



High Holidays 5781
2020 Literary Supplement

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Squeezing through the Wire **Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve**

Good evening, friends. *Shana tova. Shabbat shalom.*

As we begin this most unusual High Holiday season, there are two things I want to share with you. The first is a teaching from the Mishnah and the second is a personal story.

There's a section in the Mishnah, the ancient code of Jewish law, dealing with Rosh Hashanah that I've had the opportunity to study with the Lunch and Learn group at least once, if not twice. It talks about the proper way to hear the shofar. Basically, it comes down to this: you are supposed to hear the actual sound, rather than an echo or refraction. The example that is given is one who sounds the shofar in the depths of a pit or a cistern, or some other location in which it's possible the sound will reverberate. The Mishnah says that if a listener hears the actual sound, that's okay, but some kind of echo or refraction, or indirect transmutation, is not. In the same Mishnah, though, it also talks about a person who is walking along outside of a synagogue and happens to hear the sound of a shofar coming through the window. Does this count? Yes, says the Mishnah, if this passerby—this person on the outside of the sanctuary, sets the intention that they really mean to hear it in all its fullness.

Now the personal story.

My wife and children are accomplished roadtrippers. Even occasionally—and as safely as possible—in recent months they've gone out on the road to visit friends and family in various locations. I stay home, more frequently, as the very involved tasks of growing food and caring for livestock, to say nothing of Jews, means I can't get away as often. But at night, before bedtime, we will visit by FaceTime or Zoom, or one other of those technological reverberations we've come to rely on these days to keep us connected. My son, Efraim, and I have developed a game. We pretend, each from his own side, that we are going to jump through the little camera hole at the top of the screen, and try to squirm through the miles of invisible coil to be where the other one is, or at least meet halfway. We will count to three, screw up our faces, and make grunts of great exertion. Then, we'll say things like: "Oh, I almost made it. I was just next door. I could see you through the window. I was going to knock. But I couldn't quite squeeze all the way through." After a few rounds of this, we'll be ready to say goodnight, acknowledging that the intention is there, even if we can't quite work the magic to be inside the sanctuary of each other's company.

My friends, many of us may not hear the shofar this year the way the Mishnah says we should, but instead echoed and reverberating through the ones and zeroes of the digital-sphere. Many of us will not be this year, with the people that we love. But we have to trust what the Mishnah tells us—that even though we are outside the sanctuary—we can still set the intension of our hearts to experience what is available to us in all its fullness. And I trust, my friends, that, whether through the power of our imagination or the force of our longing, we can still meet each other halfway.

RBW

Return

Jena Schwartz

When we say return
let us not return to denial
or the fog of focusing
only on our own desires.
Instead, let us turn
towards something so new
as to be perpetual—
that moment of seeing
the truth so clearly
that nothing will ever be
what it was in the garden,
no matter how we worshipped
its apparent innocence.
Beyond those walls
there was always suffering.
Let us not return to a time
when we could close our eyes,
when we could justify
inaction or shake our heads
in pity on our way to the centers
of commerce and busy-ness
that thrive on numbness.
No. Instead, this year,
in this day and in this season,
let us plunge into the heart
of how achingly connected
we are, how the turning
of this fragile planet
is not under warranty, how
the ladder we've erected
where some will always
have a better view must come down
for good, that we may live
not in illusion but on the grounds
of what is real, tangible, and true.
This waking, this is the return
of soul to body, a re-pairing
so forceful it may hurt, it may jolt
you away from comfort
and consolation, and yes, you might
resist it. Let this moment
be not a test but an opportunity
to come back to what has always been
available to you— depth, feeling,
and facing what is beneath
the quiet surface of things.
Don't turn away.
Return.

President's Address

Eric Weiss

Shana Tova.

With so much going on in the world this was a challenging Rosh Hashanah speech to prepare. We are all straddling the past and future all in the same moment! I think I have found the right approach, and I want you all to know it is my honor to serve in this role during these incredible times.

First, I want to thank our Leadership Team: Rabbi Weiner, Keren Rhodes and Ann Wetherbee for all that they do to keep the JCA going in this challenging time.

Second, I want to thank the Executive Committee and Board of Directors for their support, clarity of thought, opinions (and there are many opinions) and willingness to help guide the JCA through this critical period.

We all know these are unprecedented, complicated and tragic times and we are all longing for the leadership to exist that will help bring us back to normal. Maybe in my own small way I can help fill that gap tonight.

We are all overwhelmed by what has happened to our country, our civil society and our culture and sometimes there are no words to express the overwhelming grief and emotions we all are feeling. Things feel unsettled and fragile and yet they don't. To say things are complex right now is an understatement to say the least.

It took me a while to come up with it, but tonight the theme of my speech is: "I could talk about!"

I could talk about... That this amazingly is our fiftieth year and how our celebrations will now have to wait until we can all be safely together again. But I won't.

I could talk about... Our great Leadership team, Ann Wetherbee, Keren Rhodes and Rabbi Weiner who have been able to do their jobs remotely amidst all of this confusion and how they need our support and nourishment. But I won't.

I could talk about... How the JCA now has its own endowment and it is performing well in these uncertain financial times (mailing to come soon.) But I won't.

I could talk about...How our subcommittees seem to be functioning and getting their work done. But I won't.

I could talk about...How the board and leadership team went through the difficult process of putting together a significantly reduced budget to get us through this year. But I won't.

I could talk about... How we have diligently gained access to over \$100,000 in grants to support us until next June. But I won't.

I could talk about...The fact that our membership has increased and what that means to us. But I won't.

I could talk about...How we have made the JCA more secure and a safer place to be (when it is open.) But I won't.

President's Address continued....

I could talk about... How we now have a building Re-opening Committee working with the executive committee to help develop recommendations on when it is safe to reopen and how to properly hold limited outdoor and b'nai mitvah events. But I won't.

What I will talk about is how important the fabric of the JCA is to us all and how we are together through all of this. In February, nobody thought of Zoom services and meetings and now they are what keep our connections clear and strong. We all want to go back to the way things were, but we all know that is impossible.

What we have is each other, our faith and our belief that things will get better. It has been 6 months since this pandemic started and we all know that this could go on for at least another 6-12 months. We all know in our souls that each of us is an important part of this incredibly resilient place we call the "Jewish Community of Amherst".

Our resiliency as a place of spiritual and societal connection, is critical to us all in this new upside down world. You are part of the JCA for your own deeply personal reasons. To that end the JCA will continue to need your help and support more than ever.

We as a people and a society are being challenged by the pandemic, climate change, systemic racism, antisemitism and our political system in ways never imagined and I, like you, do not expect that to stop any time soon.

I will close by saying we have each other, and we have the JCA to spiritually hold us up. The fabric and community of the JCA is strong and the JCA in this time, like many other significant places in our collective history as a people, will survive and thrive because of our interactions and how we maintain them as we get through this unprecedented time.

From the bottom of my heart I say to all of you: thank you all for being here and thank you for supporting and being part of the JCA!

Shana Tova!

The Amount of Time I'd Need **Jena Schwartz**

The amount of quiet I'd need to write a poem feels unattainable, as if I'd have to somehow reach deep space and even then, the harrowing sounds of earth might echo in my ears. I would hear fathers wailing and sisters grieving, I would hear lovers making love for the first time or the last, I would hear a mother singing the softest lullaby. I'd hear explosions and code reds and so many sirens, I'd hear planes crashing against mountains and the sounds of whales mating, I'd hear a cricket's legs rubbing together, a shimmer of hummingbirds hovering inside the reddest flowers, the first cries and the last breaths, the pleas for justice, the chants, the songs from the fields and the mountains themselves telling all they've witnessed and never told. If I were in that emptiness, listening, maybe then I'd realize that there was no need to travel so far from home. I could've stayed at my kitchen table, with the dog snoring, my daughter's voice on the phone in her room, a deep sigh escaping my own body, a mango silently ripening in a bowl. If I had just sat there long enough, a poem might have found me, slipped in under the door like a love note or a ransom note, demanding nothing in return.

The Pandemic and the Return

Irv Seidman

My name is Irv Seidman. My wife, Linda, and I have been members of the JCA since 1972. I am honored that Rabbi Weiner asked me to reflect on my experience with the pandemic and share those reflections with you.

Linda and I are in our 80's. We know that because of our age and some underlying health conditions, we are at high risk of having a serious illness should we catch Covid-19. Every once in a while, I have a flash of fear that despite all the precautions we take, the virus will catch one of us. We are encouraged by the fact that those in our congregation who have been infected, have survived well.

Many days we just stay home. If we go for a ride to get out of the house, we plan how long we can drive without having to make a pit stop. Our social life is restricted. On Tuesdays, I pack a lunch and meet to talk with a good friend sitting in our lawn chairs six feet apart on the Hadley Common. Once a week I take a walk and talk with another good friend, masks at the ready should we approach other walkers. Linda's long-standing book group meets in a green space, where the four of them wear masks and discuss the book at hand. I maintain three friendships by long regular phone conversations. We share Friday night blessings once a month via Facetime with Richard Cohen and Eliza Gouverneur. What Linda misses most is hugging our son and daughter and our grandchildren. I, feel sad when I read of deaths in our community. By necessity, the ritual ceremonies have become private occasions. Other than writing a note or joining a Zoom shiva, we cannot reach out directly to connect to the families at the time of their loss.

At our age, though, we don't have the same worries as the younger generations. We are retired. Our son and daughter and grandchildren have more challenging concerns. Linda and I met as students at Oberlin College in 1958. We are thankful that we are both alive to be companions to each other during these times. As a poem we read in our service states, "It could be otherwise." While our age makes thoughts of our mortality more prevalent, we realize that we are privileged.

Recently a group of Oberlin College alums gathered via Zoom to discuss the effect of the pandemic on us. We were all in our eighties. Many of us had been active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Kathryn Kirschner, from Brookline Massachusetts, started the discussion. She noted that the pandemic has made it impossible not to take in painful truths about the medical and economic inequities in our country. I assume that, eventually, with considerable additional loss, we will finally manage our response to Covid-19. But we will still face the societal illnesses the pandemic has so glaringly spotlighted.

When we were younger, Linda and I marched to protest. Now my energy is beginning to wane a bit. I am ready to share my thoughts, but my hope for rightful action lies in the younger generations. At 83, I face the fact that the ways of the world are no longer in my generation's hands. With some sadness and some hopefulness, I step aside.

That was the last line of this reflection that I wrote last Monday. And then, last night, after our services, we learned that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg had died. I read that on the wall in her Supreme Court Chambers she had a framed quote from Deuteronomy, "Justice, Justice, you shall pursue."

Before she has been laid to rest, the political fight over who will nominate her successor has begun. Justice is at stake. The question in the air is "What can be done?" In my return, I am searching for the answer to that question and the part I will play.

Tshuva and Hard Choices

Josh Polak

In September, 75 years ago, mere months after his liberation from Bergen Belsen, my grandfather, Jack Polak, walked into Rosh Hashanah services in the grand Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam. He told his family about it this way: Before the war, he took it for granted that he would sit in the back of the temple; since the front rows were reserved for the prominent and wealthy families. But on that day he uncomfortably found himself walking further and further forward... not enough Jews remained to fill the front pews.

What did he feel as he walked up the aisle on that horribly changed Rosh Hashanah? Did the absence of his murdered parents and so many other members of his community create an unbridgeable distance from God? Or did he feel an extra responsibility to uphold the sacred traditions?

What repentance did he seek during the High Holidays of 1945? To which of the choices he made during the years of Nazi terror did his mind turn? Did he think that day of the time six months earlier when, with hunger and illness increasing in the camp, he refused to give a piece of bread to his sister Juul when she asked... his sister who later died of the typhus that also nearly killed him?

Often, on the High Holy days, we understand teshuva as an opportunity to reflect upon and atone for the many ways we have sacrificed important values for unworthy reasons... pettiness, selfishness, thoughtlessness, laziness, or anger. On Yom Kippur we will recite the Ashamnu and Al Het, cataloging the sins and the corrupted states of mind that led us to spurn the values most central to us, and beseech God for forgiveness. But perhaps more importantly, this season offers us an opportunity to atone for the important values we have sacrificed in service of other important values. To seek forgiveness for the choices we made for all the right reasons, and perhaps in the process realize some greater measure of peace.

When I have difficult decisions to make in my life, with my family, at my job, or in my communities, I find it helpful to remember that these decisions are difficult precisely because principles important to me are pitted against one another. I am being forced into a choice between values, each of which is meaningful to me as an individual, to those I care for, and to the greater world. The impossibility of reconciling this tension can paralyze me. Finally making the necessary choice places me at odds with something fundamentally important to me, just as the opposite choice would have done. At best, I can attempt to find a path that best balances these values, but there is no path forward that does not require compromising something significant.

How we weigh competing values is complex. We may choose to lean on societal norms, cultural habits, the lived experience and advice of friends and relatives, and ethical standards to help inform those choices. Some of us may even be good Jews and turn to Torah, prayer, and religious practice for guidance. These are the guideposts and guardrails that help us make rational and moral choices, or at least mitigate the chance of harm from the choices we do make.

But in the past seven months of pandemic, so many of those guideposts went missing... so many of those guardrails slackened. And as a result the choices we have had to make are new, and feel starker. How do we best care for elderly parents... by visiting them or not? How do we support our colleagues and employees that rely upon us, by keeping them safe at home or by continuing to operate and saving their jobs? How do we best provide for the education of our children... safely at home in a remote setting that has no track record of success or in person, thereby risking the health of teacher and student alike? And to what extent do we let the exigencies of responding to the coronavirus subsume the continuing urgent need to pursue environmental and racial justice?

Tshuva and Hard Choices continued...

We have all been forced to make and we continue to make new and bewildering choices. The process of weighing competing values has felt harder and more irreconcilable. And now the coming of the New Year calls on us to pause and reflect on the decisions we have made. To seek tshuva for the ways we responded or failed to respond to challenges we hardly could have imagined at this time last year. And we must do so in a strange, new context... a service similar to what we are familiar with, but in many ways fundamentally changed ... trying to draw strength from a gathering of our community in a virtual space.

As novel as this is, how often in our history have our people faced an upended world, yet carried on and created new meaning in the traditions of the Days of Awe? Think of the Kol Nidrei prayer – the repudiation of false vows – the melody of which now evokes the Jews forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition. Think of the refugees of the Pale of Settlement, and the mixture of consolation and discomfort they must have felt in that first Rosh Hashanah service in the New World.

Or think of my grandfather in September 1945. For many decades in his later life, he spoke publicly and often of his experience of the Holocaust. And he did not shy away from the horrible moral compromises that the Nazis imposed upon him and his fellow survivors. He found ways to bear witness and inspire others not just by speaking about what was done to him, but also about the decisions he made, decisions both noble and not so noble. It became a lifelong calling, one of the ways he moved forward with purpose from all that had been lost and all that had changed, one of the ways he reconciled his having survived, one of the ways he sought tshuva.

There was one other Rosh Hashanah tradition that my grandfather made sure to follow in 1945. He sent a New Year's greeting to a woman he got to know and fell in love with in the camps, my grandmother. He wrote: "We are now at the eve of our Jewish New Year. And according to old Jewish practice, we write a Rosh Hashanah letter to those we love most.... My dear sweetheart, the coming year will be the most important year that anyone can imagine. We will be married very soon, I hope, and have our love witnessed before God.... May Our Good Lord, who up until now saved both of our lives, give us the greatest happiness that a couple can have in the coming year; and may He do the same for many years to come."

With the New Year comes new opportunities for us all to move on from the difficult times and hard choices of the past year and make new choices – new chances to choose love, to pursue justice, to tend to the health of ourselves and our community. To bolster the values that, in the previous year, we sacrificed, whether by neglect, by choice, or by necessity. Last year we made hard choices, and in so doing we got many things right and many things wrong. Let's look forward to striking an even better balance this year.

Growing Through the Loops

Amina Mednicoff-Misra

Around a bend in the path, a few feet off of the raised boardwalk, an ancient, rusty pile of machinery lies in a grassy clearing. A tractor, once a bold orange, that has greyed with time, turning closer to the color of the trees that surround it. Upon further examination, it becomes clear that the trees not only surround the tractor, but are actually growing through it, stemming out of the holes in the framework as if interlocked in a firm handshake with the machine. It's beautiful, a perfect place to stop and think.

For me, the High Holidays mean a chance to slow down and reflect on the year that has passed. I have a lot to think about this year, as it's been the strangest year of my life. In the past 12 months, I've undergone countless transitions. A little under a year ago, I was applying to college, trying to decide where to spend the next four years of my life. At the same time, I was getting into the groove of high school life, a little late maybe, but not too late. I finally felt that trademarked, overwhelming rush of belonging, that sweet strength of knowing who I was and what I wanted to do. Everything was moving so fast, the days whirred by, but I went to bed most nights happy, albeit exhausted.

And then of course, March came, and everything changed. I have been incredibly lucky throughout this pandemic. I have a stable and supportive home, and access to all of the resources necessary to stay healthy, physically and mentally. I haven't lost any friends or relatives to COVID, which I'm extremely thankful for. But that doesn't mean I didn't feel a little cheated, and incredibly jarred, by the virus.

Like many of you, I spent months at home, going outside once or twice a day at best. I continued senior year remotely, but nothing seemed to matter and with nobody to discuss them with, scouring dry textbooks felt unbearable. As the reality set in that I would never attend in-person high school again, I began mourning the untimely end to the parts of my being that felt inseparable from walls and people of the school. I graduated sitting in my living room, imagining my classmates' reactions to the prerecorded snippets. I didn't feel any closure.

As the days went on, each with little to no importance or difference from the last, time seemed to stop. I was frozen, watching the world around me churn, disconnected from everything that mattered, stranded because of my own inability to adapt. I had no idea when the spell would be broken. I woke up every morning hoping that I'd feel like a high school grad, a college freshman, or whatever I am. It never happened. But each morning I did feel a bit happier, a bit more able to face whatever the day entailed.

Now, six months (to the day, last Monday) into living under COVID guidelines, I've gotten the hang of things again. I know how to keep in touch with friends while physically distancing, and I'm really enjoying my remote college classes.

Standing by this old tractor, alone except for the trees sprouting through it, I think I understand what happened. I didn't have some huge revelation. I just grew through the metal loops. It was scary for awhile there, when I didn't know whether I could. But now, I've made it through to the other side, and I'm so proud. We've all come so far, and I know we will all continue to grow in the new year.

Shana Tova.

Unetaneh Tokef
Jena Schwartz

We lend power to the holiness of this day.

By bringing ourselves fully to this moment, humble as dust, knowing that the blank page holds our fate, knowing we must choose our words with courage that would make an angel tremble.

You remember all that is forgotten.

Every crevice we ignored, every injustice we told ourselves was not ours to bear, each slight, each callous thought, each time we remained silent to protect our own interests, each failure to appreciate the gifts of life and of this beautiful world. Who alone and who holding the hands of loved ones, who in fear and who at peace, who by neglect and who by despair, who by rising seas and who by raging storm, who by wildfire and who by toxin, who by addiction and who by despair, who by bullet and who by rage. Who by hatred and who by hubris, who by confinement and who in a cage, who by miscarriage of justice and who by an attempt to better their lives, who shall receive respect and who shall be disparaged, who shall be virtuous and who deceitful, who shall be included and who cast out.

We come from dust, and return to dust.

We stand before you, Holy One, God of Light and Shadow, knowing that you are all and we are nothing, in awe of your power. We are a ripple, you are a wave. We are the leaves, you are the roots. We are the fruits, you are the source. We are but a moment, you are eternal. We pray for your mercy, as you decide who among us shall live.

Hannah's Story
Janis Levy

Each year as I prepare this haftarah, I wonder - why is this story read aloud on Rosh Hashanah? On this day, for some thousands of years and all over the world, we listen to the intimate details of one person's life, and her anguish. Why was this woman, Hannah, chosen by the rabbis so long ago to teach us, or reveal to us, some truth that endures and is universal.

At first glance, Hannah's situation may be considered very particular. She is a pious woman, married to a man, Elkanah, who declares that he loves her more than 10 sons could, but Hannah has not been able to conceive despite trying for many years. She is deeply upset by her situation, as well as being tormented by the other wife, Peninnah, who has given birth. Elkanah tries to console her.

However, weeping and feeling forgotten, Hannah asks God to remember her, and give her a son, with a vow that she will dedicate the child to serve God all the days of his life. The following year, Shmuel/Samuel is born, and he does become a great leader of the Jewish people.

Hannah has been cited by the rabbis, over the centuries, as a model for prayer because, whilst in the tabernacle, she mouthed the words to herself, modestly moving her lips but without sound, and although in great distress retained a sense of devotion and gratitude.

Let us think, for a moment, of today before the Torah service began, when our rabbi and hazzan were leading us so beautifully in prayer. As we responded and glanced up at our screens, we saw each other

Hannah's Story continued...

moving our mouths, sometimes closing our eyes, even swaying, and yet there was no sound. Perhaps, it has taken us these thousands of years to have the opportunity to pray as Hannah did, and to realize that when we are quiet and inward, or muted even, we are indeed praying. And whatever our experience may be as we connect with our Judaism, it remains profoundly personal.

Certainly, no one today thinks we are *shiker*, drunk, when we move our lips without sound - because in our story that is what happened to Hannah. The priest accuses her of drunkenness because of the unique way she is praying. She defends herself by saying, "No. Wine has not touched my lips, I am - *isha ke'shat ruach* - translated by some as "a woman of aggrieved spirit"; or "a woman sore in spirit"; or even simply as "a very unhappy woman".

I would like to suggest, however, a different interpretation of this phrase. I think that it is from these very words, *ke'shat ruach*, that Hannah uses to describe herself, that we can perhaps learn the most. The Hebrew word *ka'she* can mean "difficult or stubborn" and *ruach*, "breath, wind or spirit".

From this we learn that Hannah has not given up. She is struggling, she is suffering, she feels alone with her pain, she is profoundly aware of what she is going through - an awareness we experience with her - perhaps especially so at this time. For me, her choice of the word *ruach* with its movement, energy and life force, when blended with the determination of *ka'she*, conveys great strength, understanding, and will. Hannah recognizes this force in herself, and with compassion for its hardened state at that moment - she acknowledges it at her core, and appreciates it deeply. Above all, she yearns to use it well. And, may it be so for us all.

Shana tova, on the other side of the ocean, over the hills and far away, and across the bridges of our valley - may it be a year of so much better health, peace, and many moments of joy.

"No Direction Home"
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

I have this recurring dream.

It takes a variety of forms, but at its core is always a reunion with some of my friends from High School. In the dream, we are not quite as young as we were when we were kids together, but neither are we quite as old as we have become. In the dream there is a feeling similar to one I've experienced at actual High School reunions, although minus the loud music and awkward conversation. It's that somehow I've returned to a station in my life that I left in body, and have long since buried under mountains of time, but haven't entirely left in spirit; that there are still many aspects of myself locked up in this vanished moment. It feels almost as if I have recovered who I really am, and all of these decades in between then and now have been lived in exile.

I was having one of these dreams only a month or two ago. It was sometime in July, I think. I was sitting around a table packed with these old friends at something like a feast, when, suddenly, it occurred to me: we are sitting too close to each other. And none of us are wearing masks!

I'm surprised it took that long for the new reality that has overtaken our lives since March to reach this inner chamber of my unconscious, to infect some of the deeper reaches of my psyche with the strange imperatives of pandemic-induced social distancing. Maybe for you it took a shorter period of time, or

No Direction Home continued...

maybe it has yet to really penetrate how strange and different things have become. But this is what I want to talk to you about today: about social distancing—about what it means to feel separated, from cherished companionship, yes, but also, more generally, from your familiar, your sense of normalcy, safety, future, maybe even from your deepest sense of who you are. Specifically, I want to examine what it means, when you are not where you would like to be, and don't know exactly when and if you will get back there, to do *tshuva*--the core spiritual concept of these High Holidays--a word that is translated as “repentance” but literally means “return.”

But first, because I'm a rabbi, I want to tell you a story from the Torah. Actually, you've already heard it, so what I really want to do is bring it more clearly to your attention. It's a story from the portion we read today. There are so many ways we can look at this text, reading it through the lens of whichever one of its principle (or unprincipled) characters are rising most strikingly to our eyes at a given encounter. Setting aside the more prominent ones—Abraham, Sarah, Isaac—I find that this year it is Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant and the mother of Ishmael, Abraham's older son, who is calling to me. We read today that she was banished into the wilderness with her young boy, when Sarah, growing anxious for the well-being of her own son, Isaac, began to view Ishmael as a threat to his inheritance. As we read, they went into the wilderness, where they almost died of exposure and thirst. This was actually Hagar's second time in the wilderness, and the two stories have some similarities between them—Sarah's jealousy, Hagar's misery, and the voice of an angel—though in the first, unlike today's, Hagar follows the prompting of the angelic voice back to the homestead of her master; that is, precisely where she had come from.

I want to tell you a thing or two about her name: Hagar. These are just whimsical speculations, with no basis in verifiable etymology, but, nonetheless, pregnant with meaning from a midrashic standpoint. Hagar. I follow two tracks of Semitic word association out of this name. The first is *ha-ger*: the stranger in Hebrew, someone whose presence is conditioned by not being where she is at home; someone who bears, potentially, the mark of exile, alienation, or—why not?--social distancing. Hagar. The other association takes me to the Arabic *hegira*—exodus, or migration, most prominently used to describe Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina—and from there to *hajj* and its Hebrew cognate, *chag*: pilgrimage, sacred journey, a dislocation from familiar circumstances that is neither abject nor miserable, because it is imbued with radiant purpose and direction.

Hagar. The stranger. Someone who is not from here—not where she should be. Hagar. The pilgrim. Someone who gets up from where she is familiar and goes in search of a mountain, a temple, a sanctuary. Depending on how we understand the meaning of her name, we might come to different perceptions of the moment when we find her lost in the desert, crying, only a bow's shot from the dying body of her son, when the angel finds her and...

No, I won't tell you what the angel said, not just yet. You'll have to wait if you don't remember.

It is amazing to me how quickly the term “social distancing” rooted itself into our vocabulary, and its regime took over the ordering of our lives. I can understand if we are still suffering from whiplash or cognitive dissonance over the rapidity of the change. I was in Israel, with the JCA trip, when this all began. I left the US hearing some murmur in the news cycle about a virus emanating from the wet markets of Wuhan that might be a problem. I asked my friends, half-jokingly, if they wouldn't mind worrying about it for me, because my cup was already full. But the airport in Tel Aviv already had a health-screening station set up at the gate, alongside the normal security checkpoints, and every day of our nearly two-week adventure was lived one step ahead of a swelling quarantine order. Returning to

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America, on a redeye flight that smelled of hand-sanitizer and the fall of Saigon, I discovered that my son was no longer going to school, that neither my wife nor I were supposed to report to our physical places of work, and that toilet paper had become a black-market commodity. Colleagues in the field were talking about this thing called Zoom, and I remember, while still jet-lagged, receiving a quick tutorial from a friend about using it for leading services.

And now, several months later, here we are, still at this electric distance from each other, celebrating and grieving from afar, or podding with a few trusted disease vectors, I mean, friends, our faces obscured by a series of increasingly couture masks, and the altered reality worming its way down into the psychical bedrock of recurring dreams.

But I don't perceive “social distancing”, at least metaphorically, as simply a suite of unfortunately controversial protocols meant to flatten the curve of COVID-19. Over this same period of time, we have experienced the advent or intensification of other phenomena that have likewise introduced into our lives a sense of the disjointed, the abnormal, the bizarre, the perilous. Think, first of all, of the economic distress that has ridden shotgun with this health crisis—the loss of financial well-being that, no matter where one stands on the political spectrum, must be acknowledged as a calamity of comparable significance. Then there is this politicization itself—the sad fact that in a moment calling for unity of purpose we are instead, as a nation, hamstrung by viciousness, vituperation, criminal obfuscation and wanton cruelty, as we limp everyday through this partisan wasteland toward a momentous election. Then, emerging only as a new reality to those with the privilege not to have noticed it before, there came the social convulsions following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a burst of tragic hope that continues to reverberate even as it is warped into an orgy of state and mob violence. And finally, as if that weren't already enough, somehow almost lost in all of this swirling mess is the reality of what a watershed year 2020 has already been in the annals of climate change, even before its likely finish as the hottest year in our historical record. I could quote you the facts, figures, and prognostications that regularly chill my blood, talk to you about remarkable heatwaves, fires, storms, melting ice, parts per million and plumes of methane. But to point the issue simply and personally in the direction of social distancing, as it were, the fearful and ominous loss of the normal, I will only invite you to imagine how I felt, a child of the cold North Atlantic, walking into the bay off Cape Cod in August as if I were wading into a tub of lukewarm bathwater.

We hear a lot of talk about “getting back to normal,” once this plague passes, god willing, speedily and in our days. My friends, I'm going to trust you with a thought that troubles me. I'm not sure there is a normal to go back to.

A few years ago, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I gave what was apparently one of my least successful sermons. One of you even had the chutzpah to come and tell me that it wasn't very good. (I won't name names.) I grant that I made the matter more complicated than it needed to be, losing the message in the details. But it was a sound message, and has become only more relevant, unfortunately, so I'm going to try again, but this time I'll do it in one paragraph. Maybe two.

I examined the basis for considering Rosh Hashanah the “birthday of the world,” by comparing our traditions to other Near Eastern creation stories and mythic practices. The Babylonians celebrated their new year as a day on which the order of the world reasserted itself. They replayed the primordial battle between chaos and order by which they understood the world they relied upon to have come into being. They rethroned Marduk, the great sovereign of their world order, slayer of Tiamat, the goddess of watery chaos—just as we tell a story in these times about an all-powerful king sitting on His throne in

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righteous judgment—and this once a year festival gave them a burst of confidence that life as they knew it would go on, no matter how far over the course of the year it had strayed from its foundations. This really is the anthropological basis for our own Near Eastern creation holiday, which we are still celebrating today. And we might understand what “tshuva” is—return--according to this comparison, too. Tshuva is how we realign the world as we know it on its familiar foundation.

Imagine it like this: what if, all of a sudden, we were each of us to take a step through the window of our computer screens—like the game I told you about last night, that I play with my son when one of us is on the road—passing “through the looking glass”, except we would be leaving behind the bizarre world of the jabberwocky for the one on the right side of the mirror—and we found ourselves all of a sudden back in the sanctuary of the JCA—or the social hall if you are more traditional—without masks, at no particular social distance from each other except for the ones dictated by our garden variety human affections and aversions—and, let's say, we were at that part of the beginning of the Torah service when I walk around the sanctuary, and up to the balcony, while everyone is clapping, and singing, and smiling, and chatting, and then when I get back up to the bimah I make that joke about getting old and out-of-breath? God is in his heaven, and all's right with the world! Who knows, in this vision, maybe the earth's carbon cycle has somehow managed to stabilize itself, and there's an executive in the White House with a profound respect for democratic norms.

There are a couple of problems with this vision, of course, the first being that nothing is that simple. An expectation that things will just go back to normal, even though we certainly hope to once again be together in the same space before too long, is an act of wish-fulfillment, a kind of magical thinking. It's like the game I play with my son, a way to make us feel a little better about being far apart. As I have suggested, the great underlying worry of these times, I think, is that we have burned through the normal and our challenge is now to stand on the threshold of the new and dangerous world that is unfolding. But beyond this doom anxiety is the reality that what we took for normalcy was a matter of privilege in the first place, and doesn't deserve the honor of being called by that name, or at least celebrated as a fit throne for a righteous king. Many never had a comfortable “normal” and even those of us who might have felt we did, must realize that it was built on shifting sands, on structural injustice, and on melting permafrost. If we were to “go back” wouldn't we just be reverting to those systems and behaviors that ratify injustice and destruction? How well does this understanding of tshuva—as regression to a status quo--really equip us spiritually to cope with a world that will not, or should not, be so blithely reordered to our specifications?

Here's my second paragraph. The other part of this sermon I gave a few years ago offered a contrast to the Near Eastern image of the god being on his throne and all being right with the world. I talked about how the midrashic tradition tells us that Rosh Hashanah was also the founding date of another sacred place—the mishkan—the portable sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them in the dessert. Moses is said to have finished putting it up for the first time on Rosh Hashanah—the first of Tishrei. We learn that in the middle of this mishkan was a throne, just like any Near Eastern king's, with two cherubim on either side framing the seat. But this throne stood empty, functioning as a focal point to concentrate the mind on the unknown.

There's another meaning to the word tshuva. In addition to repentance or return, it can mean response. In the Jewish tradition, when you have a dilemma about what to do you frame it as a question, and what comes back to you is called a tshuva, a responsum, a sacred answer. From this answer you enhance your understanding of of halacha, the term for Jewish law that literally means the path that is to be walked. This is what Moses did in the mishkan, with the empty space in front of him. In the wilderness,

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enfolded in the provisional safe space of a portable tent, he addressed his questions to the abnormal and unfamiliar, and the tshuva, the response that came back transformed him from a stranger to a pilgrim.

We might hope that doing tshuva in this time will entail ceasing to be a stranger, returning to the homestead of our master. I want to urge us, instead, to experience it as becoming a pilgrim—not “returning” but “responding.” The stranger stands in the midst of a world she no longer understands, that has shifted without her permission. Where she perceives her life as worthless, ebbing away as the sands of the wilderness. Where she is haunted by dreams of her vanished youth. She cries abject tears of heartbreak and fear. It is right to do that for a time, if the burden in our hearts is in need of that expression. But the pilgrim is the stranger after she has stared into the empty space between the cherubim, and seen, not the old king rethroned, but the kindling of a new vision of how she must live in her time, where she must endeavor to go, what she must respond to. She is not lost anymore, though her surroundings remain obscure, but fortified and searching. Not going back but forward, with integrity, into the new normal. Into the no normal.

Hagar didn't leave because she wanted to, but because of “social distancing”—because reality kicked her from the place where she had known temporary comfort. And she would have died in the wilderness had not the angel found her, and...

“Well, Hagar,” he said, “stranger, there is no going back now.
But here is some water to drink.
And here, pilgrim, is a blessing for your journey.”

RBW

**“Kill Your Little Darlings”
Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Day Two**

They say rabbis really only have one or two sermons, which they keep giving over and over again in different forms. This is especially true of me on the High Holidays, particularly day two of Rosh Hashanah when, year after year, we confront this same complicated text: the Akedah. To put it simply: I've long been an apologist for the Akedah, this remarkable narrative incident in which, at God's apparent request, Abraham nearly sacrifices his son, Isaac, in the hill country of Moriah. Since my earliest adulthood, I've never really been interested in the “how could God ask such a thing? How could Abraham do such a thing?” questions that the good liberal people of my social milieu were prone to asking. Of course, these are legitimate questions. If I ever met a man with a long beard and some otherworldly glint in his eyes who told me he would be willing to offer up his child to his god, I would probably run the other way as fast as I could, and then dial 911. But the story here in our Torah has never struck me as dripping with that degree of fanaticism, but rather as a kind of intentional provocation toward an even more troubling point—more troubling because harder to dismiss.

The whole point of provocative stories like this is to push us toward contemplation of the more challenging reaches of human reality. Otherwise, we might just go on assuming we are the kind of unimpeachably righteous people who would never falter before a deep moral or existential challenge—a self-perception which is as much a matter of privilege as anything else. I remember, after the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* came out, about a decade ago, people were horrified to learn that the father of one

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of the young girls who appeared in the movie had offered to sell her to an investigative reporter posing as a child trafficker. I was horrified, too, along with the rest of the civilized world, but I also recall thinking: what? Do we think all poor people in the slums of India should just go and win Who Wants to be a Millionaire, like the hero in that charming fairytale? So I've always looked for more interesting readings of this story, probing it for insights regarding parent-child relationships, and other matters, set against the backdrop of the existential turmoil of human life.

But, interestingly enough, I've never really spent much time wrestling with the more standard “apology” for this story. Invariably, after one of my many tortuous pro-Akedah sermons, someone will come up to me and say: rabbi, don't you know this is just God's way of saying he doesn't want human sacrifice? I've always scoffed at such a simple justification of the moral worth of this tale, preferring my more arcane and esoteric takes. But I've decided this year to take it on, inspired by the fact that I've been reading a new book by an old friend of mine, Professor David Carballo, an archeologist at Boston University. He's an expert on Mesoamerica, and his book is a “deep history” of the fall of the Aztec empire, where the practice of human sacrifice was prevalent—though we should remember that they fell to the Spanish, who were also pretty good at human sacrifice, though, considering themselves more enlightened, they chose to call it “the Inquisition.”

What does it mean to call the Akedah the Torah's polemic against human sacrifice? How does this work exactly? It seems, taking into consideration that God asks Abraham both to do it and not to do it, that the ultimate religious message is that we should be willing to do it, like Abraham was, but, at the same time, refrain from doing it. God seems, in this story, to want it both ways. But why? What is going on here? If God doesn't like it than why does he want Abraham to be ready to do it? What is it that god wants Abraham to retain about the motivation to the practice, even if the practice itself is abolished? What is the nature of the devotion that should be present in a devotee, even though the act itself is to be considered abhorrent from here on in?

I learned a few things related to this topic from my friend's book. Trigger warning: they tend toward the gruesome. The Aztecs, as I mentioned, did a fair amount of human sacrificing. They even had racks of skulls set up in some of their major temples. Much of this practice was related to warfare. In fact, one of the reasons, in addition to their technological inferiority, that they had such trouble on the battlefields with the Spanish was that the Aztecs were prone to trying to capture opposing warriors, in order to bring them back for sacrifice, whereas the Spaniards, practitioners of “total war”, tended just to kill as many people as possible. So human sacrifice was, on the one hand, an extension of combat—a way both of offering victims from the opposing side to the god that you felt was on yours, and, at the same time, striking fear into the hearts of your opponents with the specter of your ritualized ferocity.

But there were also other types of sacrifice, as indicated in the archeological records, including of women and children who had clearly not been taken as opponents on the battlefield. There must, therefore, have been other pretexts and justifications for the practice. It seems, in addition to its military and political applications, it was undertaken out of a sense that it was what the lords and creators of the cosmos required. In some cases, a human might be offered in the course of grand religious ceremony, after being cosseted for a time, drugged, and dressed in ceremonial garb. This was how the practitioners fulfilled their understanding of what was demanded of them by the divine order; the rent due, as it were, on the continuity of human existence. I'm reminded here of an example from a different source, not historical per se, but imaginative. In Gustave Flaubert's very strange historical novel, *Salambo*, set in ancient Carthage, the people of the city, responding to incipient catastrophe, decide that the gods must be propitiated with an offering of their own children—human sacrifice, as an ultimate offering of something incalculably precious, to ward of catastrophe.

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It's clear that the Torah finds the idea of human sacrifice abhorrent, and seems to have particular cultural knowledge of the practice of sacrificing children. We read a few times in Leviticus the text's disgust with the offering of children as fire sacrifices to Moloch, a pagan god of some renown. This seems indication both that it was happening and that the religious visionaries of Torah wanted to stamp it out--one case in which we can all get behind the Torah's tendency to seek the obliteration of other forms of worship, which in other instances gives our modern multicultural sensibilities a little more pause.

But I think, overall, the Torah's attitude toward human sacrifice is slightly more complex. It seems clear, as you read through the sacrificial material it does possess—passages and passages about the offering of domesticated animals—that human sacrifice is not so much abandoned as deferred. There seems to be a conscious identification of the offering with the offerer, indicated most prominently in the act of *smicha*—laying on of hands on the sacrificial animal (coincidentally the same term is used for the ordination of rabbis), as if investing it with the ceremonial personhood of the one who is giving it up; the animal in place of the man. And there is a sense that the Levites and priests who are responsible for the sacrificial precinct are themselves offerings—the Levites given as a wave offering before the Lord, the priests so thinly separated from the animals they slaughter that on one memorable occasion—Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron—they are actually “accidentally” offered up on the altar themselves. The persistence of this current may even inform a somewhat controversial reading of the central story of Christianity—which, of course, emerges out of this same sacrificial tradition—the need for the offering of a human being so necessary for the proper reconciliation of the human place in the divine order that God himself does what he told Abraham not to do. Even to this day, traditional High Holiday liturgies suggest that we read the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah to show god how willing our ancestors were to perform an act of human sacrifice—of child sacrifice—Abraham to offer and Isaac to be offered. It's considered meritorious, at least by humans, even though god didn't ultimately want it, maybe following the thread that you should be able to do it, even if it shouldn't be done.

But why? The simple answer may very well be the right one—the *pshat*—the plain meaning of the text: as a demonstration of loyalty. It's as if god is saying: I don't want you to do this, but I want you to prove to me that you would if I asked you to. This is the basic understanding of the Akedah as a “test”, which is how the story itself invites us to read it, by announcing at the beginning, as if taking us into its confidence, that god is going to test Abraham. Abraham is meant to demonstrate himself to be such a devoted servant of his new god that he would give up even his son, his “only” son, the one that he loves, Isaac, if that's what this god demands. Once he's demonstrated this undying loyalty, like a mafia capo to his don, God feels satisfied enough to be ready to make the larger point that human sacrifice, maybe especially the sacrifice of children, is hereby anathema.

I think it's this very plausible reading of the text that has given us the disturbance I talked about earlier. I can certainly understand people reacting negatively to the whole set up—asking those questions: what kind of a god would demand this? What kind of a man would do this? The feminist critique is strong here—the suggestion that this is all some perverse game of masculinist allegiance, using innocent children as pawns; the recognition that the feminine perspective was entirely absent from this exchange, and the raising up of the classic midrash suggesting Sarah's death, which follows right after this in the narrative of the Torah, was eventuated by the shock and horror she experienced upon learning what her husband had intended to do with their son.

And yet...while I acknowledge and accept this criticism of the story and its premise, and have my own doubts about a god who would demand this kind of savage devotion, I have long sidestepped this critique, as I suggested, and received this story less as one of religious devotion to a sovereign deity and

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more as an existential parable of beholdenness to sovereign reality. Its essence might be rephrased with a dictum that is attributed to William Faulkner, the great novelist: you must be ready to “kill your little darlings.” He meant it in an aesthetic sense. A writer can become so enraptured by a particular sentence or phrase—so ego or emotionally invested in it—that they have trouble recognizing it has no place in the larger work. If they are truly to achieve the larger potentialities of their craft, they have to be prepared to surrender this attachment, thereby reentering the flow of the larger work. Isn't this, in some sense, what God asks of Abraham, only with regard to a being far more valuable than a mere work of art? You love your son with all your heart, God says, but there is more to life than that.

I think this reading is far more palatable knowing that God never really wants Abraham to kill Isaac at all. Otherwise it would be as bloody and reprehensible a tale as you might imagine. But that's never what God wants. Instead, God just wants Abraham to experience the loosening of his grasp, as if it were the type of intense Buddhist meditation that invites the practitioner to envision the death of his loved ones, in order to surrender his little mind for a glimpse of the bigger one. There is some spiritual benefit to understanding that the world and all it contains is far greater than the realm you have encircled with your love. This may sound harsh, but it is true. As a father of small children in an existentially fraught era of the human experience, I wrestle with this truth all of the time, and find some strange solace in a reading of this story that can affirm the struggles of my own heart. But this understanding also lends itself to what is one of my favorite original readings of this text—that it's only after such a revelation of “non-possession” that Abraham can bring himself to unbind Isaac, and let his smothered son become his own man. Maimonides, a thousand years ago, offered a radical reading of the sacrificial tradition of the Torah, suggesting it was never meant to be permanent, but was simply a grossly materialistic rendering of spiritual concepts that the primitive mind was ill-equipped to grasp in any other way. Maybe we can understand the parable of the Akedah as a similar stage in this learning process, as if it is saying: you don't need to kill your children in order to realize that they don't really, at the end of the day, belong to you.

Maybe. Maybe not. The truth is that after this little journey I've taken you on, rehashing the sermon that I always give, in one form or another, I want to tell you that I've come to an additional understanding. To express it, I have to ask one final question, which has seemed, up till now, too obvious to merit the asking: What's so bad about human sacrifice? Why should it be forbidden?

The answer, on the face of it, is straightforward: it is egregious and horrendous ritualized murder. But, going a little deeper, we recall that in Aztec society, as well as Spanish, it rested on the premise of a social order in which one class of people were presumed to be people, and another offerings, contingent lives to be sacrificed for the spiritual and material well being of the privileged. Does this not sound at all familiar? As we sit here in judgment of the practice, can we not look around and see multiple ways in which our own world remains a place where, in this sense, human sacrifice is still practiced on a regular basis, even by us—where the lives of some are demanded for the well-being of others, the many for the few, the future for the present? Where those who are engorged in their own loves and pleasures have trouble looking up, surrendering their own limited well-being—their little darlings--and taking account of their place in this larger picture?

We like to sit in judgment on the Akedah. This allows us to pretend it is not pointing in our direction. But, let's just pretend for a moment that god is smarter than we think, even more moral, and this whole meditation on human sacrifice has been rigged up not to see if Abraham is willing to do it, but to see if he can stop.

May All Who Enter **Jena Schwartz**

May all who enter through the open gates be met with forgiveness. May old wounds heal and future wounds be wrapped in tapestries of light. May peace seep into the cracks that divide us. May the righteous be humbled and the wicked be righted. May we be held in a vast container of love. May the Days of Awe have mercy on all whose hearts are willing to return. May I be ready to walk through the doors tonight to sing and pray. May our path to forgiveness be lined with jewels. May the travelers be watched over and the sick be comforted. May our hunger bring compassion where there was conflict and support where there was suffering, honesty where there was hiding and movement where there was stagnation. May the darkness deepen and give birth to light. May destruction only prepare us to shine more brightly. May we remember who we are and why we are here. May we ask for more than we think we deserve and receive with gratitude what comes into being. May fear be consumed by fire and bitterness dissolve in the void. May sweetness linger on our lips and coat our speech like the honey that will coat the sliced apples we'll share when we emerge.

Kol Nidrei – All the Vows **Jena Schwartz**

All the vows we made
with such good intentions --
where did they go?
Lost to inertia, saturated
by the status quo,
choked by the path
of least resistance
as we fell back on old ways
of being and behaving.

All the vows we made,
sure this time would be different --
what happened?
We look over our shoulders
and cannot identify
where we drifted from conviction
or the precise moment
we decided it was too hard,
too much work,
not enough reward.

All the vows we made
because we wanted,
we told ourselves,
to be better people --
not realizing we were unknowingly
hinging our promises
on getting something in return.

continued...

All the vows we made,
all the resolutions and declarations,
the clean slates and fresh starts,
now sullied and stained
by our lesser selves.

All the vows we made
to change our ways,
to get more involved
or to take a step back,
to pray or study more,
to begin again,
to be more patient, less reactive,
more compassionate, less judgmental --
these wore thin
as the months wore on
and we swore we couldn't handle much
more than simply surviving.

We were wrong.
We were wrong to let our vows
become casualties of fear,
wrong to see ourselves as victims,
wrong to deny the ways
we continued to oppress
each other
and suppress our own inner wisdom
and faith in You.

Oh God, how are you so gracious
as to give us this day,
this chance to atone
for all the vows we have once again broken,
to renew our intention
to represent you rather than leave you,
once again,
weeping?

Taking Off the Mask Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Kol Nidre

I'll start with my anger. Not righteous indignation or impotent political rage but the kind that comes out at loved ones like a volcanic eruption.

I want to tell you a little story about something that happened to me after Rosh Hashanah prayers on the second day of the holiday, just last Sunday. The services had gone well, and I was feeling pleasantly exhausted as I drove home, anticipating the long rest that awaited me on a cool autumnal afternoon. But when I got home, I found that the baby had been restless and skipped her morning nap. She had just gone down to sleep herself, meaning Elise and Efraim couldn't take her with them on their planned excursion. This didn't bode well. They left, and I lay down, and a few minutes later I heard her whimpering. That was as far as sleep went for either of us.

It didn't take much to trigger me when the rest of the family got back, almost as if I were waiting for some pretext to explode. I started shouting, genuinely shouting, about how exhausted I was after days of preparation and all that had come before that. All I had asked for was a few hours to rest. Efraim, who is eight years old, covered his ears and started screaming, like something out of Rain Man. I did what I hadn't done in a while—went into the bathroom, slammed the door behind me, and started throwing little objects around the room. They may have been bath toys, now that I think of it. Then I lay down on the rug, while whatever it was continued to pulse through me. I thought of what I can be like out in the barn when the goats have overmastered me with their stubbornness, how shocked I was the first time by the violence with which I smacked one of them on the flank and pulled her by the collar, after she had run me around the yard for twenty minutes, thinking: for all my good-nature, there is a vein in me capable of abuse. It always starts with animals.

Eventually, my breath settled. I got up slowly, opened the door, and left my sanctum. I was relieved that my wife deigned to receive me as if nothing egregious had happened. I felt saved, like some scurrying creature who manages to stop himself on his journey to the end of a dead tree branch, just before he reaches the snapping point.

We call tonight Kol Nidrei, taking the name from the signature prayer of the evening, the strange Hebreo-Aramaic formula we chanted in a haunting tune, about annulling our vows. But I am equally, if not more so, drawn to the short verse we say, also three times, preceding this more famous passage. I like its simple and plaintive melody, spare and suggestive when compared with the peaks and valleys of Kol Nidrei. I was grateful the Hazzan let me chant it tonight. And I find its content mysterious and compelling. Like Kol Nidrei, it suggests that the first act of a day of atonement must be an “undoing”, a releasing of ourselves from a common sense of obligation and expectation. In Kol Nidrei, we excuse ourselves from the duty to fulfill untenable vows. In this other passage, *B'yeshiva*, we welcome into our midst some entity that, under normal circumstances, we might imagine doesn't belong here.

B'yeshivah shel ma'ala, we chant. In the gathering above, and in the one below. With the knowledge of God and of the human congregation. We give ourselves permission to pray with the *avaryanim*--this last word translated in the Lev Shalem *mahzor* as “those who have transgressed.” It's a very mysterious thing to say, an esoteric statement that begs a lot of teasing out, full of binaries and dichotomies. There is a *yeshiva*—literally a “sitting place”, used colloquially as the word for an academy of Torah learning, but plausibly translated as a “court”--some body with the legalistic authority to sit in judgment; to determine right from wrong. In fact, the verse says there are two of them: one above and one below. We follow this by making reference to *da'at*, knowledge or awareness, both ours and God's. We declare that we have somehow ascertained that it is fitting in the estimation of both these parties for us to do

Taking Off the Mask continued....

something radical. Here we make one final distinction—between *anu*, us, and these *avaryanim*--from the root ayin-vet-resh, crossing over, the same root as 'averah, meaning: sin. This appears to be some group of questionable people who we assume are in our midst tonight, whose presence might not strike us intuitively as being appropriate, as we begin the spiritual motions of this holy day of purity. So we make this special declaration, right at the start, that we know they are here, and that we have it on good authority—though it is ultimately *anu*, we ourselves, who make the determination--that they are welcome to stay.

But who are they? One historical theory, which Josh Polak noted in his wonderful words on Rosh Hashanah, is that *avaryanim* is actually a corruption of a similar sounding word from another language: Iberians. It is therefore read, by some, as an allusion to the Jews of the Spanish Inquisition who converted under duress, and then, perhaps, spent generations as Conversos, crypto-jews, performing the public service of Christianity and eating demonstrative quantities of pork, even as they tended a guttering allegiance in their souls to the faith of their fathers. After so many years of spiritual compromise, those who were eventually reintegrated into overt Jewish community faced a crisis of legitimacy. *B'yeshivah*, in this reading, was an innovation meant to affirm their belonging—albeit as a distinct group of others that we decided, compassionately but with some *noblesse oblige*, to allow into the sacred community in which we are the unimpeachable regulars.

Another reading is available. It isn't based on historical analysis, but rather on drawing out the relationship between *b'yeshiva* and other elements of the Yom Kippur liturgy. It points toward the *avaryanim* as being something equally cryptic, but harder to define as a distinct population. Famously, in the *al khey*t litany, the list of sins we will confess to in just a few moments, we also speak in the first person plural of *anu*. *Al khey*t she'*khatanu*. For the sin we have committed. The question is asked: why should I be joining into a public confession for a sin I didn't commit. The answer generally given is that this is a matter of collective consciousness. Somebody in your *kahal*, your community of responsibility, probably did it. Whatever we may choose to do with our own private words, with these public ones we acknowledge that we are neck deep in the midst of *avaryanim*. It might be anyone—even a valence and a shadow of ourselves; a secret presence, difficult to admit, but, somehow, yearning to be named.

How about despair? Is that a transgression? It certainly feels like one for someone whose professional responsibility is to inspire people, like you are trying to avoid being caught up in a hypocrisy. Rebbe Nahman said it was. “Jews, do not despair!” he commanded. But you got the sense he was speaking to himself as much as anyone else.

In the place where I first served as a congregational rabbi, they had—probably still have—a custom on Yom Kippur of inviting each member of the congregation to write down a personal sin on a slip of paper, and place it anonymously in a basket. These are read at random later in the service, each one by the person who happened to pick it up. Many were predictably middle-class: “I was too hard on myself,” “I drove when I could have used my bicycle.” I appreciated the time somebody read out, “I ogled women on the subway,” because I felt at least the writer was trying to dig a little deeper. Once, as the basket was going around, somebody I consider an everyday sort of guy picked one out, did a kind of doubletake, then said, editorially, “This must be a cry for help.” Then he read it. “I have given up,” it said. I kept a stony face, but I was upset with his editorializing—his sense that he knew what it meant, and why the writer had submitted it. You see, I had written it, the rabbi, scrawled it quickly in my childish handwriting and dropped it in the basket when nobody was looking. It wasn't a cry for help so much as the attempt to pull some kind of safety valve that would enable me to stand before my congregation with a semblance of personal honesty.

Taking Off the Mask continued....

There were specifics at the time. I was in one of the major waves in my life of taking in just how extensive was the human impact on the natural world—how destructive and unsustainable was the underpinning of everything I had taken for satisfaction and meaning—and the burden was so heavy that some days it was all I could do to go through the motions. But this acute episode also played upon tendencies that have colored my character since earliest childhood—depression--a sudden flip to the big picture that renders the little one insignificant—a wind blowing through my life with the voice of Ecclesiastes: “The difference between a person and an animal is nothing. All go to the same place, for all is vanity.” On the one hand, this suggests why and how I became a rabbi, viewing religion false as a blanket reassurance, but invaluable as an arena of meaningful confusion. But, on the other, it explains why sometimes I feel I am standing before you like a mask with no face behind it.

As for my own lusts, they are commonplace, and not worth your time. In any case, I'm not going to tell you about them. There's such a thing as rabbinic TMI. But I do want to tell you about something I saw—a Netflix documentary with which I deeply identified. You can draw your own conclusions.

It was part of a series called (Un)well, that examined a variety of alternative health practices—essential oils, breastmilk for bodybuilding, fasting—exploring each of them with an evenhandedness I'm not sure they all deserved. There was one on tantric healing—the kind of meditative use of erotic energy that originated as a mystical Buddhist tradition of demon-taming. Its abuses in the modern world are predictable, ranging from pornographic cultural appropriation to cultish networks overseen by sexual predators. There was one storyline, though, woven throughout the segment that amazed me, though I was sure, at the beginning, I wouldn't like it. It was about a young woman, with an over-the-top spiritualist persona, who had begun a tantric healing practice in a Mexican town. A burly, bearded, middle-aged peanut seller, from Atlanta, came with his wife to see her, hoping she could help him to unlock his capacity for love. In a session that was physical, and yet clothed and “chaste”, whatever that means, she helped him to explore how imprisoned he was by his disgust for his own body and its appetites, and to discover that the sharing of deep, honest, pleasure is both the hostage and the conqueror of shame.

I haven't been to the mikveh—the ritual bath--all that many times in my life. There are two experiences I can remember clearly. The first was the morning of my wedding day, when I went with a group of men--my brothers, my cousins, my brothers from other mothers--to a spot in the Smoky Mountain National Park for a brief ceremony and then a private dip on my own. Just when I began immersing in the cold, rocky water of the river, suddenly a group of bikers went revving over the bridge above me. I don't know if they saw me or not, or, if they did, what they made of the little naked jew in the mountain stream.

The other time was a year earlier, just before I graduated from rabbinical school. A few friends thought it would be a good idea, for the occasion, to visit a more formal mikveh in suburban Philadelphia, to experience a ritual cleansing on the eve of being invested with spiritual leadership in the Jewish world, at least the Reconstructionist segment of it. I wasn't expecting much from the experience. I tagged along, as I had done earlier in the year when one of these same friends suggested we should celebrate finishing rabbinical school by skydiving.

It was a typical little mikveh, a kind of deep spa pool with a few tiled steps down into its cistern, gathered from rainwater but pleasantly warm to the skin. I disrobed in the dressing room. I no longer had a nose ring by that point, and I didn't have a wedding ring yet, so there was no jewelry to remove. Then I went to the room with the holy pool in it and descended into the water.

Taking Off the Mask continued....

You are supposed to have moments in the mikveh when you are completely immersed, when the water covers every part of you. You have to lift your feet off the ground and float, but without your head breaching the surface. I did this, curling up into a kind of floating fetal position—which I guess is the actual fetal position—floating, I mean, not bunched up on a rug or under the covers, but in a warm fluid that surrounds you and knows every part of your body, not with judgment but with elemental love—because it is there to shelter and sustain you as you grow, before you are pushed out into the world of right and wrong, pride and shame, sinners and saints. That's what I remember thinking at that particular moment, a grown man floating in holy birth water. This water knows me, every part of me—what is above and what is below, mentionables and unmentionables. It knows me even better than I allow myself to be known by others, to say nothing of myself alone.

At the root of atonement is this same yearning to be known. So we begin by granting each other, provisionally, delicately, even anonymously, permission to suspend judgment of the *avaryanim*, the transgressors. It is alright, we say, you creatures of rage, and hopelessness, and desire. It is alright to be here tonight, saints and sinners together, especially if you are the same person.

We are the crypto-Jews we have been waiting for, hiding in the shadows, waiting to kindle, with tantric grace, our laughter in the caverns of darkness. It is alright. I don't know about tomorrow, but tonight it is alright.

Anyhow, it is only by trusting in this possibility, and by virtue of what is above and below, what we show to each other and what is only seen by god, that I have allowed myself to pray with you tonight.

RBW

Stripped **Jena Schwartz**

There is room here.
There is room in this room for you.
By you, I also mean me.
By me, I mean empty belly,
tired body, too many ideas
for one lifetime,
and a refusal to worry about the
crowd. The crowd in my head that
clamors for first place, wants to be
special, the best one,
the one who gets all the gold stars,
as if teshuvah was a sport.
And by room, I mean these four walls,
interrupted though they are
by windows and doors,
white paint and scratched-up
old dark wood just begging
to be stripped down
to its original, inimitable beauty.

Make Room
Jena Schwartz

God said,
make room for me
in your day --
that crow swooping low
as you walk,
the trash heap
next to the turning trees,
a falling-down fence
partitioning
wild from civilized,
a child's question
Mama, what does civilization mean?
Make room for me
is what I heard God say --
broken glass
on pavement,
emergence from caves
of safety and
the effort of survival

Make room --
Don't look too hard
or mistake the moment
you might overlook
for anything but my presence

Many poets have died trying
The ones who wrote
the truth of a battered
and broken world
saw the beauty, too
and knew the difference
between the act and the word
the jester and the gesture
the seamless unfolding
of one season to another

Make room
Make room
Keep your eyes open
and tell me what you see

I Have Done Wrong. What is Next?

Rafi Ash

Good Yontif! My name is Rafi Ash. I am a Junior at Amherst Regional High School and a board member of the JCA's youth group, Chai.

Today is the day of atonement in preparation for our new year, 5781. We follow rituals to cleanse ourselves and make ourselves better. This is the importance of Yom Kippur: we take responsibility for our own actions over the past year, for what we have done wrong, and for what we have not done that we should have.

Many have said that the past year has brought racial reckoning. But it is often said with a "them": "the other America", "the other generation". The racist is anyone except me. Today I pledge to look hard at what I have done to perpetuate racial exclusion and harm. I will ask myself these questions. When have I upheld or done nothing in the face of systems of racial violence and oppression right next to me? When have I used or benefitted from my privilege as a young White cis man from an upper middle class family and chosen to ignore those forms of privilege? When have I become defensive and played a game of oppression olympics, using my religion or sexuality as a shield, saying 'I am oppressed, too', as if that negates situations where I have acted as an oppressor? When have I been an irresponsible ally and made social justice movements about myself? -- as I fear I have just done.

The 12th century Rabbi Maimonides gives us four steps to repentance or Teshuvah:

- We confess our mistakes and we ask forgiveness from those we have wronged.
- We pledge not to make the same mistake again.
- We do everything we can to correct the damage we have done and to prevent further damage.
- When faced with the same situation, we do better.

Today is the day to look at ourselves, at our community--of Jews and of Amherst--at our schools, and at our society to identify the ways we support systems of oppression and exclusion. Then we say "I have done wrong. I have upheld a system I know is wrong. I have not fought as hard as I must. I have been silent when I needed to speak out, and I have spoken when I needed to listen. And tomorrow is our first day to act, to begin to correct the damage and to do better, and ask, "What is next? Where do we go from here? How do I fix what I have done wrong?"

Good Yontif.

A Life Well Lived **Libby Army**

Most mornings I record the daily numbers of covid cases and deaths in the world, the country, Massachusetts, and Hampshire county. I started this on March 20th. I think it began as a ritual as it helped me to grasp the immense tragedy that was unfolding in front of me.

I have attended two funerals and a wake in this season of COVID. They were beautiful but strange and heartbreaking gatherings as how does one stop themselves from embracing the mourners and instead offer condolences from afar.

Over the past 25 years I have watched my neighbor Frank and his wife have a daily cocktail hour on their porch during spring and summer months. Each evening friends and sometimes family members gather together, their laughter echoing down the street in the summer air.

After his wife passed away, I would often stop by while walking my dog, Coco Channel. Frank would pat her head and tell her she was a "good dog." I would listen to his stories, we would talk about the news and he would share his adventures while visiting family members around the country.

As time went on Frank became more frail and had a series of falls. His family intervened and he moved to local care facility close by. I visited him on a few occasions. He was usually lying in his bed, fully clothed and seemed in good spirits. He noted that it was a pretty good place and that boy, the food is good here.

In June a neighbor stopped me on the street and explained that Frank's heart was giving out and it would not be long before he "passed."

Later that week, Coco and I walked by his house on our evening walk. The porch was empty but the marigolds he had planted were still blooming and his American flag was fluttering in the breeze.

I had an urge to somehow comfort him during his final hours. I knew that no visitors were allowed. I worried that he might be alone in his room during his final hours in this world. Oh well I thought, I'll just drive up and sit in the parking lot outside his window.

It was one of those perfect early summer evenings. There was still a glow on the horizon from the setting sun and the air was thick with the smell of fresh cut grass and the sounds of crickets. I pulled into the lot and parked a distance from the building. I was unsure which was his window but noted that one had the shade pulled down with only a faint glow around the edges.

I began to softly sing some songs and chants I had learned a lifetime ago. I envisioned Frank sitting on his porch on such a beautiful evening as this, drinking martinis enjoying the company of loved ones, the tune of Shalom Aleyhem filling my car and spilling out into the dusk.

Come, then, in shalom,
blessing us with shalom,
leaving us with holy shalom,
from deep within us, Majesties,
the blessed Holy one.

A Life Well Lived continued...

The sound of a truck interrupted me. A young man got out, a cell phone in his hand as he slowly walked towards the building. He stopped in front of the middle window, placed the phone to his ear and began talking. The shade slowly lifted. The room was barely lit but I could see the silhouette of a nurse walking toward the bed and holding up a phone and bringing it up to Frank's ear.

It was time for me to leave. Others were now here to take up the watch and maybe more to come, offering comfort and love from afar.

The next day I was told that Frank had died. A few days later, neighbors gathered six feet apart wearing masks, along both sides of the street and clapped and cheered as the hearse slowly carried Frank's body one more time through his beloved neighborhood where he lived for over 50 years. It was the final chapter of a life well lived.

Facing the Shadow Cailin Reiken

My name is Cailin Reiken. I live in Shutesbury with my husband Rick and my daughters Arcadia and Miranda. I have lived in the Pioneer Valley since 1992 and we have been members of the JCA since 2012.

This pandemic life is hard. Everything takes more time, more energy, more psychic space. I am overwhelmed the majority of the time. I know I'm not the only one who regularly struggles to get enough sleep. I am scared and swimming in uncertainties, big and small.

None of us knows how long this will last. Will the kids go back to school? Will I use my office again? How are we going to see our friends this winter? Can the electoral process possibly function smoothly? What's going to happen to the supreme court? How bad is it going to get?

None of us asked for a pandemic. The enormity of the loss is overwhelming and staggeringly painful. But maybe it has taken a pandemic for us to pay attention to a larger sea change that has been coming for a long time. Perhaps irrevocable changes to the status quo are unavoidable and, some of them at least, long overdue.

Four years ago when our current president was elected I had a strong sense that our world was entering a time when the collective Shadow – those aspects of our identity, history, and infrastructure which we would rather ignore – was coming out into the open. And it was painfully clear that, from my perspective, things were going to get worse before they could get better.

I am a bodyworker and a trauma therapist so I often view things through the lens of psychology and healing. From that perspective, the shadow coming to light can actually be a good thing. I don't say that with Pollyanna-like false optimism. I know there is no guarantee that things will get better. But I do know that there is no hope for transformation without facing and letting go of that which no longer serves us. Old patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving, though they helped us to get to this point in time, must be faced, felt, and let go of in order to move forward with healing and development. This includes the aspects of ourselves that we do not like, those things about ourselves that we have kept hidden from the world and possibly even from our own awareness. This process is easier said than done.

Facing the Shadow continued...

Deep transformation is a grueling, painful, and often terrifying process. It is profoundly uncomfortable to grapple with our unwanted feelings, our old patterns, our shadows. It's messy. It requires being willing to lose everything and to let oneself come apart at the seams. In other words, it gets worse before it gets better. And while we're going through it, we can't tell if it's all worth it. We don't know if we will actually emerge on the other side to something better. It is dark and murky and once we have let go of what we know, we are flying blind. It takes some serious bravery and motivation to step off of the familiar, well charted paths of habit to forge into the wilderness of the New. Most of us will not do it unless we are forced to do so.

For me these concepts about healing are not just theoretical. As I said, I work with trauma survivors. I also am one. I have spent many years doing my own grueling healing work. One of the ways it has been worth it is that I can stay present and open with my clients when they spiral down into profound agony or terror or rage. I am not scared or repulsed by my clients' experience because I have faced so many of my own extreme emotions. We can only help others to face that which we have already faced in ourselves.

But what happens when someone is not able or willing to face their demons? When we don't face the shadow, it gets stronger. Eventually it starts to take over. This can appear as someone hurting others in the way that they were hurt – becoming the perpetrator and continuing the cycles of abuse and violence. It can show up as addiction when someone gets so committed to avoiding their feelings that they give their vitality over to that which keeps them numb. And when a whole nation or an entire species refuses to embrace its shadow, it seems to me that it starts to look a lot like our world today. In the past four years the deeply and systemically repressed secrets of our world have been coming out in ways that fewer and fewer people are able or willing to ignore. And with the arrival of Covid-19, this simmering hot mess of shadow and denial has been stuck in a socially isolated pressure cooker with the heat on high. Truly, any hopes for holding on to the status quo are gone. We are in a critical time when humanity has the choice to either take a hard look at itself and decide to find a new way or continue, at our great peril, to ignore the shadow in the interest of holding on to the ever thinning veneer of comfort.

So it is time for some honest self-reflection. The high holidays are one of the times of year when we are asked to take this kind of stark look inside and to sit in the discomfort of what we find. But I suspect that the kind of transformation that is necessary will require more than 10 days of introspection and a day-long fast. And it is going to take more wisdom than any one prophet or rabbi or leader or activist can access on their own. This is going to require all of us to step up and take responsibility for finding the solutions. There is no free ride here. Every single one of us needs to bring our unique and precious piece of the map in order to find our way out of this. I hope that enough of us will do the deep work so that we can stay present and awake and help one another to face what is coming.

In the meanwhile, we still need to go about our daily lives. How do we maintain enough spiritual, emotional and mental resources and honest motivation to make these super hard changes when it feels like all available energy is used up just getting through the tasks of each day? I think we are all still finding those answers and they change day to day. Tomorrow I will get out of bed and go for a bike ride. I will breathe deeply and try to inhabit my body. I will go to therapy and ask myself the hard questions. I will make space to shake and cry and laugh. I will meditate and pray to be a pure and clear channel for divine will. I will look for ways to help where I can. I will do my best to be a loving and compassionate parent and spouse and therapist and friend. I will wear my mask if I go out, but I will also try to reveal myself with greater honesty and vulnerability to the people I am with. And when I feel overwhelmed, overstimulated, and scared of what disasters will come next, I will turn inward to listen to my own sources of wisdom and I will listen to the wisdom offered by others. I will know that although it is scary out here in the unmapped territory of the New, I am not alone.

HaMakom
Jena Schwartz

This unnamed place.
this unmarked map.
No device will tell us
where to turn
or when we've arrived.
We ask how we will know
we are there,
and the answer lies
in the question itself.
The answer, like the place,
is hidden in plain sight:
There is no there.

As long as we are searching,
we will search.
As long as we are wandering,
we will wander.
But the moment we stop,
the moment we pause,
the moment we set down
our heavy load,
look to the sky --
esa enai --

it is then we will find the place
we've been looking for,
longing for,
yearning for,
is here and here alone,
in the moment
when we finally rest,
weary from the journey,
so very ready to be home.

Putting On the Mask **Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Yom Kippur**

Though I've been to a few costume parties in my time, I've never really given them my all. I have trouble making that leap--committing to the role. There always seems to be a piece of me lagging behind saying: I don't know if I can quite summon up the energy to pull this off. That generally turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. My costumes have usually just been some hodgepodge of whatever comes to hand. Once I went to a Halloween party in a pair of angel's wings and a leather biker cap, and you've probably seen me here on Purim in a threadbare three-piece thriftshop suit and set of plush moose-antlers. People ask me what I am and I say: "I don't know. A flea-bitten Bullwinkle? A Jew with horns? Why don't you figure it out for me?"

But I have known some people who revel in working the magic, who cherish the opportunity to inhabit a fantasy self, and click into character as soon as they put on the first article of their costume. It's as if the transformation releases a flow of pent up creative energy, or gives shape to compelling aspects of the self that seldom find free expression in day-to-day life.

I like the idea even if I seldom succeed in the practice. As a sophomore in high school, I was a roving bit player in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I played townspeople number five, a guard in the duke's entourage, a friar, but not the one you're thinking of, and, maybe most fun of all, a guest at Capulet's masked ball, where the lovers meet. It's this image that sticks in my mind—a masked Elizabethan ball of palm and pantomime, a multitude moving in clockwork precision on the dance floor, nobody really sure who anybody else is—friend or foe? Enemy or lover?

This same sense of masquerade has come to mind, from time-to-time, in the era of COVID-19. I'm sure I'm not alone in the experience of having had to guess who I am talking to, when I happen to meet someone I seem to know out in the world. I think I have a pretty good sense of who it is from the hair or the shape of the body, maybe the eyes. But the mask over the mouth, and hopefully the nose, leaves this little margin of uncertainty, and the six-foot pas de deux we weave around each other adds that touch of choreography, as if we are both engaged in the same elaborate set dance.

Only, there's nothing frivolous about it. It's less an Elizabethan caper than a page out of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", though the burden of that ghost story is an aristocracy's futile attempt to evade a galloping plague in a sealed off ballroom, and the purpose of our masking is, to the contrary, to flatten the curve. Though, of course, it hasn't been that simple. As these little strips of cloth, looped around the ear or tied to the back of the head, have become an ever-present element of our attire, something to remember, along with wallet, keys, and phone, if you leave the house—something to slip on quickly when you catch sight of another body coming up your front walkway—they have also become the focal point of an intense social dilemma. The battle lines have been drawn between those who understand them as a means of mitigating contagion—an act of public service—and those who see them as a restriction of freedom to do whatever the hell you want, even infect and die—or, as a political liability.

The implications of masking have transcended the ambience of the costume party and become a matter of grave moral concern. This is what makes them a fitting topic for a Yom Kippur sermon.

It's funny, though, that the last holiday we celebrated together in the same physical space was Purim, just at the beginning of March. Right after that, things got serious and we closed the building. You might think conversations about masks would be a more fitting topic for that day—if we were intended to be sober enough on Purim to give and receive any kind of wisdom. That's our carnival day, and its

Putting on the Mask continued...

salient emotion is giddiness. The wildness of early spring, at least theoretically, takes hold of blood made sluggish by winter. We celebrate the onset of this fever by mixing everything up from a moral standpoint. Mordechai and the other guy are interchangeable faces, and one tradition instructs us to become so intoxicated that we can't tell the difference. It seems a far cry from this somber day of self-reflection and ethical stock-taking. As one rabbi put it: "The days of Purim are days of feasting and gladness, whereas Yom Kippur is a day of fasting and the dread of judgment, a day of repentance and penetrating reckoning of the soul."

And yet, if you study midrashic literature, you find it contains a recurring riddle: how is Yom Kippur like Purim? The first, and, after you think of it, most obvious answer lies in the similarity of their names. Kippur. Purim. This is a phonemic coincidence, with no etymological implications. Kippur is from *kapharah*, purgation or cleansing, hearkening to the fundamental purification of the Holy of Holies in which this holiday began. This is what we read about in Torah today, the ceremony God instructs Aaron, the high priest, to perform in the *mishkan*, which later became the basis for the more elaborate service in the Temple, which we will reenact this afternoon. The *pur* of *purim*, on the other hand, is a noun meaning "lot", as in "casting lots", the game of chance by which the guy I'm not going to mention determined the date on which he would oversee the murder of all the Jews in the Persian Empire, may god save us.

But the rabbinic mind finds meaning in this coincidence of sound, first in a play on words. A fuller name for today's holiday is Yom Kippurim—the day of purgations—which can also be read as Yom k'Purim: a day that is like Purim. Having made the word association, the task becomes to flesh out the connection, which proves not to be as difficult as we thought. On both days, a fate is decreed—one by lots before the throne of Ahashverosh, emperor of Persia, and the other, regarding our own well-being in the new year, before the heavenly throne of the king of kings. And in both cases, we hold out hope for a reversal of evil decrees, through proper appeal to the sovereign.

This is where things get really interesting. In essence, both stories hinge on an encounter between an emissary of the people and a ruler holding sway over the power of life and death. And guess what? In both situations, this emissary is wearing a costume. The Zohar, the bible of Jewish mysticism, draws out the analogy in detail. "[On] Yom Kippurim, the [High Priest] is clothed in beautiful clothing, clothing of atonement: the golden forehead plate, the flowering turban, the white linen sash, the four white garments from the right side, and the four garments of gold from the left side. [And] at that time, [on Purim, Esther] beautified herself with clothing of forgiveness. That is what is meant by the verse [of the megillah:] 'And Esther put on royal clothing.' And with these garments she entered into the inner sanctum. That is the meaning of the verse: 'She stood in the inner court of the king's house.' And with them 'she found favor in his eyes.'"

Do you remember this part of the story? I know it's been a few months. Mordechai tells Esther of the evil decree and beseeches her to intervene with her husband, Ahashverosh, on behalf of the Jewish people. Knowing it is perilous to enter the throne room before she is summoned, like it is for the high priest to step into the holy of holies, Esther fasts and prays for three days, and then puts on special, resplendent clothing for the occasion. You might think it's just an attractive dress, but the Zohar tells us its more than that: it is a costume of service. Esther, we are told, is herself a high priestess, on a mission of life and death, gathering her face into a mask of special power, with which to catch the conscience of the king.

Putting on the Mask continued...

If you'll bear with me, I'm going to pull out just one more stop in my erudition. Somewhere in my checkered past, I managed to achieve a masters degree in modern Irish literature, and though my focus was primarily on James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, I became quite taken with the work of William Butler Yeats. Though better known as a poet, Yeats was an accomplished, experimental playwright, as well, blending the content of Irish myth and history with the form of Japanese ceremonial drama, particular the Noh theater.

This was high concept, masked ritual, and, in taking it on, Yeats developed a theory of “the mask” itself. As one scholar expressed it, “Yeats's theory is that true identity is aroused in...character and...audience through poetic drama, which, [he] says, is 'the deliberate creation of a great mask.’” Put simply: rather than concealing who we really are, a “great mask” has the potential to make us what we really can be. It does not obscure the common play of human features so much as it gathers them up into a fixed moral or existential expression. This, Yeats felt, was so powerful as to be terrifying.

You can hear it in some of the verses of his poetry. In “Under Ben Bulbin”, describing the wild face of the warrior given over entirely to battle, he writes: “Something drops from eyes long blind/he completes his partial mind.” In his great work, “Easter 1916”, he tells of the “terrible beauty” brought into the world by his acquaintances who gave their lives in the Irish rebellion, while he smoked and laughed in his social club. Here's what he says about them: “Hearts with one purpose alone/through summer and winter seem/enchanted to a stone/to trouble the living stream. The horse that comes from the road,/the rider, the birds that range/from cloud to tumbling cloud,/minute by minute they change...minute by minute they live/the stone's in the midst of all.”

The stone that troubles flowing water...the completion of a partial mind...these are phrases of “the great mask”, the arousal, as Yeats said, of “true identity.” There is no frivolity here. That's not what is at stake. Here is the opposite of what we normally take for personal freedom. Here is commitment to a mortal cause.

I've tried to make mask and costume Torah out of Esther's story before, but it's always come out differently. The moment I've focused on is not this priestly audience before the throne of her husband, but what follows: when he accedes to her request, and comes—with that other guy in tow—to a series of feasts in her palace. I bet you remember this part, too. At the highpoint of his merriment, he says to her: ask me whatever you want and I'll give it to you, even up to half my kingdom. This is the beginning of the great denouement of the story, and it comes through a removal of her mask. I am a Jew, she says. I didn't tell you before, but I have to, now, because this guy over here wants to kill me. It is a clear act of heroism, achieved through the realization of, more or less, the opposite of everything I've been telling you about today. By taking off this element of her costume, she reveals a true, vulnerable human face, at great peril, and, to the relief of her people and her own eternal renown, achieves salvation.

But it wasn't the “great mask” she took off in this moment. It was a partial one—the make-believe face she wore to pretend she wasn't who she was. She never stopped wearing the great one, and, in fact, it was putting it on that made it necessary to take the other one off. When Mordechai came and told her of the plot against the Jews, it was within her power to ignore him, and go about her private business, which, being a queen, must have amounted to a pretty good life. It's possible she could have pulled off pretending not to be a Jew even after her people had been massacred, relying either on secrecy or, if the thing should come out, the affection of her husband to save her life. But, instead, she chose to be a priestess.

Putting on the Mask continued.

If there's one thing we've learned about masks in the past several months, it's that they are not just for costume parties. As a tool of public health, they are a means of bringing some measure of control to the course of a raging pandemic, and as a social symbol that have become an indication that we are devoted to something greater than our own little petulant notion of freedom. And what I've been trying to add today is a sense of what they can mean to us as a moral metaphor. To put on the “great mask” is not a matter of concealing who you are, but of gathering up the frayed and indeterminate aspects of yourself—like we do with the four fringed corners of that prayer costume we call the tallit—into a fierce singularity of expression. It is to summon the strength of character to face mortal challenge with sacred purpose.

And so, we might say that the task of discernment we are seeking to accomplish today is not to “take off our costume and show our real face”--but to determine what “great mask” we are crafting for the dance of the year to come, and whether or not we will have the courage to wear it.

RBW

Trapped in the Belly of Something Gigantic **David Mednicoff**

For many decades, I have had the honor of chanting the Book of Jonah, and the challenge of saying something new and relevant about it each year. Whether because the title character is something of a cypher or the book itself is easily allegorical, I usually find myself able to come up with something. Last year I actually wrote two sets of remarks.

So this year I was all set to bring out my extra interpretation from last year. However, last week, on the second day of Rosh Hashana, during the Rabbi's Dvar Torah, an important, relevant meaning for this book just stared me in the face, kind of the size of a whale, and I had to follow through on it. I'll keep that extra interpretation of Jonah around for at least another year.

This year, it seems to me, the book of Jonah matters because we are all trapped in the belly of the whale (or, more literally in the text, the big fish).

What do I mean by being trapped in the belly of the big fish?

Obviously, the image is very poignant in our current experience of COVID isolation. Like Jonah in the story, we are literally and physically trapped inside of whatever structure surrounds us, cut off from people and the society around us. I was speaking to a colleague this week who just lost her elderly father, and is sitting *shiva*. She was cognizant of how strange *shiva* felt in its quarantined limitations, but also because she has health issues and lives alone. In some ways, she found *shiva* had released her from the very strong borders in which she now feels trapped by herself. She wondered to me how it would be to back to her empty home when she left her family's house. During COVID, stuck in very confined spaces, the barriers to being able to escape and return to a normal life seem daunting, and perhaps even impossible to those of us who have lost loved ones or aspects of our financial security during this time.

Of course, the image of Jonah's being stuck inside the large fish can have just as strong a metaphorical resonance this year. It's not just the literal isolation of COVID, but the sense that is so prevalent and challenging these days that it is difficult or impossible to escape the many big structural challenges around us. Cailin Reiken portrayed this sense very eloquently in her remarks here earlier today.

Trapped in the Belly continued...

Whether it's mitigating the terrible dangers of the pandemic, confronting the dramatic effects of climate change, countering the cynical and selfish politics of power-accumulation and wealth-hoarding within American society or elsewhere, combatting institutionalized racism, safeguarding fundamental rights like voting or women's capacity to make decisions about their own bodies, confronting renewed outbursts of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, trying to protect refugees and other extremely vulnerable people, or something else, most of you are with me today in feeling surrounded by highly tangible structures of injustice that can easily produce a sense of despair or more specifically "surplus powerlessness," to use a term popularized decades ago by my old friend and teacher Michael Lerner.

Like Jonah, we are trapped in the belly of something gigantic, like a whale, unable to escape the inevitability of impassive and unmovable structures that seem to close us in and threaten our hopes for the future.

If this common image from the book of Jonah underscores our current literal and metaphorical predicament of being trapped within what appear to be insurmountable structures, what can we do to escape?

I think the Haftarah suggests two answers. The first is how Jonah gets out of the big fish. What does he do? He offers a prayer. Now I'm not suggesting that the praying *per se* is itself the answer to how to free ourselves from structural constraint; if I were, perhaps I should be switching professions. How Jonah prays is what I want to highlight. Rabbi Feld's commentary in the margins of p. 369 of *Lev Shalem* notes that Jonah's prayer, because it is in the past tense, is a pastiche of old prayers; it isn't original, and, if you read the prayer, it's also not particularly poetic or memorable. Clearly, Jonah was *no* Jena Schwartz.

So what precisely does Jonah do to escape the huge structure that constrains him? He does imperfectly what he knows how to do, as a believing Jew and Prophet, and prays. He prays not in an extraordinary way, but just the best way he can, repeating fragments of other prayers. In other words, Jonah gets out of the big fish not by doing anything heroic or beyond himself, but just by being himself. Popular songs from my generation refer to this as "keep on keeping on," getting through major challenges by doing our best to be and act out our particular and individual selves. This idea of evading a huge force working against us also recalls a scene in the moving and heart-breaking 2019 film "For Sama," in which a young Syrian artist, bride and mother documents her family's life in Aleppo while the Bashar al-Assad regime and others rain bombs and havoc on her city as the Civil War rages. The way Waad al-Kateab copes with the terrible constraint and physical confinement of her life resisting authoritarianism is simply to film; sometimes we also see her laugh or dance. Her manner of "keep on keeping on" by filming her life doesn't actually seem extraordinary, but what she did both helped her and her family escape the Syrian Civil War, and brought her experiences and struggle to much wider global attention, including PBS and Amazon.

This answer that Jonah or Waad gets out of a major structure by sticking to they are and what they can do has some resonance with what we see in self-help and pop psychology columns, like the New York Times' Smarter Living pieces I often read. But I don't think it's an entirely adequate answer to the challenge of overcoming structural constraints. It isn't even an answer that works in the book of Jonah. For, as we know, after Jonah escapes, he remains trapped in the further, more sociological constraint of his prejudice. Specifically, he is frustrated that, because his prophecy was successful, Nineveh will survive as a major city in his world, despite its prior aggression against the biblical state of Northern Israel. So each of us doing our own thing as best we can may help us manage in some ways, but other structures that constrain us remain.

Trapped in the Belly continued...

Yet here is where Nineveh, not Jonah, shows us an additional way forward. The way the city's repentance is described is rather interesting. To be sure, the decision for the city to repent is made by the leader of the society; but the implementation of that repentance happens across all of the varied segments of the city. The ruler himself, people of all classes, and even the city's animals, are part of the repentance. Out of a collective response of varied individuals in a community came successful resistance to the strongest possible structural constraint of all – the established will of the divine force itself.

The significance of the individual responses to the Ninevites' collective act of repentance and their help in overcoming what appeared to be the gigantic structural constraint of God's prophecy of utter destruction connects to something the Rabbi said last night in his dvar torah on one of the logics behind Kol Nidrei and the Yom Kippur process of *tshuvah*. In a teaching that I also remember from my time in Orthodox day school, the Rabbi suggested that one way of understanding the passage just before Yom Kippur that conveys permission to pray with the "*avaryanim*", often translated as "sinners," prior to undertaking Kol Nidrei is that it brings all of us together collectively and lumps up together as a community of transgressors who have transgressed in our own unique and specific ways. As with the Ninevites' *tshuvah*, specifically how we pray on Yom Kippur implies that diverse aspects of who we are and what we do as a community combine to overcome a major structural constraint, in the case the constraint of our sins, past selves and a possible terrible divine judgment against us. Taking these two ideas from the Book of Jonah together, diverse individual effort combined in community purpose allows escape from structural constraint.

One final example of this stays with a story of a big fish but draws on the implicit argument from another sacred text, at least within my family, one of my daughter Amina's favorite childhood movies, the 2011 sleeper hit *Dolphin Tale*. *Dolphin Tale*, based on a true story, shows its audience that it takes the talents of a varied group of individuals, with help from an entire community in Florida, to save the life of, and provide safety to, a dolphin who was injured and lost much of its tail from being trapped accidentally in fishing nets. [And, yes, I know that a dolphin, as well as a whale, is technically a mammal and not a big fish.] The book of Jonah, and its contemporary cetacean cousin, *Dolphin Tale*, help us appreciate that unique individual approaches and capacity, combined with community engagement and determination, can overcome immense structural constraints from saving a city to preserving a fragile life. I say "can overcome" because naturally I wouldn't suggest that there's some formula to eliminate the many ways we feel trapped by big things that seem beyond our control. But at least the Ninevites' *tshuvah* and salvation allows for some hope.

In that regard, I've been inspired by the JCA this year as a community that has harnessed diverse individual good will and talent to broader collective purposes of overcoming major constraints, whether this has been the constraints of feeling connected in spiritual community, of finding ways to support the Black Lives Matter movement or other issues of social justice, or of bringing in care and compassion despite the isolation of COVID. I've been grateful to the Rabbi and other lay leaders for all that you have done to help us feel free of the constraint of being cut off from human contact and ethical purpose during COVID. Let's think of what we can do with our diverse individual abilities to work against other structural constraints when we are back together and the pandemic is behind us.

Shana Tovah; a good year that can free us all from our structural constraints!

Forgive Yourself for Each Time

Jena Schwartz

For each time the words flew out of your mouth and you wished you could unsay them.

For each time you remained silent, only to wonder why you swallowed knives.

For each time you searched for but couldn't find the perfect thing to say, and so you just sat with her, put your hand over his, kept company that which could not be consoled.

For each time your kids proved wiser than you.

For each time you hung up the phone and immediately wanted to call back to say, "I love you."

For each time you were sure you'd ruined things up for good. For each time you learned to forgive yourself. For each time you spoke your heart with no way of knowing how it would be received -- if at all. For each time you felt the ache of the world in your sinus cavity, your chest cavity, your belly -- all of the hollow places where the body fills with breath, with longing.

Last night, you dreamed of a kitchen in a small apartment. It was elevated, modest in size, painted all white, and brightened by sunlight. A bank of windows overlooked sparkling blue, blue water in the distance. It was such a peaceful space, and you'd lived there once though you couldn't remember when.

Standing there overcome by longing, you didn't know if you could stand the leaving again. But you had to and you did, waking to a new day and a world of bright beauty and impossible pain, determined not to worry about getting it right but instead to be present. To love without interfering, to support without the pretense of saving, and to know that you aren't here to be a saint but a person.

Today, you notice what quickens your pulse. What makes your stomach drop. What gives you a glimmer of hope and what seemed so urgent yesterday that you can simply set aside. You let the bread rise under its damp covering and the child grow towards her own sources of light. You learn, just a little bit, to let things be, thus becoming more available to what actually needs tending.

In the words of Ernest Hemingway, "Go all the way with it. Do not back off. For once, go all the goddamn way with what matters."