High Holidays 5783
2022 Literary Supplement

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ROSH HASHANAH EVE

ROSH HASHANAH DAY ONE
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ROSH HASHANAH DAY TWO

KOL NIDREI

YOM KIPPUR MORNING

YOM KIPPUR MINCHA/NEILAH

Opening Words: The Narrow Bridge
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

Shana tova!

When I was younger, I was more prone to go looking for adventure—maybe because it did not as frequently find its own way to my door.

The summer I was 25, which fell in a year I was already spending abroad in Dublin, I went with some Irish friends to the Slovakian side of the Tatra Mountains, for a memorable week of hiking. Starting from a basecamp a few miles up from the railway station, we would spend each day scaling a new peak, and then come back down pleasantly exhausted to the hostel for a dinner of trout and beer, and an evening of song.

One image that still sticks in my mind is of a narrow pass we had to traverse one day, in order to get to the higher ground we were aiming for. It was maybe seven or eight feet across. There were steep drops on either side.

Maybe you've felt that visceral dismay that comes with realizing the only way forward is to cross the narrow bridge Rebbe Nahman was always talking about, when all of life comes down to one intimidating pass. There is no choice at such a moment but to breathe deeply and take small steps, (though I'll let you in on a little secret: our Slovakian friends also recommended a discrete belt of Slivovitz.)

I remembered this moment when I sat down to compose these reflections on the start of our New Year—believe it or not the 13th time I will presume to lead the JCA through the observance of the High Holidays. It seems to me that we are at a similar pass in the life of our community, seeking to renew and reconstitute ourselves after two years of pandemic-induced fragmentation and malaise—keeping our eyes on the higher peak but knowing that in order to get there we have to confront our fears and cross the narrow bridge with careful steps, one taken after the other.

And, really, if you look beyond our little community to the wider world, you quickly realize how pervasive this predicament is, and how necessary the task of cultivating an attitude of conscious stepping, day-by-day, across the topographical challenges of our heaving landscape.

I believe the *tshuva* that we seek—the return—must this year be understood as the summoning of our spiritual attention to this moment; to the courageous crossing of the narrow bridge.

Rebbe Nahman told us not to fear as we did so, but to fill our hearts with purposeful joy. I do also have a bottle of Slivovitz on my mantle, but even more so, I have hope in a vision of the higher ground, and the expectation that, whatever we find to eat when we arrive back, pleasantly exhausted, at our places of refuge, there will be song.

A Chicken Poem
Marian Parker ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

Moulting
One of my chickens is practically unidentifiable
As she drops her feathery duff around the yard
She is half her size, scruffy, vulnerable
Goofy balding patches
Shedding the old, the unnecessary
All that's accumulated throughout the seasons
Winter chill, spring ephemeral, summer hot and dry
This time, scatterings left behind
Imaginings of her shiny bronze and ochre finery
Will return

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Purpose
Anne Burton ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

Intention without action
Goes into an abyss.
Doing what you meant to
Brings new life to what is.

Purpose love into action;
Make goodness work
To coat each transaction
With connection.

Purposefully act to affect
the outcome;
Exchange what you have to give
With what needs to be taken.
Make connection.

If what you intended goes unsaid,
The intention is less than naught.
Reach out —stretch toward;
Connect with your heart;
— Because I am you.
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Shofar
Randi Stein ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

Did you ever wonder what “Truah” means?
Or “Tekiah”?
Or “Shevarim”?

We name these sounds that enter into the horn of a ram
With a push of our breath
Sounds that shatter the air
Shatter the certainty with which we conduct our lives
Sounds that break the patterns we have traced
Again and again
In our relationships with others.

This is a time of breaking open,
Breaking away from a past full of our all-to-human flaws—
Flaws that—yes— we will repeat again and again.
And knowing that, we ask for God’s understanding
And forgiveness.
In a few days, we will voice the mournful cry of Kol Nidre:
All of what we were and will be. Please forgive us.
We plead, we limp, and perhaps even fall
Into the new year.

But Truah and Tekiah and Shevarim shatter and support us,
Break us , and realign us—
A new puzzle of strength and weakness, pride and humility, striving and failing.
We trumpet these mysterious sounds with energy, commitment
And devotion.
We will try again to be our best
In the coming year.

Truah!
Tekiah!
Shevarim!

Begin Again…
Reed Mangels Alper ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

Each year we begin again, but where is it that I begin this year? I picture myself on a path.

Am I in the same place where I was a year ago?

Have I taken steps forward or gone backwards?

Are my hopes and dreams the same as a year ago, have some been achieved, are some less important?

Are there hopes and dreams that are with me each year?

For closer relationships and a more meaningful life.

Perhaps these will always be my hopes.

What about regrets?

In this past year, have some regrets eased or gone away?

Some regrets will always be with me.

But then, what does it mean to begin again?

Is it to remind myself of the path that I am on, that sometimes circles back on itself, that sometimes feels like an uphill slog and sometimes, just occasionally, like an easy glide?

How can I begin this journey again and work to make the coming year a year of real change, a year of taking steps that will bring me closer to where I want to be?

Presidential Address
Eric Weiss ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve

It has been a long year with many challenges, and yet here we are again saying the shehecheyanu and celebrating a new year. We all agree the JCA is a special place, a place we all cherish and rely upon for spirituality and our own peace of mind during challenging times. We have all felt and experienced the challenges of the pandemic, and during these High Holy Days, as we emerge from the pandemic, we all are reflecting on how we are doing. This is a complex question that we all must answer for ourselves. I am here to say we are doing well, and there will be many opportunities, challenges, and new directions to come.

As I look inward at myself and look back on my time on the Board of the JCA I am caught up with what a powerful experience it has been for me. I am thinking about how much we had done to improve the JCA before the pandemic, how we were able to maintain the JCA during the pandemic and now that we are emerging from the pandemic, how much we have to look forward to including making the JCA as accessible as possible. I am proud of how well the board, staff and membership have come together and maintained a strong sense of community during this difficult time.

On my own behalf and behalf of the Board, I want to thank our extraordinary professional staff—Rabbi Weiner, Ann Wetherbee, and Keren Rhodes—for their unparalleled dedication to this community, and for the sacrifices they have made as they invented and supported new ways for us to come together when being in the same place at the same time was impossible. I also want to thank my fellow Board members for the many hours of open-minded deliberation that we have all invested over the past few months as we look forward to the JCA's post-pandemic renaissance.

The task before us is momentous: we are trying to envision the future of our community not just for the day after tomorrow, but for the decades to come. We were celebrating our 50th anniversary when the pandemic started. Now we are thinking about the next fifty years. The pandemic compelled us to shut our doors and focus all our efforts on making it through the ordeal while maintaining, as best we could, the vital activities of learning and spiritual exploration. Now we have to imagine what it means not just to survive but to thrive, and to plan for a new set of realities.

As we all know from other aspects of our lives, moving forward after the pandemic means needing to change — and grow again, otherwise we become stagnant. The fabric of our community is strong, and its potential for flourishing and enriching all our lives is greater

Presidential Address continues

now than it ever has been. As we contemplate our future, we recognize that we will all need to come together to help make changes essential to our growth as a sacred community. I look forward with excitement and confidence to the next generation of JCA community leaders charting the way forward.

There are many levels of reflection during the high holy days. As I look ahead to the next three months, before I leave the Board, I can cherish the experience and feel strengthened by the deep friendships I have made. I deeply care for the JCA and recognize its importance in my life and my spirituality. It has been my honor to serve as President of the JCA and I thank you all for your love, kindness and support. I will miss being President but I will always think back with gratitude and pride to the time I was able to give to the JCA.

B' shalom

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As the Book of Life Opens
Ruth Love Barer ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

As the Book of Life opens…so does my heart. The layers peeling away- layers that do such a good job of protecting my heart.

As the Book of Life opens, I slow down.

As the Book of Life opens, so do my eyes as I reach out to those that need connection.

As the Book of Life opens, I remember those that came before me and lessons I learned by their example.

As the Book of Life opens, I renew my commitment to learn from my mistakes.

As the Book of Life opens, I am seeped in gratitude for family and community.

As the Book of Life opens, it is a time to have courage, to return to my true essence, to be more of who I am meant to be.
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Rosh Hashanah at the JCA, Then and Now
Barbara Berlin ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

What chutzpah that about 30 Jewish families decided that they could create a Jewish community and a synagogue in Amherst in the 1960's. This was the home of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. And it was a town where in 1965, when Normand and I and our sons moved here, there were people who – if you can believe it – had never met a Jew. But it was a time when the University of Massachusetts was growing, and as the university grew, so too did the number of Jewish families in Amherst. Most of us were young families, and we wanted a community where our children could receive a Jewish education and where everyone would feel welcome. And because, in our youth and our naivete, we didn't know that we couldn't do it, we did it. We came together – the reform, the conservative and the orthodox – and we created a community where all of us could feel comfortable. After all, we were the only act in town.

We started with almost no budget. Dues were $50 and for that you could have your children go to the school that we were about to form – Jewish studies and Hebrew every Sunday. With no money, we needed people who were committed to making this happen, people who were willing to work as volunteers. And we had them – driven by the passion we shared in creating something new and important. We borrowed a Torah – which was kept in the home of one of the congregants because we didn't have a physical home at that time. We were gifted siddurs – given to us by other synagogues. We developed a curriculum for our Jewish school and found university students who could teach our children each week. And we received spiritual and practical guidance from Rabbi Lander, the Rabbi at Smith College.

At the beginning we would have Friday night services once a month in the Lutheran church. We would rent the space, cover up the very large wooden cross that hung on the front wall of the church, and because we didn't have a rabbi, one of the community members would lead the service. Then came our first major event as a community – Rosh Hashanah. We needed a larger space than the Lutheran church because in our inclusive way – something that remains a part of our community and should be a part of every Jewish community – we wanted a room large enough to welcome all who wished to attend. And we of course wanted to attract new members to our small community. So we rented Johnson Chapel at Amherst College, which was a beautiful setting for our first Rosh Hashanah together. There was a feeling that day that the Jewish Community of Amherst had come of age – although we of course had a lot of growing left to do.

Rosh Hashanah continues

At the JCA's first Rosh Hashanah service, in addition to the usual members, those of us who attended the Friday night services at the Lutheran church, we welcomed Jews who had not yet joined the community as well as Jewish students from the local colleges. These were different times. The attendees came dressed for the special occasion that it was. The children sat with their parents and they were mostly quiet during the service. And the service and the singing were beautiful, led by members of the community. After the service, we had a kiddush, and that became the tradition in our young community. Most of us were new to Amherst and we became a kind of "family" – so we stayed after the service to eat and to schmooze and to visit with each other.

Those early days carried the joy and the excitement of something new. It was a very different place than today's JCA but I believe we built a foundation, and established certain traditions, that remain today. And we of course continued to grow and to flourish as a community. We acquired a building, this building, further strengthening our roots in the town. We were no longer nomads but now had a real home, a physical space to gather together. We made what was at the time a momentous decision to hire a full-time rabbi. We created a cemetery, for which my husband Normand was the driving force – and where Normand, and so many of the early members, are now buried. As one of those founding members, Ted Slovin, said one day as we were walking around the cemetery, "It's like visiting old friends."

I have good memories of those "old friends" and good memories of the JCA's past. It was a wonderful time, filled with purpose and with the excitement of something new. But I am both proud and happy with how the JCA has evolved over the years, and with what I see today. I see so many committed people who want to see the JCA flourish; a Rabbi (and a pretty wonderful one) who has brought so many new programs and new ideas to the JCA; a real staff to keep the JCA going (because we have gotten so large that we can no longer rely on just volunteers); and even our building has grown bigger. In this time of the High Holidays, I look back and reflect on where we started and where we are now. I feel joy and I know my Normand would have as well. And I am so glad for the chutzpah that we had in our then young selves, when we were ready to do what we were told couldn't be done.

Acceptance
Hollie Kalkstein ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

On my bike in Fall I savor the last miles before moving indoors.

Time becomes a path that blazes like fire into the quiet winter calm.

It shifts and changes.

I learn acceptance.

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A Heritage of Collective Action
Karen Levine ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

My earliest memory of a political rally is of legs. I was little and all I could see were grown-ups' knees and thighs. It was around 1961, likely a rally in support of early Civil Rights efforts in the South, led by a progressive rabbi a few towns over from where I grew up, in Northern New Jersey.

Years earlier, my father had been stationed in the army in Virginia, in the Jim Crow South, where I was born. During those years in Virginia, my parents, New York Jews through and through, were deeply and personally affected by the racism and antisemitism all around them. They had to navigate frequent antisemitic remarks as well as how and where they could spend time with their African American friends.

My parents were passionate Jews- secular, cultural, left leaning, atheist Jews.

This is how I was raised.

On Sundays from the age of 7 until 13, I went to "shuleh", a secular Jewish Sunday school, fashioned after the labor movement and socialist affiliated shulehs in NYC that my mother had attended in her youth. She became our principal and Yiddish teacher. We learned Jewish history, read the stories of Sholem Aleichem, celebrated Jewish holidays in a secular fashion and sang a lot. Lori Wyatt, who would go on to be a well-known folk singer and colleague of Pete Seeger's, was our music teacher. We sang songs in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as contemporary folk songs and freedom songs.
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A Heritage of Collective Action continues

From the age of 9 until 12, I spent a month each summer at Camp Kinderland, a Jewish camp near Poughkeepsie, NY, with left leaning affiliations, where my mother had been a camper. I had counselors who shared stories from the previous year of their arrests protesting the war and standing up for Civil Rights. We sang songs in Yiddish, were shown the movie Night in Fog probably a little too young, and celebrated Hiroshima Day by making 1000 origami cranes and setting them afloat on the camp's lake.

In 1968 my father took me out of school for a few days, so we could go to New York City and participate in the Biafran airlift effort. For 3 days, in a huge warehouse, we packed food into boxes, destined for a country where famine was killing families and from where images of severely malnourished children were broadcast on our tv screens.

In 8th grade I went to school wearing my black armband in protest of the Vietnam war. Most of my classmates had no idea what this was all about. But at home I heard about this evil war regularly and how we needed to help stop it.

There is also another aspect of my Jewish upbringing that has deeply shaped who I have become. Growing up, our weekends and holidays were usually spent with our close-knit extended immigrant family in Rockaway, NY, where Yiddish was predominant among the adults. Along with the Cholent, Fricasee, Kneidlach, lox and gefilte fish, stories of the aunts, uncles and cousins who had perished in the holocaust were part of the air we breathed. Chaike, Pelte and Genendel, for whom I am named, and their husbands and many children- there just wasn't enough time for my grandmother, the first of her family to leave Europe, to get them all here. She and my grandfather had a grocery store in Brooklyn. Every free penny earned was used to sponsor one family member at a time, with the help of HIAS, to get them from their shtetl in Poland to the US. But the US immigration quotas for Jews made it a slow process and time ran out to get them all here to safety. Cousin Shepsl had numbers on his arm. We knew why when we were little. And he was the one that saw the others killed and bore that trauma.

My grandfather had left Europe before my grandmother. They were young and in love. He could not get into the US so he went to Canada, where several of my other great aunts and uncles landed and stayed. But he was determined to get to NY to marry my grandmother. He crossed the Canadian border at night through the woods and made his way to NY. He had the official status of "illegal alien" most of his adult life, until Roosevelt offered amnesty and my mother, at long last, could help him prepare for his grueling citizenship exam.

A Heritage of Collective Action continues

"Illegal alien", it stings. Yet we still use these words today to describe people fleeing danger and seeking safe harbor in our country. Quotas then, like fences, walls, and immigration policies today– Title 42, Remain in Mexico, Migrant detention- all deliver the same message: "*we have enough of your kind here already and don't want anymore*".

How as a Jew can I not respond? As a Jew how can I let this evade my attention and care?

I anticipate Rosh Hashanah each year with a sense of communal warmth and togetherness- knowing that wherever I am, or however I spend the holiday, in a synagogue observance or not, I am joined in the shared promise of renewal, new beginnings, new life, sweetness, beauty and renewed commitments to what we each love and value.

But this year, like so many recently, the world feels harder, meaner, and less safe. More guns, more violence, more climate emergencies, more stripping away of rights and freedoms to vote and control one's own body, less freedom of movement for those fleeing danger and seeking safe harbor, a rise in overt antisemitism and racism, and more overt and frightening authoritarian expressions from many in power.

I know I am not alone in digging deep on this Rosh Hashanah to find the sparks for renewed energy, to not let fear dominate my thoughts, to not despair in the face of so much darkness.

How I pray is something like this: I petition the universe- some amalgam of spaces between, within and around the branches and roots of trees, the pulsing of hearts, the bonds of love, the whispers of ancestors, the tides of the ocean, the intelligence and glory of nature, the enormity of the heavens to the stars and beyond, and the earth's immense regenerative capacity. -- I try to feel into all of this, to place myself in the stream of all of this, in order to remember that which endures, that propels us all forward in time, in the creative wheel of life. Maybe these words are my attempt to describe what some call God. My parents, may they rest in peace, might cringe a little at this.

But honestly, even with this turning of my mind and heart, I cannot muster quite enough on my own most days to land with a net positive outlook.

In other words, I don't think we are meant to do this alone.

A Heritage of Collective Action continues

I don't think we are meant to make sense of the rapidly changing world, to resist what is bad and defend what is good, to work for a *besere velt,* a better world, without the support of each other. And so, it is no surprise that with my social justice, secular Jewish upbringing, I have found my most natural anchor at the JCA in the Tikkun Olam Committee and in another local group, Jewish Activists for Immigration Justice. (JAIJ). Given the political climate of the last 6 years especially, I have needed the safety of working for social change in a Jewish context.

In the JCA Reparations Committee we have learned together about critical aspects of US racial history we were never taught, about the depth of what has been stolen and what is owed, about who has profited and who has paid. We developed an educational tool, the Stolen Bean Series, a study of Reparations, and now humbly and eagerly offer it in the town of Amherst and beyond.

In JAIJ, we continue to educate ourselves and the Jewish community, about what is happening at and within our borders and about the policies that prevent asylum seekers, like so many of our grandparents' generation, fleeing danger and seeking safety, from a fair and just asylum process. And we collaborate with other organizations, among them the same HIAS, that helped my grandmother all those years ago, to bring the lucky members of our family here.

As I reflect on the apples and honey of this season, on the ways I seek renewal and recharge, along with my petitions to the universe, I depend on the dear humans with whom I share and care, with whom I can experience the grief and sadness of our days but also the persistence and determination, the vulnerability, fear, humility as well as the collective strength to contribute what we can. For all of this I am so grateful.

May my beloved parents and grandparents rest in peace. May I honor them with my humble actions. May their love infuse this season of renewal.

Shana Tova

The Culmination of My Beginnings
Cady Reiken ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

Shanah Tova,

My name is Cady Reiken. I use they/them pronouns. I have just started ninth grade at Amherst High School. My family has been part of the JCA since I started Hebrew school here at age four. This year I am working as a Hebrew School TA. When the Rabbi invited me to speak today it didn't take me very long to figure out that I want to talk about beginnings, both because it is such a prevalent theme in Rosh Hashanah and because I have been thinking so much about it already.

If I think of this new year as a culmination in my life, it has been a long process. In the past year I have started a lot of new things. Some of them came on more abruptly or recently, while some parts of my culmination this Rosh Hashanah have been developing for quite some time and are not very new at all. Rosh Hashanah is the ending of the year passed, but more relevantly it is the beginning of a new one. As humans we are constantly changing beings that never truly culminate. Instead, each of our ends and beginnings weave and intermingle.

So, the way I have chosen to think of this new year is as a culmination of my beginnings. It is not the end of any process, but I think that my stage of beginning is coming to an end. Even with that understanding, I could trace my beginning process back to many different places.

One of the more relevant ones is my b'nai mitzvah which took place about 15 months ago by the Gregorian calendar. On the day before my b'nai mitzvah I wrote a long reflectional letter about how much I had changed in the past year. I think that around that time I began to have a much stronger sense of myself. But as far as my fourteen year old examination can understand, having a sense is only the first step in beginning something. Next you must gain a solid understanding of that sense. Then is arguably the hardest part: mustering the courage to bring your newfound understanding of what needs to be done into being. Once you have gathered that courage, you can finally take action. After the completion of this your beginning has culminated and you can move forward in your process.

In August, two days after my fourteenth birthday, I wrote a poem about the third step in this process: getting the courage to move forward. It goes like this:

And I Become Unbound

I smile, and
forget every time
I sat awake in the blinding
night to ponder every
line to the origin where
it rests, but I loop
‘round again until the end of dawn
like the flies on my ceiling and I
know that tomorrow night they’ll be gone.
Daddy Long Legs learned how to build wheels and move on.
I am stuck with lead weights on my heels.
Tried to rip off the band-aid, but forgot that it only peels.
So I grin at the floor,
and this moment feels so
good but I almost
don’t want it.
And I try
to ignore how my smile is:
compressed by doubt,
do not wonder (Try not to obsess!).
I’ve got wishes that this wasn’t
all so true
as the sun on my cheek
as the softness of whispers
as if I have a clue,
but it’s true that I know, I saw the monster and slew!
Except that was my dream — now it’s long after
the dew.
Yes, it’s something I’ve just got to do,
but not be done.
Get out of my head!
I’m not a girl, but I want to have fun.
Soon I can run through the field to feel
the softness of sun.
I am done!
With this waiting.

The Culmination of My Beginnings continues

This new year marks for me an unbinding of my personality. Except that it is not something I have been hiding or stopping, so maybe binding is not the right phrase. It has been a long process moving as quickly as was right for me. Now, though, I get to begin living with an understanding of the new things I have begun. I am queer, I am nonbinary, I am autistic, I can make music, I can make art, I can stand up for myself, and it is time for those things to finish beginning. Now it is time for them to live.

This Rosh Hashanah I hope that all of you, too, have a chance to look at each of your beginnings at whichever stage they happen to be. I think that they are truly beautiful.

Shana tova

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Listening
Hollie Kalkstein ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

When I hold my ear close to my soul,

I feel the buzz of my belly get in my way.

I keep still,

And listen.
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Haftarah Thoughts: Vulnerable Strength
Janis Levy ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

For some weeks now, each time I used my refrigerator, I saw a yellow sticky note, with these words on it: What is "being strong"? What is 'vulnerable"? Fine/faltering. These have been my overall thoughts on what I would say today. I just had to live with them for a while.

I'll begin by telling you my first impression of the United States, now more than 50 years ago, and indeed how culturally different I was then! I heard Americans greeting each other by calling out cheerfully, "Hi, how are you?" And the equally cheerful reply was, "Fine, how are you?".

When you greeted in England as I was growing up, it would be calm and direct, and yes, a little bit formal, and you would not ask how they were unless you really wanted to know…

In our lives today, we don't often ask casually, how are you, and if we do ask, we stand still, we listen, and empathize with the response. It is no longer just a greeting.

So often over many of my years here, instead of calling back in greeting, "Fine", I wanted to say, "Faltering, how are you?". I didn't, but there were indeed times when I wanted to. And, today, even more.

And now, it is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of another year of our lives, and we are about to hear, unusually so in our readings, of one woman's personal feelings and, yes, faltering thoughts, and how she is coping with so much, even though she is in despair.

The story of Hannah and her inner life was chosen for this day by the rabbis, thousands of years ago, for us to know and each year perhaps, to learn from. It is revealing and very moving. And are we struck by Hannah's coping strength, or just deeply saddened by her suffering?

So, to the first question on my frig: What is "being strong"? In Judaism, we have a custom of calling out loud, at the conclusion of the reading of each of the five books of Torah, "chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" (be strong, be strong and we will be strong).

Haftarah Thoughts: Vulnerable Strength continues

As one commentary I read on this topic said: …this custom and its blessing has little to do with physical strength, though health and bodily strength are certainly necessary for a balanced life, and for spiritual or intellectual achievements." It goes on to say that this custom must be based, therefore, upon "the Jewish definition of strength – of an inner characteristic of strength of purpose, will and morality", which each of us can touch deeply within.

It would be interesting, I think, to talk further on this at another time. Let us now also ask, "What is vulnerable?" It takes courage to be vulnerable, and it is always there somewhere inside of us - an acknowledgement to ourselves that we are capable of being wounded – yet we will survive, and yes, even flourish.

It takes strength and courage to express those most intimate parts of ourselves, our insecurities, even our anguish. In doing so, perhaps we are searching for a connection to others, aware of our own fragility and mortality. In our haftarah today, Hannah is trying so hard to understand her situation, searching for answers and seeking a dialogue with God.

This woman who is helping guide us today, inadvertently but perhaps intentionally by those rabbis of long ago, describes herself as *ke'shat ruach* – a deeply unhappy person but of "*stubborn spirit*". At that moment, Hannah is acknowledging and appreciating it as her core, and with increasing compassion and understanding, she yearns to use it well.

May our spirits stay strong, may we find ways to articulate and share our vulnerabilities, and like Hannah, may we never truly lose hope.

The Rain Sermon
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

We are sitting together on the front porch of our house, underneath a gray sky, but I've seen this one before. Fool me twice, I think, shame on me.

She is singing: “Rain rain go away.” When she comes to the part about who it is that wants to play, she sometimes inserts: “sweet little Abba.” No, I tell her, sweet little Abba wants it to rain, and I give her my own version as an answer song: “Rain rain, come today, you don't have to go away, there's more to life than children's play.”

The clouds are too thin and fast for a real rain, though I've heard a distant rumble of thunder. It is a tantalizing sound. I begin, in my mind to run through a litany of the words I know for rain, along a spectrum from least to most, as if trying to draw the moisture down with my abundant vocabulary: a sprinkle, a drizzle, a shower, a downpour, a soaker, a deluge.

At night, sometimes, when I'm putting her to bed I sing through the short list of Hank Williams melodies that my children know as lullabies, coming eventually to a story he tells about two men wandering lost in the desert: “All day I face/the barren waste/without a taste of water./Cool water.”

I went for a walk with the older one, my son, back to the woods behind our house where not too long ago we mucked our boots in the spring mud. The creek was bone dry, and I could tell it was one of the first times he'd ever really registered the anxiety I am so familiar with, because for the rest of the day he was inserting nervous little questions about it into the flow of our conversation. It will fill up again, right? It won't always be like that.

Meanwhile, down in the Smokies, where his mother comes from, there was a flood. Trees and boulders came crashing down the mountain in a torrent. A 100-year old elder said he'd never seen such a thing.

There comes a week of 95-degree days when the thermostat in the morning says the same thing it had the night before, and by the time it passes—not with a bang but a whimper—a new degree of trauma has been inflicted upon the landscape and its temperate souls. The rabbits bite into the ripe tomatoes for moisture. The trees look worn and sickly. Some even start to color, and shed their leaves before their time, in a false autumn.

I pull the hose around at dusk, when little water will evaporate, and I hold the nozzle right down to the roots. I take some solace that I am still bringing forth a crop in these conditions, through close attention and small-scale “primitive” techniques, but I know this is not an ultimate fix, that they all still depend upon the predictability of the weather.

The Rain Sermon (continues)

The real fear comes from the awareness that this isn't a fluke, some freak of a cycle that will knock back into form, but the beginning of something new, in which my well-being is not assured. How do you live with that?

There's a short book in the Talmud called Ta'anit—the tractate of fasting. Most of it is taken up with public behaviors mandated in order to avert catastrophe, including sounding cries of alarm on the shofar, abstaining from food, and even, in the most extreme cases, bringing the Torah ark out into the public square and covering it with ashes. Though other calamities are mentioned—including plague and war—the primary concern is drought, something our ancestors knew and feared, living as they did in a part of the world where it only rained for a limited window of time each year. The text reads like a meditation on how people respond to the emergence of such a calamity—how they bring expression to existential anxiety and a pervasive sense of powerlessness, or, if they are believers, how they solicit God to respond with salvation.

In the midst of it, we find the famous tale of Honi Hameagel. Honi's nickname comes from the Hebrew word 'igul—circle--and he is called “Honi the Circlemaker”, though one theory I came across suggests it might be a reference to the rollers used by roofers to compress plaster and mud--that, apart from being a shaman, he was a working stiff.

One year, after months of the rainy season passed with hardly a drop falling, he took up a chalky stone, drew a circle on the ground, and told the Holy One he would not step outside the perimeter until it rained. The Holy One teased him, as the Holy One sometimes does, sending a little drizzle, till Honi said, “That isn't what I meant,” then sending a deluge, till he said: “That isn't what I meant, either.” Finally, the Goldilocks rain began to fall, a soaking rain that quenched the earth and filled up wells and cisterns. It kept falling and falling at its steady pace, till the people had to come all the way up to the Temple Mount for shelter, from which the rabbis derived a teaching that we are never to pray for the end of a rain, but only for its beginning.

They wanted to put Honi in herem, in ostracism, because he had worked such blasphemous magic. But what could they do? God listened to him.

I am not above magical thinking myself, sometimes, though mine tends more towards irony, like leaving the car windows open at night in hopes that my dry seats will tempt the weather gods. I identify, too, with the impulse towards confining yourself to a circle—making your world smaller in response to an overwhelming sense of dread. I've done this with my bedsheets some mornings. And fasting? Elsewhere in the Talmud, in Masechet Berakhot, the rabbis analogize tzedakah with fasting, suggesting that fasting is to the substance of your body what tzedakah is to your bank account—a flesh offering of the

The Rain Sermon (continues)

living, as if you are trying to exorcize a riddling bodily alarm with a proactive donation to nemesis.

The story of Honi is almost comically reassuring. God, a benevolent trickster, seems to care about this petulant roofer who won't get out of his circle, like a child who must be coddled. The rains fall, maybe just a bit too much, but, nonetheless, calamity is averted, and life goes on as it should. But how much comfort can such a magical tale really provide in the face of a real world crisis, in which we might suspect that God, or the climate, doesn't really care whether we move out of our little circle or not?

I've seen Honi's circle in real life—maybe not exactly, but something that reminded me of it, and prompted me to consider its efficacy from a different angle.

It was just a few days after she was born. We took her on the St. Xavier Reservation, just outside of Tucson, in the shadow of the twin white steeples of the mission church. We joined her birth mother and some of the members of her family in a tourist parking lot, and then drove in a caravan to the yard of one of the many matching rundown ranch houses. There, we met the makai, the medicine woman. She took a fat stick of chalk—I don't know if it was natural, or ceremonial, or just something you can buy in the school supplies aisle at the Walmart—and drew a circle on the dusty ground. It wasn't a protracted circle. It was imperfect, but it was practiced and efficient, with an even roundness that separated the cosmos into that which was outside and that which was inside. From the belt around her waist she withdrew a long feather, and with brusque, precise flicks of her arm she waved it in the air around the circle, with such snapping force that it seemed to whistle as it cut through the atmosphere. The birth mother stepped into the circle with my new daughter in her arms, as we all stood in a row of solidarity facing the direction of the light still rising up over the desert, told by the birth mother's mother, the grandmother of my daughter, to fill our hearts with prayers for the child's wellbeing.

She got her name in this circle—her first official name, though we had already begun calling her Batya, the daughter of God, without having formalized it yet in the sacred rainwater of the mikveh. The makai named her, spontaneously it seemed, breathing in the air and light of the moment and letting her mind drift into the realm where real names come from: Tastonelig. Tas—sun. Tonelig—light. The light of the sun. These were the first words I learned in the language of where she came to me from, followed by the many others I drilled into myself with the free online flashcards I rigged up: Do:ag—mountain. Ba:n—coyote. Su:gadi—water. Ju:ki—rain.

I am wary of fetishizing indigenous people, or simplifying the complexity of their lives so as to appropriate some magical solution to our predicament. But I do believe a culture still much more closely identified with the rhythms of nature can remind us of

The Rain Sermon (continues)

forgotten aspects of our own, which may point toward a self-understanding of relevance to our times.

They would watch the monsoon come on in the old times, gathering miles away but still visible across the flat plain of the desert, and have time before it arrived to put in a crop of Tepary beans. The Colorado, or whatever they called it, still ran all the way down to the salt flats on what is now the Mexican side of the border, a place to seek purification, assuming that salt had the same effect on the soul that it does on meat. The saguaro is known as the hashan. With its spine and limbs resembling the human form, it is a brother, a living man, an ancestor. We might laugh and say: that's just childish mythmaking. Really, the saguaro is a cactus used to decorate golf courses. But to call it a man, far from cartoonish fantasy, is an acknowledgment that it is alive, and brings life to so many other creatures. The cactus fruit is a focal point of ceremony, and the misshapen crop the year before last was a bellwether of the collapsing ecosystem we already mistake for dead.

How much of the breakdown of our connection with the earth resides in our inability to tell stories that somehow encode wise habitation, or the scale of our lives in the aspect of the global life that sustains them—like in the Amazon they now say, in the face of the creeping savannah, that the gods are crying, and that even more than these tears, they fear the day when the crying stops?

Our ancestors had their own religious understanding of the land where they aspired to live. This was a theology based in ecology, a theocology, if you will. You can read about it in the 11th chapter of Deuteronomy: “But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.”

This description was drawn in contrast to the house of bondage from which they had emerged: “The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden.”

What this Holy Land lacked in apparent certainty, however, it made up for in spiritual drama. You were closer to God because you had to rely upon the rain, whereas the Nile as a form of irrigation gave rise to a self-satisfied civilization, which never questioned the availability of its resource base and assumed things would continue on in the same proud fashion.

It's no coincidence our ancestors placed the New Year at the start of the rainy season, and coupled it with a period of atonement. On the one hand, it pointed towards something cyclical, the return of the rains with the coming of autumn, but at the same time it betrayed a trepidation that this wasn't assured. They understood the rains to be

The Rain Sermon (continues)

dependent on their tshuva, their repentance, as much as on any pattern of the weather system. And this explains something at the core of the spirituality of the land of Israel—that sustenance could not be taken for granted, as could, perhaps, the annual flooding of the Nile. This truth is harder to take, but maybe necessary to begin working into your heart to live with integrity and purpose in a changing world—the truth that everything we do and dream isn't built upon or etched in stone, but rather relies on something as fickle as whether or not it is going to rain. Beneath every mundane moment is the sacred drama of life and death, lived beneath the "eyes of god"; a spirituality, which, like all relevant spiritualities, is concerned with how we grapple with the physical terms of our existence, rather than how we pretend they do not exist.

Tshuva, to the true believer, might be understood as a literal bargain—if we do all the right things then God will give us rain. I don't know about that. I'm just a working stiff and don't expect to be coddled like a petulant child. I see it more as a return, a circle redrawn in my soul in response to a cycle that is breaking down, like Honi sketched in the dirt in the face of emergency what the makai writes on to the desert each time a child is born. It is a journey back from the fleshpots of Egypt to the holy trepidation of the unpromised land; back to the bounded realm where real names come from.

But, really, I'm not above a little prayer, either. Prayer, for me, is the language of a heart still pulsing with hope in the impossible. Won't we stand in the sukkah soon, celebrating our vulnerability, and shake the palm branch so it's patter can soothe our anxious souls with the imitation of rain?

We sit together, now, on the front porch of our house, watching the rain that is either too much or too little, and I'm not sure if the cosmic trickster will indulge us with his beneficent jest, but I can wake up, each day, and pledge to her that I will not be moved.

So I take her in the circle of my arms, and fill my heart with a prayer for her well-being, and sing her, once again, the lines the lonesome old cowboy taught me:

"And way up there, He'll hear our prayer and show us where there's water. Cool, clear, water."

Malchuyot, Zikhronot, Shofarot
Hazzan Diana Brewer ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

Malchuyot

Who?
What?
Where?
When?
Why?
How?
Yes!

AND

Not yet…

OR

I have something better for you

He/hu/She/hee/they/them/We/Anochi
It
Is not too far off
In around

Blessings
Curses

All things
And
No-Thing

Dreams
Reality

It is only What
Is
Was
Will Be

Zichronot

Why do I leap
To thoughts of Eternity
When I think of Memory?

Is it because Memory and Time
Are practically synonyms?
And Eternity is
All Time and
No Time?

Or maybe it is because of
All the things
I'd rather not remember

Those moments
Of being bound at the altar
Of watching the flood waters rise
Of the awareness of the emptiness
Of my womb

To not remember means
No I and no Thou
And where would that leave me?

I would forget
That I was remembered
I would forget that
The crucible of those moments
Formed me more and more
Into the image of the Compassionate One

I would forget that
Without shadow
Light is meaningless

Shofarot

You came here today for a reason

No - you don't have to tell me

You don't even have to tell yourself
(Although you may want to ask yourself)

You heard a call

Maybe in the form of a blast
That enfolded you in its waveform

Maybe in the form of a still, small voice,
That can hardly be called a voice at all

Does it call you to something?
Away?

No - you don't have to tell me
- or yourself
But you may want to ask

Rosh Hashanah 5783
Daniel Berlin ~ Rosh Hashanah Day Two

I greet the soft full moon light of ELUL…
Half-way to the new moon of TISHRAY, to Rosh HA'SHANAH 5783…
To the holy-day of which so little is said…
In the myth-theo-logy of our Torah
In which the name "Rosh Hashanah" is not mentioned…
A name created by our later-day sages!
What few words Torah reveals...
Refers to our collective memory…
"YOM TERUAH/The day of the Shofar blast."
So, on ROSH HASHANAH, we are to remember, TERUAH?
What TERUAH?
Oh, that TERUAH--the Voice of the Shofar on Mount Sinai…
The blast that grew continuously
louder and louder…
Oh, my dear friends,
let me tell you, I was there…
Standing at Sinai, 3300 years ago…
And nobody, nobody was sounding the Shofar.
Yet, as the Voice of the ram's horn became more thunderous …
The greater the stillness became in the heart of Moses.
And when MOSHE spoke…
ELOHIM answered Moses with a whisper…
a still small Voice…
With the crystalline Voice…
of Moses, him-SELF!!
And this is the essence of ROSH HA'SHANAH…
Awakening to the Voice of our innermost Self…
In the Sinai moments of each day…
That guides, heals, and renews.

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner and Efraim Weinbarber as "the son"
Rosh Hashanah Day Two

"Efraim, do you know the story of Abraham and Isaac?"
"Yes."
"Did I ever tell you about it? Did you read it in the Torah?"
"I learned it at school."
"How?"
"I can't remember."
"Well, what do you remember about the story?"
"So, Abraham goes to sacrifice Isaac on, what's it called, Mt. Zion?"
"In the story, it's called Mt. Moriah."
"Moriah, wait, that sounds like a place in The Lord of the Rings."
"Yeah, the mines of Moria. It's where they went under the mountain, and they thought Gandalf died fighting that demon."
"Mt. Moriah. Thanks for correcting me. So pretty much then he sacrifices a sheep instead. Am I right?"
"Sort of, but you left out a few details."
"Like what?"
"Well, God called to Abraham and said make your son an offering. And Abraham got up early and got all his stuff together, like his knife, and some wood."
"Why would an offering need wood? I thought it was Isaac that was being offered."
"Well, they need to make a fire, to burn up the offering."
"Why would they have to burn him? Why would they burn him?"
"That's how they make an offering. First they kill him with the knife and then they burn him up."
"Ew, gross. I don't exactly get the point of sacrificing a human."
"Well, in the end he doesn't do it. An angel tells him to stop."
"That's good. But why did he try to do it in the first place? Cause "god" told him to?"
"Why do you put quotation marks around the word "god"?"
"Because."
"I notice you did that at the Seder, too. When "The Lord" parted the Sea of Reeds."
"I don't want to say."
"Why not?"
"I just don't. Abba, c'mon."
"I think I know why, but I won't make you say it. Let's try it this way. What if we looked at the story like this: Abraham says to Issac, ``I believe in God so I'm going to take you up the mountain to sacrifice you, and what if Isaac says, "I don't believe in God."

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"You're right!"
"Well, what do you think Isaac was doing when Abraham came in to get him?"
"Possibly sleeping, or maybe eating or doing normal stuff that aren't being sacrificed. Getting his energy out outside. If he had animals maybe he would take care of them, if he had plants maybe he would help with the farm. Or if he just wanted to get his energy out he would just randomly run."
"How old do you think Isaac was?"
"I'm not sure."
"Make a guess. How do you see him in your imagination? Your age?"
"Maybe a bit older, or something like that."
"Have you ever had a time when your dad comes in and says—hey stop what you're doing, we're going to do something else that I say you need to do…?"
"Yeah, I can kind of remember when I was two or three or four, and I was sleeping, and you came to get me and said: stop sleeping. Look at this lunar eclipse. I'm pretty sure that's how it was. It was a while ago."
"Do you remember how you felt?"
"No."
"How do you feel when you think about that now? Are you glad I did it?"
"Yeah. But it's probably a different story with Abraham and Isaac."
"Why?"
"Because I don't think Isaac would ever be glad that Abraham almost sacrificed him. Yeah…"
"Do you think Isaac knew what was going on, or did he just think his dad wanted him to take a trip with him?"
"I think he knew what was going on."
"How?"
"Cause he saw the sacrificing stuff and he didn't see the animal to sacrifice so he must have just assumed it was going to be him."
"It sort of says something like that in the story."
"I think you told me that. That's where I got that from."
"Well, in the story, Isaac asked Abraham: where's the animal? And Abraham said: God will provide it."
"I would just say: you'll see who's going to be sacrificed and you might not like it. Actually, you won't like it. You really won't like it."
"You are more straightforward about it than Abraham. Or "God.""
"You have a point."
"Why don't you think Isaac said anything after that."

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"He was nervous."
"Is it hard to disagree with your dad?"
"Sometimes. Sometimes it's easy—like choosing what movie to watch, it's really easy."
"When is it hard?"
"When you make me practice the piano."
"What's that like…?"
"I have to stop what I'm doing and practice the piano…it's just that. Don't start yelling at me!"
"I won't yell at you in front of all these nice people."
"That's good. Thanks."
"Why do I make you practice the piano?"
"Because you want me to get better at it."
"Why do I want that? For me or for you?"
""For me."
"I think maybe it's something I want for me, too."
"What do you mean by that?"
"I think sometimes I want you to stick with things better than I did when I was your age. I was very good at piano when I was little, but I quit, for a long time, and it took me a long time to come to being happy making music. And I want it to be easier for you, so I make it harder for you."
"I had no idea."
"Do you know what I mean?"
"Kind of."
"But I also think that you will enjoy being a good musician someday."
"I'm starting to enjoy it. But Abraham wasn't telling Isaac to practice the piano. He was going to kill him because he thought "God" told him to."
"Even though "God" didn't."
"But it says in the Torah that "God" did."
"God told him to, but then God told him not to."
"I don't think it really makes sense for somebody to say: I'm going to sacrifice you because I believe in God. Because like you said earlier, what if Isaac didn't believe in God and said that."
"Does the father have a right to do with the son according to what the father believes, even if the son believes different things?"
"Not necessarily. If the son believes in something and the father believes in something else and the father tells the son to do something according to what the father believes, that doesn't make it completely fair because the son believes differently so he might not agree."

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

“Does Isaac get sacrificed in the end?”
“No.”
“What happens?”
“Abraham sacrifices a lamb instead.”
“I think it’s a ram.”
“Oh, you’re right. I get those confused because they have similar letters and they sound similar.”
“A ram is a male sheep, and a lamb is a baby sheep.”
“I know that. I know that.”
“What was God’s plan in all of this?”
“According to me basically nothing. According to the Torah, I can’t exactly remember.”
“The Torah says: God was testing Abraham. What do you think that means?”
“It means God was like: Hey, Abraham, sacrifice your son. It turns out God was trying to test him—kind of like that story in Lunch and Learn when that guy was testing his nephew about the prayer.”
“What?”
“You know when the guy says: 'your mercy is upon the bird's nest' and stuff like that.”
“Oh, yeah! That's the story from the Talmud where a guy is leading prayers, and he says a prayer the Talmud just said we shouldn't say, and Rava says--what a great prayer. And his nephew Abaye says—but we aren't supposed to say it. And Rava says—I know that. I was just testing you.”
“I wonder if they are related, those two stories.”
“Well, they are in the sense they are both stories about someone watching to see what somebody else will do if they put them in a confusing situation.”
“Yeah, you're right. But I think we're going on a bit of a tangent.”
“I'm just so happy you like studying Talmud, even if you put “God” in quotation marks.”
“Yeah. Can we get back on topic.”
“Okay. Let me tell you something else. There are two ways I’ve looked at the story, one when I was a young man, and one when I became a father. Do you want to hear about them?”
“Uh, I guess.”
“When I was a young man, I thought this story was kind of like Isaac’s bar mitzvah.”
“Huh? I want to hear about that. That sounds interesting.”
“I thought about it as God’s way of telling Abraham—you have to let your son make his own choices, and live his own life, and not just be what you want him to be.”
“How do you associate that with Isaac’s bar mitzvah?”

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"Well, I thought of it as a kind of very dramatic bar mitzvah, where Abraham brings up Isaac to the mountain, like the bimah…
"Oh, for a second I thought you meant your brother Isaac's bar mitzvah…"
"Oh, no. That was less dramatic. I mean Isaac in the Bible."
"Thanks for correcting me."
"So, anyhow, then Abraham ties Isaac up and lifts up the knife…"
"What a bad bar mitzvah!"
"I've seen worse."
"I don't think so."
"And then God says: No, I want you to let him go and be his own person. Like at a bar mitzvah we say—it's time to start respecting you for your own ideas and not just what your parents want you to do. Does that make any sense?"
"Somewhat. But sometimes you already let me make my own choices."
"And then there's the way I started thinking about this story when I became a father. Do you remember when I became a father? You were there…"
"It was ten years ago, so I can't exactly remember. The only way I can remember it is because of pictures. Cause of that picture you put on Facebook when I became ten, and the one that Imma sent to me in my email as a birthday thing, I guess."
"What was in those pictures?"
"One of them was exactly when I was first born, and one of them was when I came home from the hospital."
"Can you tell me a little more about the pictures? What was in them?"
"Me."
"What else?"
"A bunch of random stuff."
"Like me? Was I in them?"
"You were in one of them."
"What was I doing?"
"You were looking at me."
"And where were you when I was looking at you?"
"In the hospital."
"Did I look happy?"
"Yeah."
"I was. But I was also thinking, in a way, about this story."
"Okay."
"Because when a father is responsible for his child, it sometimes feels like you are walking through strange territory..."

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"You mean like a jungle?"
"...hoping for the best, but also sometimes worrying. Does that make sense?"
"I guess. Interesting. Continue."
"It sometimes feels like Abraham—and I'm not always sure if I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing when I tell you to come along with me, but I hope everything will turn out okay."
"Good."
"Like the lunar eclipse. Or maybe piano lessons."
"But what if Isaac, when the whole sacrificing thing happened, was trying to convince Abraham to stop?"
"That's a great, important, and very troubling question."
"What do you mean?"
"Well, I think there are sometimes parents who do bad things to their kids, and it's horrible, and to think about a kid who is trying to get out of it and can't is really upsetting."
"Yeah. Is that where the whole ram thing went in?"
"What do you mean?"
"If Isaac was doing that, is that when Abraham sacrificed the ram instead? And maybe that's why Abraham did that, maybe that's why?"
"You mean it wasn't God? It was Isaac who told him not to do it, and that's why he stopped?"
"Maybe. I don't know. The Torah says something different but I don't always have to agree with the Torah."
"You sure don't. Well, that's really a powerful idea—that Abraham finally was able to hear what he was doing to Isaac, because Isaac was able to speak up."
"Which I think he should have a right to do."
"Yeah. It makes me sad to think about that. I wish that kind of thing never happened—that parents could do bad things to their children. I hope I've never really done anything like that to you."
"Well, there is that time you were holding me too tight because I was overreacting, but that's just because you were used to doing that with Batya, because she was a baby so there's a reason. But I wasn't a baby."
"Did I say I was sorry after that?"
"Yes, you did."
"Did you forgive me?"
"Yes."
"I'm glad. Do you think Abraham ever asked Isaac to forgive him?"
"No."

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"Well, at least I have that on Abraham."
"Here's one that I think is good: Couldn't Abraham just not listen to "God"?"
"That's a great question. Some people think that if Abraham had just said, "No thank you," at the beginning, God would have said: "A-plus. You passed the test."
"Nice."
"There's another explanation—an anthropological explanation."
"What's anthropological?"
"It means the study of human cultures."
"Interesting. So, can you explain."
"Yes. People say that around the time this story was written, there were people in the same area who actually DID sacrifice children as part of their religion."
"That's bad."
"I agree."
"Really bad."
"Yes, and so some people think that this whole story was actually a kind of "public service announcement" with the message: hey, God doesn't want you to kill your children!"
"Well that's good. How long ago was this story written?"
"Well, the version of the story that we have in the Torah might be as old as 2500 to 3000 years old."
"That's old."
"But it might be based on a storytelling tradition that's even older. And it's a very popular story. The Christians have a version of it, and so do the Muslims."
"I didn't know it's that popular."
"It's a best-seller. But what do you think about that—that this story is really trying to tell parents: you better take care of your children, and don't think you have the right to do whatever you want with them. That's not really what "God" wants."
"Interesting."
"So, you see, people can read this crazy story in all kinds of ways. Some are really disturbing and some are really meaningful. And that's Torah for you."
"Yeah. But I take it back about the lunar eclipse. I kind of did want to see that."
"What about this? Are you glad I made you do this? Or was it like bringing you up to the bimah to be sacrificed?"
"No. It wasn't like bringing me up to the bimah to be sacrificed?"
"Does it feel a little like an early bar mitzvah?"
"Not exactly."
"Does it feel like following your father on a weird, crazy journey through the jungle?"

Akedat Efraim – A father and son discuss the Binding of Isaac continues

"So you did listen to me!"
"Yes, I did. And now you are released."
"Thanks."
"Maybe we can go find a lamb to sacrifice."
"It was a ram. Anyhow, I'm a vegetarian so I'll pass."

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All The Vows We Made
Roslyn G. Heafitz ~ Kol Nidrei

All the vows we made –

But how many did we keep?

Our liturgy confronts, challenges, and protects US!

It knows we will fall short; It absolves us of guilt.

But we are still responsible, invited to try again to follow through; or perhaps to question the wisdom of making a vow in the first place.

Was it an act of impulse?

Did we think it through?

Did we try but life intervened as it sometimes does?

Perhaps, it is not enough to annul our vows.

Perhaps, we need to learn from our failures.

Learn to be more careful with speech and promise to "speak less and listen more" as the song lyrics instruct.

HaShem, please forgive us, but please do not give up on us.

We are not perfect, but you have gifted us with the opportunity to notice, to repent, and to return.

Perhaps, that is the pledge of greatest importance –one that compels us to self-scrutiny, honest reflection, amends-making, and the courage to commit to try again.
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Judge Judah
Mani Schwartz ~ Kol Nidrei

It's 98 degrees in Phoenix
a reprieve from summer's heat
finally, it's cooling down

I can hear my grandson
counting down
his chubby baby-voice
trilling, "Two... two... two!"

I can practically see my daughter
clutching phone chin to shoulder
branding iron car seat buckles
tender flesh, never the two should meet

Mom! I got his Halloween costume
you will die... are you ready for this?
He's going as Judge Judah!

He's in the 96th percentile for height
99th for weight
has 24 discernable words, doctor says
3-5 is the norm

Putin annexes four occupied regions
every time I read the word annex
an ancestral shudder trills down my spine
the reverberations of genocide linger

"Uh-oh! Uh-oh! Uh-oh!"
the small worried voice grows louder
oh, you dropped your sippy cup!

I got him a black choir robe
what toddlers are singing in a choir?
a little white wig, plastic gavel
Micah's making a judge's bench to go over his stroller

Judge Judah continues

Ian's aftermath: dozens are dead
I keep seeing pictures of white yachts
in tumbled heaps, but what of the trailer parks?
It's the trailer parks I'm worried about...

"Good girl! Good girl!"
He thinks all dogs are named Good Girl
but his Good Girl, Seleh, is best of all

Yes, Ju-jy! We're home!
let mama unbuckle you
and we can go see
your Good Girl!

Oh! You're so happy to see her!
He is perpetually happy
life's buffet of delights
feeds him one moment of joy after another

Flooding, drought, unprecedented heat
farmers and climate change activists
irreversible damage to food supply in progress

Mom, I need to put him down for his nap
can I call you back in fifteen minutes?
He played so hard at the children's museum...
Oh, sleepy boy! You want to go night-night?

On Yom Kippur, I will stand in synagogue
a photo of my grandson slipped up the sleeve
of my death shroud, beating my chest in repentance

We have trespassed (against G-d and Man, and we are devastated by our guilt)
We have stolen from the land and our neighbors, here and not here
We have caused others to commit sins of war and colonization
We have taken from others, and taken, and taken, and taken

Judge Judah continues

We have added falsehood upon falsehood; lying to ourselves for absolution
We have given harmful advice, focusing on canvas bags and composting
rather than corporations, mass consumption, and modern-day slavery
giving advice, asked for and unasked for, instead of turning our lens inward

We have caused our friends grief, naming them Other
naming them Enemy, naming them Immigrant
naming our borders and our facades

We have been stiff-necked, refusing to admit
that our suffering is caused by our own sins
We have gone astray
We have led others astray

Judah, forgive us for the world which
We have knowingly and unknowingly
willingly and unwillingly
defamed and destroyed

Judge us from a place of compassion
of which we are undeserving
yet beg of you, nonetheless

New Year Irresolution
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Kol Nidrei

I was dreaming, one early morning, in the middle days of summer.

In my dream, I was in the halls of my high school, a building made of orange bricks that was somehow both immense and squat, and rumored to have been designed by a firm that also handled prisons. It doesn't exist anymore. It was knocked down over a decade ago, when my hometown voted to erect a massive new state-of-the-art facility, complete with massive cost overruns. I hadn't been inside of it for years. I missed the final promenade they offered to alumni before the wrecking ball.

Now here I was back inside, in my dream. I'll own that this is not entirely uncommon. Along with the house where I lived till I was ten years old, it's a frequent choice of whoever in my unconscious scouts for locations. This time, I ran into my younger brother, which was strange. He is almost six years younger than I am. The two of us never overlapped in high school.

We met each other in the hallway. I said to him: “Oh, my god!” and he said “What is it?” I said: “I haven't been to math class all semester. I don't think there's any way I'm going to graduate.”

Then, I added--and this is what I remembered most clearly after I woke up, even hours later, which is rare for me and the details of dreams these days–

“I don't think my future is going to be what I thought it was going to be.”

It is true, from the perspective of my teenage self, that my present is not what I thought my future was going to be. Firstly, as a Cold War kid, and one who came to early ecological awareness, I wasn't even sure I was going to have a future. It was a tenuous concept. I am about as surprised as anyone to be standing before you today on the cusp of 50. This explains some of my sluggishness in early life. My heart breaks open to hold the youth of today who have all the more reason to carry such concern.

Apart from the apocalypse, I admittedly was not voted, especially by some of my Jewish educators who did a double-take when they heard the news, most likely to join the rabbinate. As I used to tell some of my more recalcitrant bar mitzvah students: “you can't pull that on me. I know both sides of the law.” As for farming, there were so few opportunities back then to discover the color of my thumb that it never even entered into my calculations.

But, obviously, a dream I had this summer wasn't looking forward from my actual past, or, really, toward the dark backward and abysm of time, in Shakespeare's beautiful phrase. It evoked a setting of my childhood, to express something in the nature of how I feel today, in the middle of middle age.

At its core was a common trope: a kind of variation on “the actor's nightmare”, in which you find yourself on stage without knowing any of the lines. It is also well-expressed

New Year Irresolution continues

in the title of a work of High Holiday philosophy at least as famous as the content of the book itself—Rabbi Alan Lew's *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*. I've had high school versions of it before, for example the recurring dream where the paper I bluffed my way through in the second semester of AP European History comes back to haunt me. There's one for rabbis, too: I open up the siddur to lead services, and all the words are wrong.

Or maybe this one: I'm giving a sermon. All the while, in the sanctuary, there is a conversational buzz. It rises and rises till it makes me so angry I leave off sermonizing and tell the congregation to shut up! (Well, this one may come from a different part of my psyche, but confession is good for the soul.)

Underneath any subconscious lampooning of professional or academic anxiety, however, lies a deeper concern: the apprehension that I have missed something, neglected to take some step, fallen short. As a result, whatever it is I had planned to build on a certain foundation has come to nothing. At least, it has turned out otherwise from what I intended or anticipated.

This was a dream, it seems, inviting me to consider what to make of the fact that somewhere in my heart I wrestle with a sense of failure.

It's an appropriate theme for Yom Kippur. This is a day over which the specter of failure looms large. When we talk about "sin", really, we are speaking of failure.

Of all the myriad words in Hebrew for "misdeed"--avon, pesha, aveyra—the predominant one is heyt. Al heyt shehatanu lifanekha, goes the penitential mantra of the litany we just recited: "for the sin we have committed before you." This word, heyt, I was taught, actually originated in the lexicon of archery. It describes an arrow gone astray. An indication of failure in the skill of the bowman is transposed into the key of the moral actor who has missed her target.

"Failure", in this sense, is an even more stirring term than the loaded and archaic concept of "sin." How much more forcefully does the self-accusation strike us when we substitute one for the other? We have failed before you "by resorting to violence." We have failed before you "through stubbornness and superficiality". We have failed before you "unwillingly and willingly", "knowingly and deceitfully", "in idle chatter", "in our innermost thoughts."

We were meant to live by a code of conduct, based in a covenant with God, our ancestors, our children. We proved unable to fulfill some of its terms. We afflict ourselves, beat our breasts as if pounding on the doorways of our hearts. We chastise our inadequacy. Fearing the wages of failure will be death, we atone with heartfelt pleas for life and well-being, assuring the one before whom we stand that we will try to do better next time.

For all of these failures "forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement."

New Year Irresolution continues

Yet we begin this day by taking an entirely different attitude toward the reality of our failures. We take our time to work into the specifics of atonement for our hata'im. We start, instead, by contemplating ourselves in the aspect of the neder.

Neder is another Hebrew word that arises from a rich glossary of synonyms. We heard most of them tonight in our introductory prayer: "Nidrei, e'esarei, sh'vuei, charamei, konamei, kinusei, chinuyei." Each varies from the others in some degree of technical specificity. All of them refer to the practice of making a vow. Neder is the quintessence of the category.

The most important thing to understand about a neder is that nobody forces you to make one. It's not something that God demands of us. The rabbis even suggest that in most cases you'd be better off leaving well enough alone.

It's not a mitzvah to make a vow. All of the truly obligatory demands of a righteous life are inherent as responsibilities whether you vow to fulfill them or not. A vow, to the contrary, is a wish your heart makes when you're wide awake. It represents an extracurricular striving for some elevated sense of purpose.

Traditional motivations might include gratitude—as when you swear to adhere to some course of action in thanks for something God has given you—or need; in exchange for something you want. A vow may arise out of the desire to improve one's character, serving as a surety of changed behavior, like an alcoholic's pledge. It may also be a manifestation of some accentuated degree of piety, as in the case of the optional Nazirite oath, the closest the Torah comes to advocating for any kind of ascetic or monastic way of life.

Whatever the prompt, vowing, at its heart, is an act of gathering the fragments of the will into a formally articulated intention for the future. It is an ambitious projection into the future, an attempt to exert some kind of control over what is to come. This is what I will do. This is what I will not do. This is how I will ensure that my life remains oriented toward my commitments, over and against the perils of distraction and forgetfulness.

Only after a vow is made does it become obligatory. The particular subject of a vow is not the mitzvah. The mitzvah is the form of the vow itself. Once you have declared, by all you hold sacred, that you will live according to a particular goal, investing your spiritual power into the intention, it becomes the bedrock of your self-expectation.

Whereas failure as heyt is a sin to be repented, the collapse of a neder is therefore a crisis of the self. It is not so much a moral failure as a failure of identity. Not only did I not fulfill what I promised to do, but I did not become the person I intended to become. God, we are given to understand, is less offended by the thing I have left undone than by this indefinite space that I have come to occupy, in between the intention and the fulfillment.

New Year Irresolution continues

But we can also understand this quite simply, without resorting to rarified religious terminology. Sometimes our lives take on the form of a vow without the words having actually been spoken. I am, or I intend to be, the person who does this, and who does not do that, in the work that I undertake, in the family I am a part of, in the way that I meet the world. But the future is not so simply mastered. All intentions are subject to circumstance, and life is notorious for the infliction of change.

I don't think my future is going to be what I thought it was going to be. I did my best to calculate the outcome. But how much successful calculation can you expect of a man who hasn't been to math class all semester?

By a certain age, a great number of futures have already withered, and mulched into the present. There are regrets: things that I wish I had done and will never have the chance to do again. There are losses: things that I loved that I can no longer have or be. There is necessity—which is a component of life that varies in its impact upon intention from person to person, depending on the nature of one's opportunity. And then there is something like malaise; things that I still do, but now without any sense of passion, purpose, or relevance, but only because they are actions that structure my day.

But if this be failure, yet it is not sin. We meet a heyt, a true infraction, with the rituals of atonement—apology and the beating of the breast. But, finding ourselves smothering in the coil of broken vows, we are offered something else, something sensible and compassionate: a ceremony of release.

Kol Nidrei, in fact, is a ritual for the burning of failure, just as we burn chametz before the feast of our liberation. With the ark open and all the Torahs out, we have chanted, as if in incantation: “All of the vows--all of the fixities of purpose--that I regret having made, that I can no longer sustain, that have run their course, may they be annulled and nullified. May they not be valid or in force any longer. May I be free of them.” If the ultimate goal of this day is new resolve, we first say: not yet. Before I am ready for that, let me experience the prerequisite: new years irresolution.

There's no rush to put up the new building. Who knows if we can even really afford it. Instead, let's stand here for a while with the orange bricks of the prison, shattered by the wrecking ball, strewn about our feet.

I don't think my future is going to be what I thought it was going to be. But nonetheless, in the present, I am an unlikely rabbi with a green thumb, still responsible to the covenant I hold with my god, my ancestors, and my children.

And if I feel like an actor who has forgotten his lines, that's just because they have yet to be spoken.

A Yom Kippur Poem
Emily and Zion Mentin-Chamble ~ Yom Kippur Morning

Forgive yourself for every time you didn't treat yourself kindly,
For the times you've doubted yourself.

Forgive yourself for every time you have misjudged someone and made assumptions.

Forgive yourself for every time you haven't honored your body and those of others.

Forgive yourself for every time you devalued the earth beneath your feet and have been careless with your actions.

Now is an opportunity to start anew, never taking for granted the world around you.

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Faith in Song
Theo Peierls ~ Yom Kippur Morning

Hello everyone, and gut yontif. My name is Theo, I use they/them pronouns, and while I have been attending services at the JCA for about six years, I am happy to say that this year I became a member.

In a lot of ways, the social distancing of Covid didn't dramatically change my life. Most of my work has been relatively easy to transfer online, I enjoy staying in far more than going out, and it's been a great excuse to avoid getting breathed on by strangers in the grocery store. On a larger scale, we are only beginning to understand the devastating impact of Covid, but in my personal routine, I didn't feel much had changed.

The crucial exception to this was singing. Beyond choral singing, I specifically craved a return to liturgical music. I feel closest to G-d when I sing. I feel like my best self, my truest self, when I join my voice with that of the congregation. Shabbat Ne'imah services are surreal in their beauty and joy, and encompass the purest form of spirituality for me.
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Faith in Song continues

I come from a relatively non-observant family. We celebrated Hanukkah, did an abridged seder, and dipped apples in honey for the new year, and that was about it. We didn't fit in in Jewish communities on Long Island, and so we didn't join them. But, like the good Long Island Jews we are, most nights we would find ourselves gathered around the piano singing musical theater in four part harmony. For us, this was our spiritual practice, and through this, music remains a core part of my faith. Because I didn't grow up going to synagogue, I still find myself struggling to find my place in the siddur at times. But once the music starts, I immediately feel at home, and like I know exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. There was a point in my life where I felt truly lost. Services were the only experience that could reach me, and I would feel all the emotions of the week on the car ride home. The music of Friday night services really saved me, and connected me to an aspect of myself I didn't know was still there after some difficult years.

The incredibly positive impact of services on my mental health and on my own understanding of myself has led me to consider Jewish practice and ritual life as central to my being. This wasn't something I anticipated, I had always had this view of religion as antithetical to intellectualism, but nevertheless I began to consider myself an observant Jew, and to learn what that really meant.

Every year since finding this connection, I have struggled in the weeks leading up to Yom Kippur. I spend the end of Elul and Rosh Hashanah in anxious anticipation of Yom Kippur, the day where I am cleansed of my sins before G-d. This is supposed to be the day we are closest to G-d, and for me at least, is often the day I experience the most guilt. While I didn't grow up going to synagogue, I absolutely grew up in the powerful tradition of Jewish guilt, and with a significant capacity for self-deprecating humor. It's not atonement that causes my anxiety, it's the knowledge that with this atonement I am supposed to feel joy, to feel forgiven. The challenge is always to forgive *myself*. It is hard for me to find the joy in Yom Kippur, to believe in my own right to life, health, and happiness. It's hard to believe that it's right for me to forgive myself for causing harm, to forgive myself for not doing or being "enough" to disrupt the cruel structures that define our world.

This time of year has both the aspect of looking back and of looking forward. It can be incredibly scary to reflect on a year filled with so much violence, illness, and pain, and to see the continuation of this pattern from years past. I have difficulty accepting the world we live in, and believing that next year will be any different. And yet, there is so much that carries me through, that brings me joy, and that helps me believe in my own right to be human, to be imperfect, and to inhabit this earth. In the organizing work I do with transgender asylum seekers, I find incredible community with radical queer folks who

understand my fears, my hopelessness, and who help me remember how beautiful life can be when we celebrate it despite these hardships. And in services, it seems impossible to feel truly hopeless once the music begins.

I hope that this year as you reflect on your mistakes, you also find the piece of your Jewish practice that makes you feel whole, feel good, feel needed. Singing may not give me answers in this broken world, but it gives me faith nonetheless.

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It Gets Late Early Out There
Jeff Cohen ~ Yom Kippur Morning

Shana tova. Hi and G'Mar Tov-For those who don't know me, my name is Jeff Cohen and I have been a member of the JCA since the early 90's. Even after making the move to Northampton in 2007, I have been inspired by this unique congregation and the merry band of musical daveners to continue to be a member at the JCA.

The famous neo-Hasidic philosopher Yogi Berra once said:

"It gets late, early out there."

Rav Berra was referring to how the shadows from dwindling daylight came on early in left field at Yankee Stadium.

Growing up in the Bronx in the early 60's, Yom Kippur meant to me, more than anything else, that it was World Series time in New York. In those days, games were played in the daytime which often meant, given how long services were in my quasi-Orthodox setting, I was still in shul when the game was on. Even though what appeared to be the "God given right" of the Yankees to be in the World Series at Yom Kippur ended by the time I was 11, some of my most vivid boyhood memories of Yom Kippur were sneaking out of shul and walking to peer through the windows of a TV store to watch parts of the game. Even as a boy, I was big time into cost benefit and probability analysis and I figured if I caught the game at least for a little, I would then have the "Kavanah" to daven and I figured that since I was not yet Bar Mitzvahed, there was a greater than a 60% probability that God would be OK with this.
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It Gets Late Early Out There continues

There's another moment in time that my mind, body and soul travel back to whenever we reach Yom Kippur: October 6, 1973. I was in Jerusalem studying and hanging out in a Yeshiva. At that time, I was of 2 worlds; modern Orthodox in the "Srugim" style and the secular pot smoking kid listening to the Dead, Allman Brothers, Dylan and Joni Mitchell. I had chosen this particular Yeshiva because the head Rabbi was known to have these deeply spiritual and piercing eyes that made anyone in his presence want to get up and dance over to the Kotel. The other reason I went there to be honest is that the Yeshiva was known to have a good cook so I figured to modify a phrase from a bygone era about marriage it is just as easy to study in a Yeshiva with good food, as it is to study in a Yeshiva with bad food so, Nu, why not pick the good food option.

The week in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in addition to regular studies, we were going over Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) and just contemplating issues of meaning and searching for the divine. Yom Kippur came and in the morning the davening was strong but there appeared to be an inordinate amount of traffic in the streets for a Yom Kippur. All of a sudden, air raid sirens went off and news of a simultaneous breakout of war with Syria and Egypt spread through the Yeshiva like wildfire.

We went into a shelter and the phrase "who will live and who will die" seemed too close for comfort.

Our Rabbi said it was time for the Kohanim to get up and "Duchan": to say the priestly blessing. This tradition of blessing by the Kohanim dates back to Biblical times and now appears to be sexist (only men) and caste oriented (only Kohanim). However, at that point, with our tallits covering our faces and our fingers drawn in the Spock Vulcan tradition, we chanted the blessings and when we got to the end and said, "Shalom" there was an audible sigh as we collectively knew what lay ahead was not peace but the reality of a war that came dangerously close to ending Israel as it was in those days. The day after Yom Kippur, my best friend at the time and I hitchhiked up to a Kibbutz near the Lebanese border, called Kibbutz Cabri. The shelling from the Syrian front was audible and in addition to Kibbutz work we helped out at a hospital where wounded soldiers were being transferred.

Before that Yom Kippur, I had struggled with the notion of a God and war but until then, the concept of who was going to live and who was going to die, had not hit me in a visceral way.

Last Yom Kippur, my late spouse, Lori, told me to accept the knowledge that this would be the year that she would pass and she said, "I wonder what form it will take." I focused in on that other Rav Berra thought, "it ain't over, till it's over", and I tried to negotiate with the

It Gets Late Early Out There continues

Universe to give Lori (who called herself Serafina her Hebrew name at the end) just a little more time and we could come back to renegotiate in the future. Alas, after more than 3 months staying at home in palliative care and hospice Lori passed on March 6th of this year.

When I think of Lori's passing, what resonates over and over and over in my mind and heart is that phrase, "It gets late, early out there."

It always amazes me how quickly things pass, and how quickly Elul pops up each year. I no longer have the idea of "God" as an umpire and my focus is on the Shechina and yet it always seems there is so much to repent for personally and in the greater world which at times appears daunting and has the potential to induce existential despair. Of course, what usually happens is procrastination. Yes, I will say "Achat Sha'alti" every day that I remember (my goal is always to hit at a .300 batting average for that) and I will make sure to make the donations to the right causes but somehow the month of Elul slips by in a dash with so little inner reflection completed.

However, then I thought, maybe, just maybe, Rav Berra never completed his thoughts. In fact, if you study closely the commentary of Rashi on Rav Berra, the expression on Yom Kippur, can be reframed as, "It gets early, late out there." The day still stretches before us. Each moment we have is a new moment to reflect and to turn inwards. It is that singular moment we have throughout this day of Yom Kippur and in fact every day of our existence to reflect and to find our better angels.

This Yom Kippur, everything is heightened in its intensity by Lori's passing and my all too real awareness of "who shall live and who shall die", but I am also aware of the power of prayer and the sanctity of the Priestly blessing to comfort and inspire us.

Thus, as in the Yom Kippur war, I close with the priestly blessing brought up to date to reflect the values I, and others, have:

May the Shechina bless you and protect you
Kain, Yahi Ratzon
May the Shechina deal kindly and graciously with you
Kain, Yahi Ratzon
May the Shechina bestow Her favor upon you and grant you peace
Kain, Yahi Ratzon

Amen

Poppa's Lap
Hollie Kalkstein ~ Yom Kippur Morning

I used to sit on my Poppa's lap
In a sanctuary that would not belong to me.
I left before the squeeze took my breath.
Death returned me, inside out and broken.
And now I hold the pages that hold the names.
I remember.
It hurts.
And I am new having returned
To remember what love can hold.

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To Return
Matt Spitzer ~ Yom Kippur Morning

My name is Matt Spitzer, and I live in North Amherst with my wife Kerry and 3 children, Jonah, Gus, and Ada. I'm an endocrinologist. While preparing for Yom Kippur, I have been thinking about parents and children, journeys, and spirituality.

My path to being Jewish started with being tutored by a cantor. I would attend weekly lessons, read books and struggle to learn to read Hebrew in one on one sessions. For my Bar Mitzvah, I wrote a reflection on Cain and Abel and interpreted "Am I my brother's keeper." I hazily recall talking about the importance of caring for others and serving the community. I had the privilege of being surrounded by friends and family at a catering hall. I remember my dad being upset and arguing with the Cantor at one point, but overall it was fun. There was good food and dancing. I gave out mugs that said "I had a blast at Matt's Bar Mitzvah." I had so many mugs that I later brought a box with me to my college coop Watermargin. Overall, I felt like I learned a lot.
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To Return continues

But I never attended a synagogue, participated in a service, or sung with others outside of tutoring sessions. I learned on my own mostly in independent study and look back at this as a solitary experience. It was the difference between seeing a play and reading it. When I read a play I understand the plot. But I feel emotions more strongly when attending a performance and connect more strongly still when actually performing. Reading about being Jewish and celebrating Jewish holidays with my family gave me a Jewish identity, for which I am very grateful. But books did not give me a sense of belonging, shared experience or wider perspective of being Jewish. I did not participate in a Jewish community growing up.

It is somewhat uncomfortable for me to reflect on this now because I do not think I thought much about choosing to seek out Jewish community during my childhood. I now think choice is more important, especially in the context of a Bar Mitzvah. Being a parent and having children attend Kesher has led to me being curious about my own experience with Jewish education. I had assumed that my dad chose this path for me because joining a synagogue was too expensive for him.

So I asked him about this when preparing this talk: why was this the way he chose to structure my childhood Jewish experience? He said that he did not join a synagogue because my mom was Lutheran and requirements to join made them feel uncomfortable. My mom had her own faith, and she felt pressured to convert in order for our family to join. This was a barrier that prevented us from joining as a family. My parents did not feel welcome. But it was important to my father that I be raised Jewish.

My dad wanted me to be Jewish because he had roots in the Jewish religion. My dad had a difficult childhood and a chaotic life. My dad did not know his father, and his mother did not feel able to care for him at a young age. My dad lived at his aunt Bella's house with his grandfather. So my dad's memories of going to temple with his grandfather were very important to him. He had a nice time going to shabbat services and fondly recalls having the honor of having Aliyot. He went to a Jewish camp called Tranquility. I think these memories are a big reason that I am here today.

I also asked my dad about why he was upset with my cantor on the day of my Bar Mitzvah. The cantor had asked my mom to speak about embracing Judaism during my ceremony. She was not ready to give up her faith and declined. My dad was protective of my mother.

To Return continues

My parents' experience trying to join a Jewish community was very different from my experience as a parent. My family has always been welcome at JCA events without prerequisites. I talked about attending Jewish community family events like Shabbot sing alongs with my dad. My dad supported us joining and paid the membership fee for our first year. He wanted us to have a good experience and be a part of a Jewish community. He felt badly that he did not give me this experience growing up, so he wanted better for his grandson. I also want Jonah to have a better experience than I did during the start of his Jewish education.

I remember many instances of kindness here at the JCA. Rabbi Weiner and Aaron Bousel allowed my son Jonah to assist with opening the ark the very first time we joined a service. Ruth Love Barer kindly guided me through an Aliyah when I stumbled through this and was unsure what to say. It has been a gift to sing along with others and gradually learn prayers together. I feel included and feel more peaceful after attending services. The JCA has helped me to feel more spiritual, together, and more Jewish. I enjoy hearing about the rules that guide us through the most difficult times of loss. I also love that Jonah is learning with others and figuring out what it means to be Jewish while baking, planting, painting, and serving the community. Jonah loves attending Kesher. I will let him speak for himself:

Jonah: "The JCA is fun for me because I get to learn what the prayers mean and not just how to say them. I learn Hebrew but also do activities that teach the words and traditions. One example: I remember making a big sign about letting the garden rest for 1y every 7y to give to others less fortunate than you. Then we picked hardy kiwis and gave them out to others at the end of the day."

Rabbi Weiner taught me that the Hebrew word for repentance Teshuvah literally means to return, or to come back. A few years ago, one of my New Year's goals was to be more spiritual. I wanted to understand more about my religious identity and connect with a community. I feel very fortunate to have been warmly welcomed back to being Jewish by this community. My son is at the start of his journey, while I am restarting mine, and I am grateful for this.

It is Yom Kippur, and there is plenty I could do better this coming year. I yell too much and struggle with seeing patients suffer. I never seem to find the time to get all of my work done and be present with family. There is much to atone for and much to do better. But I am here, and being here makes it a bit easier. Thank you for being so welcoming.

Begin Again
Bob Kumin ~ Yom Kippur Morning

How do I become One
When my onion
Layered with hiding spots,
Never stops hiding from your Light.

If the light is too blinding,
I might lose my sight
And go into some other excuse
For Being.

If the light requires me to strain
To gain clarity,
When I see you not loving me,
What have I gained, or lost?
What part of the Other is myself?
Your beauty is pulling at my heart,
And I am distracted
By a TV show?

How many home movies
Must I run
Before the sequel comes out,
Before I become the producer?

What kind of love is this
That dissolves my doing
In the sweet nectar
Of Your being.

/McCartney
Benjamin Weiner ~ Yom Kippur Morning

after a hard day's night
and help!
i thought to show him
what his fifteen-year old
dad used to
look at in the wee
hours, on VHS,
while wondering if
that was what it's
like to trip (he still
doesn't know)

and so i dialed
up the blue
meanies, on YouTube,
and then the
theme song bathed
in a montage
of snippets from
the film, and

in one of them
the fab four awash
in the sea of time
and growing wild
white beards in
a single mystic
bout of aging

and it was then
i felt it—an
inexorable
grief—

/McCartney continues

looking at him,
with the beady
glasses, who was
never to grow
a white beard
in life, because,
you know,
a warm gun,

and i thought
about Paul, alone
on the stage of
the rock hall of
fame, almost
thirty years ago,
still dewy, as they said,
(and even now,
aging almost like
a eunuch with
his smooth cheeks,
despite the beard
of let it be)

when he inducted
his friend, who
was absent, but
for the miasma
of unshed tears
that followed him
from one side of
the podium to the
other, so
he had to sway
to their opposite
to avoid being
drenched,

/McCartney continues

and that night
of the fame seeking
lead, which i
remember as nothing
more than
a strange mood
of grown-ups at
the breakfast table,

and all of our
partners in song
now lost in the void,
behind the slash,
beyond the sea
of time.

The Money Sermon
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Yom Kippur Morning

My sister-in-law, Rebecca, is one of my heroes. She endures debilitating chronic illness. She is at least as anguished by our planetary predicament as I am. And, over the past year, she won a great victory for the persistence of Jewish life.

Some of you had a chance to visit with her when she joined us, by Zoom, for a Maariv Talk last fall. She lives, with my brother, in Helena, Montana. This is a part of the Diaspora where Jews are few and far between. The larger region has been described "by experts at organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center" as "the white-supremacy heartland."

In her conversation with us, she shared the fruits of her work as an amateur historian of the Helena Jewish community. She offered the rich stories of some of the remarkable personalities who built and maintained a collective life that was both nourishing to their Jewish souls and contributory to the mosaic of their Mountain West abode. In particular, she discussed her presidency of the Montana Jewish Project. This is a current effort to revitalize Jewish life in the area, while simultaneously strengthening the bulwark against the forces of hatred.

Their focal point has been a particular building, and what seemed like the impossible dream of reclaiming it. Dedicated in 5651, corresponding to the Gregorian year 1890, Temple Emanu-El of Helena was then the only synagogue between St. Paul, Minnesota, and Portland Oregon. Built of granite, porphyry, and sandstone, it bore on its facade the inscription "Gate to the Eternal" in Hebrew. Adorning its roof were twin onion-domes, at the time the architectural signature of splendid Jewish difference.

With the decline of the community in the early-20th century, the Temple was desacralized. Its edifice came into the hands of the state, and was eventually sold to the Catholic diocese. When, last year, the Church announced its intention to sell off the property, my sister-in-law and her comrades hatched the plan to recover it as a Jewish communal home.

They succeeded. One month ago, at a ceremonial signing that will be followed by a formal rededication, the physical structure of Temple Emanu-El was returned to Jewish ownership. "We can't wait to fulfill our mission," said MJP board member Julie Bir, "to create a statewide center for Jewish life, enhance interfaith opportunities, combat antisemitism in Montana schools and bring to reality the Jewish value of 'repairing the world.'"

They did it. They did it. And all it took was passion, vision, diligence, and a lot...of money.

The Money Sermon continues

It shouldn't really surprise us when our idealistic aspirations reveal their fiscal underbellies. It is the way of the world: much of what matters is, in this sense, material. Those members of our community who have been working to raise our consciousness to the cause of reparations to African-Americans, for the legacy of slavery and the systemic economic discrimination that followed, understand their task as more than a symbolic gesture. It is an assessment of the price of justice. In the meantime, as they work towards this greater reckoning, they continue to make us aware of organizations and businesses towards which we might direct our charitable giving, in immediate economic service to this more drawn out effort.

Given the legacy within our own community of both systemic persecution and reparations, it might not surprise you to learn that such a motion towards recompense also played a role in the MJP's fundraising. One significant donor was the Lutheran Synod of Montana. The bishop, in her solicitation to church members, stressed that "throughout its history, the Christian church and its members have done deep harm to the Jewish people and their communities."

Indeed, we know that money is a powerful tool in our aspirations to atone and to build a better world. What is, I think, a little more difficult, is coming to terms with its necessity, not only for special projects and campaigns of social justice, but in the day-to-day operations of a modern synagogue community.

I wonder if anyone else here grew up in a shul, where Yom Kippur was the biggest fundraising day of the year. I most certainly did. We would arrive at Kol Nidrei, to find pledge cards taped to the seat-backs in front of us. (I'm not sure where they were stashed for those sitting in the front row, but, as it seems to be a universal law of synagogue life that nobody sits that close to the rabbi, it probably didn't matter.) These cards were a compromise. Unlike many churches, where a collection plate is passed around, and the jingle and scent of money injects itself into the ambience of hymn and ritual, there is a Jewish injunction against money changing hands at sacred times. But there was also a recognition among clear-thinking synagogue executives that this was the night of the year when the greatest number of Jews would be availing themselves of the facilities.

As kids, it was a game to fold down one of the pledge tabs on the cards with our parents' names on it. We were dimly aware that in our affluent Jewish enclave the indicated amounts could run into the thousands of dollars. I say it was a game, but at the same time I recall thinking that somehow once you folded down the card-stock the action became irrevocable. At a stipulated point in the service, the ushers would come walking through the aisles and expect each family unit to hand over the goods, in the plain sight of everyone else, as if the pinnacle of the appeal was an exercise in social coercion.

The Money Sermon continues

As I evolved into idealistic young manhood, I began to find the whole thing less funny. My reaction grew more akin, l'havdil, to that renegade rabbi who was known to have said, at least in the Tim Rice translation with which I was most familiar: “My Temple should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.”

On the one hand, this was an early manifestation of a lifelong tendency toward anti-materialism. This is a streak in my character that should be evident to anyone who knows how I live, and how I tend to dress underneath this kittel—but also one that was tested by the eventual desire to have a wife and family. On the other hand, to that point, it betrayed a naivete about the world, and what makes it go round, one that I think was even enabled by my upbringing in an affluent Jewish enclave.

In between these two poles lies a lingering ambivalence about the role of money in Jewish communal life. This can perhaps best be expressed by a question I asked myself repeatedly while writing this sermon: is this really something to talk about on Yom Kippur? What is the place of money in Jewish sacred space and time?

I've been in the business for a few years now. I will admit that some of the cold calculation of the synagogue executive has crept into my bloodstream. I know how “the sausage is made”, even in a building with a dairy-pareve kiddish policy. If this is the day you are all going to show up, why not take the opportunity to remind you of all that it takes to ensure there is a place to show up to?

But my idealism has not been so thoroughly corrupted. I understand that, for many, religion is a culture that we hope rises, to some degree, above the material. It speaks of God, the soul, a value system that transcends the mutual abuse of the marketplace. Considering it as just another product with a price tag is jarring.

On the other side of this coin, so to speak, is a disdain for religion. I'm going to guess this is not a prevalent attitude among those who show up for Yom Kippur, but perhaps it still whispers in a few ears. Isn't the whole thing just some kind of a con? Isn't it all just made up to dupe the naive, and amass resources for a priestly cast? I grew up in the 80s, the heyday of the Televangelist. I know there is truth to this critique, and a long list of religious fundraisers who have not placed their gains in the service of the Lord.

Closer to home, I can think of at least three headwinds faced by conversations about money and Jewish life.

The first is the antisemitic stereotype of Jews as obsessed with nothing but money. This doesn't particularly concern me as a reality. I know we are no more or less pecunious than any other Race of Man, but I wonder if the fear of being seen as such sometimes leads to overcompensation—or under compensation!

The Money Sermon continues

Of more relevance to me is the reality that Jewish life can, indeed, be very expensive. I will take my own family as a case study. We send our son to Day School, where our daughter will follow, have to apply for additional financial aid so they can go to Jewish summer camp, and rely on the fact that synagogue membership is a perk of my job to round out the picture. And I'm the rabbi! How many others are simply priced out of such participation? How is this reality compounded by our communal tendency to underestimate poverty in our own midst, and therefore the need to address it.

Finally, here's the issue I think might be most significant. Given all of the other claims on our wallet, and what I see as a pervasive ambivalence to really "dig in" to the soil of our Jewish identities, how many of us question whether or not Jewish communal life is as worthy of our funds as other causes and opportunities?

We see, again, that the question of materiality, is really an inquiry into what matters.

How do I respond to this? How to answer the question of why I think Jewish communal life matters, while simultaneously trying to avoid creating the impression that you've stumbled on to NEPM during a pledge-drive (with apologies to JCA-member Martin Miller.)

I think, firstly, it's important to stress that we remain absolutely a non-profit organization—no Televangelists or Rolex-wearing rabbis here—thoroughly in the service of the virtues and ideals toward which we aspire.

I don't know a better way to characterize these aspirations than to invoke, with great sadness, the memory of our friend Jacob Speaks, may the legacy of the righteous be for a blessing. From an occasional visitor to our community, specifically at these High Holidays, Jacob emerged in the past two years, before his shocking and untimely death, as a leader of the JCA. He gifted us with the language of non-exclusion—the idea that it is wrong to speak of disability "inclusion" because it suggests that exclusion has already been allowed to prevail. He taught us the principle of "universal design", proactively considering our physical and spiritual commons with an eye towards maximizing access and minimizing barriers. We have a lot still to do in this regard. I say this from my perch on the inaccessible bimah. But we work on, in his name, recognizing that as much as anywhere else in our society a synagogue community has the responsibility to advocate for seeing the image of God in all people. And we will continue to educate and improve, to the utmost extent that we can…afford it.

But aspirations such as this emerge out of something simpler: the regular day-by-day existence of a synagogue community. While I would love to continue to highlight our virtuous and exceptional campaigns, I also want to stress that it is okay to want to be Jewish, and be sustained by Jewish community, for any number of reasons, or for no particularly good reason at all.

The Money Sermon continues

Over a decade ago, I wrote an article on the topic of "Jewish authenticity." I still stand by the contents of this piece, which is either an indication of prophecy or monomania. Borrowing the phrase "dense particularity" from a literary critic who had used it to describe pre-and-early modern environments in which Jewish communal life was still "thick" enough to be a primary font of meaning and identity, I suggested the modern synagogue community was "an artificial ecosystem where, even in the face of the rapid loss of habitat, the dense particularity of Jewish life could be maintained."

"As Jews of the early-21st century," I wrote, "we carry our heritage in shards, whether we call them spiritual, religious, secular, traditional, or personal. The synagogue community, as I understand it, is where we give ourselves the latitude to experiment with fusing these pieces into a densely particular Judaism of our own."

What I want to suggest, today, maybe more than anything else, is that the dynamics of Jewish communal funding, in fact, present us with an index of our ambivalence towards the claims of Jewish life. I believe this ambivalence is historically conditioned, and originates in the terms of Jewish emancipation, and assimilation into the modern world, owing to which we must repeatedly decide whether our Jewishness will be assertive or vestigial.

I want to assure to you, in the absence of any chauvinistic claims to superiority, that it is a great thing to be Jewish, and that Jewish communal life is a remarkably creative force, pulsing with all of these motivations and potentialities, waiting to be given their dense and particular form by our collective efforts. But in order to be real, it must materialize.

If you're worried that this has all been a wind-up to "the big ask", I invite you to relax. There are no pledge cards on your seat-backs. That's not exactly what I've been working towards. We've already done our High Holiday fundraising. Thanks to the efforts of Keren Rhodes, and the generosity of all of you, we have raised, in a relative blink of an eye, ten thousand dollars, in this season, for our Youth and Family programming. Thank you for that.

No, what I wanted to leave you with is the awareness of the fact that the reason we needed this campaign in the first place was because of a hole in our budget.
The JCA has been well-managed in these difficult times, challenging in so many ways and only getting harder, but I also believe we are at a moment when the community itself needs to pay new attention to our financial culture, asking not <u>only</u>"what will it take to balance the budget" but "what will it take to establish the quest for our potential on an enduring foundation?"

All I can do with my words today is extend the invitation to this dialogue, and stress that the beginning of the effort lies in the willingness to talk frankly about money.

The Money Sermon continues

As for whether or not it is a fitting topic for Yom Kippur, let me put it this way:

We read today in Torah about the basis for the most solemn moment in the Jewish year, the first Yom Kippur, when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, in the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary, in order to stand before the Holy One, and express the deepest and most somber concerns of the human heart.

He was able to do this only because a few months earlier a call had gone out to the people saying: "Any of you who are moved to give over some of your stuff and some of your talent so that together we can build a sacred place, come now and join this holy project."

And you know what?

They did it. They did it.

They did it with joy in their hearts, because they knew it meant that wherever they wandered--from the High Mountains to the Happy Valleys-they would have a place to call their home.

Dam
Carolyn Yael Provine ~ Yom Kippur Morning

This month last year I tried to make a life
and for a short time carried in myself
two lives two deaths
my soul and my prayer for another soul,
my prayers for time before our someday-deaths.

The open gates of life look onto death,
all life awaits a death, which feeds a life.

They say this day each year in older times
the high priest stood in the most holy place
and said the name of God,
risking his life.
Such holiness can't always be survived.

What will I do if I die? And I say the Shema
in my mind as I fight my eyes open
lying on the bloody floor
and waiting for the ambulance—

as since the birth of time our mothers knelt
beside the open gates to wait for us,
and prayed that we would not pull them back through
and now, because of them, we live and breathe.

This day each year we bow and beg for life,
but once in every life we must go home.
Therefore let us praise you, now and forever—
halleluyah!

Jonah, Yunus and Our Age of Anxiety
David Mednicoff ~ Yom Kippur Mincha/Neilah

Shana tovah. We all know that the Book of Jonah is a Jewish sacred text of some importance, especially in today's service. And I find it a challenging and useful text. The story isn't always clear. Jonah flees from God because he doesn't want to go to Nineveh and warn the inhabitants of this powerful city that they are in danger if they don't repent. God doesn't let him get away with trying to run from his mission and causes him to be swallowed by a giant fish. Jonah prays to God from inside the fish, gets spat out and then goes to Nineveh and tells them they will be destroyed. Jonah is then angry when the Ninevites take his prophecy seriously, repent sincerely, and are spared through God's mercy.

Why does Jonah run away from his prophetic mission? Why is so upset that his prophecy is perhaps the most successful in Jewish history, even to the point that he wants to die? And, perhaps even more pressing, how could a human live inside a giant fish for three days? This biblical book always vexes me, even after decades of chanting and interpreting it. And I suspect this could be true for you as well.

But do you know the traditional Islamic version of the story? Like the biblical account, Jonah's story, or the story of Yunus, in Arabic, is an important touchstone in Islamic theology about God's mercy. Yunus is one of the few Old Testament figures mentioned in detail in the Qur'an; and the story of Yunus is fleshed out through other sacred Islamic texts. For those of you who may not know much about Islamic exegesis, the Qur'an is a comparatively shorter and less narrative holy book than the Old Testament. It is therefore complemented by what are known as Hadith, sayings or deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammed that were transmitted orally in the early generations after the foundation of Islam. Hadith and the chain of their transmission are therefore very important in Islamic textual tradition, The Quran and the hadith therefore provide additional structure to events and legal measures, somewhat like the Talmud and its commentaries, the *Torah shebeal peh*, do in Judaism.

Anyway, here is a summary of the Islamic story of Yunus, the Arabic equivalent of Jonah. I encourage you to follow along with the Jonah text when I read it later to see the differences. Yunus lived in Nineveh. He was a well-known prophet in his community. Yunus delivered God's message frequently that the Ninevites had strayed in their idolatrous and evil ways and would be punished unless they returned to God. But the Ninevites mocked him. Eventually he became angry. When Yunus heard that God planned to destroy the city in three days, Yunus left, and tried to escape the area by ship. But God caused a storm to hit the ship, because Yunus should have stayed in Nineveh and

continued his prophecies, rather than giving up on the people of his community. Yunus' shipmates drew lots and realized he was the cause of the storm, and threw Yunus overboard, just like in the Biblical version of the story but in a different sequence. Yunus was swallowed by a big fish, prayed inside the fish, and was disgorged, as in our version of the story. There is an added flourish that God's connection to the big fish and Jonah's prayers caused all the fish near the big fish to gather around and praise God themselves. Yunus realized that he had done wrong by not continuing to try to get the Ninevites to repent and returned to the city. While Yunus had been away. God caused the skies over Nineveh to turn red and very threatening. Seing this, the people of Nineveh had made a complete repentance. They then welcomed Yunus back and asked him to stay to teach them how to be closer to God. Yunus resumes living in the city and continues to work with and preach to the Ninevites.

I like this version of the story. By changing the sequence of some of the events from the Biblical version, the Islamic version is more linear. It resolves some of the dilemmas in the text by situating Yunus in Nineveh to begin with, He is angry at the Ninevites' early failures to return to God, not at the fact that he is a prophet or that the city of Nineveh is spared. Yunus' status and accomplishments as a prophet are clearer. His motivations make more sense – he wants to save Nineveh, and feels a sense of belonging to the city. In the sense that the Islamic version shows clear progress, it is a modern story. It is a happy, clean ending for Yunus. He continues his mission and helps the people of his community get closer to God. Gone is the sense of irrationality and anger that the Ninevites are forgiven, and the confusing ending to the story that Jonah is miserable and perplexed after God's act of mercy is no more.

I've said that I appreciate the traditional Islamic version of the story, Jonah 2.0, if you like. At the same time, I believe that the older Jonah 1.0 version that we know remains quite relevant. After all, we live at a moment that is full of uncertainty, and during which it's very difficult to trust in the idea of any linear narrative or progress, which I felt the Rabbi's remarks on the first day of Rosh Hashana on rain and our climate illustrated poignantly. While the Yunus version of the story points towards a lesson that redemption will occur and that people have roots and stability, our present time feels more post-modern or pre-modern if you like. We are buffeted about by forces that we can't control, and we can have no certainty that we will be spared, like the Ninevites. Instead, confusion about what we can and should do in the world, and anger at a God who doesn't seem to order the world as God should, seem to be the order of the day, as Jonah radiates in the Biblical story.

In this regard, I want to highlight two personal reactions I had to rereading the Book of Jonah this year.

Jonah, Yunus and Our Age of Anxiety

First, the past several years as a general matter have really made it easier to appreciate the despair and confusion that I feel come from Jonah in our version of the text. There's my fear of planetary disaster. There's my anger that parts of Europe that my and I'm sure many of your families came from generations ago is experiencing destructive war. I'm frustrated in my professional capacity that the only Arab political system to have transitioned to a democratic order is now headed back towards authoritarianism in Tunisia, and, for that matter, that repressive leaders and governments have gained so much ground globally in the past decade, including here. And then there are all the people who have been sick or died because of COVID and other terrible disease. The frustration with God and general sadness that Jonah conveys are unfortunately all too easy for me to appreciate.

A second reaction I have is not to anything clearly stated in the Book of Jonah or its tone, but that stood out this year to me as an undercurrent. As opposed to Yunus, Jonah is never shown as having a home or a place to call his own. The Book doesn't tell us where Jonah is from, and we only see him either in the middle of the sea in a boat or a big fish, or in Nineveh, which clearly in no way feels like home. In his status throughout the short text that bears his name, Jonah embodies the idea of being a refugee. He has no society that is safe or right to him – he is on the run and doesn't feel accepted. I realized this year that this sense of Jonah as a proto-refugee permeates some of my own discomfort with the book, given that part of my work and teaching are refugee policy. I continue to be discouraged by the number of stateless people in today's world, whether fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine or somewhere else. While I'm grateful to people in this community and elsewhere who do so much to try to help refugees, I'm still struck that Jonah's despair reflects all too clearly that of today's 100 million displaced people.

After reflection, I'm not giving up on the idea that I might feel like Yunus, where I may experience moments of great doubt in my life's work, but I can ultimately hang onto a belief, and see empirical proof, that it is well-grounded. Yet I fear instead that I must share Jonah's anxieties – it's hard to see what extraworldly justice looks like or means. And the best I might do is to try to understand and see great sources of compassion and change around me, even when I am buffeted about by the world's literal and metaphorical storms. Perhaps having to hold onto Jonah's traumatic view of life is one of the reasons that the opportunity and hope that Yom Kippur provides through the concept of *tshuvah,* repentance, return, are so precious and important.

*G'mar Hatimah tova*h to each of you.

Neilah Meditation
Leslie Lorber ~ Yom Kippur Mincha/Neilah

Shana tova. We have just chanted, *Ashrei yoshvei veitecha*. Happy are those who dwell in Your house. Over these past 40 days, we have spoken or sung the words from Psalm 27. In it we voice, *Achat sha'alti*, One thing I ask, One thing I ask, I yearn for, *Shivti b'veit Adonai*, That I may dwell in the house of the Divine, That I may dwell in the house of the Divine all the days of my life.

Shivti shares the same root as *Lashevet*, to sit, to dwell. We ask to sit, to dwell, to reside, so that we may be in the presence of the Divine, the source of all, God. May I take a seat, may I show up, may I be truly present. In sitting we can allow ourselves to be present, to be here, at home in our body, the dwelling within which our spirit resides. We can use our breath to help us to be present, to take a seat within this body, this dwelling of ours. Our breath, *neshemah*, which ties with and feeds our spirit, our soul, our *neshamah*. For just a few minutes, can we leave the mind and its many thoughts and worries? Can we let go of the sense of urgency which has been building throughout the day as we approach the closing of the gates and be here, now, open to whatever arises, without commentary or mental discourse.

To do this, to sit and be present, all we have to do is pay attention, notice, as we breathe. If you are comfortable, allow your eyes to close or let your gaze become unfocused, perhaps falling on a spot, on the floor or on a seat, a few feet in front of you. Let your attention come to the breath. Notice how it feels as the breath enters the body, where you feel air or pressure, and then how it feels as the breath leaves the body. The rise and fall of your chest and belly, the sense of filling and then emptying. No need to force anything, let the breath just naturally come and go while watching and noticing. With each new breath we are renewed with life from the Divine and with each exhalation, we die a little death until the next breath when we are once again renewed with life force, with *chiyut*.

As you continue to follow the breath, notice what might be present in the body, in your dwelling. Is there any tension, any holding, exhaustion, hunger, anticipation, or something else? Where do you feel these states of mind, these sensations, these emotions in the body? Can you let the breath come to those places of discomfort? While these unpleasant sensations are as much a part of living in a body as having pleasant sensations, the breath may offer some ease, some relaxation, some release. Looking inward, allow the breath to bring some opening to any constriction and invite there to be some space in the body, as we imagine taking the breath into our entire body, breathing out to the very edges of the

Neilah Meditation continues

container of our being. Continue to notice, no need to do anything else, no need to judge, to change anything. Just breathing, one breath at a time. [Pause]

Drawing the attention to your head, allow the forehand to relax, any lines in the forehead to become smooth, the eyes to sit lightly in their sockets, the face to relax, the jaw to become loose. Allow any tension in the head to roll downward. Let your neck, upper back, and shoulders fall loose, allowing any tension in your chest or upper torso to roll down through the lower torso, allowing the belly to be soft and the lower back to relax, the hips and upper legs to become loose as tension continues to roll downward. Allow any remaining tension to simply roll down the body, through the lower legs and feet and out into the Earth where it might be absorbed by the ground.

As the tension leaves your body, feel what it is like to be soft, to be free of constriction. Perhaps even the heart may feel open. Allow compassion, *rachamim*, to flow inward, to fill us up and accompany us, as we prepare for the final prayers of this day.

Bringing your attention to the breath if it has wandered, take in one deep breath and slowly open your eyes or allow your focus to become clear, bringing your awareness back to the space in which you are sitting.

Shivti, May I dwell, may I sit and be truly present, as we continue toward the gates. Breathing in life with each new breath.

May All Who Enter Through the Open Gates
Karen Levine ~ Yom Kippur Mincha/Neilah

I have never liked this idea of entering through the open gates,
because it means that what's next is that they will close;

like there is a deadline by which we must shed our regretful selves,
in order to be granted a new beginning.

It feels frantic, like musical chairs,
when the shrinking number of chairs threatens to make you Out.

What if it's a long line at the gates and we just can't get through in time?

What if the old garment sticks to our skin, just as we approach,
and we can't get it off in time?

And for so many around the world,
Really, there are no open gates-
just walls and border patrols and predators and separation.

For all who need to enter through the open gates,
May we help open them!

May we reach our hands,
carefully and bravely across the barbed wire,

and do more than pray,
to open the gates, every day, for all who need to enter through.

Perhaps Even Today
Jena Schwartz ~ Yom Kippur

Perhaps even tomorrow
I will wake after first light
feeling rested and refreshed
without any thoughts pulling
the strings of my heart
tighter and tighter still.

Perhaps even tomorrow
as I wake
my heart will yawn and smile
as I greet myself kindly,
open my eyes and see
my beloved at my side
and not for a moment
take this for granted.

Perhaps even tomorrow
the first words on my lips
will be *thank you*
and no dreams will drag me
backwards tumbling through
the darkness of times and places
long gone like stars.

Perhaps even tomorrow
all the vows I made
will entrap me
in a protective and impenetrable
holding pattern
and I will reach into my pocket
to retrieve the key to the gates
of my own spirit.

Perhaps Even Today continues

Perhaps even tomorrow
Walking across this perilous span of days
will be a sacred chance
to remember the earth
beneath bare feet, the heart
without its fortress, the mind
unencumbered by old rutted-out roads.

Perhaps even tomorrow
all of this will be,
and perhaps the seeds
I water today
will grow into mighty oaks
that will shelter generations to come.

Perhaps even today
I will live
with this much faith.