

Love in the Time of Confusion

Talk by Symone Saul

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Thank you so much for welcoming me to speak with you all. Dor Hadash has always been so welcoming to me and made me feel at home and I'm so grateful to get to participate in the incredibly passionate social action committee and in services today. I hope all of you feel welcomed and appreciated as well.

I want to start by welcoming in our ancestors to join us in reverence of this new year, as well as the many ancestors who were native to the land we currently inhabit. Here in what we call Pittsburgh, there have been natives of the Osage, Iroquois/ Haudenasaunee nations.

Let's take a moment to summon in their presence and know that while many people of those tribes are still alive, they have been displaced from this land I now occupy at their expense after having maintained and stewarded this land for 15000 years. So as we bring in the year 5781, we acknowledge with humility how little time our people have existed, how new our ideas are, and how much we can learn from others who've been around even before we were supposedly created.

I've been blessed to spend 23 years at Dor Hadash quietly learning from all of you and I'm not particularly qualified to talk about anything, but I will say that I was not unprepared when the pandemic hit and the revolution came into the open. We knew this was coming and we know there is much more to come. And I know it's hard for us to hear, but our lives will not go back to normal. We cannot. What we are experiencing now and what Black, brown and Indigenous People of Color have experienced for centuries is a direct consequence of that normalcy. So instead of striving to go back to our pre-pandemic lives, we can embrace this crucial opportunity to reconstruct our world with love.

In this year in particular, we're seeing a rapid onslaught of what feels like chaos, uncertainty and technological growth. We are confused and probably overwhelmed if not terrified. We already know that love is the only path to peace, but what may be difficult to admit, is that we cannot conquer or cure chaos and uncertainty with love. Love is simply how we learn to embrace chaos and confusion, to not fear it. So if you thought this past year has been turbulent, please brace yourself with every bit of care and empathy for humanity and for yourself you can muster for the year ahead because this is what will save us in hectic and confusing times.

And I use the word confusion, because while globalization and diversification and technology are creating a beautiful world where we are all connected, our empathy and communication is lagging behind. In fact, I'm sure in the last few minutes that I've been speaking, you've already misinterpreted a dozen things I've said. It takes so much patience and compassion to slow down enough to understand others *inside their own perspective* and break through a conflict.

I started learning to resolve conflict in the winter of 2016-17, when I spent 7 weeks at the resistance camp in Standing Rock, North Dakota opposing the Dakota Access pipeline built through indigenous Lakota land.

Right now, my everyday world feels more and more like those weeks in the tent city of Standing Rock. We are all engulfed now in the hurricane of conflict and confusion and for me the response is serenity and I've only found true serenity in struggle. Serenity lives in the eye of the hurricane, so you have to let go of fear and lean into that chaos. You can't run from it, you can't destroy it.

Our society often encourages us to avoid conflict until it crescendos into a tidal wave. This year, Dor Hadash had the opportunity to use their influence among people in power in order to protect our most vulnerable community members and chose to remain silent. I don't know the individual reasons for doing so but I hope we can hold ourselves accountable to our own high standard for social action by performing mitzvot and tikkun olam in a genuine and equitable way moving forward.

In every chapter of history, there have been moments in which conflict becomes so unavoidable, that everyone inside its grasp is forced to confront it. For me, as a child sheltered from direct conflict, that chapter was the Holocaust, which I researched endlessly. I obsessed over what values caused some Germans to begrudgingly perform the Nazi salute against their own conscience. Was it fear, loyalty, ignorance, obedience?

And what values caused some Germans to risk their own lives to hide Jews or use their privilege to protect them? It wasn't heroism. They simply knew in their hearts that the lives of those they protected mattered as much as their own. One woman, Johanna Eck, who successfully hid Jewish children in her Berlin apartment said of her motives, "In principle, what I think is this: If a fellow human being is in distress and I can help him, then it becomes my duty and responsibility. Were I to refrain from doing so, then I would betray the task that life—or perhaps God?—demands from me."

And whether we choose to acknowledge it, we are making these choices now every day, in everything we do.

Making the decision to go to Standing Rock was terrifying, forcing me out of my comfort zone for the first time in my life. But what I found there was an abundance of peace and sacred community in a war zone. In addition to the physical torture of tear gas, water cannons, poison and subzero temperatures, the "law enforcement" relied heavily on psychological torture to agitate and confuse us. They surveilled us, spread rumors and infiltrators among the camp. They hacked into our radio channels with gruesome threats of murder and rape. But the sheer force of the spiritual energy of that place kept us strong and bonded in survival. As they'd done with the Black Panthers and many others, security forces used tactics of division and fear to attempt to break our loving and peaceful community.

I see them doing it now in my Pittsburgh community of Black activists and organizers whose lives are at stake every day and who have no choice but to speak up. They are portrayed in the media as angry and violent, but those of you who've stood next to them know the genuine love and humility they carry. My friend Fatima said, "humility is understanding that we all have a responsibility to others and power that we must use to show up for one another."

So where do we find the strength? For those who understand G-d as a powerful energy resonating through the universe, we know every human is also G-d and worthy of unconditional love whether they are family, neighbor, stranger or perceived enemy.

For those of you unfamiliar with Ms. Danielle Brown, she is a mother who came to Pittsburgh to demand from Duquesne University an investigation into her son's death on campus. Today is her 79th day on hunger strike.

Knowing that she cannot bring her son back from the dead, she seeks to make the world a safer place for other students. Mama Brown speaks constantly of her unconditional love for the students at Duquesne and all of our children, even those who ignore her or torment her. If you cannot stomach the thought of sharing unconditional love with someone who hates you or is trying to harm you or someone you are fearful of or simply annoys you, remind yourself that G-d lives in all of us.

When G-d spoke to Joseph, Moses and Abraham, they responded Hineni- Here I am. What they were saying was, “I am here to do what is needed of me” despite the massive sacrifices being required of them.

If we see every individual as a divine being, we would see a panhandler in the street and say, “Hineni! Here I am! What can I do for You?” And if we truly see this person as G-d then we don’t see them as destitute, less-than-us. We wouldn’t feel that helping each other makes us somehow holier-than-thou.

If we recognized the Divine spark in the earth beneath us, and felt it cry out with forest fires, droughts and flooding, we would get on our hands and knees and say “Hineni Adonai! We are here to protect You, whatever it takes, Creator of Life!”

And if we saw G-d in the people harming one another, we would not greet them with anger and impatience, but help them see the Divine spark within themselves that they have forgotten. Because it is merely confusion that has caused us to forget our own holiness and cease to feel the sacred all around us.

My Native relatives at Standing Rock helped me find my Divine spark as they beat drums and sang and prayed at the razor wire at the frontlines, we prayed while being beaten into frostbite by the wind, we prayed for the men pointing rifles at us and instead of hating them in return, we welcomed them to join us. Remember gratitude and love and you will have no fear and you too will thrive in chaos. I am not a powerful activist, as Donna Coufal may have misled you to believe. I’m a regular person who is doing the very least that I feel responsible to do. I am only as powerful as any one of us and I have a lot to learn still.

Preparing for t’shuvah, I know I’ve made many mistakes this year that I must confront and resolve, not just for my own wrongs but those that I benefited from indirectly.

I will do better in the coming year to address the ways my education has betrayed me and I will not give in to the many social pressures to act, live or speak with anything but truth and love.

This time of confusion is bigger than a political issue or a regime, this is a cultural paradigm shift. Reconstructionist Jews rejecting the trope of the “chosen ones” means nothing if we exploit our own religious persecution to justify the oppression of others.

Giving 10% tzedakah will not balance any socioeconomic scales.

In the year 5781, I will not listen to the role-call for attacks on Black, immigrant, Indigenous, and transgender people, and sit quietly until they call for the Jews.

I’m not saying you’re not doing enough and I’m not asking you to do more. My modest opinion is that the best thing we can do for our planet and humanity is to do less and rest more, so we have time to *manifest* love, *renew* our patience and *heal* from problematic ways. We can slow down and reflect on our own complicity and cultivate our resiliency for discomfort.

In Avinu Malkeinu, we ask Our Creator, Our Sovereign to “rid us of every oppressor and adversary.” so let us also ask to rid the oppressor in ourselves and cease to be adversaries or see others as enemies.

I wish everyone of you a meaningful year full of radiant love! Shana Tova Umetuka!