

Imagining the World to Come
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon- 5787
Temple Micah
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How do we imagine a future that is different from the world we inherited?

One hundred years ago, in 1926, could our grandmothers, or great-grandmothers have imagined a future in which women would become doctors, lawyers, professors,

journalists, rabbis, CEOs, not as exceptions, but as an expected part of public life?

Could they, only a few years after being given the right to vote, have imagined women, of all races, serving in Congress, sitting on the Supreme Court, or running for president?

For many people living in 1926, such a future could have seemed difficult to imagine.

The world we inhabit today was shaped by people who were willing to imagine a world beyond the limits of their own time.

We often think of imagination as something playful and unserious, only for children and artists. But imagination has always been one of the forces that shapes history. Every *movement* for liberation begins when someone looks at the world as it is and refuses to believe that it is the only world that can be.

Oppression seeks to control not only people's bodies but also their sense of what is possible. The social order of our past narrowed the horizon by teaching women what kinds of lives are supposed to be available to them. It told a girl which ambitions were appropriate, which professions belonged to her, what she could do with her body, and how much space she should take up. The women's movement challenged those limits

not only by changing laws and institutions, but by expanding what women could imagine for themselves and for one another.

When people lack the ability to *envision* something different, it becomes much harder to *build* something different.

The process of imagining beyond the limits of our reality thrives wherever people refuse to let the present define the boundaries of their future.

That refusal lies at the heart of what's called Futurism, or futures thinking. In our rapidly changing world, "futures thinking" helps us imagine beyond what is probable, to what is plausible, and even possible in our world to come. Through these lenses, we recognize that the "world as it is" is only *one* version of the world that could be.

This field is best demonstrated by Afrofuturism, a movement that uses art, literature, music, and storytelling to envision Black futures beyond the burden of slavery, racism, and colonization.¹

We see it in the novels of Octavia Butler, we encounter it in Wakanda, a world that imagines Black sovereignty and high tech innovation on the African continent. While these works can be brushed aside as "speculative fiction," I believe they contain the core ingredients of the theory of change. Imagination is a powerful tool.

¹ Aretha Flucker. "When Juneteenth Meets Afrofuturism." Alliance of Baptists, June 18, 2023. <https://allianceofbaptists.org/when-juneteenth-meets-afrofuturism/>.

If we want to build a different world, we have to be willing to look beyond the most obvious trajectory of the present, to move beyond the single line of what seems likely or preferred, and open up a wider cone of what might be possible.

This is not Pollyanna optimism or escapism. It is active, long-term work for transformation: reckoning with the past, examining the systems that produced the present, and articulating the values we want to carry forward. It is the willingness to act in the present on behalf of a future we cannot yet see.

For Jews, the practice of imagining beyond the horizon of the present is ancient.

We call it “The Prophets.”

The prophets, who lived through war, political collapse, corruption, exile, and fear knew what it meant to stand in a world that seemed to be unraveling. Their task was not only to name what was broken but to imagine what healing could look like.

Rabbi Dr. Tamara Eskenazi, prominent scholar, said, “[The prophets’] messages of hope are coming from the brink of disaster. And every prophet had a different vision to share based on the world he was living in, based on the particular fractures that were dragging his people so far down.” Dr. Eskenazi reminds us that their words were on the edge of absurdity. They looked at their world falling apart and still said: this is not how our story ends.²

Our prophet Micah, writing in a time of fear, instability, and war, offered this classic vision to his people:

² Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, "Yom Kippur 5786" (sermon, October 2, 2025)

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall not take up, Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war;
They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
with none to make them afraid."³

Think about what Micah is promising: yes, easily read as speculative fiction;. He is offering a communal vision in which his people can wake each morning in safety and dignity and to trust that tomorrow will come. For people living through instability and war, this vision must have seemed almost unimaginable.

That is precisely the point. The point was never that Micah could predict the future. The point was that, even in the middle of collapse, he could imagine one.

These visions are not simply utopian fantasies. They are intellectual and creative exercises in asking: What becomes possible when we refuse to accept the limits we have inherited?

Imagining is part of the work of justice. The vision does not replace the work of justice; it gives that work somewhere to go.

There is a particular danger when *all* of our energy is directed toward repairing what is broken, responding to suffering, and putting out fires as they arise. Judaism rightly calls

³ Micah 4:3-4

us to that work. When someone is bleeding, we grab the tourniquet. When something is unjust, we speak up. The urgency of that responsibility is real.

Micah paints an image of the future for the people living through war and says: Look at what is happening right now AND look beyond what is happening right now. The future cannot be sacrificed at the altar of the present.

There is a danger here: when we become so consumed by the past and the present and we stop imagining the future, someone else will imagine it for us. Imagination is not inherently liberatory, and a better future is not guaranteed for all. And sometimes, we wake up to discover that we are living through someone else's imagined (preferred) future.

Picture yourself 10 years ago.

In September of 2016, what would that version of you have said or felt upon learning that ten years later, we would be living in a Washington, D.C., where countless armed and uniformed U.S. Military forces patrol our public transportation, our community parks, and our residential streets? That war planes would regularly roar overhead, their bone-shaking noise becoming part of the soundscape of our city's summer? That our history museums would be censored, accused of ideological activism? That all of this could be justified in the name of beauty and safety?

What would you have thought, five years ago, if you were told that your neighbors would be taken from their homes, workplaces, parking lots, hospitals, and streets by masked

federal government agents? Men, women, and children, the elderly, and the sick? Disappeared for periods without access to their family, let alone legal counsel and transported miles away to detention facilities, en masse, forced into rooms built to hold people for a few hours holding them for days instead? What if you were told that news segments documenting these detention camps could themselves be pulled from the air? What if you heard that in the near future, you would pass a yard sign, across the street from the elementary school on your block, that reads “ICE kidnapping happened here?”

We are living in a present that sounds an awful lot like stories my grandmother told us about her childhood in Germany in the 1930s, of families afraid to leave their homes for groceries and diapers and work and school, fear of being separated. Or worse.

Would we have recognized that future of 2026 as probable?

And yet futures that once seemed improbable, dramatic, or even ridiculous can become reality when people spend time and effort imagining them, planning for them, writing them down, building the infrastructure to enact them. This is our American story.

At first read, Project 2025 sounded like a pipe dream (nightmare?) whose pages, in part, are becoming our reality. Its authors described it as a governing blueprint: a nearly 900-page plan to restructure our federal government, including mass deportations of immigrants (check); ending Temporary Protective Status (check); severely restricting student and work visas (check); not to mention limiting on Abortion Pills, banning trans people from the military, termination of DEI policies, pulling out of global climate change accords; check check check. And our most precious democratic way to speak out, our

free and fair elections, being openly challenged (check). All, I believe, seemed institutionally impossible.

And now we are, intentionally, experiencing what futurists call, “‘Future Shock’... the psychological paralysis induced by rapid, profound technological and social change.”⁴

Our attention is getting spliced thinner and thinner and thinner and our timelines for thinking about the future are getting shorter. We are living in a profoundly reactive mode: responding to the latest crisis, the latest headline, the latest threat. And when we are constantly reacting to what is happening now, it becomes harder to step back and ask: what might happen next? And, more importantly, what we *want* to happen next?

Our ability to imagine is a muscle that is atrophying, but it is also a muscle our tradition has exercised for generations. This is part of our inheritance as a people who have had to carry a vision of a better world through circumstances that made mere survival seem impossible. When the present became unbearable, Jewish tradition gave us ways to look beyond it, to imagine that the world could become something different.

One of those ideas is Olam HaBa: the World to Come. It is a Jewish way of imagining a future for all beyond the world as we know it. In Jewish tradition, Olam HaBa can refer to many things: to the world after this one, to an afterlife, to the messianic age, or a future reality in which the world has been repaired and transformed by justice, peace, and wholeness.

⁴ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970)

Importantly for us, dreaming Olam HaBa gave us tools and worked our muscle of imagining the present from the vantage point of a future that had not yet arrived.

The rabbis used Olam Haba as a way of wrestling with the big question of: what comes next? And like so many questions in Judaism, the question itself matters more than arriving at a definitive answer. The point of imagining the future is not to predict it perfectly or present a polished vision of what is to come. It is to develop a relationship with the future, to expand our sense of what might be possible, to remain flexible in the face of uncertainty.

What if we inherit that practice, the practice of looking at the world we have inherited and imagining what could come next?

I spoke with futurists Lisa Kay Solomon and Becca Leviss about this. Solomon told me, “We need to develop a greater comfort with thinking about the future despite its uncertainty. In a world of constant alerts and accelerating change, that fear response can stay on overdrive. Most of us have never been taught how to sit with uncertainty or discomfort long enough to imagine what might be possible.”

If we can sit in that discomfort and imagine a new future for all of the world’s inhabitants, we can also imagine a preferred future for the Jewish community.

Becca Leviss calls this practice “Judeo-Futurism—a combination of scholarship, culture, practice, and art through which contemporary American Jews can envision and build a generative future. Judeo-Futurism is not diagnostic or predictive (like a weather

forecast), and approaches all the facets of what it means to be Jewish not just 10 weeks or 10 years from now but 100 years from now.⁵

In some ways, we have been co-creating a framework for how we envision our future as Jews for centuries. Think of our transition from Temple Judaism to the rabbinic Judaism that shaped our tradition today. Becca Leviss says, “it’s not like the Second Temple was destroyed on a Monday and then BOOM we magically have rabbinic Judaism on a Tuesday. By the time the Temple was destroyed, the stirrings of rabbinic Judaism had already begun.”⁶ Temple Judaism already wasn’t working for the rabbis, and they began to work through new futures using strategic pragmatic decisions, even amongst chaos.

Another successful example in terms of impact and scale of Judeo-futurism is the group project of Zionism.

“Take for example, Theodore Herzl’s *Alt(nay)land*, the 1902 utopian novel in which Herzl imagined a Jewish state into existence nearly half a century before the establishment of the State of Israel. *Altneuland* was an exercise in imagination, asking what a Jewish future could look like if it were built deliberately from hope rather than fear.”⁷ Ahad Ha’am offered one approach for this dream. Ze’ev Jabotinsky offered another. Their visions contradicted one another in important ways, and that is part of the process.

⁵ Lex Rofeberg, “Judeo-Futurism: Judaism Unbound Episode 464 – Becca Leviss,” Judaism Unbound, January 2, 2025, podcast episode.

⁶ Becca Leviss, “Future Reflections for Tisha B’Av,” The Judeofuturism Project, July 22, 2026; <https://www.judeofuturism.org/post/future-reflections-for-tisha-b-av>

⁷ Becca Leviss, “Who We Are and Who We Can Become: Jewish Storytelling and Democratic Imagination,” Sources, Summer 2026

Becca Leviss says, “At its core, Judeo-futurism helps us to navigate communal uncertainty with resilience, creativity, and curiosity. Resilience because we need clarity around what elements of our traditions and stories still serve us in this moment and should be carried forward... Creativity because we need many new and innovative ideas—even the ones that don’t work—in order to find ones that do. And curiosity because we need to stay open to whatever those ideas turn out to be.”⁸ We can then turn those ideas of the future over in our heads and hands, get messy and play with dreams like clay, and give shape to possibilities. We can examine them against other visions, argue about the values they embody, and begin to discern what is worth building.⁹ Futurism asks us to practice possibility rather than surrender to probability.

Futurism is far from planning a perfect utopia or fighting against a dystopia. It’s a protopia. The change we seek cannot happen all at once, and the futures worth imagining will have room for contradiction, uncertainty, and conflict. Look at Wakanda: it offers a vision of beauty and technological innovation and cultural flourishing, while its people still experience political turmoil, personal conflict, and competing visions for what comes next. Protopia makes room for the complexity of humanity as it is.

The futures worth imagining are not polished or predetermined. They can hold contradiction, uncertainty, and the messiness of being human. Judaism knows something about our messiness, and we see it every year on Rosh Hashannah.

⁸ Leviss, “Future Reflections for Tisha B’Av,”

⁹ Benjamin, Ruha. 2024. *Imagination: A Manifesto*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company

We are asked to look backward at the year that was, take stock of where we have been wrong, what we have done, and what we have failed to do. And then we use that reflection to look forward; We reflect in order to *prospect*

So I want to offer an invitation, on this Rosh Hashannah, to everyone in this room:

What is your vision? Not just, “How do we survive what is coming?” or “what do we do tomorrow?” The status quo no longer holds, so then, what are you dreaming about?

If you were to stand at the top of our mountain and gaze out at the horizon the way the prophets did: not *just* at what is broken, but at what is possible — what would you see? Ten years from now. 100? 250? Imagine a child, descended from someone in this very room through some line not yet fully traced, living in a world that we, tonight, are beginning to imagine into existence. What does their life feel like?¹⁰ What have they inherited from us? What did we refuse to accept as permanent? What Teshuvah was required to get there?

Hayom harat olam. Today the world is conceived.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to return to the beginning, to the moment before the world has taken its final shape, and to consider what kind of world we might bring into being.

As Leviss reminds us, “Generations of Jews before us—from the prophets to Theodore Herzl—have modeled this for us and it is imperative that we carry on these practices.”¹¹

¹⁰ Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, “Yom Kippur 5786” (sermon, October 2, 2025)

¹¹ Leviss, “Who We Are and Who We Can Become.”

We are a people who have creatively carried a vision of the world that does not yet exist through relentless experiences of exile and darkness. We also have inherited the audacity to imagine beyond what the evidence in front of us seems to permit. To insist, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that the present is not permanent.

That the story is not finished. Before we can build a different world, we have to be able to imagine one. This is our work now.

Shanah Tovah

