

Atem Nitzavim — You Stand Here Today

Farewell Address, Rabbi Andrea London, Beth Emet The Free Synagogue

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Twenty-six years. That's how many years I have been part of this community.

In Jewish tradition, the number 26 is not arbitrary. Twenty-six is the *gematria* — the numerical value — of God's name, *Yud Heh Vav Heh*. It is also the number of times the strings of the tzitzit are wrapped between each knot on a tallit. To wear a tallit is to wrap yourself in the presence of God.

And that is exactly what these twenty-six years have felt like. I have felt wrapped in God's presence every single day I have served this congregation. I know. That may seem like maybe just a touch of rabbinic overstatement...maybe even hubris? . But what I mean by this is not that I have been sitting at the right hand of the throne of the Almighty. It's that even on the hard days — and there were hard days — I felt held by something larger than myself. By this community. By our tradition. By the One who renews creation daily, who brings us out from the narrow places and opens us to a wider reality. By the Power in the universe that has helped me learn, and grow, and become.

So before I say anything else, I want to say: thank you. Thank you for being the congregation I dreamed of serving before I was ordained. From the first time I stepped into this building as a rabbinic student (sitting on the floor in the old lobby surrounded by congregants as Rabbi Knobel led the Tisha B'av reading of the Book of Lamentations), I could feel this community's vibrancy—that it took the life of the mind, heart and soul seriously. That it understood its obligations to each other and to the world around us. Thank you for demanding the whole person from me — my intellect, my heart, my doubts, my convictions. Thank you for growing with me. And thank you for letting me grow with you.

Over these twenty-six years, I have stood on this bimah and often returned to a phrase from the Book of Deuteronomy that we read on Yom Kippur morning and teaches us what it means to be a community.

Atem Nitzavim hayom culchem — You stand here today, all of you.

Moses speaks these words to the Israelites on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. He is about to die. The Israelites are about to cross over into a new life without him. And what does he say? He looks out at the whole assembled community — the tribal heads and the elders, the children, the strangers, the woodchopper and the water drawer — and he says: You are here. All of you. Together.

I have returned to that verse so many times because it contains, I believe, the whole of what Jewish community is meant to be. Not a gathering of the like-minded. Not a club for the comfortable. But a community of all of us — in our disagreements, our doubts, our grief, our joy, our full and complicated humanity. Standing together in prayer and

protest. Standing together to support immigrants, the homeless, the hungry, and the LGBTQ community. Standing together against racism and to be leaders in the reparations movement. Standing together against antisemitism and hate alongside our interfaith neighbors who have stood with and supported us. Responsible for one another, challenging each other, comforting one another.

In order to stand together, we must first ask ourselves the question God asks at the very beginning of Torah.

After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they hide among the trees of the Garden. And God — the all-knowing, all-seeing God — calls out to them: *Ayeka. Where are you?*

This is not a ping me your physical location kind of question. God knows where they are on the map. The question is existential. What are you doing with your life? Where is your heart? Who are you becoming?

Beth Emet should be, and, at its best, has been, a place where people are invited to bring their full selves and grapple with how we can grow and live a more fully integrated life. A place where questions are as welcome as answers, where struggle is understood as a sign of seriousness, and where showing up imperfectly is something we embrace.

Asking *Ayeka* — asking where we are — takes courage. Because to answer that question honestly, we have to be willing to change. We have to be willing to be boundary crossers.

This is why Abraham has always been our model. He is the first *Ivri* — the first Hebrew — a word rooted in the Hebrew root *avar*, to cross over. When God calls to Abraham *Lech lecha* — go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house — God does not reveal the destination. God simply says *asher areka*: which I will show you, as you walk. The path reveals itself only through the journey. To embark on the journey takes courage and the attentiveness to recognize each next step as it appears.

And what was Abraham called to do on that journey? What is the destination? Two words: *Heyeh bracha*. Be a blessing.

Not *heyeh shalem*. Not be perfect. Not *heyeh batuach*. Be certain. Not *heyeh b'noach*. Be comfortable. But *heyeh brachah*. Be a blessing.

There's a midrash about Abraham that I've shared before: as he embarks on his journey, he sees a palace — *doleket* — either burning with flames, or brilliantly illuminated. Both translations are valid. Both are true. He sees the world burning with suffering and injustice. He also sees it radiant with beauty and possibility. And in both cases, he calls out: Who is the owner of this palace? And God answers: I am.

To hold both without collapsing into certainty is Abraham's greatest act of faith. And our tradition has a concept for what that openness and willingness to embrace paradox makes possible.

Makhloket l'shem shamayim. Argument for the sake of heaven.

The Talmud teaches us that for three years, the famed scholastic houses of Hillel and Shammai debated every question of Jewish law. And then a heavenly voice declared: *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim* — these and these are both the words of the living God. Because both houses argued **not** in pursuit of their own glory or validation but in the spirit of seeking the truth of God's will. Not to score rhetorical points or get more likes or shares on social media, but to engage thoughtfully with the goal of increasing one's knowledge and understanding and to act more justly and morally.

We cannot get to *elu v'elu* if we are not willing to listen, to cross the threshold and reach out to another person. You cannot argue for the sake of heaven if you have already decided that only your view of the palace is true — that it is only burning, or only radiant. The capacity for genuine argument, genuine dialogue, genuine community, rests on the same foundation as Abraham's faith: the willingness to keep walking even when the destination is unclear, and to trust that God is present in the encounter with the one who sees things differently than you do.

I have tried to model that in my life and my role as a rabbi. I have not always succeeded. But the vision has always been this: that a community which can hold disagreement with civility and intelligence— that can say *I hear you* and *I disagree with you* and maybe even I've learned something new and I agree with you — is a stronger community than one that demands uniformity.

Rabbi David Polish founded this congregation on the principle of freedom of the pulpit. He believed that a rabbi who cannot speak their conscience is not doing their job. I have tried to honor that principle throughout my time here. Our next senior rabbi, Rabbi Immerman, has much to teach us. We are so fortunate that we will be the beneficiaries of his wisdom, guidance, and kindness in the years to come. Be open to him. Challenge him respectfully. And extend to him the grace and generosity that this community has shown to me.

The Free Synagogue principle must also extend beyond the pulpit — to one another. The person sitting next to you who thinks differently about Israel, who votes differently than you — they are not your enemy. Well-informed and reasoned conversation and debate has been Beth Emet's hallmark from its very origins. In a world filled with reactivity and reliant on sound bites, we must hold on to this value more tightly than ever.

Elu v'elu. These and these. Hold onto that. It is harder than it sounds, and it is critically important to the health of this congregation.

And finally — *atem nitzavim culchem* — we stand together.

As the Torah states: The woodchopper. The water drawer. The stranger within your camp.

Our destinies are intertwined. That is not a political statement. It is a theological one. We are made in the image of the same God. We are responsible for one another.

Beth Emet has never forgotten. And I want to say this clearly, because I think we sometimes take it for granted: what this community has built is rare. The soup kitchen that has fed our neighbors for over twenty years. Declaring ourselves a sanctuary congregation — twice. The civil rights journey and the border immersion trip that changed how our young people see the world and themselves. The relationship with Kibbutz Kissufim, turning our grief after October 7 into an embrace across an ocean and in person. The gatherings in which we have listened intently and respectfully to one another and stayed in the room together even when we disagreed. The list goes on.

I have watched you show up for each other in hospital rooms and at gravesides. I have watched you show up for strangers, for refugees, for people whose names you didn't know. I have watched you argue passionately and then break bread together. I have watched you grieve and celebrate and question and wrestle — and come back the next Shabbat and do it all again.

This is what community is for. Not convenience. Not the feeling of being among people who, to a person, already agree with you. Community is for the hard, holy work of becoming more fully human and making the world more fully whole.

We all face things we cannot anticipate. There will be moments when the palace seems only to be burning and when the light is very hard to find. In those moments, remember: we are not meant to face them alone. Turn to one another. Let this community hold you as it has held me, wrapped in something larger than any one of us.

Please don't stop showing up for one another. Please don't stop showing up for the world. That is our covenant. That is our calling.

May each of us hear God's voice asking *Ayeka* — where are you? — and answer with our whole self: *Hineni*. I am here. I am ready to be a blessing.

And may we hear, rising around us, the voices of this community answering the same.

Atem nitzavim culchem. We are not standing alone. We never were.