This *Beit Am*, This Jewish Home, Is Not Going Anywhere.

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This Rosh Hashanah launches Temple Beth Am's platinum anniversary, the 70th anniversary of our congregation's founding. For seventy years, Temple Beth Am has been a Jewish home in Seattle. Since 1956, 5716 in Jewish time in Jewish time, our members have been empowered to live Jewishly and reaffirm their Jewish values at the beginning of each new Jewish year.

I want to thank anyone and everyone who has walked through the doors of Temple Beth Am over the last seven decades. To do so has been a true act of faith. Long-time Jewish Seattleites can attest that over the last seventy years the Emerald City has sometimes been kind, has often been ignorant, and at its worst has been hostile to its Jewish citizens.

What is true for Temple Beth Am has been true for every Jewish community around the globe. Since time immemorial, we Jews have been a minority; our fate as a minority means that the future is always uncertain and sometimes is tragic.

Perhaps that's why we read the *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, as part of our new year's celebration. Every year, I am horrified. Out of the blue, at the behest of a mystifying God, our patriarch Abraham prepares to murder his son. How could Abraham embark on such a journey? And how my heart aches for his beautiful, fresh-faced child! I imagine Isaac, eyes filled with adoration, trying to keep up with his father on their special excursion, only to find himself tethered to a plank, his dad hovering above him, a knife pointed at the boy's neck.

It's a tale worthy of a trigger warning.

It's a call to our moral conscience.

It's a reminder of what this world might ask of us in the year ahead.

Hayom harat olam, on Rosh Hashanah the world is reborn. Our new year rituals have developed over three thousand years of Jewish experience with one intent: to imbue us with resilience and hope for the coming year, even in a world where we encounter cruelty and suffering

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In January1963, Rabbi Milton Grafman, Rabbi of Temple Emanu-el in Birmingham, Alabama, joined nine other local white clergymen and published an open letter criticizing the racist rhetoric of Governor George Wallace and the racist policies of Birmingham's Public Safety Commissioner, Bull Connor.

As the weeks unfolded, outsiders flooded the city to protest laws that segregated the city's public institutions; the police retaliated with harsh brutality. Events escalated, and in April 1963, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was dragged to jail and thrown into solitary confinement.

Rabbi Grafman and seven of the white clergymen published another open letter in the aftermath of Dr. King's arrest. This time, the clergymen pled for moderation, seeking disengagement from acts of civil disobedience. The clergymen feared more violence and argued that desegregation was working its way through the courts.

Dr. King received a copy of their letter in jail and composed an impassioned response in the margins of the newspaper. This became *Letter from a Birmingham Jail,* an instant American classic, a poetic statement of democratic ideals.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

"One has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of good people."

When *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* was published Rabbi Grafman became a pariah on all sides of the political spectrum; in the parlance of our day, he was cancelled. He was denounced as a segregationist by liberals both within and beyond the Jewish community. On the other side, he and his family were continually threatened by right-wing reactionaries who saw him as a northern Jewish integrationist.

Then, in September, Birmingham combusted into unprecedented violence. Four Ku Klux Klansmen planted dynamite in the16th Street Baptist Church. The dynamite detonated when young people were milling about, preparing for a youth service. Four girls, ages 11 to 14, died in the blast, and a score of other children were seriously wounded.

The following Wednesday in St. John's AME Church, Dr. King eulogized the girls at their funeral:

"In a real sense these young girls have something to say to each of us in their death...Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream...These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for our aristocracy of color. Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience."[1]

Among the mourners in the church that afternoon was Rabbi Milton Grafman. Later that day, two miles and a million miles away, Rabbi Grafman entered his synagogue as the sun was setting and stepped onto the bima of Temple Emanu-El. It was Erev Rosh Hashanah 5724.

The following morning, after reading the story of the binding of Isaac, Rabbi Grafman preached an emotionally raw sermon, without notes.

Regarding the dead girls, Rabbi Grafman told his congregation, "I answer to my conscience, and you'll have to answer to yours. I want you to know as your rabbi I've always been mindful of two things. [First,] my responsibility to God, and the obligation that places upon me to other [humans]. And [second] that as your rabbi I *cannot* speak for you, we have no hierarchy, thank God, in the Jewish religion…but I owe you a responsibility: *Nothing* I say or do can in any way bring shame, disgrace, or God forbid, destruction to you as a congregation and to this beautiful house of God."[2]

The synagogue's safety was an acute concern for the rabbi because the congregation had been the target of several bomb threats earlier that spring. In his sermon, Rabbi Grafman begged the local Birmingham white community to donate *all* the funds necessary to rebuild the church. He believed that only residents of Birmingham could fully comprehend the enormity of the death of those four young girls. He pleaded with white Birmingham citizens—Christians and Jews alike—to atone for their past and do right by the slain children.

The echoes of the *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, flowed through the rabbi's words.

On that Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Grafman and his congregants had no choice but to come face to face with real suffering, the slaughter of children, the most vulnerable among us.

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Ever since I first read *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* in college, I've been inspired by Dr. King's timeless wisdom on democratic values. And to be honest, I've been haunted by Rabbi Grafman.

[1] https://speakola.com/eulogy/martin-luther-king-for-four-victims-birmingham-bombing-1963
[2] https://soundcloud.com/user-47776571l/milton-grafman-sermon-1963-september-19

I've thought *a lot* about Rabbi Grafman in this past year, maybe because we find ourselves in another critical moment in American and Jewish history. Before I did a deep dive for this sermon I, like many of Rabbi Grafman's contemporaries, assumed he was part of the problem of racial discrimination. And perhaps he was. And perhaps he was part of the solution, too. I now believe that Rabbi Grafman did his flawed human best, however insufficient or imperfect it may have been. Our knowledge is always incomplete. Almost six decades of living has taught me that life is always more complex than I could ever imagine it to be. As my father of blessed memory liked to say: The more I know, the more I don't know.

We know that whatever is in store for us in 5786 the reality on the ground will be much more complex than we can ever imagine. *That's* why we read the binding of Isaac on Rosh Hashanah. We humans are often witnesses to the inexorable pull of cruelty; we have not outgrown human sacrifice. As Rabbi Tali Adler teaches, "We accept that some need to die for the world to flourish. When the angel stops Abraham from killing his son...God offers us another way."[3] Like the angel who did not turn away from the suffering child, we read this tale on Rosh Hashanah as a reminder not to turn away. *Hayom harat olam*, maybe on this day of rebirth, we are to see ourselves as *more* than human; more *humane*; more like the angel, the messenger of God, who saved Isaac.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that our every action has moral consequences for the whole human family. On Rosh Hashanah we attest to the sacredness of all humankind and of all Creation. In the words of Dr. King, we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Like the angel, we can change the course of history with one simple act.

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Last Rosh Hashanah, we prayed for an end of the Israel-Hamas war believing one year of bloodshed was more than enough. This Rosh Hashanah we stand with the protestors in Israel who want to bring the hostages home, end the destruction of Gaza and the occupation of the West Bank, and rebuild their Israeli democracy. I'm particularly moved by T-shirts and signs that many protesters bear: *yeled hu yeled.* A child is a child. Any child that suffers is every child that suffers.

In 5786, Temple Beth Am's Israel Engagement Team will continue to offer programming that helps us better understand the plight of Israelis and guide us to support a free and democratic

[3] Rabbi Tali Adler, Facebook Post, September 14, 2025

Israel. This year, we will also launch Temple Beth Am's Palestinian Human Rights group—a group of concerned members who are dedicated to learning more about how we can aid in alleviating some of the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

These are not opposing groups; they are tied together in a single garment of destiny. As Israeli Sarah Tuttle-Singer has written: "There is no contradiction between mourning our soldiers and hostages, fearing for those still trapped in tunnels and feeling heartbroken over the deaths of so many Palestinian children. We live in a region where there is no room for either/or. It is always both. It is always and."

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It is always both/and. Life is always more complex than we ever could have imagined.

Last Rosh Hashanah we anxiously anticipated a presidential election that we knew would change the course of American history. This Rosh Hashanah we see how the present administration is tearing down the structures of American democracy at a fast and furious pace. I know you're frightened by the encroaching authoritarianism of this administration. I know you're repelled by the escalating violence of political polarization. The damage and the chaos are real, and it's understandable that some of us are tempted to be the proverbial ostrich, head in the sand, shielding ourselves from the horrors of the world.

Our Torah portion teaches us otherwise. Yes, we live in chaotic times, like Rabbi Grafman and the Jews in Birmingham in 1963, or the Jews in Germany after the Reichstag fire in 1933, or the Jews at almost any other moment in global history. Still, by placing the binding of Isaac as our Torah text today, our ancestors remind us that we have the resilience to resist cruelty, and we have the capacity to stop suffering. We can be *more* than human, more *humane*, more like the angel, the messenger of God who stopped the killing of a child.

Our congregation is up to the task. I'll give you 70 reasons why. For 70 years, Temple Beth Am has been a beacon of progressive Jewish values in Seattle.

In 2014, Rich and I had the pleasure of visiting Gerry and Molly Cone, two founders of Temple Beth Am. At 99, Gerry baked the most delectable raspberry tart I've ever eaten. He and Molly regaled us with stories of the origins of Beth Am. How they gathered in their View Ridge living room with a group of other progressive Jews, many of whom were associated with the university and the hospital, and how they decided it was time for a Jewish home in Seattle's north end. How in January of 1956 they called for a Shabbat service, put out 25 chairs in UW's Hillel, and were overcome by more than 100 participants. How the initial charter for Beth Am reflected the founders' fervent belief in egalitarianism and social justice.

Beth Am's founders desired an intellectual, values-driven Jewish home in Seattle's North End and they built it. For 70 years our congregation has drawn inspiration from our Jewish traditions to embrace the complexity of the world and uphold the promise of American democracy. This year we will celebrate 70 years of Temple Beth Am's presence in Seattle, and we will honor the past with reverence, celebrate our achievements with joy, reflect on the present with wisdom, and strategize for the future with clarity because

this Beit Am*, this Jewish home, is not going anywhere*.

For 70 years our congregation has lived in Jewish time, learned from Jewish texts, and engaged in Jewish sacred rites, and we will continue to do so this year.

Like our founders before us, like the angel of God, we have the resilience and the courage to live our religious values and not turn away from cruelty and suffering.

Hayom Harat Olam

As Beth Am's founders understood, in 5786, we will build the world we want to live in.

As Jewish tradition teaches, *Olam hesed yibaneh*[4], in 5786, we will build this world with love. *Amen v'amen.*

[4] Psalm 89:3