Healing Ourselves in a Broken World

Jewish Wisdom for Healing Mind and Soul: Part 1
Erev Rosh Hashanah
Rabbi Michele Medwin, D.Min.

My brother, who is friends with many rabbis, asked me last month, "So what are the hot topics for HH sermons this year?" I know what he was asking. Are you going to talk about Israel? Are you going to talk about American politics?"

And I replied, "I am taking a different path. I am not going to do politics from the Bima."

We have all done reading on the issues. We have all formed our opinions. You have yours. I have mine, and most likely, neither of us is going to change the other's mind.

I used to do political sermons until one day a congregant came to me and said, "Rabbi, I know all about what is going on in the world. I come to synagogue to find peace. To get away from it all. I don't want to hear about that. I want to find comfort here."

And so, rather than talk about, "How to Heal a Broken World," because I really have no answers, I am going to talk about "How to Heal Ourselves, in a Broken World."

That I do have answers for.

We, as Jews, as a people, have been through some pretty rough times in our history. We were slaves in Egypt. We were exiled by the Babylonians, and then again by the Romans. We saw both of our Temples destroyed. We endured the Crusades, the pogroms of Eastern Europe, and the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust.

Just two years ago we lived through the trauma of October 7th—a day that reopened wounds, echoing earlier times when Israel was attacked, leaving us shaken in ways that still haunt us.

And then there is antisemitism today, not only in our country but around the world. And it feels like it is spreading exponentially. Optimist that I am—or at least that I was before October 7th—I had hoped the world had learned from the past, that maybe antisemitism was finally subsiding. But once again, we have seen—even from those we thought were our friends and allies—anger, blame, and hatred directed our way.

And yet here we are. Still standing. Still gathering. Still praying. Just as Jews have done every single year on the High Holy Days for two thousand years.

What keeps us going?

I'd like to propose tonight that Judaism itself has built within it the tools we need to care for ourselves - not only physically but emotionally and spiritually as well.

From the beginning, our tradition has taught us to seek out healing. The priests—the *kohanim*—were not only spiritual leaders, but they were also healers. They diagnosed disease, helped prevent contagion, and cared for the health of the community. Maimonides, one of our greatest philosophers, was also a physician.

Spiritually, our worship, has guided us along the way. Even when our ancestors were wandering in the wilderness, they carried the *Mishkan*—the portable sanctuary that housed the Ten Commandments representing our laws. It was a reminder that God was always near, and that even in uncertain times, holiness could be carried within us.

As many of you know, I am not only a rabbi but also a psychotherapist. In working with clients who face anxiety, depression, and trauma, I have studied many therapeutic tools for healing. And what has struck me, time and again, is this: so many of these tools already exist in Judaism. We had them long before Sigmund Freud was born.

Johann Hari, a journalist who researched depression worldwide, concluded that depression is often not only a chemical imbalance—but also a response to disconnection. He identified several forms of disconnection that contribute to despair:

- Disconnection from other people
- Disconnection from meaningful work and values
- Disconnection from the natural world
- Disconnection from a hopeful future

Tonight, let's focus on the first two: disconnection from others, and disconnection from meaning.

Community is at the very core of Judaism. We are a people defined by relationships. In the Torah portion *Vayakhel* (Exodus 35:1), Moses gathers the *kahal*—the entire community. He speaks to the whole group, not to individuals. The message is clear: we are in this together. Each person is invited to contribute to building the *Mishkan*, the Tent of Meeting, that would represent God's presence among them. Everyone had a part to play.

Pirkei Avot teaches:
אַל תִּפָּרֵשׁ מִן הַצִּבּוּר
Al tifrosh min hatzibur—
"Do not separate yourself from the community."

Even our word for synagogue reminds us: it is first and foremost a *Beit Knesset*—a house of gathering. The Talmud teaches that prayer requires a *minyan*—a minimum of ten people—because spiritual life is not a solo act. Judaism insists: we need each other.

The Rabbis also showed remarkable psychological wisdom in shaping our mourning rituals. They knew that in times of grief, we are tempted to retreat and isolate ourselves. But they insisted: this is when we most need community. The rabbis also reassured us that mourning takes time.

- **Shiva**: The first seven days of intense mourning, we stay home, and people come to us. We are required to be surrounded by others, needing a minyan, at least ten people, to say Kaddish.
- **Shloshim**: The thirty days, when we slowly reenter the world, the rabbis provide us with gentle limits so that we do not move too quickly.
- **The first year**: A full cycle of holidays and life events, giving us time to integrate loss into a "new normal."
- **Yartzeit and Yizkor** – The Rabbis knew that we never stop missing our loves ones, but to stay in perpetual mourning is not good for us and for those around us. Yet, one can feel guilt ridden trying to return to life and trying to experience some joy again. So, the Rabbis said, "Go ahead. It is OK to take a break from the sadness. We have the custom of Yartzeit and Yizkor, to allow us to focus on mourning certain times throughout the year. This gives us permission to enjoy ourselves the other times.

  As Kohelet teaches: "There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Disconnection from meaningful work and values can also leave us despondent and adrift. Judaism responds with *mitzvot*—commandments that give our lives purpose and structure.

We often translate *mitzvah* as "good deed," but its deeper meaning is "commandment." These are not merely nice things to do; they are sacred obligations. They tell us that our actions matter. That we matter.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who survived the Holocaust, observed that those who found meaning—even in suffering—were the ones most likely to survive. From this he developed logotherapy, teaching that meaning sustains us. He says we can find meaning in three ways:

1. Through creative work or action.
2. Through experiencing love or beauty.
3. Through the way we respond to suffering. If we are in a situation we can't change, we are challenged to change ourselves.

Frankl echoed what Judaism has taught for millennia: life has meaning, even in pain.

Throughout the generations, we as Jews have found ourselves in broken worlds. And yet Judaism continually reminds us: we do not suffer alone. We have each other. We have our values. And we have our tradition to guide us. In a world that often feels chaotic and threatening, Judaism offers a structured, meaningful path forward.

Tomorrow morning, we will turn to the other two forms of healing in a broken world, that Johann Hari describes—and that Judaism has long embraced: reconnection with nature, and reconnection with hope.

This evening, may we begin the year reminded that healing begins with each other—with the strength of our community, and the sacred obligations that give our lives meaning.

As we enter this new year together, may we draw strength from one another.
May we resist the temptation to isolate, and instead lean into the gift of community, here at RTR.
May our lives be guided by mitzvot that give us meaning and purpose.
And may the God who has carried our people through broken worlds for thousands of years carry us, too—into a year of connection, courage, and renewal.

L'shanah tovah.

Healing Ourselves in a Broken World

Jewish Wisdom for Healing Mind and Soul: Part 2
Rosh Hashanah Morning
Rabbi Michele Medwin, D.Min.

I don't know about you, but I feel that we are living through one of the most difficult times in memory. From one day to the next, we never know what to expect—whether from our government, from the war between Israel and Hamas, from the frightening rise in antisemitism, or even from the weather. Hurricanes, wildfires, and floods grow stronger, threatening lives and leaving behind damage beyond comprehension.

So how do we keep going?
How do we find stability?
How do we hold on to calm and contentment in this broken world?

Last night, I suggested that Judaism has within it practices and teachings that help us survive—not only physically, but spiritually and emotionally. Our rituals, our stories, and our liturgy give us tools to heal by reconnecting with one another, with our values, and with God.

As a psychotherapist, I see every day how people struggle with anxiety, fear, and depression—challenges magnified by the uncertainty of our time.

Johann Hari, in his book *Lost Connections*, suggests that much of modern suffering comes from disconnection:

- Disconnection from other people
- Disconnection from meaningful work and values
- Disconnection from the natural world
- Disconnection from a hopeful future

Last night, I spoke about the first two.

If you weren't able to join us, copies of that sermon are available in the lobby. This morning, I want to focus on the last two: our disconnection from the natural world, and our disconnection from hope. Judaism, I believe, gives us a path back to both.

One of the simplest yet most powerful pieces of advice I give clients facing anxiety or depression is: *go outside*. Even if you don't feel like it—especially when you don't feel like it—step outside for five minutes. Notice the sky, feel the breeze, hear the birds. And very often, you will feel less despondent, calmer, and more at ease.

Judaism understood this long before modern psychology. Personally, I first felt God's presence in nature at URJ Camp Eisner in the Berkshires. Every Shabbat we prayed in an outdoor sanctuary. I remember looking up at the sky as we sang, watching clouds float by, hearing birds join our chorus, and seeing the leaves dancing in the wind. The prayers came alive, carried by the beauty around me, and entered my soul.

From the very beginning, Torah roots us in creation. God begins creation with light, sky, sea, and earth. Only on the sixth day are humans created. This ordering teaches us something: we are not separate from nature; we are part of it. But as we built walls and cities, as we grew comfortable with heating and air conditioning, we sometimes forgot that truth.

Yet our tradition keeps calling us back. The Psalms declare: *"The heavens tell the glory of God."* Our Shabbat prayers celebrate the sun and the moon, the light of dawn and the cycle of time. At Shabbat in the Park, we read blessings for lightning, for mountains, for trees in bloom—texts written by our sages in the Talmud.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav had a deep spiritual connection to nature. He taught: *"When a person prays in the fields, all the plants enter his prayer. They help him. They give him strength."*

He wrote a prayer that has become beloved, especially through Debbie Friedman's melody:
"Grant me the ability to be alone, may it be my custom to go outdoors among the trees and grass… to talk to the One to whom I belong. May I express everything in my heart. And may all the foliage of the field awaken at my coming, to send their life into my prayer."

The Talmud tells us something similar in Avot d'Rabbi Natan:
"If you have a sapling in your hand and someone says, 'The Messiah is coming,' stay and complete the planting—then go to greet the Messiah." What wisdom and insight! Even in the face of redemption, we are told not to abandon life, growth, and care for the earth. Nature grounds us in what is real. It reminds us of God's renewal every day.

If you can't get outdoors every day, try this exercise. I invite you to close your eyes for a moment. Imagine your own sacred outdoors space where you feel most alive. Immerse yourself in that setting. Using your senses focus on what you see there, what you hear there, what you smell, what you touch. Do you feel a little calmer?

Hari's last category of disconnection is perhaps the hardest: disconnection from hope. And let's be honest—hope can be hard to hold onto these days. With disturbing headlines flashing at us every day, optimism can feel a bit naive. But Judaism insists that hope is not optional—it is essential.

We sing *Od yavo shalom aleinu*—"Peace will yet come to us." Not because we ignore reality, but because we believe in possibility.

Hope is woven into our liturgy. After the *Aleinu* we pray:
"Let the time not be distant, O God, when all shall turn to You in love; when the brokenness of this world is repaired by the work of our hands and hearts, inspired by Your Torah."

Our history testifies to hope. Despite destruction, exile, persecution, and even the Shoah—we are still here. We are still praying; we are still singing. We are still hoping.

It is no accident that Israel's national anthem is *Hatikvah*—"The Hope." Its words come from a 19th-century poem: *"Our hope is not yet lost, the ancient hope, to be a free people in our land*. "This anthem reminds us that hope has carried us across centuries of darkness, and it still carries us today.

So what can we do—today, this year—to hold on to hope and find healing? Judaism offers us practical tools. When anxiety overwhelms us, we can ground ourselves in breath. The Torah says that God breathed into Adam *nishmat chayim*—the breath of life. Every breath we take is a reminder that God is near. That's why I begin Shabbat services with a deep, collective breath: a spiritual and emotional cleansing, helping our souls reconnect to God.

Meditation is often recommended for mental health well-being. We are taught to do slow deep breathing, and focus on our breath, trying not to let our thoughts distract us. Jewish meditation has a different focus: as we meditate, we focus on the soul within us, the spark God gave us. Each breath becomes a reconnection with God.

Gratitude is another tool. Modern psychology affirms what Judaism has always known: gratitude heals, focusing on what we have rather than what we don't. I often recommend clients use a gratitude journal, but Judaism gives us this practice daily. We begin the

morning with *Modeh Ani*— “I thank You, God, for returning my soul to me.” In the *Modim* prayer, we thank God together for life, for strength, for goodness. The morning blessings remind us to be grateful for sight, movement, freedom, strength. Gratitude grounds us. Gratitude heals us. Gratitude reminds us that even in darkness, there is light.

Even in the hardest times, Judaism reminds us: healing is possible. We are not lost. We are rooted.This Rosh Hashanah, as we begin a new year, may we find ways to reconnect—

- With nature,
- With hope,
- With one another,
- And with the eternal spirit at the heart of our tradition which gives us purpose and meaning.

We have the tools. Eternal God, help us to use them.
Shanah Tovah.

Sermon: Creation, Science, and Oneness
Rosh Hashanah Morning Second Day

Rabbi Michele Medwin, O.D., D. Min.

This morning, before we read the Torah's account of creation, I'd like us to pause and reflect. When we hear the words *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,"* what does that mean to us today? How do we, as modern Jews, living in a world shaped both by science and by faith, understand creation?

Here is science's understand of "creation."

- According to physicists, the universe began about 14 billion years ago in what is called the **Big Bang**.
- Everything we know—space, time, matter, and energy—emerged from an explosion, a big bang, that came from a single point of unimaginable density and heat.
- The universe has been expanding ever since, forming galaxies, stars, and eventually the earth itself.
- The Big Bang theory describes **what happened from the moment of expansion onward**. It does not explain what came before or what caused it.

Here is a Jewish approach

There are many ways to interpret Torah text. One way is by *Pshat*, the simple level. You read the words literally. Yet, even in ancient times, the creation story was seen not as a science textbook, but as a poetic way to understand God and God's role in the world. They understood what seven days meant, sundown to sundown. They wanted to seek deeper meaning, asking what lessons we can draw from "In the beginning."

This way of understanding Torah text is called Drash, or stories of explanation. How to find additional meaning in the text? One lesson we can learn is our relationship to nature. When were human beings created? Not on day one, or even day two. Trees and vegetation came first. Then the fish in the ocean. Then birds. Then land animals. And finally, human beings, not until the sixth day. So, who or what is more important than us? - All that was created before us. We are tasked to remember our place to care for and share the earth and all its creatures.

The Rabbis also taught that we all came from the same human being to remind us that no one is more important than anyone else.

Before Darwin and Evolution, ancient Jewish commentators understood that we needed to look deeper into the meaning of the creation story. The mystics understood the Torah by means of Sod, which means Secret. They see the Torah containing hidden messages from God that we are to seek out.

As a mystic, Nahmanides believed that there were hidden meanings in the Torah for us to decipher. They explain: The Creation story opens with the following verses:

When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being *tohu* (unformed) and *vohu* (void). In his commentary on these verses Nahmanides offered, "The process of creation is a deep mystery not to be understood from the verses . . . The Holy One, Blessed be God, created all things from absolute non-existence . . . God brought forth from total and absolute nothing.

Kabbalists search for hidden meanings in the Torah Text. They describe creation in this way. Before there was a world, there was only **Ein Sof**—the Infinite, beyond comprehension.

In order to create, God performed **tzimtzum**—a self-contraction, withdrawing to make space for the universe to exist. This means we are not separate from God but exist within God.

Out of this act, divine energy flowed into vessels. When these vessels shattered, fragments of divine light became embedded in creation. Our task is to help restore that wholeness—*tikkun olam*, the repair of the world.

Just as the Big Bang describes a moment of everything emerging from one point, so too Kabbalah describes all existence as flowing from a single divine source.

Perhaps the mystics were describing the "Big Bang" in spiritual terms, the emanations of Divine light that shattered the vessels.

There are Other Parallels between Science and Kabbalah's understanding of creation.

From unity to multiplicity: Both science and mysticism describe everything beginning as "one"—a singularity of energy, or the oneness of God.

Expansion and unfolding: Physics speaks of cosmic expansion; Kabbalah of emanations of divine light. The morning prayer, Yotzer Or, reminds us , *Uvtuvo m'chadeism b'chol yom tamid maaseih v'reshit*. God, in goodness, renews the work of creation each and every day.

Brokenness and order: Science speaks of entropy, randomness, and natural processes; Kabbalah of shattered vessels that need repairing.

Human role: Science sees us as observers trying to understand; Judaism sees us as partners in the work of repair.

These are the hidden meanings that the mystics saw in the text. Perhaps, because they were close to God, they had insider information about how the world was created, beyond the text.

This brings us to one of Judaism's central prayers, the **Shema**: *"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad." Echad* is usually translated "one," but it can also mean **oneness, unity, wholeness**. With our expanded perspective, *echad* means that everything—the totality of being itself—shares a common origin.

The Big Bang suggests a single point of origin in time and space. Kabbalah teaches that all existence flows from God. Together, they affirm: the universe is united in its source, and God is that oneness.

But we still wonder: what happened before the Big Bang? Science is silent here—it cannot go beyond that first instant.

Our sages, too, warned against speculating on what was "before." The Talmud asks: Why does the Torah begin with the letter **beit**?

Because בּ (beit) is closed on three sides and open only to the front.

We are not meant to peer behind creation into mysteries beyond human understanding.

We are invited to move forward, into the unfolding story of God, creation, and our place in it.

Science gives us the *how*. Judaism gives us the *why*. Together, they point us toward wonder, humility, and purpose.

The Big Bang shows us the vastness of the universe.

Kabbalah shows us that this vastness is filled with divine light.

The Shema reminds us: all is *echad*, all is one.

If all this seems confusing, and you would like to know more about the parallel between the Big Bang Theory and Kabbalah's understanding of creation, read the book, Godand the Big Bang by Daniel Matt, a noted Kabbalisth. Or join me for my Adult Ed Class, on Zoom, **Judaism's Answers to Life's Tough Questions**, which starts on Oct. 20th. Some of this sermon come from the last chapter in my book, *Are God and Science Compatible?,* and we will discuss it more during class.

Now, as we turn now to the Torah's words of creation, may we hear them not as an ancient myth opposed to science, but as a sacred invitation to see the unity of all existence, and to embrace our role as partners with God in sustaining and repairing this magnificent world.