragment of that Divine light, and each Jewish act in the Diaspora redeems sparks from the broken vessels. The scattering of Israel is thus bound up with the scattering of the sparks—and the promise that one day, through countless small deeds of holiness, those sparks will be gathered in, the vessels made whole,

and the world healed. We are forever—not because history spared us, but because we took catastrophe and turned it into covenant. We made memory into obligation. We made survival into witness.

The midrash tells of Abraham, a boy left alone in his father's idol shop. He smashed the idols with a hammer, placing it in the hand of the largest. When his father demanded an explanation, Abraham shrugged: "The big one must have destroyed the others." "Absurd!" said his father. "They cannot move!" Abraham answered: "Then why do you worship them?" That act was the first declaration of Jewish forever. Abraham saw the emptiness of false power and chose instead the God of life. Every generation since has replayed that story, smashing the idols of its age—whether fear, hatred, or despair—and making room for covenant.

Our tradition also tells of Nachshon ben Aminadav at the Sea of Reeds. The people trembled, frozen between Pharaoh's army and the sea. No one moved. Nachshon stepped forward. He walked until the water reached his knees, his chest, his neck. Only then did the sea part. The miracle was not only God's; it was Nachshon's impossible hope. Jewish forever is not waiting for certainty—it is stepping into the waves with faith that the path will open.

And then there is Honi the Circle Maker, a famous figure from rabbinic literature who, during a devastating drought, drew a circle on the ground, stood inside it, and prayed for rain — vowing not to leave until God answered. Honi once saw a man planting a carob tree. “How long until it bears fruit?” he asked. “Seventy years,” the man replied. Honi pressed him: “Do you expect to live seventy years and eat from it yourself?” The planter answered, “No. My ancestors planted for me, and so I plant for my descendants.”

Eternity is not a possession—it is an obligation. We plant for those we will never meet.

These stories are not quaint. They are strategies of survival. Abraham teaches us to smash what is false. Nachshon teaches us to step into uncertainty. Honi teaches us to plant for the unseen future. This is how the impossible becomes eternal.

And Rosh Hashanah itself is the rehearsal of that method. Our sages teach that on this day all creatures pass before God like sheep, their deeds weighed, their futures considered. Yet the liturgy insists: Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah—repentance, prayer, and justice—soften the decree. Even judgment is not final. Even the Book of Life can be reopened. The gates never fully lock. Hope is not sentiment—it is the system’s very design.

The shofar gives this hope its sound. The rabbis say its broken blasts recall the sobs of Sisera's mother waiting for her son who never came home. Out of grief we fashion a cry that wakes the heart. The shofar is not eloquent—it is honest. It is the sound of hope refusing to die.

And rabbis taught: "Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person's neck, they should not withhold themselves from mercy." Hope is not denial of danger; it is defiance of despair. Maimonides wrote that each of us must see the world as evenly balanced: with a single deed, we can tilt the scales for ourselves and for all humanity. That is forever—not invulnerability, but responsibility renewed every moment.

And so, the cycle of the High Holy Days calls us: Who rules us? What do we remember? What cry is inside us that words cannot say? These questions braid together into a rope we can hold onto as we step into another year.

Valdary's words return to us now: "Impossible is nothing. For you, too, are forever." To say that is not triumph but charge. Isaiah reminds us: "You are My witnesses," says the Eternal. Maimonides reminds us that with one deed, we can tip the balance of the whole world. Our forever is not for ourselves alone. It is for witness, for planting, for stepping, for smashing, for sparking joy.

When the shofar sounds tomorrow morning, let it remind us that eternity is not a guarantee but a discipline. It is the daily choice for Jews to keep planting, stepping, smashing, blessing.

We are here not because empires spared us but because covenant sustained us. We are here not because we avoided sorrow but because we turned sorrow into purpose. We are here not because the sea was always calm but because we stepped into it again and again.

So let us choose hope once more. Let us cultivate joy as mitzvah. Let us plant for generations to come. Let us search for sparks where the world sees only darkness.

For the Jewish people are forever, and our forever is a river—flowing through Abraham, through Nachshon, through Honi, through our sages, our mystics, our poets, and now through us.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah.

May this year be one of impossible resilience, unshakable joy, and hope that flows like water, eternal and alive.