

5787 High Holiday Sermons

A collection of High Holiday sermons

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Recollecting Hope: From Shadow to Light

Twenty-five years ago today, I stood in Dachau.

I was there with a group of rabbis and Jewish journalists, guests of the German government for the opening of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. We had spent several days visiting Jewish communities in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Munich, learning about Germany's terrible past and its remarkable Jewish rebirth.

It was September 11, 2001.

That morning, we had gone to Dachau to confront one of the darkest chapters in human history. A Jewish survivor led us through the camp. The place was almost antiseptically clean, and yet everywhere we looked we could feel the presence of the more than 200,000 people imprisoned there and the 30,000 who were murdered.

We were near the crematorium when a guide came toward us and told us that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center.

Then another.

Then the Pentagon.

Our tour ended abruptly. We returned to the bus, desperate for information. Back in Munich, we found a television and became news junkies—watching CNN and the BBC, making phone calls, trying to reach our families in New York and Colorado.

We went back to the hotel and said Kaddish—for the victims of the Holocaust and now for the victims of terrorism.

The juxtaposition was almost unbearable.

Dachau.

September 11.

The same human capacity for hatred and destruction, separated by decades but connected by our vulnerability.

And yet, twenty-five years later, when I think about that day, I don't want simply to **remember** it.

I want to **recollect** it.

There is a difference.

One of the names our tradition gives Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaZikaron*—the Day of Remembrance. But I have come to prefer the word **recollect**.

To remember can be effortless. A childhood vacation may simply come to mind.

To recall requires a little more work. You search your memory for the name of the hotel, the person sitting beside you, the details you haven't thought about in years.

And to recollect is more powerful still: to bring something back into conscious awareness.

That is what I want us to do tonight.

Not merely remember September 11.

I want us to recall where we were.

Who we were with.

Whom we called.

What we feared.

What we learned.

Because recollection is the beginning of *teshuvah*—return.

We cannot change the future unless we are willing to bring the past consciously into the present.

And twenty-five years later, I believe there is one lesson above all others that we need to recollect:

We must choose hope over fear.

But there is a danger in the way we remember September 11.

Memory can heal us, but memory can also be weaponized.

This twenty-fifth anniversary is being used by some to stir up anti-Muslim sentiment. Others are trying to revive antisemitic conspiracy theories. They take a tragedy that should have taught us about the dangers of hatred and use it to manufacture more hatred.

That cannot be our Jewish response.

If we are truly going to **recollect** 9/11—to bring it back into conscious awareness—we must ask not only, *What happened to us?*

We must also ask:

What did we learn?

And perhaps the more important question:

What kind of people did we become because of it?

The terrorists who attacked America were Muslim extremists.

But Muslims were not the terrorists.

Muslim Americans were among the victims of 9/11. Muslim first responders ran into the burning buildings. Muslim doctors treated the injured. Muslim firefighters and police officers served alongside their fellow Americans.

And in the twenty-five years since 9/11, countless Muslim Americans have responded to Islamophobia not by retreating from American life, but by reaching across religious boundaries.

They joined interfaith organizations.

They turned lemons into lemonade.

They took an experience that could have driven them into isolation and used it instead to build bridges.

There is a profound Jewish lesson in that:

We don't choose the darkness that comes into our lives.

But we do choose what we do with it.

And perhaps this is where Jews and Muslims—and **all** people of conscience—have something important to learn from one another.

Because today both Islamophobia and antisemitism are rising.

And the answer to one cannot be indifference to the other.

When one minority is targeted, all of us are made less safe.

When conspiracy theories about Jews spread, Muslims should care.

When Muslims are demonized because of the actions of extremists, Jews should care.

When any community is told that it doesn't belong, every community becomes a little less secure.

That is why this twenty-fifth anniversary can become something more than an anniversary.

It can become an opportunity for *teshuvah*.

An opportunity to reframe what happened—not to forget the horror, not to minimize the evil, and certainly not to excuse terrorism—but to ask what kind of society we want to build in its aftermath.

Will we allow September 11 to remain a source of fear and division?

Or can we transform its memory into a commitment to greater understanding, greater vigilance against hatred, and greater solidarity among communities?

That is the choice.

And that brings me back to Munich.

That night, something happened that I have never forgotten.

We walked into Marienplatz, the great gothic central square of Munich. Thousands of Germans had gathered there in solidarity with Americans.

The German flag was flying at half-mast.

People held candles.

And then, beneath the shadow of a city with an unspeakable history,

Germans began singing:

We shall overcome.

We shall walk hand in hand.

We shall live in peace.

We are not afraid.

We shall all be free.

I remember thinking:

How do we get through this?

How does a person get through tragedy?

How does a community survive the darkness?

The answer I saw that night was simple:

We come together.

Fear isolates us.

Hope gathers us.

And that lesson has particular meaning for us tonight because this year we celebrate the **thirteenth birthday of the Thailand Progressive Jewish Congregation.**

Thirteen.

In Jewish tradition, thirteen is when a child becomes responsible for helping to carry the tradition.

And after thirteen years, TPJC has become something more than a place where Jews and their loved ones and friends happen to gather.

It has become a *kehilla*.

A community.

A Jewish home.

For thirteen years, people have come here as strangers and discovered friends. We have celebrated together, mourned together, learned together, prayed together, laughed together—and sometimes, as every good Jewish community does, disagreed together!

That is not incidental to Jewish life. It **is** Jewish life.

Because when tragedy comes, we discover something that we sometimes forget when life is going well:

None of us is meant to carry life alone.

We mourn together.

We pray together.

We celebrate together.

We help one another find our way back into the light.

That is why community is not simply comforting.

Community is how we survive tragedy.

And after thirteen years, TPJC itself is a testimony to hope.

Think about that.

A Progressive Jewish community in Thailand.

A community that exists across continents, cultures, and languages.

A inclusive community that says, simply by gathering:

We are still here. Not merely surviving, but thriving!

And *we are still here* is one of the most powerful statements of **hope** a Jew can make.

There is another Jewish lesson that helps us understand this.

There is an ancient midrash, rabbinic legend, about Adam and Eve that I love.

On the first night of creation, Adam watches the sun go down.

He has never experienced darkness before.

He becomes terrified.

He thinks perhaps the darkness is permanent.

Perhaps the world is ending.

So Adam stays awake through the night.

And then, slowly, the horizon begins to brighten.

The sun rises.

Adam realizes that darkness is not forever.

Later, when winter comes and the days grow shorter, Adam becomes frightened again. But this time he does something different.

He takes wood and makes a fire.

Humanity's first response to darkness is light.

That is a beautiful lesson for our lives.

We cannot always prevent the darkness.

But we can decide what we will do when darkness arrives.

We can sit in fear.

Or we can light a fire.

Twenty-five years ago, after September 11, I asked myself what I could possibly do.

I wasn't a firefighter.

I wasn't a police officer.

I wasn't going to climb into the rubble of the World Trade Center.

But I knew I had to do something.

I decided that if people were willing to run **toward** the Towers while everyone else was running away, I wanted to be there for them.

That decision eventually led me to volunteer as a law enforcement chaplain with the Denver Police Department, and later with the Secret Service. In my almost quarter century of service, I've been with officers in moments of joy and in moments of sorrow.

I discovered that chaplaincy is often about standing beside people in the shadows until they can see a little light again. And when the first Moslem chaplain, Ahmed Sali came aboard I went out of my way to welcome him—I even gave him one of my prized duty flashlights!

And in reaching out in service, I learnt that there is a difference between **shadow** and **shade**.

A shadow is where darkness falls.

But shade is where we go to find shelter.

The same darkness can produce either fear or refuge depending upon what we do with it.

That is the choice before us.

And it is not only an American choice.

Here in Thailand, you know something about terrorism and fear.

For decades, communities in southern Thailand have experienced violence from Islamist insurgents. (In Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat), ordinary people have lived with bombings, shootings and uncertainty.

(In 2017, two bombs exploded at the Big C shopping mall in Pattani during peak hours, wounding 56 people.)

The danger has evolved, at times connecting local insurgency to a global jihadist ideology.

And yet the people of southern Thailand continue to live, work, raise children, shop, pray and build their communities.

They refuse to allow violence to define them.

That is courage.

Not the absence of fear.

The decision that fear will not have the final word.

And today we face other kinds of darkness.

Antisemitism is rising again.

The line between legitimate political disagreement of Israeli policies and hatred of Jews has become increasingly blurred.

We have witnessed horrifying violence in places close to my home like Boulder, Colorado and other places that I visited on last year's world cruise in Bondi Beach, Australia.

We have seen people who claim merely to oppose Israel cross the line into celebrating the suffering or death of Jews.

We have watched our political world become more polarized, more authoritarian, and less willing to listen to people with whom we disagree.

And I know I am stepping into political territory here.

But on the High Holy Days, I don't think we are called to be partisan.

We are called to be **moral**.

Judaism teaches us that *teshuvah* means turning.

Turning away from hatred.

Turning away from indifference.

Turning toward justice.

Toward compassion.

Toward community.

Toward hope.

Hope is work.

Hope is action.

Hope is showing up.

Hope is lighting another candle.

There is one more thing I remember from Munich.

The synagogue that had once stood in the heart of the city had been destroyed by the Nazis in June of 1938.

Today, a magnificent new synagogue and Jewish community center stands in Munich.

The original synagogue was destroyed.

The Jewish community was devastated.

But Jewish life returned.

A new Ohel Jakob synagogue was built.

A Jewish community gathered again.

And the German government helped fund the rebuilding.

There is something almost miraculous about that.

The Nazis tried to erase Jewish life from Germany.
And generations later, Jews were once again praying in the center of Munich.
That is *teshuvah* in architectural form.
The past is not erased.
The wound remains part of the story.
But something new is built upon it.
And that is what we do as Jews.
We don't pretend the darkness never happened.
We remember it.
We recall it.
We recollect it.
And then we build.
So tonight, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of September 11, I ask you to do
something more demanding than remembering.

Recollect

Bring back into conscious awareness where you were.
Who was with you.
Who you loved.
What you learned about the fragility of life.
And then ask yourself:

What will I do with that memory?

Light a candle, be the shade, embrace hope!

Because we are the people of hope:
Israel's national anthem is *Hatikvah*.

The Hope.

Od lo avdah tikvateinu.

Our hope is not yet lost.

Not because the world is safe.

Not because darkness has disappeared.

Not because we know what tomorrow will bring.

But because we know what **we** can bring to tomorrow.

We can bring courage.

We can bring compassion.

We can bring community.

We can bring light.

And when the darkness comes—as it inevitably will—may we remember the lesson of Adam on that first night.

The sun will rise.

And until it does, we can light a fire.

So let us enter this New Year 5787, TPJC's bar mitsvah year, not without fear, but **with the courage to choose hope despite our fear.**

Let us be one another's shade.

Let us be one another's light.

Let us strengthen the bonds of this remarkable community that has carried us for thirteen years and will, God willing, carry us for many more.

And let us say together the words we have spoken for generations:

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek.

Be strong.

Be strong.

And let us strengthen one another.

L'Shanah Tovah. Sawadee Pi My!

May this be a year of remembrance that leads to recollection, recollection that leads to *teshuvah*, and *teshuvah* that leads us back to one another.

And may we never forget:

Hope is not the absence of darkness.

Hope is the light we choose to kindle together.

Rosh Hashana 2026

I have been getting notices about my 50th high school reunion. I remember my days in high school. It wasn't exactly a great time in my life. I was lousy at sports, and I didn't find it appropriate to smoke marijuana with the cool kids behind the Upper School building during free period. My friends were pretty much smarter than me, since this was the Albuquerque Academy, a fancy prep school. And to show you how totally out of step I was with my classmates, I took my classes seriously and did my homework. "What a loser," I thought of myself back then.

What eluded me during that period was that this school pushed me to develop an intellectual rigor and self-discipline that served me well in college and prepared me for rabbinical school. I could sit, focus, and study in rabbinical school longer than any of my peers — skills I honed at the Academy. From all of that, I was ordained in 1986, and I earned the right to serve the Jewish community for 35 years: the honor of a lifetime.

I have been out of high school for half a century. When I look in the mirror for that 18-year-old, the senior citizen looking back at me smirks and even laughs. But I look in the mirror nonetheless, because I can't figure myself out without remembering the before-times — and all the times in my life: not just school and profession, but the many blessings I have received from my marriage, kids, grandkids, friends, and community. Without remembering back then, even 50 years ago, I don't fully know who I am today and how I got here.

That is why Judaism understands memory as a divine gift and obligation. We are commanded to remember: it is a central mitzvah. To be a Jew is to remember. To be a Jew who knows what God demands of us now requires that we remember who we were as Jews in the past.

Rosh Hashana is also known as Yom HaZikaron: the Day of Remembrance. We use that root, *zachar*, "to remember," in many places: *Zichronot* in our Musaf today; the *Eleh Ezkerah* service on Yom Kippur, remembering our martyrs; *Zecher Yetziat Mitzrayim*, remembering leaving Egypt; *Yizkor*, remembering our loved ones who have passed away. Or the verse in Deuteronomy 32:7: "*Zechor Yemot Olam*" — "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations."

And the most ominous of all the verses of remembrance, in Deuteronomy 25:17–19: "*Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek*" — "Remember what Amalek did to you along the way, when you came out of Egypt. How he met you by the way, and struck you at your rear, all who were feeble and weary....." The passage ends: "Do not forget." We have had enemies in the past and we have them still in the present. "Do not forget" can also mean: pay attention and protect yourself!

America 250

This year is the 250th anniversary of this country's founding. Go back 50 years to 1976 when I graduated high school: the nation's Bicentennial. It was a bad time in this country: the fallout from Watergate, Vietnam, the Yom Kippur War, oil shocks, stagflation. No one wanted to celebrate much of anything in 1976, and we didn't, really. Fifty years later, this year, no one was

much in the mood to celebrate either. Some fireworks, a UFC match at the White House, a kind of a fair on the National Mall.

But I think in both instances — 1976 and now — we missed a huge opportunity: an opportunity to remember with some historical unbiased clarity, to study our nation's past. Our country has had a long, unique, and distinguished history. Even with all its problems and shortcomings. Shouldn't we know more about it?

I am no expert in American history, but I do know a little about American Jewish history. For us to know who we are as American Jews today, we need to know something of our past here in this country.

So let me start with two simple questions.

One. Over its history, what has this country done for us, its Jewish citizens?

And the second question: What have we, the Jews, done for our country?

These, I think, are appropriate questions for America 250. It is our obligation to know this history — as Americans, and even more so as American Jews.

Let's Begin

There was a Jewish kid, named Israel Beilin, born in Belarus in 1888, whose parents brought him to America in 1893, fleeing pogroms. His father was a cantor. They settled on the Lower East Side and lived in poverty. He had no formal education and taught himself music.

In 1918, while serving in the American Army in World War I, he wrote a little song, put it aside, and it was picked up some twenty years later and sung on the radio by Kate Smith. She sang it on Armistice Day, November 11, 1938 — ironically, the day after Kristallnacht in Germany. The song was called "God Bless America." Yes, that one: Land that I love, stand beside her and guide her.

The song went viral, one might say. It became so popular that people wanted to replace the Star-Spangled Banner with it. Mr. Beilin's name was Americanized, probably because of antisemitism in the industry. His new chosen name: Irving Berlin.

And I suspect Mr. Berlin meant it when he wrote "God Bless America," as America blessed this particular Jew and so many others like him, and gave him the opportunity to make it here. "God Bless America," he wrote, as America truly had blessed the Jews.

I am not going to whitewash the history of the Jews in this sermon. Antisemitism was present in this country from the beginning and manifested itself in a variety of ways. However, this is also true: in all Jewish history, the Jews have never had it so good, for so long, as they have had it in the United States of America.

The first Jews arrived on these shores in 1654 — 23 of them, by ship, to New Amsterdam. Peter Stuyvesant, Director-General of New Amsterdam, complained to his bosses at the Dutch West India Company that these Jews were "deceitful," "very repugnant," and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ."

His bosses back in Amsterdam essentially said: "Stuyvesant, are you kidding?" The company knew the Jews who had fled the Inquisition in Portugal and settled in Amsterdam around 1590 — their community was among the most productive and successful in the city's history. The company told Stuyvesant: "The Jews stay." And stay they did, to this very day.

The Founding

Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, and ten years later he wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which, in effect, protected the rights of Jews among other faiths. This influenced the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

To this day, the First Amendment has protected American Jews and Judaism — it is why we can hold this High Holiday service in this building, in this city, without harassment from government officials, who may not like our views on God, religion, or our commitment to the State of Israel.

George Washington, in 1790, wrote to the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. He wrote: "The citizens of the United States of America... all possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship."

He continued: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."

In other words, Jews, like all citizens, enjoy inherent natural rights by law, not by tolerance. Elsewhere in history and going back thousands of years, Jews did not enjoy liberty of conscience or immunities of citizenship. Rather, they were second-class citizens in the best of times, and demeaned, persecuted, and murdered in the worst of times — which was most of the time.

But here, according to Washington himself, that would not be the case, by law: he wrote, "For happily the Government of the United States... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." For the first time in Jewish history, that applied also to the Jews.

For the most part, over the past 250 years — with significant exceptions, one I will get to in a moment — Washington was prophetic. Protections for Jews remained more or less intact and American Jews flourished.

Ambient Antisemitism

It is of great concern to us that the moment we're in now may be one of those exceptions. Rabbi Shulman spoke powerfully yesterday about rising antisemitism and what our response should be. I want to take a slightly different tack and come to a similar conclusion.

Yael Silverstein, a research fellow at NYU's Center for Antisemitism, writes of what she calls "ambient antisemitism." She describes that as "a societal climate in which antisemitism becomes normalized, where mainstream cultural and institutional cues signal that Jewish identity is less legitimate, less protected, or less welcome ...seeping quietly into the atmosphere of everyday life... in classrooms, offices, and public discourse."

I certainly feel that. Don't you?

And Silverstein may even be understating the problem. There are public figures today, making bold antisemitic proclamations, as there always have been in this country. What's different now, at least in my lifetime, is that they do so without shame and without, for them, adverse consequences.

They are normalizing antisemitism, and that, my friends, puts a target on our backs.

Let's Get Back to Our History Lesson

I spoke of what this country has given to us: now, let's focus on what we have given back.

Jews in America

There is no aspect of human endeavor in this country to which Jews have not made a meaningful contribution that improved life for all Americans.

I already mentioned Irving Berlin, and that barely scratches the surface of the Jewish contribution to entertainment — bringing joy, laughter, and inspiration to millions. If you've ever enjoyed a motion picture, from Dorothy saying "There's no place like home" to an extra-terrestrial saying "ET phone home," Jews built the industry that created it.

Many Jews in the early 20th century had limited job options, again, due to antisemitism, so they created a whole new industry, ...the movies.

Sam Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, and brothers: Hirsz, Aron, Shmuel and Jacob Wonsel who changed their last names to Warner. Jews built Paramount, Fox, Universal, MGM, Warner Brothers and Columbia. Most of these founders were themselves, immigrants.

Jewish actors and actresses since then number in the hundreds — Adam Sandler, in his funny song, covers a few of these. Here are some more: Dustin Hoffman, Rob Reiner, Natalie Portman...and Adam Sandler.

Comedy

Classic Jewish comedians made generations of Americans laugh: George Burns, the Marx Brothers, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, Sarah Silverman, Jon Stewart.

Comedian Dave Chappelle, in his 2022 SNL monologue, made an obnoxious remark about "there being a lot of Jews in Hollywood," smirking, as if he were confirming some kind of secret conspiracy — knowing full well he's a descendant of the Jewish stand-up comedy tradition that came before him.

Without them as models, there would be no Dave Chappelle. So, shame on him!

On Broadway

On Broadway, in addition to Irving Berlin: there was Rodgers and Hammerstein, who created Oklahoma!, South Pacific, and The Sound of Music.

West Side Story, in which there was not a single Jewish character, was created by four Jews — music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, script by Arthur Laurents, choreography by Jerome Robbins.

Judy Garland sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" — music and lyrics by Jews.

Fiddler on the Roof, one of the most successful shows in Broadway history — the creative team, needless to say, all Jews.

Literature

American Jews have also written serious, acclaimed literature: Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer, both Nobel laureates; Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud and some more recent authors: Michael Chabon, Cynthia Ozick, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer.

Popular Music

Jews were fully engaged in popular music: Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel — Paul and Art grew up near each other in Jewish households in Queens.

Carole King, born Carol Joan Klein, in Brooklyn in 1942, grew up in a Jewish home and wrote and performed Tapestry, one of the best-selling albums of all time by a woman artist.

Sports

Every Yom Kippur, I think of Sandy Koufax, the best pitcher of his day, who wouldn't pitch the first game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Mark Spitz, a proud and connected Jew, won seven gold medals in swimming at the 1972 Munich Olympics — just days before Palestinian terrorists kidnapped and killed eleven Israeli athletes.

Gymnasts Aly Raisman and Kerri Strug.

And here is my favorite American Jewish sports story of all time: Hank Greenberg, a Jew, who played for the Detroit Tigers and was one of the greatest hitters of his era.

His biggest moment came in 1945, when he won the American League pennant for the Tigers with a ninth-inning grand slam, and then led the team to a World Series win.

But that's not why I love the story.

Greenberg had already served in the Army Air Corps and been honorably discharged just before Pearl Harbor. He could have simply gone back to baseball. Instead, he reenlisted and served in the China-Burma-India Theater, helping oversee construction of the B-29 bomber bases used against Imperial Japan.

When he was finally discharged in 1945, he hadn't played baseball in five seasons, and most people assumed he was washed up. That was the year he hit the grand slam and became a hero in the war effort and at bat in Detroit.

The Press

The Jewish Ochs-Sulzberger family bought a struggling newspaper in 1896 and turned it into one I've read every day for 43 years, which irritates me utterly these days — but I still read it: The New York Times.

Joseph Pulitzer, a Hungarian-Jewish immigrant, built the New York World and endowed the Pulitzer Prize. Mortimer Zuckerman owned the New York Daily News and U.S. News & World Report.

Now, there is a vile antisemitic conspiracy theory, straight out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which claims Jews secretly control the press and everything else. That is a lie!

Jews founded these papers which served their readership with hard-hitting journalism for over a century. Nothing secret, here. No conspiracy. Just American Jews providing what their communities needed and wanted.

Broadcasting

In broadcasting: William Paley founded and built CBS, most recently owned by the Jewish Redstone family, and now the Jewish Ellison family, who recently installed Bari Weiss as editor-in-chief of CBS News — herself, a connected Jew and an ardent, proud and loud Zionist.

David Sarnoff built radio in this country with RCA, then NBC.

Press personalities today: Ezra Klein, John Podhoretz, Ben Shapiro, Andrew Sullivan, Peter Beinart — all Jews.

CNN's Wolf Blitzer studied at Hebrew University and wrote for the Jerusalem Post and AIPAC's Near East Report. I met Wolf at my shul, at his nephew's bar mitzvah.

Jews reporting the news from the left, right, and center.

Civil Rights

Abraham Joshua Heschel, who taught at my rabbinical school, marched with Martin Luther King in Selma. Kivie Kaplan, Joel Spingarn, and Arthur Spingarn were among the founders and leaders of the NAACP.

Feminism and Women's Rights

Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, co-founded and led the National Organization for Women.

Bella Abzug, congresswoman and advocate for women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and antiwar activism.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin, co-founder of *Ms. Magazine*.

LGBTQ Community

Harvey Milk, one of the first openly gay elected officials in the U.S., who also served on the board of San Francisco's Temple Emanuel's Brotherhood. He was assassinated in 1978 and became a symbol of the gay community.

Barney Frank, longtime congressman from Massachusetts and one of the first members of Congress to voluntarily come out while in office.

Tony Kushner, playwright of *Angels in America*, which dealt directly with AIDS, gay identity, and Jewish identity.

Law and the Judiciary

Louis Brandeis, an early American Zionist, served on the Supreme Court from 1916 to 1939. Other Jews followed: Benjamin Cardozo, Felix Frankfurter, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Breyer, Kagan, and Ginsburg sat on the Supreme Court together from 2010 to 2020 — Jews, a little more than 2% of the country's population, made up 33% of the Supreme Court during those years.

Science and Medicine

From Jonas Salk who cured polio to Einstein to Oppenheimer, to Stanley Prusiner who discovered "prions" and Murray Gell-Mann who discovered "quarks" and Carl Sagan, a Jew, who tried to explain to us what a "quark" is, among other scientific things.

Over the years, many American Jewish scientists won the Nobel Prize for their work.

Business

Without American Jews, there would be no Macy's, no Bloomingdale's, no Neiman Marcus, no Sears, no Levi Strauss, or Home Depot.

No Mattel Toys, either — Ruth Handler grew up near her future husband Izzy here in Denver; they attended East High School together and created Barbie and Ken.

Technology

In tech — whatever you think of it now, and the real and serious problems with social media and AI — American Jews innovated and built major tech companies: Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg, Sergey Brin, Sam Altman.

Sheryl Sandberg, the former COO of Facebook, is a committed Jew worth spotlighting. She inspired countless women to "lean in," and became an important voice condemning Hamas's atrocities against Israeli women on October 7th — shaming international women's organizations into finally issuing statements they didn't want to make because they hated Israel more than they cared for women.

In all, Jewish businessmen and women have provided products and services used by most of America, and created, literally millions of good American jobs — an enormous contribution to this country.

Public Service

Hundreds of Jews serve in local, state, and federal office across the country.

Just a snapshot: Jewish governors currently serve in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Delaware, Illinois, Hawaii and Colorado — the largest number serving simultaneously in American history.

And, special mention, of course, our own Colorado Governor, Jared Polis, and candidate to succeed him, Phil Weiser, who has been close to and active in our local Jewish community for years.

Jews have contributed to this country in nearly every conceivable field — willingly, happily, proudly. They are all patriots in their own way, and this country would not be the same without them.

The Dutch West India Company knew what the Jews from Amsterdam could contribute to New Amsterdam and to this country and would go on to contribute, despite Stuyvesant's antisemitic rants.

The company was more right than it could have ever known.

Pride, Self-Esteem, and Agency

OK. I bring up the Jewish contribution to this country, not because it will convince some antisemite of our value and loyalty.

The Reich Federation of Jewish Front Soldiers was founded in Germany in 1919 to catalogue Jewish contributions to the German war effort in World War I. They were hoping to convince a growing antisemitic public of Jewish loyalty and sacrifice to the fatherland.

The Nazis couldn't have cared less.

I'm speaking about Jewish contributions to this country for our benefit... for our own sense of pride, self-esteem, and agency, so we can stand strong and fight when necessary.

The preeminent historian Jonathan Sarna has noted what some now call the post-October 7th "surge." He highlights "The young Jewish leaders fighting antisemitism on campuses, the Jews who have flocked to Jewish institutions to align publicly with their own people, the grassroots leaders battling antisemitism in workplaces and schools, the adult learners crowding into courses on Jews and Israel, the parents switching their kids into Jewish day schools, the students filling Hillel and Chabad houses, and the multitudes who have visited or plan to visit Israel since the tragedy — all show that Jews need not be merely passive victims. We can respond with Jewish pride, resilience, and [even] defiance. Fostering a "surging" Jewish community, history suggests, will prove more effective in the long run than fighting incorrigible enemies."

So my answer to what Yael Silverstein calls "ambient antisemitism" is to support the "surge" — and to be part of it yourself.

This is not going to be a short or easy battle. All the more so, we must be resilient, proud, unmovable and defiant.

We must use every means at our disposal: political, financial, legal, cultural, educational, religious, and even the beefed-up security at our institutions, to protect ourselves.

And more than that, ...to retain our well-earned place of honor in a country we helped build.

If we do that, I believe, we will prevail and send the antisemites back under the rocks from where they came. We will win this battle.

Yom HaZikaron

It is Yom HaZikaron. A day to remember.

It looks like I am going to do some remembering on my own, going to my 50th high school reunion. And I will report back on the colorful young characters, well...senior citizens, that I will meet down there who I remember from when I was 18.

I'm proud of where I started in Albuquerque, and I can trace a logical enough path from there to here.

So it is with American Jews.

Even in 1654, we were headed for greatness. We were fated to build and sustain this country. And we did just that.

We were, then and are now, patriots — and one might even say, in a time as politically fraught and dangerous for Jews as today is in America, America needs its Jews now more than ever.

In celebration of 250 years, let us make a pledge of allegiance, if you will.

As proud Jews, we stand for America, and we will do all we can to fix her problems, however daunting.

We will not let our country or our people: the Jewish people, down.

So, in the words of a famous American Jew:

God Bless America.

Now That You're Here: The Call of Genesis

Rabbi Lizzie Frankel | Rosh HaShanah 5787

In the beginning... my student, Suzi, logged onto Zoom. And Suzi said, "Let me begin this class called Learn to Read Hebrew!" And she began the class called Learn to Read Hebrew.

And, slowly, Suzi and her classmates befriended each Hebrew letter, one at a time, until they knew the whole Hebrew alphabet. And they called the befriending "learning", and they saw that this was good.

And, weeks later, when the time came for the class to conclude, Suzi thought back on her journey and how her life had unfolded into this moment. How she had been told as a young girl in the 1950s that she couldn't have a bat mitzvah. How she had dropped out of Hebrew school. How she had then watched her own granddaughter grow up and become a rabbi. How she had realized, at age 80, that now was the perfect time to study for her bat mitzvah.

And Suzi said, "Life begins at 80 years old." And it was so.

Today, we roll the Torah back to the very beginning, to the book of Genesis, the story of creation. "In the beginning," we read in those famous lines, "the Divine created the sky and the earth. And the earth was chaos and nothingness, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a Divine wind hovering over the water. The Divine said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light."¹

And the story continues, tracing through each of the six days of creation: "Let there be earth and waters. Let there be sun and moon. Let there be wild beasts and creepy-crawlies and *humans* — and it was so."²

Again and again in Genesis, we encounter the refrain: "Let there be. And it was so." We are rocked in the arms of the Universe, swaying us from intention to completion: "Let there be. And it was so. Let there be. And it was so." It feels like a literary lullaby, trying to soothe us into sleep with the calm certainty that creation has a clear beginning point and a clear endpoint. But WOW is that *not* the case.

Jewish teachers throughout the ages help us awaken to the reality that creation is not a clearcut, one-and-done event. Creation is *not* as simple as, "Let there be. And it was

¹ Genesis 1:1-3

² Paraphrase of Genesis 1:4-27

so.” It’s a complex and continuous process. As my student Suzi said, life *can* begin at 80. Life can begin at 15 or 55! And Rosh HaShanah is a wakeup call to that framework: Our ancient sages teach that on Rosh HaShanah, the Universe says to us, “My children, I look upon you as if today I had created a new creature.”³

I imagine the Universe cradling us in Its arms, gazing down at us and saying what a friend of mine exclaimed to her newborn daughter: “You’re here! You’re here!!!” How miraculous it is that we each exist! How many things had to happen for us to be here, alive, in this moment!

And I imagine the Universe encountering us with primordial hope and wonder. It whispers blessings into our fresh ears and asks the biggest question It can think of: “Now that you’re here, who will you become?”

Who will you become. Because genesis never ends.

Our traditional prayers each morning suggest that *every* day is part of the creation story. There’s a gorgeous line in Yotzer Or, the blessing before the Sh’ma, that says, “The work of Genesis is renewed every day, always, with goodness.” In Hebrew, that’s “*Uvtuvo m’chadeish b’chol yom tamid ma’aseih v’reishit.*” *The work of Genesis is renewed every day, always, with goodness.*

Rather than leaving it at “let there be; and it was so”, Genesis dares to echo across time, inviting us to join in: How will *you* continue the creation story?

This past May, I was ordained as a rabbi and had the honor of stepping into my full-time role as Rabbi & Adult Learning Director at Judaism Your Way. In my work every day, I am blessed to witness the process of creation in the lives of so many people.

I see our Be Mitzvah students of all ages tackling projects that challenge them and grow their Jewish identities. I also get to meet with newly engaged couples reflecting on what marriage means to them and how they want to commit to showing up for each other. In our Hebrew classes, I work with students like Suzi, slowly sounding out the words of the prayer book and finding a new sense of connection and belonging.

And I even witness the process of creation within the context of grief and loss.

When I was first studying to become a rabbi, a woman reached out to me to ask if I could officiate her father’s funeral. She explained how her dad had lived a long life and

3 Leviticus Rabbah 29:12

had a successful career, but he had not been a loving father. The woman described her father as “difficult” and “self-focused”, always needing to be the center of attention. She thought perhaps this stemmed from his own father rejecting him and him feeling the need to compensate by placing himself in the limelight.

And now, as she planned her father’s funeral, the woman asked me for something very specific: “Can you play Debbie Friedman’s Mi Shebeirach song on your viola as my dad’s casket is interred?”

I had never heard of something like this. Debbie Friedman’s Mi Shebeirach is a gorgeous prayer for healing, but it’s typically not offered at funerals since it’s not a memorial prayer. In this case, though, it made total sense. The woman recognized the hurt her dad had carried and passed down to her throughout his life. She didn’t feel she could ask for healing for *him*, but she wanted to take a step toward her *own* healing.

And so, we planned the funeral with Mi Shebeirach as her father’s final resting song. With the notes of Mi Shebeirach in the air, the funeral that marked the end of her dad’s life was also the ritual that welcomed a new beginning in the woman’s process of healing. The call of Genesis was palpable: “Now that you’re here, who will you become?”

As this question plays out in our own lives, we might think of the work we’re doing as *t’shuvah*. *T’shuvah* is often translated as “repentance”, but if we translate more closely to the Hebrew root, ש-ו-ב (*shuv*), it’s really about *returning*. *T’shuvah* is returning to what is good inside of us and inside of the world. The mystical teacher, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, suggests that when we return to this goodness, we’re working toward saying not just, “Let there be...” but, “Let *me* be...”⁴: Let me be compassionate, courageous, forgiving, free... Let me become a better version of myself, in ways big or small.

Rosh HaShanah is our wakeup call to the possibility for creation. That looks different for each person here today. Perhaps for you, creation means healing old hurts, like the woman burying her father. Or maybe it means learning something new, like Suzi and her Hebrew classmates. Or maybe it’s making a change in a relationship, or creating a new relationship... or perhaps, creation for you means simply taking your next really deep breath. *Every day* invites us to create in new ways, and Rosh HaShanah wakes us up to answer those invitations in the year to come.

And so, before we read from Genesis in the Torah today, I’d like to take you to one more beginning.

4 Likutei Moharan 6:2

In the beginning... a shoemaker lit a candle. And the candle was bright and radiant, with light illuminating the room. And the shoemaker said, "Let there be shoes." And, very slowly, after hours of work and creation, it was so. And the shoemaker saw that the shoes were good.

And late at night, the shoemaker's candle began to flicker and sputter. But there came a knock on the door. A hand stretched out a pair of torn-up shoes, tattered and in need of repair. In the light of the flickering candle, the shoemaker said, "Let there be repair." And, very slowly, in the half-darkness of the flickering flame, there was repair. And the shoemaker said, "As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to mend."

As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to mend.⁵

We are each the shoemaker: you, me, Suzi, and the woman... *We are each the shoemaker.* May we sit by the light of the candles in our lives and remember that the call for creation is constant. Whoever we are, wherever we journey, the Universe smiles at us and greets us with love: "HERE YOU ARE. Now, who will you become?"

⁵ Inspired by *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 81. Adapted from text by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values: A Day-By-Day Guide to Ethical Living* (Harmony, 2000), p. 93.

The Denver Kehillah

Yamim Noraim Dvar Torah Reader

A Collection of Sermons from
the Yamim Noraim
תשפ"ז - 2026



Dear Friends,

I am pleased to present this booklet containing the Drashot I gave on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. **As I have said before, it is such a privilege to be the Rabbi of The Denver Kehillah.** Every day, I am uplifted by our community. **It is a special privilege to teach Torah to this community, a group of thoughtful and insightful individuals.** I am grateful for the feedback you have shared with me about these Divrei Torah and I am always open to discuss the ideas that I share. **Please consider this an invitation to reach out to discuss the ideas found in these Divrei Torah or on anything else we have studied together.**

The High Holidays give us a rare opportunity to step outside the ordinary rhythms of our lives and ask larger questions: Who are we? What has shaped us? What do we want to remember, and what do we need to let go of? What are we capable of becoming? And what kind of Jewish lives do we want to build for ourselves, our families, and our community?

The four sermons in this booklet explore these questions from different directions. On Rosh Hashanah, we consider the surprising spiritual possibility of **forgetting**. Rebbe Nachman teaches that sometimes we need to loosen our grip on the past—to forget the mistakes that have become identities and to encounter Torah, prayer, and life with fresh eyes—so that the past does not become a barrier to becoming someone new. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we turn from the past to the larger story that animates Jewish life. Through the contrast between **Auschwitz and Sinai**, we ask whether Jewish identity will be defined primarily by what has happened to us or by what we are called upon to create: lives of Torah, meaning, kindness, creativity, and community. On Kol Nidrei, we turn inward and consider **aspiration**—*she'eifa*. The image of the Kohen Gadol, Rav Kook's **kanfei ruach**, and the teachings of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein remind us that we should not underestimate what we are capable of becoming. We are called to pursue our wings, to think expansively about our lives, and to have the courage to aspire to greatness. Finally, at Yizkor, we return to the question of **who we are**. Yom Kippur's singularity becomes an invitation to recognize our own singularity—to answer God's **Ayekha?**, “Where are you?”, not only as a question of accountability but as an invitation to return to the person we were created to be, while recognizing the people whose love, presence, and memory helped shape that person.

These sermons also reflect something of what I have come to believe about Jewish life and about the privilege of building a community together. Judaism asks us to take our lives seriously—to recognize both the uniqueness of each person and the extraordinary possibilities contained within a community of people who are willing to learn, question, remember, aspire, and grow together. My hope is that these reflections offer not simply ideas for the High Holidays, but invitations to think

more deeply about the lives we are living and the lives we still have the opportunity to create.

May these words accompany you into the New Year with a renewed sense of possibility: the courage to let go of what holds us back, the wisdom to remember what gives us strength, the aspiration to spread our wings, and the confidence to stand before God and say, **Hineni—here I am.**

Shannah Tovah.

Rabbi Gelman

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Rosh Hashanah I - Rebbe Nachman - Forget About It!!

I would like to talk about the virtue of forgetting today.

It's a strange day to talk about forgetting.

Rosh Hashana is Yom Hazikaron! The day of remembering.

In the davening we plead with God, "Zachreini L'chaim" - remember us for life...we WANT God to remember us.... To remember us for life.

In Sefer Bereishit, we are told that God remembered three times...all for the good - God remembers Noach and brings him out of the ark, God remembers Lot and saved him from the destruction of Sodom and God remembered Rachel (Today's Torah reading) and gave her a child.

One of the main sections of the Mussaf Amidah we are about to recite is called Ziichronot - remembrances. In that section we recite phrases from Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim, dealing with God remembering...and they are all good..God remembers God's covenant with us. God remembers our loyalty...and then we ask God to remember us B'Zichron Tov Lefanecha - with a favorable memory.

We have all of this textual evidence relating to the positive aspects of remembering.

When I shared with a colleague that I wanted to talk about the virtue of forgetting, he told me the following story about his aunt Charlotte.

"When my Aunt Charlotte who suffered from Alzheimer's started forgetting her life she called me very upset. I shared with her that we daven on Rosh Hashana that God remembers all the forgotten things. The pshat (straightforward meaning) appears to be that God remembers the misdeeds that we've forgotten...and holds us accountable. But for my Aunt Charlotte God's memory was no threat. It was a promise that if we forget the events of our lives, God will not. And if God holds the events of our lives for all eternity, then our lives are not a dream that evaporates. God's memory ensures that everything we do matters. My Aunt Charlotte found this incredibly comforting, that as her mind was emptying...she could trust that God would not forget a single detail."

This is beautiful and touching and a reminder that when God remembers, as we see in the Amidah and in the Torah reading, that it is for Good. God remembers our good deeds..and God even remembers our life when we may, tragically, forget it.

But that is God. What about us?

Well, one the one had, remembering is good...We should remember birthdays, anniversaries, Yartzheits...and we should not only remember those dates, we should remember what is wonderful about the people associated with those dates.

Teshuva, we are told, is a lot about remembering...remembering our sins, promising never to do them again. We can't promise not to commit sins that we forget about - so we have no choice but to remember.

This is the classic model of Teshuva as expressed in the Talmud, Rambam and others.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov offers a different approach and I would like to share it with you. When I read it the first time, I was mesmerized by its boldness and Rebbe Nachman's willingness to "buck the trend" if you will...if there is such a thing as a "trendy" Teshuva.

Here are his words from Sichot Haran (#26) - an introduction to the thought of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, compiled by his closest disciple, Rabbi Natan of Nemirov.

אָבֿל הָעוֹלָם הַשְׂכָּחָה הִיא חֲסָרוֹן גָּדוֹל בְּעִינְיָהֶם.

Most people think of forgetting as a serious drawback. But to me it has a great advantage.

I am not sure who "most people" are in this reference...but as I read this in the context of Teshuva, it occurred to me that it could be referring to those who champion the standard version of repentance.

He continues:

אָבֿל בְּעִינְי, יֵשׁ בְּהַשְׂכָּחָה מַעֲלָה גָּדוֹלָה. כִּי אִם לֹא הִיָּתָה שְׂכָחָה, לֹא הִיָּתָה אֶפְשָׁר לַעֲשׂוֹת שׁוּם דְּבָר בְּעִבּוּדַת ה', אִם הִיָּתָה זִכָּר כָּל מַה שֶּׁעָבַר לֹא הִיָּתָה אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְהָרִים אֶת עֲצָמוֹ לַעֲבֹדָתוֹ יִתְפָּרֵד בְּשׁוּם אֶפֶן, גַּם הָיוּ מְבַלְבְּלִים אֶת הָאָדָם מְאֹד כָּל הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁעוֹבְרִים עָלָיו. אָבֿל עֲכָשׁוּ עַל־יְדֵי הַשְׂכָּחָה גִּשְׁפָּח מִה שֶּׁעָבַר.

If you did not forget, it would be utterly impossible to serve God. You would remember your entire past, and these memories would drag you down and not allow you to raise yourself to God. Whatever you did would be constantly disturbed by your memories of the past.

Rebbe Nachman is tapping into something very important here.

When one wishes to serve God, they have to consider the good that they possess and not the bad. If we focus on the bad, then we would never have the chutzpah to stand face to face with God.

“There is a difference between: "I did something wrong" and "I am the person who did that wrong thing."

Remembering can begin as accountability and gradually become identity. I did this. I did this again. I always do this. This is who I am. I've always been this way. I'll probably always be this way.

At that point, memory ceases to facilitate teshuvah and begins to prevent it. And this is where Rebbe Nachman's idea of forgetting becomes extraordinarily sophisticated: A person sometimes needs to forget the evidence against themselves in order to become capable of becoming someone new. The past contains information, but it does not contain destiny.”¹

If we remember all of our misdeeds, how can we stand before God...it would be too embarrassing.

There is another application of this besides how it affects our relationship with God. If we remembered, and by remembered, I mean, defined ourselves by all of our miscues in our relationships with our spouse, our friends, our parents, our children, we would be stuck.

Repeatedly rehearsing one's own failures can become counterproductive. Healthy Teshuva, according to Rebbe Nachman involves acknowledging the wrong while eventually reducing the emotional grip of the memory.

Remembering , the very mechanism that we often associate with Teshuva - the return to God - according to Rebbe Nachman, may be the very thing that actually blocks our relationship with God. This is a total revolution in terms of how we should view Teshuva.

But Rebbe Nachman is not finished with forgetting. I can relate to his next point very well.

¹ Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz - email correspondence

You see, I often cannot remember whether or not I have seen a particular movie. More than once in our home I have told Gabi that I recently watched a movie and she tells me that I already saw it... This happened last week as I was battling a cough, I could not sleep, so I found myself surfing netflix. I watched an interesting movie about a scam drug company selling opioids (Pain Hustlers, 2023). I told Gabi...of course, she reminded me that we had seen that movie together. I consider it a bracha...these movies are new to me each time. This is why I relate to Rebbe Nachman's next point.

Forgetting, says Rebbe Nachman, does not only free us from the past; it can also free us from the feeling that we have already experienced the present (from the movie groundhog day²). The same faculty that allows us to say, "I am not trapped by who I was," can allow us to say, "I am not trapped by what I have already experienced."

Here are Rebbe Nachman's words:

ואיתא בספרים: שֶׁבִּשְׁבִּיל זֶה נִתֵּן הַשִּׁכְחָה כְּדֵי שֶׁתִּהְיֶה הַתּוֹרָה חֲבִיבָה עַל לִוְמָדֶיהָ תָּמִיד כְּשֶׁעַתָּה הָרָאוּנוּ. כִּי עַל־יְדֵי הַשִּׁכְחָה כְּשֶׁחֲזָר וּבָא וְלִוְמָד אֶפְלוּ מֶה שֶׁכָּבַר לָמַד, הוּא אֶצְלוֹ כְּתוּבָה וְחֲבִיב עָלָיו.

In our sacred literature, we find that God gave us the power to forget so we can always appreciate the Torah just as we did the first time we learned it (Kohelet Rabbah 1:34). Because you forget, you can re-learn or review a lesson, and it is like learning it anew. Therefore, you appreciate it as much as the first time.

In the fortieth year of Bnei Yisrael's travels in the wilderness, God says

הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וְשִׁמְרָתָם וְעָשִׂיתָ אוֹתָם בְּכָל־לִבְכֶּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ:

The LORD your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul.

The Midrash asks the obvious question -

וְהֲלֹא אוֹתָהּ שָׁנָה שְׁנַת אַרְבָּעִים הָיְתָה

And was not this the fortieth year (since they left Egypt

The answer is powerful.

² Billy Murray plays an arrogant TV weatherman, Phil Connors, who gets trapped in a time loop and must relive February 2 over and over again

אֵלֶּא כִּדְ אָמַר מֹשֶׁה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּכָל יוֹם יְהֵא תִּתּוֹרָה חֲבִיבָה עֲלֵיכֶם כָּאֵלּוּ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה קִבַּלְתֶּם אוֹתָהּ מִהַר סִינַי.

“Simply that Moses spoke to Israel as follows, “On each and every day, let the Torah be dear to you, as if you had received it this day from Mount Sinai.”

This is a recipe for what R. Abraham Joshua Heschel called wonder and a bulwark against routinization of our religious life.

Heschel calls routine “spiritual poison.”

Davening and ritual are meant to remove our callousness to the world...Mitzvot are there to help us adjust the way we see the world. This is the difference between religion and religiosity. Religion is a collection of beliefs and actions. Religiosity is our sense of wonder, surprise and chiddush.

Rebbe Nachman's permission, even encouragement to forget, allows us to hone a sense of religiosity and to fight against religious boredom.

Think about what happens when we know something too well. We stop seeing it. We recognize the words of the prayer before we actually read them. We know the melody before we actually listen to it. We have been to the same holiday service so many times that we know exactly what is coming next. Familiarity can be wonderful—but familiarity can also make us stop paying attention.

Perhaps this is another kind of forgetting. We need to forget, just a little, that we already know this prayer. Forget that we have heard this Torah before. Forget that we have stood here last year, and the year before that. Not because those experiences don't matter, but because they matter enough to encounter again.

Perhaps these two forms of forgetting are not really two different ideas. They are actually the same spiritual discipline. In teshuvah, I have to forget enough of my past to believe that I can become someone new. In religious life, I have to forget enough of what I already know to believe that I can encounter something new. In both cases, forgetting creates space for possibility.

And maybe this is why the idea of forgetting belongs on Rosh Hashanah after all. Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaZikaron—the Day of Remembrance. We ask God to remember us, to remember our good deeds, to remember us for life. But perhaps on this day, when we ask God to remember us, we also need to remember that we are allowed to forget.

We can forget the mistakes that have become identities. We can forget the version of ourselves that we have decided we will always be. We can forget enough of our past to believe that teshuvah is really possible.

And we can forget what we think we already know. We can forget that we have heard this prayer before, that we have stood in this room before, that we have celebrated Rosh Hashanah before. We can encounter these words, these rituals, these people—and even our relationship with God—as if we are encountering them for the first time.

Perhaps that is the strange spiritual gift of forgetting: it gives us the courage to believe that the past does not have to determine the future, and it gives us the ability to experience the present as something new.

So this Rosh Hashanah, as we ask God, Zochreinu l'chaim—“Remember us for life”—perhaps we should also ask ourselves for something else: Help me forget what I need to forget, so that I can become who I have the potential to be, and so that I can see what I have been given as if for the very first time.

Shanah Tovah.

Rosh Hashanah II - Auschwitz or Sinai

My father-in-law, Irwin (Eurchie) Fisch was a very young child when the Nazis occupied his hometown in Hungary. In order to save him, his family placed him in a convent, where he was hidden along with several of his cousins.

One day, his aunt, who was passing as a Gentile, came to the convent to check on the children. She discovered that the Nazis had come and taken most of the Jewish children who had been hiding there. My father's cousins were gone. Somehow, my father-in-law was still there.

His aunt took him and fled.

What followed was an unimaginable journey. They boarded a train filled with Nazis. At one point, the Nazis even offered to take this little Jewish boy to the bathroom. His aunt knew exactly what that offer meant and managed to keep him safe. Eventually, after this terrifying journey, he was reunited with his mother only to find out that his father had been murdered in Auschwitz.

He came to America not speaking English, and was suddenly thrust into a country, a culture that was completely foreign to him.

My father in law was a man who had every reason to see his entire Jewish identity through the lens of what had been done to him and to his family.

But that is not what he did.

I never heard him say that we needed to build Jewish institutions in order to defeat the Nazis. I never heard him tell his children or grandchildren that they needed to remain Jewish because that was how we would defeat antisemitism. I never heard him suggest that the reason he needed to succeed was to prove that Hitler had failed.

What I saw was something very different.

I saw a man who was deeply committed to building a Jewish family. I saw someone who supported Jewish institutions and Jewish causes. I saw someone who took pride in Jewish life and invested in the Jewish community.

He did not spend his life looking backward at the people who had tried to destroy him. He spent his life looking forward, building something.

In 1982 Rabbi David Hartman wrote an essay called Auschwitz or Sinai³. In that essay, he asked whether Auschwitz or Sinai should be the orienting category shaping our understanding of our relationship to Judaism? For him Auschwitz represented victimhood and Sinai represented the sovereign State of Israel.

I would like to riff off of R. Hartman's provocative and jolting "Auschwitz or Sinai" dichotomy to address a current trend in the Jewish community. In my take, Auschwitz represents antisemitism and victimhood and Sinai represents Torah, meaning, community.

Here is a remarkable Gemara (Yerushalmi Peah 2:4)

אָפִילוּ מָה שֶׁתִּלְמִיד וְנוֹתִיק עֲתִיד לְהוֹרוֹת לִפְנֵי רַבּוֹ כְּבָר נֶאֱמַר לְמֹשֶׁה בְּסִינִי. מָה טַעַם יֵשׁ דָּבָר שֶׁיֵּאמַר רָאָה זֶה חֲדָשׁ הוּא. מִשִּׁיבּוֹ חֲבִירוֹ וְאָמַר לוֹ כְּבָר הָיָה לְעוֹלָמִים.

Even what a competent student will share before his teacher was said to Moses on Sinai. What is the reason? (Eccl. 1:10) "There is something about which one would say, look, this is new!" His colleague will answer, "it already has been forever."

I do not think this means that God told Moshe at Sinai how to kasher a microwave. What I think this means is that **Sinai** is the **wellspring**. Sinai is the source and oxygen of Jewish life.

Everything we love about Judaism, all of the warm feelings we have for our Jewish life and all of the sustaining energy we get from Judaism is from Sinai.

So...the question before us is, what animates Jewish life. Auschwitz or Sinai.

I have noticed a proliferation of programs and books that have used anti-semitism and anti-zionism as a way to draw jews into more Jewish commitment.

There is no denying that antisemitism has once again become a powerful force shaping Jewish identity. October 7, the explosion of antisemitism on college campuses, the normalization of anti-Jewish rhetoric, and attacks against Jewish communities are frightening. The advocacy agencies of the Jewish community whose job it is to contend with and defeat these terrible developments should use all of the resources available to them to do so. People are frightened...I am frightened.

³ <https://www.hartman.org.il/auschwitz-or-sinai/>

For some, these events have rekindled a connection to Jewish life. That response is understandable. Shared suffering has always reminded us that we share a common fate.

I understand that pull to do that. It is a powerful hook.

That may be true, but it is not a foundation on which to build Jewish life.

Fear of antisemitism cannot help us become better spouses, more patient parents, more generous neighbors, or more compassionate human beings. It cannot teach us to notice the beauty of a flower, to experience gratitude over a meal. It cannot transform an ordinary Tuesday into something sacred.

There is a remarkable Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (2:12) that encapsulates the idea that Judaism is meant to change the way we experience the world...to turn an ordinary Tuesday into something special.

רבי יוסי אומר...כל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים

Rabbi Yose said: ..let all your actions be for [the sake of] the name of heaven.

The classic commentary on the Mishna, the Bartenua (16th Cent. Italy) teaches that this Mishna instructs us to find ways to sanctify God.

אף בשעה שאתה עוסק באכילה ושתיה ובדרך ארץ

“even at the time that you are involved in eating and drinking and in the way of the world...”

Sinai, the Torah, is not simply the story of what has happened to us. It is the story of what we are called to become. As the Mishna teaches, Torah transforms every dimension of life. It teaches us how to sanctify time through Shabbat, how to elevate our relationships, how to care for the vulnerable, how to build communities of kindness and justice, and how to discover God's presence in the ordinary moments of life.

Even more remarkably, Sinai empowers us to create. Torah is not a museum piece. Chiddush - new interpretations of Torah - is not a departure from Torah but one of its greatest expressions. The covenant calls upon us to study, question, interpret and argue. Everyone in this room should know that the Torah is just waiting for your interpretation, your take and your chiddush. A Judaism animated by Sinai is

alive with surprise. The very name Yisrael means to struggle with God and with humanity. This is what we do - we struggle with ideas and texts and turn those struggles into moral action.

Additionally, Auschwitz defines us by what others have done to us. Sinai defines us by what we choose to do. Auschwitz can leave us trapped in the identity of victims. Sinai empowers us to become creators, builders, teachers, partners with God, and moral agents. Auschwitz tells us that evil exists. Sinai tells us that holiness can exist.

In the Unetaneh Tokef section of the Amidah that we will recite shortly, we find the following phrase.

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע. וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה יִשָּׁמַע.

A great shofar is sounded, and a silent, gentle voice is heard

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers a beautiful insight into this passage.

“In a brilliant linking of two famous biblical episodes, the prayer recalls two scenes on Mount Sinai. The first took place when the Torah was given to the Israelites in the days of Moses, when “the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder” (Ex. 19:19) and the people trembled. The second took place several centuries later when the prophet Elijah, after his confrontation with the false prophets of Baal, stood on the same mountain. There was a whirlwind, an earthquake and a fire, but God was not in any of these. Then came the *kol demamah daka*, “a still small voice” (I Kings 19:12). It is not the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire that are truly terrifying but the still, small voice of God that tells us that we are in the presence of Infinity.”

And here is a key point - the first time that the Torah was given, amidst the pyrotechnics, the result was that the Torah was destroyed. That Torah did not endure.

God is not found in the noise, God is not found in the whirlwind or in the fire...God is found in the Kol Demamah Daka - a still small voice - the quiet sounds of Torah...the sweet melodies of Tefillah, the kind and gently words offered to a person who is suffering.

In the Rosh Hashana Amidah, the shofar is described as the sound of a people becoming a covenantal people. It is the sound of revelation, of Torah, of mitzvot, of possibility. It is the sound of God calling us not simply to survive history but to participate in shaping it.

When we hear the Shofar in just a few minutes – take it as an invitation to Sinai – an invitation to dare to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary – the mundane into holy. This is the power of Sinai...**only Sinai has this ability.**⁴

Which story is ultimately animating our Judaism? We dare not forget Auschwitz. Its memory is sacred. But memory is not enough to sustain us. If we hope to inspire ourselves and our children and our grandchildren; if we hope to build a robust community of builders, dreamers and learners, if we hope to build Jewish lives filled with joy, meaning, intellectual curiosity, moral courage, and spiritual depth, then

Auschwitz cannot be our destination. The destination has always been Sinai – the wellspring of the wonders of Judaism.

We have a choice about the story we tell ourselves about being Jewish. We can tell the story of what the world has done to Jews, or we can tell the story of what Jews are called to do in the world.

We can focus on the whirlwind or listen carefully to the Kol Dimmama Dakkah – the calm voice of God, the gentle pull of Torah and the comforting ways of chessed.

We can live at the gates of Auschwitz or, like my father in law, we can stand at the foot of Sinai.

That is the choice before and our answer will define our people for ages.

I choose to sit with my Father In Law at the foot of Sinai.

May this year be a year in which we remember where we have come from, but never lose sight of where we are going.

May we build Jewish lives of Torah, of joy and meaning, of kindness, of courage and creativity.

May we all live as we are standing at the foot of Sinai.

Shanah tovah.

⁴ Sinai is portable and can be taken with us wherever we go. See Ramban [here](#) and [here](#) about the Mishkan / Mikdash mimicking Sinai. See [here](#) for an extension of the holiness of Sinai / Mikdash to synagogues. The point is that our connection to Sinai is not contingent on time or place. We ALWAYS have access.

Yom Kippur Eve / Kol Nidrei - Wings of Spirit - Kanfei Ruach

If you do not pay careful attention, you will miss it...

In the middle of the section of the Avodah in the Mussaf Amidah, there is a shift.

In most of the Avodah service we re-tell what the Kohein Gadol did during the Avodah, but at some point we move from retelling to reenacting exactly what the Kohei Gadol did.

Move from reading about the Avodah and outlining all that the Kohein Gadol does, to reciting the actual tefillah that the Kohein Gadol would say.⁵

The Lubavitcher Rebbe sees something extraordinary in this.⁶ In his view, we become the Kohein Gadol! The holiest person, during the holiest time of year, in the holiest place. He stresses that this applies to men, women and even children!

המדובר הוא אודות תפלתו של כהן גדול ביוהכ"פ — היהודי
המקודש ביותר מכל בניו, כמ"ש, "ויבדל אהרן להקדישו קדש קדשים",
שהתפלל מיד לאחר צאתו מקדש הקדשים, המקום המקודש ביותר
בבית המקדש (מקום הארון, ובבית שני — "אכן² שתי", שממנה הושחת
העולם³), ובזמן המקודש ביותר מכל זמני השנה — יום הקדוש, "אחת
בשנה"⁴, כלומר, הבחינה ד"אחת" — "יחידה"⁵ — בכל ג' העינים
דעולם (מקום) שנה (זמן) ונפש.

ואעפ"כ, אמרה תורה, שכל אחד ואחת מישראל, אנשים ונשים,
לאחרי בר-מצוה ובת-מצוה או לפני בר-מצוה ובת-מצוה (שגם אותם
מחנכים ע"פ תורה להתפלל את כל התפלות), בכל מקום ובכל זמן, גם
בחוץ-לארץ ובזמן הגלות — יאמר בתפלתו: "כמו ששמעת תפלת כהן
גדול בהיכל, כמו כן מפינו תשמע ותושיע"!!

This is stunning...we move from reading about the kohein Gadol, to becoming the Kohein Gadol.

This is in stark contrast to some many other parts of the davening on Yom Kippur that compare us to dust and ashes....to animal animals

⁵

https://www.sefaria.org/Machzor_Yom_Kippur_Ashkenaz%2C_Musaf_for_Yom_Kippur%2C_The_Avodah_Service.20?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

⁶ Sha'arei HaMoadim - Yom Hakippurim

This seems to be a counter to all of that and tell us something very different...we can be great ... we can be a Kohein Gadol.

How does this make us feel? If we take this seriously, how does it make us feel to hear that we, each of us, is compared to the Kohein Gadol?

There is a beautiful poem (it's also a beautiful song⁷) written by Rav Kook that can help us understand the message of this switch from narration to re-enactment. The poem is called כנפי הרוח - wings of spirit

Human being, rise up, rise rise up, rise, man rise, rise up	בְּן אָדָם, עֲלֵה לְמַעַל עֲלֵה עֲלֵה לְמַעַל עֲלֵה בְּן אָדָם עֲלֵה לְמַעַל עֲלֵה
Because you have great power you have wings of spirit you have wings of spirit wings of noble eagles	כִּי כֹחַ עֹז לָךְ יֵשׁ לָךְ כְּנָפֵי רוּחַ יֵשׁ לָךְ כְּנָפֵי רוּחַ כְּנָפֵי נְשָׁרִים אֲבִירִים
don't deny them lest they fail you pursue them - pursue, man and they will immediately come to you	אַל תִּכְחַשׁ בָּם כֵּן יִכְחֹשׁוּ לָךְ. דְּרוּשׁ אוֹתָם - דְּרוּשׁ בְּן אָדָם וַיִּמָּצְאוּ לָךְ מִיָּד

Rav Kook uses the word “Drosh” - pursue - pursue our wings - pursue our greatness...be a Kohein Gadol

I want to share with you a passage from an autobiographical essay by Rab Aharon Lichtenstein.

It's a translation from the original Hebrew. See if you can pick up on a recurring theme.

“The aspiration, the yearning, the longing to make the world a better place—these could take many different forms. This aspiration finds expression in the world of

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6GY-Ig4Zxs&list=RDE6GY-Ig4Zxs&start_radio=1

Victorian literature that I so enjoy, in the literature of Mussar, and in the words of my teachers and others who have influenced me. Rabbi Hutner established Yeshivat Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in 1936 with four students, in a basement in Brooklyn, and it grew into a major yeshiva. The Mir Yeshiva, which today has thousands of students, began with only ten.

I do not presume to claim such success, but I too carry within me an aspiration to spread Torah: out of a love for Torah, out of a love for my fellow Jews, and out of the conviction that Torah is the elixir of life, the blood flowing through the veins of the Jewish people. The aspiration to help the Jewish people, then, found expression in my desire to spread Torah.”

The word “aspiration” is repeated four times in the short passage. In the original Hebrew, the word is שאיפה . It was a favorite theme of Rav Lichtenstein – the aspiration of greatness

Maybe this is what we are supposed to glean from the subtle move from telling to reliving...it's a shot in the arm, so to speak, to encourage us towards שאיפה לגדלות – aspirations to greatness.

I want to share something very personal with you. When Gabi and I moved here, we felt this pull – the She'eifa to greatness – to work with all of you to create something special. I look back and think that I am sure glad I did not overthink it..I am so glad that I let “sheifa” – aspiration and Drisha – a sense of seeking something great – take over.

We see this in another context during the Yamin Noraim season – the words are Shoel and Avakesh – but the theme is the same.

אֶתָּה | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי תַי לַחַצֹּת בְּנֻעַם־יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלֹ:

One thing I ask of the LORD, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD, to frequent His temple. Notice the language of “house of God” and sanctuary – Heichal. As in the Mussaf where we act as if we are the Kohein Gadol, in this psalm we yearn to, likewise, dwell in God's house.

This is a statement of spiritual aspiration - She'eifa.

I would like to share with you a remarkable teaching.

“There is a statement in the Talmud (B.M. 61b) that says. *ani hu she'atid li-para mi-mi she-toleh kala ilan bevigdo v'omer tekhelet hu*, “I will punish one who affixes a thread of blue dyed with *kala ilan* and announces that it really is *tekhelet*.” Now, the *tekhelet*, coming from the rare mollusk *hilazon*, is expensive and scarce; *kala ilan* is a common and cheap vegetable dye, called indigo. One who dyes his fringes with *kala ilan* and proclaims it to be *tekhelet* is therefore palming off the artificial as genuine. The statement in the Talmud is, therefore, a protest against hypocrisy and deception.”⁸

R. Abraham Chen, (“1878 - 1957)Be'malkhut Ha-yahadut” Vol. II, p.161) taught that “the reverse is true as well! God is also displeased with ***toleh tekhelet bevigdo v'omer kala ilan hu***, one who possesses the genuine *tekhelet* and yet proclaims that it is merely the artificial *kala ilan*. God not only will punish the hypocrite who passes off the artificial as genuine, but He also dislikes the coward who disguises the authentic as the inauthentic.”⁹

Rabbi Chen is teaching that God does not like when we diminish ourselves - when we say we are unworthy, when we lack confidence, when we say we are not the real thing - *Kala Ilan* - indigo, instead of the real deal - *techeilet*.

I want to go back to the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a minute. In the same essay that we started with he says that the reason we recite the actual prayer recited by the

Kohein Gadol is so that we will know that throughout the year we will act like the Koheim Gadol.

⁸ I encountered this source in a sermon by Rabbi Norman Lamm
<https://lammlegacy.org/indexes/on-showing-your-true-colors-1967/>

⁹ Ibid

**וכמבואר בספרי מוסר (אף שלא מצאתי זאת בספרי חב"ד) שטעם
הדבר מה שכאו"א מ ישראל אומר את „סדר העבודה“ דיוהכ"פ הוא —
כדי שידע שבמשך כל השנה כולה צריכה להיות עבודתו בדוגמת הכה"ג
ביוהכ"פ בקדשי הקדשים, במקום המקודש ביותר וכזמן המקודש ביותר
וע"י האדם המקודש ביותר!**

Being the Kohein Gadol is not just for today or tomorrow. It's all year long...it is forever. We are Techeilet!

This is a Twenty-Five hour period where we can ask ourselves what are our She'eifot...what are our aspirations. This is a Twenty - Five hour period when we are supposed to think big about Mitzvot, about our Kanfei Ruach - our wings.

Not making commitments and not having goals that one sets for oneself can be religiously and emotionally stagnating. People who have fear of commitments, or are too cautious because of the fear of failing - because they think they are kala ilan and not techeilat - can miss opportunities in life, in love, in spiritual growth, and in experiencing all of life's joys and wonders.¹⁰

Rav Lichtenstein used the word "She'eifa". Rav Kook used the words "Drosh" and David Hamelech used "shoel" and "avakesh." It's all about seeking and longing , aspiring to be great.

The greatest sin we can commit today is to believe the we are Kala Ilan - and not Techeilet...the greatest sin is not thinking big... not thinking big about our relationship with God and Torah, not thinking big about our relationship with our partner, our kids, or parents, our friends, not thinking big about our community.

For the next Twenty- Five hours, let's ask ourselves how far we can soar with our Kanfei Ruach - with our wings of spirit.

¹⁰ I thank my friend Rabbi Nati Helfgot for the formulation of some of the language in this paragraph.

Yom Kippur / Yizkor - Yom Kippur and Original Sin

Yom Kippur is a singular day...

It is referred to as Achat B'Shannah - "once a year" three times in the Torah.

It is interesting to note that Yom Kippur is never more than one day - it is always one day.

All of the other Chagim can be two days.

There is only ONE Kohein Gadol to do the Avodah

There is more

On the singular day of Yom Kippur, the one and only Kohein Gadol enters the single most holy place in the world to bring a unique Karban -the Ketoret

During the year, the ketoret was offered **twice daily on the golden altar**, which stood in the Heikhal, outside the Holy of Holies.

On Yom Kippur, however, the Kohen Gadol took ketoret **into the Kodesh HaKodashim itself:**

Additionally, the Mishnah notes

בְּכָל יוֹם הָיְתָה דָּקָה, וְהַיּוֹם דָּקָה מִן הַדָּקָה.

"Every day it (the incense) was finely ground; **on this day it was finer than fine.**"

Yom Kippur has within it all of these elements of singularity -

A single day

A single Koheinm Gadol

A singular space

A singular degree of refinement of the Ketoret

Achat B'Shanah - once a year

These facts — the singular day, the person, the place, the service, even the quality of the *ketoret* — should not be ignored or considered a coincidence. These singular elements are part of what Yom Kippur is trying to tell us.

I would like to suggest that all of these unique occurrences are there to remind us that **Yom Kippur is a day on which we are supposed to focus on uniqueness — not only the uniqueness of this day, but the uniqueness of the person standing before God on this day.**

And it seems to me that this fits in very well with the idea of Teshuva according to Rav Kook in his Orot HaTeshuva

Rav Kook writes:

“When one forgets the essence of one's own soul, when one ceases to attend to the inner life within oneself, everything becomes confused and uncertain.

For Rav Kook, *teshuvah* is not simply about correcting a particular mistake. *Teshuvah* begins when a person returns to the self that he or she has lost sight of.

In another composition¹¹ Rav Kook alludes to the same idea with a brilliant insight into the sin of Adam HaRishon.

חטא האדם הראשון, שנתנכר לעצמיותו, שפנה לדעתו של נחש, ואבד את עצמו, לא ידע להשיב תשובה ברורה
על שאלת איך, מפני שלא ידע נפשו, מפני שהאניות האמיתית נאבדה ממנו...

Adam sinned. He was alienated from his essence. He turned to the perspective of the serpent and lost himself. He did not know how to give a clear answer to

¹¹ https://www.sefaria.org/Shemonah_Kevatzim.3.24.1?vhe=hebrew|Rav_Kook_public_files&lang=bi

the question, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9), because he did not know himself, **because he had lost [his] true “I”...**

Think about how remarkable that is.

When God asks Adam *Ayekha?* — “Where are you?” — God is not asking Adam about his location, God is asking an

existential question: **Who are you? What happened to the person you were created to be?**

According to Rav Kook, sin is pretending to be someone other than ourselves - to be overtaken by an outside influence.

And that Rav Kook identifies this as the original sin is so powerful. It also means that **this is not simply Adam’s problem**. It is baked into the human condition. Adam is not only a person; **Adam is the idea of humanity**. What happened to Adam is something that continues to happen to us.

Perhaps there is no place where this is more evident today than in the age of social media.

The pressure to become someone other than who we are is ubiquitous. We often pretend to be something or someone we are not on social media. I am not referring to a creepy type of thing when someone creates an alternate online persona. I am referring to something much more ordinary and, in some ways, much more dangerous: the pressure from outside, like the snake, to be what we are not.

Of course, our kids, who can potentially spend so much time on their “socials” are especially vulnerable to this.

Beauty filters, digital tools that use AI to modify a person's appearance in real-time photos and videos , are a great example of this.

And the problem is not simply that a photograph has been altered. The deeper problem is the message underneath it: **the person you are is not good enough. Your real face is not enough. Your real body is not enough. Your real life is not enough. Here is a better version of you.**

For the adults in the room...there are other serpents...other voices that alter our real selves...careers? status? and staying quiet to fit in...?

We should be careful not to repeat the sin of Adam and make ourselves beholden to exterior forces. We should not hide what we believe in or what we think is right because we think we will be more acceptable in the eyes of someone or some group.

That is the voice of the serpent.

The reason why this is identified as a sin is because it is a betrayal of God's plan (this is what all sins are). God did not create us as interchangeable parts. God created each of us with a particular soul, a particular set of gifts, a particular set of possibilities, and a particular purpose.

Let's go back to Rav Kook for a powerful understanding of this idea.

At the end of each Yom Kippur Amidah, we recite the following.

אֱלֹהִי. עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִצְרַתִּי אֵינִי כְדַאי, וְעַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּצְרַתִּי כְּאִלּוּ לֹא נִצְרַתִּי.

God, before I was formed, I was unworthy [to be created]. And now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed.

Rav Kook explains the passage as follows: Until I was born, I was not needed - now that I have been born, it is as if I was not born, because I am not staying true to my particular mission - I am mimicking someone else.

I love this because it reminds us that we have a purpose...the challenge is finding it and then, perhaps even more difficult, not letting our purpose get derailed by listening to the snake.

I don't think our society does enough in the realm of teaching and insisting that every person, each one of us has a purpose, just the way we are.

And this has implications not only for how we see ourselves, but for how we are able to love and be loved. Our ability to believe that we were created as God intended us to be is a crucial piece of our ability to enter into a genuine and loving

relationship. How can I be fully present with another person if, deep down, I believe that I am not worthy of love? How can I allow someone to know the real me if I am convinced that the real me is somehow deficient.

When we measure ourselves against some external definition of beauty or goodness, we hide. We present a version of ourselves that we think will be more acceptable, more desirable, more lovable. But that is not honest.

And this brings us back to Yom Kippur.

On this day, we strip away so much of what normally defines us. We step away from food and drink. We step away from the ordinary rhythms of life. We are basically all dressed alike. We put aside the distractions and the routines that can make it difficult to hear the quieter voice within us. And we stand before God...as ourselves.

There is something profoundly liberating about that.

There has never been another person exactly like you, and there never will be. Your particular combination of talents, experiences, relationships, struggles, possibilities and spiritual capacities exists only once in the history of the world.

Perhaps we can spend some time today not only confessing the things we have done wrong, but listening for the answer to

God's question: *Ayekha?* Where are you? Where have you gone? What part of yourself have you lost? And what would it mean to come home to that person?

And perhaps at Yizkor time, there is another dimension to the answer to *Ayekha* — another way we come to understand who we are. We are shaped not only by our experiences, but by the people who have shared those experiences with us and helped make us who we are. The parents who loved us, guided us, challenged us, and believed in us. The spouses, children, siblings, grandparents, teachers, friends, and mentors whose presence became part of our own story. And even those with whom our relationships were complicated or difficult have, in their own ways, contributed to the people we have become.

The difference between the “serpents” in our life and these people is that the serpent says “you’re not enough,” while the people we’ve lost saw who we really are and uphold and celebrate who we are.

Right now, I am thinking about my father who helped shape me into the husband, father, grandfather and Rabbi I am today. I miss him especially around the Yamim Noraim as I would always send him my speeches in advance.

I invite you to pause and think about the people who are no longer physically present in your life but whose presence remains within you.

A mother or father whose values you still hear in your head when you make an important decision.

A grandparent whose stories, traditions, or simple way of living gave you a piece of your identity.

And there is one more thing about *Ayekha*? that I think is essential. We often hear God’s question as a frightening one:

Where are you? What have you done? How far have you fallen? But perhaps the answer to *Ayekha*? can be one of the most joyous, empowering, and uplifting responses we ever give to God.

Here I am — this is who I am. These are the gifts God has given me. These are the people I love. This is what I care about. This is what I believe. This is the work I am capable of doing. These are the ways I can make a difference. I don’t have to be somebody else. I don’t have to become a different person in order to be worthy. I don’t have to measure myself against someone else’s definition of beauty, success, or goodness. **God created me, and I can answer: Hineni. Here I am.**

When I was in my 20's, the first sermon I delivered was about forgiveness. Specifically, how to forgive someone who never apologized, and never will.

Then earlier this year, what was the title of the sermon I gave? "Forgiveness and Letting Go: When Receiving an Apology Isn't Possible." 😊

Almost 20 years later, my own inner wrestling is just as present.

There are so many different kinds of forgiveness we each grapple with.

Where I'm drawn tonight, is when forgiveness feels incomplete.

Maybe because reconciliation will never be possible. There are all sorts of situations where we have to let go of the hope that another will ever fully understand how deeply we were affected by them and our hurt remains.

As I've navigated my own journey with forgiveness, I have found it helpful to differentiate between our intellectual knowing in a situation, our emotional truth, and a spiritual perspective. We can often feel resolved in one of these realms but not in another. For instance, we can have the intellectual knowing that the other person did the best they could. If they *could* have done better, they would have. And we can take into account everything about their background that may have led to their behavior.

And yet, alongside this logical knowing, we may still have an emotional experience that feels so strongly that what happened was NOT ok. Some really important needs were not met, or violated.

So here we have these 2 very different experiences. Logic/intellect understands rationally why things happened the way they did. And then there's our emotional experience which may still feel completely unseen and uncared for.

To make things even more layered, we may also have a spiritual perspective that can zoom *way* out and understand how these painful experiences in our lives are here as our greatest teachers.

This is why forgiveness can often take years and years. Getting our intellect, our emotions, and our spirit all on board, each with their different needs and agendas is deep work. And the logical part of us might get impatient with a slower timeline for our emotional selves.

Judaism has a surprisingly nuanced understanding of this. It doesn't offer a model of “do your healing work and never feel hurt.” Our tradition is much more comfortable with the idea that healing can be slow, cyclical, unfinished, and intertwined with creating something new. There are 3 Jewish concepts in particular that I've found potent.

First, Judaism doesn't tell us we have to “let go” of all our pain.

Remembering what shaped us is a mitzvah. The word *zachor*, remember, is etched into almost every major holiday. We each spent time on *Zichronot*, Remembrance, just a few minutes ago in our service. We are not meant to forget Egypt as Jews. But we can **remember Egypt differently**. The generation that leaves Egypt still carries Egypt with them. They cling to the memory of their life there.

And then over time, **our memory of Egypt becomes part of a story we tell, rather than the place we live**.

Egypt, the metaphor for our pain, our trauma, is not something we let go of. But it can be something we change our relationship to.

At first, the past happens to us. Then, we remember it. Then, over time, we grieve it. Then, we tell the story of what happened. And slowly, slowly, we discover what it taught us.

Little by little, the story of Egypt is a part of us, but it's not **all** of us. It is not our defining truth.

Having been slaves in Egypt isn't the only way we see ourselves, it's not the only thing that happened. We have also celebrated and gathered and reflected and renewed.

There's a gentleness to the Jewish rhythm of healing. Judaism doesn't expect that deep emotional experiences go away.

Grief, and talking about pain, and discoveries about its lessons, are all part of the winding path of walking toward the Promised Land.

The second concept comes from Jewish mysticism. One of the names for Divinity is **Shechinah**, meaning the indwelling presence. Spiritual connection isn't only once we feel whole and healed. **The sacred dwells within our struggles.**

The process of forgiveness isn't, *How do I get rid of this pain?*

It's: **Can I discover that I am not alone inside it?**

Something happens to our pain when it's held by the compassionate presence of others, by our own loving presence, by the Infinite presence of something way bigger.

I don't think there is anything more powerful in life than feeling seen.

And the Shechinah offers a way in...*who or what is with me in this tenderness, in this heartache? Might there be something bigger holding this with me?*

There have been many times when I called out to the Universe, "Help me." "Be with me." "Show me the path." "Make this easier."

And in time I would sense the Shechina. A dream would remind me it's all gonna be ok. A friend would show up. I'd have an encounter with a hummingbird that reminded me of Divine presence. We are not meant to navigate this wild ride of human-ing solo. We can create openness for Transformative Presence with ourselves, with Divinity, and with others.

And the third concept on the forgiveness path is a Jewish rhythm that reminds us **we don't wait until we're perfectly healed to participate in life's fullness.**

For instance, on Shabbat, we don't wait until everything is 100% perfect to light the Shabbat candles. The house might be a mess, dinner isn't ready, we're frazzled...but here's Shabbat. And so we light candles and welcome Shabbat in, in the midst of our messy, real lives.

Similarly, we don't wait until we're no longer grieving to be in community. We bring our grief into community.

We don't wait until we've figured out what we believe about God before we pray.

Judaism encourages us to enter into life as we are—to participate, to connect, to create, to celebrate, to encounter something bigger than ourselves. Messiness is baked into all of it.

As we think about the layered, circuitous path of forgiveness, the disparity we may feel between being logically vs. emotionally ready to let go of pain, we can find solace in remembering that **our pain is a part of us, but it's not our only truth.** We can discover new connections to the Shechina—we're **not alone inside our tenderness, and we can bring sacredness to it** - whether through ritual, sharing with trusted friends, or deepening our own relationship with Divinity, Love, the Mystery, whatever gives us a wider perspective. And we can remember that perfect healing isn't required to enjoy life's beauty and fullness.

As we navigate our own paths of forgiveness and healing, may we be gentle with ourselves. The way forward is layered, to put it mildly!

AND it is a core part of our path to meaning—deeper connection with ourselves and each other. May we find our way with authenticity and a sense of the sacred.

Shana Tovah

Choose Joy in Spite of the Oy

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5787, Rabbi Sarah Shulman

There once was a young Jewish boy who was born into a world of few Jews and many enemies. His parents were older and wiser yet challenged with making big decisions about how to raise their beloved son, including whether to protect him from the world or to let him lead his own Jewish life as a product of his generation. They were tested with raising a Jewish child in a complex world with so much uncertainty and so much stacked against them. Sound familiar?

I suppose this young lad could have been any Joe or Shlomo, born last century or this one, walking these very halls even. But he wasn't. His name was Isaac, or Yitzhak in Hebrew, meaning laughter, and he was the son of the first Jewish couple, Avraham and Sarah. We know him because our Torah reading begins with his birth and his story and continues with the tests of his family and their faith. And we know him because in fact his story is ours; his laughter and tears are ours; his questions and trials are ours and those of our children today.

Isaac speaks out to us generations after his birth and binding as a litmus test, prompting us to consider whether we will lead our lives through an ethos of fear and protectionism, or through laughter and love. Through the test of time, we must determine once again how we will define this young lad's identity and education, and in turn our own. Isaac asks not just of his father, Abraham, but of all of us: do we choose to live by the knife or by the horn in the thicket, by fear or by joy? What takes priority in our lives?

This is a real question for us now across personal and communal, political and spiritual spheres. One posed eloquently back in February by journalist Bret Stephens at the 92nd St Y as a tension between Jewish survival and Jewish thriving. With limited resources, time, and energy, with limited programs and lifespans: which will we invest in?

Yes, of course, it's going to be both. Yes, of course, we need excellent security on the one hand and excellent Jewish education on the other; a strong standing against Jew-hatred and strong Jewish musical and cultural experiences. For we live in a scary world in which our enemies often outnumber our allies. A world in which even yesterday someone graffitied the egregious words "Israel did 9/11" on a street corner in north Denver. It's a different world in many ways than the one you or I grew up in.

As an example of the contrast, I recall the experience of attending my first AIPAC policy conference in my 20s. I walked into the huge DC ballroom that was crawling with politicians from both sides of the aisle. I was struck then by the bipartisanship that existed in this pro-Israel space.

Now, flash forward to 2026 to a different time and culture in which AIPAC has become toxic to many, at least on the progressive left and the far right. In which the ADL is being attacked constantly by established federal officials and political candidates. In which we are divided and worried for the safety and security of our people. And in which anti-Zionism and even antisemitism have become normalized in public life.

It's tempting in this milieu to throw all our weight, money, and energy into fighting antisemitism. To shift into a defensive mode through expensive Superbowl ads and lashing out at our enemies. **But if and when we have to tip the scales of philanthropy and focus to one side of the surviving or thriving equation, I would, like Bret Stephens, elevate Jewish joy and thriving as our priority and our core mission, every time. It's simply more Jewish.**

For our tradition, after all, teaches us that if a wedding procession and a funeral procession come upon the same road at the same time, the funeral procession must pull aside and wait for the wedding procession to pass. Why? Because, according to the Talmud, the honor and joy of the

living take precedence over the honor and mourning of the dead. Yes, that is the Jewish way. Joy takes precedence.

Likewise, Bret Stephens argued back in February that the goal of Jewish life is joyful Jewish thriving, not ingratiating ourselves with others so they might dislike us a little less. “And by Jewish thriving,” he said, “I mean a community in which Jewish learning, Jewish culture, Jewish ritual, Jewish concerns, Jewish aspirations, and Jewish identification are central to every member’s sense of themselves... when being Jewish is not merely an incident of ancestry, but a source from which we derive meaning and purpose, our spiritual compass, moral anchor, and emotional safe harbor.” **In other words, we must define our Jewish life by our actions, not by our enemies.**

To better understand what Stephens meant by “Jewish thriving” and its significance to us, it’s helpful to go back to someone who made this argument before him. Years before, Rabbi David Hartman wrote a cornerstone essay “Auschwitz or Sinai” in which he argued that our people should be defined by a modern expression of the Sinai covenant and NOT the demonic forces of antisemitism, the Holocaust, or any one atrocity as the dominant organizing category of modern Jewish history and national renewal.

Rather, he stated, “Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with the challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of God. Sinai creates humility and openness to the demands of self-transcendence. In this respect, it is the antithesis of the moral narcissism that can result from suffering and from viewing oneself as a victim.”

According to Hartman and sages before him, Sinai set the tone for a culture of rigorous learning and moral responsibility, of positive Jewish perception and inclusive action. For we ALL stood at Sinai, Midrash Tanchuma invites us to imagine. All of us – Jews by birth alongside Jews

by choice, the young beside their elders, all genders and all backgrounds in the mix. “*Na’aseh ve-nishma* (we will do and we will understand) was the response of our people at Sinai. We understand ourselves through our shared responsibility for holy doing and holy learning in partnership with God for the betterment of the world.

Another giant of the 20th century, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, went so far as to have once claimed that God is a verb and as we are living out the Jewish year and the commandments from Sinai, we should add two words to the end of each verse which are “through me.” In other words, God blessed Avraham to be a blessing. So too, we should embody an ethic of holiness through our actions as follows:

Blessed is the one who gives us Torah to study **through me**.

Blessed is one who sanctifies Shabbat and the holidays **through me**.

Blessed is the one who cares for the sick, creates light from darkness, and inspires laughter and kindness **through me**.

I’ve witnessed that “through me” spirit on display at HEA this past year in the most touching of ways. When we dropped our Torah, people stepped forward to learn in its honor. Sure, I knew fasting was an option, that we could go without food and beat our chests in penitence. Yet, in the 30 seconds I had between when the Torah tragically hit the ground and when I stepped forward to deliver my sermon that morning, I evaluated what might be the most compelling response. Were we going to choose the punishment of fasting or the joy and transformation of learning?

I recalled in that stressful decision-making moment a teaching by the 19th century Satmar Rebbe that if the main point after a Torah is dropped is to show honor for the enduring teachings and wisdom it contains, then it is appropriate for members of a community to establish times for Torah study to recommit to that very honor on a daily basis. And so I walked up to this Torah table as the ark doors were closing and gathered the courage to do what I felt was most aligned with our community, the Hebrew **Educational** Alliance. I first recognized, thank God, that the person who

fell and the Torah were unhurt. Then, I asked, “How many of you are feeling distressed by the fall of our Torah and the fear that we will need to fast for 40 days?” Nearly every hand in the sanctuary shot up. “Well,” I said, “you know what? We are going to *learn* for 40 days. Tonight, I will send out an email, and I invite you to join me in committing to a day of learning in honor of our Torah.”

And so we did. I sent out an email at 9:30 that Saturday night inviting people to join me in learning in honor of our dropped Torah, and by 7am on Sunday morning the Sign-up Genius was already full. This took my breath away; I was so moved.

I then texted James, our Communications Director, *can you add more sign-up slots on the off chance that others may want to learn?* And he did. And then you know what happened? The 40 new sign-up slots filled again, just hours later, with your names, committing to a day of learning. And so we added even more signs ups for people to learn – alone, together, with neighbors, friends, and allies – to restore holiness to our scroll and to our lives.

One couple signed up to study Mussar together and found it to be healing for their relationship. Another member invited other moms from her neighborhood to come study the *V’ahavta* to explore and share how to build a loving home.

For others it took time to wrap their heads around what a day of learning really meant. For example, one person emailed me saying, “Rabbi, I signed up for a day of learning in honor of our Torah. Do I just come meet you in your office at HEA to learn?”

“Oh no,” I responded, “this is your learning. You can do it wherever you like, with whomever you like. I’ll send you some possible texts you can study. But it’s your opportunity to craft the study experience that is most meaningful for you.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic,” he responded. “I can’t wait to sit in my living room with a glass of wine and a study buddy and learn.”

A few weeks later this same person emailed me back. “Rabbi, I’m delighted to share that I learned Torah with my son for the first time. And you know what the best thing about it was? When we finished, he asked, ‘Can we meet next week and do this again?’”

It probably should not have taken a dropped Torah to remind us all how precious learning in community can be. Or how when we reach out and ask of each other to step up in a meaningful way, we will. But I’m happy to share that this uplifting spirit did not begin or end with the learning in honor of our scroll. Like when we called on people to come sing and celebrate with our Sisterhood at a 100th anniversary celebration with Cantor Azi Schwartz, over 500 people stood singing and smiling proudly together. And when we invited professionals of various fields to come study and discuss Jewish ethics with colleagues, they came and shared their insights.

But I must pause and share now, that what truly surprised me about these conversations with medical, legal, and mental health professionals was that when I posed the question: how does Judaism show up in your professional life? Very few could easily answer. It’s as if Judaism, once again, was viewed by many as something quarantined to the synagogue or ritual life and largely not integrated into other aspects of one’s livelihood.

And so this year I am going to invite us all to work on integrating Judaism into not just what we do in this sanctuary but into who we are and how we live out all aspects of our lives from the table to the office, from the backyard to the board room.

The goal of the synagogue is not to perpetuate the institution but to inspire Jewish thriving, learning, joy, and belonging!

- We’ll do this by continuing our Jewish professional ethics conversations this year.
- We’ll do this by bringing transformative speakers and musicians like Rachel Goldberg Polin, Caissie Levy, and Chef Ruchama to HEA.

- And we'll do this by taking HEA on the Road – with the support of a major 3 year grant we've just received from USCJ to offer more pop-up experiences for our community in your neighborhood, on retreat, and beyond!

My goal is for HEA to be the runway for your Jewish life, Jewish identity, and Jewish relationships for you and for the next generation.

As we enter the Jewish year 5787, I challenge us all to choose to thrive Jewishly. How so? Specifically, I invite you to spend at least 18 hours over the coming year in prayer, study, or both. The program guide on your seats will provide you with ample opportunities to engage here for at least 18 hours.

Why 18? Because it's an achievable amount and because it is a special Jewish number that has the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word *chai* (meaning life). Let's choose life by engaging in Jewish life and learning with joy.

But it's not just about what you do here. So additionally, I propose that we each spend at least 18 hours at home during the coming year in discussion, learning, ritual, or sharing stories over meals and Mah jongg with others. Let your home be a sanctuary for Jewish life.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I challenge you to spend 18 hours in the community teaching others about Judaism at your firm or office, volunteering, or otherwise living out your Jewish life outside of these walls with purpose and pride. My friends, we need to build more allies.

I hope you'll take me up on this 18-hour challenge and that you'll find it to be empowering and meaningful so that when we gather here in 5788 you can confidently say, "Blessed are you Adonai our God who sanctifies our lives with these mitzvot through me." Through this 18-hour

challenge, may we each celebrate who we are Jewishly and not hide from it – or how could we possibly expect the next generation to do the same?

For in a world with antisemitism growing around every corner and rampant throughout the digital world, Jewish joy and thriving not only become more important, they become critical for our survival and for building our courage and that of the next generation. The Jewish people are hurting; we are feeling the uncertainty and bitterness of the moment and the need for purpose. As Isaac once showed us generations before, the best antidote to victimhood and fear is communal joy – not in naivete but in resilience. **We must each define what it is we are surviving for!**

I'll conclude with a personal example. In 2020, just as the pandemic was gripping our world, I decided to commit to a daily practice of studying Talmud, known as Daf Yomi, in which I (and thousands of other Jews around the world) have been studying one page of Talmud each day since.

We'll complete the 2,711 pages of Talmud study this coming June. I can tell you that this learning experience has been one of the most enriching ones of my life and a source of spiritual sustenance through the aftermath of October 7th. The conversation amongst the rabbis, arguing passionately across pages and generations has reminded me how deep & thoughtful our tradition is.

What I didn't know back in 2020 when I began studying a page of Talmud a day, was how joyful this learning would be. Sometimes the daily page of Talmud makes me chuckle. Other times it makes me cringe or wonder. But always there is something about turning the page along with so many others, engaging with the voices of our tradition that makes me feel connected, appreciative, and renewed.

Today we all turn the page to a new year. And I bless us that in this new chapter of our journeys, even with all our *tzuris*, with all our struggles and questions – we may remember that we are all connected back to Sinai and back to Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac of our Torah. Life may very well be one big test by God or the universe to find out what we are all about, what we care about, what we stand for. I don't know why we are tested. But I do know that tests are always better when we go through them together, learning from our challenges.

If you take one thing home from this day and the legacy of Isaac and our ancestors, I hope it is to choose joy in spite of the *oy* by having the chutzpah to learn, celebrate, and gather Jewishly this year. May we be roused to find our own *daf yomi*, whatever pathway to Jewish learning, holiness, and meaning making that may be.

But I implore you: find it **now**; enjoy it **now**. For life is too short to wait or to wallow. And so may we all go forward with joy, with pride, and with possibility to embrace this New Year together. Shana Tova!

Lessons from a Segment of the Colorado Trail

Kol Nidre 5787 Sermon, Rabbi Sarah Shulman

This year for our 15th wedding anniversary my husband Nate got me a map. Specifically, he gifted me a giant topographic map of the 567 miles of the Colorado Trail stretching through the Rockies from Denver to Durango.

Why a map? You're probably wondering. I mean, wouldn't a lady prefer a diamond necklace or designer purse? Actually, this gift was more personal and consequential to me, for I've been wanting to hike the Colorado Trail in its entirety, point-to-point, for some time, ever since Nate and I first hiked a breathtaking section of it through the Collegiate Peaks on our first date.

What Nate gave me for our anniversary was not false hope to try to complete something that I couldn't possibly have time to do all at once given the nature of my work as a rabbi and responsibilities as a mother of two young girls, but rather an invitation to take on each of the 33 segments of the trail over time, however long that might take.

And I have. When the staff of the Jewish summer camp, Ramah in the Rockies, called to inquire if I would scout a few sections of the trail in search of water for the camp's backpacking trips on account of it being such a dry summer, I said yes.

And so, in June I jogged 13 miles of segment 7 of the Colorado Trail from Breckenridge to Copper Mountain, over a gorgeous alpine pass in 4 feet of snow. At moments along the way, I didn't know if I would ever make it up that pass, as I sunk deeper and deeper into the snow with each step. Suddenly I heard a rustle in the trees and looked up from the hole of snow I was currently stuck in, half expecting to see a hungry Black Bear salivating before me. But the furry creature that approached me, as if laughing at my predicament, was just a puny marmot, who coincidentally seemed more interested in eating my trail mix than gnawing at my limbs, thank God. I

ventured on, and managed, though ego bruised, to complete the remaining miles up and over the pass where Nate awaited me on the other side.

Then a few weeks later in early July I ran an additional 15-mile section of the trail closer to Ramah in the Rockies. In both cases, I found just enough water for their trips, along with plenty of sunshine, solitude, and a few minyanim of marmots and mosquitos. These were memorable treks, leading to some minor battle scars from tree branches, wildlife, and sore calves the following day. But you see, the point of the map was not that I would run, hike, or bike each of the 33 segments of the Colorado Trail alone.

Rather the goal was that over time we as a family would together and separately travel its different sections and then note on the map who from our family had trekked each segment as well as the date on which we had done it. It was a commitment to a future of small steps rather than grandiose plans.

This summer the four of us did have the opportunity to hike a few shorter sections of the Colorado Trail near Kenosha Pass, enjoying the golden Aspen leaves, the columbine flowers, and the quiet of the forest before camping nearby. And my daughter Lielle even covered a few miles of the trail I had scouted, while at camp with her bunk.

But here's the thing: as I hung the Colorado Trail map on the wall of my office and began to mark off completed sections, it occurred to me that this map charted not just an approach to trekking but a metaphor for a new approach to living: *take it one segment at a time*.

For so often we only see the big picture of our aspirations and expectations of ourselves and others. And we inevitably fall short of these ideals.

Sometimes it even feels like we are falling short in nearly all aspects of our lives, disappointing those we care about the most. Cause we can't do it all; we face limits in time, energy, and emotional and physical capacity. I know I certainly do.

But this one segment, this one conversation, this one project or change, I know I can do that. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "You don't have to see the whole staircase; you can just take the first step."

On this night of Kol Nidre, we each have a choice: do I continue to measure myself up against the person I dream of being, OR the person I actually am today. Sure, I might become her one day. Just as someday I do hope to complete the whole Colorado Trail over time. But it won't be with my own two feet alone nor all at once.

On this Yom Kippur I invite us to acknowledge that the process of teshuvah is gradual and methodical. Repentance begins not with grand plans but with accepting who we are today with all our gifts and imperfections. And with taking the next step from there to change our perspective and our behavior.

To illustrate this point, our tradition tells of a water carrier who had two large pots hung on each end of a pole across his shoulders. One pot was perfectly molded and unblemished, delivering a full portion of water down the long path from the stream. The second pot had a crack in its side, and by the time it reached the village, it had leaked out half its contents.

For two years, the cracked pot delivered only half-measure. Day after day, it felt bitter, ashamed, and inadequate because it could only do half of what it was designed to do.

One day, out of nowhere, the cracked pot spoke to the water carrier by the stream: "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you. Because of

this crack in my side, you only get half my value, and all your hard work yields half the results."

The old water carrier smiled gently and said, "My friend, pay attention as we walk back to the village today, not just to your crack but to the ground below." The crack listened and watched the ground on the way home. Suddenly he noticed that there were colorful wildflowers only on his side of the path, and not on the other pot's side.

When they reached the village, the water carrier turned to the cracked pot and said, "I have always known about your flaw. And so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my Shabbat table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.

One thing a rabbi knows: we are all cracked pots; we are all *avaryonim*, those who have fallen short, as we are described in the liturgy of tonight's service just prior to the Kol Nidre prayer. We recited back on page 204 in our machzor: "By the authority on the court on high and by the authority of this court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we grant permission to pray "*im havaryonim*," with those who have transgressed."

Originally this language referred to lifting the ban on those who were in *cherem* (or excommunication) and could not attend synagogue to pray on Yom Kippur. But over time, the word *avaryonim* began to speak more generally to all of us who have missed the mark, fallen short, or crossed over, as derived from the Hebrew root *avar*, meaning to pass over. For every one of us has passed over into the land of imperfection and wrongdoing. Everyone has had moments when life veers off the map. No one ever planned for a divorce or a disease or a criminal act. No one anticipated an undistinguished career or underachieving child. No one ever expects life to

bring disappointment, halts, or conflict. No matter how good we look on the outside, no one's life is perfect. We all have cracks.

Yet here's the truth of Kol Nidre: there is life after stumbles and disappointments if we 1)come to accept our shortcomings, 2)learn from our mistakes, and 3)take the journey to forgiveness and healing one segment at a time.

Thank God, Kol Nidre disrupts our typical way of evaluating our lives and faults. Thank God, through the music, fasting, and sacred words of this liminal moment, Kol Nidre offers us a ritual tool through which we can reconstruct the map of our lives.

For it's easy to be overwhelmed by where we fell short, leading us to internalize the disappointment of others without really changing our behavior. Yet tonight we are invited to arrive as sinners and leave by focusing on even just one opportunity for change. We can read the full Al Chet tonight and get overwhelmed by the entirety of the prayer and therein distance ourselves from doing much more than mindlessly hitting our chests. Or we can study the Al Chet as a map, pause, and choose just one of the 44 lines of this confessional as our segment to start and explore: *for the sin of empty promises* perhaps, or, *for the sin of betraying trust*.

I have found through this year's journey, that taking one segment at a time in fact gives me hope for the future in an uncertain and fractured world. Let me give you one global and one personal example to demonstrate how this gift of segmentation might apply to us. The first example is big and may surprise you, and the second is personal and certainly surprised me.

First, on a global level, I find I often talk to Jewish friends and colleagues who feel overwhelmed by the situation in the Middle East, related media

coverage, and by their concerns for the safety, security, moral standing, and future of our people, not sure exactly where to focus their efforts or attention.

While there are, of course, many ways we could discuss Israeli society: its cracks and remarkable resilience, its history and the dreams we hold for our people, just as we could with American society, the one segment I am focused on right now related to Israel, and I suggest you should be too, is the upcoming elections on October 27th.

This is one of the most important elections in the history of the state of Israel and will determine not only what rabbis will be sermonizing about for years to come, but more importantly, will determine the fate, welfare, policies, and international standing of our people. It's quite possible that no politician, party, or coalition may get the minimum 61 seats to form a majority and govern. But the next step in Israel's future and evolution is clear: and we need to be present and supportive of its unfolding. For this segment truly matters.

Now, to apply segmentation on a more individual level, I invite you back to my office in January on a Saturday afternoon. After kiddush, I found myself in tears, digesting a conversation that I had just had with a congregant, who expressed their disappointment in me for not being there that week when they needed their rabbi. Though taken off guard, I had listened empathetically and then thanked them for expressing to me how they felt and offering their feedback. For letting me know I had missed the mark and giving me an opportunity to learn and do better.

But nevertheless, it is hard to witness another's disappointment; it stings. Because I truly care about this person and would never want to hurt them. I had to hold two truths at once as we so often do: that I am capable of boundless love and compassion, and also that I am limited and imperfect.

So what did I do? I pulled myself together and called up this congregant the following week to first apologize and then inquire how their next procedure had gone. We spoke at length about their health and about the road ahead to healing. And before we hung up, they thanked me for following up and for caring.

And I thanked them too. For letting me know what was going on with them, for giving me the opportunity to be there for them and their family, and offering me the chance to learn and change for the better.

I know in this coming year that I will fall short in places and for people I care about again. And so will you. But I've learned this year that teshuvah truly begins one conversation at a time – so what are we waiting for?

Unfortunately, we so often view forgiveness, as Jonah mistakenly does in tomorrow's haftarah – as something only given to those few who are truly pure. But God teaches him, and in turn us, that we are all worthy of forgiveness, divine love, and the grace of being “good enough.” It took a rocky sea voyage, lodging in a whale's gut, a desiccated plant, and sackcloth to teach Jonah that lesson; let's hope we can come to understand it in a less gruesome manner.

The mindset that I hope we may all embrace this year is one of “good enough.” Good enough is one segment, not the whole map. Good enough is backpacking along the Colorado Trail with your son for two days and not ten, as was the case for one of our members this summer. Good enough is appreciating opportunities to improve or simply say “I'm sorry” without labeling ourselves as a failure or drowning in remorse. What is good enough for you this year? I wonder. And what might be that one segment of improvement that you hope to approach in your life with a new perspective and with an abundance of compassion?

One of the features I have come to most appreciate about the Colorado Trail is the beauty and challenge of each segment – the unique trees, peaks, creeks, and even the snowbanks one encounters along the way. I’ve realized over time that I would rather savor each segment than complete the whole trail anyway.

Another thing I’ve come to appreciate is the history of the trail which almost wasn’t finished. In fact, in December of 1984, the Denver Post’s magazine published an article entitled “Trail to Nowhere” about the failure of the Colorado Trail project to reach completion. Back in 1974 at the trail’s inception, its founders, forester Bill Lucas, and magazine publisher Merrill Hastings, dreamed of a legendary, uninterrupted trail to expand access to the jewels of the Rockies and spur tourism to its trails and nearby towns. But progress on the Colorado Trail halted in 1984 short of Durango due to a clash of different visions for its finalization. How was it eventually finished? By record numbers of volunteers - thousands in fact - who built the trail, yes, *one segment and one day at a time*.

May we all learn to take life and the process of teshuvah one day at a time. Jewish time is measured, after all, in smaller chunks: in days and weeks and months. In Genesis we read that the creation of the world was day by day; and that is what made it “good.” And the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people just as they were leaving Egypt was that of Rosh Hodesh. In other words, their passport out of slavery and through a wilderness of transition was their ability to reclaim control of time in smaller, monthly units.

Judaism, in this way, encourages us to live just one segment, one conversation, one election, one surgery, one moment at a time, celebrating the small victories and pauses along the way. And in turn, we begin to approach the whole map of our lives and the world differently, as I have found to be the case.

In this spirit, I'm hoping that for our next wedding anniversary, Nate and I might return to segment 10 of the Colorado Trail on which we had our very first date. Back in 2010 on a day off from Ramah, we hiked the 12 miles up Mt. Harvard in the Collegiate Peaks. I honestly don't remember the view from the 14,421-foot summit that day. But I do remember taking in lupine-lined meadows, Nate's sore knees, and the answer to a question that I asked him on the way up the trail: "Do you really think you would want to date a rabbi?"

I don't remember Nate's exact response, but I guess the answer was yes, or at least, *let's take it one peak at a time, Sarah*. And we have. And we will. One segment at a time.

My friends, my community: I want to wish all of you a meaningful journey ahead through Yom Kippur and beyond, one which I hope you'll let yourself take in short segments with supportive trail mates. I wish you an easy and purposeful fast and an even more purposeful life.

G'mar Chatimah Tova

Choose Life: Lessons of the Time Bound Man

Yom Kippur 5787, Rabbi Sarah Shulman

Just over a year ago a member called me out of the blue. “Rabbi,” he said, “I am going to die. My liver is failing. I don’t have more than a few months to live. Maybe a year at the most, according to my doctors. Can we meet?”

Over the course of our ensuing conversations, this gentleman and I began to converse often – not just about his diagnosis, but about how he wanted to live out the short time he had left on this earth.

And so, he chose to retire, he witnessed the birth of his first great-grandchild, he celebrated his 90th birthday surrounded by family, and he invited them all to come visit him in Denver often. He guided his decisions by an answer to this essential question: **If I only have a short time to live, what’s important to me, now?**

My friends, the significance of this question cannot be understated either for this man or for any of us, especially not on this day. And so, prior to the Yizkor service in which we will be remembering our loved ones and honoring the lives they lived, I pose to each one of us: If you knew you had only one year left to live, what would you do? What values, relationships, and experiences would you prioritize?

For when there is only a year remaining, our options seem to expand exponentially. Should we take family, friends, and a bottle of tequila and head for Cancun? Should we “get down to work” or quit our job? Should we get married? Or divorced? Should we take up golf? Get a tattoo or remove one? Should we read all those books that keep piling up on our bookshelves or abandon reading for living? Save all our money for our heirs, or spend every cent on tzedakah?

I've been thinking about this question of how we might spend our time as I have walked the journey of the last year with my friend, and in turn, with my own mortality in mind. Wondering, we who will all expire at some point soon, or not so soon, do we appreciate what a gift life offers us now?

Our Torah portion today deals with this exact topic in describing what's at stake on Yom Kippur for the ancient Israelites. Even as he recovers from the tragic loss of his two sons, Aaron steps up on Yom Kippur day as High Priest to prepare a unique sacrifice, the scapegoat, by laying both hands upon the head of this living goat and confessing over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites. That poor goat was then sent forth with the community's sins into the wilderness to purify the hearts and souls of the Israelite people.

But the scapegoat was not escorted by Aaron the High Priest. In fact, the person for this task is not even designated by title, role, or name except to say that the goat shall be sent off to the wilderness *b'yad ish iti* (Leviticus 16:21). By the hand of an *ish iti*, a time bound man. Not by a priest or a leader. But by a person of a designated time. What we might call the time bound person who knows their own end is coming.

I can't help but itch with curiosity – who was this time bound man charged with taking the scapegoat out into the wilderness? And for how long was his journey to rid the community of its sins before he ventured back, purified his clothes, and re-entered the Israelite camp? The neurotic Jewish mother in me wants to know – did he have enough water with him, sufficient snacks, perhaps a tent in case he got trapped in bad weather?

For a people that wandered in the desert together for 40 years, it seems odd that anyone would go out into the wilderness alone. For doesn't our Torah instruct us, "it is not good for a human to be alone" back in the book of Genesis?

This is precisely why I find the *ish iti* who leads the goat out to Azazel on Yom Kippur to be so concerning and so fascinating. Sure, call me a Jewish mother. But this is core to Judaism. You just don't rough it on your own.

And, yet this *ish iti* is unique and unafraid, unencumbered and focused on his purpose, whoever he might be. The 11th century French commentator Rashi explains that the *ish iti* is a person "who has had time" to prepare for the task they are now ready to undertake – who has made the most of their time in this world. This time bound person has come to accept their finitude and thus is willing to take on this monumental task for the community. In this way, Rashi reminds us that rather than staring at the clock of our lives, we must – no matter how difficult it is – make the most of the time we have. We must get up and dance, even in the halls of the hospital; we must share meals with family and friends, even in the hustle and bustle of demanding careers or caregiving responsibilities.

Though we rarely have enough time, the time bound person is courageous and audacious enough to measure life through its *quality* rather than its quantity.

I have been fortunate enough to meet several people like this in my time as a rabbi. Those who seem to have a nearly clairvoyant understanding of how to spend life's most precious resource, time. Recently, I sat beside a member who was weeks from the end of his life. When I asked him in his dimly lit living room, "What gets you up in the morning?"

Without a moment's pause he replied, "Finishing these extra reports for the office."

No, who says that!? Seriously, he answered immediately: "Family." Family. So clear. So simple. And yet we have an uncanny way of complicating this, don't we?

Building on this point, many of us were touched this past year when Eliya Cohen who spent 505 days in captivity in Gaza shared his orientation to what matters when faced with the darkness of the tunnels and impossible circumstances. He learned from Hersh Goldberg-Polin the teaching of Nietzsche (*Knee-tcha*) as taught by Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, that one who has a why can survive any how. What was Eliya's "why"? That the value of family is everything, including the relationship he shared with his fiancée Ziv whom he wasn't even sure was still alive, nor she him. And yet they sat together on our bima with such love and resilience this past March. And a few weeks ago, they were married in Israel.

They taught us that no one knows what tomorrow will bring. But that in spite of it all, you have to look for the good. Eliya returned to his faith in the tunnels of Gaza, leading kiddush on Friday evenings over drops of water and scraps of pita. In the lowest and saddest of moments he came to feel that somehow, somewhere God is always listening and that love is unconquerable by torture, by hatred, by darkness, by all.

"Grief dares us to love once more," wrote author Terry Tempest Williams. Whether in the form of anticipatory grief before we or others are gone, or the splintering grief we experience after a painful loss, somehow the end of life puts our priorities into sharper focus through a kind of life review and a new rubric for meaningful living.

In Judaism we call this life review *heshbon hanefesh*, a self-examination or accounting of our souls, that we undertake each year leading up to and through the High Holy Days. Through this spiritual process we ask ourselves three essential questions:

First: who have I been this past year? Second: which are the relationships that I most appreciate, and which are those that feel broken that I am

called to repair this year? And finally: who do I want to be in the year ahead?

The time bound person is one who faces the unfinished business of one's own successes and stumbles, unafraid to engage in the labor of teshuvah and asking for forgiveness. They live undeterred by shame, ready to pick up the goat that is our mistakes and those of others and haul it out into the wilderness with resolve and opportunity. In other words, to do the work.

Along these lines, Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam, views the *ish iti* instead as a "timely" person, someone whom the community is accustomed to sending on such a mission because they are an expert at traveling through the wildness. They are prepared to navigate the rough terrain ahead. Rashbam guides us to prepare and educate ourselves for the taxing mission of accompanying our loved ones through the journey of life and death. While we can never be fully prepared for this sacred passage, there are incredible resources, including organizations, spiritual community, books, friends and mentors who can teach and support us throughout the aging process.

In fact, even this very day, Yom Kippur, offers us an opportunity to anticipate and embrace the end of life through its rituals, liturgy, and mood. Zooming out just a bit, we can see how the High Holidays themselves are a bridge from birth to death. Rosh Hashana, known as Yom Harat Olam, is the day the world is born, on which we read about the birth of Isaac; it is all about beginnings.

Then over the next 10 days of teshuvah in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we venture from birth to death. Finally, Kol Nidre arrives, and the 25 hours of Yom Kippur are in many ways a dress rehearsal for death and with it a journey back to life.

We see that in the white kittels worn by clergy, which are unmistakably death shrouds. As in times of dying, we don't traditionally eat, drink, bathe, or have intimate relations on Yom Kippur. Moreover, as on our death bed, we recite the Vidui, or confessional prayer, standing here together. And the sobering Unatanetokef prayer in Musaf, which asks who shall really live and who shall really die? Who by fires of passion and who by waters of indifference? It's as if this whole 25-hour holiday experience existed to force us to become better acquainted with, dare I say befriend, death. Who shall live? That's not the point. For indeed, all of us shall live. AND none of us shall live. **We encounter death to reencounter life.**

In the words of poet Mary Oliver:

*When death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like,
that cottage of darkness?*

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Oliver invites us to relinquish control over the not dying, the active resistance and fear of death. And instead, to face eternity with wonder at what we have made of this life as something particular and real. In accepting the brevity of life, we make space to love, to learn, and to live more fully now, in this moment.

For the truth of the matter is this: we are all living on borrowed time and every day we live is an additional gift. I've been thinking about that reality this year ever since I officiated back in May at the funeral for my cousin who saved my husband's life. Prior to reciting Mourner's Kaddish at her graveside in Houston, I reflected on how when she was a young woman living up in Fort Collins, she started a conversation with a pregnant stranger at a bus stop:

"When are you due?" My cousin inquired.

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not keeping the baby," the woman responded.

"You know, my aunt has been trying to get pregnant for a long time; she really wants a kid. But she hasn't been able to have one. Would you be interested in arranging an adoption?" my cousin asked.

And miraculously they did. And thank God, because Nate was born without a soft spot and needed emergency brain surgery as a newborn to survive. If he hadn't been adopted by Bob and Marcia; if our cousin Liana hadn't bravely started this conversation with a stranger at a bus stop; then Nate probably would not have survived. And he certainly wouldn't have come into my life.

Standing beside my cousin's grave, our family was yet overcome by mourning for our loss and at the same time gratitude for the gift of life. As we recite in our morning prayers, *Baruch atah Adonai michayei hameytim*, "Blessed are You God who brings life from death."

This attitude of profound gratitude is what I attribute to the time bound man who has found peace and purpose in his turns through the wilderness of life, aware of his impending departure. To measure our lives not according to what we did or didn't accomplish, nor whether we use a walker or not, but according to the values we acted upon, the family we embraced, and the contributions we made to lift another's spirits, relieve another's suffering, or inspire another's meaning.

I think perhaps the time bound man is not named because he is each one of us.

Each one of us has an opportunity to choose how and with whom we will navigate our own relationship with the pressures and challenges that come with a finite time on this planet. For like it or not, death is the great equalizer and destination of even the most exceptional of journeys.

I recall a particularly synergizing moment after October 7th when I gathered with a group of Imams (Muslim religious leaders) here in Denver to sit face to face and attempt to connect. There was so much we did not have in common in our viewpoints and agenda.

Until we started to speak about loss and shepherding communities through love and mourning in the face of overwhelming grief. It was an unexpected moment of like-mindedness and solidarity. One I've often returned to as tensions have risen along with death tolls over these past few years.

It's moments like this of solidarity in the face of our impermanence that prod us to not wait until a terminal diagnosis or peace treaty before opening our hearts to the preciousness, the grace, and wonder of this living moment.

And you know what's miraculous? The member of our community whom I began this sermon speaking about is still alive, thank God. He is still living his truest life through new memories, new poker games, and new loves. But are we?

My friends, may we each have the strength to journey with the time bound people around us, to reflect with them, to support them, to dance

with them, and even to embrace and be them, choosing life in the face of our own mortality.

It's certainly no coincidence that the Torah ends with Moses, nearing the end of his life, returning to the idea of choice as he teaches: This day, I call heaven and earth as witnesses before you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, therefore choose life so that you and your children may live with meaning.

As the hours of Yom Kippur wane until the gates are closed, I ask you to choose life by choosing for yourself who and what you are living for in the year ahead. Not just choosing to live, but choosing to live wisely by asking ourselves: What really matters, who will I choose to be, and, as the sage Hillel once famously asked, if not now, when?

G'mar Chatima Tova

Kol Nidre 5787 - Shechehiyanu

Once there were two friends Aaron Shmuel and Ze'ev Wolf. They were inseparable. They were students in the yeshiva of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. They learned together, prayed together, laughed and cried and were never apart until one day their Rebbe sent them each to study in another Yeshiva - Aaron Shmuel went to Volozhin and Ze'ev Wolf to study in Jerusalem. The friends were apart for just over a year and it so happened, by coincidence, if there is such a thing, that the friends arrived back in Koretz on the same day! They saw their teacher Reb Pinchas and recited the blessing on seeing a Torah scholar, "who gives wisdom to those who fear Him!" Amen, amen, amen! And then the friends saw each other and together they shouted out the bracha, the blessing you say when you haven't seen a friend for more than a year, "m'chayei hametim - Blessed is the One who brings life back to the dead!" Amen, amen! A little boy at the back of the class raises his hand. "Rabbi, Reb Pinchas, I don't understand. Why when friends see each other after a year do they say "who brings life back to the dead?" Who died?" "Ahh," said Rebbe Pinchas, "The Zohar, the Book of Splendor, teaches that each of us has a light that shines in the world above, a light that is unique to us, but when two people become friends, as their friendship grows, the two lights merge into one great light and from this union is born an angel, the angel of friendship! The angel of friendship lives as long as the friends are together and has the strength to live for one year after they are separated, but then she withers and dies, but if, after that year has passed, the friends come back together again, the angel of friendship is brought back to life!" Did they imagine it or did everyone in the study hall that day feel a gentle fluttering of wings?

This story is about the power of deep relationships, but it is also about the profound spiritual practice of saying brachot, blessings, with the sage advice to say 100 blessings a day.

The blessing *m'chayei hametim*, who reenlivens the dead is indeed the traditional bracha we say when we see a friend that we have not seen for more than a year, and it is also in the second blessing of the amidah, *gevurah* (heavenly power) traditionally recited three times every day. *M'chayei hametim, Who reenlivens the dead*. Parts of ourselves, our damaged relationships, and everything we thought was lost forever, given up for dead, can be brought back to life. But what if you

see a friend you haven't seen for a month, or several months? The same section of the Talmud, *Brachot 58b*, that offers *m'chayei hametim*, suggests that we say *she'cheyianu, v'kiyamnu v'higianu lazman hazeh*, the bracha we said just a few minutes ago; who has kept us alive, or enlivened us, sustained us, helped us endure and brought us to this new and unique moment. Of course there is a strong connection between these two brachot; both are about restoring and affirming life. Whether seeing a friend after a full year with *m'chayei hametim*, or after a month with *shehecheyanu*, our tradition gives us sacred words to notice the miracle of living connections.

She'cheyianu v'kiyimanu v'higianu lazman hazeh! It is such a beautiful and powerful blessing and one that we say a lot but don't talk or think about that much. As well as saying it on rekindling a friendship, the rabbis invite us to say it when we are doing something for the first time that we hope to do again, when we eat fruit for the first time in a year, when we wear new clothes and, of course, when we celebrate the holidays. It is a blessing full of meaning in three parts that I would like to unpack and suggest that it is such an important and rich bracha for these times that connects us to community, to the power of gratitude and to the essence of life.

Shehecheyanu can mean to enliven us or to give us life. It assumes, in the words of my teacher and former dean Rabbi Brad Artson, *"that life is not static, that the enlivening is gifted at every moment, and that the process of life is, not surprisingly, a living process. It is so easy to take for granted that we have awareness, that we have breath, that we have consciousness, and to forget that these attributes are an ongoing gift."* Any of us who have been through major health challenges know the fragility and finitude of life and each new breath renews us.

Every day, our morning prayers before the shema contain the words *"ham'chadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh bereshit"* - God in God's infinite goodness renews creation every single day, gives us new light, new life, new possibilities.

Rachel Naomi Remen, doctor and author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather's Blessings* who died very recently, has amazing reflections on life and death, as a doctor working with cancer patients. She says:

“What I have found, in the end, was that the life I had defended as a doctor as precious, was also Holy...I no longer feel that life is ordinary. Everyday life is filled with mystery. The things we know are only a small part of the things we cannot know but can only glimpse. Yet even the smallest of glimpses can sustain us.”

Rachel Naomi Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal

The mystery and the miracle of being alive! In 2024, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, better known as Yitz, an important teacher of mine and founder of Clal in New York, published a book called *The Triumph of Life*, which he subtitles “A Narrative Theology of Judaism.” It is a hopeful, optimistic view of humanity and human dignity and much of it is about the Torah’s mandate to choose life!

We are called to be open to life, to embrace it, to love living it, to view and experience it as an ever-flowing abundance of fulfillment and pleasure, and to want more of it. Life's unpredictable side should be viewed not as a threat, but as a source of wonder and excitement. True, certain conditions take the joy out of life- unavoidable defeats, losses, and painful setbacks; tense and dangerous situations; depressions so deep they rob us of the will to live; illnesses that disrupt our capacity to relate; obsessions that trap us into compulsive, colorless routines. Bad things happen to good people. But those who choose life understand that the sum is greater than any or all of its parts. They choose life for the good. It is so precious that they are prepared to pay the costs.

The Triumph of Life, Rabbi Irving Greenberg

Shehecheyanu - You have reenlivened us and we renew our lives and choose life this New Year!

V'kiyimanu - you have sustained us. We are resilient, we are still standing because others help us stand tall and we help them. We keep each other going through life’s trials, sustained and sustainable even when we are weary. For Rabbi Brad Artson *v'kiyimanu* is about our interconnectedness:

“There is a web of relationship in which we live and breathe and have our being. And that web is itself a living dynamic, a changing thing. How blessed are we to be part of a community of people that extends back across the millennia and around the world. The unity of the Jewish people is surely among the most fractious unities of any imaginable. But it holds, doesn’t it? We yell at each other. We scream at each other. We protest each other. Each political opinion is abysmal when compared to our own. And yet, we’re there for each other. In that standing together, we stand woven into an ancient tapestry of living Torah—a tradition of wisdom forged by our God and our ancestors in each new age, continuous and novel. We are given our opportunity to internalize that eternal, sustaining love, and to move it forward and to shine it onto a needy world.”

Rabbi Brad Artson, JNS, July 2026

V’kiyimanu - we are sustained and we sustain. We stand together as we enter this Yom Kippur, confessing in the plural because we hold each other up, we cover for each other and help each other to stand when we are weak.

Finally *v’higiyanu lazman hazeh* - we have been so blessed to be brought, to attain this new moment, which is unlike any other moment. The gift of presence, to be here and now - “The Power of Now” as Eckhart Tolle would put it. Yes, Yom Kippur is in part about reviewing our past so that we can make new commitments in the present and future, but we often carry so much guilt and shame about the past and so much fear of the future, both of which keep us from the present with its gift of infinite possibility. Confession, regret, return and forgiveness are vital components of this awesome day, but their ultimate goal is that we can be whole and present and clear. Let’s begin this Yom Kippur in deep gratitude for being here together, for rekindling relationships that just may be birthing angels, to the appreciation of being alive, renewed in spite of all the threats and challenges, to the profound ways in which we have been sustained and sustained each other and to the power of this new moment!

With all of this, let’s turn to one another, perhaps people who have helped sustain you, and say together again.....Baruch atah...

Yom Kippur 5787 - Zionism

Just over two weeks ago, our beloved members Barbara Steimmetz and her daughter Julie Shaffer attended a Boulder City Council meeting to share in public comment, their civic right, their views on city funding for Spruce Swimming Pool. As they left the council chambers, there was a group of protestors waiting for them who hurled vile abuse at them, calling them Zionist bitches and worse, claiming that Barb, a survivor, was now complicit in another holocaust. As some of you know, both of them were badly burned in the fire bombing attack on The Run for their Lives walkers on Pearl Street on June 1st, 2025 by a perpetrator who, in his pre-trial hearing for the murder of our beloved Karen Diamond and intent to murder so many others, said "End Zionism before it ends you." The horrific trauma of that day was very much reactivated for Barb and Julie on September 3rd and it is appalling and intolerable and goes way beyond the right to free speech.

In June the ADL issued a Title VI complaint against Boulder Valley School District alleging that BVSD failed to protect a Jewish middle school student from repeated, awful antisemitic bullying, slurs and physical assault, despite the district being continually notified. Thankfully a settlement was reached a couple of weeks ago and BVSD has begun implementing significant measures to address antisemitism in the schools. The process included members of the Jewish community, including students and parents from Bonai Shalom, speaking out at board meetings. ADL runs a very effective anti-bias program called No Place for Hate that has been implemented in many of our schools. In those meetings, some parents spoke against the use of that program because ADL is a Zionist organization. All this has been happening right here in Boulder!

This is not the sermon that I was planning to give, nor wanting to, but it is now the sermon I feel I must give. How has Zionism become a code word, for some, for everything bad in the world? How can it be that anyone wanting to run as a political candidate with an endorsement from the DSA, the Democratic Socialists of America, must adhere to the 2025 resolution to stand on an anti-Zionist platform?

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The first time I went to Israel, I was 18 and was going to meet up with friends who had been there for a year program. I felt ambivalent. I was not raised in a strongly Zionist home and other things were happening in my life. I remember writing questions on the plane about why I was going there. As the plane touched down at Ben Gurion airport, I burst into tears and felt a profound sense that I had come home. These were the days before the modern airport when we still walked down the steps of the plane onto the tarmac and some people kissed the ground. Eretz HaKodesh. The Holy Land. That feeling of being home never left and I still feel it when I go back there. I cannot explain this in a rational, intellectual or ideological way, it was and is an emotional and spiritual reality about connection, as if I am a link in the chain in the 2000 year dream of returning. Abraham Joshua Heschel captured this so beautifully in his 1969 book, in the aftermath of the Six Day War, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*:

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Does this make me a Zionist? Yes it does. Zionism in its simplest form means the right of the Jewish people to have self-determination in a Jewish majority State, in their ancestral homeland. Yet there is not one Zionism, there are Zionisms: secular, religious, political, socialist (Labor), revisionist, cultural, liberal, practical, synthetic, diaspora. There are Christian Zionists and even Muslim Arab Zionists, as I discovered hearing Fatema Al Harbi, a Bahraini Muslim woman, speaking at a CU Hillel event last week. So, is an anti-Zionist a rejection of all of these Zionisms and a rejection of any right for a Jewish majority state where non Jews can also be citizens? Israel is very imperfect and for some the 2000 year old dream has become a nightmare, but this tiny country, against impossible odds, still exists as the only Jewish majority state in the world, where there is a Muslim Supreme Court judge and 10 Arab Members of the Knesset. The Declaration of Independence of May 1948 explicitly commits the new state to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." That's Zionism.

I recently read Yardena Schwartz's book *Ghosts of a Holy War: The 1929 Massacre in Palestine That Ignited the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. This history is almost entirely forgotten today, especially by those who act as if this conflict began on October 8th 2023. In the 1920s, Jerusalem's Grand Mufti, Haj Amin Al-Husseini, incited bloody riots by spreading false rumors that Jews were trying to take back the Temple Mount and destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque, claiming Jews had no historical connection to the land. The riots culminated in the Hebron massacre in 1929, in which 67 Jews were savagely murdered,

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I am not a historian of the Middle East nor of Zionism and realize that any telling of history never tells the full story, but many people with very, very strongly formed views and opinions on any side, that lead them to protest, sometimes violently, rarely have a context of history and are used and manipulated by forces that do!.

And of course awful things have happened within and at the hands of Israel. Zionism has become a dirty word, especially among many young people. Perhaps that is because for that generation, the only Israel they have known has been led by an increasingly right wing government, with some far right nationalists in power who do not hide their racism and aims to reoccupy Gaza and to annex the West Bank. The silence and inaction of the government to reign in the extremist settlers who are daily committing violent crimes against Palestinians, is awful. The death toll in Gaza is really painful, including terrible mistakes by the IDF like the killing of Israeli hostages trying to escape, of international aid workers and journalists. The allegations about what Prime Minister Netanyahu knew before and on October 7th are deeply concerning. Religious youth pelting eggs at Kol HaNeshama, a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem, on the 2nd Day of Rosh HaShanah! Hateful and despicable. But this is not Zionism! This is the current administration and its policies and some awful, violent extremists. Thousands and thousands of Israelis protest week after week, and at the end of October will exercise their democratic right to vote for change!

The JFNA survey finds that 8% of Jews identify as non-Zionist and 7% as anti-Zionist. I am a Zionist and the Conservative movement is a Zionist organization and we are a Zionist synagogue. It enrages me that Zionism has become such a dirty word that can lead to violence and bigotry like the abuse suffered by Barb and Julie. And yet, I do not want to cancel or ignore the mostly young Jews who define themselves as anti-Zionist. I want to understand them as much as possible, just as I would hope they would understand the perspectives of the older generation. I do believe, as others more scholarly than me like Rabbi Irwin Kula, have said recently, that the mainstream Jewish community has not done a good job of educating our people with a more critical Zionism that is able to acknowledge the lethal mistakes along the way in a full and honest context of history. Simon Sebag Montefiore's newest book *The Cauldron - The Making of the Modern Middle East*, which I hope to read after the holidays, begins not in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration or 1929 with the Hebron Massacre, or 1948 with Israel becoming a state, but in 1900. Over 100 years of complex, painful, bloody history that gets us to today. Being a Zionist does not mean we white wash over the difficult parts of our own history. We can be proud of Israel's achievements and survival and also critical of its policies and mistakes and some of the people in power.

In the early 2000s I participated several times in Encounter trips to Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron. Groups of Jewish leaders and activists meeting with Palestinians and listening to their narratives. These were challenging and painful experiences, but have been crucial to my understanding. Julie Shaffer was on the board of Encounter for 10 years and after the June 1st attack, she received a book full of messages of love and support from the Palestinians she worked with over those years, saying "this is not in our name."

In his 2015 book *My Promised Land - The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, the Israeli author Ari Shavit suggests that his own Zionist ancestors did not really see the Palestinian villages in their aspirations to resettle and build the land. Rabbi Hanan Shleshinger is one of the leaders, along with Ali Abu Awaad and his brother Kaaled, of Roots/Shorahsim/Judur, a grassroots organization that brings together Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank. They have been to Boulder and Bonai Shalom three times including earlier this year. When Rabbi Shleshinger tells his own, moving story as an ideological, religious settler returning to his ancestral homeland, he very honestly shares that he too did not notice the people who were already there and then one day, when he met his now close friend Ali Abu Awaad, his eyes were opened. We need both stories. All stories. This is the Zionism I believe in, not one that diminishes our dreams of return and our indigenous, historical right to have self-determination in that land, but one that allows the dream to be more universal, more expansive, even through the pain

and trauma of the bloody history. In his recent book *Zionism in Crisis*, Rabbi Zachary Truboff, who lives in Jerusalem reminds us that the phrase we say when we pray for Israel—"*reishit tzmichat geulateynu* - the beginning of the flowering of our redemption," is not a guarantee or a political statement; it is a prayer. It requires us to reckon honestly with Jewish power, to name what has gone wrong, and to have the courage to change course."

Yes, many people after October 7th have given up the idea of there ever being peace, but as I said on Rosh HaShanah, I am an apocoloptimist and strive to hold on to hope and optimism even within the catastrophic potential realities we face.

There is no doubt in my mind that anti Zionism has largely become antisemitism, even the new blood libel, and has been weaponized in awful and deadly ways as we have seen here in Boulder, as well as in Washington, DC, Sydney, Australia and many other places. It is different to legitimate and honest criticism of today's Israel, and most of us hope for some real change in the elections there, whilst also fearful of what might happen in the mid terms here with the DSA-getting more and more traction in the Democratic party, including here in Colorado. We must reclaim Zionism as a positive force in the world.

Next November, we are planning our 2nd Bonai Shalom Israel trip led by me, Nate and Rachel, who as many of you know is an authorized Israeli tour guide. We have an information meeting at Bonai on October 8th at 6.30pm. This trip will not be a passive sightseeing tour, but an opportunity to grapple with and understand more of some of these themes and the people and organizations working for change.

Rabbi Avi Weis brought us a positive vidui several years back; an alphabetical list of positive confessions beginning *ahavnu*, *barachnu*, we have loved and we have blessed. For the letter kuf, he wrote ***kivinu la'aretz*** - we have hoped for the Land of Israel! Some of us have been relentlessly over critical of Israel and some of us have not been critical enough.

It's Yom Kippur and we are reflecting individually and collectively, all of the confessional prayers are in the plural, to remind us we are in this together and the more we can unify around Zionism and Israel, the more credible our critique. We cannot separate our fate as Jews from Israel and perhaps, whatever our politics, whatever our personal relationship with Israel, some of our Yom Kippur reflection can be focused on committing to doing more to help create a better Israel, to redeem Zionism and build a safer community here in Boulder. *Or chadash al Zion tair* - a new light will shine over Zion! May we all merit to see its radiance.

Yom Kippur 5787 - Zionism

Just over two weeks ago, our beloved members Barbara Steimmetz and her daughter Julie Shaffer attended a Boulder City Council meeting to share in public comment, their civic right, their views on city funding for Spruce Swimming Pool. As they left the council chambers, there was a group of protestors waiting for them who hurled vile abuse at them, calling them Zionist bitches and worse, claiming that Barb, a survivor, was now complicit in another holocaust. It was very ugly and very disturbing. As some of you know, both of them were badly burned in the fire bombing attack on The Run for their Lives walkers on Pearl Street on June 1st 2025 by a perpetrator who, in his pre-trial hearing for the murder of our beloved Karen Diamond and intent to murder so many others, said "End Zionism before it ends you." The horrific trauma of that day was very much reactivated for Barb and Julie on September 3rd and it is appalling and intolerable and goes way beyond the right to free speech.

In June the ADL issued a Title VI complaint against Boulder Valley School District alleging that BVSD failed to protect a Jewish middle school student from repeated antisemitic bullying, slurs and physical assault, despite the district being continually notified. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color and national origin, including discrimination against Jewish students on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, by educational institutions that receive federal funding. Thankfully a settlement was reached a couple of weeks ago and BVSD has begun implementing significant measures to address antisemitism in the schools. The process included members of the Jewish community, including students and parents from Bonai Shalom, speaking out at board meetings. ADL runs a very effective anti-bias program called No Place for Hate that has been implemented in many of our schools. In those meetings, some parents spoke against the use of that program because ADL is a Zionist organization. All this has been happening right here in Boulder!

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In February of this year JFNA (Jewish Federations of North America) released a report that 88% of US Jews believe Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state, and yet only 37% identify as Zionists. How can that be? The same report finds that 71% feel an emotional connection to Israel (up from 58% in 2020), 60% say Israel makes them proud to be Jewish, and nearly 70% also report finding it hard to support actions taken by Israel or its government. Enough statistics. You get the point. Zionism has become tainted in the eyes of so many in the US and beyond.

The first time I went to Israel, I was 18 and was going to meet up with friends who had been there for a year program. I felt ambivalent. I was not raised in a strongly Zionist home and other things were happening in my life. I remember writing questions on the plane about why I was going there. As the plane touched down at Ben Gurion airport, I burst into tears and felt a profound sense that I had come home. These were the days before the modern airport when we still walked down the steps of the plane onto the tarmac and some people kissed the ground. Eretz HaKodesh. The Holy Land. That feeling of being home never left and I still feel it when I go back there. I cannot explain this in a rational, intellectual or ideological way, it was and is an emotional and spiritual reality about connection, as if I am a link in the chain in the 2000 year dream of returning. Abraham Joshua Heschel captured this so beautifully in his 1969 book, in the aftermath of the Six Day War, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*:

'The land of Israel is memory...Just to be in the land is a religious experience. It is a land where time transcends space...The land is a text. Wherever you stand you are at the frontier of biblical moments.'

Does this make me a Zionist? Yes it does and yet there is so much more to say about what that means. Zionism in its simplest form means the right of the Jewish people to have self-determination in a Jewish majority State, in their ancestral homeland. Yet there is not one Zionism, there are Zionisms: secular, religious, political, socialist (Labor), revisionist, cultural, liberal, practical, synthetic, diaspora. There are Christian Zionists and even Muslim Arab Zionists, as I discovered hearing Fatema Al Harbi, a Bahraini Muslim woman, speaking at a CU Hillel event last week. So, is an anti-Zionist a rejection of all of these Zionisms and a rejection of any right for a Jewish majority state where non Jews can also be citizens? Israel is very imperfect and for some the 2000 year old dream has become a nightmare, but this tiny country, against impossible odds, still exists as the only Jewish majority state in the world, where there is a Muslim Supreme Court judge and 10 Arab Members of the Knesset. The early Zionists were clear that Israel was to be a Jewish majority state with full and equal rights for Muslims, Christians and others. We see this clearly stated in the Declaration of Independence of May 1948, which explicitly commits the new state to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." That's Zionism.

I recently read Yardena Schwartz's book *Ghosts of a Holy War: The 1929 Massacre in Palestine That Ignited the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. This history is almost entirely forgotten today, especially by those who act as if this conflict began on October 8th 2023. In the 1920s, Jerusalem's Grand Mufti, Haj Amin Al-Husseini, incited bloody riots by spreading false rumors that Jews were trying to take back the Temple Mount and destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque, claiming Jews had no historical connection to the land. The riots culminated in the Hebron massacre in 1929, in which 67 Jews were savagely murdered, including families who had lived there for generations peacefully with their neighbors. Al-Husseini, who later allied himself with Hitler, appointed as director of the Nazis' Arab Bureau, became a founding ideological father of Palestinian nationalism and a mentor to many.

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And of course awful things have happened within and at the hands of Israel. To return to the disconnect between the large majority of Jews who support Israel's right to exist and yet avoid or recoil at the label Zionist. Zionism has become a dirty word, especially among many young people. Perhaps that is because for that generation, the only Israel they have known has been led by an increasingly right wing government that has perpetrated some awful stuff, with some far right nationalists in power who do not hide their racism and aims to reoccupy Gaza and to annex the West Bank. The silence and inaction of the government to reign in the extremist settlers who are daily committing violent crimes against Palestinians, is awful. The death toll in Gaza is really painful, including terrible mistakes by the IDF like the killing of Israeli hostages trying to escape, of international aid workers and journalists. The allegations about what Prime Minister Netanyahu knew before and on October 7th are deeply concerning. Religious youth pelting eggs at Kol HaNeshama, a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem, on the 2nd Day of Rosh HaShanah! Hateful and despicable. But this is not Zionism! This is the current administration and its policies and some awful, violent extremists. Thousands and thousands of Israelis protest week after week, and at the end of October will exercise their democratic right to vote for change!

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people with a more critical Zionism that is able to acknowledge the lethal mistakes along the way in a full and honest context of history. For two or more generations, Zionist education has not told the full story. Simon Sebag Montefiore's newest book *The Cauldron - The Making of the Modern Middle East*, which I hope to read after the holidays, begins not in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration or 1929 with the Hebron Massacre, or 1948 with Israel becoming a state, but in 1900. Over 100 years of complex, painful, bloody history that gets us to today. Being a Zionist does not mean we white wash over the difficult parts of our own history. We can be proud of Israel's achievements and survival and also critical of its policies and mistakes and some of the people in power.

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