



J STREET RABBINIC & CANTORIAL CABINET

Summer Reading Companion

Reflection Questions & High Holiday Sermon Themes
Summer 5786

This reading companion is intended as a starting point, not a comprehensive guide.

When We See You Again

Rachel Goldberg-Polin

ABOUT THIS BOOK

An instant #1 New York Times bestseller, this memoir by the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin — murdered by Hamas after 328 days in captivity — is one of the most searing and luminous books to emerge from October 7. It moves from 'The Before' to 'The After,' weaving Hersh's childhood, personality, and inner life with the unfolding nightmare of his captivity and death. Goldberg-Polin is a Jewish educator, not a politician, and the book is conspicuously not political. It is about a mother's love, about the psychology of sustained hope, and about what it means to find meaning and light in unbearable darkness. Hersh carried Viktor Frankl's phrase — 'He who has a why can bear any how' — into the tunnels, and shared it with fellow hostages.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Goldberg-Polin speaks of her life being divided into 'The Before' and 'The After.' Many of us and our community experienced our own before-and-after on October 7. How do you as clergy hold pastoral space for that rupture — especially when your own life was ruptured too?
2. Hersh shared Viktor Frankl's teaching — 'he who has a why can bear any how' — with fellow hostages as a tool for survival. What is the 'why' you offer your community? What gives them reason to return to prayer, to community, to Jewish life in this moment?
3. Goldberg-Polin describes 'hope' not as optimism but as a discipline — something she had to practice every day, not something she naturally felt. How do you preach hope without toxic positivity? What is the difference between genuine hope and denial?

HIGH HOLIDAY SERMON THEMES

Hope as a spiritual practice.

The *Yamim Noraim* are drenched in a mix of hope and fear (or awe) — *U'netaneh Tokef* holds the fear while *Avinu Malkeinu* holds the plea. But hope is not passive. Goldberg-Polin shows us that hope is something you actively choose. What does it mean to invite your community into an active, disciplined, eyes-open hope this new year?

The holiness of the particular.

Goldberg-Polin refuses to let Hersh be only a symbol or a headline — she insists on his specificity: his raspy voice, his floppy hair, the shape of his toes. Yom Kippur's *Yizkor* is itself an act of particularity. How might this book inform how you lead *Yizkor* — and how you invite people to hold grief that is simultaneously personal and communal?