

Dvar Rosh Hashanah September 12th 2026

Hello, shana tovah, happy new year. I'm Rachel Hess, former board president, and long time member and shule parent. As the new year enters, the leaves change, the cool fall breeze returns, I have been thinking about life cycles. Certainly my own individual life cycles, of which I have been through many during my time with BWC. But also how we hold life cycles in the community, and go through them collectively. I appreciate the way we, as Jews in our secular tradition, think about the new year, and the year overall, as a cycle. The challah is round, the target, with the mark we are trying to hit, is a circle. We recognize the flow of life in a way that is meaningful and connected.

In my role as a postpartum doula, I have spent years bearing witness to that first life cycle, birth. I have had the honor to hold space as a person becomes a parent, and the ripple effects that has on the self, the family, and the broader community. This life cycle is often celebrated, as it should be, but is also one of the most challenging moments in life. The huge emotional and physical toll having a baby takes on you is life-changing. I have always said that much of the care that is needed in those early weeks and months is not unsimilar to the help needed when someone passes away. Both are times that we cannot survive alone. Or not well.

I recently had the honor to witness the support and care that communities like ours can provide during these huge life changes. I got to doula a new family in our community, and help guide them through those early days and weeks. One of the things I witnessed was the way in which their community showed up for them. We live in a world where it is very hard to ask for help, let alone accept it. I referred back to the words of our mutual aid society many times when supporting them around this challenge, of the feeling like they are asking too much or giving too little. Community holds you precisely when you cannot give back. Community holds you when you have nothing left to give. Community does not let you drown. At BWC, we have broken down those capitalists ideas around the exchange of goods as a tit for tat. I have spent many hours reminding new parents that people want to help and hold them, and that those same people expect nothing in return.

On the other end, there has been a lot of loss in our community this year. The way the community shows up is very similar. It is not an exchange of goods. It is an outpouring of love. It is an acknowledgement of the value that every life has. I went to a shiva for one of our beloved members who had passed and saw so many BWC folks there, bringing food, and showing up with our bodies. Saying to each other, your grief matters, we see it, we hold it, we connect with it. Looking around I felt both a deep sense of gratitude and grief at the same time. I believe what I felt was not a personal loss, but a communal loss. This person matters to us, collectively, and that loss is felt by all of us, whether we were close to the person who has passed on or not.

I mention all of these things to point out why community is so important, and it certainly is to build on those personal relationships and connections. But it is bigger than that, exponentially bigger. And time and generations matter. Knowing you have people to fall into, and people you can lift up when you feel resourced. This is a strong community. This is how we stay strong for another 125 years. This is how we fight facism, build up democracy, and hold and protect those members of our community who are the most marginalized. Not only because each person individually matters, but because we are all part of a fabric that makes our community strong, richer, and more meaningful.

This community has been through many “life cycles,” especially during my time as president. We know that deeper connection is built through rupture and repair. One might argue that October 7th was a time of deep rupture in the broader Jewish community, and in our little one as well. I will not sugar coat it and argue that everyone felt good about how we got through that. But I do believe it was an example of our little but mighty org going through a change, not unlike an individual life cycle moment. I believe we became firmer in who we are, what our values are, and who is part of this community. It was a time defined by great loss, heartbreak over the conditions in Gaza and the loss of palestinian life. At BWC we spent time in conflict and also practiced communication and community building. We took strong and bold stances, making our solidarity with Palestine abundantly clear. The stances we took, calling for a ceasefire right away and sticking up for a diasporic Judaism, were not without risk. But we talked and discussed, 2 jews 5 opinions, I like to say, and we knew our community would be even stronger if we held firm to these values. I like to think in my role as board president, I did a little doula-ing for us. Helped us acknowledge what was hard, what kind of support we needed, when we could venture out on our own, and how to listen to our instincts, or our deeper values.

As we enter the new year and then on Yom Kippur, and we reflect on who and how we want to be in the following year, let us think about how we can continue to build and grow a stronger community. My offering to you is more of a list of questions. How can we become more connected over the next year? How can we deepen our commitment to our shared values? We will all need to lean on others at some point, so how can we hold people up now? How can we connect with someone who we don't know or maybe who we even have had disagreements with? Where can I reflect on my own responses and experiences, and either use them to help others, or put them aside so that I am really listening and being present. From my heart space, not my trauma space, or even my intergenerational trauma space. How can we do that deep listening and connecting with an understanding that humanity is divine, and that somewhere, deep down, we are all connected.

This is the liberatory act. To love and connect and understand each other. To not let them divide and conquer. To not let them ruin our awe and love for each other and the plant. This is the path forward. And the path I look forward to walking with all of you.