

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Bridging Divides

There's a story told about two villages separated by a river. For years, the villagers crossed easily by way of a simple wooden bridge. But over time, storms wore it down, planks fell away, and eventually the bridge collapsed. The villagers shouted across to one another, but their words were lost in the wind. Each side believed the other no longer cared to cross. What began as silence turned into suspicion, and suspicion hardened into resentment. They mistook absence for abandonment, distance for indifference. The truth was simpler — there was no bridge.

One day, a villager picked up a plank and laid it across the water. The other villagers saw and, from the opposite bank, began to do the same. Slowly, piece by piece, they rebuilt what storms had destroyed. And when they finally stepped onto the bridge, they discovered something surprising: the distance between them had never been caused by rejection, but by neglect. The silence they had taken as hostility was nothing more than absence. What they thought was abandonment had only been the loss of a path. The bridge was not as straight or sturdy as before, but now it carried something stronger than wood — it carried the will to be together.

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of our season of bridge-building. Tonight, as the sun sets and the year 5786 begins, we are invited to look honestly at the divides in

our lives. The work of teshuvah — of return — begins not with crossing fully to the other side, but with the courage to notice the gap, and to take a step toward building.

Our ancestors understood this truth as well. When God commanded Moses to build the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest object in our tradition, it was topped not by a single crown or symbol of power, but by two golden cherubim, angels, facing one another, wings outstretched. And the Torah says: “*There I will meet with you — from between the two cherubim.*”

God’s voice did not come from one cherubim or the other. It came from the space between. God is not found in isolation, but in the relationship that creates and sustains connection.

The rabbis taught that when Israel lived in harmony with God, the cherubim faced one another tenderly; when the relationship broke down, they turned away. Even in the Holy of Holies, relationship mattered. God’s presence was revealed only when there was a turning toward one another.

That is the essence of a bridge. Not wood or stone, but the courage to face each other. To create a space between where holiness can dwell.

And yet — we know too well that sometimes bridges collapse.

In the city of Mostar, in Bosnia, a magnificent stone bridge spanned the Neretva River for more than 400 years. It connected neighborhoods, communities, cultures. The city itself was named for it. *Mostar* means “*bridge-keeper*.”

But in 1993, during the Bosnian war, the bridge was shelled until it fell into the river. When it collapsed, people on both sides wept. It felt as if their shared life had been shattered. For years, the broken stones lay in the water like an open wound.

And then, slowly, a decision was made: to rebuild. The stones were lifted from the river. The arch was reconstructed. In 2004 the bridge reopened, many of its original stones set back in place. Today it stands again, not as if nothing had happened, but as a witness: what hatred destroyed can be rebuilt with hope.

Rosh Hashanah invites us into the same work. To face the bridges that have collapsed in our lives and to believe they can be rebuilt. Not quickly. Not perfectly. But plank by plank, stone by stone.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov once said: *“Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tzar me’od, v’ha’ikar lo l’fached klal — the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the essence is not to be afraid.”*

We often hear this as personal advice: don’t be afraid of life’s challenges. But think of it communally. The whole world is a narrow bridge that we must cross together. If one side shakes it in fear or rage, everyone risks falling. The only way across is courage and trust.

The Mostar bridge teaches us that even when bridges collapse, they can be rebuilt. Rabbi Nachman teaches us that once we step onto the bridge, the essence is not to be afraid but to turn toward one another for support and strength. Together, they remind us: teshuvah — return, reconciliation, repair — requires both courage and hope.

And so we ask ourselves: what bridges in our own lives need rebuilding?

Some of us carry relationships that have frayed over time — a sibling we haven’t spoken to in years, a friendship that ended in sharp words, a silence that has grown heavier with each season. Sometimes the divide is small, but we let it widen because reaching out feels too awkward, too vulnerable. And yet, what if the first plank of the bridge is nothing more than a phone call, or even a simple text: *“I’ve been thinking about you.”* That is how bridges begin — not in grand gestures, but in small acts of courage.

But brokenness doesn't only live in our private lives. The rivers run through our communities too.

We also know how fractured our Jewish world has become. Politics, ideology, how we speak about Israel, how we see one another's commitments — these differences run deep. Too often we stand on opposite banks of the river, raising our voices louder, convinced that if we just shout, the other side will finally hear. But shouting never builds a bridge. Listening does. Respect does. A willingness to say: *"I may not agree with you, but I refuse to give up on being in community with you."* That is a plank we desperately need to lay down.

And yet the hardest divides may not be between us at all, but within us.

There are chasms no one else can see — the ones inside us. The distance between the person we are and the person we long to be. The promises we make to ourselves each year — "I'll be more patient, I'll be more present, I'll be more grateful" — and the disappointment when we fall short. These are not small rivers; sometimes they feel like oceans. But teshuvah means we are never trapped on one side. God gives us another chance, another year, to build a bridge between our best intentions and our daily lives. And every step we take across that bridge, no matter how small, matters.

Tonight, on this first night of 5786, we begin the journey of teshuvah. Not by leaping across the divide, but by taking one step toward the bridge. By choosing one place in our lives where we will try.

The villagers in the story discovered that the river had not grown wider — they had simply stopped building. May this year be the year we pick up hammer and nail. May we lay the first plank across whatever river separates us from God, from each other, and from ourselves.

And may the bridges we build inscribe us, and all the world, in the Book of Life.

Shanah tova u'metukah.