



High Holidays 5782  
2021 Literary Supplement  
“ONCE UPON A...”

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## **A Story Before the Big Bang** **Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve**

A couple of weeks ago, just before his ninth birthday, my son, Efraim, came out with one of those remarks of his that I am fond of posting to social media, to let my friends in on the secret that my child has a mind at least as unusual as my own.

“Abba,” he said. “Do you know that if you're going to tell a story that took place before the Big Bang you have to begin it 'Once upon a...' because the time-space continuum didn't exist yet?”

He's what I call the “science officer” in our household, always quick with a random fact about sauropods, or the rings of Saturn, or the engineering of the Burj Khalifa. He sometimes bristles when, as is my wont as a rabbi, I try to bend the insight towards Torah. But I can't help thinking that this witty remark about a story suspended in a volatile dot out of space and time has some bearing on our experience of the High Holidays this year.

I've been joking, myself, to my colleagues that this is the High Holidays of “scotch tape and paperclips”--something we've had to assemble hastily without a clear sense of how exactly they are going to hold together. They are so early this year (or, as I also like to put it, Labor Day is so late!) and, because of the ascendancy of the Delta variant, none of us are where we thought we would be.

So enlighten me, my wise son: how do I tell a story that takes place before the Big Bang—in constricted time and imaginary space? What do these yearly rituals have to offer us as we linger here, waiting for the explosion? What seeds of unfathomable creation are lying compressed in our hearts, yearning to burst out into the void? How do we cope with the tension and the uncertainty, the fear and expectation? What is tshuva without the reassurance of the familiar continuity of space and time?

Abba, I imagine him saying again, but this time infused with a little of the flavor of my rabbinism. Don't make it so difficult. When you tell a story that takes place before the Big Bang, the most important thing is just to open your mouth and begin it:

Once upon a...

## **The High Holy Days** **Hazzan Diana Brewer ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve**

Shana tovah!

This afternoon, my wife asked me, “When did we start calling it High Holy Days?” I wasn’t sure I quite understood the question. First, as I am inclined to do, I went linguistic and semantic, noting that the word “holiday” is just a contraction of “holy day” and that biblically, our holy days are known as z’manim mikra’ei kodesh (literally, times that are called holy).

“No,” she said, “I mean we always just called it High Holidays when I was growing up. Is that a you thing, or a Renewal thing, to call it High Holy Days?”

Most of you know that I came to Jewish life relatively late in the game. Since my involvement in Jewish life, I have always heard “High Holy Days,” as well as “High Holidays.” I noted that we use the language of High Holy Days here at the JCA, so it’s clearly not just in use in the Renewal crowd.

I thought some more, and this is where I landed. The English word “holiday” connotes celebration and joy - a party. Now, nobody can deny that, especially Rosh HaShanah, this period includes celebration. But, it is so much more complex than that. Although the result is that truth does set us free, hardly anyone feels celebratory going into a 10 - 40 day period of soul accounting (depending on whether you start during the month of Elul or any time thereafter), which culminates in a public confession of the myriad ways we may have blown it over the past year. Nobody can dispute, however, the holiness of these days.

Tonight, as we celebrate the birth of Creation itself, and begin our cycle of prayer on behalf of all of humanity, I cannot deny the shadow in my heart at the fact that this sanctuary is not full with your wonderful presence. For better or worse, however, the Jewish people have come to know well that holiness is not contingent upon space.

Therefore, it is my honor to welcome you into the holiness of these days, into the holiness of your homes and hearts, and into the holiness that we will weave across the miles and the broadband highways we travel together.

Shana tovah.

**Is it Enough?**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

Is it enough to catch the calls  
of songbirds — chickadee, cardinal, jay —  
to stop whatever we're doing  
for a moment

to really hear the songs  
that we never imagined might dwindle  
to a devastating silence  
if we didn't act soon enough  
to protect them?

Is it enough to pause for a full breath  
or three before we launch  
into our side of a tiresome tirade  
of right and wrong  
so entrenched  
the chasm between threatens

to consume us equally?

Is it enough to recall the ways  
we stepped right back into the rush  
that leaves little space  
for listening,

our still, small voices  
lost in the roar of competing views  
and discarded vows?

Is it enough to gather now,  
to return again, to turn  
towards something both smaller  
and larger than the moments

when we succumbed to our lesser angels?

## Is it Enough?

Is it enough to stand in the doorway  
again with trembling lips  
and open hands, humbled as we prepare  
to own our shortcomings  
and ask for forgiveness?

Is it enough, oh holy of holies?

Will you look at our faces  
and see beyond, into our hearts?

Will we?

## **What Have We Learned This Year?** **Eric Weiss ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve**

Good evening, I am Eric Weiss the current president of the Jewish Community of Amherst. First, I want to thank the rabbi and all who were involved in getting us to where we are tonight and who will get us through the High Holy Days. It has been a complex year and we have had to make many difficult decisions, not least of which was to again hold these services via zoom in recognition of the potential danger of the Covid-19 delta variant.

I am here to say tonight that the fabric of the JCA is strong; we are doing well despite all circumstances; and we are fiscally sound. I want to thank Rabbi Weiner, the JCA Board of Directors, Ann Wetherbee and Keren Rhodes as well all committees and those who give of themselves (in any way) to the JCA...Thank you ....Thank you...Thank you.....

I have been reflecting on the past year and decided my theme for tonight's speech will be ..."What have we learned this year" .....

We have learned that covid is dangerous and it stinks.....

We have learned a lot about ourselves.....

We have learned that we and our children are resilient....

We have learned that working remotely, is in fact remote....

We have learned quarantining is challenging....

We have learned, like it or not, how to cope with covid.....

We have learned that politics and the science of health don't mix.....

We have learned zoom is great but.....limited.....

We have learned that vaccinations are needed.....

We have learned that masks are necessary.....

We have learned science is important.....

We have learned we want this pandemic to be over (but it is not) ....

We have learned how much we love and need each other .....

We have learned that the JCA is resilient.....

We have learned that the fabric of the JCA is strong.....

We have learned that there are many ways to appreciate our Judaism.....

We have learned we need to be more inclusive.....

Most of all we have learned how much we love and need the JCA.....

Thank you to all of you. It is my honor to be your president. Please continue to support the JCA in the many ways that you do. We need you and your support now more than ever!

Shanah tovah.

**Stay**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Rosh Hashanah Eve**

You might not want to stay here

Stay

You might prefer anywhere, anything  
over the ceaseless flow  
of thoughts

Stay

You might distract yourself  
Aim a thousand ways  
(surely we could name them together,  
heads nodding in recognition)

Stay

You might think  
I was not made for this —  
Or its estranged cousin —  
I don't deserve this

Stay

Your heart might pound  
inside so much stillness  
Your heart might ache  
in its devotion to the body



## Stay

The body that houses you  
The body that thrives  
The body that falters  
The body that filters  
every last bit of living  
into muscle, memory,  
the very marrow  
or your being

Stay

Stay

Stay here if only for one more moment  
one more breath  
each inching you forward  
and not back  
towards the gates  
towards forgiveness  
towards a new beginning

## **Rocks in the Tide**

### **Sophie Sweeting ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

A couple weeks ago, my family and I visited my great aunt and uncle at their beach house in Rhode Island. This is a house I've been going to since before I could walk, and everything about it- down to the salt air smell just feels right, comfortable, loving. We spent long days at the beach, packing lunches and spending hours switching between freezing in the water, getting sunburnt on the sand, and collecting the beautiful rocks that littered the shoreline, right where the waves came crashing down. There would be a split second after each wave, where the sand would clear, and I could see all of those beautiful rocks. My eyes would lock onto one, shimmering under the water, but by the time I reached down to grab it, the tide would pull back in, dragging the rocks over my feet and back out to sea.

As I stood there, grabbing as many rocks as I could, losing twice as many, I thought "this has to be a metaphor for something." How as soon as you register the beauty of the rocks, they are out of reach. Then it hit me, because in this crazy year we've had, what else could anything be a metaphor about? It honestly matches up too perfectly, which had me contemplating whether this was a little bit too cheesy. How things were getting better, and then they weren't. How after everyone in my family got our vaccines, and after a week or two of crossed fingers and bated breath, everything seemed ok again. We wouldn't dare say normal, or all fixed, but this collective breath we had all been holding could be let out. Our shoulders settled, a weight not exactly lifted, but definitely lessened. The first hugs after not being able to even sit next to my friends for a year felt like a miracle. We had followed all the rules, we had been careful and diligent and put our faith in modern medicine and it had paid off. This summer was a beautiful shimmering rock, but as always, the tide comes back in.

When I set out to write this speech, I was planning on talking about reopening. I was writing from the light at the end of the tunnel. I thought I would be up on the bima, trying my best to stand up straight. I even wrote in a joke about how I hadn't been up there since my Bat Mitzvah, but I haven't gotten any taller.

Now nothing is certain, and as much as I am so grateful to be getting to give this speech, it is a little bittersweet that I am once again talking to a computer screen. To me, Rosh Hashanah, is a time of both looking forward, ushering in the new year, but also looking backwards, at the year that is coming to a close.

During COVID, I found it especially hard to look forward, to make any plans. When two weeks off in March slowly turns into a year and a half out of school, it seems silly to try and

pinpoint anything. When all the picnics I planned as an attempt to see friends got rained out, and then suddenly it was below freezing every day, it made it hard to keep making those plans.

Now, as a Senior in highschool, I am being forced to look forward, and for the first time in my life, I have no idea where I will be a year from now. In the midst of the college application process, the future is hazy, and it is terrifying. But out of so many unknowns, one that I keep coming back to is where will I be spending the high holidays next year? When I toured Bates college this summer, I made my mom make the drive out to the only synagogue in a 25 mile radius, a big brick building home to an orthodox synagogue about a 10 minute drive from campus. When I was at Skidmore a few weeks ago, I noticed a poster with a clip art pomegranate on it, advertising Rosh Hashanah services on campus. One of the columns on my giant color-coded college spreadsheet is what percent Jewish the school is. I feel absolutely confident that wherever I am a year from now, I will find somewhere to be on Rosh Hashanah, but that doesn't make the unknown any less terrifying.

As much as I am looking forward, I am also looking back. Trying to figure out, how on earth did I get here? How am I already a senior? I turned 16 last May, at the very beginning of the pandemic. And I turned 17 just a few months ago, which means my entirety of being 16 was during COVID. I really struggled with my 17th birthday. I felt myself dragging my feet, trying to slow everything down. Time was moving on whether I liked it or not, but I just couldn't come to terms with any of it. How could I already be turning 17, when I was never really 16? I was angry, I was upset, I felt like I was being robbed of a whole year of my life. I know that I am not alone in this feeling of loss, this feeling that COVID took far too much time from us, and I am incredibly grateful that that's all it took from me. Even though everyone on the planet was experiencing this loss of time, the fact that COVID took ALL of 16 from me just felt bitterly unfair. And 16 was supposed to be the best year of my life, or so I had been told by John Hughes movies and The Disney Channel.

I used to joke that I peaked in 5th grade. That ever since that year of library books and math games, nothing had been as good, as simple or as pure. And while I stand by the fact that 5th grade was an amazing year, I think I've finally topped it. In my last 6 weeks of Junior year, the only 6 weeks of that year I got to spend in school, instead of hunched over my computer in my increasingly messy room, I think I've topped it.

Sitting awkwardly distanced from my classmates, in cinder-block classrooms that used to feel suffocating, all I could focus on was that for the first time in over a year, I didn't feel so alone. I think the teachers felt it too, because for as much math as we learned in pre-calc,

we also had several cribbage tournaments, and as much chemistry as Mr. Thompson tried to cram into those 6 weeks, he still found time to let us out into the brilliant May sun, where individual work time quickly dissolved into passing a frisbee around and picking dandelions. We were all just relishing in getting to be together, in getting to be in school, staring at a whiteboard instead of a computer screen, turning to talk to the person next to us instead of sitting silently in a break out room.

That bit of school was magical, and the highlight of it for me was the school musical, *The Sound of Music*. I got to assistant stage manage that show, and sitting in a room with 35 actors dressed as nuns, listening intently as our director gave out notes, I was filled with joy and excitement for the first time in what felt like a long time. That's the thing about that incredible, easy kind of happiness, is that you don't realize you were missing it until it's there, making even math class something you look forward to every day.

Summer came far too quickly, and for once, I honestly wished school could just continue on. But summer ended as quickly as it began, as it always does, and now I'm back in school. Math is a little more learning and a lot less cribbage, but I'm still excited for each and every day. So as much as it is dizzying that I am somehow a senior, and as much as the future seems terrifyingly uncertain, I welcome the new year with open arms.

Shana Tova.

## **Mirrors and Windows**

### **Judith Souweine ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

The High Holidays are a time when many of us take a moment to see who is here and who is no longer with us. We recall the holidays with our parents and grandparents and our siblings. In my case it was going to synagogue in suburban LI where all the men wore suits and the women wore fur stoles – sometimes those fox stoles with the little heads that were incredibly intriguing when your interest in the prayers waned. Every year my brothers complained that the wool pants my mom made them wear were itchy. Those of us who are parents recall holidays with our own children, also complaining about the clothes we insisted they wear. My children were lucky enough to grow up in this synagogue and I can picture them up in the balcony with their friends – not necessarily taking in all the wisdom of the services but enjoying the chance to be together – not under the watchful eye of their parents. And we come to the present day and we are delighted if our children and grandchildren can join us at services. But of course we recall the many important people in our lives and our community who are no longer with us. Our Yizkor service on Yom Kippur is designed to keep their memories alive. I have a vivid image of my husband Jonathan sitting at his last Yom Kippur as my grandson was asked by Rabbi Bauer to extinguish the Havdalah candle in the wine at the conclusion of the Yom Kippur service. So I encourage you all to take a moment to reach back and remember the High Holidays gone by and who was there and who you miss.

When the Rabbi asked me to be part of these High Holiday reflections my thoughts went back to a different synagogue service – the memorable bat mitzvah of my younger sister Leonora who is 13 years my junior. I was pregnant with my daughter Jesse and wore a navy blue maternity dress. Perhaps I remember it because she was the first girl in our family to become a bat mitzvah. When I was growing up in the Reform movement girls were not allowed to have a bat mitzvah – so only my 2 brothers did. By the time Leonora came of age the rules had changed. My parents and several of my grandparents were in attendance. Most importantly my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Joshua Goldberg was on the bima with the rabbi of the synagogue. Grandpa Josh was a formidable figure – a Russian immigrant who had come to this country to avoid serving in the Czar's army in the early 1900's. He became a Reform Rabbi, studying with Stephen Wise and also became a chaplain in the US Navy, attaining the rank of Captain. He was an important person in the Navy, serving in the 6th Fleet and also a big figure in the Reform movement. He was a wonderful speaker and his wise words perhaps seemed more special because of his Russian accented English. At this point I will admit that having gone to services for many, many years there are few Rabbinical sermons that I can recall with any detail. But this one

I did. Well it wasn't actually a sermon...it was a benediction. Grandpa had been very solicitous of the synagogue's Rabbi and made clear that he didn't want to take over his pulpit. He asked however that he merely have his permission to give his granddaughter a benediction. We all were quietly laughing when we realized that the benediction was going to be longer than a sermon. I will never forget his hands over her head as he started "Leonora darling" and kept them there for over 15 minutes. Try it - it's pretty hard to keep your hands up that long. Despite our snickering, his message stayed with me all these years. He said to her - There are 2 kinds of glass - there are mirrors and there are windows. You can choose which one to look at. If you look only in the mirror you will be consumed by your own troubles and focus on unimportant matters. You will focus on how you look, how tall you are, what you are wearing, what you don't have to wear and covet. But if you choose to look through the window you will see so much more. You will see the beauty of nature and you will see art. You will see the faces of different people - people of all ages and all nationalities. You will see people who look like you and those who don't. As you look through the window you will see both the joy and suffering of others. If you look through the window you will know that you need to help those who have less than you do. You will know that you need to protect our earth. You will see other people working for justice and peace. And you will join them.

The wisdom of that message has stayed with me through the years - when I am most consumed by sadness or worry I find relief in looking out the window at other people's suffering. Sometimes because it puts my own suffering in perspective. Other times it helps me stop focusing on my own concerns and put my energy into others' worries. Looking out the window always helps me shift my focus from myself to all the things beyond me - whether that be the outdoors, the sky or the town. When I reflect on this past year and a half of the pandemic I know that one of the things that helped me get through the time - besides zoom and outdoor theaters - was my involvement with the Tzedek Initiative of the JCA. As we all know the pandemic coincided with massive upheavals in our country related to race as we confronted the murder of George Floyd as well as the treatment of people of color in our country since our beginnings. By looking through the window more consciously at people of color, incarcerated people and our complicity in racism I used this period to learn, grow, reflect and act. Our Tzedek sub-group that focused on policing and incarceration studied the many ways people of color are treated differently in our criminal justice system and the myriad ways our system of incarceration is cruel and not conducive to people rehabilitating. The disproportionate number of people of color arrested and incarcerated is staggering. The lack of support in prisons for rehabilitation, maintaining contact with their loved ones, skill building or spiritual growth is beyond depressing. Besides becoming more educated on these issues through our many zoom meetings, classes and discussions I formed stronger ties with members of our JCA community. I

learned once again that by studying, discussing and formulating actions my appreciation for others increased and flourished. The connections formed by working together nurtured my intellect, my commitment to justice and to my feeling of belonging in a very special place.

Looking out the window rather than in the mirror – we have that opportunity every day. I encourage you to find the connections with other people, their suffering and their needs. I encourage you to look out the window for the beauty and the uniqueness of our environment and the need to respond to the current challenges to its continuation. For me the High Holidays are always a time of reflection of the past year and a chance to recommit to my ideals. As our world reopens we can continue to cast our gaze through the window...towards the arc of justice.

## **Discovering the Milky Way** **Hal Schneider ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

As I look back on this past year, it is hard for me to believe that we are still mired in the worldwide scourge that is the COVID-19 virus. The magnitude of the impact is obvious to anyone who has been awake for the past 2 years. Like all of us here, I am aware that so many individuals have been deeply affected, in many different ways, by the virus and the ripple effects of its spread. Even beyond COVID, how many other disasters have tested the heart and will of humanity this past year? Incidentally I was distracted while writing this reading about the massive earthquake in Haiti that happened earlier last month (the day I was drafting this)! Since then Afghanistan is reverting into a humanitarian crisis and Ida has washed across Louisiana. We even had a large ship turn sideways in the Suez Canal earlier this year disrupting trade on a global scale. An absolute crazy past year for certain following the upheaval of the previous year.

However, I am not here to despair. Quite the opposite. As I enter the Jewish year 5782 at Rosh Hashanah today and look back at the whirlwind of this past year, even though my heart is heavy with the suffering all around, I find myself being thankful – more than anything else, surprisingly thankful right now.

A little over 4 years ago, I moved out here with my family – my wife, Lili, and 3 amazing children, Miles, Aliya, and Eli. We moved out to the Pioneer Valley to be closer to friends. We moved out to Belchertown from Lowell to be away from city noises, confinement, and stresses to be surrounded by trees, nature, and be part of a community. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, here I am surrounded by community, friends, and family and am overwhelmed with appreciation. But not just for this...

I am thankful for modern technology that is bringing us all together today and has done so more than we could have anticipated over the past couple of years.

I am thankful that my wife's parents chose to move up here from Texas and that we are all able to live under one roof. -And yes, I did say I was thankful for having my in-laws live with me. I'm sure there are a number of folks listening who can't imagine that for themselves, so I am also thankful that I married into a wonderful family whom I enjoy.

I am thankful for modern medicine and overwhelmed by the health care workers who employ it despite such grueling and emotionally trying conditions these days.



Thankful for the ideals of freedom that this country promotes – even if the country still needs a lot of work making sure that it upholds them for all of us who call this nation home...including those who wish to.

Thankful for where I live with its abundance of green and life and to all those striving to preserve our natural surroundings.

Thankful for being employed at a company working alongside amazing coworkers doing meaningful work impacting cancer care.

I am truly thankful for so many aspects of my life, way more than I could possibly list. But as I reflect on this past year, more than anything else, I am thankful for my family. Somehow, amidst all the crazy of this past year, our family became closer. Shuttered into our house, rarely leaving even for groceries, we became one another's best friends, teachers, psychologists, coworkers – the list goes on. As we are now returning to schools and offices, I am thankful for that fleeting moment of time – as stressful as it was.

Without the world being turned upside down, Lili and I would have continued on with our days and schedules only seeing our kids for a few hours a day and weekends. We learned so much from and about our kids during this time. Sure it was a hectic time balancing jobs, teaching, schedules, and everything else that daily life entails. It was not easy and quite frankly I'm not sure we could sustain it forever without breaking, but it has been an experience (despite the reasoning) that I will treasure forever and I believe will fondly be recalled by all of us.

I feel awkwardly selfish in saying so, but I am immensely thankful that despite all the many ways in which this year took wrong turns or even steps backwards, my family, so many of my friends and members of the community have been able to navigate safely a positive path forward.

As we enter this new year, with more uncertainties continuing, hardships still active for many, and the severe risk of health and life still very present, I know I will be taking a much greater appreciation into the new year for the many positives that exist around me and around us all.

This may be a poor analogy, but this past year for me has been akin to discovering the Milky Way in the night sky. Yes, I knew it was there with many other stars and the moon and other celestial objects and enjoyed seeing them all when I had the chance. But just as when one views the night sky in a place of complete darkness, all the stars become so clear

and shine brighter and you realize how truly amazing the night sky is. Up until now I have enjoyed my family and loved them dearly and appreciated the world around me. The darkness of this past year has allowed me to see and appreciate everything around me so much more. For this, I am thankful and will bring a heightened appreciation with me into the new year and beyond. And I wish the same for everyone else.

Shanah tovah and may you all have a year filled with bright stars no matter what darkness comes your way.

**UnetanaH Tokef: Who By Hubris?**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

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 by hubris  
and who by heat wave

Who by flash  
and who by flood

Who by overdose  
and who by stray bullet

who by lack of choices  
and who by denial

Who by procrastination  
and who by plague

Who by homelessness  
and who by callousness

Who by mystery  
and who by mistreatment

Who by self-hatred  
and who by savior complex

## Unetanh Tokef: Who By Hubris?

Who by brutality  
and who by blaze

Who by too little  
and who by too late

Who by tragedy  
and who by trauma

For we are the ink  
before it has fallen  
from the tip of the pen

We are the dust  
of your glorious creations

We forget that you breathe us  
we forget that without you  
we cease to exist

We stand before your  
blank pages

Have mercy on us

## Hannah: Stubborn of Spirit Janis Levy ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One

Today's haftarah was chosen especially for Rosh Hashanah, by the rabbis, millennia ago. It is a deeply personal and unusual narrative, containing intimate details of a woman's life and her anguish, and the thoughts of those around her in ways that are both revealing and moving.

Yearning, hope, despair, jealousy, short-sightedness, misunderstanding, rush to judgement, gratitude, awareness, and love, are each within the layers of this story of Hannah, her family, and a priest of the Temple where Hannah goes to pray. We hear words, both spoken and unspoken.

Hannah has not been able to conceive a child 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. Her husband, Elkanah, tries to console her. In the Temple, 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.

Over the centuries, Hannah has been cited as a model for prayer because, whilst in the tabernacle, she mouthed the words to herself, moving her lips without sound, yet retaining a sense of devotion and gratitude. A familiar sight to us now, perhaps, at this time of zoom.

Yet, today, we are not being accused of drunkenness by our spiritual leaders ... In a profoundly moving way, Hannah defends herself to the priest with words that I spoke about last year. She says: "No - wine has not touched my lips, I am (in her words) - *isha ke'shat ruach* - translated by some as "a woman of aggrieved spirit", or even simply as "a very unhappy woman".

Her way of explaining herself might perhaps be heard differently, especially for us today. The Hebrew word, *ka'she* can mean "difficult or stubborn" and *ruach*, "breath, wind or spirit". Last year, I felt that her choice of the word *ruach* with its movement, energy and life force, when blended with the determination of *ka'she*, conveyed great strength, understanding, and will. I think that even more this year, whatever our yearnings. Hannah recognizes this force (*k'shat ruach*) 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, here we are, after another year of struggle, bewilderment and times of pain, wondering about renewal and healing in our lives and in the world around us. May our spirits stay strong, even stubborn, and like Hannah, may we never truly lose hope.

## **Abierto/Cerrado**

### **Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Day One**

Although my wave of American humanity is known as Generation X, I prefer to think of us as “the kids raised on Sesame Street B.E” -- B.E. in this case standing, not for any sponsoring letters, but “Before Elmo.” Unlike my one-year old daughter, I've never been a fan of that shrill red puppet and the computer-generated scrim zone of the imagination he inhabits. At the age of 48, the grumpy old grouch in the trashcan of my spirit still grouches at the vanguard role he played in the debasement of the show's genius: from the liberatory exultation of “Sing a Song”, the raw confession of “It's Not Easy Being Green”, the lust-for-life that pulses through every bar of “C is for Cookie” to--“La la la la, Elmo's World!”

We were raised on Old Testament Sesame Street, a neighborhood where Cookie's unwholesome appetite could still meet with occasional celebration; where children were deemed capable of wrestling with the paradox that Snuffie was real, even if only Big Bird could see him; where none other than a young Stevie Wonder, by all appearances baked out of his gourd, might show up to enlighten the youth with the untamed funk of his electric keyboard.

I've been thinking recently about an animated segment from those heady days. It was a single installment in the show's perpetual effort to teach us a little Spanish, focusing on a particular pair of opposing words. Though I have since passed through several bouts of fluency in that language, this binary remains, thanks to such memorable exposure, among the most deeply rooted terms in my vocabulary: *abierto/cerrado*.

As I remember it—and I should admit first of all that I haven't been able to corroborate any of this on YouTube—each side of the coin was championed by a different monster, not one of the puppets, but a hairy cartoon blob with limbs and a face. One may have been red, and the other blue, though I can't recall which was which. I do still hear their voices, however, quite distinctly. *Abierto's* was high-pitched, a falsetto that ranged in timbre from coy invitation to mournful plea.

*Abierto?*

*Cerrado* spoke in a low growl, sometimes furious, sometimes exasperated.

*Cerrado!*

As the sketch progressed, they became locked in an increasingly hostile battle of wills, brought to bear on a series of apertures. I remember a doorway suspended in vacant space and a manhole cover. *Abierto* would open it—whatever it was—and *cerrado* would

bang it shut. Abierto would try to sneak it open again, and when cerrado caught on he'd slam it home with an almost vicious degree of force. This was education through conflict—abierto versus cerrado—an aggressive vacillation that, again, I can't imagine making it into anything but the Old Testament volume of the Children's Television Workshop.

Abierto? Cerrado! Abierto? Cerrado! Abierto? Cerrado!

I don't remember which creature wearied first in its quest to dominate the other—who had the last laugh as the segment ended.

Open. Closed. Open. Closed. Open. Closed.

Maybe they're still fighting to this very day.

If you'd asked me a month ago, I would have told you the topic of today's drash was going to be “reopening.” I assumed, in fact, this concept would provide an underlying theme to the entirety of our High Holidays. It was the word on everybody's lips, bespeaking the burgeoning sense that we were due to celebrate the victory of abierto over the long and aggressive cerrado we have endured during this pandemic.

You know me well enough to guess it wouldn't have been some blatantly optimistic affirmation of a glorious and wide open future. I'm still conscious of the trouble besetting us on all sides, the irony, even, that it was only lockdown that prevented a record amount of greenhouse gas being released last year, and that this year we will not be so lucky. I was toying with the idea of playing against the grain by exploring the concept of “reopening a wound.”

But, still, despite all of this shadow, it did seem we had the right to reflect on the meaning of some kind of reemergence into sunlight, rubbing our eyes and taking stock of the horizon like the siblings in that other complex work for children—Hansel and Gretel—when the witch's spell is broken and the music swells.

Each of us may have a unique detail that stands out in our minds as emblematic of this era of lockdown—a particular perception or experience that encapsulates the spiritual burden of the time. It may be a period of our own illness or the loss of a loved one, an economic dislocation, a silver lining, a yearning for something unavailable. For whatever reason, I keep coming back to a phrase that a friend used to describe her own COVID tribulation. It's odd that I'm stuck on this, because what she told me is so far from my own state, riding it out, as I have, in the bosom of my family, with small kids clinging to my body like barnacles to a rusty hull. But she, living alone—physically if not socially isolated--told me, about a year in, that she was suffering from “skin hunger,” a kind of cold fever brought on by prolonged forced abstinence from the meaningful touch of another person; as if the pores of the epidermis were themselves the gateways to the soul, and the cerrado of this

virus were, at its most essential, an atrophying of the nefesh, the embodied self. The long-awaited abierto would therefore be nothing less than the great “reopening” of the sacred flesh itself.

A mentsh trakht un got lakht—goes the Yiddish saying that I didn't learn on a Sesame Street of any vintage. Though we are still on the upswing, the advent of the Delta variant has altered our trajectory, and muted—or, at least, once again diffracted through Zoom—the fanfare we had anticipated accompanying these Days of Awe. The eternal battle of abierto and cerrado rages on, like titans who shake the ground beneath our puny feet with their hurled boulders. All summer, I've heard their clamor at the doorway of this very sanctuary:

Open. Closed. Open. Closed. Open. Closed.

They were going at it, too, in the Torah and Haftarah portions we read today, though, of course, not in Spanish. Hannah, in the prophetic passage, the more beloved of her husband's two wives, is mocked by her counterpart for her barrenness, or, as the text puts it: va'adoni sagar rahma—“for the Lord had closed her womb.” Not unlike “skin hunger”, this causes mounting emotional distress, culminating in her tearful outpouring at the shrine in Shiloh, which the ancient rabbis considered the first recorded act of Jewish prayer. Hagar, in Bereshit, is banished to the wilderness with Ishmael, her son, when Sarah perceives in him a threat to Isaac. Their water gone, Hagar lays the boy under a bush and walks the distance of a bowshot away--because she can no longer bear his suffering--and, like Hannah, begins to cry. Then: vayifkakh elohim et eyneha, vateyreh be'er mayim. “The Lord opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.”

Cerrado. Abierto. Sagar. Pakakh. Closed, like the womb of Hannah.  
Open, like the eyes of Hagar.

These stories bring to consciousness something obvious, but, so far, unspoken: we like “open” better. Abierto is the one who invites in a pleading tone, whereas cerrado growls. “Closedness” is the enemy—the hunger of the skin, the empty womb, the devastating wilderness. We want the pores, the eyes, the sanctuary door unsealed. Really, these are miracle tales, testaments to a fabulous divine “reopening.” Hagar, wailing in the desert, is saved by angelic intervention, and Hannah, praying over her barren body, is rewarded with the child she craves. The womb is opened and the son comes forth. The eyes are opened and the son survives. Barukh hashem; praise be to God.

But you may have noted that God is on both sides--yotser closed u'voreh open. God encourages Abraham to send Hagar away and stops up Hannah's uterus. This gives us



something to think about. Perhaps, as a significant detail in two anecdotes of religious miracle, this is meant to remind the pious that all things come from God, and the favor of God determines how they are apportioned. It is in the moment of prayerful heartbreak that God hears and favors us, responding with the joyful reopening that leaves closure a dim, though perplexing, memory. Maybe. At the very least, to the impious, it may suggest that the actual relationship between open and closed must be something more nuanced than brute opposition, if both of them come from the same source.

There's another way to look at these stories, which, as much as I'm usually not so fond of this dichotomy, I would differentiate as spiritual, rather than religious. We can seek in them, not the faith that our prayers will be answered, but the tao of cerrado-- insight into the spiritual capacities that can arise when one is standing in the uncertain and perilous presence of the closed door. Leaving aside the question of what it will take for God to grant us reopening, we ask, instead: when inhabiting a closed moment in the fabric of existence, what did Hannah do? What did Hagar do? What should I do?

What does Hannah do? She cries, and in her tears finds hidden in her heart the capacity to articulate what she is suffering. This is the spiritual invitation that she offers: the permission to be honest in our frustration, and to speak the terms of our brokenheartedness at all that is closed to us. There is an opening in such passionate expression, even if the prayer for some specific thing goes unanswered; a catharsis in striving to articulate a pain that hasn't had a name, such that speaking of it requires new form, a new service of the spirit, no matter if it strikes the uninitiated as wanton intoxication. In so doing, even the experience of being closed gains a kind of fertility—if not the changing of circumstances, then the rebirth of self in response to them.

The analogue to this message that I hear whispering out of Hagar's story is so subtle, that I first feel the need to remind you about the rules of reading Torah. Traditionally, we are allowed to interpret the same passage in at least four different ways—ranging from a focus on the plain meaning of the text to the plumbing of its deepest secrets—each method occupying a dimension of its own and none of them obviating or discounting the other.

I'm only going to concern myself today with two of these strategies: the pshat—the plain meaning—and the remez—the philosophical or spiritual hint inferred when a text is read as parable.

I bring these tools to bear on what may be, perhaps, the most horrifying moment in our entire Holy Book: the depiction of a mother so imperiled and distraught that she sees no option but to leave her thirsting child to die. I would be ashamed to brush past the plain

meaning of this text, resonant as it is with a suffering we might imagine happens a million times a day in our corrupted world, to the marginalized and the dispossessed. This pshat puts our own inconvenience in perspective, and reminds us that closure is not just a theme for rumination, but an injustice to be remedied. Yet there is also a *remez* here, a hint we might intuit, not from Hagar's destitution, but, rather, from the process of her survival.

It's simply a matter of taking God, at least as a literary character, out of the equation. You might ask: what kind of a cruel brinkman's game is this God playing, waiting for the situation to devolve into absolute misery before intervening? But if we shift our understanding of the role of the divine, from willful arbiter of fate to internal dynamic, then a new possibility arises. It is the moment that Hagar names and owns what she is feeling—saying: I cannot bear this and I need to turn away! I need to close myself in response to this closing, and not continue to wrestle with its futility!--that provides her with the beat, the breath, the space for the vision to emerge of a source of water not previously identified within her narrowed perspective. That is to say, the polar elements of this tale are not miraculously resolved opposites, but intrinsically related. If she does not embrace *cerrado*, then *abierto* never happens.

The common Hebrew word for “opening” is *poteach*. We say in the *Ashrei*: *poteakh et yadekha umasbeah l'khol hay ratzon*. “You open up your hands and satisfy with contentment all that lives.” Or, in the psalms of *Hallel*: *pitkhu li sha'arei tzedek, avo vama odaya*. “Open for me the gates of righteousness, and I will come within them and give thanks.” But in Hagar's story, we have found, instead, *pokeakh*, a sister word that always refers specifically to the operations of the senses. Bearing in mind the importance of understanding this as spiritual rather than physical blindness, we speak of God, in the *Birkhot haShachar* as *pokeakh ivrim*—opening the eyes of those, like Hagar, who falter in their vision. And, unlike *poteakh*, *pokeakh* is not the opposite of “closed”, any more than *systole* is the opposite of *diastole*, or breathing out the opposite of breathing in.

The eyes can be open when the womb is closed, when the skin hungers, when the door is shut. The trick is just to try and resolve a little of the ancient enmity, like Hagar, who lets the misery overtake her just long enough to slacken her bow and find the strength to draw it back again, or when you join in Hannah's prayer, without judgment, subsumed to your pulse and your breath--inhale, hold, and exhale--open close open close open close--waiting for the vision of a well in your wilderness; understanding the truth, in one way or another, that everything comes from God.

We might wish that life were simpler. But, please, take this to heart, in love, from a member of my funkyed up generation: we don't live in Elmo's world.

## Abraham/Cain

### Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Rosh Hashanah Day Two

One of the open secrets of my rabbinate is, no doubt, that I'm a Reconstructionist with a taste for orthodoxy. I don't mean ideologically—I'm thoroughly at home in a branch of Judaism that allows for modern latitude in the interpretation and embodiment of tradition. It comes out, rather, in my preferred style of davenning, and in the way I like to study. Some of you know that I'm a devotee of a podcast platform called YUTorah.org, a purveyor of a mostly centrist Orthodox stable of teachers and topics, run under the auspices of Yeshiva University. It's been my habit over the summer, especially, while performing my nightly, legacy task of washing the family dishes, to tune into the Daf Yomi shiur—review of the daily page of Talmud—offered by a talmid chacham out of Woodmere, NJ. I joke with my wife that, while some seekers may find nourishment in the murmurings of a dulcet guru about breathing the soul one with the universe, my spirit thrills to a booming Judeo-Brooklyn accent rapidly explaining why you may need at least three different vessels to brew a cup of tea on Shabbos.

It's really the halakhic work I enjoy, the precise methodological argumentation that, since they are most beholden to it, is, in my experience, most thoroughly preserved in orthodox dialectic. I tend to care a little less for their parshanut—for the way they interpret and draw meaning from scriptural passages. Here, things get a little too pious for my tastes. The pulsing ambiguity of Torah as literature usually gives way to Torah “as it is supposed to be read.” Hidushim, truly novel, breathtaking, and uninhibited interpretations, are few and far between. The project is more often the effort to establish, for example, the patriarch as paragon, rather than appreciating him as a human being.

Nonetheless, when faced with the prospect of delivering yet another second day Rosh Hashanah drash on the Akedah, the binding of Isaac on the altar by his father Abraham, dusting off this old case-study in family dysfunction for another round of analysis, it occurred to me I might benefit from an alternate—if not entirely fresh—perspective. So, one afternoon in my office at the JCA, I typed “Akedat Yitzchak” into the YUTorah search box, though the trove of material I was anticipating did not materialize till I had amended my criterion to “Akedas Yitskhok.”

One title, in particular, caught my eye, an hour-long lecture, complete with text sheet, by a fresh-faced rabbi out of Toronto named Sammy Bergman, with the provocative, almost lurid title: “Did Isaac Know?” It wasn't just “click-bait.” Though framed with some of the pious normativity I have come to expect, at the heart of the matter was a little more exegetical daring. The young rabbi, who I hope is still gainfully employed by his shul,

chose to experiment with reading against tradition, or, rather, with emphasizing minority opinion against consensus—all of this brought to bear on the question of whether or not Isaac knew what was happening when his father took him to the hill country of Moriah, with only some wood, a knife, a pack animal, no sheep, and a couple of sullen servants for company.

As Rabbi Bergman explained, the mainstream opinion is that Isaac did know, and this knowing submission to his fate is what makes him, in many traditional sources—including our own mahzor—as much of a hero on this occasion as his father. Maybe even moreso. Which servant of the Lord, after all, is more to be praised—the one who offers up what he loves most, or the one willing to give his very life? The rabbi even asked his audience what I thought was a brave question: doesn't it make you feel more comfortable with the story to think that Isaac did know? He asked them to raise one finger for YES, and two for NO. It was audio, so I couldn't see the tally of the vote, but he affirmed that the one fingers had it. (I assumed it was the pointer finger.)

But what if Isaac didn't know? What if he were just an unwitting innocent at the mercy of his father's sense of obligation to a higher power. Well, this is a more disturbing proposition.

What struck me most was the way that certain key details in the narrative need to be reinterpreted if you hold that Isaac was in the dark. The young rabbi, for example, lingered on the matter of *vayashkeym Avraham baboker*—Abraham getting up early in the morning to ready all the implements required for the ordeal, and saddle the pack animal, for himself. If everyone knew what was going on, why did he rise in the wee hours to do all of this on his own? He was a wealthy man, with many servants, certainly not accustomed to carrying out his own menial preparations. If Isaac knew, as tradition generally has it, this was an exemplification of Abraham's *zerizut*—his diligent haste in performing even the most arduous service to his Lord. But if the matter was not known, another explanation leaps to mind: he got up early in the morning and took care of it all by himself, lest someone else have to be taken into his confidence.

It was at this moment in the *drassh* that a totally new thought occurred to me: if the *Akedah* is read in this way, through the lens of Abraham's experience, and in the aspect of Isaac's ignorance, then, whatever other meaning it may hold, it is transformed into an intense parable on the burden and habit of secrecy.

Let's think this over for a bit. The secret that Abraham is carrying is the knowledge of what he thinks he is going to do to his son. But we can also understand this as a discrete

incident conditioned by a broader tendency. He is a man who has thrown over many things since the first call of his God to be lech-lecha—to get up and go forth. He alone hears this call. The voice of God is his first secret, and conditions a mentality motivated primarily by something he thinks nobody else knows. Avraham, we might say, has cultivated an intense, maybe even solipsistic, “lech-lecha” consciousness as the mission of his life. We celebrate his zerizut, his unflinching readiness to say hineni—here I am-- whenever God calls to him, but this means that he is ready at any moment to leave EVERYTHING behind—his land, the place of his birth, his son, his only son, whom he loves. And now this voice has called again, and used the magic words: lech-lecha—get up and go, or go to yourself, go to that part of your deep self that is prepared to forsake all else but this voice. It's time to act on your own, again. Don't even think about telling the wife.

Something personal is not necessarily a secret. When it comes to prophets, in particular, the solitary inspiration is usually something meant to be shared with others. If the prophet has leverage, then he can take people along with him, as Abraham did in response to the first lech-lecha, bringing his household on the journey to the promised land without demonstrating any apparent need to obfuscate what he was doing—at least not after he had sorted that whole broken idol business out with his dad. It's possible, bedieved, as we say—in fact--that such personal inspiration might devolve into something like a secret if nobody will listen, receding to the inner thoughtspace of a carrier who has wearied of trying to convince anybody, but that's not quite the same thing as believing, likhatkhila—in principle—that you can't tell anyone.

No, the personal is only fully transformed into the secretive when something else is involved: shame. The burden of the personal voice cannot be spoken when there is something radically impolite in its content, even as the person who hears it still feels compelled to act according to its wishes. This is what establishes the drama of secrecy: the incompatibility of compulsion and propriety. The result is inhibition, either of action or of speech. Either you find you cannot “do the thing”, and so live with an unrealized craving, or that you can't tell anybody about it, and so come to live in the shadow of your shame.

We've watched Abraham keep specific secrets before, even secrets that have put those close to him in compromising positions. Recall the wife/sister ruse he played with Sarah on a couple of occasions, passing her off as an eligible bachelorette when it seemed more conducive to his estimation of their safety. But, whether she liked it or not—whether it was sheer patriarchal manipulation or a little bit of Bonnie and Clyde--at the very least we can still call her a secret-sharer. She knew what was going on. This stands in awful contrast to the dialogue in the second aliyah we read today, between father and son, in which the inhibitory pressure of Abraham's shame is on full display. I paraphrase:

“Where's the sheep, papa?”

“Oh, it'll be along.”

Abraham is considered the father of many things, but when it comes to the shameful secret he has clear antecedents in the Bible; he's in company, if not entirely decent company. We can think back to the mythical parents of humanity, Adam and Eve, whose very first act “outside the lines” was met with an instantaneous onrush of naked shame, and the impulse to cower from the all-seeing presence that walks in the garden. And then there is Cain, who, we might say, like Abraham brings human flesh to the sacred altar, and then, likewise, finds there is something he cannot bring himself to say--

“Where is your brother, Cain?”

“Oh, he'll be along.” –

and ends up suffering what the solitary secret-bearer fears, perhaps, most of all: not death, but ostracism—the isolating power of the secret weaponized against its bearer as a banishment from human community.

But there is also a significant difference between these earlier situations and Abraham's ominous walk with his son: in the Akedah, there is still hope. The shame experienced by Adam, Eve, and Cain, is exclusively post facto. They've already done the bad thing, and the shameful sense of secrecy arises out of an impulse to cover it up. The apple has a bitemark in it and Abel is dead, and they just don't want God to know about it. But Abraham's is a secret in medias res—in the midst of the thing, in process. Although he is slouching towards the point of no return, he isn't there yet. Though his secret may be festering, it isn't bleeding.

His case differs, also, in the matter of what—or who—is making him feel ashamed to the point of keeping the secret. Recall that all those other folks kept their secret from God, but Abraham keeps his from Isaac. It's as if the irresistible force of his lech-lecha consciousness—his sense that all is permitted him in the service of God—the empowerment he feels in a destiny that is his alone--has come up against what might just prove to be an immovable object: a beloved upon whose innocence he can finally perceive the shadowside of his unswerving devotion. The drama of secrecy in the Akedah is therefore, on an even deeper level, a drama of conscience—the excruciating framing of the dilemma of a consciousness suddenly aware both of its overriding impulse and its consequence, and the question hanging over the whole sordid affair is: how far will he let it go?

Of course, the “he” in that question is ambiguous. It could be Abraham--or even Isaac, if he cops on--but the more sensible reading, at least according to the plain meaning of the text, is: it's God. How far will God let it go? God, of course, bookends this tale in a most unusual way. God gets the matter underway by saying—do it—and then brings it to a screeching halt by saying—don't do it! Well, which is it? Again, according to the plain meaning of the text, this isn't such a problem. The whole thing is a test, and when Abraham has acted according to God's satisfaction, God rings the bell and tells him to put the pencil down. But if the Akedah is really the drama of conscience that I have been suggesting, there's another answer, and that is to suggest the paradox that God wants both, or, at least, both are possible outcomes lurking within Abraham's understanding of what God wants, and that's what makes the whole thing so troubling. God wants him to be unswerving in his individualized commitment to the divine service, and God wants him to love his son. And the question how far will he let it go, can be rephrased as: which of these understandings of the divine purpose will be offered—or sacrificed—to the other?

Because, I'm pretty sure, however you understand it, the Akedah ends in a sacrifice—something painfully surrendered in a sacred ritual of transformation. Thank God, it does not end up with a child killed according to the secret purpose of his father. Instead, what makes Abraham not Cain is the painful exposure of his secret prior to its full commission, but not sufficiently prior such that Abraham could pretend he wasn't ever going to do it. When the angel finds him, the boy bound and the knife raised, it is to catch his secret contradictions in the light of day—to make his shame public--in a moment of excruciating realization. We might imagine this angel appearing on high, or, as I prefer, glimmering in the terrified eyes of his bound child. Either way, it is only by virtue of this moment of full and awful clarity that he is offered another option: to dig into the tangled thicket for the ram that is caught there; to initiate a synthesis his lech-lecha mind had never been able to conceive of before--an offering with, rather than of, his son.

This is all parable. There is many a malignant secret that stops short of the murder of a child. There may be some who would prefer to carry the shame of a secret—whatever damage done to self or other by its weight—rather than risk a moment of clarifying exposure. But, thanks to the good Rabbi Bergman, I do now see a hiddush in this old story, that I hadn't quite noticed before—a message, too, that reaffirms its fitness as a tale to be remembered in this season of atonement. And it isn't just for legendary patriarchs.

There may also happen to be some part of ourselves, mired in unspeakable contradiction, yearning, in its own way, to be caught with the knife in hand, and, finally in daylight, be offered the chance to grow towards some previously inconceivable resolution.

If only the angel is kind.

**When We Look Back**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Kol Nidrei**

When the boxes are packed  
When the windows are clean  
When the floors have been swept  
When the flowers have bloomed  
When we've removed our clothes  
When the children have grown  
When the prayers are complete  
When the prisoners are free  
When the seas have stopped rising  
When the babies are smiling  
When the ache has subsided  
When the Book of Life yawns closed  
When the last locks are turned  
When the guilty parties have paid  
When we've gone all the way gray  
When we look back, what will we see?  
The way the days and months  
blurred into seasons  
and how our bodies softened  
and our voices strengthened  
The choices we made for each other  
The grievances we put away

How we made each other laugh  
and safe  
and stuck it out when running away  
might have seemed easier  
The birds, the dogs, the books,  
the meals, the pain, the lost years  
The finding and forgetting  
and finding again  
All the while asking  
the impossible question,  
where did the time go  
as if maybe someday an answer  
might present itself

Fleetingly  
like a sunset  
just under the long horizon



## The Letters

### Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Kol Nidrei

An old man, riding on a train, was behaving strangely, at least in the eyes of the young man who was watching. The old man's lips would move inaudibly, and immediately afterwards, he'd start to laugh. Then, from time-to-time, he'd raise his right palm in the air, and a stern look would come across his face.

The young man's curiosity finally got the better of him, and he leaned across the aisle.

"Sir," he said. "Excuse my intrusion, but I've been watching you, and I just have to ask: what are you doing? What does it all mean—the murmuring, the laughter, the raised hand?"

"It's simple," said the old man. "I get bored on these long train rides, so I tell myself jokes to pass the time."

"That explains the murmuring and the laughter," said the young man. "But what about the hand?"

"Of course," said the old man. "I have to stop myself if I've heard it before!"

This was one of my favorite bits from the Big Book of Jewish Humor, otherwise known as the alternate Bible of my childhood. Though I know it's bad form to analyze a joke—either you laugh at it or you don't—I always felt there was more to this one than met the eye, as if the old man were a holy fool, or a Zen master, and his seeming absurdity in fact a riddle for the ages. Because there is a spiritual mystery, I think, in the incongruity that breathes life into this jest: how can you tell yourself a joke that you haven't already heard?

I actually told you this joke as a set-up for a story—two stories, really, though the second flows out of the first. I thought to start this way, because the first story, at least in my experience, is such an old warhorse that I got self-conscious about sharing it. It's what you'd call in Yiddish a mayse mit a bord—a tale that's been around long enough to grow a beard—and I was afraid that telling it tonight would be the rabbinic equivalent of asking a troop of jaded second-graders if they'd ever heard the one about the housebuilding pigs. So I thought I'd soften you up to my unoriginality with this strange little joke about new stories and old stories, and the fine line that runs between them. Because whether or not

you give me the right palm and the stern expression, I still feel compelled to tell this next one:

Once upon a time there was a rebbe, a very wise rebbe, learned in the holy volumes and the mystic lore. But there came a fateful Kol Nidrei night when he opened up his mahzor to discover that he could not recognize a single word on the page in front of him. He felt the shiver of a panic to which he was unaccustomed, and searched frantically in his mind for a passage or even just a single verse of the liturgy, but nothing rose up to fill the terrible vacancy. He recalled not a word of the prayers he was expected to offer up on his own behalf, and for the atonement of all Israel, on this holiest night of the year, when all creation trembled on the knife's edge of judgement. Glancing furtively about his court, like a bashful child, at the everyday Hasidim immersed in their davenning, he felt a secret shame, and, beneath his shame, an aching despair.

Then, as if by miracle, like a line thrown from an unseen ship to a drowning man, a memory flashed into his mind. He saw a simple, homely room, just like in the song you might know, that my grandmother sang—afn pripetchik brent a feyerl—a little fire smoking on greenwood in the open hearth, and the dardeke melamed—the beleaguered instructor of the three-year olds—painstakingly rehearsing the pronunciation of the alef-beis with his charges: komets-alef—o, komets-beis--bo, komets-gimmel--go.

“Alef, beis, gimmel, daled...” the rebbe thought. There was nothing else—only these fragmentary particles of the words he had lost. And with the voice inside his head, amidst the murmuring room, he addressed himself to the Master of the Universe.

“Ribboyno shel oylam,” he said. “These are the holy letters with which you make and unmake the world, and they are all I can remember. Let me offer them back up to You, and trust that You will fashion them into whatever prayer this urgent moment demands.”

And he began to pray: “Alef, beis, gimmel, daled... etc.”

If you don't know this one, there's still a good chance you've heard a few like it, at least if you're familiar with the corpus of Hasidic storytelling. It's characteristic of the literature of that spiritual revolution, in the way it plays on the tension between erudition and spiritual truth—the friction that can sometimes arise between knowing the right words, and accessing veritable passion. Often the hero is some variety of “holy schlepper”—a pious though ignorant watercarrier or the shepherd boy who pries open the gates of heaven with his sacrilegious flute—each of them offering comeuppance to conventional wisdom with their sacred illiteracy.

What is indeed novel about the one I told you is that the protagonist is the rebbe himself, and not in all his grandeur, but, rather, in a moment of weakness. This one doesn't offer praise to the soul never shackled to the siddur—the prayerbook—but, instead, poses the question: what happens when the formal terms of your ongoing conversation with God suddenly vanish?

I'll bet you haven't heard my last story yet, although I shared a few cursory details with some folks when it happened over the summer—and even though you're in it, too. I want to try telling it like a folktale, at least for a while, to put myself in the company of the alphabet rebbe, and the old man on the train, laughing to himself as he hurtles toward an unknown destination.

Not long ago, in the East, there was a rabbi who had no beard. He woke up early one rainy morning--it had been raining for days and days. It was the kind of rain that made people say, "I've never seen it rain like this before. I've never seen this river so high, or that lake so high," just like, in the West, they were saying, "I've never seen it this hot for so long, or this dry, or fire that starts so early and burns forever."

But, as I said, here, in the East, it had been raining and raining. And when it wasn't raining, the air was still saturated. You could swim through it. It gave you the feeling of the Noah story, where the Bible says the flood happened because God removed the separation of the upper and the lower waters. You could feel the upper waters in the air straining against the firmament. The evening was as warm as day because the moisture in the air would wrap its arms around the heat and refuse to let it go, even when the moon rose somewhere high over the thick embankment of clouds. At night, the lightning flashed in the distance and then rain would pound again on the rooftops.

Though the sky was still grey in the morning, the rain was light. The rabbi took his little daughter in his arms--picking her up from the floor of the living room where she was playing with her brother's toys--and went out for a walk in the field where they lived, like he did every summer morning, to watch the food growing in their gardens. It meant a great deal to him to watch his food grow, and he was in the habit of picking a few things in the morning to lay them on the kitchen counter as a harbinger of the day.

But when they got to the entryway of their field, a kind of secret entrance bounded by two lengths of chainlink fence and the listing branches of an adolescent butternut tree, he found himself standing ankle deep in a pool of water. When he lifted up his eyes and looked around he saw water pooling throughout the field, as if it had become a shallow lake, and inundating the garden. At first, he thought: the ground is so bloated it is refusing

to drink any more, but that's not what my soil does, unless, god preserve us, the world is truly ending. Then, from a distance, coming from the far side of the field, where the thin creek flows through the edge of the woods, he heard the furious sound of rushing water.

He started walking out, his arms beneath his daughter's legs and hers about his neck, all the way to the back of the field, milky grey water squelching underfoot, boots sticking in mud almost like quicksand, his daughter in his arms and he wondering what sense it made to take her with him, because he might need his arms, but it was like he was in a trance and he kept walking out, through the flowing water to the back of the meadow where the woods began and, at this time of year, the creek was normally just a glorified trickle, but now a crazy torrent, thick and muddy and chalky and spilling over the bank and down the slope, laden with debris, like someone's left the bathtub to fill up and overflow in a cartoon, but this was really happening.

The rabbi waded in, and felt a force eddying around his legs. His daughter stared at the dark water, uncomprehending, and he thought: the water is so strong underfoot that I may drop her, and it's high and fast enough, even in this one little passage, that she could knock her head and drown—like what happens in others places--so I'd better take her back. And so he did.

When he returned, the goats were moaning in the barn, but there was no time to milk them. As he walked out again, he witnessed half-submerged tomato and potato plants, their leaves caked in mud, and muck despoiling the creeping vines of cucumber, sweet potato and squash, and the stray green of a carrot top askew above the silt like the arm of a drowning man, and beneath it all, he felt an aching despair.

The rain was still falling, and water still rushing in a mad flood down the hillside, over the banks, and into the rabbi's field. He waded in, again, the current overtopping his boots. The creek was backed up—that was the problem. It was full of debris, including large branches and even trunks, washed down from the sloping woods in the endless rain, snagged at a chokepoint where the water ran narrowly under the exposed roots of a river birch.

Slipping in water of uncertain depth, sometimes having to pause and summon extra leg strength to liberate his foot from the sucking bottom, he began pulling out debris, piece by piece—alef, beis, gimmel, daled--first the easy branches and later, rocking his body back and forth to generate momentum, endeavoring to extricate the trunks--a “holy schlepper”--wondering all the while: what is happening to all the words I used to know?

I don't remember exactly at what point in all of this the old story about the rebbe actually came back to me—only that it did happen while my feet were still in the water, before I finally managed to get the river flowing on its course again by clearing out the flotsam and piling it up on the weak spot in the bank like a beaver dam, and even broadening the channel with my shovel. All tolled, it was the labor of an hour or two, and most of the time I was thinking about climate change—how we are coming to live at the mercy of the relentless forces we have unleashed, be they water or fire, plastic, methane or carbon dioxide, and that this was my own modest taste of their fury. Later that day, I wrote on my Facebook page: “I know it's nothing compared to the suffering endured every day by the impoverished millions on our decompensating planet, but today I wrestled with climate change in the flesh.” The fact that the next day the sun was shining and I took my children out to admire their father's handiwork, and then, together, we followed the receding stream bed up through the woods to find a wonderland; that my garden survived and, months later, I interrupted the writing of this sermon to bring in buckets of tomatoes, peppers, and sweet potatoes —gives me ample momentary pleasure, but does not allay the premonition, confirmed by peer-reviewed science, that this battle will not be my last.

But there was a moment, not a miraculous flash of memory but almost born out of the rhythm of my body laboring in the water, that I found I was telling myself a story that I'd never heard before. I mean, I'd heard the words before, and thought I knew what they meant, but now I could see the letters swirling around me in the water—broken tablets, shattered vows, dissipating futures, the fragmentary particles that make and unmake the world--without any surety as to what they would amount to, but only alef, and then beis, and, if I can get to it, gimmel.

Alef, beis, gimmel.. No more words, only whatever elemental power I can summon within myself to meet the urgency of this moment, when all creation trembles on the knife's edge of judgment.

It was only much later, really not until I sat down to figure out how to tell you all of this, that I thought of that other one, the old fool from the book of my childhood, riding a mystery train to god knows where, raising a stern hand to the words that mean nothing to him anymore, but reveling in the letters that dance in his skull.

That's how he tells the difference between dead words and prayer: by his laughter, which, after all, is only another word for the will to live.

**Al Chet**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Kol Nidrei**

For all the ways  
our good intentions  
faded into the oblivion  
of autopilot

when we shuttered  
our eyes instead  
of seeing the suffering  
right before us  
right within us

and held fast to small boulders  
of self-righteousness  
even as our balance wobbled

For the moments  
of expecting more  
from ourselves  
than is kind  
and less from ourselves  
than is right

For being nice  
at the expense of honest  
For being polite  
at the cost of justice

For depriving ourselves  
of joy  
and for forgetting that tenderness  
always leads us home

Being human doesn't require forgiveness  
More like the kind of friend  
whose love for you can hold your worst  
moments while still seeing  
that you are so much more than these

**Al Chet**

And now the Book lies open  
revisiting the stories  
of another year  
Unable to revise  
we might need a moment to weep

But then — soon — an opening  
as miraculous as the sun  
that rises every morning  
over some imagined horizon:

We get to return  
We get to return  
We get to pray.

**Go Wider. Broader. Deeper**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Yom Kippur Day**

Go wider. Broader. Deeper.

Go smaller. Narrow. Focus.

Pull back. Step away. See.

Zero in. Peer. Curious.

Context. Container. Continuum.

Tile. Mosaic. Era. Moment.

Past is present. Present is future.

Time. Illusion. Trust. Tend.

## **Singly None**

### **Bob Kumin ~ Yom Kippur Day**

I never fasted for Yom Kippur when I was growing up in Worcester. In fact, I didn't really understand the purpose of the holiday until 10 years ago. I didn't realize, for example, that we put on our tallit for Kol Nidre, the only evening service during the year when we do that. I didn't know that we start with the Torah Service at Mincha. The details I could learn easily. What has been more difficult, and a labor of love, is learning about t'shuvah and repentance. And learning how to ask other people for forgiveness.

I think I have a pretty good handle on asking God for forgiveness. For example, I think: "I tried to attend shul for every Shacharit service, but I wasn't able to. Understandable, with COVID and all." God usually doesn't talk back, but I know when I am faking it. What comes next is usually the humility of silence, and I ask the question, "How can I do better next time?" It is much more difficult for me to ask for forgiveness from someone I may have hurt. I may worry that they will not forgive, or that I am not asking for the right thing. I am afraid that we will continue to be estranged from one another by my own fear. To have the courage to reach out, to know that this is an important part of returning, I need the support of the whole community.

One of my biggest challenges is what happens when I think about all the missings of the mark that I was responsible for this past year. Do I wallow in self-pity, disabling myself from my true purpose, or do I get up and recommit myself to the spiritual path? The prayer from Psalm 30 that I say every morning helps: Eleha Adonay ekra, v'el adonay et-hanan. Sh'ma Adonai, v'honeini, Adonai heyey Ozer Li. What benefits my going down into the pit? Can dust acknowledge you? Can it declare your truth? So I get up and keep moving.

But how do I move into the community practice of t'shuvah during these High Holidays? What exactly is collective will, and how do I nurture that in my life? When I celebrate Shabbat on Friday night with my family, I draw strength and courage from the knowledge that millions of Jews are celebrating with the same prayers at the same time. That feeling is magnified even further on Yom Kippur, when everyone is fasting and doing the difficult work of t'shuvah.

In my twenties and early thirties, I was part of a theater company in Boston. We often reflected on the phrase, "emotional consensus," since, in order to successfully express, in artistic form, an understanding or feeling, the actors must be in tune with each other, feeling safe with their vulnerability, listening with all their hearts, bodies and minds. We



said that the connection (and therefore the collective will) is only as strong as the weakest individual link.

That has often felt like a tremendous burden, to feel the responsibility of doing my own inner work so that the group can create something that, through the collective will, furthers the common good. Over the years, mostly by being gentle with myself and letting in more and more the love of others, this sense of burden has been changing to a labor of love. When I hear others say, "Have an easy fast," or when I see people help each other in the late afternoon, I feel that sense of caring community that carries me forward, "on the wings of angels".

Rumi, the Sufi poet, says, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." One of the barriers I have built shows itself in my struggle with wanting to be alone, wanting to be insulated from the sometimes hard to handle needs of other people, the crowding in of egos, the constant pressure to be someone else, other than who I am. The pandemic has furthered this isolation. Zoom has taken away our ability to hear each other pray. I live in a cohousing community that helps to mitigate this isolation. And I pray in a synagogue where we share the bonds of prayer, engulfed in our tallit but in community. I see the asking for forgiveness from those I have wronged during this past year as a remedy for isolation.

When my prayers for a better world unite with your prayers, and the prayers of every individual in the world, true healing can occur. When the stranger is brought into the community, understood and respected as a member of humanity, true unity can occur. This last year, my own study of racism in this country has created more empathy, a space in my heart, to unite with others who have a different life experience than my privileged one. Understanding the disabilities of others is another example of this heart muscle practice. My mother used to suggest to me, when I was depressed, that I go walk the halls of mental hospitals. I went into a career as a Special Education Director, and this has taught me to develop a spirit of inquiry when it comes to others, what may be going on for them, lest I judge.

In my early 50s, I was a Union organizer and negotiator for 6 years. I moved to that position from a job as Principal/middle manager in a school district - stuck in the middle between the needs of the students and the pressures of the administrators above me. In the union job, I felt a renewed sense of purpose, advocating for others. Nowhere is it more evident, in the secular world, of the Maccabean power of the collective will, the beauty of a shared mission, than in the labor movement.

I will end these reflections by singing a verse from the Union song, "Step by Step". This song was written as a preamble to the constitution of the first mineworkers union in the US, in 1870. The song uses the imagery of a stone arch, then a watermill, to symbolize our collective strength. When the song speaks of "what we will," I think of our collective will to merge with the Divine and heal the World. When the song says, "the longest march," I think of our collective struggle for unity with the Divine, and with each other. The struggle to heal the world is one I take on daily, not, as Hillel said, to finish the task, but because I am not free to abstain from it.

Step by Step, the longest march, will be won, will be won,  
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none.  
And by Union what we will, can be accomplished still,  
Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none.

## Exactly the Same, and Completely Different Benya Wolfson ~ Yom Kippur Day

This is not how I imagined things would go today.

When Rabbi Weiner invited me to offer a reflection during the high holy days, I knew what I wanted to talk about: teshuvah, a word which here means “returning.” Returning was on my mind because we were all going to be “back for the holidays” — squeezing together on those wooden benches in the sanctuary, chanting and singing and looking for moments that make the day holy for each of us.

For me, one such moment is “Ha-Melech ”: the Hazzan’s appeal is so poignant, and the melody she improvises as she builds up to that first word of the prayer weaves together so many different feelings... I loved our services last year. But when we got to “Ha-Melech,” I realized that what I was looking for wasn’t just about the melody or the words. What made that moment powerful to me in the sanctuary was experiencing it in the presence of others, breathing and whispering and closing their eyes and bowing their heads, all around me.

So I was going to talk about our collective return to being together, in one space.

And today, we are back — but back where we were last year, in front of our computers. This is not the return I was hoping for. But there is a kind of teshuvah I experienced this summer that I want to share with you, because it helped me think about the connection between our personal returns and our larger return as a community, whenever that happens.

I’ve been playing the piano for two-thirds of my life. In fact, the ten-year anniversary of my first lesson was yesterday, just as Yom Kippur began. I’ll take that coincidence as a sign. For eight of those ten years, I studied with one teacher. She challenged me and gave me the courage to explore more complex works than I could ever imagine playing. She helped me understand how music mattered to me and to those around me.

Then, two years ago, my teacher decided that it was time for me to work with someone else. This new teacher speaks the same language and comes from the same culture as my first teacher. You may not be surprised to hear, given the family I come from, that they are both Russian-speaking and Jewish, born in the Soviet Union, only five years apart. But I can’t imagine two people more different from one another in temperament, or in the way they see the world. I know, a sadistic Russian piano teacher is such a cliché they don’t even

use it in movies anymore. My first teacher, in that respect, was an exception. My new one is not.

I don't object to the intensity of our lessons. Her dedication to music is one of the things I really admire about her. She is fierce because every note matters that much to her. The most difficult part of the transition, though, was that she expected me to reject who and what I had been before I met her. In order to become a better musician, she said, I had to go back and re-learn the most fundamental skills: how to listen, to think, to be, both physically and emotionally. Most days it felt like nothing I was doing worked. Many times I wondered what the point of the previous eight years was. I had really loved those eight years, so the more my teacher showed me what I was missing, the more lost I felt. It seemed that I was giving up a part of who I was and what made me happiest about making music.

And what made me happiest was Greenwood.

Greenwood is a chamber music camp I attend in Cummington. When parents and friends show up to watch us perform there, all barefoot and wearing white, it may seem to them like a little New England paradise. But this is what counts as fun at Greenwood: on Monday morning you get an assignment — usually a movement of a quartet or quintet — and on Saturday night you perform it. Five days to get to a concert-ready level from scratch. The outcome depends not only on how hard you work, but on collaborating with others. You have to both lead and support, and so come to realize that it's not about you. At Greenwood I learned that I could be more than myself by being less than the main event. The work can be grueling, but it pays off when we feel ourselves playing as a true ensemble. When that happens, a chamber group can become another kind of sacred community. So, despite (and because) of all the ways it has challenged me, Greenwood is the place where I have been the happiest.

My first lesson with the new teacher came just a few weeks after the end of a Greenwood season. The tougher things got with her in those first few months, the more I reminded myself that I had been through some exciting-and-scary challenges at Greenwood, and so I could handle the new demands that she was shouting at me. Except to her, the word "Greenwood" meant nothing, and the idea of learning a complicated work quickly is offensive. You work carefully and slowly, note by note, phrase by phrase; you don't just sit down with a bunch of friends and try to play through a Schubert trio. Was everything I'd done at Greenwood, then, also a kind of failure to make the most of my music?

Throughout those first six months I wanted to go back to Greenwood so badly to experience again what I could only describe as being myself at the piano. To return. And

then COVID happened. And in the summer of 2020, for the first time in eighty-eight years, the camp did not open. I'm not sure which was tougher — dealing with my teacher's unrelenting sarcasm or facing the void that opened up for me that summer. But having all that time to myself last summer meant that I could practice more than I ever have, and I think I worked harder than I ever had before. Very slowly I began to find my way to a richer sound, to music that flowed and that mattered more to me and my audience. Very slowly I was moving farther and farther away from what I was before my re-education began — which meant, farther away from Greenwood.

So when Greenwood reopened this July, after two years of my difficult life with the new teacher and away from camp, I headed back with a kind of trepidation. When I climbed out of the car in Cummington two months ago, I wasn't sure what I was coming back to anymore. Was I a better musician now? Would the new way of learning make it harder to work with others under such intense conditions?

But, it turned out, Greenwood was unmistakably Greenwood, with the same passion and dedication and care — and the same sense that coming together to make music has the ability to transform each of us. What was a little harder to measure was what exactly has changed in me. Performing with my friends this summer was exciting-and-scary not only because it reminded me of who I was but because it showed me that I was no longer that person. I felt both exactly the same and completely different. The place that used to matter to me in a previous life still mattered, even as I felt the distance between what was then and what is now. And that felt to me like teshuvah: returning to a place you can always count on being your own, and yet a place that will always make you feel like you've changed.

I came back from camp really looking forward to experiencing that sense of community during the high holy days, back in the sanctuary. That didn't happen. But my experience of teshuvah at Greenwood taught me to trust the process of returning. That faith in our ability to return — to Brahms or to “Ha-Melech” — is what gives me hope today. Hope that maybe returning to our monitors for high holy days this year, instead of returning to the sanctuary, is still something that can push us to hear and see ourselves differently.

Maybe that's why it was important to see and hear “Ha-Melech” on Zoom again: because I had to trust that, even though I am not who I was last year, it would still make my heart skip a beat. And maybe being away for two years — as was the case for me / and Greenwood — can give us all / a better sense of where we want to be when we do come back. Next year. In Amherst.

## **When the Rains Come** **Emily Bloch ~ Yom Kippur Day**

Hello, and good yontif.

I am grateful to the Rabbi for inviting me to speak with you today. I've been a member of the JCA for about a dozen years. I am a therapist, and before that, I was a writer. I have spent a good deal of my professional, as well as my personal life interested in the essence and the nuance of people's inner lives and experiences. These Covid years we are all living through have given me a lot to consider on this subject.

Every one of us is having our own experience -- on the planet, in our consciousnesses. In the past year and a half, some of us were alone, most of the time. Others had company, all of the time. But none of us have had the types and varieties of human contact we were accustomed to. This marked isolation, this aloneness, during a time of global, societal, and personal traumas and losses, has turned up the volume on our inner lives. How are we taking things in, and how are we turning them around in our minds? What is the tone and tenor of the voice we're using with ourselves while we're going through all of this?

"How are you?" I'd text loved ones at the height of lockdown. "How are you doing?" And then, the question I find myself wanting to ask: "How are you doing in there?"

What happens inside of us when we're alone? Alone not because we want to be, but because we have to be? Psychologist Diana Fosha calls this "the disastrous experience of aloneness -- unwilled, unwanted aloneness." It can often be accompanied by an anxiety that is so strong that it numbs the mind, and "necessarily renders huge regions of self inaccessible." "Fear-fostering aloneness," she says, "rises in response to the unresponsiveness and unavailability of the other when the self is in need." Just when we need someone the most, no one is there.

Or at least, that's how it can feel. We know that our relative isolation during periods of lockdown, behind masks, waving to others from afar at a curbside pickup--we know, intellectually, that we are not being abandoned or shunned. We know that those dear friends really are on the other end of the line. We know that this congregation is here ("here"), every Shabbat, and a million times in between.

But if there's one thing that has impressed me about being a therapist, it is just how vast a difference there can be between what we know and what we feel. And when we feel abandoned -- when we feel alone, unseen, uncared-for -- unfortunately, we can often turn

on ourselves, too. It's a kind of doubling-down on abandonment. We "render huge regions of self inaccessible"--even to ourselves. Instead of countering the bleak loneliness with a friendly, reassuring way of keeping company with ourselves, we may go kind of blank, or we may despair. Or an inner voice can become dismissive, cutting, mean.

As for me, even though I live with my partner and children, even though my work brought me into intimate contact with others via Zoom, I missed people. I missed people so much. I missed some individual people very much, but at least I could talk to them. What I really missed was many people. I missed humanity.

But I didn't allow myself to feel this longing very often, especially at the height of it. It seemed such a minor loss, in the realm of losses. But I think I really didn't allow myself to feel it because underneath the missing was a fear: what if people are gone from me... forever, somehow. What if we're all alone now. Instead of being in contact with the intensity of my aloneness, and seeing if I could do something to address it, I edged away. My inner landscape went a bit two dimensional. Now I can see that I was protecting myself -- it felt like despair was barely around the corner, waiting. I apparently had to keep it at bay, fearing it could overwhelm me, at a time I needed to not be overwhelmed.

Then, in late May of this year, just as masks outside were deemed unnecessary, I went to New York to see some of those individual people I missed so much. I found myself walking down Amsterdam Avenue, on a glorious, sunny Saturday, and I was suddenly in a boundless stream of people--the first weekend in New York, my friends told me, that felt almost normal. There were hundreds and hundreds of people on the sidewalks, walking towards and around me, going about their business. I could see many of their faces. They could see mine. It was so beautiful. It was hard for me to know if I was having trouble catching my breath out of habituated fear, or from delight. I think it was both, exploding at once.

As Jews, we're taught that Yom Kippur is our chance to have an audience with God. As Rabbi Akiva points out, "How fortunate are you, O Israel! Before whom do you purify yourselves and who purifies you? Your Heavenly Father." It's our opportunity for an in-person meet up; no intermediary, no "distance." The idea is to make contact with the Truth: to recognize where we've been, how we fell short, and what we want for ourselves going forward. It's a moment of reckoning with what is -- what's actually happening, inside and out.

But I think it can be hard to know how we're doing when we're isolated from others, from humanity. How can we meaningfully encounter Truth and the passage of time while alone -- when regions of self have been rendered inaccessible?

We know that we need people, like a field needs water. We need each other, and our kindest selves, keenly, while living in our troubled, and troubling world; as we go about the business of reopening, then partially closing; masks, testing, risk tolerance, booster shots... we don't know what.

But after a drought, a dry field has trouble accepting a heavy rain. Water pools up on the surface and runs off, and the parched earth under the top inch stays dry, unyielding.

So we must learn to stay receptive, countering the defensive instinct to grow a crusty layer to protect whatever moisture is left under the surface. We must try to allow what we know intellectually -- that we're not really alone -- to seep into our emotional experience of aloneness. I believe we can do this by noticing, and bolstering, the kind of company we are for ourselves.

I guess, fundamentally, what I mean to say is: Please, be good to yourself, especially when you feel alone. In doing so, you can irrigate your field from the inside, and will be better able to absorb the rains when they come.

Thank you, and Shana Tovah.



**HaMakom**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Yom Kippur Day**

HaMakom

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.

## **Shatnez and the Empty Room** **Rabbi Benjamin Weiner ~ Yom Kippur Day**

I think, after all these years as your spiritual leader, it's high time I talked to you about the most important principle of Judaism: shatnez.

I'm not kidding.

Some of you may be unfamiliar with this, the most important principle of Judaism, so I thought it best to begin with a brief review:

Shatnez—and I'm tipping my hand by letting you know that in order to make sure I was recalling all the necessary details I consulted the website of a purveyor of bespoke menswear—is a term referring to “cloth containing a mixture of wool and linen, which is prohibited under a strict reading of Jewish law.” We trace this prohibition to two distinct verses in Torah, first Leviticus 19:19, in which we find a general admonition against “wear[ing] clothing woven of two kinds of material”, and then Deuteronomy 22:11, in which this rule is specified: “Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.” Again consulting Tractate Bespoke Menswear of the World Wide Web, I find it written that the “prohibition against shatnez...does not apply to wearing separate garments made of wool and linen...a wool jacket may be worn over a linen shirt as long as the two garments are not sewn or twisted together”, and a note that the “restriction applies not only to suits, jackets, and pants, but to any type of clothing, including socks, pajamas, gloves and ties.”

I'm reminded, too, speaking of tabooed blends, of a funny exchange between two of my professors in rabbinical school at a lunchtime faculty seminar, one idiosyncratically orthodox and the other classically Reform—both of whom exerted profound influence on my formation. The first was describing taking a new suit to a neighborhood “shatnez checker”, who ripped out part of the lining upon discovering the forbidden mixture, when the other gasped in horror: “You mean you ruined a perfectly good suit? For religion?”

So that's shatnez.

As for what makes it the most important principle of Judaism? Well, there's a traditional answer, which I'll tell you about, and then there's...another answer, which it'll be my labor to explain to you this morning.

Traditionally, we can divide mitzvot—the divine commandments of the Torah--into two categories: chukim and mishpatim. I suppose I could make an effort to translate these two

terms distinctly as “laws” and “statues”, but the point is less which English word matches up best with which Hebrew one, than: what is the rubric by which a mitzvah is placed in one category or the other.

It comes down to whether or not you understand—rationally--why you are being asked to do the mitzvah.

There's a lively body of inquiry, going back at least as far as the Middle Ages, called ta'amei ha mitzvot, which seeks to establish the sensible basis for the rules of Judaism, addressing the question: why does God want us to do this? For example, in parashat Ki Teitzei of Deuteronomy, we are instructed to place a parapet around the perimeter of our roof, which, at the time, was understood to be a flat, navigable surface on the top of the house. Why? So that nobody falls off. Sometimes the matter is not quite as plain—as in the case of the responsibility to shoo away a mother bird before taking the eggs from her nest, and the debate that follows as to whether this is an act of animal welfare or self-service. But the principle is the same: irrespective of a mitzvah's status as a detail in the book God gave to Moses, there must be a reason behind it that we can comprehend.

At least, as Bob Dylan once said, “most of the time...”

These rationally corroborated mitzvot are what we call mishpatim, but it does happen, every so often, that no reason can be found, at which point, rather than abandoning it as a dictate of unreason, the mitzvah is placed in the other category. It's a hok. Shatnez is such a mitzvah. No one has made a convincing case for the ethics, utility, or public health benefits of keeping linen and wool in separate corners—at least nobody I know. Even the word itself is etymologically obscure. But that's what makes it so important—traditionally--because it is precisely in its failure to satisfy the predilections of the human intellect that the provision asserts itself as the purest manifestation of the Divine Will. You don't do it because you get it, but because God wants it, and what better way to fulfill the mandate of Judaism, which is—traditionally--the service of God than an obedience that passeth understanding?

I'm not going to devote much time either to apology or critique as far as this idea goes. What you think of it is really an indication of your own degree of trust in authority. The best of parenting—at least so I'm told—lies in the ability to initiate your children into a set of behaviors they only gradually come to understand. This approach becomes a rallying cry in the famous phrase the Israelites are reported to have shouted at Mt. Sinai: na'aseh v'nishma—“we will do, and then we will understand.” Conversely, as Hannah Arendt has

taught us, obedience without understanding is the operating principle of totalitarianism, in which the meaning of the rules is irrelevant to their deployment as an assertion of power.

In any case, this isn't why I think shatnez is the most important principle of Judaism. To get at what I have in mind necessitates looking at the matter a little differently. Instead of lingering within these traditional categorizations, I want to examine instead what we can learn about the disallowance of shatnez in the Torah, from those moments in which it is permitted—and vice versa. Because we do find that certain people, in certain places, are not only allowed to mix linen and wool, but required to do so.

It's really not just anybody, and anywhere—there are only two instances, but they are each significant enough to demonstrate the point, and the first, anyhow, is very appropriate to this day on which we recall how the high priest, in all his regalia, would enter into the Holy of Holies to effect purification for all Israel. Because guess what he was wearing when he did that.

In Exodus 28, we read this description of the composition of the Ephod—the bespoke mystical upper garment fabricated for the High Priest to wear at the height of his service: “Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet [woolen] yarn, and of finely twisted linen—the work of skilled hands.” And this isn't the only garment of splendor partaking of the forbidden blend—you might say the whole sacred wardrobe is the pipedream of a shatnez-checker with itchy fingers.

The other example I referred to, while comparatively plebeian, drives the matter home. According to ancient authorities—as opposed to more recent ones who have decided to forbid it as a kind of protective stringency—the tallit, the ritual garment composed of a shawl and fringes—can likewise mix these two materials.

This is all to suggest that while shatnez may be inappropriate for mundane daily life, there's something about it that the Jewish notion of the sacred yearns for.

I'm going to come back around to this point from another direction. In order to understand what shatnez and the Jewish sacred have to do with each other, we need to spend a little time thinking about how Judaism understands what is sacred.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this, especially on Yom Kippur. That's what this day is supposed to be all about—what we hold to be sacred, and how we restore what has been lost in our relationship to whatever that is. In the symbolism of the day, which I've already

referred to, what is sacred is a place, a special room, an innermost chamber, which we call the Holy of Holies. At first, according to our storytelling, this was a tent, within a tent, within a tent, put up and taken down repeatedly as the Israelites wandered through the wilderness between slavery and the Promised Land. Then, twice, it stood at the heart of a magnificent Temple on a sacred mountain in Jerusalem, only to be lost when this building was destroyed by conquerors. Now it's everywhere, or anywhere that it's construction is effected, not by textile or brick-and-mortar, but by the mitzvot themselves—by sacred Jewish practice. As we find written in a famous passage from the Yiddish play *The Dybbuk*, by S.Y. Ansky, which Rabbi Feld has included in the *Lev Shalem* mahzor as a coda to the section known as “The Service of the High Priest”: “Everywhere that a [person] raises [their] eyes to Heaven is the Holiest of Holies.”

Now, this was a point of fascination for me as a child—not the generalized notion that this holiness is everywhere, but the speculative one that on Yom Kippur, this High Priest, in all his *shatnez*, went into a special room and found himself in the presence of God. Really, he was a janitor, and I say that with utmost respect. His responsibility was to cleanse this holy place of the wages of sin, and so restore it as a fitting throne room for the King of Kings. But if he did his job, then God was there, and this fascinated me, because from a certain age onwards I couldn't really imagine God being anywhere. I certainly hadn't seen Him around, and so, at my most cynical, the whole thing started to seem to me like a bit of a con. Sure, with all that smoke and incense swirling around, you could tell the people you saw anything you wanted and if you raised the stakes high enough and put on a pretty good show, most of them were going to believe you.

But, really, I concluded, at the heart of the matter was an empty room. And what do you do with the thought that the most sacred locale of your religious tradition is an empty room.? Well, a certain kind of nihilism can be a natural conclusion, leading you to abandon the way of life that is woven around this vacancy, but another option is that you can decide to use the empty room for storage. You can take a trip around the world, bring back some souvenirs, and display them on a set of shelves you knock up in the Holy of Holies.

This is kind of a tongue-in-cheek way to put it, but what I'm getting at is the description of a period of my own life, in relationship to Judaism, and I wouldn't be surprised if others have passed through something similar: a suspicion that, while it may have structure in abundance, my Jewishness lacked its own indigenous substance, and so this had to be found elsewhere—wherever that might be—either at the expense of what I had come from, or in order to imbue it with vitality.

And then, to make a long story very short, I rediscovered the Talmud. I spoke of this in passing on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, but if we have all developed our own little COVID obsessions then one of mine has surely been binge listening to Talmud-study podcasts. At a certain point, relatively recently, I took a moment to ask myself why I was doing this, and the answer that came back most clearly was: because it is SO Jewish. It is something that we carry that we didn't get from anyone else, both in content and in form; a roiling multi-century debate about things like shatnez, that nobody else cares about, that can precipitate conversation and trains-of-thought that take you to the most unusual places, as I believe I may be demonstrating today.

I don't know if it counts as God showing up in the Holy of Holies, but, at the very least, you could say it's like an old box of His stuff that you found in there when you went to clean it out, and it was so intriguing that you dropped the broom for a while and started leafing through it.

But it's not just hok—it's not just Judaism for Judaism's sake. In the methodology of our traditions of learning and debate—at their best—there is, indeed, something genuinely sacred—something that I think is well-symbolized by the image of the priest entering the most holy place in a mixed garment that is abjured in mundane life.

As I was reflecting on these ideas, a thought came to me that I believed for a time was wildly original, until I did some research and found that others had stumbled upon it as well. Think about this: where else in the narrative of the Bible do you find a battle raging between linen and wool? You may strike on the answer if you take a moment to remember where these substances come from. I actually asked my son a day or two ago if he knew where wool came from, and he said: sheep. And then I asked: what about linen? And he said: different sheep? But of course, it's from flax, which is an agricultural product, which leads us to the hypothesis that the tension existing between the two parties of shatnez actually originated between Cain the farmer and Abel the shepherd.

It would make a good deal of sense then that as we go about our daily lives, we'd want to keep this tension from simmering up again, because we know where it led. And so we say: linen is linen, and wool is wool, and never the twain shall meet. We keep them in their lanes, or their silos, as we say today. And in so doing, we endeavor to maintain a certain degree of order.

But, as we would also say today, this means keeping them in their bubbles, keeping them on their own separate newsfeeds, immuring them in their own realities without ever encouraging the risk of meaningful encounter, that, who knows, if it's handled well, might

lead to something more fruitful than fratricide. And where might we imagine this could take place? In the precinct where the High Priest ventures to wear conflict emblazoned on his clothing—in the place where we learn the virtue of Talmudic back-and-forth—in Jewish sacred space.

I learned another helpful term, recently, and I want to make it clear I learned it from a progressive activist, and not a Fox News commentator. We talk a lot about “safe space” she told me, but for real progress we need something else—we need “brave space”. We need an arena where people will set ground rules not just for their unruffled sense of well-being, but for how they are going to bring something real about themselves into each others presence, without the promise of contentment, but with the trust that everyone will be given the chance to speak, respond, and grow.

I appreciated this terminology--“brave space”-- and would further suggest that we might make the same point by saying: we need a place for shatnez.

This is what we have the potential to offer each other, wherever we lift our eyes up to Heaven. This is what the Jewish sacred yearns for: the bravery to embrace contradiction, whether we acknowledge it in ourselves or encounter it in each other; an opportunity to unloosen the shackles we place about ourselves and each other for order in everyday life—not haphazardly, but with ritual care—and risk our way towards authenticity and real relationship.

And what could be more important than that?

## **Jonah and Zero-Sum Thinking**

### **David Mednicoff ~ Yom Kippur Day**

Because I've been honored to speak about and chant the book of Jonah at Yom Kippur Minhah for much of my life, saying something new each year is always an interesting task. One challenge I face interpreting the book is that the title character doesn't come off very well. To borrow a lit crit term, Jonah isn't a fully fleshed-out protagonist. Although Jonah runs away from serving God as a Prophet, he's not a coward, as he volunteers to be thrown in the sea when he fears he has endangered the boat in which he escaped God. He's amazingly effective as a prophet, both in serving as a mouthpiece for a divine warning, and in seeing his prophecy move the entire population of Nineveh. Yet this makes his subsequent sadness or self-pity confusing, given what a good job he did.

Since Jonah's overall character is unclear, I thought I'd reflect on the few obvious traits he shows. His single clearest characteristic is stubborn-ness, or close-mindedness. Jonah is stubborn about rejecting his prophetic mission. Inside the big fish, he's stubborn in his faith in God. Later, he's close-minded about Nineveh's repentance. So one way to see this book is as an exegesis on stubborn-ness.

Now, as is often the case, the germ of an idea that I had about my remarks today connected pretty directly with a core theme of one of Rabbi Weiner's Rosh Hashana sermons. He hinted on the first day that binary or opposite ideas don't necessarily have truth or goodness on only one side of the binary, using Sesame Street characters embodying "closed" and "open" as his focus. As the parent of two young adults, I'm sorry I lack fresh kids' tv show characters to deploy as examples. But I still want to pick up on the theme of zero-sum binaries generally, and stubborn-ness specifically. Spoiler alert: I don't think that the trait of stubborn-ness or closed-mindedness is always bad, even if it can manifest in destructive ways, as we see with Jonah.

In fact, in recent years, I bet that many of us feel that being stubborn or even closing our minds to certain things can be useful. For example, I imagine that the inspiring work that many of you have done around social justice sometimes means closing your mind to the possibility that the goals that motivate you are off-target or impossible to realize. One of the things that has sustained my soul through the pandemic, working to improve my ability to play complex piano works of Beethoven and Brahms, among other classical music, has only been possible because these two great composers had very stubborn convictions about what music should be and how it should evolve. The Rabbi's eulogy Sunday of our late friend Yaffa Gunner underscored that she could be usefully single-minded in pursuit of what she considered important. And, keeping our minds closed to the pseudo-science and conspiracy theories that have nurtured resistance to the COVID



vaccine has been important to the health of people in our community and region overall.

The Haftorah text, and more so, the High Holiday prayers, also see stubborn-ness as sometimes helpful. The verses from Micah that end the Haftorah include a description of God in verse 18 as *“lo hecehzeek l’ad apo, ki chafetz chesed hu.”* God does not hold onto anger, the text says. That is, God is –not stubborn about being mad. The same verse continues to describe God as an entity “who relishes or desires mercy.” In short, God is stubborn about being kind.

This idea of God being not just kind, but stubborn in kindness, comes up more directly in the central Yom Kippur prayer known as the “13 Midot,” the 13 qualities of God that we say in each of the Yom Kippur Amidah repetitions, and the Torah service. Part of this text actually is quoted ironically by Jonah to express his frustration with God’s clemency towards Nineveh. But the full 13 Midot has a relevant phrase among God’s attributes that again uses the term Chesed, “mercy” that’s in Micah. The phrase is *“notzar chesed la’alifim,”* “holding on to mercy for thousands of generations.” In other words, a key, and comforting, attribute of God is God being almost eternally close-minded in kindness towards people.

If stubborn-ness under some circumstances can be helpful, Jewish texts mostly see it as negative. Through much of the Torah, the Jewish people are described by God and Moses using a compound Hebrew synonym for stubborn, *“am k’shai oref,”* a stiff-necked people. When we recite the collective Yom Kippur confession of our sins, the *al-Chayt* prayer, our Mahzor deploys as a sin the English word “stubbornness” twice, first translating the Torah term “stiff-necked,” and second using the term *“azut metsach,”* meaning “raising up our forehead.” These corporeal metaphors of being unable to move ourselves from a haughty position suggest a type of closed-mindedness or stubborn-ness in which someone sticks to their perspective in an unyielding, unconstructive way.

Jonah, too, seems to exemplify a destructive sort of stubbornness when he is so angry at the Ninevites’ repentance that he tells God he wants to die. Indeed, according to the story, Jonah moves his stiff neck more to enjoy a shade tree than to see what –actually- happens to Nineveh. The construction of the story here though shows Jonah as someone too stubborn to see the renewal of possibility and moral capacity that Nineveh, and life generally, represent.

So there’s a sort of stubborn-ness that corresponds with a polarizing tendency to be unable to see the good in others. And this sort of close-mindedness is destructive enough that it surfaces in our Mahzor as one of our collective sins. Here is an example of how our ancient texts can have striking contemporary relevance, or perhaps how little humans have evolved ethically as a species, depending on whether you see the cup as half-full or

half-empty. There are times that closing one's mind or being stubborn in one's views is helpful. Yet the polarized, even nasty, nature of so much of national political discourse in the US today is a malignant magnification of the harm in Jonah's specific close-mindedness towards the Ninevites' potential for decency. This is exactly the malignance that God tries to help Jonah get over, and it is familiar to we who read the Haftorah today.

The reason I framed my remarks in terms of being suspicious that one side of binaries like being closed or stubborn is always bad is indeed that, apparently in Jonah's time, and even today, we are socialized in many ways to think of things in zero-sum terms. For Jonah, the Ninevites have been associated with evil. So he is stuck in a binary in which he doesn't want to stay alive if he must accept their basic humanity. On a myriad of issues, because it has proven all too easy for some influential leaders and people to see the world in terms of simple binaries, we divide in distinct, debilitating and destructive ways.

People trained as political scientists like myself have assimilated an argument that political systems that allow for individual rights and free expression are more likely to be stable when divides or cleavages are cross-cutting, instead of segmental. What does this mean? Simply put, when our varying views and identities don't all line up on the same side of a political affiliation, a democratic system is more likely to thrive. If all of the things that we believe tend to skew along the same political party lines, a polarized and potentially unstable system emerges. This is a major reason that, for example, countries in which politics almost completely follows particular religious affiliation tend to have trouble with effective governance, as has been true in contemporary Lebanon, and more recently, Iraq.

New York Times contributor Thomas Edsall yesterday had a column yesterday called "Abortion has never been just about Abortion." The column uses diverse arguments from social scientists that trace the rigid divisiveness of the abortion issue today to conscious efforts from decades ago by some former pro segregationist politicians and evangelicals on the right. In the wake of desegregation, these right-wingers saw themselves as more likely to retain their political influence if they focused more around a possibly morally ambiguous issue like abortion than if they championed illegal racial segregation. Edsall marshalls evidence that American polarization has happened in part through political agency, which bundled together what had been cross-cutting issues around partisan lines to amplify zero-sum thinking and close minded segmentalism across political divides.

As a card-carrying political scientist, I hope you find useful this foray into the sacred texts of Arend Lijphart and his successors on how divisive politics grow. Yet my basic point, which we all experience, is that polarization, if anything, seems to have gotten worse than in Jonah's time. We see zero-sum thinking in reality TV shows; we see it in our politics and legal system, where there is typically a winner and a loser. Zero-sumness is a staple of much mainstream economics.

How do we counter pervasive zero-sum thinking? More specifically, what can help us sort out when stubborn-ness or closed-mindedness can veer into dangerous divisiveness, as we all saw early this year when some people's determination to see our national election results as false without evidence led to deadly violence at the US Capitol? A good answer to this would take many hours, and prolong our fast much too long. But, Jonah's second major personality trait suggests at least a partial answer to when stubborn-ness can become toxic, and what might counter it. Throughout the Book, Jonah is alone, and seems lonely. Isolated from others, whether on a boat, inside the belly of a big fish, or outside of the great city of Nineveh, Jonah cannot feel compassion for others. Nor can he unpack and appreciate the diverse experiences and affiliations that push his identity to become stuck in a zero-sum binary.

I just read a searing investigative account of anti-Semitism and white supremacy in the US, the Jewish journalist Talia Lavin's book, *Cultural Warlords*. Lavin finds that the predominantly male Jew-haters and racists, whom she learns about by creating fake personas in the dark web chat rooms they use, tend to share challenges finding communities in real life. Their ideas become stubbornly polarized in part because they don't have to be tested in open or diverse human gatherings. We need human community and contact, as Emily Bloch reminded us so movingly this morning.

Now I don't mean to imply another rigid zero-sum binary of community versus alone-ness. Indeed, communities themselves can be echo chambers that sometime reinforce the sort of stubborn-ness that polarizes. What I do think is that community can help us see when our stubborn ideas may be harmful or non-productive, and open the brave space the Rabbi described earlier today. And, by community, I mean face-to-face community, not the simulacrum of community that the Internet can approximate, where there is often little interpersonal accountability.

This need we have for others who might call into question some pieces of our close-mindedness has made the pandemic a special challenge. My heart goes out to those of you who have experienced loneliness and isolation during these past months. Being cut off from others can turn stubborn-ness into destructive divisiveness, as we see happening with Jonah.

Given this, I want to conclude by offering sincere thanks for everything those of you in the JCA leadership have done to keep our community strong, vibrant and connected during these dark times. Your efforts have meant a great deal to me personally, and helped me from feeling too disconnected from community in my occasional spiritual or political stubborn-ness. Thank you, and a hearty *gmar chatima tovah* to each of you!

## **Closing Gate/Open Heart** **Leslie Lorber ~ Yom Kippur Day**

Ashrei yoshvei veitecha. Happy are those who dwell in Your house. We are reminded even as we approach the end of our Days of Awe, 10 days of searching within, asking for and offering forgiveness for those actions which were less than desirable, we are to still hold on to the happiness of feeling close to the Divine. We dwell within our own bodies while living here on this Earth. With the closing of the gates fast approaching, we may feel some sense of urgency within, perhaps a tightening or clenching in our bodies, some anxiety. Today we recited 'Pardon us, Forgive us, Grant us atonement' for our mistakes, for when we have missed the mark. We may feel tired and raw, our hearts may have opened a bit or a lot, and we may have set an intention, a kavannah, to make some changes that may result in being better, kinder beings as we enter this new year. As the day is coming to a close, can we hold the anxiety of whether we have repented enough along with the desire to do better at the same time? Does one overshadow the other? Can we resolve to do better no matter which book we have been written in?

We are taught that on Rosh Hashanah, Adam, or man, was born. Breath, Neshamah, was breathed into Adam's nostrils. The gift of breath, available to us while we are alive, can help us to stay aware at each moment. Aware of both the anxiety and the desire and how that might feel within. We use our breath to help us to stay present, letting go of the judgment, accepting whatever arises, and doing our best to practice staying aware so that when we are not sitting in meditation we might be a little more awake to the choices we make in treating others as well as ourselves. So as we prepare for the closing of this day, we will take a few minutes to use that gift of breath to become truly present within our body, our dwelling, perhaps touching into our hearts as we approach the final prayers of this, the holiest day of the year.

We begin with the breath and the body. In whatever position you are now, notice your body being held firmly by the gravitational pull of this Earth. You are supported. If you are comfortable, allow your eyes to close or if they are open, let the eyes relax into an unfocused gaze. Allow your attention to come within. Notice the breath. Where do you feel it? It may be strongest at the tip of your nostrils, or at the back of your throat. Maybe you notice the expansion and contraction of your chest or back as your breath enters and leaves your lungs. Just notice. Try not to control the breath, simply be aware of feeling it. You are being breathed. If breathing is difficult for whatever reason, notice instead the pressure of your body on whatever surface it rests. Feel that pressure, where is it stronger, where is it less intense?

Now notice if any of that anxiety or urgency with the closing of the gates is present. How does that feel within your body - perhaps there is some tightness or a pulling somewhere. Breathe into it if you can and imagine soothing it, allowing it to relax, to expand into some warmth that spreads throughout your body. With each breath, each moment, let the feeling of anxiety or urgency begin to subside.

Returning to your breath or the pressure of your body, allow any intentions, any desires for this coming year to come to your awareness. Perhaps an insight came to you over these 10 days of T'Shuvah. Hold them in mind for a few moments. Letting them bubble up as they may. With these kavannot in mind, allow them to grow wings, release them, let them go, knowing that they will stay with you, guiding you in your choices going forward.

Return once again to your breath or the pressure of your body, and simply rest in the present. If you get pulled into thought, simply return, T'Shuvah, bring your attention to your breath or body, without judgment. Grateful, for this gift of being alive. Happy to be dwelling within our bodies.

As we approach the gates, keep breathing, and offer yourself some compassion for any discomfort which may yet arise. Just as you might comfort a friend, extend that same caring to yourself, and allow your heart to soften, knowing the Divine is always there for us no matter what the position of the gates.

Bring your attention once again to your breath, taking in a full breath and beginning to notice any sounds around you. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes, if they are closed, and take in the room or space around you, returning your awareness back to our service.

G'mar Chatimah Tova.

**Taking Care**  
**Jena Schwartz ~ Yom Kippur Day**

The wringing of hands  
and the ringing of bells--  
both are true.

Sometimes it washes over me,  
that life is what happens  
mostly between the two:

Neither disaster nor dream,  
but full and real,  
ordinary and complex,  
as simple as a good-morning kiss,  
a bike ride to town, an exuberant child,  
a moment in the sun alone,  
two giddy children  
preparing for the grand finale  
of their improvised show,  
a second cup of coffee,  
a real-time experience  
of closing one door  
and watching another open,  
trusting that life intends to take care of us,  
so long as we take care of ourselves, and each other.