

*Meditations on the Psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat*  
*By Rabbi Joshua Hammerman*

**Psalm 95**

**“For forty years I argued with that generation,  
‘till finally I said, ‘They are a people with a wandering heart,’  
nor did they ever come to know my ways.  
And as for them, I swore amid my wrath,  
That they’ll not come into my place of rest.”**

*A Place of Rest*

Where can I find rest?  
Where can I escape the noise of life?  
The TV-radio-DVD-CD-boom box-blaring  
Siren screaming  
Petty complaining  
Chatty cell phone gossipy  
Squeaky wheel kvetching  
Noise of life?

How can I sink into my easy chair  
into God’s arms  
into the deepest, warmest *menucha*?  
Mikveh-womb-like,  
Quiet, chirping,  
Hear the blades of grass,  
Soft between my toes  
Squishy  
Quiet?

Where is that place of rest?  
Look within.

There is no such place on earth.  
For the people with a wandering heart, God’s place of rest is beyond this life.  
If we are looking for a place that will save us from our frenetic selves  
If we are looking for true replenishment  
We have to stop looking for a place.

It is not a place.  
It is a time – called Shabbat  
The time of rest is God’s gift to us;  
A Palace in time -- Where God lets us in.  
With open arms.  
When we are ready  
To rest.

## **Psalm 96**

**“Sing unto Adonai a new song!  
Sing to Adonai, all the earth!  
Sing to Adonai, bless the name!  
Spread the news each day, of God’s saving help.”**

### ***The Back Pages***

Start spreadin’ the news...  
And open to the back sections of the newspaper,  
Where salvation can be found.

The front page tells of war, famine, corruption and death.  
People who are larger than life  
And smaller

But read in the back  
about the weddings and bake sales  
the recipes  
the 17 year old’s perfect ten on the unevens  
the tips for potty training  
the evening snow and morning sun  
the almanac

Look in the back sections for seas splitting,  
For movies and books and other myth machines  
For cotillions and comics  
For deaths that are not your own  
For clothing you can own  
For things that never change  
For the song of life that never ends  
But remains new every day.

## Psalm 97

**“Those who love Adonai shun evil, so that the One who guards the spirit of kindness will save them from bad influences.”**

### *The Question of Religion*

The question of religion today  
Is not how those who love God shun evil,  
But how those who perpetrate unlimited evil  
Can do it so freely in the name of God?

We affirm, like the psalmist,  
That to love God  
is to embrace kindness;  
to be religious  
is to see goodness not only in God  
but in all of God's creatures  
including the other  
including the enemy  
including the one who perverts God's name  
in God's name.

To love God is to shun hatred  
And to love all God's creatures;  
But not at all costs.

To love God  
Is to protect innocence  
At all costs.

## Psalm 98

**“Let the rivers clap their hands together  
And the mountains sing in joy,  
To the One who comes to rule the earth with justice.”**

### *The View From the Top*

*One winter's day in 1979, during my first year at my uptown rabbinical seminary, I decided to make pilgrimage to the World Trade Center. I was mourning my father at the time, and eager to fulfill one of his final requests: that I purchase my own Talmud. The Lower East Side by way of the Twin Towers seemed the way to go. Centuries of striving could be navigated within a few city blocks. The journey to my ancestors' Babylonia had to begin with this contemporary Babel, for the Towers were modernity's holy of holies.*

*I rode to the top and was entranced by the view.*

The Hudson was a frozen, grey, meandering ribbon;  
stretching out toward the Catskills, gasping dogs beneath me in the distance.  
The buildings, in contrast, were mighty:  
the jagged Chrysler,  
the sharp-stepped Empire State,  
and the U.N., a massive bookend holding the East River in its place.  
The waterways were clogged arteries,  
but the bridges glistened from the same ice, as trucks edged along them delivering life to the periphery.  
Directly ahead, the traffic copters skipped like rams from cloud to cloud.

And on that September morning twenty-two years later.  
A morning so perfect, so blue, so inviolate,  
Flawless, glistening, the Hudson awaits justice  
As the planes descend from the mountains  
Navigating downriver from Albany  
Meting out terror's justice  
And as glass and bodies shatter the river's plane  
Like a clap;  
They sink instantly  
While reams of memos float on the surface of the deep.

## Psalm 99

**“Adonai, You have answered them,  
as the One who could bear their imperfections,  
after exacting a penalty for what they did.”**

### *Imperfection*

God could bear the imperfections of Moses, Aaron, Jacob, Miriam and Samuel  
So why can I not forgive my own?

For You it is all so simple  
Sin, punishment, teshuvah, slate cleaned.  
The never-ending cycle  
Never ends in pain.  
The pain comes and goes;  
The guilt is gone,  
Only to return with the next golden calf.  
The pain is gone, the memory is short.  
It's so un-Jewish!

And so un-me!  
I cannot forgive myself so easily;  
For last week's indiscretions.  
Missing my child's bedtime  
Or missing a meeting;  
Forgetting a call  
Or making it.  
Not hearing one cry,  
Because I'm listening to another.  
Or not listening hard enough to either.

You who suffers our insufferableness,  
Grant me the ability to bear my own suffering.  
Teach me, O paradigm of Perfection, how you stomach us  
So that I may forgive myself  
For not being You.

## Psalm 29

**“The Voice of the Eternal on the Waters, God in full glory thundering...  
The Voice of Adonai smashing cedar forests on Mt. Lebanon...  
Convulsing all the deer...stripping the forests...presiding over the cosmos...  
Adonai’s force will be channeled to Israel, blessing God’s people Israel with peace.”**

### *The Storm Before the Calm*

Amichai the poet wrote:

*“Now in the storm before the calm*

*I can tell you what*

*In the calm before the storm I didn’t say*

*Because they would have heard us and discovered our hiding place.”*

It is in the storm we hear the cosmic cry  
Wind whipping, rain smashing, thunder blasting away  
At our false sense of security.  
And illusions of immortality.

There is no hope of hiding  
From fear  
From doubt  
From ourselves.

Everything comes into question in the storm  
And everything falls into place  
We hold tight onto those few things we cherish the most  
And those people  
And God.

Jerusalem is built high in the mountains.  
So when the plumes of clouds swell with rain  
They plummet to within inches of the holy soil  
The rain slashes the earth, violently decanting,  
Splashing the shrines; the gravestones sink in the mud.

The entire force of the storm is concentrated there, going not one inch beyond Scopus  
Into the arid wilderness.  
In Jerusalem, the desert meets the sea.  
There are no compromises.

But the storm does end.  
The clouds depart quickly, and stay away for months.  
Allowing hope to rise again.  
And the illusion of calm,  
Which swells and swells  
Until the storm returns.