



Coming Home to My People

Jen Kiok, Rosh Hashanah Dvar

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Good Morning. Welcome to the first day of Tishrei, the first month in the Jewish calendar. The month of new beginnings, of deep reflection, turning, of harvest. And welcome to the new year, 5782, which is the 7th year in a seven year cycle of Jewish time, called Shmita. Just as shabes is the 7th day of the week, the day of rest, Shmita is the 7th year, the year of rest. The year in which the fields go fallow and all debts are forgiven. I begin by anchoring us in Jewish time as the compass for the story I want to tell you this morning, the story of returning home to you, to my people and to myself over these past 7 years that I've had the honor of serving as the Executive Director (ED) of BWC.

The rhythm of the Jewish year invites us to return each Rosh Hashanah to take account of the year gone by and to turn towards our better selves. In order to turn towards something new we must have the courage to let go of something old. As you begin to think about what you are turning towards in this new year, I invite you to take a peek at what you may be consciously or subconsciously turning away from.

I believe the path to liberation lies here, in turning with a gentle gaze towards that thing — whatever it may be and promising it just a bit of your attention.

Many of you have heard me say I followed a spiritual call to my secular role as ED at Boston Workers Circle. What I haven't said as publicly is that I was terrified to take on this role. I was terrified to work with my people in a majority white Jewish organization.

I was terrified because as a white Ashkenazi Jewish woman fighting racism and an occupation in my name, I had developed a practice of turning away from these core pieces of my identity. After a transformative experience 20 years ago of awakening to racism and my role in it, I wanted to do everything I could to distance myself from my own whiteness.

Five years later, I traveled to Palestine. I witnessed homes that had been demolished by bulldozers, communities that had been divided by the separation wall, I travelled through checkpoints and roadblocks, experienced collective punishment in the form of curfew and restriction of movement. I witnessed all of this being carried out by my people, including my



cousins who are soldiers in the Israeli army. They were using techniques of occupation on the Palestinian people that were used against our ancestors in Poland. As I witnessed this, something inside me broke. I quietly moved as far as I could away from my Jewishness while still remaining in my body. Distancing first from my skin, then from my culture, there was little of me left.

After turning away from my people as an attempt to turn away from the parts of myself I couldn't reconcile with, stepping into this role was a leap of faith that it was time to come home. And while you might not have known this was a homecoming for me, you welcomed me with open arms. And as I turned towards you, I also turned towards myself. You became my teachers. I learned to braid challah, to build a sukkah out of bamboo, to sing in Yiddish, to move in rhythm with the Jewish calendar. **And I realized that I wasn't alone.**

In fact, in my first meeting upon being hired with then-board president Rosa Blumenfeld, I gathered all my courage and confessed that I was sort of a self-hating Jew.

Rosa laughed and without skipping a beat said, "Don't worry, we all are."

Now, I hope this is not true, but what I think she meant is that many of us are conflicted about being Jewish in these times. This ambivalence towards being Jewish is an identity that many of us share. It's perhaps partly in our not belonging that we all belong here. And from this place we get to boldly experiment with a different way to create Jewish community. Following in the footsteps of our Workers Circle ancestors whose founding charter stated, "We fight sickness, premature death and capitalism."

In these past 7 years, those words took on new meaning as we travelled through unprecedented times- Through the Trump presidency and into a global pandemic. We witnessed, we organized, we grieved, we stood in solidarity together as the curtain was pulled back and white supremacy, racism and antisemitism were exposed more clearly than many of us had experienced in our lifetimes.

I'm grateful to the friends and teachers who have shown me that we have to build the more beautiful world we long for while this one crumbles. We may not live long enough to see the end of sickness, premature death and capitalism or white supremacy and patriarchy but we can't wait until they fall to build something new to take their place. We get to do that right now,



right here. This is the work I see us doing together. **I believe the path to collective liberation lies here.**

And whether you come here to speak Yiddish, to organize for racial justice, to celebrate Shabes or maybe just once a year for the High Holidays, you are a part of this multiracial, multiethnic, interfaith, queer-affirming, progressive Jewish community.

As we enter into this 7th year together, I am called to the Jewish tradition of Shmita. And in this transition moment from one BWC chapter to the next, and from one political chapter to the next, we are all called to slow down and catch our breath. Although the work is never done, Jewish tradition offers us the guidance to learn how to rest. Shmita can be translated as release. It is a time of liberation and mutual aid, when all are invited to eat from the bounty of the previous six years. Shmita invites us to reconsider our relationship with work and with rest. As I look back on the past 6 years, it is clear that we have been working hard. We have accomplished a lot together in these unparalleled times:

- ★ When xenophobia was carried out in government policy, our members helped to create an accompaniment network, to provide sanctuary & safe haven for immigrant families, to raise over \$40,000 for people coming out of ICE detention centers.
- ★ In the face of heightened censorship in the Jewish community, we've taken bold stances against redlining and for freedom of speech.
- ★ As congregations throughout the region report declining membership, we nearly doubled in size.
- ★ As Jewish institutions struggle to engage the next generation, we have done the hard work of building trusting partnership and leadership across generations,
- ★ We moved from our home of 50 years into accessible space and we are learning through this pandemic how to make our programs accessible to all, around the globe.
- ★ In a time of severe isolation, we created connection and mutual aid.
- ★ Our young people have led the way in gender justice, leading training for our adult members on gender identity and leading us to a historic name change.
- ★ We took a hard look at ourselves and realized we had some work to do to show up better for racial justice, to show up better for our members of color and our Sephardi and Mizrahi members, to transition from a progressive organization to an actively anti-racist organization. We're still in that transition. All board, staff and member leaders are now required to participate in a training on the intersections of white supremacy, racism and anti-semitism.



- ★ In this past year, our Acting for Racial and Economic Justice committee led our board to adopt a policy on reparations, institutionalizing our commitment to racial justice. And this week, as we begin this new Shmita year, we also begin our new fiscal year, in which for the first time we will be paying an indigenous land tax.

One of the privileges of being the Executive Director is that I got to see how we fit into the larger constellation of the Jewish social justice community and the broader movement for social change. I got to feel how the work we are doing to understand the intersections of racism, antisemitism and white supremacy are part of a national movement for racial justice. And when we took bold stances, I got to feel the support of movers and shakers across the country who have our backs, who believe the future of the Jewish community is in the hands of communities like ours who are not afraid to take a stand.

And while I'm proud of all that we've accomplished, I think what I am most proud of is how we've accomplished it. We have worked together to create a culture that is welcoming, inclusive, heart centered, a community based in chesed, or loving kindness.

Thank you for the many ways you have shown up for each other.

Thank you for the many ways you support each other and for the many ways you have supported me.

Thank you for helping me to heal my broken heart.

We may have a long way to go to build the community and the better world we long for but we make the path by walking it and I think we're on the right track.

In this next chapter I encourage you to be bold, to act from your values, to lead from your hearts and to slow down and rest.