

Letter to the Leader of the Synagogue in Luke 13:10–17

Dear Brother,

Shalom to you across the millennia. I address you as brother because we are children of Abraham, the father of many nations, which includes Jews and Christians, and people of many tribes and ethnicities all created in the image of the Ruler of the Cosmos. And so, I offer your prayer, *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam*.

Despite my limited knowledge of Hebrew, I write to you with a faith that seeks understanding down the corridor of history, hoping that a gracious interpretation of your role in your spiritual community could illuminate my own.

Your official position as leader of the synagogue, *archisynagōgos*, meant you exercised overall responsibility for the local synagogue, including supervising Scripture readings, arranging teachers (rabbis), maintaining membership rolls, caring for the building and finances, and anything else that was needed. Your position blended administrative oversight with spiritual guardianship, anticipating many features later seen in Christian churches. Your position was the first-century equivalent to what we call “elders” in the church.

I am more like a rabbi in your context; however, I work closely with elders in my church. I know they have a demanding calling. Like you, they are responsible for much of what happens behind the scenes, often aspects of community life that escape notice unless something goes wrong! An elder is under pressure, invests time and effort, and is often underappreciated. Yet, I think most people would say that they served not to seek praise but rather to praise God. I imagine you would say the same.

However, Yeshua ben Yosef, the Nazarene, had strong words against you. He labeled you a hypocrite, meaning an individual who pretends to be one thing but is actually something different.

One of the terrible legacies of Christianity has been its egregious history of antisemitism, whereby all Jews are painted as hypocrites, legalists, or worse. This interpretation overlooks the obvious: Yeshua was himself a Jew. He observed the Sabbath with reverence, worshiping in synagogues and seeking quiet time alone to pray. He understood the holy day was a gift from *Adonai Eloheinu* for the rest and restoration of humankind as well as of all creation.

What's more, Yeshua spoke firmly from within the Jewish prophetic tradition, which had argued for centuries before him that truly honoring the Sabbath is "to do right, seek justice, and defend the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow" (Isaiah 1:13–17). Was freedom not granted to the woman, bent for 18 long years? Imagine that first deep breath she took upon being healed. Was that not holy, almost like the first breath of life? Her new life? She immediately began praising God!

Nevertheless, Yeshua's healing of the woman filled you with what our brother Luke described as "indignation" or "resentment" (Luke 13:14). I note that Luke wrote how you "kept saying" to the crowd that healing was not lawful on the Sabbath. As we say, methinks you doth protest too much. Were you not aware of other rabbinic teachings in your era that declared how it was always the right time for healing? The vast majority of rabbis in your time would have said "Amen" to the healing and sided with Yeshua against you.

The same word to describe your reaction, which is often translated as "indignant," can also mean "to grieve." That nuance helps me understand your situation better, as we all grieve the things we lose. What were you afraid to lose? I don't know many details of your synagogue, but 2,000 years later in my country, large numbers of churches and synagogues are losing members, money, and influence. Many communities of faith are grieving change.

One response to change can be considered "cautious." I recently learned from a friend in China that the Chinese word for "caution" literally means "small heart." Certainly, there are situations when caution is appropriate, but (as Eric wrote) "living always with caution, living self-protectively, living based on fears of what might go awry, can lead to living in a small-hearted way."

What if Yeshua ben Yosef, the Nazarene, wanted to spur all of us into a large-hearted way of living and perceiving the world? What if he meant to change our perspective?

There was once a musician who was asked during a war, "Why are you playing your cello on the streets when they are dropping bombs on the city?" The musician replied, "Shouldn't you be inquiring why they are dropping bombs on the city while I am here performing my cello?" I wish you knew the beauty of a cello, but my point is that perceiving beauty does not ignore the problems or injustices; indeed, it highlights them through contrast. City streets are meant for music, dancing, and laughter, not bombs, destruction, and death.

The presence of beauty in the midst of suffering also points to something else. That something is known as *simchah* in Hebrew and *chairo* in Greek. That something is joy. I realize that, when so many people are bent and broken in the world, it can feel inappropriate to invoke the word “joy.”

But I note that Brother Luke ends your story by reporting that “the entire crowd was rejoicing” (Luke 13:17). Everyone! Might I think, or perhaps hope, that you, too, rejoiced? That you decided to take the risk of enlarging your heart? That you changed your perspective and, rather than the drumbeat of law, heard the music of grace? I pray it was true.

My brother, we are all children of Abraham. As such, we belong not to an institution, a state, or even a religion, but we belong to our creator, *Adonai Eloheinu*. There was an African American woman who sang a spiritual of her people, “This joy that I have the world didn’t give it to me. The world didn’t give it; the world can’t take it away!”

This joy is the gift to all of us from our Creator, which means we then belong to each other. Joy is the gift of this belonging, and joy is often realized by trusting that our connection is there and taking a risk to realize it. That is a large-hearted way.

Right after the healing and the rejoicing, Yeshua, like any rabbi worth his salt, told parables (Luke 13:18–21). The first was about a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. The next parable was about yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

My hunch is that joy is like a seed or a bit of leaven, a small precursor to wild, unpredictable, transgressive, and unboundaried solidarity. And that that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity. And on and on until we find ourselves in what you, my brother, called in your ancient tongue, *shalom*, which is peace; *shalom*, which is healing; *shalom*, which is wholeness. And I say “Amen” to that.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the cosmos, for you have created humankind in your image. You give joy that the world cannot take away. In a world that is bent on injustice and near-broken with suffering, you come with healing in your wings, which leads to peace, wholeness, and *shalom*.

God of creation and redemption, your prophet Jeremiah reminds us, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you.” (Jeremiah 1:8) We thank you for this assurance of your strength and power. You have written the law of love on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). You also come into our present moment, our times of vulnerability and trial, to renew our faith.

Yet we acknowledge, O God, that the realities of our world weigh heavily on us, our children, our nation, and the entire globe. Our crises make us feel isolated and deeply vulnerable. Teach us, O God, to discern our deep interdependency with one another and with you. Help us remember that there are seeds growing that will bring glad tidings of great joy. Though the woman was bent for 18 years, she was raised to give thanks and praise. Though the arc of history is long, it bends toward justice.

We continue to pray for war-weary nations, people, families, and children who are in harm’s way. Bless students, teachers, faculty, and staff at the start of a new school year. We pray for healing for all who are sick and for comfort for all who have lost loved ones. Make yourself known to those who feel your absence and mourn your silence. May they trust that others are praying for them, even when they find they cannot pray themselves. Enlarge our hearts through compassion and kindness that we find solidarity with all peoples.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the cosmos, for you have created humankind in your image. You give joy that the world cannot take away, and we pray the prayer your beloved son, Yeshua, taught ...