

THREE REFLECTIONS ON BELONGING, BROKENNESS, AND BECOMING

Talk 1: The Choice – “I Found It!”

Dr. Stephen Daniel Arnoff

Shabbat Shalom.

It's an honor to be with you at Congregation Beth El and my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Steven Abraham. You should know that you are blessed to call Rabbi Abraham your spiritual leader. He is a person of great principle and deep commitment to the best of Conservative Judaism. Rabbi Abraham has a clear-eyed approach to Jewish law and practice. He is a lucid, passionate, and greatly respected thought leader among congregational rabbis of North America.

Thank you for welcoming me, and special thanks to Stacie Metz for ensuring that everything has run like clockwork. The government shut down, but not this place, thanks to Stacie.

As CEO of the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center — a home for the very best of Conservative Judaism in the heart of Jerusalem — I'm honored to share with you three reflections from that holy city: a place that has taught me more than I can ever say about faith, fragility, and hope.

And I do so at a time of extraordinary complexity for the Jewish people.

In Israel, October 7th shattered so many assumptions about the Jewish State — about threat and power, unity and fracture, safety and loss. And in the Diaspora, antisemitism has resurfaced in ways many of us never imagined we would see in the country we love.

And yet, something ancient and essential is stirring, too — a turning toward each other, a reckoning with what truly matters. Jewish identity, for many, has become not a passive inheritance but a conscious choice. In some sense we have no choice but to reaffirm what it means to be Jewish. This is a gift, despite our rage, our sadness, our shock.

Now the last time I was with you in 2019 – before COVID and before the War (in other words “forever-ago”), I had the honor of speaking at the Klutznick Symposium in Jewish Studies, where I offered a lecture on Leonard Cohen. Since then, I've written a book about another rock-and-roll rabbi — Bob Dylan — and recently completed a manuscript, spiritual memoir on faith, work, and love.

My remarks this weekend are inspired both by that book on faith, work, and love which I'll be publishing next year and also by being here again with you. I want to reflect with you on three stations in a journey through belonging, brokenness, and becoming — and above all, I want us to ask ourselves what it means to be a Jew living in the rhythm of our people in these crazy days.

Tonight we begin with The Choice — about the Jewish identities we, our children, and our grandchildren inherit. Tomorrow we'll turn to The Pain, thinking as we must about October 7, and then we will talk about The Hope after some schnapps at kiddush. The Choice, the Pain, and the Hope: all are stops on a path of belonging out of brokenness, and becoming despite the crises of our life and times.

The Choice

A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... in the summer of 1980, on the side of the ravine that my best friend T. and I crossed from his yard to mine countless times a day, “I Found It!” bumper stickers began to appear on the trees.

I was ten, T. was eleven, and it had already been an eventful summer. The Empire Strikes Back had been released, and I’d seen it three times. The U.S. Hockey Team had beaten the Soviets like Rocky beating Apollo Creed. But then Jimmy Carter boycotted the Olympics, and instead of gold medals in my hometown we had “Super Joe” Charboneau — a rookie hero for the hapless Cleveland baseball club — whose greatest feat was opening beer bottles with his eye socket live on camera. This was the best thing that happened in my world of sports all summer long.

T. and I had met when I was five and he was six, after my family moved from the suburbs to a dead-end street carved out of Ohio forest. Our houses were divided by that ravine — a small river of imagination we crossed daily.

We built forts, played endless sports, made up entire worlds. There was no “It” to find because everything was right there. Play itself was home.

Then those “I Found It!” stickers appeared. I asked T. what they meant. Sitting together on a vine halfway between our houses, he explained the Rapture — how he and his family would rise to heaven while mine would be left behind.

“You mean we could just be sitting here and you’d go up, and I’d go down to H-E-L-L?” I asked.

He nodded, gently but with certainty.

“Because I’m Jewish,” I said.

T. shrugged as he explained the rules of the Rapture, and it was clear I was out of luck.

“I’ll have to ask my Grandpa Phil about this,” I said. But I never did.

That was the day I learned that religion, that being Jewish, could divide as much as it could unite. There was no room for me on that vine of faith with my best friend — and so a kind of spiritual wandering began, and it led me to a life of Jewish questions, leadership, and — I hope — some Jewish wisdom too.

Years later I learned that “I Found It!” was part of a national evangelistic campaign. But at ten, all I saw was that my friend belonged to something I could not join. His families’ “It” was closed to me. I was jealous of their certainty. I still am, sometimes.

You can create an entire world with a friend, but you cannot be that friend. Perhaps John Lennon was right that we should imagine a world without labels. “Imagine all the people, living for the world...” Yet difference — even painful difference — is part of what colors the mystery of being alive. And it’s a primary color for being Jewish.

That conversation on the vine was my first taste of what it means to be outside the circle. To be an outsider. It was confusing and painful, and it’s an experience Jews have known forever.

We have been citizens and exiles, neighbors and strangers — loved for our contributions, feared for our differences. Even when we feel completely at home, something always reminds us that our belonging has limits.

The Torah names this truth directly: *“Gerim v’toshavim Atem imadi”* — “You are strangers and sojourners with Me.”

To be Jewish is to live between worlds — rooted in covenant, yet never fully absorbed by the cultures around us. We build bridges; we contribute deeply; but we also carry a story that will always make us stand out, stand up, stand aside, standoffish, stood up, and sometimes castigated and shut up and shut out.

But that’s only half the story. Because to be Jewish is also about choosing belonging — actively, deliberately, joyfully. We are the choosing people as much as we are the chosen people.

Every Friday night we step inside that choice again. We chose to be together, to step away from work. The candles are lit, the doors of the synagogue are open, and we come inside the warmth of the community that we have chosen to honor, to support, to lean into.

Belonging in Jewish life isn’t passive — it’s something we create together. We choose it when we show up, when we pray, when we study, when we care for each other.

This is what this congregation embodies tonight: the choice to come inside, to gather, to make holy space together. The outside world may feel uncertain, even threatening at times, but inside this sanctuary we taste what true belonging feels like. Just like “Cheers,” sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.

In Judaism, “chosenness” is not as much a privilege as a responsibility.

God may have chosen us in our mythic lore, but every generation must choose back.

As Deuteronomy teaches, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life.”

Our covenant depends not on certainty, but on action. We belong because we keep saying yes — to our people, our values, our God — even when the world tells us no.

This past year has reminded us how fragile belonging can feel. In Israel, our hearts broke; in the Diaspora, many of us felt suddenly outside again — in classrooms, on campuses, even among friends who no longer seemed to understand who we are.

And yet, at the same time, I have never seen Jews turn toward one another with such urgency, such compassion. The very pain of exclusion has deepened the power of inclusion.

The choice to belong — to keep crossing the ravine of imagination toward one another — has never felt more essential.

The vine where my best friend T. and I once sat still lives in me, and we are still close friends — he with his Rapture still a-coming and me with my Jewish choices. This reminds me that friendship and difference can coexist; that curiosity about difference is holy; and that faith, at its best, does not divide us but calls us to cross the ravine again and again in search of what we might yet find together.

And that's what the Jewish story really is — a people who never stop crossing. The ancient Hebrews, the Ivri'im, the term literally means "those who cross over."

From Abraham leaving home to Moses wandering the desert, from exile to return, from despair to hope — we keep asking, Where do we go in order to belong? What ravine must we cross?

Tonight, as we welcome Shabbat together, we cross that ravine of imagination and connection once more — from the noise of the week to the quiet of Shabbat, from the loneliness of a world that doesn't know what to do with us — or is all too sure it knows what to do with us — to the embrace of sacred community where all we need to do is show up.

In a world where we often do not feel fully at home, the Jewish act is to choose belonging anyway, building a house of community together, each Shabbat, each year, in every generation.

This is the Choice. My choice. Your choice. Our choice. More on all of this tomorrow. For now, thank you for making this choice together, and Shabbat Shalom.

Talk 2: The Pain – Living Through and After October 7

Dr. Stephen Daniel Arnoff

In our first conversation, The Choice, we explored what it means to belong – and not to belong. To choose to come inside the warmth of Jewish life even while knowing that, in the wider world, we often stand apart.

This morning we turn to the other side of that choice: what it costs to be Jewish, what it costs us to choose. What it means to keep faith when the world is enraged by our choices, and yet we have no choice but to fight back, to find resilience, to hold fast to our choices, to mourn, to rebuild, to heal.

Parashat Chayei Sarah opens paradoxically: “And the life of Sarah was a hundred and twenty-seven years...” – and then the very next verse tells us that Sarah died.

This tension – between life and loss, between the living and the dead – is the space where we stand after October 7.

Abraham’s first instinct after Sarah’s death is not to pray; it is to act. To find a burial place. To buy, not borrow, the Cave of Machpelah. He insists on owning a space for mourning, on claiming grief as sacred ground. Grief requires ownership. It asks us not to look away.

I carried that teaching with me when, with colleagues and friends, I led a solidarity mission that brought us to Kibbutz Be’eri just days after October 7, 2023.

We were the first civilian group to visit the site of a massacre of unfathomable brutality. On the floor of a home, death covered the tiles. A butcher’s knife lay atop the coagulated blood of a mother who had been burned alive in her own home.

And in that moment I heard the echo of Genesis: “*Kol demey achicha* – your brother’s and sister’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.”

Like Abraham, we could not turn away. We had to own the grief – to see it, to touch it, to hold it as sacred.

At Hadassah Hospital the next day, we met a social worker who said to our group of North American rabbis and communal leaders, “I’m sorry for my broken English. I don’t speak English well on a normal day, but today I have no words. But I have many pictures.”

She was right. We all have many pictures now – from those days, those weeks, those endless doomscrolls of sorrow of the past two years.

Pictures of soccer balls beside single shoes in the deserted yard on a kibbutz. Soldiers digging through rubble for fragments of bone. Our people emaciated in cages. Parents carrying the coffins of their children. My friend Rachel crying out into the void of the universe for all that she had lost.

Like Abraham, we bore witness. We could not look away.

The Hebrew word *teshuvah* — return — has never felt so literal.

We return to what we've lost and in this, painfully, we return to ourselves. We return to one another through the smoke, through the grief, through the doubt.

Faith in these times is not clarity; it is endurance. *Gam ki elech bgatzalmavet, lo eira rah.* Even in the valley of the shadow, life insists on life.

For me, that insistence is not theoretical.

Both of my sons-in-law served in the IDF throughout the war, constantly rotating through war zones. My daughter chose to volunteer for her own reserve duty — not because she had to, but because she could not imagine standing aside as she lost friends and teachers.

And in the midst of all of this — while the air-raid sirens still sounded, while the nation still trembled — both of my daughters chose to marry their soldier partners.

The oldest kids' wedding was interrupted by air raid sirens. The Houtis. As the sirens blared, my daughter and son-in-law and her cousins and friends simply danced into the shelter and carried on until it was safe to emerge again. There was never a hesitation that the joy would outlast the Houtis. And it did. It really did. And then we came out and danced some more.

That is courage. That is *teshuvah*. That is what it looks like when life insists on life.

My kids' generation's choices — to serve, to marry, to dance — are acts of defiance and faith. They remind us that even when we cannot see the road ahead, we lean into life. We lean into the hurt, the wonder, the future, each other.

Just as we said last night: the Jewish story is of a people forever crossing extremes, again and again. The *Ivri'im*, the Hebrews, the Crossing Ones, those who cross over both time and place, from tragedy to a new day, that ravine of imagination.

One night in a Jerusalem taxi during the war, I met a driver whose son was serving on the front lines. "Every day," he said, "I pray not for victory, but for his heart. I don't want him to lose who he is in the war."

He looked at me through the rearview mirror and said, "That's faith, my friend — to keep driving even when you can't see the road and to pray to get to the other side."

That is what it means to live through and after October 7: to keep driving, to keep living, to hold fast to who we are even when the map has been torn to shreds.

And this is what our tradition teaches. After Sarah's burial, the Torah tells us simply: "And Abraham rose."

Even after an unbearable loss, he stood up. That's the spiritual work before us, too — to rise. To build, to comfort, to live, to keep faith, to choose life.

Our task, like Abraham's, is to make space for mourning and for meaning, for tears and for trust.

The Cave of Machpelah was not a tomb; it was a beginning. It was the first piece of land Abraham ever owned in the Promised Land. Out of pain, a future was planted.

We will never unsee the pictures, never unhear the screams and sirens, never undo the grief. But we can decide what to do with them.

Abraham insisted on owning the land of his loss — and by doing so, he claimed his place in the future. So must we.

We can build a field of connection where memory becomes a mission, where sorrow becomes the seed of compassion. We can turn pain into purpose — the kind of belonging that only those who have suffered know how to create.

Last night, thinking about the choices of the Chosen and Choosy People, we said that to be Jewish is to belong inside even when the world keeps us outside. After October 7, that belonging has become an act of courage — to gather, to comfort, to keep showing up. Belonging itself has become a form of resistance, a sacred declaration that life wins.

That is the covenant of this moment — to bury our dead, to bless the living, and to build the world they dreamed of both for us and for them.

And from that covenant — after the schnapps, after the kiddush, maybe even after whitefish, in my final talk, we will turn from this standing up and resilience, to the Hope — in particular toward the young Israelis of the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center, where I serve as CEO — the artists, the seekers, the newlyweds, and the soldiers who are teaching us to sing again, to dance again, to rise up again.

These war children are our teachers now, showing us what Abraham must have felt when he rose from his grief and faced the dawn of a new and beautiful day despite his loss and his sorrow. So too must we rise up. But more about that after a drink.

Shabbat Shalom.

Talk 3: The Hope – The Room and Zamru Dr. Stephen Daniel Arnoff

This Shabbat, we've traveled a shared path: from *The Choice* — the decision to belong, even when we stand outside; to *The Pain* — the price we pay when we keep faith and rise again from the hard ground of grief. And now, we turn to *The Hope* — the part of the story that reminds us why we keep crossing the ravine of imagination and faith even when the going gets tough.

Come with me to Jerusalem — to the back of the room of the Zucker Family Synagogue on the corner of Agron and Keren Ha-Yesod, on the campus of the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center. It's the summer of 2025. I'm kneeling between sound equipment on my left and a small set of stairs on my right, watching the moment unfold. A time of war, of fear, of anger, of hostages — but also — despite it all — a time of music, a time of hope in the heart of Jerusalem.

Purple and red lights dance across centuries-old stone, casting a mystical glow. Two hundred and fifty people fill the space — festival kids in peasant dresses and seminary students in black and white, clergy and tourists, men in long coats despite the summer heat, women from China and France — all chanting and clapping in ecstatic song.

Down the hill, the Old City marks time in four quarters — Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Armenian. Up the hill, thousands protest: to bring the captives home, to end the war. Standing at this threshold — between the music and the street, the ancient and the urgent — I feel the weight of a question that has shaped my whole life: *How do we create belonging in a world bent on keeping people isolated and afraid?*

Robin Williams once said, "I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up alone. It's not. The worst thing is to end up with people who make you feel alone." His words echo at the edge of the music. For me, it's spaces like this — sanctuaries for seekers — where I come closest to feeling that I belong. Tonight, I am less alone.

I wasn't always a builder of communities. There was a time when I didn't even have one. Like many others, I began as a seeker — wandering through the landscape of loneliness that defines so much of modern life, that kid crossing the ravine, unsure of what tradition meant or how or why to belong to it, not sure of where I belonged.

But I've come to believe that loneliness itself is not a curse, feeling on the outside is not a burden one cannot lift — because this burden of loneliness and not knowing where I belonged led me to my choices. Loneliness is the raw material that leads to empathy and grit. It's what allows us to turn dark matter into light, solitude into solidarity.

And now, somehow, I've become a doorkeeper where people move into places of belonging and out of loneliness one prayer, one text, one song at a time. That's my job at the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center. I'm one of the doormen. During war, during these difficult times, I and my colleagues in Jerusalem are minding the door to ritual, connection, community, and hope.

In my line of work, the door to a room like the Zucker Family Synagogue that holds our music is symbolic and material, ethereal and practical. It marks an *ingress* for strangers that, in the course of one night, becomes an *egress* for friends. At the end of these evenings, I see the same immovable footstone resting on cobblestone, the same cracked wood doorjamb, the same janky lock. And yet, like the magical wardrobe that captured my imagination as a child, those who enter the space behind this door changed, through the very same portal that welcomed them a few hours before.

And that's what our music program Zamru, which was so very alive from the first days of the war until now, has become — a doorway for transforming loneliness into community, absence into connection, fear into courage.

At the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center, we gather people from every corner of Jewish life to sing, to learn, and to pray — to remember that what binds us is stronger than what divides us.

As our flagship initiative alongside the Conservative Yeshiva, Zamru trains musicians and spiritual leaders who turn music into a language of belonging, a bridge between hearts. Each year, our *Zamru Fellows* study and create side by side, shaping prayer circles, summits, and retreats where hundreds come together — secular seekers and Hasidic regulars, Israelis and visitors — all lifted by the same song.

After launching this program in Jerusalem, *Zamru* is now carrying that spirit across North America — widening the circle of prayer, music, and hope that began in Jerusalem and keeps rising. We will be in Seattle, Portland, LA and maybe even Omaha next year.

Week after week, through song and community, something miraculous happens. The lonely become a community. The wounded become singers. The seekers become the found. This is the power of Jewish music and community. This is the door of hope.

The prophet Hosea wrote:

"I will make the Valley of Trouble a door of hope."
וְנִתְּנִי לָהּ אֶת-כָּרֶם מִשָּׁם וְאֶת עֵמֶק עֲכֹר לַפֶּתַח תִּקְוָה

Every week at Zamru, we open that door to meaning and hope a little wider. In the music, in the heat of conflict, we find the cool air of belonging. We remind ourselves that loneliness and conflict are not the end of the Jewish story — it's often where our song begins.

When the drumbeat sounds at Zamru, I think of Abraham rising from the ground after Sarah's death. When a voice begins to sing, I think of my children, whose weddings were interrupted by sirens — and how they danced beyond fear and into the joy of love. Every time the crowd swells in harmony on our campus, I think: *this is what belonging looks like after exile, after pain, after wandering.*

And this is what it means to be a Jew: to turn mourning into music, isolation into invitation, despair into dance.

Hosea's door of hope — that's what these rooms, these gatherings, these songs are. Every open door, every melody, every gesture of care says to the world: *we are still here, living life, seeking meaning and purpose.*

Maybe this is the truest belonging there is — the moments when we recognize our shared humanity in the midst of our shared solitude. And our task is to keep creating those moments — to build rooms where the music plays and the door stays open, where each of us can walk in, breathe, and feel, even for a while, that we've found it.

If *The Choice* taught me to step inside Jewish spaces, and *The Pain* taught me to rise from the ashes after the price we sometimes pay for that choice, then *The Hope* teaches us to keep the door open — for others, for myself, for the next song still waiting to be sung.

As this Shabbat afternoon draws to a close, I want to thank this community for listening to these three reflections. What began with the story of a boy across a ravine has touched upon the story of a people who keep crossing divides — of faith, of grief, of distance — to find one another.

In a world still trembling from war and uncertainty, I've learned again and again that our calling is not to wait for belonging to find us. It's to build it — one gathering, one song, one gesture of compassion at a time.

At the start of this journey, I told you about a bumper sticker that read, "*I Found It!*" I said that genuine faith is not a declaration of having found, but the holiness of still seeking.

Maybe now, after all we've lived and learned together, I would add this: sometimes, in moments like this — in rooms filled with song and soul — we *do* find it, even if only for a while. And when we do, may we hold onto that moment, and then offer it to someone else, to hold the door open for others, to make this threshold safe and inviting and hopeful and real no matter what the world outside demands of us.

May we keep choosing, keep rising, and keep hoping together.

Shabbat Shalom.