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I hope my words find you, and those you love, well. As the days shorten, the light softens, and summer's energetic blaze yields to autumn's gentle solemnity – we gather, as Jews have for thousands of years in this season, in reflection. We consider not only the events, births, and losses of this past year – but also how this year recast the meaning of years past, the way a book's later chapters remake the meaning of its opening pages. The experience of every person, and every Jew, finds its clearest expression in the lives of the beloved students who will return to (or arrive in) New Haven in a matter of weeks: eager for a new year's potential; seeking friends we can trust with our secrets, and projects to which we will commit our energies and hopes.

This year, we will undertake this timeless spiritual work within a particular, and darkened, human climate. What does it mean – and what does it require – to live courageously into the future when our dreams for the world seem only stalled, but even receding? Since last Rosh Hashanah, Europe has been plunged into a gratuitous war of imperial conquest; Americans' trust in the fair administration of the law at the highest levels has collapsed; one of the few things that four-fifths of our fellow-citizens agree on is that this country is on the wrong path. To be far from redemption is one thing – to be getting farther from redemption, something else – and worse. And yet as the season turns, we are summoned to take ourselves, our hopes, the Covenant, and our capacities – seriously, with purpose, and even awe.

Our spiritual mentor in this moment is none other than Abraham, the hero of Rosh Hashana. His journey from home out into the world, like each of ours, was urged on by promises of the future's promise, "God said to Avram, 'Go forth out of your land, out of your birthplace, and out of your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and bless you, and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. And all the families of the earth shall be blessed by you.' And Avram went..." Similar dreams, perhaps smaller in scale but no less cherished, guide each student as they leave home for Yale – and inspired each of us as we set forth from our homes at the age of eighteen.

But the blessings did not come quickly or easily: unexpected, and unspoken disappointments preceded them. No sooner has Abraham begun to make his home in the land than he is driven out by severe famine (Genesis 12:10). Our Rabbis are awed at Abraham's ability to abandon the land for which he had abandoned everything – without bemoaning his decision to upend his life in exchange for a place that, at first, repaid him more in curses than in blessings (Genesis Rabbah 40:5).

Years later, Abraham learns that God's promises towards his children, while perhaps the last word, will not be the first: "Know well, that your descendants will be refugees in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13). We can scarcely imagine Abraham's shock, perhaps even sense of betrayal, at this Divine revelation: yes, your children will be blessed, but they will first be cursed; yes, they will be a great nation, but they will also be nearly crushed by a yet-greater nation; nations will bless themselves by your children, but first, those nations will subjugate and nearly eliminate them.

Abraham's heroism comes into sharp relief as the contrast between his unflagging, faithful efforts and the unyielding difficulty of his circumstances. He stubbornly keeps faith: rearing children and arranging for their futures; negotiating with wary neighbors; when necessary, waging war. It is no small thing to

do all of this while enjoying the ripe fruits of one's destiny, made manifest – it is a high level of grit and hutzpah to do so in defiance of one's times.

Our work as Jews this year is to be Abraham: maintaining our faith in the promises that have inspired and challenged us, even as our faith in their timely realization fades. Sheer willpower is insufficient to maintain hope and purpose – and this is why Shabbat has always been the central pillar of Jewish time. We humans require frequent uplift: the crackling warmth of friendship, the sensuous delight of good food, and the release from demands in easy play. Could it be that Shabbat, unique among the world's calendrical markers in that it corresponds to neither the sun's nor the moon's cycles, could instead be calibrated to the cycles of human restoration and invigoration?

The provision of hope-engendering experiences and relationships is the work of Slifka Center. The joys of a Shabbat dinner elevate students' sense of what life can be – they are small oases in a week of hurry and pressure. The fulfillment of study for the sake of wisdom, without the pressure of grades; the fulfillment of living in community with and for others, without the demands of productivity – these are simultaneously respite from the work of Yale and inspiration to return to it restored. Most significant of all, students are not the passive recipients of these moments, but active partners in creating them: they can feel, in one restored building, not only the possibility of the world to be in good order, but their capacity to help make it so.

As you well know, this is not work for a few individuals, but for the entirety of Yale's Jewish community, of all of us: parents, alumni, students, and staff together. So firstly, I want to invite you to be in frequent and forthright conversation: I will always be happy to hear your voice over the phone or read your words in email, and doubly so to meet with you as you pass through New Haven.

Second, and no less important – **please consider supporting the work and vision of Slifka Center as we enter this new year together. From welcoming the class of 2026 to accompanying the class of 2023 as they enter the wide post-Yale world – the work of nurturing Jewish life, Jewish souls, and Jewish community has never been more needed, or more difficult. We hope you will choose to support Slifka Center this year with a charitable gift.**

Personally, I want to thank you, individually and collectively, for staying close and keeping this community in your minds and hearts through the upheavals of the past two years. None of us could have done this alone, and I hope you feel your due measure of pride at what we have created together. I want to close with a piece of personal news: my family has just moved into a new home in East Rock: purchasing it (our first home) is the most sincere expression I could give of my belief in and commitment to this community. I look forward to sharing many years together, and pray that many of them will be filled with goodness and peace - for each of us, the Jewish people, and all of humanity.

May you and yours be inscribed for only goodness and blessing in this new year.

Shanah tovah,



Jason Rubenstein

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