

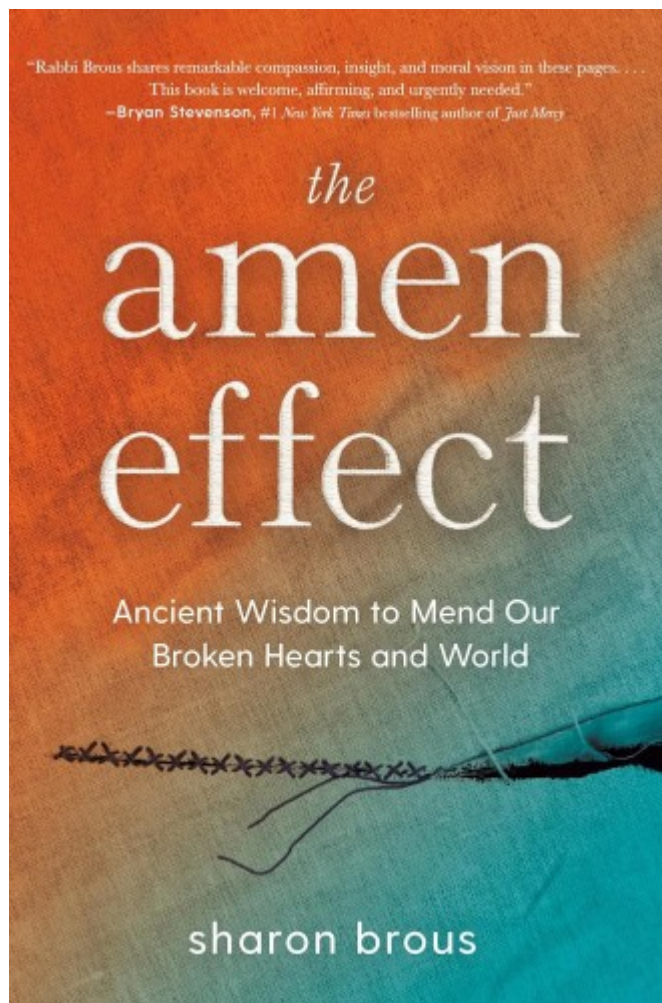
Eight homilies for practicing presence

Rabbi Sharon Brous believes we can build beloved community simply by showing up for one another.

by [Emily Soloff](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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In Review



The Amen Effect

Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World

By Sharon Brous

Avery

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The promise of what Sharon Brous calls “the amen effect” is an end to social isolation, an end to hiding from heartache. It is the regeneration of caring relations and the will to be present when people are suffering.

Brous is a leader at the junction of faith and justice in the United States. She is the founding rabbi of IKAR, a spiritual community in Los Angeles whose mission “is to reanimate Jewish life and develop a spiritual and moral foundation for a just and equitable society.” In 2013, she was named by the *Daily Beast* as number one on a list of the 50 most influential rabbis in the country. *The Amen Effect* is both a window into Brous’s interpersonal philosophy and, she hopes, a tool for social transformation. Rather than bearing witness to the challenges of life, she focuses on the importance of “bearing with-ness.”

From its beginning, Brous and IKAR’s founding members wanted the community to be outward facing and justice oriented. They quickly realized that “the path to manifesting the beloved community out in the world had to begin with building a beloved community in our own home.” The book focuses on how to build that community, offering many examples of congregants and others showing up not only for friends and relatives but for strangers as well. Being with people in sad times as well as glad times is a holy practice for Brous, and it’s one that she wants others to embrace.

She draws inspiration from an ancient rabbinic tale as well as from the words of religious leaders as diverse as St. Francis of Assisi, Rumi, and William Barber. The driving force of her religious life and faith, Brous says, has been recognition that every person is made in the image of God. In fewer than 200 pages of text, she distills 20 years of pulpit experience into eight homilies that provide readers with models of how to practice what she preaches, creating a way of living that is both fully present to the world and fully responsible to families, communities, and the future.

Brous begins her exhortation with a discussion from Mishnah Middot (part of Judaism’s oral Torah) that describes a joyous pilgrimage service at the temple in

Jerusalem. Most pilgrims entered the sacred area and processed to the right around the courtyard. But a mourner, someone who had suffered a loss or been ostracized or was brokenhearted, proceeded to the left. When pilgrims would come face to face with the distressed, they would stop and ask why they were circling opposite to the joyous throng. When the distraught explained their reason, the pilgrim would offer comfort and blessing. Those who were whole were not allowed to ignore those who were broken. “Even though we can’t heal each other, we can *and we must* see each other,” Brous writes. Not to repair, not to save or distract, just to be present. Knowing that we are not alone helps us endure unimaginable hardship.

As a rabbinical student, Brous found herself dismayed by the spiritual dissonance between abstract scholarship and the urgent human need she saw around her. She considered leaving rabbinical school and following a different career path. Eventually, with guidance from faculty and friends, she learned to embrace the tensions between scholarship and activism, between the particular and the universal, and between what was spiritual and what was political. “Our life’s work is to hone the spiritual and moral clarity we need to live into our purpose, a purpose unique to each of us and to the time we live in,” she writes.

Brous does not believe in the God portrayed in the book of Job who brings suffering to test or teach lessons. She does believe that struggles in life may bring us the opportunity to learn, grow, and “orient toward the blessings” of the world. Being present when someone else is suffering “is imbued with a kind of Divinity,” she writes. “We don’t need to offer the perfect mix of wisdom, consolation, and inspiration. We just need to show up and make space for something holy to flow through us.”

She encourages people to look past differences, alienation, and polarization: “When we affirm another’s humanity, we reinvigorate our own.” But she also warns against toxic behaviors or ideologies. “Morally equivocating about those who hold those views . . . becomes a validator for violence and abuse,” she writes. Brous’s sense of justice demands standing against hatred and contempt. Still, her heart leaves room for repentance and return, for *teshuvah* to happen, for the life-changing power of profound encounter.