"Caring for the world between us" - Greetings for the ICCJ 2023 Conference

01.09.2023 | Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

In her welcome address, Rabbi Anisfeld hoped that the ICCJ 2023 Conference would inspire us to renew our commitment to caring for the "world between us", as Hannah Arendt put it.

In 1959, the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that “the world lies between people” and expressed concern that more and more people had retreated from the world and their obligations in it. She noted that “with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss takes place; what is lost is the specific and irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and their fellow human beings.”

This conference 2023 reflects the inspiring work of so many who have not retreated from but have committed themselves to caring for *the world that lies between us*, even across sometimes challenging differences and divides.

Juneteenth[1], which we celebrate tomorrow, carries within it a powerful reminder of the life-denying brutality that is allowed to flourish when we retreat from our obligations to the world, and of the life-giving possibilities that become real when we embrace our responsibilities to and for each other.

Tomorrow also marks the beginning of a new Hebrew month, the month of Tammuz, during which we enter a season on the Jewish calendar which reminds us, all too darkly, of what happens when *the world that lies between us* comes apart at the seams. When we turn away from, rather towards, one another and allow indifference, intolerance, and violence to grow and fill the spaces between us.

In ancient Jerusalem, the announcement of the new month began when two witnesses came before the court and testified that they had seen the first sliver of moon. Once their testimony was accepted, a fire was kindled and a signal sent from mountaintop to mountaintop – all the way from Jerusalem to Babylonia. In the Babylonian Talmud *Masechet Tamid* we are taught: *Eyzehu chacham*? *Ha’ro’eh et hanolad.* Who is wise? The one who sees what is being born. A *nolad* means a newborn child but it is also the term for that first sliver of the new moon.

This is often understood to mean that the wise person can anticipate the consequences of their actions.

I’m going to go out on a limb and say nonsense. We really, really do not know what is around the bend. When we see a newborn child or a sliver of moon in the sky we are not predicting the future and we are not seeing outcomes. *We are seeing possibilities*. In our world. In our arms. In our night sky. To see the nolad is to understand that we are witnesses and we are also midwives, holding and helping others to see what is being born.

In the words of Reverend Victoria Safford, from an essay called, The Small Work in the Great Work:

> “Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope – not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be . . . And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeking, asking people what they see.”

I am so grateful to all of the organizers of this conference. May it inspire us to renew our commitments to bringing loving attention and daily care to *the world that lies between us*.

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1990, served for many years as a Hillel rabbi at Yale University before becoming dean of students at the Hebrew College (Newton, MA), dean of the rabbinical school in 2006, and president of the college in 2018. Remarks presented at the opening session of the ICCJ Conference at Boston College on June 18, 2023.

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