

THOSE WHO GRASP IT

Insights on the Torah by the Members of Minyan Maat

1979-2023



Art by Adrienne Weiss

עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחְזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכֶּיהָ מְאֹד.

It is a tree of life to those who grasp it...

Proverbs 3:18

**VOLUME III DEUTERONOMY,
HOLIDAYS & OTHER OCCASIONS**

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Drashot for parashayot that are sometimes paired as a double parasha are listed for the pair, rather than the individual parasha.

Within each parasha, drashot are listed chronologically, to the extent a date was discernible from the materials submitted.

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MELANIE	SCHNEIDER	ROSH HASHANA		2022	991
MELANIE	SCHNEIDER		PRAYER FOR THE USA	2023	1149
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Vayeitzei			259
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Devarim			833
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Haazinu		2008	907
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Haazinu		2010	913
DAVID	SHAPIRO	Vayeishev		2022	303
JUDITH	SHULEVITZ	Behar / Bechukotai		2022	657

JUDITH	SHULEVITZ	YOM KIPUR	YIZKOR	2021	1031
YONA	SILVERMAN	Bamidbar	AUFRUF	2018	693
YONA	SILVERMAN	Bhaalotecha	HS GRADUATION	2001	743
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bereishit		1996	1
NANCY	SINKOFF	Vayishlach			279
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bo		2023	371
NANCY	SINKOFF	Acharei Mot / Kedoshim		1991	597
NANCY	SINKOFF	Acharei Mot / Kedoshim		1995	605
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bamidbar	SHAVUOT	2001	677
NANCY	SINKOFF	SHABBAT ZACHOR		2010	1045
NANCY	SINKOFF	SHABBAT HAGADOL		1999	1053

Devar Torah-Devarim

In my other life, the one I didn't have, I would have been a clinical psychologist. That's what I was planning to be before I stumbled into an 8 a.m. religion class in college, taken solely because it fit my schedule. I still find myself often approaching the biblical text from the point of view of the individual struggling in the world. Deuteronomy, Tigay's commentary tells us, is the Torah's most intellectual book, concerned with attitudes and beliefs.

With its broad sweep, this parasha is holistic. It shows the see-saw between confidence and fear, feeling intimidated and small in the face of larger peoples, while remembering past triumphs and seasons of strength. It meditates on faith and the lack of it. Its God veers from being a warrior to a faithful guide to a parent carrying a toddler. It echoes two of the organizing stories of the Torah, Exodus and the Jacob story, which intertwine the personal and the communal. Like the rest of the Torah, it all takes place on the cusp, in a state of expectation before entering the land, but is infused with memories.

We're reminded of Exodus at first because of the grumbling "It is because the Lord hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt" (1:27)... reminiscent of Exodus 14:11 "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Or more explicitly inv. 30 "The Lord your God who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt *before your very eyes*." Several times Moses mentions of God as "the one who fights for them." Their defeat of King Sihon is because "the Lord God had hardened his spirit and made his heart defiant in order to hand him over to you (2:30)" as he had hardened Pharaoh's heart. But all this reassurance by recalling the past doesn't work. The Exodus story is now being rewound. Their crime? "Uvadavar ze ainchem ma'aminim

B'Adonai Eloheichem" (1:32), yet for all that you have no trust in the Lord your God," literally, "you don't believe..." Recall that in Exodus, Israel's state of mind is unclear until the very end, after they have crossed the Red Sea. Everyone else, including Pharaoh, the magicians, the army, had acknowledged God's power earlier. Only on the other side of the Red Sea, after the drama, does Israel come along. "So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord, and in his servant Moses," Vya'aminu B'Adonai uvMoshe Avdo" (14:31). Here, because of lack of faith God reverses the Exodus drama, "as for you, journey back into the wilderness, in the direction of the Red Sea" (1:40). They fail to believe and he sends them back, slouching towards Egypt.

The question of faith has always interested me. I teach at a Christian institution where students more easily talk about their faith, although as the years have passed more have "come out" as atheists and agnostics. In general I hewed to a standard Jewish idea that we're deed over creed people. It's okay to be fuzzy on belief as long as one is doing the right thing. Yet we cannot really side-step the faith language in today's parasha, nor the strain of disappointment at forgetfulness and lack of trust.

One day I was walking in Riverdale and passed the Episcopal church. It had a big sign "Great faith? Little faith? No faith? You're all welcome here." I thought it was a wonderful message for any religious institution, including the synagogue a block down the Parkway. But I began to think—which one of those am I? Great faith-I don't have the temerity to claim that. No faith?-I've wasted a lot of time in synagogue if that's true. So I guess I am in the "little faith category," along with Israel in our parasha, and probably most of my fellow progressive Jews. But that can't be the whole story. Talking about faith misses the other feeling beyond the rational—love. I don't come here because I believe—I come

here because I love. And perhaps a little bit because I hope. Faith, hope, and love are of course the 3 virtues touted by the apostle Paul, who was fundamentally a Jew, not a Christian (because that term did not yet exist). The opposites of these virtues are incredulity, cynicism or despair, and hatred, all strong temptations in today's climate.

Devarim contains a lot of love language. In next week's parasha (4:37) we will hear "because he loved your fathers," he chose their heirs, and the accompanying verses to the Shema—"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (6:5f) In the next chapter--"It's not because you are the biggest that God chose you, indeed you are "Ha ma'at m'chol ha'amim" but because of love. Ki M'achavat Adonai (7:7-8) . There are many more examples of love language.

This brings me to the other story alluded to by our parasha, the Jacob story. In chapter 2 our parasha alludes to the conflict and healing of the breach with Esau. God instructs them to carefully pass through the land of your *kindred* Esau. Don't bother them. Buy food and water, but don't get greedy. Haven't I taken care of you for 40 years? He's nervous- Don't start anything. Twice the text refers to them as "family," *acheynu* and *acheychem*.

There are two references to Nachal Jabbok (2:37; 3:16). It was next to the river Jabbok that Jacob struggled in the night, with a man, with God, wit an angel, with himself—there are many views. He was also full of fear, knowing he was about to face Esau and aware of his past failings. But he prevailed and emerged as Israel, the eponym for the people. He called the place Peniel, for I have *seen* God face to face. This prepared him to meet his long-absent brother Esau, to whom he said "to *see your face* is like seeing the face of God." Because of Jacob's *seeing* and because of Esau's grace, comes a healing. Jacob's fear evaporates.

Something about seeing differently brings transformation and the courage to move ahead. Today's parasha contains several reminders to "see" and ends with Moses to Joshua "Your very eyes have seen what God has done" (3:21).

Permit me to go back to that early Jewish teacher again, who acknowledged that seeing is always partial, saying we could only see "as in a dark mirror," literally "in enigmas" in Greek. If you have seen ancient mirrors from archaeological finds like the Bar Kochba caves, you can tell they are not very good. After he wrestles with this problem of seeing, he says "but these things remain-faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).

Faith and love references populate our parasha, but where is the hope? It is in the haftorah. This is Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath of Seeing, so called after the first word of the haftorah, Chazon Yeshiyahu. It is one of the 2 Shabbatot around Tisha B'av, meant to send us into the day with a certain amount of hope and consolation, cushioning the blow. It contains that wonderful verse, "Come let us argue it out, says the Lord." Think of Jacob wrestling with the divine, contending with Esau, Moses sparring with God, Israel with God. "Come, let's talk it out, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like white wool" (Isa 1:18). In other words, change is possible. It starts with seeing things differently.

Back to my sign on the Parkway. If I could creep up with a magic marker to alter the sign for myself, I would go to that "little faith" phrase and write in parentheses (but a lot of love, and quite a bit of hope). That is what brings us in and keeps us in. Whatever combination of those attributes we have, the first line of the reading today reminds, us we are all Israel. And we are all welcome here.

VAETCHANAN – SHABBAT NACHAMU

Ron Lee Meyers

Minyan Maat – August 5, 2017

Here we are at Shabbat Nachamu. We've turned the corner from the three weeks of rebuke, to the seven weeks of consolation. And just as the seven weeks of the Omer charted our climb from spring toward the full sun of the solstice and the full light of the Torah at Shavuot, now begin the seven weeks of our descent, toward the shadows of the autumn and the depths of our reflections in the High Holidays. And at the same time that we move from the heat and growth of the summer to the season of chill and withering, we are also move in the opposite direction, from the darkness and despair at the destruction of the Temple toward the beacon of renewal at the Holidays.

Shabbat Nachamu is the turning point in our calendar that directs us toward the great turning point of our renewal. The season of tshuva, of turning, is launched by the last verse of Eicha, which we read on Tisha B'Av a few days ago: *Hashiveinu Adonai elecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem*: "Turn us back to you, Gd, and we will return, restore our days as of old". And from there we look toward the great turning at the climax of the Akeida story, which we read on Rosh HaShana, when Gd calls Abraham and Abraham replies, *Hineni* – Here I Am.

Hineni is a refrain in the Akeida reading. It's like a metronome ticking off the beginning, the middle and the end of the story. At the start of the story, Gd calls, "Abraham", and he answers, "*Hineni*". And thus begins the test and the climb up

the mountain. Then Isaac calls to him, “Father”, and again Abraham replies, “*Hineni*”, making up some comforting words when Isaac asks where is the lamb for the sacrifice.

The first time he replies, it means, “Here I am, as Gd’s servant”. The second time he replies, it means, “Here I am, as Isaac’s father”. The parallel beats of the story shine a bright light on the conflict between Abraham’s two different roles. But then the third beat resolves the conflict: when Gd calls again, Abraham again replies “*Hineni*”, and Gd is served, and Isaac is saved, and Abraham’s conflicting identities are somehow integrated.

The third *Hineni*, the one that formed the turning point to an unsuspected new pathway, was a response to a different kind of call. At the beginning of the story, Gd calls “Abraham”, but at this point, Gd calls “Abraham, Abraham”. Calling Abraham in the singular does not do justice to the complexity of Abraham’s identity. Doubling the call acknowledges his complex, divided self.

When Gd calls “Abraham, Abraham”, you almost expect him to answer “*Hineni*, *Hineni*”. But you can’t be two people, and you can’t be in two places at once. That’s the challenge that faces us in the Holidays. How can we be all of the different selves that we need to be, in a single, integrated life.

*

The doubled call is familiar from Moses’s experience at the burning bush. Gd calls to him, “Moses, Moses”, and he replies “*Hineni*”. But when Moses says, Here “I” am, what does he mean by “I”? Does he mean the Israelite slave child sentenced

to death? the Egyptian prince? the Midianite shepherd? the freedom fighter? the stutterer? the murderer? The doubled call allows for all these identities – and since it's Gd Who is calling, that double call also includes the new identities that lie in Moses's future, which he hasn't yet imagined. There's no such thing as just "Moses" – he is much too complex for that – there is only "Moses, Moses". And the single response, "*Hineni*", acknowledges that all of his identities are all part of a single self.

So, *Hinenu* – here we are at Shabbat Nachamu. And as we travel from Shabbat Nachamu to the High Holidays, there is a moment, exactly that the middle of the trip, where we encounter another notable doubling of language. In parashat Shofetim -- in the fourth of the seven weeks of consolation -- we read Gd's command, "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*". This doubled word is one of the most familiar subjects of commentary and interpretation. The difficulty of grasping its meaning is evident even from its direct translation: "Justice, justice", being the most familiar, but also "Righteousness, righteousness" in the Art Scroll and "Equity, equity" in Everett Fox's rendering. Some readers take the doubled phrase to constrict the meaning, as in "justice, and only justice" shall you pursue. Others take the doubling to imply a range of broader meanings. I will leave that question for a different darshan a few weeks from now. But for the moment, I will observe only that the word *Justice*, recited even once, is hardly a simple proposition. Every case has at least two sides, of course, and any case may present numerous issues, to say nothing of the range of facts that may call for the novel application of established law. It seems to me that the repetition of the word – *tzedek, tzedek* – has to be an acknowledgement of its kaleidoscopic implications – of the

difficulty of achieving justice in any individual case, and then the greater challenge of working justice throughout an entire society. When I hear “tzedek, tzedek tirdof”, I almost think it means “complexity, complexity, shall you grapple with”. And the fact that Justice is something to be *pursued*, rather than merely administered, is perhaps the greatest suggestion of its inherent complexity.

*

So, amid all the complexity that is suggested by “Abraham, Abraham”, “Moses, Moses”, and “Justice, Justice”, what do we make of “Nachamu, nachamu”?

I think the notion of being comforted is no simpler than the notion of justice. To be comforted is a process, not an event. It necessarily contains a history of some happy situation, that has been tragically disrupted, and of a prospect, or at least a belief, or a trust, or a hope, that things can once again be as they were. Comfort, then, contains all the complexity of belief and trust and hope, as well as all the practical challenges of restoring the integrity of a ruined order. The doubling of “Nachamu, nachamu” seeps into the many facets of comfort.

...But then again, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Robert Alter, in his comment on “tzedek, tzedek” says that there’s no need to spill a lot of ink about the doubling; we should just accept it as an emphasis. And perhaps that’s what we have here – it’s not just that we should be comforted at some cursory level, but that we should be deeply or completely comforted. But even if it’s as simple as that, think of what that means as we come out of Tisha B’Av. The “Nachamu, nachamu” we recite this week isn’t a consolation for a scraped knee, or even for a

failing subway system, or a lost election. It's a consolation for the destruction of Gd's home on earth, the loss of an entire way of life and world view, and for the exile from a homeland to which the people had a divinely ordained connection. In order to amplify a single "*Nachamu*" to the scale of that loss, the doubled "*Nachamu, nachamu*" must be more than an arithmetic, geometric or exponential function – it has to be an existential function that elevates the message from the mundane to the divine.

*

So, as we begin our movement this week toward our encounter with the divine at *Rosh HaShana*, we go from "*Nachamu, nachamu*", through "*Tzedek, tzedek*", to "*Avraham, Avraham*".

And... as we move from here toward *Yom Kipur* we go from "*Nachamu, nachamu*", through "*Tzedek, tzedek*"...to "*Adonai, Adonai*" – *el rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed v'emet*.

"*Adonai, Adonai*" is the refrain of our *Yom Kipur* liturgy. It's a grand reminder of Gd's grace on the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment is exactly when we are not pursuing Justice, justice – we are seeking a justice that is tempered with comfort – a blend of *Nachamu* and *Tzedek*. It's the day when we are seeking Mercy – perhaps we are seeking Mercy-Mercy. But in reciting *Adonai-Adonai*, we don't have to call out for *rachamim-rachamim* – exactly because we are calling out to "*el rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed, v'emet, notzer chesed l'alafim, nose avon va-fesha v'chata, v'nakeh*". We emphasize the vast complexity

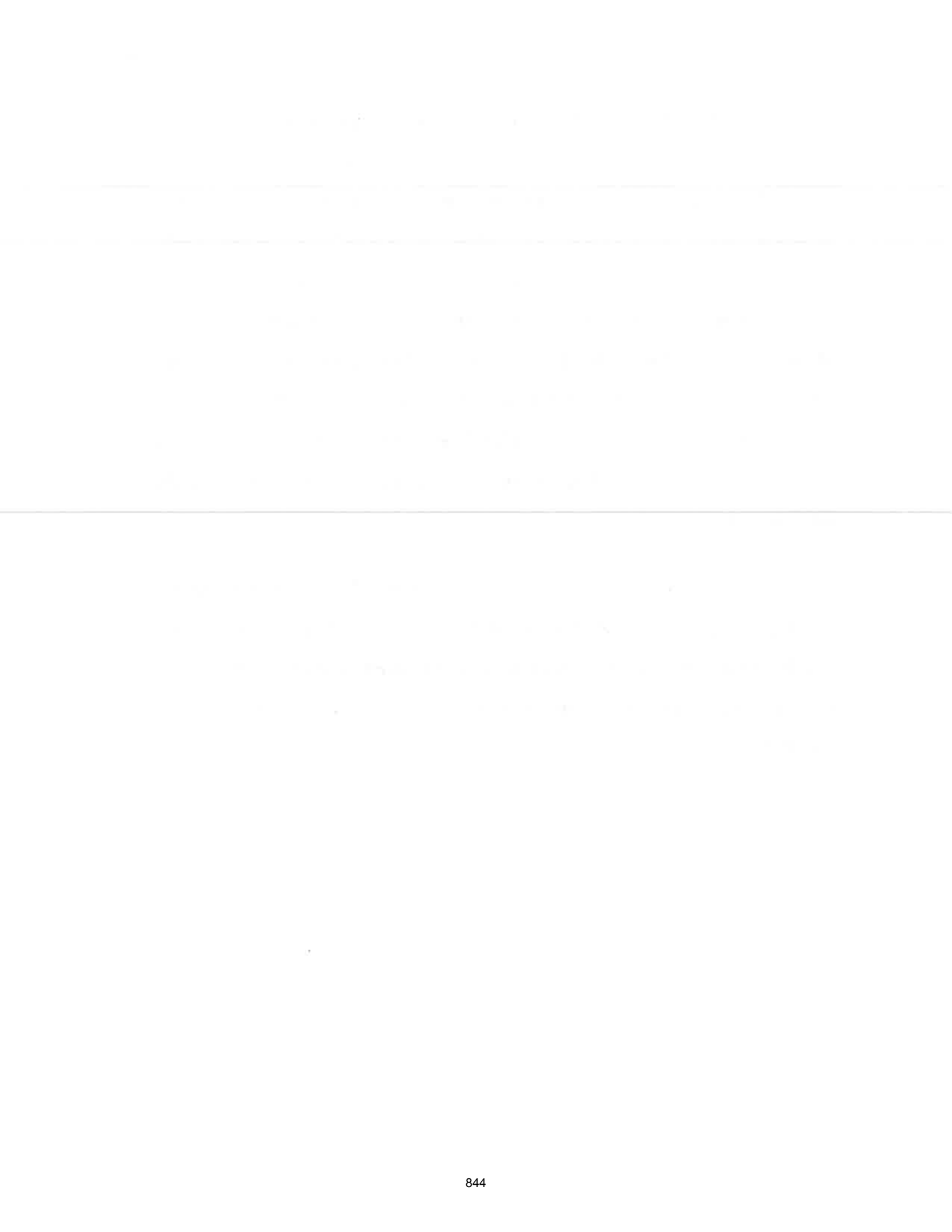
of justice by saying it twice; we emphasize the vast vastness of Gd's mercy not by doubling it but by saying it in thirteen different ways.

Now, we do have to acknowledge that we're being a little dishonest in reciting the thirteen attributes of Gd in our liturgy, because in the original text where it appears in Shemot, Gd's attributes of mercy are immediately followed by the harsh attributes of judgment and punishment. Gd keeps kindness to the thousandth generation, but that "will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and the fourth generation." But even if we did not edit the text – even if we included the whole text in our liturgy – the math still works in our favor. Not only are there thirteen expressions of kindness – there are a thousand generations of kindness, and only three or four generations of guilt. No matter how much sin each of us may be heir to, we are heirs to so much more kindness and love.

Amid the thirteen attributes, let's go back to the first two of them, which is the doubled name. What is the meaning of "Adonai, Adonai"? Gd in this verse is revealing himself to Moses, to the greatest degree He ever revealed Himself to anyone. What I hear in this is Gd not only presenting Himself to Moses, and not only giving us the Torah, but is giving Himself to Moses, and by extension giving Himself to the rest of us. I recall reading a memoir once in which the writer reflected that his favorite people all had the characteristic of "giving themselves away, in both senses" – giving away their secrets, and giving of themselves without reservation. I think Gd here is pouring Himself out to us.

By doubling His name, He is giving Himself to us with the same fullness that was in his call to Moses and to Abraham. Gd reveals himself to Moses on two occasions, and each time it's with a doubled name – so Moses receives a doubling of the doubling. At the burning bush, Gd identifies Himself as “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” – “I am that I Am”, the magnificent double-declaration of pure being, and here Gd identifies Himself as “Adonai, Adonai”. This second time coincides with Moses's redoubled effort of inscribing the tablets of the law. It's at this point – at the second effort, after the horrifically failed first effort – that Gd reveals Himself to Moses, and reveals Himself with doubled abundance. This is the revelation of a Gd in the act of giving us a second chance. That is surely the Gd we are calling upon at Yom Kipur.

With “Adonai-Adonai”, Gd isn't only revealing Himself to Moses, he is telling us how to call on Him forever after. It's just the way that Gd called on Abraham-Abraham and Moses-Moses. We call on Adonai-Adonai, with all the infinite resonance of the doubled name, so that Gd can hear us and respond back to us by saying, *Here I Am*.



When asked to give the drash today I immediately thought of a comment made by my revered Bible teacher in rabbinical school at JTS. Since he was not given to sweeping statements, I have never forgotten his characterization of the so-called Deuteronomist – the person or persons responsible for the book of Dvarim and other Biblical texts commonly attributed to their authorship. The D., he said, was responsible for Western progress and for the Holocaust. This statement clearly requires some explanation. After all the book of Dvarim – and today's parashah specifically – includes the reiteration of the 10 commandments, the Shema, the assertion of God's compassion – Ki el rachum A. elohechah - for God's treasured people who were rescued from slavery in Egypt as well as the assurance that God is close at hand and that the law proves God's wisdom and discernment. But my teacher's declaration is based on the central theme of Deuteronomy – the theme of unity itself: "the one God, whose name rests on the unique shrine, has chosen one people, Israel" as covenant partner. This is the classic formulation of biblical monotheism which demands total obedience to the one God who shall be worshiped at a single shrine: Ki A. hu ha'elohim ein od milvado.

To quote Professor Stephen Geller in his essay entitled *Fiery Wisdom* from the book *Sacred Enigmas*: "The tremendous concentrated force of these combined unities made D'ic faith into the exemplar of later crusading religions, all of which, like their model, rouse the militant conscience by setting up a foe of the true faith." For Deuteronomy, ~~he~~ ^{argues}, the object of this "militant ideal", the "foe of the true faith" - is the Caananites who are to be exterminated in holy war. And further: "It is this unity of outer and inner realms, of action and conviction along with its strident, unflagging militancy, that made D'ic faith the prototype of all later puritanisms." This analysis applies then to the three monotheistic traditions which derive their central God ideas from the Bible; three "puritanisms" that, according to Dr. Geller, are characterized by "strident, unflagging militancy" at their core. We can find many manifestations of this militancy in today's parashah.

But this model is replicated:

4:2 – Neither add nor subtract from God's commands - no ifs, ands, or buts!

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

4:3 – A reiteration of the ^{incident} zealotry of Pinhas at Baal Peor when God struck down those who disobeyed ~~and rewarded Pinhas for his deeds~~ ^{divine law}

4:23-26 – Where God is characterized as El Kaneh – a zealous or impassioned God – and Esh Oclah – a "consuming fire"

5:30 – Implicit threat that we should obey the laws so that it may "go well" with us; in short, that we are in big trouble if we don't obey

6:15 – We are warned that if we don't obey God's laws divine anger will blaze forth against us:

"God will wipe you off the face of the earth."

וְיָקַח אֱלֹהִים מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְיִמְחָא אֶתְּכֶם מֵעַל־הָאָרֶץ

Therefore, observe faithfully the instruction - the laws & the rules - with which I charge you today.

God instantly requites w/ destruction those who reject Him.

7:2 - And as we know from so many places in the Bible - our enemies are doomed to destruction - Haharem tacharim otam - and God will also destroy those who reject God: (7:10)

There is no relativism in this system; no situational ethics. There is one God, one truth and one set of laws that must be obeyed without question. If we disobey we face destruction while ~~For~~ God's enemies, those who by definition oppose God's absolute authority, there is only destruction. ~~And destruction awaits those among God's chosen people if we disobey.~~

This single minded commitment to a singular truth, expounded in a singular ethical system, this Puritanism in Dr. Geller's words, becomes a powerful force in Western culture, spurring invention and creativity, exploration and economic growth, but it has also been the rationale again and again for "strident militancy" by monotheists determined to see their singular truth prevail. Throughout post-biblical history this theological absolutism has been cited as the motivation for the Crusades, the Inquisition, jihad and even, sometimes, for acts of violence by Jews. And while God was not the justification offered up by the Nazis their crusade was fueled by a pernicious Puritanism in the service of a demented and debased monomania. Hence the assertion about Deuteronomy which I've never forgotten.

Another recurring motif in this parashah - and one of the themes of Deuteronomy - is our obligation to teach our children. Here in 4:9 is the injunction to tell our children - v'hodatam l'vanecha u'livnei vaneicha - so that our children will also revere God. We know the language of Deuteronomy's concern for the children; it is familiar to us from the v'ahavta - v'shinantam l'vanecha v'dibarta bam - and from the Passover Haggadah: "When, in time to come, your children ask you, you shall say to your children, Avadim Hayinu" But there is an implicit threat here as well since disobedience also leads to punishment of our children (4:40 and 5:26). We must teach our children according to Deuteronomy but what is it that we are supposed to teach: that God is compassionate and we are God's treasured people or that God is El Kanah, will destroy us if we disobey and that, since God's will is absolute, we must destroy our enemies if they have an opposing truth????

Observe his laws & commandments... that it may go well with you & your children after you...

The challenge posed by the command to teach our children - "v'shinantam l'vaneckha" jumped off the page of a recent article in The Jerusalem Report. Although we've read a lot recently about the actions of young Israelis in Gaza this report was particularly chilling. It told of sisters aged 12 and 14 who spent 30 days in an Israeli jail after helping block a major highway skirting Tel Aviv on May 16. This so-called "children's crusade" evokes mixed emotions among us but beyond the issue of disengagement from Gaza there seems to be a more fundamental issue at stake. The August 8th article quotes kids who claim "We're acting in the name of God," and "We obey only the rabbis," and relates the story of a Druse medic who was blocked from entering one of the cells to care for one of these Jewish kids and was told "We won't let an Arab take care of us!". The prison warden, a Jew, reports that these adolescent prisoners call him a "Nazi storm trooper." We've read and heard reports like this and worse for some time now.

Here's one of the fundamental problems with Deuteronomic monotheism that my teacher's statement dramatized: the theology of D. can be used to justify whatever one decides is the will of the true God. Monotheism can become monomania. And just a week earlier than the Jerusalem Report story there was a striking parallel in the July 31st New York Times of July 31st. Entitled "Seething Unease Shaped British Bombers' Newfound Zeal" ~~and~~ it described the transformation of young Muslims living in London to a rigid, orthodox school of Islam whose adherents include the Taliban of Afghanistan. They no longer wish to be taught their parents' brand of Islam which they see as "contaminated" but take what they see as a "literal approach to the faith": "Religiously, the young men came at Islam like converts – questioning everything, accepting nothing. If they were going to practice, they wanted to do it in what they considered the right way. If they wanted to go to heaven, they felt, they had to find the purest form. They wanted evidence for whatever they did in the Koran."

The children's crusade of the anti-disengagement kids in Israel and the radicalizing of young Muslims in England are not unrelated. Both are a manifestation of the Puritanism of monotheistic fundamentalism. In each case, the "militant conscience" is roused by setting up a "foe of the true faith", ~~their faith and their version of that faith~~. And in both cases parents are rejected as too liberal and their more tolerant forms of monotheism abandoned.

Blocking highways is in no way equivalent to planting bombs. However, we cannot afford to be smug about monotheism and its all too easy descent into fundamentalism – ours or anyone else's. The theology of Deuteronomy emerged in the first millennium and became part of the bedrock of monotheistic Biblical theology. The problem, of course, is that each religion – or a sect within that religion – can construct its own truth and its own understanding of the will of the one true God. When our understanding of God's will is different from theirs, they become the "foe of the true faith" and our militancy must be directed against them. ~~The peril of Deuteronomy lies in who gets to determine the will of the one true God and whether monotheists can tolerate divergent views about God's will without trying to delegitimize or destroy each other.~~

and their faith

What answers do we give our children when they ask, "Mah ha'edot v'hachukim v'ha'mishpatim asher tzivah A. eloheinu etchem?"

Do we, like former chief rabbis Avraham Shapira and Mordechai Eliyahu, quoted in *The Jerusalem Report* answer that "giving up any part of the Greater Land of Israel violates the Torah and halakhah, so that one is obligated to do "everything in his power," to stop it? How do we teach our children to oppose what we see as injustice without portraying the other as the "foe of the true faith"? The British government was quoted in the Times as saying that community leaders should police their communities, mosques their devotees, fathers their sons. That too is the message of Deuteronomy and it is certainly one of the messages we need to heed.

על מה שה' צוה אותנו לעשות
כל המצוות אשר צוה אותנו אלהינו

EIKEV

August 11, 2012 – Ron Meyers

This is my favorite passage in today's parahsa:

"What does the Lord your Gd require of you? ONLY to fear Gd, walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord you Gd with all your heart and all your soul, to keep the commandments that I command you this day." Deut. 10:12.

Oh, is that all? Gd requires "ONLY" this of us? It's essentially a shorthand account of the whole Torah in five succinct instructions. It's a little like saying, What does it take to land a roving vehicle on the surface of Mars? You ONLY need to invest a hundred billion dollars in research & development, hurl a spacecraft across 50 million miles over to the next planet, deploy the largest parachute in the solar system, and then execute a nice five-stage descent. It's easy to describe in a few brief sentences, but it's rather a lot do.

To hear this brief account of Gd's expectations actually makes me nervous. I wouldn't want to rely on it, because I'm not sure that I could follow it in a way that actually would satisfy Gd.

It comes after a lengthy recounting of the Golden Calf episode. It comes after repeated, and recent, experiences with plagues that Gd sent to express His wrath; it comes after Gd has dictated literally volumes of breathtakingly specific laws. And, we might note, after a decades-long ordeal to intended punish the nation for its unwillingness to trust Gd and to cleanse its population of a whole generation. What's more, it comes after we have been specifically warned not to overestimate our righteousness – "Don't think," Gd tells us, "that you're entering the Land because of anything good that you've done. You're entering the Land because it's my plan for you."

So, when I hear Moses's summary of Gd's wishes, I'm concerned: Can we possibly think that the requirements of this stringent, jealous, demanding Gd can be reduced to this brief shorthand of five easy steps?

It is striking to see this attempt to condense the entire relationship between Gd and Israel into two verses of text. Deuteronomy is Moses's valedictory address, and it must be an insuperable task for him, to say everything that he wants to express, about a truly extraordinary, 40-year career.

So, it's not surprising that he makes an effort to give a pithy account of a big subject. The human mind can only digest so much, so we summarize. We do it all the time. We try to reduce every

difficult subject to a few manageable pieces. Every newsstand calls out to us with the six certain steps for losing fat and building killer abs. Every airport bookshop invites us to contemplate the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. I recently saw this marvelous summary of a complex subject in the NY Times – it's about saving for retirement:

What should you do to save adequately for retirement?

First: figure out when your and your spouse will be laid off or be too sick to work.

Second: figure out when you are going to die.

Third: understand that you need to save 7% of every dollar you earn. (Didn't start doing that at age 25, and now you're 55? Just save 30% of every dollar.)

Fourth: earn at least 3%, above inflation, on your investments every year.

Fifth: do not withdraw funds when you lose your job, have a health problem, get divorced, buy a house, or send a kid to college.

And Sixth: time your withdrawals so that the last penny is spent on the day of your death.

I think this is a great example, because it gives great advice, but it also lampoons the very idea of simplifying things that are inherently complex. One of the points of it is that the act of simplifying is itself complex. The joke is that some things cannot be simplified.

We see a somewhat similar joke in Genesis, when Abraham is bargaining to purchase the cave of Machpela to bury Sarah. Efron, the land owner, says, "A plot of land worth only 400 silver shekels – what is that between you and me?" It's ironic, it's disingenuous – it puts only the slightest veil over the irreducible, un-simplifiable fact that the land is very expensive and that Efron does not intend to lower his price.

The difficulty of simplification is what makes a joke like this possible. And we're so familiar with the absurdity of trying to simplify difficult things, that we pay real attention, I think, when a simplification is earnest and successful.

Here is Micah's prophetic, and poetic, formulation of Gd's expectations:

"What does Gd require of you? ONLY to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your Gd"
Micah 6:8

When Micha says the word "ONLY" here he is not being ironic, and he's not exaggerating. He really is trying to make Gd's ways accessible to us. He does this by focusing on broad principles that enrich *human* relationships – justice, mercy and humility. The simplification succeeds because it comes down to where we already are, and asks us to amplify the best qualities of our nature, the things that

are already familiar to us from direct experience.

Micah's formulation is so similar to Moses's summary in today's text: *What does Gd require of you? ONLY this, ONLY that...*

But Moses's message is quite different. Where Micah says, "walk humbly with your Gd", Moses says that we are to "walk in ALL of Gd's ways".

To "walk in Gd's ways" would be one thing – it would be a broad statement of values, and it would be a goal that we could all hope to fulfill, at least some of the time. But to walk in ALL of Gd's ways – that's something else – it's a hugely onerous, and possibly an infinite, project. Micah is making Gd's ways accessible; Moses is trying to put them in simple terms, but they remain complex, abstract, demanding, and far out of reach.

Moses goes on to say "serve Gd with ALL your heart and ALL your soul". Again, it's not the broad vision of serving Gd with your heart and soul. It's the major-league expectation of serving Gd with ALL your heart and ALL your soul.

He doesn't go so far as to say that we are to observe ALL of Gd's commandments, which would raise the bar even higher. But it's pretty nearly implied, and even if it's not, the expectations are heavy enough already. The word ALL appears three times amid the five precepts, and it keeps the simplification from really being simple at all.

I think that Moses's rhetorical intention is very much the same as Micah's – to explain a big subject in a brief statement. But his effect, strangely enough, seems more like the effect of the retirement article – you can't possibly argue with the wisdom of the advice – but the advice is rather hard to implement. It leaves you not much better off than you were before.

The effectiveness of simplification – and the overall effect of it, be it comical, ironic, or dead serious – all has to do with whether the simplification works – whether it gets you closer to achieving the goal. Is it really possible to plan for retirement in six easy steps, or get killer abs with a few easy exercises? Is it really possible to fulfill Gd's expectations by following Moses's five-point roadmap?

I don't think so – I think it is not possible. The briefly-stated task remains so great: How would you even begin to walk in ALL of Gd's ways? How would you even begin to know all of Gd's ways?

But I think we can find the answer elsewhere in our parasha.

Moses exhorts us to serve Gd with all your heart and all your soul. This rhetoric is familiar, of course, from the first section of the Shema, which comes from text we read last week, part of which appears again this week, in the text that forms the second section of the Shema.

“You shall love the Lord your Gd with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might. These words that I command you this day... teach them to your children, speak of them when sitting in your house, and when walking on the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your arm and between your eyes, and write them on the doorposts of your home. ” Deut. 6:5-9

How to you enter into the onerous tasks that Gd has put before us and that Moses has summarized in his brief but still challenging words? You saturate your life with the contemplation of them. You give yourself occasion to think of them and talk of them, in all places and at all times. You make every occasion an occasion to recall Gds ways. And if you do: then, by and by, you might find yourself not only walking in Gd’s ways, but eventually – after a lifetime, perhaps – walking in ALL of Gd’s ways.

So, that’s a relief. We now have the WHAT and the HOW. Moses tells us WHAT to do, and the Shema tells us HOW to do it.

But WHY do we do it? What is the goal and the reward for doing all of this? From today’s parasha, the answer is very clear: the goal is to enter and settle the Land. It is told to us over and again in this parasha:

All the commandments that I command you this day, you shall observe and perform, so that you may live and become many and enter and possess the land. Deut. 8:1

It shall be if you hearken to my commandments... that I will provide rain for your Land in the proper time, the early rains and the late rains.... In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the Land that the Lord has sworn to your forefathers. Deut. 11:13-21

The description of the task was simplified for us in today’s text; the description of the reward is not simplified. It is laid out in elaborate and beautiful detail. But I can’t help wondering if the very concept is an oversimplification. Is it really the Land that is the boon and the goal of all our obedience and observance?

Moses recounts in this parasha that *“it is not by bread alone that Man lives, but by all that emanates from the mouth of the Gd”*. Deut. 8:3. Through 40 years in the desert, we did not have bread, of course, we had mana. And the suspension of normal eating, along with the suspension of living any

kind of normal, settled life, put a great focus on Gd and on our relationship with Gd.

Is the settlement of the Land going to be the culmination of that relationship? It seems to me that the settlement of the Land is just as likely to undermine that relationship. It removes the conditions that created the great focus on our connection with Gd through all the years in the desert. Once we go back to living on bread, we go back to the unending labor of bringing forth bread from the earth¹. Which may make it difficult to remember that we don't live by bread alone. Settling the land means clearing and plowing and tilling the land. It means a return to the labors of agriculture, it generates the burdens of a domestic economy, it brings politics, and land disputes, and the thousand ordinary and aggravating things that can so easily take our focus off of our relationship with Gd.

Our relationship with Gd was most intense not in the Land, I think, but around the Tabernacle. I have always found it so inspiring to read in Exodus how Gd gives a lengthy set of elaborate plans for the building of the Tabernacle, and then to read the lengthy and elaborate narrative of the people fulfilling every word of that instruction. Later, in Numbers, at the dedication of the Tabernacle, there's a similar episode of national unity, when each tribe brings a rigorously identical set of gifts to the dedication ritual.

It seems to me that this is the goal of walking Gd's ways. The reward is not a physical place, or even the freedom to be an independent nation in our own space. The reward of serving Gd is to be close to Gd. To achieve that elusive unity between ourselves and Gd, and that elusive unity amongst ourselves.

Living in the land ages ago gave us a backdrop for achieving those unities – it made the pilgrimage festivals possible and allowed us to establish a permanent temple. But it didn't guarantee that we would achieve these unities. And, as we know, our possession of the Land today doesn't guarantee it, either.

Our moments of reaching the goal are often inspired by the Land, but they happen outside the Land – they happened before we had the Land, and they happened after we lost it.

So, rethinking what I said a minute ago, it may not be an oversimplification to say that the Land is the goal of our walking in Gd's ways. It may be just the wrong simplification. I think the truth might be even simpler still: the goal of Gd's law is the law itself. It's the ordered and ethical life that the law makes possible. It's the culture that grows up around the Law, that struggles with it, and interprets it – and in so doing, holds itself together from one century to the next.

¹ The Hamotzi blessing is a really effective simplification of this relationship. We praise Gd for bringing forth bread from the earth, when in fact it's only wheat that comes forth from the earth. The blessing condenses the very complex partnership between Gd and Man that results in the production of bread.

Parashat Eikev

Barry W. Holtz*

Some wag once called the book of Deuteronomy “the Torah reading’s version of summer re-runs” because significant sections of its narrative review what we have previously read in the fall, winter and spring *parashiot* of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers. Deuteronomy is structured, at least in its opening sections, as Moses’ recollection of the powerful events that the Israelite nation has already experienced, as the people wait for their climactic entry into the Land of Israel. But rather than summer re-runs Deuteronomy might better be viewed as the old exercise beloved by writing teachers: tell a story using a third person narrator; now tell it again in the first person, from the point of view of one of the characters. What we read previously, in other words, in the omniscient, almost God’s-eye view of the Torah’s narrator, we now hear through the human voice of Moses. Events are refracted through his eyes; his interpretive spin is what we read in Deuteronomy.

Parashat Eikev gives us a very striking example of the Bible’s double-voiced telling, for it is here, after some preliminary warnings about the need to carefully obey God’s commandments, that Moses recounts “in his own words” one of the most dramatic moments in the entire Torah—the sin of the Golden Calf.

This dramatic story surprises us in Parashat Eikev. It catches us unawares. Moses is talking about the importance of the people faithfully obeying God once they enter into the land. He tells them that God will be behind their conquest of the land; in fact,

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everything that they accomplish—the people should understand—comes not because of their skill or even their merit but because God has helped them in battle and made their land fertile and prosperous.

And then almost casually Moses comments “Know then that it is not for any virtue of yours that the Lord your God is giving you this good land” (9:6)—we’ve heard this before; it’s a repetitive theme by this point. But that remark leads him to something new, *his* story, his example *par excellence* of what it means to displease God, the incident of the Golden Calf.

If we look at the two versions of the Golden Calf story, the 3rd person version of Exodus and the “Moses version” in Deuteronomy we find many similarities. But the version told in the 1st person shows two striking differences from what appears in Exodus. First, in Deuteronomy 9:20 we read “Moreover, the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him; so I also interceded for Aaron at that time.” But if we look back in Exodus 32 there is no mention of any special pleading by Moses on behalf of his brother. In his retelling of the events in Deuteronomy, is Moses perhaps feeling guilty that he didn’t make an effort to help his brother at the time of the event? Is he falling prey to the kind of selective memory that all of us are prone to—remembering events as we *want* them to have happened rather than the way they *did* happen? Such an interpretation may be supported by a subtle distinction in the text: The 3rd person narration in Exodus describes the golden calf as being made by Aaron (Exodus 32:35) while in the Deuteronomy text Moses reminds the people that “you had made yourselves a molten calf” (Deuteronomy 9: 16) and talks to the people about the “calf you made” (9:21). Moses clearly leaves out Aaron’s culpability in his retelling. Here it is the people

who are to be blamed. Family loyalty—with perhaps a touch of guilt—has reshaped his telling of the story.

One of the most powerful aspects of the story of Moses' ascent to the mountain, indeed one of the most beautiful and unforgettable moments in the entire Torah, is recounted at the end of Parashat Ki Tissa, the section in Exodus that contains the story of the Golden Calf. Moses finally returns down from the Mountain and when he does we are told "Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant...Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him (Exodus 34:29-30). It is this remarkable phenomenon—the shining face—that requires Moses to put on a veil every time he came to speak with the people after his ongoing meetings with God. Otherwise they could not bear the radiance.

Nothing of this story is to be found in Moses' own version in Deuteronomy. How are we to understand this? I can suggest two different ways. First, the story of the veiled Moses has always struck me as a kind of tragic dimension in Moses' life. Moses has gained something that no human being has been privy to—he spoke to God face to face unlike anyone else. This very closeness to God literally lights him up, but that illumination also causes a great gap between him and other people, symbolized most dramatically in Exodus by the image of the veil. Is this isolation from others so painful that Moses chooses not to recount it in his own version in Deuteronomy?

But perhaps there is a simpler, less tortured explanation. We learn in Numbers 12:3 that "Moses was a very humble man, more than any other man on earth." That enormous humility is a kind of moral signpost for all human beings, from Moses' time and for us today. Moses did not recount the story of the veil because he refused to be

anything else but *anav*, humble, a man who saw himself as God's servant, a man who recognized the dangers of overweening ego and too much self-regard. His face was shining but in his humility he just wouldn't see it.

Dvar Torah Parsha Re'eh
Leon Hoffman
August 23, 2003

When I responded to Binyamin's request for people to give a dvar torah today, I did not know the contents of today's parsha. I just knew that we would be in town today and in shul.

On a first glance and then a first reading, I regretted volunteering because the topic just did not sit right with me—if you follow my commands you will be blessed and if you don't you will be cursed.

The opposite of good child rearing.

A child learns about right and wrong from his or her parents. He or she wants to please the parents—that is, wants to do good, even if he or she cannot perform or is forced by whatever issue not to perform in a way that pleases the parents. As the child grows he or she wants to please other adults. And, eventually, in most of us, most of the time, these strictures are internalized and we want to please ourselves by doing good.

Back in the old days, the example of a child doing good was the boy scout helping the old lady cross the street and the little girl brownie selling cookies for a good cause. But, certainly it is usually not wise for a parent to rub it into a child's face: follow my rules or else!!!!

To go back to another rationale for giving a dvar torah today.

When I did volunteer and Binyamin accepted, Anne and I spoke about this dvar being in memory of her father, Maurice (Mosheh), who died suddenly, unexpectedly, and tragically, on the 22 of Av exactly 30 years ago (this past Wednesday being the yarzeit).

He was a very good man who was an attorney and who defended those people who needed defending—whether from the outside they looked good or bad; whether they would have been judged by the “one who sees all” as evil or as good. One can just imagine the upbringing and the parenting some of these people had.

Maurice was a quiet man—well read, the strong silent type. I only saw him in court once—and the transformation was remarkable. His authority with the judge was incredible. And, I have another memory from that summer—the Watergate hearings—he expressed his vehemence against Nixon in a very dramatic way.

But who are we to judge anyone's particular actions? Of course, we do. But is the Christian motto, of “turn the other cheek” a way to live. Of course, not!!

How do we respond to aggression that is inflicted on us? Currently we debate: Should we have gone into Iraq or not? Who really knows the right answer? Should we get

out? Again, how do we really know prospectively? Only, retrospectively will we know. And, then of course, this parsha reminds us of the hagim. How many of us realize consciously that hag and haj are identical words? Our most bitter enemies our closest kin.

Truly like Jacob and Essau.

What are we to do when our sisters and babies are bombed? What are they to do when their idols (whom we consider villains) are slain by us? Are those of us who preach non-violence correct? Or, are those of us who preach that might is the only way to act correct?

On NPR yesterday morning I heard about the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King's leadership and the March on Washington. At that time, I was not one of those who was an activist—in fact, I never became a political activist. We all know that famous picture of Heschel marching with King. Yesterday I learned that in the negotiations for the march, President Kennedy wanted to make sure that it was not an all-Negro march, and thus urged others, including Jews to participate.

I remember watching and feeling sad that I did not go. My heart though was on beginning medical school in a couple of weeks. Who was to know that in three short months the world would change on November 22, 1963?

Which takes me back to the beginning. Are the ones who follow the rules blessed and the ones who don't cursed? Again—Who is to know?

My parents certainly were ones who followed the rules, obsessively I would say. They were blessed in many, many ways but they were also cursed. They lost all of their families (and a certain amount of their joy of life) in Poland and they had to emigrate. I mention them because on August 26, if they would have been still alive it would have been their 69th wedding anniversary. I also thought of them because in cleaning out my office for a paint job, I came across a copy of the Tlumacz Memorial book published in 1976. Tlumacz was the town of my father's birth in Galicia.

In the book, my father ends his contribution with the following paragraph.

"Thus I reminisced and remembered things long gone, on the other side of the world, across the ocean, the little town of Tlumacz, with its hills and river, where our beloved lived and worked and thanked God for the little they had. Then came the tragedy that wiped out all of them, leaving us the memories and the commemorations. Yet these bind us together, me and my classmates, one now in Australia, another in Chile, the third in Alaska, the fourth here in New Jersey and another in Israel. We grieve and we pray that the death of our townspeople was not in vain, that their blood would in time purify the world which shed it."

Shabat Shalom

Dvar Torah Re'eh Ben Orlove 19 August 2017

Our parashah this week deals with issues of idolatry, one of the most keenly felt issues in the Torah. It contains detailed instructions to the Israelites, who are about to enter the Promised Land, that indicate to them how they are to eliminate the idols of the indigenous populations.

Worshipping idols is a grievous breach of our connection with the source of holiness, We receive clear instructions this week about idolatry. We should obliterate the idols and obliterate their names.

We often focus on the benign, positive sides of the Torah: creation, love, mercy. And here, we are taught not to create, but to destroy, not to love, but to hate, or rather to go beyond hate to an utter annihilation of the idols. Moshe makes two long speeches in Dvarim and mentions idols several times. I'd like to take a few minutes to explore why this destruction was challenging to me, and how I've come to reconcile myself to it.

I get that idols are false. They appear in one of the very few pieces of aggadah that I received when I went to Hebrew school at Temple Beth Elohim in Park Slope, then a yekke mecca, the only shul my family could find in Brooklyn that would take me when, at age ten, I decided to have a bar mitzvah. With their highly rational and moral forms of devotion and instruction, my teachers there did bring in the section from Bereshit Rabbah of Abraham smashing the idols of his father Terah.

It recounts a time when Abraham's father left him alone in charge of the idol shop. He took a stick and broke all the images, except the largest one. He placed the stick in the hands of this one surviving idol. When Terah came back and asked what happened, Abraham explained that the idols had gotten into an argument over an offering that a customer had left. The biggest one decided to punish the others, Abraham said. Terah couldn't help but recognize the absurdity of the story.

As a child, I really enjoyed this story. It's got the simple drama of a child home without any parents around, a bit like that other great work, "The Cat in the Hat." A child's rebellion unmasks parental hypocrisy.

In a similar way, the prophet Habakkuk shows the inertness of idols. He states, "Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a dumb stone, Arise! Can this give revelation? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it."

And there's the great scene in 1 Kings, Elijah versus the 450 prophets of Baal. They both slaughter oxen and invite their respective gods to bring down fire to consume the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal are not having much luck with their entreaties to their god. Elijah tells them to shout louder. He says, "He may be in a conversation, he may be detained, he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up." This goes on all day. Elijah has people pour water on his altar—four jars full, three times, perhaps an echo of the twelve tribes—and yet it's our God, not Baal, who sends fire to consume the sacrifice. Of course: Baal doesn't even exist, he's an illusion.

These passages make the commandments to destroy idols complicated for me. If idols are false, why destroy them? I have to confess that my immediate response to the commandments was that the idols belong in the Met, somewhere in those galleries on the south end of the first floor where the art from Africa and the Pacific is displayed. It's interesting for visitors to see what those other cultures believed in, and besides their objects are beautiful in their own way, or at least striking and engaging. Moreover, they have a historic importance. Would Picasso have developed cubism if he hadn't had the chance to study African sculptures at Palais du Trocadéro in 1907? Gauguin may have been disappointed in his travels to Tahiti in the 1890s, since he failed to find any Tahitian idols. But he was able to make do with tattoos and carved handles of canoe paddles, and came up with striking images still resonate in the present. If it weren't for these artists, we'd have nothing edgier than Renoir's rosy-cheeked women, dreamily dancing in the arms of straw-hatted gentlemen.

For me, the destruction of idols was one of the numerous challenges of the Torah, not the largest but still significant. After all, there was worldwide condemnation when the Taliban blew up enormous 6th century Buddhas in a cliffside niche in 2001, when Al Qaeda destroyed historic tombs and libraries in Timbuktu in 2012, when ISIS set off bombs in a Roman temple in Palmyra, Syria earlier this year.

And we had a much smaller, yet still significant case, right here in New York, a few decades ago. In 1980, when Trump purchased the Bonwit Teller store on Fifth Avenue as a site for his tower, a year after the store closed, he promised to save the limestone relief panels at the top of the façade, a beautiful piece from the late 1920s. It displayed two women who unfurled large scarves, as if dancing. These striking images were unusual for that period. Trump promised these panels to the Museum of Modern Art, which reserved a place for them in its sculpture collection for them. But then Trump's workers jackhammered them into pieces. His representatives stated that they were "without artistic merit." They added that saving them would have led to delays and unnecessary expenses.

How could I make my peace with a text that seems directly to support these acts of wanton destruction?

Our parashah does offer a clue. It tells us that idols lure people away, so we need to eliminate them. And rather than envisioning new galleries at the Met, I could pay attention to the Torah. It focuses on two themes: danger and destruction.

The danger seems pretty clear in this week's parashah. We're about to enter the promised land, we've received the blessing and the curse, and we've heard the hideous destiny that awaits those who stray from the Lord. The very first specific commandments of what to do in the land in Dvarim 11:2-3 tell us "You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations who you are to dispossess worshipped their gods—on the high mountains and in the valleys and under every lush tree. And you shall smash their altars and shatter their sacred pillars, and their cultic poles you shall burn in fire, and the images of their gods you shall chop down, and you shall destroy their name for that place."

In other words, this section doesn't just focus on idols. It makes us think of idolatrous places and idolatrous worship as threats to our community and our future. The Israelites face a serious risk of temptation. It's not enough just to destroy the idolators. We need to destroy their objects and places.

There's a powerful image—not just a metaphor but a piece of literal truth—in 11:29-30. Those verses warn us to take care against being ensnared and seeking out their gods. I think that the use of the word snare, *makeish*, is a powerful message, to people who might have actual experience with snares. Animals are tricked by snared, they are caught in them, they can't escape, they will be killed. I have only limited direct experience with snares: walking through a forest and suddenly feeling a spiderweb on my face, or crossing a meadow and having my pants snag on a thorny vine. These momentary unexpected interferences in the freedom of my movement were sufficient to startle me. For people who actually used snares to trap birds and animals, the would be far more vivid, an expression of the way that idols can indeed trap people unawares.

If danger was the first theme, destruction is the second. It's striking that there is a pairing of verbs and objects. So many words for destruction! For the places, the verb is *abad*, destroy, also used elsewhere in the Tanakh for big things--idolatrous places, buildings, cities, and even kingdoms. For altars, the verb is *natzatz*, break down, applied elsewhere to smaller things, stoves and houses, and, in Psalms, the fangs of lions. For their sacred pillars, the verb is *shavar*, break into pieces, a word which occurs elsewhere in relation to even smaller things, tablets, bones, vessels. We know this word from one of the three kinds of shofar blasts, shvarim, broken sounds.

We are told to burn their cultic poles, *seraf*, a word that has come into English, seraphim, a kind of fiery angels. And for their images, we are told to *gada*, chop them down, a verb used for cutting down trees, for chopping horns off cattle, and more metaphorically, for cutting off a person's strength.

Why does the Torah use this variety of verbs? Why does it go into all this detail? We were told at Sinai to have no graven images. And again the holy one says to us, have no other gods before me. That seems pretty clear. It would make sense to be told to destroy idols, or to remove them. What use is there in all this detail?

I've come around to seeing the wisdom of the people who bequeathed the Torah to us. They insist on telling us that there are many kinds of idols in this world. There is a need to destroy each kind in its own way. Idolatry isn't an abstraction, it isn't just a philosophical system to be opposed. Much as idolatry manifests itself in many specific ways, we have the a variety of means to oppose the danger of idols. Idolatry isn't just an idea in people's minds; it's a tangible presence in the world, or rather a diverse array of presences.

The Babylonian Talmud was written when Jews lived in a world filled with idol-worshippers. They had to know how to distinguish idols from other sculptures, such as images made to honor kings. And it wasn't just entire idols, set up on altars, that have to be avoided. Our forebears sought to distinguish dangerous from non-dangerous pieces of idols. Masekhet Avodah Zarah tells us, "If one finds fragments of images, he is allowed to use them. However, if he finds fragments in form of a hand or a foot, they are prohibited, for such are worshipped." Rav Johanan prohibits an idol that was broken by itself (i.e., without the cooperation of a human being), while Rav Simeon ben Lakish allows it. The former advances the argument that the broken idol was not yet profaned by any one, while according to the latter, the breaking is sufficient profanation, for people would say: How could this idol save others when it cannot save itself?

And then there are the objects located near idols. Perek 4 of the masekhet states, "Money, garments, utensils found on the head of an idol are allowed; [but] vines with grapes on them, wreaths of grain ... and whatever is offered upon the altar, is prohibited. The Gemara then asks: But why does the Mishna allow money which is then, doubtless, for decorating purposes? Said the disciples of Rav Janai: It is allowed only when the money is hung in a sack round the neck of the idol, which makes it look like a porter, and is not an ornament; furthermore, as to

garments, they are allowed only when they lie folded on the head of the idol, which makes it look like a washerwoman.”

This masekhet examines the difficulties of ever destroying idols. Rav Jose said: One may grind the images and scatter them to the wind, or sink them into the sea. Thereupon it was objected: They might turn into dung, and it reads [Deut. 13:18]: "And there shall not cleave to thy hand aught of the devoted things.”

Rav Jose was referring to verses in our parashah which discuss the destruction of a city of idolaters: they should be slaughtered, everything in the city should be burned. And yet even the ashes of this great fire are dangerous, since they could cleave to the hands of those who burned the idols. The sages also turn to a brief incident in Second Chronicles when an image was burned, and then scattered in the Wadi of the Kidron. Here, too, they worry that the ashes might have remained somewhere, and wonder whether bushes were present in this wadi, since they might trap and retain these traces of idolatry.

We are not in Babylonia in the first millennium of the Common Era, but these issues still apply to us. I could link them to our individual processes of saving some objects as mementoes and destroying others. I think of the family photo albums from which former spouses and in-laws have been carefully eliminated, their images removed and their names obliterated, a practice as specific as the detailing of verbs of destruction in our parashah. Or I could connect idolatry to the materiality and consumerism in contemporary society, and to our pursuit of recognition. There’s a lot that could be said about our celebrity culture and the television show *American Idol*.

But I’d rather take this concern in the direction that the Torah guides us towards, recognizing that idolatry can threaten the historical destiny of a people. We’ve seen that with the toppling of statues of Lenin and Stalin and of Saddam Hussein.

Perhaps more serious are the debates in our own society over Confederate memorials, which as we know have led to deaths in recent weeks in Charlottesville. And here the Torah, with its

careful listing of forms of destruction, serves as a valuable guide. What kind of idol might these statues be, and what sort of removal, or destruction, is appropriate for them? Do they belong in a museum, or is a better lesson to smash them? Does danger linger in pieces of them, or in the dust that remains after their destruction, or in the now-empty places where they once stood?

It troubles me to raise these questions. What comments would I have given for a dvar torah on parashah Re'eh in an earlier presidency? I am unwilling to suggest that our forebears who shaped these texts for us had our current situation clearly in mind. But I think that these texts were relevant in earlier times as well. And I can say that they glimpsed wider issues in their anxieties about tablets and altars and sacred pillars, the ritual paraphernalia of the inhabitants of the Promised Land. They recognized how easily distracted we humans are, how tempting it is for us to take comfort in images. And, for all their celebration of the divine capacity to create, they acknowledged the role of destruction as well—the specific kinds of destruction of false images. We modern people immodestly imagine ourselves as fully in charge of our own minds.

Let us be grateful for the ancient voices that warn us how easily we can be ensnared by objects, whether large and small, whether made of precious metals or more ordinary materials. And let us be grateful that they instructed us in a wide range of specific actions that each of us is capable of, actions that can set us on the path of truth and justice, of rebuilding a flawed world.

Shabbat shalom.

Dvar Torah on Parshat Ki Tetze

By Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, given at his bar mitzvah, September 9, 1995 at Minyan M'at.

What's most striking about this parsha? Is it the severity of the punishments--killing a child for only disobeying his parents as in the din, or law, of the ben tzorer u'morehd--the stubborn and rebellious son--is very severe. Or is it the frequent proximity of life-or-death mitzvot to others of arguably less importance?-- as with the din of the parapet, which could save a life, being put next to a law about not mixing seeds in a ploughing. Or is it the sheer number of the mitzvot?-- 72 according to the Rambam--the largest number of mitzvot in any parsha. Perhaps it is somewhat this, but it is also the immense variety. This parsha embraces almost all aspects of life: war and peace, public life and private life, agriculture and even building. While hearing this parsha, we find it difficult to absorb such a large number of often seemingly unconnected mitzvot.

Even Rashi, it seems, had trouble connecting all of the mitzvot in this parsha. In this Rashi, we see how hard one has to think to try to come with a house-of-cards explanation for this . --translated as : if you fulfill the commandment of letting go the mother bird, in the end you will build a new house, and you will fulfill the commandment of the parapet, and since the observance of one commandment draws after it another, you will get a vineyard and a field and beautiful garments. For that reason are these sections adjoined. Rashi in fact, is quoting another source, the Tanhuma. This is the kind of roundabout connection that people are sometimes forced to make when faced with this parsha.

The parsha of Ki Tetze, if we are even going to begin to understand it as a whole, has to be united by very complex routes and by many different principles, not just by one all-uniting rule. Unlike some other parshiot, there is no single overreaching principle, but rather themes that run through. One way to get at these themes is to examine some of the adjacent and apparently unrelated mitzvot in this parsha to see if they are indeed related in some way.

One of the most troubling instances of apparently unconnected mitzvot being set next to one another is that of the halacha of makkot, or the punishment of lashes, which is immediately followed by the halacha of Lo tachsom shor be-dishoh--don't muzzle the ox while it's treading. The two don't share a subject or similar wording. So what's the connection? In the halacha of makkot, the wicked man is given forty lashes "by number" as a punishment, which for complex reasons that are not important here, Rashi says is actually 39. The important thing here is that we are taught not to exceed that number for fear that the person will be dishonored--this law defines the punishment and its limits. In the very next halacha, we are told not to muzzle the ox while it's treading the corn, and this pertains to all beasts of burden. So again, we ask ourselves, what the connection is.

Perhaps it's a causal relationship--You do X and therefore Y happens. It would be logical to have lashes as a punishment for the negative commandment of don't muzzle the ox while it treads the corn, but why particularly here? Makkot could have the same causal relationship with over half of the mitzvot in this parsha, which are negative commandments. In addition, it would be rather strange for effect to precede cause--in other words, to have the punishment of lashes described before we learn of what we are being punished for. So I doubt that's the explanation.

Another explanation strikes me as being far more revealing. In each of these two dinim, there is a juxtaposition. The juxtaposition of judgment and mercy. When I use the word judgment, I really mean "how things must be." On the judgment side, the wicked are condemned to lashes, and the ox must work for his food. But the harshness is tempered with mercy. Even as

one can't exceed in beating the wicked, so one can't muzzle the ox and turn his already disagreeable task into agony. This is both a demonstration of G-d's justice, and also G-d's kindness.

Another incidence of kindness, indeed one of the best-known mitzvot in this parsha, is the shooing away of the mother bird. We take the eggs and the young, but we send away the mother first. Many say that this is a demonstration of Hashem's mercy toward the bird. Nehama Leibowitz discusses various schools of thought about the intention of this mitzvah. Some argue that the focus is not on the bird but that we are being shown compassion for our fellow human beings by having to respect a bird. Perhaps the most interesting element in this halacha is its conclusion in which it says that if you observe this "that it may go well with you and prolong your days." The only other place in the Torah where we are promised both of these rewards at the same time is for Kaved et avichah ve'imechah-- honor your father and your mother. Many of the Rabbis felt that it was strange that these two mitzvot should have such rewards in common, and that we would be given the promise of a good and long life simply for honoring a bird. Many of the Rabbis have argued-and I would agree-that we are being taught compassion for our fellow human beings through an animal example.

The parsha of Ki Tetze actually begins with an example of mercy being taught through human beings—the case of the woman of goodly form. She is a captive, and the law dictates that she can be taken as a wife by the captor. But at the same time, the Torah gives her a space to recover from the shocks of her capture, including a time to mourn both her father and her mother. This demonstrates again the juxtaposition of judgment and mercy. Through very different mitzvot we are shown how Hashem's world works, with judgment being tempered by mercy, the one balancing the other.

As I said earlier, this parsha cannot be united by one principle which covers everything in it. Therefore I'd like to point out, another major theme that runs through much of this parsha. In order to do this, I'm going to once again examine two mitzvot which are adjacent. In this case, one which teaches us not to plough with an ox and a donkey together, and one which tells us not to mix linen and wool in a garment. These have an obvious connection, namely that after you've not plowed with an ox and a donkey together, you don't mix the results of that plowing-- the linen--with wool.

But it seems to me that there's an entire other element that relates these two halachot. Shaatnez makes a clear distinction between kingdoms, forbidding us from mixing things that come from a plant and an animal, the linen and the wool, so closely. Because by doing this, we blur the lines of order in the world. In the other halachah, we are taught not to mix species under a yoke. When seen in this way, the two dinim are similar in that they demonstrate that there is a certain order in the world. Shaatnez is a mitzvah we just accept--we don't completely understand the reason for it--but clearly it has to do with a sense of how things are ordered, even if we don't understand that order. The other halachah, however, unlike shaatnez, can be explained, and in fact lends itself to analysis. The ox and the donkey have to work for their food. But to put the two together under a yoke would be a great cruelty to them both, because they are so differently paced and sized. So perhaps the order that this mitzvah recognizes is related to my earlier theme, namely that how things must be is tempered with mercy.

Often in this parsha, one finds the idea of mercy juxtaposed with ideas about the order of the world. An excellent example of this is the proximity of beged ish to the kan tzipor. I don't want to get bogged down in a long discussion of what beged ish is, but what the Torah teaches us definitely is order. As the din says, "A woman shall not wear a man's clothing and neither shall a

man put on a woman's garment." The kan tzipor is sometimes seen as an expression of the balance of judgment and mercy. We take the eggs and the young, but we mitigate the mother's suffering by shooing her away, so she will not see the robbery of her nest.

The more I have thought about the parsha, the more I've found that the themes of order in the world and the balance of judgment and mercy have come together in my mind. They're so closely intertwined, that I'm led to believe that , perhaps, part of the order of the world is the balance of judgment and mercy. The constant balancing of judgment and mercy is vital to the maintenance of order. The Haftorah also encompasses the theme of judgment being balanced by mercy. "For a moment I forsook thee," we read in the Haftorah, "and with great mercy will I redeem you."

As I said at the beginning, this is a parsha that is hard to grasp in its entirety. There are parts that are close to impossible to unite under any guiding theme--such as aliyah shlishi, which in part deals with a woman's marital status. Ki Tetze presents a great many laws, a great many absolutes. And as we look at all these aspects of the world, we see, if we look closely at some of the dinim that apply to the themes, that they are not so absolute. In this sense order is not straightforward, but must be seen as composed of fluctuating elements. The laws are meant to be workable. A sense of mercy expands the din, and in the process of making it palatable, it gives the law interpretive breadth, it allows the law to become multifaceted. For law to become part of the order of the world it must be balanced by mercy.

Shabbat Shalom.

I am David Bergman. I would like to speak about today's parsha, Ki Tetze, in honor of Elana who will be married tomorrow.

Elana, this is your Aufruf — you are being called upon to be attentive to the feelings that arise when entering a very new stage in your life.

The parsha is particularly appropriate for tomorrow's occasion because it deals with the many aspects of how we live together. It speaks about laws, sharing with others, making vows, dealing with temptation and placing our daily work in the proper perspective.

Laws

Not being a lawyer, I cannot speak about the letter of the law, but I can take what is said as a letter from the law, as a guideline for how we should act. Laws are clearcut, but guidelines are more amorphous, harder to see, and at times we need a Guide for the Perplexities of life.

Laws, for me, have always had a negative connotation. They leave little room for a person to make his or her own decisions. "Thou shalt not" and "Thou shall" echo throughout the parsha.

Yet, there is another way to appreciate laws --- more in the spirit of the politician William Gladstone's remark that "Good laws make it easier to do right and harder to do wrong."

It is hard enough to live with oneself, let alone with other people. Laws provide the framework for how we associate with one another.

Well, Elana, you and Bradley have been associated for a while and on the verge of becoming a social unit -- a married couple, which is one of the prime building blocks of society.

The better you interact with each other can only lead to your better interacting with the community.

Sharing

Interacting includes sharing with others. Not only do we share our material goods, but our spiritual ones as well. Today, we read:

"When thou reap the harvest in your field,
and have forgot a sheaf in the field,
thou shalt not turn back to get it:
it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow. . ."

DEU 24:19 (Stone Chumash says PROSLEYTE, not STRANGER)

Elana, you do that statement one better: you are a person who doesn't forget to leave a part of yourself available.

What you have harvested from your experiences, you share readily. When a person is in need, you are there to give of yourself. The love you and Bradley share is not only directed at each other, but extends to others.

Ironically, leaving a part of the harvest can be likened to planting a seed. What you give to others grows inside them, until it bears fruit. Thus, the fruits of your labors are returned to you in a roundabout way.

Vows

Yet, there is nothing roundabout about making a vow. Elana, tomorrow you and Bradley will give each other your vows unhesitatingly - vows that are founded on the bedrock of the deep love you have for each other. Today, we were reminded not to take vows lightly,

when “you vow ... you are not to delay paying it.” DEUT. 23:22

And then in the next line it says,

“But if you hold back from vowing, it shall not be (considered) a sin in you.”

“What issues from your lips, you are to keep...”

That is, we are to deliver on our word as quickly as possible.

If we only intend to do something, then we should not speak of it until it grows into an actual deed we cannot keep ourselves from doing.

Broken promises lead to fractured relationships and loss of trust -- which leads to another topic of the Parsha: *temptation*.

Temptation

The extreme temptation of adultery and the punishment for it were described.

Elana, I don't bring this topic to your attention to scare you, but merely to highlight a few points about temptation.

We read that if a woman is attacked in the city, she is expected to cry out (DEUT. 22:24), the implication being she will receive assistance.

The message is clear here: don't hesitate to ask for help when in extreme need.

Perhaps, I'm stretching it if I interpret not crying out as giving into another type of temptation, that of false pride - the pride in thinking we can handle every situation on our own without seeking help from others.

Elana, keep in mind that relationships are built on trust. We trust each other not to give into the variety of temptations readily available to tantalize us.

Yes, there is always sexual temptation as Billy Crystal points out in *When Harry Met Sally*, but there are also less dramatic temptations:

- the temptation to do just what we want to do
- the temptation to say the first thing that comes into our minds without thinking of the consequences of our words
- the temptation to buy whatever strikes our fancy.

We have to acknowledge to ourselves when we are being tempted and not give into those temptations we can resist. Rest easy though, as the wit, George Bernard Shaw, reminds us, marriage is one of the best antidotes against temptation, because it “combines the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity.”

Work

Now I come to the most important message the Parsha has for you, Elana.

"When a man marries a new wife, he shall not go to war,
neither shall he be charge with any business:
but he shall be free at home one year,
and shall gladden his wife whom he has married." Deut. 24:5

Let's re-phrase the above line to:

"when a man and a woman marry, they shall only work normal business hours."

You and Bradley should be together as much as possible.

You need to prevent work from interfering with your lives.

Gladden means to enjoy each other's company, because true joy is only experienced when we bring joy to others.

So you need to have Bradley explain to Price Waterhouse that he is not permitted to engage in business that will keep him away from home - or least, that he must take you with him.

I just want to leave you with this one wish. Elana, may you and Bradley gladden each other with laughter. We hope that later on in life, the two of you can look back on your lives and say, in the words of Mark Twain, that

"the wrinkles merely indicate where smiles have been."

Dvar Torah, Parashat Ki Tetzee, August 17, 2013**Aufruf of Shuki Cirlin on the occasion of his upcoming
marriage to Lucy Cohen**

Shabbat Shalom. Welcome to the second leg of the Benhaim – Cirlin whirlwind wedding tour! It is wonderful to celebrate with all of you on this very special Shabbat for our family. We are thrilled that Shuki and Lucy are getting married after having spent more than seven years together, and we are grateful that the only itch they collectively have is the itch to get even closer and formalize their relationship through chupa and kiddushin.

So here are a few words to you Shuki, our beloved son, on your last day as an unmarried man. We have watched you and Lucy grow from being young high school sweet hearts into the loving couple you are today, both in the midst of productive lives. We

are blessed to have arrived at this moment. And these words are for all of us, for in truth, anytime any one of our community transitions through a life cycle event, it brings the rest of us back to our own lives, experiences and memories. Births, britot and smachot bat take those of us with children back to our own family beginnings. Bnei Mitzvah ceremonies lead us to measure the days that have gone by since our entrance into adolescence, and certainly any funeral returns us to our own past losses.

Weddings, like the one you and Lucy will celebrate tomorrow, help all of us to focus on the state of intimacy in our own lives. Shuki - we today are figuratively lifting up you and Lucy, and will do so literally tomorrow, but in some small way, we all sit in those chairs with you facing the others in our lives.

You know, this is a strange time of the year. Here we are in Elul, the time of Teshuva and rededication. Everyone knows the sweet acrostic for Elul – aleph, lamed, vav, lamed - the acrostic for ani lidodi and dodi li. A phrase symbolizing connection and togetherness. Elul is meant to be a time in which all of us return to the Divine lover, to our pure souls, and to mend our ways with our fellow humans. Although Elul contains some anxiety, it is in many ways a hopeful time, filled with anticipation of a better future. What makes this a strange time is that the parshiyot we read in Sefer Devarim at this time of year contain a tremendous amount of darkness as they describe the human capacity for cruelty, betrayal and pain. Perhaps that is the point of this startling juxtaposition – enter into your new beginning with open eyes and an honest heart.

Take a look at the first aliyah of our parasha, Ki Tetze, as it talks about waging war, prisoners of war, failed marriages, out of control children and capital punishment. What an uplifting reading! Aren't you glad you came to hear about these sordid events - stories that are not too different from what many of us read this morning in the Times. All of these incidents are about failed dreams and dashed hopes on national, familial and individual levels. In truth, it is a rather depressing beginning to our reading this morning. But thankfully, the Torah doesn't leave us there. It goes on to tell us that history is not only about failure and destruction. In teaching about the Mitzvot of hasheyvat aveiyadah, the return of the lost object, and kan hatzipor, the chasing away of the mother bird, mitzvot of responsibility and compassion, the Torah exhorts us to leave our own bubbles and consider the plight and feelings of the

other and implicitly encourages us not to give up. It teaches us that it is not naïve to believe that humans are capable of more than sowing destruction.

In fact, it is these two themes of compassion and responsibility that lead us in the text to new relationships and to the holy commitment of kiddushin. Immediately following the mitzvah of kan hatzipur comes the verse in chapter 22, “ki tevneh bayit hadash, “, “when you build a new house.” Rashi teaches us here the classic behavioral concept that “mitzvah gorreret mitzvah, ” the doing of one mitvah leads to the doing of another. For Rashi that meant that chasing away the mother bird would undoubtedly lead to one getting married, but Rashi’s message for us today is that positive relationships are inevitable if thoughtfulness is an ever-present component of one’s life. So build your house Shuki...you and Lucy can do it! It

doesn't matter that others before you have failed. Continue to be responsible and compassionate the way the two of you are, and indeed your house will stand.

But the verse describing the building of the new house, this new relationship, is intricate and complicated. It ain't so simple. The first clause reads "when you build a new house you should make a maakeh, a parapet, for your roof."

It is very striking that the Torah teaches us that when building a new house, the first thing we need to do is ascend to the roof. It does not tell us to immediately place a mezuzah on our doorposts, to buy kosher dishes, or to even find a special place for a tzedaka pushke in our living rooms. No, it tells us to go up on the roof. So what is this about? Truthfully, is there any better place for a young couple to be, on a mid August late

afternoon, than up on the roof? Shuki, picture yourself up there, margarita in hand, surveying the city from on high – the expansive view, the peacefulness above the fray of the city and the many details of planning a wedding, with Lucy by your side, and your future in front of the two of you. Intoxicating, no? Is it any wonder that when we hear Carol King, James Taylor or the Drifters sing “Up on a Roof” that we are elevated to a place of joy and hopefulness? “On the roof is the only place I know, where you just have to wish to make it so...at night the stars put on a show for free, and darling you can share it all with me. I keep telling you, right smack dab in the middle of town I found a paradise that’s trouble proof, up on the roof.” These are perfect wedding day sentiments.

It’s great up there – on the roof we are alive in our bodies and souls. In our tradition, the roof is associated with eroticism and

deep desire. In sefer Shmuel we read, “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful.”

And so the Torah is teaching us that when you build the new house of your relationship, find your way up to the roof to experience the joy, the wonder, the excitement and playfulness of sexual and emotional closeness. Let your desire for your betrothed (make sure you don't learn from King David in this aspect) roam free and make physical closeness be a healthy part of your life. And may it be so in your relationship with Lucy!

But the Torah, being a book of truth, in asking us to ascend to the roof, ultimately does not endorse a Carol Kingsian view of life in which “up on the roof everything is all right.”

Our own verse cautions us, “When you build a new house, make a makake for your roof and don’t place blood in your house because the faller will fall from it.”

So, the Torah wants us on the roof, but it will not allow us to close our eyes to the danger that lurks in paradise. Not just danger, but possible mortal danger. It seems to imply that falling is inevitable – hanofel yipol, and warns us that we all are at risk.

In the Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, the laws of the Maakeh are found in the section called “hilchot rotzeach,” the laws of the murderer. So whether we are talking about literal roofs or

romantic roofs, death and danger reside on the edges of our experience, even in the midst of deep love and joy.

So what exactly is this danger, and why is the maakeh, the parapet, so important? In Stephen Mitchell's book, Can Love Last, the Fate of Romance over time, in the chapter titled "Safety and Adventure, " he explicates in a deep and penetrating manner many of the psychological issues that cause us to fall from the roof of romance, and I would like to focus on one of his points. Mitchell calls the falling from the roof the degradation of romance – we fall from the heights and have a hard time climbing back up the stairs to our romantic selves.

If Mitchell was a Hebrew scholar, he would read the "ki" in our verse, usually translated as **when** as in "when you build a

house” to , “ki” meaning **because**, “because you want to build a house.”

As human beings, we long to build secure homes, places of comfort and ease. We seek continuity and the known experience. Mitchell points out that the word family shares the same root as the word familiar. We all long for the known and comfortable. Conflict arises however, because we humans also desire newness and adventure – we rebel against the monotony of sameness in spite of the comfort it brings.

Mitchell rightly claims that habituation kills desire. Again, if he was writing in Jewish terms, he would speak about the conflict between “keva and kavannah,” the fixed and the inspired, and he would definitely rule that “mitzvot tsrichot kavannah,” the doing of a mitzvah is only fulfilled when one has the right intention.

This conflict plays out in how many of us feel towards our minyan....we love the ease it brings, the known Shabbes experience, the familiar faces and tropes of our communal life, the great joy we experiences on days like today. But sometimes it feels dead and deadening, and so quite a few of us flee to places like Rommemu for an adventure into newness.

Nonetheless, most of us return here for the safety this minyan

offers. This is our place – yet we struggle and when we experience too much of the habitual. And so too in most monogamous relationships. We strive to make our relationships known and predictable. And this is where Mitchell is brilliant...he claims that “the great irony is that our efforts to create safety inevitably make our relationships more dangerous, because in so doing, we shy away from the risks involved in loving.” Loving a partner has the potential to make

us radically dependent upon them. We think we are making ourselves secure by decreasing our potential to be hurt, but Mitchell claims that obsessive attempts at safety “undermine the preconditions of desire, which requires robust imagination to breathe and thrive.” Total safety and predictability stifles romance and passion.

Ultimately, Mitchell claims is that romantic love doesn't die a natural, inevitable death: We kill it, out of fear. Mitchell implies that it is we who throw our own selves off of the roof of romance because we get scared of the heights of dependency on our partner. True romance requires revelation, exploration and the willingness to honestly open our hearts and risk the sharing of our authentic wishes, feelings and fears.

And so Shuki, this is where the Torah comes to our rescue. It asks us to lead a complicated but fulfilling life. Go to the roof, it tells us, and don't be afraid to love freely and openly even though there are no guarantees. Let desire find a place in your life, even though it is risky. Explore the roof, and don't let any fear of the heights keep you earthbound. But nonetheless, build yourself a maakeh, a parapet, out of the consciousness that

love and people change, and true commitment to a spouse requires lifelong work. Build yourself a maakeh that allows for the presence of irony, ambivalence and a huge tolerance for conflicting points of view. Be sure sure to include in your make the understanding that you inevitably will fall at some point, but do not refrain from climbing back on high. Remember the mitzvah of hashavat avidah, returning of the lost object, that precedes the building of a new house. Your relationship with

Lucy will never be hefker, ownerless. It is both of your jobs to find a way bring it back its loving place when a fall occurs.

The truth is, I am very hopeful about you and Lucy because in fact it is easy to see that you do spend time up on the roof.

There is a quality of playfulness that you two share that is very endearing. Anyone who spends time with the both of you clearly sees how you enjoy being with each other and how that pleasure has only grown over the years. I bless you that that spirit of rooftop play always finds a place in your hearts and lives. And, understanding that sometimes it rains on roof, come on inside. I bless the two of you to also enjoy the safety of the familiar - your friends, family and the Shabbat table, even as you make room for adventure and romance.

And finally, let me add an important postscript. I want to thank you for the sense of safety you bring to Eema and me. You are an important part of the *maakeh* on our roof. Your thoughtfulness, willingness to help, flexibility and commitment to your siblings, Yosi, Margalit, Amy, Max and Emil and Matt, is powerful. You are a comforting and kind presence in all of our lives, and we love you very much and can't wait to dance with you and Lucy tomorrow. Shabbat Shalom.

Dvar Torah for Ki Tavo – September 21, 2019 (v. 6 – 1587 words)

In Deuteronomy generally, continuing through our parsha Ki Tavo, we encounter Moshe delivering a series of discourses to the Israelites. What we hear are the reminiscences of an old man who knows he must soon die, whose recollections do not always correspond exactly to what we had read previously, whose intention is to bind the Israelites to their history and obligations. What we have is an old man who knows he must soon die who is increasingly desperate about his flock, the Israelites, who will soon be without their shepherd and he is frantic knowing they will go astray...knowing we will go astray. Moshe utilizes every means at his disposal, every device to attempt to prevent this dreaded inevitability. In Deuteronomy we have been receiving mitzvot at an accelerated pace, with last week's parsha, Ki Teitzei, containing more mitzvot than any other. And to make the mitzvot harder to ignore, Deuteronomy is the main source of the doctrine of reward and punishment, which is the ground bass to the great counterpoint across the days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.

Ki Tavo begins with Moshe introducing the foundational declaration of Jewish identity, the Viddui Bikurim, as the Israelite in the land presents the first fruits to the Temple: "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us..." Having reminded the Israelites of their indebtedness, Moshe then imposes a fantastic, multi-media event in which the people on crossing the Jordan are to erect monumental stones on which they are to inscribe every word of the Torah. Then the Israelites are to divide into two camps, half the tribes on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Eval, while the Levites shout out a list of curses across the valley, each of which the people must endorse by voice as just punishment for straying. This is to be followed by a ritual repetition of all of the blessings and curses Moshe now gives us in the parsha, with the 54 verses of curses far outnumbering the 14 of blessings, which become increasingly terrible, intended to batter the people into submission. Moshe concludes the parsha with a blockbuster claim to the people, which simply is not true: "You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his courtiers and to his whole country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet until this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." Deut. 29:1-3) The truth was, forty years after the Exodus, just prior to crossing the Jordan, there were very few Israelites still alive who had seen all of the miracles and the giving of the Torah while most of those present had seen none of that. But Moshe insisted that they, and we, were present and saw with our own eyes and are bound by those events because, only at that moment, whenever that moment happens, did Moshe think we would come to understand.

Ki Tavo is read each year as we approach the High Holydays yet it begins with the Viddui Bikurim of Pesach. These holidays bestride the year, dividing it between them. Passover is the chief-most event in the entire year for Jewish identity, the seder really culminating in B'chal Dor

v'Dor, "In every generation it is everyone's duty to regard herself or himself as though she or he personally came out of Egypt..." thus fulfilling Moshe's vision. Having done that, we then have to contend with the brachot and kelalot which accompany that Jewish identity, which Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur pick up on half a year later. The Viddui Bikurim of Pesach gives way to the Viddui Zuta and Rabbah of Yom Kippur. The emphasis on identity yields to a focus on confession, purification and hesbon hanefesh.

But it may be that Ki Tavo, in including the Tochacha just prior to the High Holydays, is over-reaching, and actually interferes with the business of the soul. Like a desperate surgeon trying to bludgeon a reluctant patient into a procedure by insisting death will result from non-compliance, the Tochacha seeks to contravene free will, which casts a pall over the Viddui. The seasonal parallel statement to the "wandering Aramean" is to say "God, I have sinned, I am contrite and ashamed and will not repeat it," which is much harder to utter voluntarily.

We balk at the notion of "no punishment without sin" because it easily morphs into "no adversity without sin." Job certainly objected. John Milton, one of the most educated men of the entire 17th century, was deeply religious, knew the Bible thoroughly and was proficient in Hebrew, as well as Aramaic, Syriac, Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and Old English. And he read in the Tochacha (Deut. 28:29): "You shall grope at noon as a blind man gropes in the dark." Milton became completely blind in 1652 at the age of 43 and he took it to have meaning but struggled to sort out what that was. The Royalists told Milton his blindness was punishment for having written the formal justification for the execution in 1649 of the despotic Charles I for high treason. Three years later Milton wrote sonnet 16- On His Blindness- in which he declared his acceptance of his yoke of blindness by concluding "They also serve who only stand and wait." But in the same year he wrote *Cyriack*, in which he asserted he had lost his sight in overworking his eyes "in liberty's defense" and not as punishment. Years later Milton returned to this question when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, that is, Samson engaged in a struggle. This was an epic poem on the last of the Judges, blinded as punishment, who became "eyeless in Gaza." Milton has Samson declare his sin as one "Who like a foolish pilot have shipwreck't My vessel trusted to me from above..." and moan "O dark, dark, dark amid the blaze of noon..." Arthur Koestler was to use this for the title of his novel about another sort of blindness. But Samson was redeemed, not condemned, by the toppling of an idol. I hope Milton took comfort in his blindness from today's haftorah, which ends- "No longer shall you need the sun For light by day, Nor the shining of the moon For radiance by night; But the Lord shall be your light everlasting..."

What we use our eyes for finds a place in the Viddui, which relies extensively on bodily metaphors. It refers to the heart, mouth, head, hand, tongue and neck with the eyes being referred to three times: for the sin of prying eyes; for the sin of haughty eyes; and for the sin through a begrudging eye. To be supercilious is literally the Latin for "to raise the eyebrow."

As you read the curses of the Tochacha, as they ascend in terribleness, you would think that surely starvation so profound that cannibalism is resorted to, as we were told actually

happened on Tisha b'Av, must represent the ultimate horror. But no, the Torah has a different understanding. It goes on to say: "The Lord will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route which I told you you should not see again. There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but none will buy." (Deut. 28:68) The ultimate threat is the reversal of received Jewish history, the undoing of all we know, the return to Egypt and the return to slavery, as it had been, as if we had never been. Meaninglessness of life and days, having no purpose, is antithetical to a Jewish existence.

To approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a pro forma exercise, as merely an annual obligation, is a sad business. There cannot be a soul who cannot find its reflection in the Viddui. The piyyut Unetaneh Tokef, which the baal tefilah leads, has a terrifying majesty to it because it is the liturgical equivalent of the Tochacha when it asks "who shall live and who shall die." In it we hear "You recall all that is forgotten, and will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page" and "...no one is innocent in Your sight." Perhaps a less coercive, more appealing way might be to strive to find, during the five opportunities we have with the silent Amidah Viddui, some way to allow an element of the Ashamnu or Al Het to speak to that still, small voice within us so that a dialogue ensues.

As Neilah finishes its race against the dying of the light and the weighty-ness of the High Holydays give way to the "ach sameach" of Sukkot, we will be with each other a lot in the next month. I have often thought that the number of holidays packed into the month of Tishrei was a proof of the existence of God since no human being would ever have thechutzpah to do that. Tishrei concentrates the holidays and, I have learned, the holidays concentrate us. After we work together through this next month, may it not be said of us, "Days pass, the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."

Howard L. Berkowitz

September 19, 1998

Dvar Torah on Netzavin

The Children of Israel, their leaders and the common man, are all standing before God as they approach the promised land. Moses continues his rebuke - be good and listen to God and all shall be good in your life; be bad and the worst imaginable shall become a reality onto you. God is making a dreaded covenant not just with the people actually standing in front of him; he is also making the covenant with the children, the minors, and the yet to born. In fact, Moses warns the people, as they are about to enter the land, and remember these are people who all were born in the desert and did not live in Egypt; he tells these people to remember the disgusting putrid idols of Egypt. They should remember what the Egyptians did to them and how God saved them from death, disaster and idolatry.

Can you imagine a little boy of almost 7 listening to the warnings and the recountings of horrendous deeds that happened OVER THERE. What actually happened OVER THERE? He wonders. He is certain that lots of bad things happened OVER THERE. But what were they? But wait a minute, things are all right over here. We are not OVER THERE, where the bad things happened. We are here. It's not so bad over here. Why do we have to go to a new place now? How do we know what the new place will be like? How come everyone is so excited about the new place? How come they used to cry so much about what was happening OVER THERE? But we are NOT OVER THERE. We are here. We like it here.

Last week, Laurie Forman asked why, as the dreaded curses are about to be listed, Moses says, "Today you have become a nation?" It seemed to me that developmentally there is an answer. Look at what happens between the ages of 4 and 7. During that time the child begins to really become a separate real person. Friends and people outside the family begin to become important and the role of the parents is no longer the role as the sole authority. So what happens to those values from the parents? Those values become part of the child himself. The do's and don'ts that the child heard all of his or her life gradually become part of his or her own fabric. If all goes well, the fabric of the parents becomes seamlessly intertwined with that of the child within the child.

Without being too simplistic and reductionistic, this line of thinking, that linking historical metaphors to developmental metaphors, a version of the physical principle that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, is similar to what Ann Mintz has discussed in her trilogy over the past couple of years in which she interprets many of the images in the escape from Egypt, from mitzrayim, from that narrow place, to reflect the passage through the narrow place of the mother's body. Now, as the children of Israel are about to cross the river, from the ever-protective cloud of God to the unknown, and therefore frightening, territory across the waters, one can imagine this also to symbolize the child leaving the protection of his or her parents. In order to live beyond their ever-present protection and become an autonomous human being one HAS to have within oneself the rules of governing one's life, the do's and don'ts.

Without the do's and don'ts or if the do's and don'ts remain foreign to the child, the child cannot be autonomous.

Within this perspective, is there a way of understanding the idea that God is making this covenant not just with the people standing before him but also with those who are not yet here today? Is it plausible to consider that idea to be a reflection of the cyclic nature of human life? We begin a new solar cycle tomorrow night and in a couple of weeks we will return to the beginning of our story, before we ever reach the goal that we have been striving towards, by the way. Perhaps that is a clue. Little children believe that goals are there to be attained. And that's that. But what happens once a goal is attained? If a new goal is not created we no longer have life. Thus, as each person, in fact as each generation, experiences life's cycles with ever-newly conceived goals, they actually DO experience that moment of being on the verge of crossing the waters in a very real way.

But what about little children who are forced to cross waters? Maybe thinking about such children, who have to experience such forced crossings, can help us imagine and experience ourselves LIVING WITHIN that historical moment, over 3 millennia ago. I only need to look back a half century to the day when Truman defeated Dewey and think of that little boy just a month shy of 7 as he was about to cross the waters from a tropical paradise to a land whose streets he imagined always to be covered with snow, not knowing that they were supposed to be paved with gold, and not anticipating that shortly thereafter he would say, like the Israelites had said more than once, "I want to go back home." I certainly can imagine the terror of that moment 3 millennia ago, particularly since it was a moment not only filled with promises, but also with threats. Promises and threats inevitably to be repeated as we continue looking for our own promised land.

Let me end with a poem.

at montparnasse

sartre and de beauvoir
stars of david
christian crosses
french men and women
side by side.

letters and flowers for
baudelaire and beckett
memorials over empty graves for
deportees from the years of shame
a half century after
lueger and dreyfus.

Searching for the grave of dreyfus
and leaving a stone at montparnasse cemetery on
tisha b'av ninety seven
one hundred years after

hertzl prayed at basel

Shabat shalom and shanah tovah

Leon Hoffman

(In honor of the 50th Anniversary of my Immigration)

Nitzavim

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

Today, we're standing on the threshold of the High Holidays—and by one of those coincidences that our tradition works so hard to arrange, we mark the occasion by reading Nitzavim.

It's not quite the end of sefer D'varim. But it feels to me as if we're at the climactic moment in the book—maybe the climactic moment in the entire Torah. Certainly Nitzavim gives us one of the most famous passages:

Hamitzvah ha-zot asher Anochi m'tzavcha ha-yom lo niflet hi mim'cha v'lo r'chokah hi.
Lo va-shamayim hi, laymor, Mi ya-aleh lanu ha-shamayma v'yikacheha lanu v'yashmienu otah v'na'asenah?
V'lo me-ever la-yam hi, laymor, Mi ya'avar lanu el ever ha-yam v'yikacheha lanu v'yashmienu otah v'na'asenah?
Ki karov aylecha ha-davar m'od b'ficha u-vilvav'cha la'asoto.

This commandment, which I command you today, is not hidden from you and is not far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it back to tell it to us, so we can do it?
Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who will go beyond the sea for us and bring it back to tell it to us, so we can do it?
Because this thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so you can do it.

From there, we proceed to the high point:

U-vacharta ba-chaim l'ma'an tichyeh, atah v'zarecha.
Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your offspring.

Now, I notice that this passage contrasts with the spirit of Rosh Hashanah, or might even be in tension with it. During the High Holidays, we're supposed to look back and think of how we might be judged for our actions over the past year. But today, the Torah gives us a different directive: Look ahead. Think about what you're *going* to do. And choose life.

But no matter whether we look back or look forward, there's an underlying unity beneath this contrast or tension. We know what to do, and what not to do, because God commanded us.

This is our basic truth claim. I know it's rude, and possibly even vulgar, to dwell on whether we actually *think* it's true. But at some point in the coming proceedings, maybe during the Musaf Amidah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the realization is going to sink it. We're engaged in days upon days of dovvening on the premise that there is a living God, a creator of unimaginable greatness and power. More than that: the premise that this creator is a person of some sort, with a name and an identity. And even more: the premise that this unparalleled self at one point in human time decided to reach down and deliver commandments to us, and is still watching to see if we keep them.

If we endorse this truth claim, then it makes perfect sense to spend our days dovvening. If we don't believe it, or if we're really not sure, then our action becomes a little more questionable. Of course, we can have reasons other than belief for maintaining a traditional observance. They might be emotional, based on early memories of going to shul with the people we love. Or they might have a political aspect, based on a determination to keep alive a heritage, and a people, that have been in danger of being wiped out. Those are good reasons. But since this is the time of year for coming clean, I will confess to you that I don't feel I can go through the holidays honestly without asking the question: Do I think this is true, or not?

A question that, honestly, I can't answer.

But I'll tell you what I can do. I can examine the figurative language that our tradition uses to make this truth claim. I'm going to take the next few minutes to talk about the metaphors in the passage I've quoted from Nitzavim. These figures of speech won't confirm whether there's a commanding, personal God. But putting the big truth claim to the side, the way we use language does tell me something about how our imaginations work, and even suggests something

about our inherent capacities. And this, in turn, might be relevant to the question of whether I feel it's meaningful to dovven.

In short, this is going to be a Litvack's guide to transcendence and immanence. Glad to have you along. Let's get started.

Now, the first thing I notice about this passage is that it doesn't give me just one metaphor. It gives two. And the surplus is odd. The first metaphor imagines that the law came to us from the sky. This image seems usual enough. It's very common to figure God's place as being in the heavens, or above them. Open your siddur to p'sukei d'zimra, and you'll find plenty of examples. Ha-shamayim m'saprim k'vod El. But then we get a second metaphor, in which the law comes to us from beyond the sea. That's not so common.

The advantage, I suppose, is that if we have two metaphors, we won't be tempted to take either of them literally. We have to combine them and come up with a meaning they hold in common, a meaning that isn't tied either to the sky or to the sea.

So, what might we have said about both the sky and the sea, if we were ancient Israelites? Number one, they reduce human scale to insignificance. They're vastly bigger than us. We can't see to the end of them. Number two, even though we can't see to the end, we imagine it's there. Ancient people told stories about sailing to the end of the sea, and they also imagined there was a higher reality above the sky. So, the sky and the sea are greater than us, but limited. Number three, they're in constant motion and are always changing. It's more common to characterize the sea as restless, but the same is true of the sky. Its colors change. The sun, moon, and stars move across it. Of course, we can perceive more of an order to the sky's changes than to the sea's. But there's an element of chaos to the sky, too, as you know if you've ever lived with the weather in, say, Chicago.

With that understood, my question is, do we have a compatible metaphor that works within our modern cosmology? And the answer is yes. In fact, our post-Einsteinian understanding of the universe makes the sky an even better image for this purpose.

What is this thing that we ordinarily call the sky? It's the tiny slice of the universe that we happen to see overhead at any given time of day. And what about the part we don't happen to see, at any given moment? We know it's there. It's all around us. It's in constant motion and is always changing. And despite being unthinkable vast, it's limited. Einstein has taught us that we exist within an expanding but finite universe.

I think that's a truth claim almost all of us would agree to uphold. If we take the sky, in Einsteinian terms, as a metaphor for the place beyond which God abides, then what are the implications? The limit from beyond which God hands down the law is still above. But it's also there, and there, and there, and there.

Now let's extend the metaphor further. Modern physics assumes that on the subatomic level, very tiny particles of matter are in motion around relatively large volumes of space. There is, in fact, much more space than matter. The physicist Arthur Eddington, whose observations during a solar eclipse confirmed relativity theory, used to say that if he apprehended the table in front of him on a human scale, with his human senses, the surface seemed perfectly solid. But if he apprehended the same table scientifically, it wasn't solid at all. The surface was more like a swarm of flies. Why he said flies, I don't know. It's a nasty image. I'm going to change it to butterflies. That's much more pleasant.

Here's my point. The space those butterflies are swarming in, the space at subatomic level, is the same as the space between the planets and the stars. There's only one universe, with

one continuous space. So, to return to the metaphor, if the place beyond which God abides is up there, and down there, and across there, then it's also *in here*.

You will notice that I have made no statement at all about God's existence. And, Litvack alert, I haven't resorted to any mysticism, either. Just physics. But I think I've shown that the very old metaphors in Nitzavim can be put to amazingly consistent use by modern minds. In fact, in their modern interpretation, these metaphors work even better. They now express transcendence and immanence in a single figure of speech. You don't have to ask anyone to bring you the Torah from out there, because it's here, very close.

So now, the big question. Of what use is it to think this way?

Well, if you make yourself aware that space is continuous from within yourself to the edge of the universe, that idea will confirm a pair of intuitions that many of us have, at one time or another. We are fundamentally alone, radically isolated, locked up in our individual minds and bodies and condemned to die one by one. And we are also somehow connected to everything around us, interpenetrated 360 degrees by shared space, buzzing with energies that run through the whole world. Fortunately, very few of us feel this way on a regular basis. We have jobs to get to, dishes to wash, and the baseball standings to follow. But it seems as if these intuitions of isolation and connection—of the universe's transcendence and immanence, you might say—do have some basis in physical reality.

Which is all well and good. But not good enough. Knowing about this dual nature of my existence, feeling it, will not make my behavior any more kind, or generous, or loving, or responsible.

If I'm going to behave any better, then I have to abandon the macro level—the first person plural of the first part of the passage I quoted: who will bring it to us? Who will tell it to

us? I have to zoom in to the second person singular of the climax: Therefore, choose life—you, singular, so that you, singular, may live.

Being kind, generous, loving, responsible, is a matter of choice. And it's not a collective matter, even though we received the Torah as a whole people. The choice is individual and personal. And it has to be made moment by moment, every day.

This is as immanent as it gets. I think the connection to the transcendent, those big ideas about the sky and the sea, is that our amazing capacity for imagining these metaphors is the same as our no-less-amazing capacity to imagine one another's lives, and decide to honor them through our actions.

Even in the midst of Yom Kippur, when we look back as a community and confess to our collective sins of the past year, we still have to look forward, moment by moment, to the decision in front of us. Choose. Choose life.

Very clever, this Torah cycle they've arranged for us.

So, with that, I'm going to take the liberty of getting a little ahead of things and wish you a sweet and healthy year. While you're busy dovvening, you might decide you're actually talking to God—or not. That's up to you. But may you choose life, and receive it.

Shabbat shalom.

Devar Torah-Haazinu (Deut 32), 2008 CSAIR

Our portion today, the Song of Moses, presents in poetic form, a colorful kaleidoscope of Israel's history. Its rich language calls up flashes of moments in the Torah and Prophets, tumbling out one after another. Verse 7 of our parasha "Ask your father, the elders, and they will tell you," recalls God's words in Exodus 10:2, "You will tell your children and grandchildren, how I made fools of the Egyptians," Verse 11, the eagle hovering over her young recalls, the line in Exodus 19:4, said at Sinai, the eloquent summing up of Israel's chosenness, "You saw what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself.." Verse 10 reminds us of God's protection in the wilderness, Verse 32 mentions Sodom and Gomorrah. Many references call up the prophets, Verses 32, 33, and 38 call up the image of the vineyard on which the people grew prosperous, but which will be laid waste, resonating with Isaiah 5, while the abundance signified by the flocks of Bashan in 14 calls up the prophet Amos, who

complains about the self-indulgent people of the north, calling the women “the cows of Bashan.”

The images of God are equally varied. Verse 6 recalls God as father, and verse 18 God as mother, “you forgot the God who gave birth to you.” God is also the Rock, as he is addressed in the Psalms. He is the warrior god that rescued Israel in the Exodus, but here he is the warrior who turns his arrows and sword against a faithless people in verses 23-25. Verses 39-41 show a remarkable image of the powerful judge and warrior who relents and saves his people, resonant of the prophets.

God is a person here, as throughout the Bible, a complex, multi-faceted, changing personality with whom Israel has a relationship. There is a certain fire and power in this myth (by which I mean religious story, not falsehood), as it speaks to a human need for concreteness. But we are all children of the Enlightenment, rationalists. When pressed, most of us would not say God is “out there” as a warrior, or even a mother or father. The absolute cannot be human or anthropomorphic, human-like, (unless one is a Christian). Yochanan Muffs, in his book, *The Personhood of God*, says that in our time, both myth and philosophy have had their wings clipped, “Monotheistic theologians-Jewish and Muslim, are in an uncomfortable

position, because they feel the truth of God's personhood, yet realize the absolute cannot be human in any real sense. They have neither the radical skepticism of philosophy or the fire of myth. What they are left with is a person, who is not much of a personality (55-56)."

I have observed three ways that contemporary believers try to solve the problem of God: 1) a repair to the abstract, 2) identifying religion with culture, and 3) identifying the longing for God with God.

An example of taking the abstract route appears in this quote from Arthur Green, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, in *Seek My Face*,

I am seeking a religious language that goes beyond the separation among "God," "world," and "self," that seems so ultimate in Western theology. The God of which I speak is not the personified "Other," so widely familiar in our culture and yet so little tested by real understanding. I refer rather to a unity that embraces all of being, a single One that contains within it all the variety and richness of life, yet is also the Oneness that transcends and surpasses all (p. 6).

So for Green, God is an eternal essence or energy that embraces everything.

The identification of religion with culture makes the wonderful trappings of religion central. An example here is from Philip Kitcher, a professor of biology at Columbia, who was affected when he read Elaine

Pagels (*Beyond Belief*) description of wandering into a church the day after receiving a terminal diagnosis for her young son's disease.

The importance of Pagel's precise description of what occurred in the church, and of the perspective she develops in her book, lies, I suggest, in the genuine possibility of comfort without supernaturalist hope. When the soprano soloist sings the movement Brahms added at the last moment to his German Requiem, "I will comfort you as one whom his mother comforteth," the promise is literally false-there is no God who will wipe the tears from our eyes-but the music itself consoles. In deeper and more enduring ways. So do the love and sympathy of others. the support of a caring community (*Living with Darwin*, 158).

So, he seems to be saying the narratives, music, and liturgy have their own power, even if what they proclaim is not real. Added to the benefits of community, these are sufficient to make religion worthwhile.

The last of my 3 alternatives makes the longing for God the evidence for God. I don't recall exactly where, but I read an example where someone said he cried out to God at night for an answer or a sign, looking to the

heavens. The skies were silent. He concludes that God was in the cry itself, that the longing for God was God.

If any of these three solutions appeal to you, fine. They don't quite work for me, for reasons I will not go into. I prefer to stand somewhere within the tension between the rationalist's God as an absolute and an essence, and the mythic God as personality. Muffs suggests that God's transcendence and personalism may be complementary. I will finish with a passage from his book:

I believe that many of these pitfalls could be avoided if we remythologized our theology rather than demythologized it. Fully realizing that the anthropomorphic God is to a very great degree a projection of man's understanding of his own psyche (not merely of his own intellectualized and abstracted ideals), we must turn up the mythical decibels of the old personal God. In doing so, we can (a) spell out more clearly the anthropological and psychological implications of the anthropomorphic God and find out exactly what new definitions of personality were being projected by ancient Hebrews; (b) win the loyalty of the reader of the myth to its humanistic content, not only by the inner cogency of its message, but also by the poetic power of its form; and (c) convince the

philosophically oriented reader, by the exaggerated nature of the power of the poetic presentation, that the theologian is as much a demythologizer in his remythologizing as the philosopher is in his abstractions. The sophisticated philosopher, instead of being embarrassed by the personhood and mythic character of the old God, can delight in them as poetically formulated models of man's humanity. He may even ponder for a moment whether or not the power that operates in man to create such humanizing images may not be somehow be associated, in fact, with what we usually call God. If the divine projections are not quite ontology (proofs of being), they may be more than mere poetry (193).

Devar Torah-Haazinu (Deut 32), 2010

One of my colleagues, an elderly Christian brother, was talking about the “New Atheists,” people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. He said “These atheists— I don’t believe in the God they don’t believe in!” Today’s parasha shows Israel pondering “What kind of God do we believe in?” Last week, Bonnie Zaben showed us how poetry can be a way of containing disparate images of God, some of which undermine each other. On Shabbat Shuvah, it seems appropriate to look at the Song of Moses, which, in poetic form, presents a colorful, kaleidoscopic review of Israel’s history and metaphors for God. As Barry Holtz noted last week, sometimes the calendar of holidays and the liturgical calendar intersect nicely.

The poetry’s rich language calls up flashes of moments in the Torah and Prophets, tumbling out one after another. Verse 7 of the parasha “Ask your father, the elders, and they will tell you,” recalls God’s words in Exodus 10:2, “You will tell your children and grandchildren, how I made fools of the Egyptians,” Verse 11, the eagle hovering over her young recalls, the line in Exodus 19:4, said at Sinai, the eloquent summing up of Israel’s chosenness, “You saw what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you

on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself.." Verse 10 reminds us of God's protection in the wilderness, Verse 32 mentions Sodom and Gomorrah. Many references call up the prophets, Verses 32, 33, and 38 call up the image of the vineyard on which the people grew prosperous, but which will be laid waste, resonating with Isaiah 5, while the abundance signified by the flocks of Bashan in 14 calls up the prophet Amos, who complains about the self-indulgent people of the north, calling the women "the cows of Bashan."

The images of God are equally varied. Verse 6 recalls God as father, and verse 18 God as mother, "you forgot the God who gave birth to you." God is also the Rock, as he is addressed in the Psalms. He is the warrior god who rescued Israel in the Exodus, but here he is the warrior who turns his arrows and sword against a faithless people in verses 23-25. Verses 39-41 show a remarkable image of the powerful judge and warrior who relents and saves his people, resonant of the prophets.

God is a person here, as throughout the Bible, a complex, multifaceted, changing personality with whom Israel has a relationship. There is a certain fire and power in this myth (by which I mean religious story, not falsehood), as it speaks to a human need for concreteness. But we are all children of the Enlightenment, rationalists. When pressed, most of us would

not say God is “out there” as a warrior, or even a mother or father. The absolute cannot be human or anthropomorphic, (unless one is a Christian). Our dear friend and teacher, Yochanan Muffs, zichrono l’bracha, in his book, *The Personhood of God*, says in our time, both myth and philosophy have had their wings clipped, “Monotheistic theologians-Jewish and Muslim, are in an uncomfortable position, because they feel the truth of God’s personhood, yet realize the absolute cannot be human in any real sense. They have neither the radical skepticism of philosophy or the fire of myth. What they are left with is a person, who is not much of a personality (55-56).”

I have observed three ways that contemporary believers try to solve the problem of God: 1) a repair to the abstract, 2) equating religion with culture, and 3) identifying the longing for God with God.

An example of the first approach, repair to the abstract, appears in this quote from Arthur Green, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, in *Seek My Face*,

I am seeking a religious language that goes beyond the separation among “God,” “world,” and “self,” that seems so ultimate in Western theology. The God of which I speak is not the personified “Other,” so widely familiar in our culture and yet so little tested by real understanding. I refer rather to a unity that embraces all of being, a

single One that contains within it all the variety and richness of life,
yet is also the Oneness that transcends and surpasses all (p. 6).

So for Green, God is an eternal essence or energy that embraces everything.

The identification of religion with culture makes the wonderful trappings of religion central. An example here is from Philip Kitcher, a professor of biology at Columbia, who was affected when he read Elaine Pagels (*Beyond Belief*) description of wandering into a church the day after receiving a terminal diagnosis for her young son's disease. There she found great comfort in the community and ritual.

The importance of Pagel's precise description of what occurred in the church, and of the perspective she develops in her book, lies, I suggest, in the genuine possibility of comfort without supernaturalist hope. When the soprano soloist sings the movement Brahms added at the last moment to his German Requiem, "I will comfort you as one whom his mother comforteth," the promise is literally false-there is no God who will wipe the tears from our eyes-but the music itself consoles. In deeper and more enduring ways. So do the love and sympathy of others. the support of a caring community (*Living with Darwin*, 158).

So, he is saying the narratives, music, and liturgy have their own power, even if what they proclaim is not real. Added to the benefits of community, these are sufficient to make religion worthwhile.

The last of my 3 alternatives makes the longing for God the evidence for God. I read someone who said he cried out to God at night for an answer or a sign, looking to the heavens. The skies were silent. He concludes that God was in the cry itself, that the longing for God was God.

I find that none of these solutions quite work for me, or they don't work perfectly. As someone said in the study session last week, our ideas of God vary throughout our lives. I prefer to stand somewhere within the tension between the rationalist's God as an absolute and impersonal, and the mythic God as personality. Yochanan suggests that God's transcendence and personalism are complementary. As we all keep thinking and negotiating between the tradition and our own needs, I'd like to finish with a passage from Yochanan's book that takes in all three of the possibilities I outlined and more:

I believe that many of these pitfalls could be avoided if we remythologized our theology rather than demythologized it. Fully realizing that the anthropomorphic God is to a very great degree a projection of man's understanding of his own psyche (not merely of

his own intellectualized and abstracted ideals), we must turn up the mythical decibels of the old personal God. In doing so, we can (a) spell out more clearly the anthropological and psychological implications of the anthropomorphic God and find out exactly what new definitions of personality were being projected by ancient Hebrews; [In other word, what was new about Israel's God among the ANE gods] (b) win the loyalty of the reader of the myth to its humanistic content, not only by the inner cogency of its message, but also by the poetic power of its form; and (c) convince the philosophically oriented reader, by the exaggerated nature of the power of the poetic presentation, that the theologian is as much a demythologizer in his remythologizing as the philosopher is in his abstractions. The sophisticated philosopher, instead of being embarrassed by the personhood and mythic character of the old God, can delight in them as poetically formulated models of man's humanity. He may even ponder for a moment whether or not the power that operates in man to create such humanizing images may not be somehow be associated, in fact, with what we usually call God. If the divine projections are not quite ontology (proofs of being), they may be more than mere poetry (193).

העזינו שבת שובה 2023

Ha'azinu, so listen up! My last words to you will be in song—very different from the Song at the Sea. You remember of course. No sooner did Egypt's army drown together with all its chariots then we burst into song: first me and the men, then my sister Miriam and the women. This time, mine is the only voice you will hear. But this is no mere swan song. Far from it. Everything you need to know about our covenant with God is in these songs. That is why my final words must be in poetic language: formal, concise and vivid. No need to worry. The scribes will write it all down, and you'll hear recitals every now and then after you enter the Promised Land.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! The prophets who come after me will also be great poets. (Jonah is my personal favorite.) And make no mistake about it: My sister Miriam was a prophetess. So there will be other women-prophets after her, like Deborah, a wonderful poet. You know, millennia from now my children will sing a song about the End of Days, when kings David and Solomon will join Miriam and me at a heavenly feast where we will drink the Wine of Gan Eden, preserved in its grapes from the Six Days of Creation, and eat the meat of the Great Ox and the Leviathan:¹

ווער וועט אונדז טאנצן אויף דער סעודהניו?
מרים הנביאה.
מרים הנביאה וועט אונדז טאנצן
שלמה המלך וועט אונדז חכמה זאגן
דוד המלך וועט אונדז שפילן
משה רבנו וועט אונדז תורה זאגן
דעם יין המשומר וועט מיר טרינקען
דעם שור הבר מיטן לויטן וועלן מיר עסן
אויף דער סעודהניו.

I myself don't know a word of Yiddish, but someday, it will be God's third most favorite language. The sound of Yiddish song will be very pleasing unto the LORD.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! *Shloyme Hamelekh*, King Solomon, will be not only the wisest of kings. He will also build us a Temple, from whose steps the Kohanim and Levites will sing. They will sing psalms and Halleluiahs to the LORD. But on account of our sins, because we cannot refrain from doing evil in the sight of the LORD, the Temple will be destroyed, not once, but twice. So the People Israel will build houses of prayer, temples-in-miniature, and each of them will become a temple of song. Rabbis will replace the prophets and prayer will take the

¹ <https://www.jyrics.com/lyrics/sudenyu-%D7%A1%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%93%D7%94%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%95/>

place of the sacrifices. Instead of the priests there will be Leaders of Prayer, **ba'ale tefillah**, and some of them will compose a new kind of song called *piyyut*. Soon every great community in every age will have its own *payytanim*. Through them, the Holy Tongue will be reborn! Through prayer and piyyut we will have so much to sing about. Not just one psalm of the day, sung by the Kohanim on the steps of the Temple, but psalms and songs for every day of the year, and for special days of the year; not once a day but three times a day.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! The house of prayer will become our Temple of Song—and our school of song. My Torah, all five books, will be set to musical notation, called TROP. A **ba'al-koreh** will chant the Torah and this cantillation will make the Torah come alive, even the genealogies, even the Levitical manual of purity and pollution. Along with the Torah we shall keep some other scrolls, each using a different trop; together—a symphonic score. Learning the trop will separate the men from the boys. But that is not all.

There will come a time when every male among us will learn to sing unto the LORD! Not just listen to the ba'al-tefillah and the ba'al koreh sing and chant. Every male Jew will learn how to *daven*, to himself, from a prayerbook or an i-phone. The sound of davening will be the sound of men murmuring to themselves. But when we daven together, in a shul, especially on the Sabbath and festivals, the ba'al tefillah will raise his voice and make the recitation more musical and melodious. And this melodic style, this musical leitmotif will be called *nusakh*. Murmur and melody will be a new sound unto the LORD.²

Then, at certain high points in the davening, the baal-tfile will break into special melodies. And the most beloved will be called *mi-Sinai* melodies! That's how much our people will love to sing. Through song they will transport themselves back to this time and place, to the wilderness of Sinai, where we are standing now; where I shall soon take leave of you.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! God help us, there will come a time when the words of Torah will become stale and merely scholastic; when the rivers of prayer will run dry. Then will the LORD bring new prophets unto Israel called **zaddikim**. Ascending to heaven, they will bring down new words of Torah. And the great zaddikim will turn davening back into the language of the soul—by means of song. This song will be called a niggun.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! Each great zaddik will gather disciples, and whenever they sit together at his *tish*, or daven with him in his court, they will learn a new niggun: either one that he composed himself or one that musical prodigies wrote on his behalf. The zaddik will choose which niggun to sing when; whether it be a wordless niggun, to be known as a *dveykes-nign*, or a niggun set to holy words.³ Dveykes means cleaving unto God. A wordless niggun, sung over and over, will open a dialogue with the Creator and leave the Hasidim on a plane of mystical exaltation.

² Judit Niran Frigyesi, *Writing on Water: The Sounds of Jewish Prayer* (Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2018), 57.

³ Ibid., 136-37.

[SING the first two parts of “Avinu malkenu,” from *Chabad Melodies: Songs of the Lubavitcher Hassidim*, Collector’s Guild, Side 1, Band 1.]

אַבִּינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ אָבִינוּ אֲתָהּ.

אַבִּינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ אֲלֵא אֲתָהּ.

After hearing this niggun from the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Habad Hasidim will take it home and sing it on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in their shtiblekh. Soon every Hasidic group—Braslav, Modzitz, Ger, Rizhin—will have its own niggunic tradition. Not only will there be nusakh, punctuated by *mi-Sinai* melodies, to recall our ancient days and our eternal past. There will also be niggun, to revitalize, to mesmerize, and to transport us to a place of endless possibility.

Ha’azinu, so listen up! Song and niggun will be the path of our return. When the People of Israel return to the Land of Israel, after two thousand years of wandering, we will sing new songs, and some of our greatest poets will be women. One, named after our matriarch Rachel will sing⁴—

מֵעוֹלָם לֹא טָהַרְתִּי בְּתַכְלֶת שׁוֹקֶטָה
וּבְתֶם
שֶׁל כְּנָרֹת שְׁלִי... הִזִּי כְּנָרֹת שְׁלִי,
הִקְיִיתִי, אוֹ חֲלֻמֹּתַי חֵלוֹם ?

Our women will work the land on places called kibbutzim. Another singer, named Naomi, will compose a song about the EUCALYPTUS GROVE on her kibbutz, which will lie by the River Jordan⁵—

אָבֵל עַל חוֹף יַרְדֵּן כְּמוֹ מֵאוֹמָה לֹא קָרָה ,
אוֹתָהּ הַדּוּמִיָּה וְגַם אוֹתָהּ הַתַּפְּאוּרָה :
חוֹרֶשֶׁת הָאֵקְלִיפְטוֹס, הַגֶּשֶׁר, הַסִּירָה
וְרִיחַ הַמְּלוּחַ עַל הַמַּיִם.

The same men and women who sing new songs to the land will also sing new melodies to King Solomon’s Song of Songs. That’s how much our people will love to sing—our whole people, men and women, ingathered from all our dispersions.

Through song, not only will we return to the land. Through song, we will return to history. At every turn new poets and singers will compose new songs, to help us overcome despair, to steel our resolve, to rouse us into action⁶—

⁴ <https://shironet.mako.co.il/artist?type=lyrics&lang=1&prfid=901&wrkid=1684>

⁵ <https://www.hebrewsongs.com/?song=chorshathaekaliptus>

⁶ <https://yiddishsongs.org/es-brent/>

ס'ברענט! ברידערלעך, ס'ברענט!
 די הילף איז נאָר אין אַינען געווענדט,
 אויב דאָס שטעטל איז אַינען טייער,
 נעמט די כלים, לעשט דאָס פֿייער,
 לעשט מיט אַייער אייגן בלוט,
 באַווייזט, אַז איר דאָס קענט.

שטייט נישט, ברידער, אַט אַזוי זיך
 מיט פֿאַרלייגטע הענט,
 שטייט ניט, ברידער, לעשט דאָס פֿייער —
 אונדזער שטעטל ברענט!

Song and niggun will be the path of our return: to our land, to history, and to God. When Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, will arrive in the New World and will see how the People of Israel has once again lost its way in the wilderness, he will send his two young emissaries, one named Shlomo, after King Solomon, and the other named Zalmen, to college campuses. Accompanying himself on a guitar, Reb Shlomo will take words from King David's Book of Psalms, and will turn them into folksongs. *Pishu li sha'arei tzedek*, he will sing, from Ps 118, and *Essa enay el heharim*, from Ps. 121. So simple, so engaging, that even those who will have strayed completely from any thought of God will return to search for God, through *song*.

It will be an age of mechanical reproduction. Songs that until then could only be heard in public in a godly setting, will also be heard in private by anyone and anywhere on something called I.P.s, long-playing records. All the niggunim, both the wordless and those set to words, which only male Hasidim heard from the living Rebbe or from each other, will be heard from inside a movable mishkan, called a speaker.

This will be the beginning of the Niggunic Renaissance. There will be a rebirth of song and niggun such as the world has never seen. Another Deborah, named Debbie Friedman, will be the first woman bard of the Niggunic Renaissance. She will record 22 albums, and her prayer for healing will bring solace to hundreds of congregations of Jews.

Ha'azinu, so listen up! Song and niggun will be the path of our return: to our land, to history, to God, and to our true selves.

A Kohen named Leonard will stray from the path of righteousness. He will live on a Greek island with a non-Israelite woman. A Greek island! But when our soldiers will fight a war right here in the Sinai where we are standing today, he will fly in a flying machine to the Land of Israel, he will borrow a guitar, and he will perform his songs to our soldiers in the very midst of battle. And before he dies, he will write a psalm of return called Halleluiah. The whole world,

not just the Chosen People, will sing this song. His grave will become a pilgrimage site. I should be so lucky! As Leonard the Kohen will teach us: our LORD is the LORD of Song.

***Ha'azinu*, so listen up!**

Dovid Roskies

Chapter 1

DEVAR TORAH FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANAH 1989

CHANGE CAN OCCUR AND ITS OUR HOPE

During the summer when I started to think about the High Holydays, I immediately thought of the *וַיְהִי חֹקֶה* prayer and knew that it spoke to me. Since June I have been facing a *גזירה*, a decree or judgment-- BUT with you and my other friends, my family, and my doctor I have been fighting that decree. I could and can not accept its finality. As part of the effort of resistance I knew I had to give this *devar torah* and dwell on the dynamics of hope and speak to you and myself regarding the motivation that we must have during this period to activate us to do what is necessary. We must be moved to get beyond just mouthing the words that change is possible and that our fate is not sealed.

The *וַיְהִי חֹקֶה* prayer leads into the QEDUSHAH emphasizing the holiness of the day by speaking of its character as a judgment day, first in the heavens and then on earth. Drawing on motifs developed in the talmudic rabbinic sources it speaks of God writing and sealing judgments, of consulting a book of records in which is recorded our deeds. At the sound of the SHOFAR, the angels are seized by trepidation at the oncoming judgment; yet it is not for them but for us humans who will pass

before the Lord like sheep before the shepherd and whose judgment will be written.

Then comes my favorite PIYYUT, בראש השנה יכתובן with its graphic imagery of the judgments decreed on each of us. WHO knew that last year that my decree was already in my body waiting to grow and to cast its malignant shadow on my life? Who knows what each of us might face in the coming year. But the text goes on to state: ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה. This is the key but what does it mean? Before we turn to it, let us note that the rest of the passage aims at convincing us that this is possible because God by the divine nature is empathetic and wants us to change our ways and to live; God does not want to act on a negative decree; God does not want a person to die. And until the day of death God waits; indeed there is no limit on the divine patience. Moreover, God's affinity to us is testified to by the connections between the divine name and the name Israel which ends in אל, one of the divine names.

Now to the key phrase. Two elements strike me. First is the formulation מעבירין את רע הגזרה, which my father translates as "annulling the SEVERITY of the decree --and not just annulling it completely. Was my father being too apologetic and modern and making the theology more palatable? I have never been sure. More on this below.

Second, in pondering the meaning of the passage, I was taken by the order of three key avenues of change and saw in it a process that each one of us must go through. First comes

תשובה. We must change our ways, make an inner decision to see the light, to obtain what Rabbi Kook would say is an internal awareness that our life will be better if we change. Prayer is next. With prayer we beseech God. To me this means that we realize that there is something beyond us; that we are not the only entity that exists. In facing this truth we also obtain strength and hope that everything is not just set in an unalterably destiny. Finally, comes צדקה. Once we have come to an inner realization, once we can see that we are not the be all and end all, we then can reach out to others and do צדקה, charity or other acts of kindness.

When I examined the rabbinic sources on which this passage is based, to my pleasure, I found that my reading may not be totally arbitrary, for the earliest sources in Midrash Genesis Rabba and the Palestinian Talmud follow a different sequence for the three key terms and employ a slightly different formulation. Let me share with you the main points. In Genesis Rabba to the scriptural account of God taking Abraham outside to see the stars, the Midrash presents our analogue making the point that Abraham should not become afraid of the stars; they do contain the astrological fate for him and Israel. Rather we have three things that ANNUL THE DECREE, note the language, ANNUL, מבטלין the decree. The PIYYUT's author had chosen to change the traditional language; perhaps my father was right and the original notion is partially softened. Obviously I would want to believe that my decree can be totally changed. Perhaps,

by reaching out to others to help them. OUR HOPE IS THAT GOD
WILL RESPOND. But that firm conviction is not a mere illusion.
I know personally, that whatever decree I face, the prognosis is
only a statistic and statistics do not necessarily speak about
any individual cases. I can be one of the survivors--or I can
make a new twist on curve on the graph. I have to look at my
case in its own terms. Hopefully I will be right and hopefully
all of you will also share in adjusting your decrees so that we
may all be inscribed in a book of life and health. כן יהי רצון.

SECOND DAY
ROSH HASHANA 5753
Leon Hoffman, M.D.

Hoffman, Rosh Hashanah 5753

How does a child learn justice and mutuality? How does a child develop from an amoral creature to a socialized human being? The chumash attempts to deal with this question on a broad scale. From Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, and onward. In each cycle, there is a movement forward where humans seem to reach a higher level of social interaction and a covenant is effectuated between a person and God. Inevitably there is some retrogression.

At times it seems as if there is the same kind of progression and retrogression in the depiction of God. God saves Lot from death yet turns his wife into a pillar of salt because of her transgression. Does her punishment fit the crime? Other times God seems arbitrary. He tells Abraham to allow Sarah to cast away Hagar and Ishmael into the desert and then miraculously saves the mother and son in the desert. As we read this are we learning about justice? This was not Hagar's first exile and eventual rescue by God. She had been exiled when she became pregnant and Sarai became jealous. At that time Abram himself allowed the exile to occur. God heard Hagar's affliction (thence the name Ishmael) and told her that she would be fine as long as she submitted to Sarai. We hear the word submit over and over.

Why did God tell Abraham to ignore his anger (the "evil in his eye") when Sarah told him to drive away his son? Is this inhumane action reasonable? What is the explanation for allowing it to occur? Is it just to allow Hagar and Ishmael to be sent out to the desert and possibly die because it is through Isaac that Abraham's seed will be propagated? What is Abraham to think when God eventually tells him to take his son, "your only one, whom you love, Isaac," to the land of Moriah. Abraham did not answer; he submitted meekly. Contrast this response to his reaction when Sarah told him to be rid of Hagar and Ishmael. "[It] was evil in his eyes because of his son." Compare Abraham's relationship to his two sons. How do we know that Abraham loved Isaac? We know that God identifies Isaac as "the son you love." We also know that Abraham made a great feast the day Isaac was weaned. But don't we know many depriving or antisocial people who make elaborate celebrations for their children or give ostentatious donations to disguise their hostility or lack of care. The big celebration is certainly no evidence for Abraham's love of Isaac.

What about Abraham's love of Ishmael? Ishmael was born when the father was still Abram, he was part of Abram's transition from a wanderer to the founder of a nation, really 2 nations. Ishmael joined his father in being circumcised when he was 13. To use the language of the 90's, can't you imagine that there was a great deal of male bonding between the two? No wonder Abraham was very angry at the idea of abandoning his first born.

What about Isaac? God can be viewed as obsessively ruminating promising that Isaac will be born and that the transmission will be through him. Abraham and Sarah do not believe this. It is

clear that God loves Isaac. Isaac is God's progeny. Abraham and Sarah are really only surrogate parents. In my reading it is not at all clear that Abraham loves Isaac.

Let's look at the spoken words in the story of the Akedah. At first Abraham acknowledges his presence when God speaks and then simply acts on God's command. Abraham then tells his servants to wait. In the third conversation, Isaac is puzzled and Abraham simply refers back to God. In the fourth interaction an angel speaks to Abraham to abort the imminent slaughter "since you have not kept back your son, your only one from me." The fifth verbalization is the second intercession by an angel where Abraham is blessed for listening to God. The essence is to submit. Is this the lesson in the story of the Akedah? Is this the lesson that is to be learned in order for us to fulfill the obligations of Rosh Hashanah? In fact when the amidah is repeated and the shofar is heard, during the zichronot, we will recite, "You who remembers all forgotten things, for there is no forgetting before your throne of glory, may you on this day mercifully remember the binding of Isaac in favor of his descendants." What is the relationship between the story of the Akedah and the prayer at this time of the year? Doesn't this sentence imply that God should rescue us from danger that may befall us the way he rescued Isaac from such danger? But who placed Isaac in danger? Was it his father Abraham who seemed to react like an automaton? In fact, traumatized persons may react in an automatic way quite different from their usual mode of action. Is Abraham in a traumatized state?

As far as I see, especially if one thinks about this story from the perspective of other stories, for example, comparing it to the other stories where Abraham is an active partner of God, or more dramatically comparing it to the Prophetic Faith, to use Martin Buber's phrase, the Akedah is very curious indeed.

It doesn't seem at all surprising that Christians took up this story as a prelude and a precursor to the crucifixion and resurrection. I don't know if this theme was prevalent in Israelite culture only to be suppressed and disappear when the theme was appropriated by the Christians. The number of midrashim related to the Akedah are so fanciful and so unrelated to the text that I found them very uninteresting to read, no less to study. Perhaps a more spiritual person could relate to the idea that a God has the power within him to interact with man in such a mysterious, but capricious, manner. I certainly can see how people who are tortured for no other reason than being Jews can come to see their lives as repetitions of both the Abraham who is traumatized and blindly follows a command to kill his son and the Isaac who lets himself be led to slaughter. Unfortunately real life does not and has not had happy endings for so many of our kinsmen.

The Christians developed a neat compromise. On the one hand, Christ died for our sins; however, salvation was not in the present world but in the future world. We Jews do not believe that. We hope for salvation in the present world. Our funerals are not like a funeral mass. A funeral mass is a celebration because the departed soul has gone to join Jesus. How does one answer the child who says, "Why is everyone crying since so and so is going to be next to Jesus now?"

How can we, as late 20th century Jews, relate to the Akedah since it depicts an instance which is contradictory to the centrality of personal responsibility in Judaism? What is the message

conveyed? When I originally planned to do a dvar on Rosh Hashanah, I wanted to talk about the power that is achieved by taking control of what happens to you. Throughout the Bible, in story after story, the Israelites are told that if they follow God's command they will be rewarded and if they sin, they will be punished. Thus, if another nation defeats the Israelites, it is not that that other nation's god defeated the Israelite God; but rather that the one God used the other nation as his instrument of punishment. Therefore, the people gain some control over their fate. However, real life does not work that way. Good is not always accompanied by external rewards and evil is not always accompanied by external punishments. Whatever a nation's or religion's vantage point, whether the belief is in the one God, many gods, an entity called nature, society, or whatever overriding global frame of reference is followed, situations and phenomena occur that cannot be explained by the normative criteria of causality.

The Akedah depicts such an event. So why was this story included by the Biblical redactor. In fact, I wonder if the story is a late interpolation because of its non-relatedness to what precedes it and what follows it. One can remove the 19 verses without losing any continuity. The same phrase which introduces this story, "and it came to pass after these things," introduces the next section.

The theme certainly seems to be that one has to learn to submit to a higher power even when the requests are unreasonable and not understandable. Isn't that how a child's conscience develops? Before a child begins to understand concepts of justice, mutuality, and reciprocity, he or she learns to follow the rules that the parents teach. THERE CAN BE NO OTHER WAY. The child's cognitive apparatus is such that he or she cannot reason. The child HAS to be told. Many of these dicta are unreasonable TO THE child. Why can't I put my toy wire hanger into the electric socket? Why can't I play doctor with that same wire hanger with my brother or sister? There is only one good reason. If I do such things, mommy and daddy will be angry. If I follow what they tell me they will be happy with me and won't leave or punish me. That's why a child learns to inhibit his or her impulses. "If I follow the rules, I will be loved; if I don't, I will be punished."

Isn't the Abraham of the Akedah a more psychologically immature Abraham than the Abraham who argues with God and tries to convince God to show compassion with Sodom and Gemorrah? I don't know if many of you would agree with that. If we look at the spoken words in the text, a clear message is given. Follow my rules and you will be rewarded. The problem with the message relates to the incomprehensibility of the rule from the ADULT'S point of view. By the way, what rules did Hagar and Ishmael break to deserve their banishment? They were not in God's plan the way Isaac was.

How different is the God of the Akedah from the God of the prophets like Amos!! Amos (5:21ff) rebukes the people of Judah and Samaria for their breaking the rules. God says through Amos, "I hate, I reject your festivals, and I will not smell the sacrifices of your assemblies. For if you offer Me burnt-offerings and your meal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fattened cattle I will not regard. Take away from Me the din of your songs, and the music of your lutes I will not hear. And justice shall be revealed like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Although Amos is enraged at the transgressions, the mutuality between God and man is clear. One gets one's just desserts. The only way I can understand the Akedah is to juxtapose it with the themes of personal responsibility. There ARE times in one's life when one must blindly follow with faith and trust: in childhood, in times of stress, disease, disaster. In times of horrifying distress, not of one's doing, can one expect the victim to listen to Amos and blame him or herself for the evil that has befallen him or her? At those times it is psychologically more reassuring to identify with the Akedah, including the hope that an angel's voice will be heard to save.

Two poems by Yehuda Amichai.

The Eve of Rosh Hashanah

The eve of Rosh Hashanah. At the house that's being built,
a man makes a vow: not to do anything wrong in it,
only to love.
Sins that were green last spring
dried out over the summer. Now they're whispering.

So I washed my body and clipped my fingernails,
the last good deed a man can do for himself
while he is still alive.

What is man? In the daytime he untangles into words
what night turns into a heavy coil.
What do we do to one another--
a son to his father, a father to his son?

And between him and death there's nothing
but a wall of words
like a battery of agitated lawyers.

And whoever uses people as handles or as rungs of a ladder
will soon find himself hugging a stick of wood
and holding a severed hand
and wiping his tears
with a potsherd.

God has pity on Kindergarten Children

God has pity on kindergarten children.
He has less pity on school children.
And on grownups he has no pity at all,
he leaves them alone,
and sometimes they must crawl on all fours

in the burning sand
to reach the first-aid station
covered with blood.

But perhaps he will watch over true lovers
and have mercy on them and shelter them
like a tree over the old man
sleeping on a public bench.

Perhaps we too will give them
the last rare coins of compassion
that Mother handed down to us,
so that their happiness will protect us
now and other days.

As the shliach tzibbur will recite during the Hineni:
Let us hope that all afflictions will be turned into joy and gladness, life and peace, for us and for
all Israel. Let us love truth and peace.

Dvar Torah Second Day Rosh Hashana 5756 Bethamie Horowitz

Two weeks ago Sophia saw a folk art picture at a friend's house -- a picture of the Akedah: Isaac as a small boy bound on the altar, Abraham standing over him with the knife held high up in the air. From above the angel reaches down to stop the knife.

What is that story, Mama? (We adults looked at each other, not capable of answering. How *do* you explain the Akedah, even to ourselves, let alone to a child, your own daughter?)

The father is sacrificing (killing) his child? (*No, honey, I would never do that to you!*)
The angel is holding the father back? (*Why was he doing that, Mama?*)

Well, an answer came to me. It was one of the many things I had learned from years of listening to my own father's sermons. It was the kind of answer that kind of works, at least momentarily. "The story is about how God and the Jewish people put an end to child sacrifice." *No one does that anymore, honey.* So Sophia was quieted with that tame explanation, if not really answered. Sacrifice is not a word she even knows. But she went off to play. (I think I am more prepared to answer her when she asks "where do babies come from?" than to explain the Binding of Isaac.)

This whole episode makes me think about parents, children, questions and answers. **It makes me think about what it means to have this story of the Akedah at the center of our liturgy for Rosh haShana. It's so different from other stories we tell ourselves.**

Usually we think of Pesach as the time of questions and answers. The tradition focuses our attention on *telling the story* to our children. We have the children ask Four Questions, and we answer them. The story is dramatic -- we move from slavery to freedom; there are good guys and bad guys, and God is on Our Side.

At Rosh HaShana it's more problematic. Faced with the Akedah we are answerless. Not just for our children, but really, we ourselves don't understand the story either. This story is dramatic, but it is remote in every way, except for the details of language..the conversational feel of "*Avi!, Father!*" "*Hineini b'ni, yes, honey*" That way of speaking is so recognizable to us, in contrast to the inexplicable awfulness about to occur. No parent would be able to do that. In the Akedah we have a father who doesn't behave like fathers we know. And most of all there's a **God** who commands Abraham to do a terrifying thing. This God is really very difficult for us to comprehend. **We can add an additional layer of discomfort, if we think about the story from our own contemporary theological perspective. Then God becomes even more problematic: the very fact that God commands Abraham to do *anything* --God's very presence-- is astonishing.**

In the Akedah, God's presence for Abraham stands in contrast to God in our own lives. In the Akedah, God commands, Abraham hears, Abraham obeys, and God intercedes to redeem Abraham from carrying out the awful deed. In our time, we seem to be left only with a residue of awful deeds, [if today someone feels *commanded*, that person ends up acting with frightening zealotry, like Baruch Goldstein, or Paul Hill (the anti-abortionist)]

So God in the Akedah is a palpable and commanding presence.

A much more benevolent God appears in the Haftorah today. God the loving father:

Ahavat olam ahavticha (I have loved you enduringly);

Hayiti l'yisrael k'av (I am a Father to the people Israel).

Ha-ben yakir li ephraim. (Is not Ephraim my darling child?)

Indeed, God as father, or parent, if you will, fills our liturgy.

Throughout the High Holidays we address God as "Avinu Malkeynu." This is the mantra. We chant it in a single breath, the whole of the congregation together.

What is it we mean when we speak these words, and address God in this way?

Most of the time I am so carried away by the music of this prayer that I don't think about the words, really. And other times I focus on what we're asking of God -- to be merciful upon us and redeem us.

But when I really *consider* the words , I am not so sure what it means for us today to call God "Our Father Our King."

Calling God "Avinu" --*Our Father*, or more generally *Our Parent*-- makes God more accessible, (although for some of us God as Father poses a challenge). After all, we all have parents or had them, and some of us are parents. So we know what Avinu means -- it evokes the realm of our most important relationships. It is an intimate way of calling up to God for compassion. We are small children, and we turn to God the parent/father for help, for comfort.

We have greater trouble with Malkeynu. We have difficulty for two reasons:

1. First, for us today the idea of KING is very *remote* -- it suggests serfs, vassals and so on. We don't have a political structure where we are completely dependent on a king. I suppose when our people lived under the rule of powerful kings, it must have been important to be reminded that the only **real King** was God, and to push harsh political realities aside.

But for us KING has become completely *de-mystified* (thanks in part to the British Royal Family). As a symbol it's broken, it has become an empty metaphor because we don't live with kings. It has no power. It is not part of our experience.

2. Second, "king" can't be easily translated into our experience. If we say "Our Leader, our President.." that doesn't work either. Translating the metaphor to our time and place does not get us anywhere. If anything, it only reinforces the point that a president ain't no king, and a president doesn't inspire the loyalty that a good king might. A president doesn't have that kind of power, while a real King commands and would be obeyed.

Obviously, though, for our tradition, kingship is a powerful and enduring image. In fact a big chunk of Musaf service is about the idea of God's Kingship and God's enthronement.

So what are we to do with this? We have in Avinu Malkeynu some familiar images of God that

are full of grandeur and compassion. But these images can also stop us in our tracks. The images are immovable, and no longer evocative in ways that carry us through the turbulence.

Let's return for a moment to compare Pesach and the God of Pesach with the God of Rosh Hashana. The God of Pesach is an all powerful God who acts in history. A God with a *Yad chazakah and z'roa n'tuya*, a strong hand and an outstretched arm. A God who redeemed us from an arm stronger than our own.

The High Holidays feel altogether different. First, there's no historical event at the heart of Rosh hashana. And the Akedah, the main reading of the day, is enigmatic, with no clear, resounding message.

Moreover, the *purposes* of the day are altogether different. The task of Pesach is to remember and to teach our children to remember, to feel as if each of us were part of the Exodus from Egypt. In contrast, during the High Holidays we are turned inward, addressing ourselves to the *process* of teshuva -- the striving for personal, spiritual and communal rebirth.

Finally, in contrast to the clearly drawn God of the Pesach Exodus, at the High Holidays we address a more *multifaceted* God: A God of creation, God the King, God of revelation, God who remembers the deeds of our ancestors. The God who holds the Book of Life in His hands.

Perhaps from this very array of images of God we can learn something. It is as if our tradition were presenting us with these many aspects of God to tell us, "Here are some ways that we can think about God. Go find out what works."

We were raised with images of God as Our Rock, Our Father, Our King -- hard hewn images that are difficult to move. If we were to "design" an idea of God that would help us in our world today we might take a different approach. We might think of God as being ever-flexible, ever-changing, not so firm and Rock-like. *Adaptable and robust without being rigid.* A God who encompasses the panoply of emotions. A God with a closet full of robes for every occasion. A God of every color in the spectrum, encompassing all smells, all sounds.

In a way, this is what those acrostic piyyutim are about. They portray a God for every human need, described with every letter of the alphabet, but spoken in our collective idiom, the language of our people and our history.

I have always felt very moved by the idea of God being in exile along with the Jewish people. This image of God in exile is a God who is affected by our experience, even if we don't feel God's own impact on us so readily. I used to feel there was a sadness or poignancy in a God who follows his people into exile. But lately I've come to feel that it's somehow liberating to have God be a bit smaller, not lording over us in the same way.

A God in exile is a God who is no longer ever-present. A God who is *not ever-present* requires us to

find our own resources. Such a God gives us room to expand, to fill up some of the space with ourselves.

The whole idea of *teshuvah* is about space. It is a time for us to create space for things to happen which *don't* happen during the rest of the year. We tend to think of Tshuvah as being about personal transformation -- becoming what you want to be in your deepest heart. But the triad of *teshuvah*, *tsedakah* and *tfilah* tells us that there's more work to be done. *Tsedakah* in combination with *teshuvah* reminds us that transformation does not take place in isolation from others. Rather, *tsedakah* reminds us that we need to change ourselves within our *social relations and through our involvements in the world*. And *teshuvah* is also connected to *tefilah*, our prayers, in other words, in how we relate to God. **If we strive to transform ourselves, should we not also be striving to transform our relationship to God?**

For many of us it's hard to connect to God, but we have to find ways into the things which seem most strange to us. So on Rosh Hashana we have the Akedah, which is indeed enigmatic. And then there's Avinu Malkeynu, as well as a host of other images and concepts, each with varying degrees of comfort and accessibility.

At the end of Sh'ma we always chant "Hashem elohechem emet." which Zalman Shachter has translated as "your God is a true God." Meaning, *your God, however you connect, is a authentic*. Zalman's commentary gives us a basis for validating our **own** understandings; it means that *our many ways of seeking of God are real and acceptable, indeed they are necessary*.

When we say Avinu Malkeynu, we say *ki-ayn hanu ma'asim* -- Have mercy on us, although we don't have any deeds for which we deserve credit. Usually we think this refers to the world of human relations. But these *ma'asim*, these deeds, aren't only about our human relations. Really those deeds are transcendent ones, as well.

So, we can think of Avinu Malkeynu as the prayer that asks us to commit ourselves to doing the deeds that we're missing in our lives -- both in relation to other people, and in spiritual terms in relation to God. ***Avinu Malkeynu, Whatever You Are For Us, help us to transform ourselves, our relationships, our communities, our world -- and our connections to You.***

Dvar Torah
Rosh Hashana (first day)
2004 5765
Bethamie Horowitz

Earlier this summer when I received my assignment to give the RH dvar torah, I began a conversation with myself about what to ask. The dvar torah, after all must pose a question. And what would be the right question to ask ourselves today in 2004?

It seems to me that we live in a period of great turmoil. At times the world feels like it's getting worse, going backwards, with ever more upsetting news around us. Even more problematic – there seems to be an ongoing bombardment of pain, suffering and danger. I don't know if this is because the amount of strife in the world is increasing, or we are just more aware of it. Certainly we are more involved in it, like it or not, because we are New Yorkers, Americans and Jews, and each of these identities connects us to the world. We have learned that however much we would like to live our lives peacefully, our place in the world keeps us tied to the world at large. There is no escape. And so we are more attuned to the challenges and there is much to fear.

How are we to deal with our fears?

Today, where do we get the strength to cope with the scariness?

In what way on this Rosh Hashanah can we face these fears and have this day help us move forward in the New Year?

The Rosh Hashanah liturgy itself gives us a number of ways to respond to fear. This morning I want to take a look at these and see how they may or may not speak to us today.

1. Torah's portrayal of Sarah.

Today we read about Sarah laughing joyously upon the birth of Isaac. But this joyous laughter is preceded (earlier in the story, as it appears in Genesis), with a different kind of laugh. When Sarah hears from God's messengers that she is about to have a child, *she laughs to herself*.

That laughter may be a laughter of joy – after all Sarah age 90 and Abraham, over 100, had been childless for a long time.

Or it may be a laughter of incredulity. Who could believe that a woman of her age could become pregnant!

Many of the commentators interpret Sarah's first laughter as a kind of skepticism or derision – as if Sarah did not believe that God could deliver on his promise.

But it's interesting that Nachmanides views Sarah's inward laughter as a reaction to *fear* and surprise. After all, Abraham hadn't told Sarah about God's promise that she is to bear a son. He didn't tell her that the visitors that came to their tent were actually angels. He didn't mention what they said about Isaac's birth (She had to eavesdrop on them to learn that). She simply discovers that she's pregnant, her old belly swelling. But we can imagine Sarah's fright:

Why is my belly growing?

What do you mean that I'm pregnant?!

She's frightened of the unknown; of childbirth and the possibility of death; Perhaps she's frightened of the responsibility.

In other words, *how does Sarah deal with fear?* *She laughs*—a kind of inward sideways laugh, almost a gasp, to herself, nothing she would share in public.

2. Hagar

Hagar's response to fear is signaled by her name, which comes from the root h-g-r meaning "to flee."

Hagar appears in the Torah in two different episodes. The one we read today, and one a few chapters earlier in Genesis, where Sarai gives her maid Hagar to Abram so that "I (Sarai) may have a son through her." When Hagar becomes pregnant, the Torah tells us that Hagar viewed Sarah's "esteem as lowered." This upsets Sarah and she *treats her harshly*. So Hagar runs away. In other words, *Hagar flees, afraid* of Sarai's anger.

Similarly, in today's reading Sarah tells Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham sends them off.

Wandering in the wilderness, with no water, and no hope, Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush and then moves away so she won't see him die. In other words, her way of dealing with fear is to *withdraw and cry in despair*.

In both of these episodes Hagar's response to the upset and scariness is to move away (flee) – both physically and emotionally.

So we have Sarah's private laugh and then Hagar's distancing herself, whether physically or psychologically.

In addition to the biblical narratives we read today, the RH liturgy itself relates to this issue of fear.

3. Z'chut Avot

The idea of *z'chut avot* -- the merit of the ancestors -- is the central image of the *zichronot* section of the *musaf* service. *Zichronot* means "rememberings" and what it refers to is that "God remembers."

Z'chut avot is the belief that God, in reckoning about our fate today, will "remember", that is, God will take into account the incredible faith of our ancestors, and this memory of our ancestors' faith will compensate for our own lack of merit.

The Midrash describes the origin of the concept.
In a moment of post-game analysis between Abraham and God after the Akedah, Abraham says,

"I didn't protest when you commanded me to sacrifice my son, through whom all of Your promises to me were to have been fulfilled. Thus, because of that, You will say nothing in the face of the broken promises of future generations. My willingness to obey You will be a credit to my descendants."

So what we have here is a kind of "Original Virtue," the opposite of Original Sin! (This is S. Levy's idea from 1905)

Fearing that our merits alone will be too meager to redeem us, the High Holiday liturgy asks God to take into account of the merits of our ancestors, so we end up with a better credit rating.

Laughter, Fleeing, remembering the our ancestors' abiding faith..

Finally,

4. **The *n'tana tokef* prayer** we chant later this morning in the Musaf service embodies the basic scariness and uncertainty at the heart of the liturgy:

It asks our basic existential questions:

Who shall live and who shall die?
Who shall perish by fire, who by water, who by hunger, who by
earthquake, by plague, or illness?
Who shall be tormented, who shall wander?
Who shall be poor, who shall be humbled?

This is scary stuff.

The liturgy then provides a response: *U'Tshuvah u' Tfilah and u'Tsedaka...*

In the face of all of the uncertainty about what the future holds (whether it is in God's hands or not), our liturgy tells us that *Repentance, Prayer and Charity or Good Deeds* can soften the severity of the decree.

So we have four different responses to fear.

1. Sarah's laughter
2. Hagar's running away and crying
3. Z'chut avot: Looking to the merits of our ancestors – the cultural store of heroic actions that can inspire us.
4. Repentance, Prayer and Charity

Do any of these strategies speak to us today?

1. The idea of *laughing like Sarah* is no doubt a good thing –

[Gail Dorph has a poster that says “She who laughs, lasts.”]

Yet although laughter can be comforting, or a means of rolling with the punches, there are many times that it doesn’t seem adequate in the face of the *n’tana tokef*, in our terrorized world.

In Sarah’s case, the inward skeptical laugh kept her separate from the rest of the world –she was not able to share her feelings with anyone else.

2. Like *Hagar*, many of us, I suspect, are overcome at times with a *desire to flee*, to run away in the woods some place or simply to weep.

We would like to run away from it all, if that were possible, or put it all in God’s hands and collapse into despair.

[Perhaps it is this impulse to run away that explains the rise of fundamentalism: feeling so overwhelmed by the world and powerless in the face of it that people fall into fundamentalism to give them a sense of how to cope. You move into universe where God is seen as telling you what to do.]

Running away like Hagar meant that she lost herself. She withdrew so completely that she couldn’t even comfort her own child!

3. The two responses provided by the Machzor liturgy present a different kind of problem, because the prayers posit a world or a consciousness where God is in charge, The prayers invoke an Omnipotent King who judges us. These prayers call to God to hear us and save us, whether because of our merit or that of our ancestors, our anguish, or simply God’s mercy.

Indeed in all of these examples *God* solves the problems.

God is portrayed as hearing the anguish and responding.

God remembers Sarah,

God hears Ishmael's cries and speaks to Hagar,

God acts as judge in reckoning our merit against the merit of our ancestors,

God judges the fate of each of us.

And when the liturgy tells us that *t'shuvah*, *tfilah* and *tzedakah* (repentance, prayer and charity) may soften the severity of the outcome, we can bring many examples of bad things happening to people despite the state of their souls and the good deeds they have done.

For many of us, certainly since the Holocaust, and perhaps even before it, that way of thinking either does not work, or it does not work well enough.

So where does this leave us?

Is there another possibility?

I think that we can find an alternative model, one that may be more suitable for our time.

I found some theological help from Rabbi Richard Hirsch:

He said, "The question of the High Holy Days is not why things happen but rather how will we respond to what happens..."

I have been speaking about fear, and I believe that "repentance, prayer and charity can mitigate the severity of the bad things that happen in life by giving us a place in which to feel supported, cared for and valued."

These are actions that help support us individually and in our networks of relationships. This is the stuff of our own community.

But I want to go one step further.

In the Haftorah we read about Hannah and her prayers.

Hannah is doubly chastised – first by the Elkanah's other wife Penina who mocks Hannah for being childless. And second by the priest Eli who sees her mumbling and believes she is drunk.

She prays to God and makes a deal: If God grants her a son she vows to dedicate that son to God.

The prayer Hannah offers at the end of the haftorah can be read on two levels simultaneously.

First, Hannah speaks about the birth of her child Samuel and she thanks God for hearing her prayer and granting her a son: "The barren woman has borne seven children..."

At the same time, in the second half of the prayer Hannah prays with a broader set of considerations beyond herself. She prays about the needs of the Jewish people: "He shall give strength to His king and shall raise up the horn of His anointed one."

This prayer is not only for a child, but also, according to the rabbis, it's a prayer for a child who will eventually anoint two Kings - Shaul and David.

So Samuel's birth makes Hannah into the "mother of children," but Hannah also wants Samuel to make Israel into the nation saved by God.

What is striking to me about the story of Hannah is how much Hannah is the active one in the story.

Both Elkanah and Eli defer to her.

And God -- despite all of the praise of God in Hannah's prayer, God does not appear as a character in the story of Hannah.

Hannah *herself* is the one who vows to dedicate her future child for the good of the nation. She allowed herself to think about not only what she was lacking and what she needed, but she thought about what Israel needed at that time, and in her own way, she acted. She articulates both her personal needs and desires and the national/collective needs of the world around her.

In our own era, where God is not so evident, we can learn something from Hannah as individuals, as members of a shul and as American Jews.

Hannah's story can give us guidance in two ways.

First, we can learn something from the way Hannah drew on her inner voice to figure out how to face the difficulties in her life. She turned inward without self-doubt and without fleeing psychologically.

Second we can learn something from the scope of Hannah's prayers. While she prayed for herself, she was concerned about the needs of the society in which she lived.

In the coming year I hope that we as a Jewish community will develop a strong assured voice like Hannah's when we face the difficult issues of our day.

I hope that, like Hannah, we think not only about our own fears and concerns as Jews, but also our concerns for the world we live in.

This reminds me of an experience we just had in California this summer—where we saw the redwoods for the first time. I was over-powered by the majesty of forest, and it was all the more amazing because of the special features of the redwoods.

Their bark is very moist, and resistant to fires. And as you know there are often fires in California in the later summer. The redwoods are able to grow in two ways – seed, and burl – a knot of wood in the tree itself. If a tree gets damaged, the burl sprouts a new growth. And so you see redwoods growing in clusters, their trunks joined together where the new tree has grown from the burl of the old.

We came upon a stand of redwoods in a circle, growing tall around a burned out stump of an old tree. It was an amazing image of rejuvenation and rebirth. Making something new and alive out of the burnt and destroyed.

The job of the Jewish people is not to dwell in our own anguish and persecution. Our own fears are part of our historical heritage, but this should not become *an hysterical heritage*. We must use our past experiences to propel us forward. We should work hard to prevent a history of Jewish oppression and worry about oppression to overwhelm us from acting.

Like the redwoods which turn their own scars into new birth for the future, and like Hannah who turned her own personal story into a prayer for the world beyond herself, may we all—in this new year—find the meeting place for the concerns we have about our inner world with the larger matters of the world around us.

And as for fear, let us recall what it says in the Psalm we say every day from the beginning of Elul through the end of Sukkot: *Chazak v'yametz libecha v'kavei el Adonai. Be strong and of good courage. And focus yourself on God.*

Shana tova.

It is said that the Rabbis instituted the reading of Kohelet on Sukkot to help dispel the complacency that might develop after the people had, quite literally, been given a new lease on life after Yom Kippur and had brought in a bountiful harvest, which ensured survival through the winter. At a time when the heart might turn haughty, we are to read Kohelet who considers the unexamined life not worth living and who, by my count, refers to death forty times. So it may be that by introducing Kohelet a little early our approach to the High Holydays might be facilitated, at a time when we are examining our lives and asking to be inscribed in the Book of Life.

In Kohelet we encounter a person of discernment in the grip of an existential crisis endured over a prolonged period characterized by a sense of dread, weariness and futility. At the outset (1:13) Kohelet states: "And I applied my heart to search and explore with wisdom, concerning all that happens beneath the heavens; it is an evil thing that G-d has given to humankind to be afflicted with." What is "it?" What is this "evil thing?" This statement seems to refer to what "wisdom" enables us to know. The central explication comes in the remarkable 3:11 where we read: "G-d has made everything beautiful in its time; even a sense of [ha-olam], G-d has set in their heart, yet man cannot discover the work that G-d has done from the beginning to the end." The meaning of this striking but puzzling statement rests on the translation of "ha-olam." Metsudah interprets this as "external world," Ginsberg as "eternity," Art Scroll as "enigma," and Gordis as "world," but with considerable uncertainty. The overall sense is that we have been given a painful dual awareness of being heir to physicality, corporality and mortality, as well as of wonder, eternity and divinity. Tanhuma Kedoshim attempts to reconcile these elements by saying: "The word ha-'olam, 'world,' spelled here defectively without the letter vav, is to be read he-elim, 'caused to be hidden.' Had not the Holy One hidden the day of death from the heart of man, no one would build a house or plant a vineyard..."

The prospect of death haunts Kohelet: "Since the fate of the fool will also be my fate, why do I seek to become wiser? (Eccl. 2:15) "And so I hated life..." (Eccl. 2:17) he concludes at an early point in his struggles. He presents line after line of deep insights into human nature that have become proverbial, yet repeatedly he is undone by the feeling of the inescapable futility of human endeavor in the face of inevitable death. Kohelet observes: "Better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of mirth, for that is the end of all men; and the living should take it to heart." (Eccl.7:2) We are reminded of his serious examination of life at this season when we realize that it is on the basis of this statement that we tap the left side of the chest during the Viddui. While Kohelet ponders issues of injustice, vanity and theodicy, he returns to the inescapable: [HL] "That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all. Not only that, but men's hearts are full of sadness, and their minds of madness, while they live; and then-to the dead!" (Eccl. 9:3)

Just how sad and just how mad humans can become at the prospect of death can be gleaned from a part of the most terrifying poem I know, Philip Larkin's "Aubade"-a song evoking daybreak:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.

Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
--The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

...
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

...
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Czeslaw Milosz attacked Larkin for this poem, saying it was nihilistic and abandoned all hope, all consideration of transcendence. Harold Bloom, the literary critic of vast erudition, wrote: "I find that my own medical ordeals, life-threatening just a year ago, have given a finer edge to rereading Kohelet." (p.23) This led to his writing *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* in which he reviewed all of the major Western sources for guidance and wisdom. And so, seeking guidance and wisdom regarding Kohelet's plaint, I read: "... growing old and ill teaches me that being matters more than knowing." (p.97) While this may represent a useful insight for the overly intellectual, it only increases the gulf between being and non-being.

How can we overcome this dread of death which can undermine life? Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, who knew for years he was dying of tuberculosis, taught: "The whole world is full of strife, every country and every city and every house. But he who accepts in his heart the reality that a man dies every day, for every day he must deliver to death a piece of himself, how shall he still ... pass his days in strife?" Captain Hook never attained this wisdom. He had already lost a piece of himself, his hand, to the crocodile whose approach he dreaded even when safe on board ship because, as you will recall, the crocodile had swallowed a clock. The 'tick-tock' of that clock reminded Hook that one day the alarm would sound and he would have to surrender up the rest of himself.

When "The L-rd said to Moses: 'The time is drawing near for you to die'" (Deut. 31:14,) Moses climbs Mount Nebo knowing he will die there. "Never did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses..." who was told the day of his death. The book of Devarim consists of a series of farewell addresses from a leader made desperate by the fear that with his death his beloved people Israel would go astray and betray his legacy. In Devarim, Moshe is an old man who relentlessly reviews, revises and relives the past, introduces new mitzvot at a furious pace and threatens his children with the blessings and the curses so as to compel compliance.

There is an extensive Midrashic literature on Moshe Rabbenu engaging in all sorts of negotiations in order to postpone or avoid death. In the most compelling story from Mishlei Rabbah, Moshe argues that in so far as his death is necessary to make way for Joshua's

ascendancy, he would be happy to live and serve as Joshua's disciple. G-d allows Moshe to experiment with this arrangement. As Moshe sees the Divine cloud consult with Joshua he cries out: "Rather a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy" – as in the Viddui: "For the sin we committed before Thee by envy." Moshe turns from fear of death to the more useful consideration of fear of a life misspent, however long. Extending life in a state that would make Moshe unrecognizable to himself is not a life superior to death. So while "being is better than knowing," simply being is not enough.

We are all familiar with the Midrash on Exodus 19:17: "Moses brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain" in which "bottom" is translated as "under." R. Avdimi bar Hama said; "The verse implies that the Holy One overturned the mountain upon them, like an inverted cask, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, your grave will be right here." This interpretation always seemed troubling because a fundamental principle of Judaism is that "all is determined by heaven, yet freewill is given." You can lead the Israelites to water but you can't make them drink.

Agnon in *Present At Sinai*, the Shavuot equivalent of his High Holydays volume *Days Of Awe*, prefers this Midrash from Otzar HaKavod: "Thus they taught in regard to this passage that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the rest of creation, saying, 'If Israel accepts the Torah, it will be well, but if not, I shall cause you to revert to chaos.'" "Ponder that," says Agnon. Pondering reveals that what is being said here is that if we were to reject the Law, the world would serve no purpose. Know that in this passage "chaos" can be translated as "water." That is, without the Law the world would revert to unformed water, as at the beginning of creation. That is, without Torah, our lives would inevitably be reduced to being "...solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short...." Water is also a traditional metaphor for Torah. It is our choice as to whether we sate ourselves on the waters of chaos or the water of Torah.

During the recent tragic events occurring in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when New Orleans was flooded, we read stories of people, clearly murdered by bludgeoning, left to rot without burial or justice. A New Orleans officer commented: "This would be a good time to kill someone." There was a frontpage article in the Times entitled "Storm Leaves Legal System A Shambles." (9/9/05) There were no enforcers, no records, no courts, no judges but there were plenty of snipers shooting at rescue helicopters and medical personnel. The boys in *Lord of the Flies* had been returned to a state of nature without law. They are saved from committing murder at the end only because the naval captain appears and restores order just as the public clamored for the Federal government to restore order in the Gulf Coast after Katrina. These ten days entreat us to restore order to our one and only life after the passage of yet another year and the Viddui leads us through a review of the year, failure by failure.

We often forget that when the Israelites traveled through bamidbar for forty years they carried not one, but two arks with them. They carried the ark of the Law and they carried the ark containing Joseph's bones. When Joseph died, rather than arranging to have himself buried in Canaan as he had his father Jacob, he consigned his bones to the Israelites as a pledge and a covenant: "So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When G-d has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'" At the time of the Exodus, as the people gathered their belongings, Moshe, relying on the communal memory that was Serach, Asher's daughter, redeemed the pledge to the dead one who had stood by them in death, located Joseph's bones and carried them out of Egypt. (Ex. 13:19) Several sources offer the following: "During all the years that Israel was in the wilderness, the ark-like coffin of Joseph and the Ark of the Presence moved side by side. When passersby asked, 'What is the significance of these two arks?' they

were told, ‘This one is the coffin of a mortal, and that one is the Ark of the Presence.’ How remarkable that would have been; to see respectful and instructive memory as a comfort in the face of death; to see the acceptance of the fact of death carried alongside the Tree of Life that had guided that life. As Rilke put it: “But suppose the endlessly dead were to make in us some emblem...”

However, aggadah aside, the ark with Joseph’s bones is never mentioned in any of the actual Torah readings of Israel’s wanderings. Human nature being what it is, might it not be that with the passage of time the ark with Joseph’s bones fell farther and farther behind the Ark of the Law until finally it was immured in some wagon at the rear as the Israelites became afraid of the daily representative of death in their midst; a totem of all the plagues and slaughter they were to endure? But, more particularly, is it not true that convicts serving a life sentence without prospect of parole are the most desperate and dangerous of prisoners? To know, as the Israelites did after the tragic episode of the spies, that there would be no exit from the desert, no hope of reprieve until their bones dropped, might have made for a degree of desperation. Do we not find something of their lot in ours? This penitential season, and Kohelet, try to deal with the meanwhile; the wise spending, as opposed to the desperate squandering, of a life.

In the Yizkor service we will say: “Teach us to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” Who can bear to know the limit of their days? But who can judge clearly how to spend those days without awareness of their finitude? “Death is the mother of beauty” (W.S.) and also the precursor of an attentive life. The Reform machzor observes that “Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.” Sadly, we are not like Avraham Avinu who, in today’s Torah reading, could see the place G-d had chosen afar off and who could see the ram behind him. Sadly, we are more like Hagar of yesterday’s Torah reading, who thrust her child away so as not to see expected suffering and death, forgetful of the promise that had been made her, and who could not see a spring of water that had always been right before her.

Sometimes, we are abruptly brought back to an awareness of our task by the unlikelyst of encounters. I would guess that many of you have been in the main Harrod’s of London in Knightsbridge. If so, you will surely recall the magnificent central Egyptian escalator which flows from floor to floor displaying ornate ancient Egyptian motif reliefs, statuary and paintings. On the basement level, in the corner a little apart from the escalator, is a small plaque with a few lines of Shelley’s *Ozymandias* displayed: “Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” The architect seemed to have had an ironic understanding of the smallness of human endeavors and I appreciated hearing a shofar amidst the hubbub of shopping.

When I was a young adolescent I used to read biographies of Teddy Roosevelt with great admiration and a sense of inspiration. Recently, when I read David McCullough’s *Mornings on Horseback*, I became aware of experiencing envy and a sense of frustration. And so I was forced to acknowledge how much time had passed from the effortless daydreams of my youth until now and how little had been accomplished. When Rabbi Heschel admonished us to live our lives as if they were works of art, he knew they were much more so and much more importantly so than any piece of architecture or literature. Maybe that is what Dylan meant by: “He not busy being born is busy dying.”

On Yom Kippur we may dread the disappearance of the day just as we may fear the dissolution of being, yet we walk about that day and each day unmindful, adrift, insufficiently conscious of our lives. The narrator of A.L. Kennedy’s “Night Geometry” says: “There is only one thing I want more than proof that I existed and that’s some proof, while I’m here, that I exist.”

On page 257 of the Bokser machzor, just before Kol Nidre, we find the statement from Mishnah Yoma: “For transgressions between humans and G-d, Yom Kippur may effect atonement, but for transgressions between humans and their neighbors, Yom Kippur cannot effect atonement unless the person who committed the offense will seek pardon from the neighbor.” At the bottom of the page, in small print, we are advised: “In the spirit of this admonition, members of the congregation may now speak to one another asking and offering forgiveness.” Actually, this was supposed to be our job all year, our career in Elul, and should be our calling during the Ten Days of Repentance now upon us. An example has been set us. In Devarim Rabbah we learn that just before Moshe did depart this world: “...he said to Israel, ‘Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me.’ They replied, ‘Our master, you are forgiven.’ In their turn they said to him, ‘Moses our teacher, we troubled you even more, we made your burden so heavy. Please forgive us.’ Moses replied, ‘You are forgiven.’”

We ask to be forgiven for failings large and small. Dina’s mother, Rose, was an Auschwitz survivor, a highly educated woman, who mended garments in a mental institution in Israel and made piece-work collars in this country in order to provide for Dina. Rose regretted two things she often mentioned for which she never forgave herself: not giving her first daughter, Vera, to the farm couple who would have taken her in rather than having Vera accompany her on the Auschwitz transport because she could not bear to be separated from her; and, after the war, not having given an old Christian man who chopped wood for her one frigid night just before Christmas more of a gift than the few apples she had handed him, in addition to his wages. For Rose, Vera and the apples constituted the pole stars of regret. It might possibly be that there is someone in this room who harbors even a greater failing than that of the apples.

Teshuva for a specific sin can sometimes take an entire life to address because, as Israel Salanter said: “It is easier to become expert in the entire Talmud than it is to correct a single stubborn character trait.” However, sometimes, complete teshuva can be achieved in a moment of full clarity. In this regard, Rabbi Scherman wrote of II Samuel (12:1) after King David had sinned with Batsheva. The prophet Nathan excoriated King David after which there is a blank space preserved in the text. David then replied with just two words “hartati ladonoy” (I have sinned against G-d) and he was immediately forgiven. The Vilna Gaon explains that in that tiny space is contained a titanic inner struggle. He notes that the Talmud offers potentially mitigating justifications for David’s behavior, which he chose not to plead. Within that space, the Gaon felt that David demonstrated the elements of true repentance: acknowledgement of a sin; the experience of heart-felt regret; and the resolution not to repeat the act culminating in a verbal confession. The viddui is merely a device, a comprehensive list of sins, that remain dead on the page unless animated by regret. The liturgy knows us so well that the viddui even contains a confession of insincere confession!

Some people think the proof text for ten people constituting a minyan is derived from Abraham’s negotiating G-d down to requiring only ten righteous people to be found in Sodom (Gen. 18:32). Actually, the number is derived from G-d’s use of the term “kahal” representing “community” in referring to the ten spies who presented a fearful, dishonest report causing G-d to say, “How much longer shall that wicked community keep muttering against Me?” (Num. 14:27) I find it tremendously encouraging that our tradition bases the definition of a prayer collective on sinners and not righteous. Could you imagine having to wait for a consensus that ten righteous have arrived for minyan! The appearance of sinners you can count on.

When Jacob stood before Pharaoh, already knowing Joseph was alive, in answer to the simple question “How many are the years of your life?” Jacob replied: “The years of my sojourn on earth are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life-spans of my fathers...” (Gen. 47:9) Yet, on his deathbed, seventeen years later Jacob was enabled to begin his blessing of Joseph saying: “May G-d in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the G-d who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day-the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm-bless the lads.” (Gen. 48:15) Though facing imminent death, Jacob was still able to give voice to the way he had revisioned his life over time so that he perceived death differently.

Rilke, in the first line of his first Duino Elegy, wrote, “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?” But in the first line of his Tenth, and final, Elegy he wrote: “Someday, at the end of the nightmare of knowing, may I emerge singing praise and jubilation to assenting angels.”

There are only two ways we can emerge intact from the “nightmare of knowing” both mortality and eternity; either by denial of death or by commitment to the creative distraction of crafting a useful and loving life. Happiness can never be a goal, only a by-product.

In ancient Israel, shofar blasts were military field signals. The tekiah gedolah we all look forward to hearing represented an “all clear,” but the truah meant “imminent danger.” In the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is never referred to as such, but rather is called Yom Truah and Yom Zicharon Truah. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are obliged to be willing to see how far we have fallen short and what we are prepared to do about it.

Vaclav Havel once wrote that: “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, no matter how it turns out.” Twist and turn as we may, there is no, and cannot be any, resolution of the existential dilemmas of what it is to be a human being. The name of G-d is inscribed in our hearts, but we cannot read it; eternity resides in our minds but we cannot know it; we are the crowns of creation but we do not act it. I hope I and my family will be granted another year; I hope I shall spend that year with all of you; and I hope that at the end it will all make sense.

Howard L. Berkowitz
Rosh Hashanah II
October 5, 2005

Rosh Hashannah, Second Day, 5768

L'shana tovah—or, as they say in Chicago, gut yontif, gut yahr.

We have reached the moment in our davvening when we're between two big outpourings of sound. Just behind us, if we use a little imagination, we can hear the echoes of the Torah being chanted—including the story of the ram sacrificed by Abraham. Just ahead of us is the shofar service, when the cries of that sacrificed ram, you might think, were ringing out on all sides—or, maybe, that the bleatings of a terrified animal were being transformed into trumpet blasts. The effect, of course, would be especially moving if one service immediately followed another. It would be as if the imagined sound of events long ago had suddenly become a presence among us.

But according to tradition, somebody has to get up now and spoil the effect by talking. Today, by invitation of the High Holiday Committee, I am that spoiler.

My goal, therefore, is to do as little harm as possible. And so I propose to talk to you for a while about silence.

To be precise, three days' silence: By common consent, this is the most striking feature of the Torah portion we read today. Everyone remarks on it. The overall narrative of the Akedah is utterly terse and unadorned—it tells the story in about 285 words, from the initial command to the final blessing—and within those 285 words, only a handful represent human utterance. Father and son go together, across a landscape that is not described, toward a place that has not yet been shown to them, and they say nothing to one another until the third day.

This is the journey that the great literary critic Erich Auerbach has compared to “a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process...which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead...”

We may judge the depth of this silence by the way people rush to fill it. In ancient times the rabbis, in their midrashim, made up for Abraham’s wordlessness by imagining the weeping and prayers of Sarah. In the 19th century, Kierkegaard thought his way into this desert of uncertainty, this blank duration, and made it bring forth Christian faith. And here is how the gap is expressed, and implicitly filled, in a well-known modern interpretation:

God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son.”
Abe said, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on.”
God said, “No.” Abe said, “What?”
God said, “You do what you want, Abe, but
The next time you see me comin’, you better run.”
[Two three four/One two three four/One two three four/One two three four]
Abe said, “Where do you want this killin’ done?”

There we have the Bob Dylan version. He builds the three days’ journey into a measured gap in the song. But as all music students are told, a rest is not a silence. In this case, we know exactly what fills the time. Abraham is calculating his main chance.

Now, I’ve always laughed at “Highway 61 Revisited.” But I also feel that Dylan (or Reb Zimmerman, if you prefer) wrote a genuine midrash—genuine because it is true to our time, much as the famously strange midrashim from the era of the Crusades were true to their time, when they had Isaac actually die on the mountain. What makes Dylan’s midrash so modern, I think, is that there is no tip-off at the beginning that God is posing a test, no sense that at the end there will be a rescue and a blessing. There is, simply and

solely, a demand issued by absolute power, followed by the heartless acquiescence of the powerless.

How far removed is this 20th century sensibility from traditional Jewish readings? Let's go back a thousand years and get a sample of Rashi. Here is what he writes in his commentary on the Akedah narrative about the phrase "and they went together": "Abraham, who was aware that he was going to slay his son, walked along with the same willingness and joy as Isaac, who had no idea of the matter." Let me repeat that: "willingness and joy." A thousand years ago, it was credible to Rashi and his students that Abraham would hurry to serve God with "willingness and joy" even at the expense of his son's life.

Now, Rashi may have expected us to emulate Abraham, but I'm sure he didn't think we could equal him. It's understood that Abraham was far greater than we are, and could pass a far greater test. But, even so, can I imagine anything in myself remotely like the response that Rashi assigns to Abraham? I confess to you, here in public, that I am closer to the Abraham of Bob Dylan. Given this command, I cannot imagine experiencing the slightest joy or willingness.

This is how I measure the distance between Rashi's era and my own, between his faith in God and my doubt. And this is the distance that I somehow have to travel today, if I'm going to get from the Torah reading to the shofar service—from thinking about the cries of a slaughtered animal, to feeling uplifted by the call of a ram's horn. Maybe it's different for you. Maybe you're blessed with a firm intuition of a caring and forgiving God, a God who is not too far away, and that feeling carries you through the davvening. Unfortunately, that's something I don't usually have. And perhaps I can find this lack

even in the story of the Akedah. If you take seriously the distinction between God and the messengers from heaven, then the words that rescue Isaac and that convey the blessing are spoken by an angel. Only the command to sacrifice Isaac is spoken by God—and this turns out to be the last thing God ever says to Abraham. The gradual withdrawal of God from our world seems to begin here. By now, I'd say the process is pretty much complete.

So, even though the actual time between the Torah reading and the shofar service is only a few minutes, it might as well be a thousand years for me. How am I going to cross this enormous distance, which has its own profound silence?

I have found that three things help: study, memory, and silence itself.

Let me start with study, because we all work from the same materials, and so this is the process that's easiest to share. The material that helped me the most in my study this time was one of those midrashim that suggest Abraham maybe wasn't so joyful and willing. According to the rabbis, when he received the command to offer Isaac, he asked God, "Am I fit to perform a sacrifice? Am I a priest?"

Wonderfully anachronistic. But this text reminded me that there really will be only one time when a non-priest will be authorized to sacrifice an animal and put it to the fire—on Passover. Here and now, in the Akedah, the offspring is rescued from death, and the head of the household slaughters a ram. Later, on Passover, the head of each household will slaughter a lamb, and his offspring will be rescued from death. The continuity is apparent: from a single father and son to an entire nation of parents and their children, who survive and so get to hear the shofar at Sinai. The difference in the two cases, of course, is that the Paschal sacrifice is the lamb we would normally associate

with youth. In the Akedah, where we're so much closer to the source of power, the animal is a ram, full-grown and strong. You don't imagine it as having strayed from a managed flock. It's a wild ram; and you can picture how it struggles against whatever has caught it. The text says only that it's been trapped in the branches of a thicket. The silence in the text says it's been caught by divine will.

Whether I believe in divine will is irrelevant. I have the text—and study of it leads me to recognize a little better its uncanny, double mood. The sacrifice of the ram is presented as being entirely coincidental. And yet, though the narrative is silent on this matter, the sacrifice of the ram seems to be inescapably right, as if it had been destined to lead to those liberating sacrifices in Egypt.

By studying, I uncover a certain feeling in these words: the feeling of living in a world of accident and contingency, where things nevertheless sometimes seem to work out as if by plan. With that, I'm a little closer to where I need to go.

My second resource, memory, is more difficult to share. But let me try, in the hope that you, too, have something like this to draw on.

On a night when I was three years old, I stood in the kitchen of a little apartment building on the West Side of Chicago as my mother showed me the special challah we were going to eat. She said it was round because the world is round, and the world was created on this night. Then she took me onto the back stair, overlooking the alley, and had me look up at the stars, so I would see this round world that God had created.

Now, we speak of children having a natural sense of wonder; but three-year-olds are often more realistic than grown-ups. Was the night sky really round? Not that I could see. Did the stars have something to do with challah? I couldn't say they did. So, at the

time, I received this folk Judaism with mere puzzlement. It was only later, in memory, that a mysterious and awe-inspiring sight became merged with something that was close at hand and nourishing, and that both were bound up with my recollection of a parent's love. For me, this is where all Rosh Hashannahs begin. But they didn't begin that way when I was three. They begin that way now, when I remember. And with that realization of the power of memory, a power I have now, I'm a little closer again to where I need to go.

Finally, there's silence. Am I about to recommend meditation to you? God forbid. I'm a full-blooded Litvak. I haven't an ounce of spirituality. But I know that all of us are apt to hurry over the spaces of uncertainty in our lives. We rush through, and fill them with whatever noise we bring along. Sometimes, though, when you need to get across, it helps to stop, and acknowledge the distance that stretches before you, and let it be empty for a moment. Let it be silent, so you don't hear even your doubts.

We all know that silence can be frightening. But it can also be expectant. That "holding of the breath," as Erich Auerbach called it, prepares for at least the possibility of something great to follow. Which is to say, it's possible to go from the silence of doubt to the silence of anticipation.

So this is how I suggest we might move forward, as we go on to the shofar service and musaf. If we aren't sure of the kingship of God, we may still experience the majesty of the text. If we can't count on God's remembering us, we may still awaken the power of our own memories. And if we aren't yet ready to hear the sound of the shofar, we may at least pause for a moment, and be quiet, and listen.

Then, when the call comes, I hope we'll be able to go forward together, as Abraham was said to: with willingness and joy.

L'shana tovah.

Dvar Torah Rosh Hashanah, day 2, September 26, 2014

Once again Isaac will be bound and we will be spellbound, some with awe and some with repulsion. Perhaps in a Bronze-age world where Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia for fair winds to Troy and Achilles sacrificed 12 young men for his friend Patroclus, a message against human sacrifice was needed. That can't be the message for us today. When the Rabbis selected these readings for RH in the Tosefta and in the Bavli, a screed against child sacrifice could not be what they were offering for all time, and the later emphasis on martyrdom was not to develop for a millennium. I would not want the high drama of the Akedah to distract us from three completely unique features of the Torah readings for RH which will serve us still.

Rosh Hashanah is the only multi-day yontif for which the Torah readings are perfectly sequential. That is, the first word of the reading for the second day follows the last word read on the first day, exactly as found in parsha Vayayra. It cannot be that when the Rosh Hashanah observance was continued for a second day, the Rabbis decided to simply extend the reading for convenience yet did this for no other holiday. In fact, the two days of readings represent a perfect laying out of contrasts in parallel. Hagar is thrust out unwillingly; Abraham readily leaves at God's bidding, saddling his own donkey. Hagar gets lost in the wilderness; Abraham can see his destination from afar. Hagar abandons her child under a distant bush, while the first use of the word "love" in the Torah is used to describe Abraham's feelings for Isaac. Hagar forgets an earlier oracle in which she is assured Ishmael will live; Abraham remembers an earlier oracle in which he is assured Isaac will live. An angel of the Lord hears the cries of Ishmael and not those of Hagar. An angel of the Lord responds to Abraham's predicament and not Isaac's. Hagar does not respond to the Heavenly messenger at all. Abraham proclaims "Hineni!" to the angel. God has to open Hagar's eyes so she can see a well right in front of her. Abraham raises his own eyes and sees a ram far off. God begins to address Hagar with "What troubles you..." which in Torah always implies a reproach. Abraham is praised by God. Hagar is silent as to whether she has learned anything; Abraham speaks of gaining "vision.

We have sometimes heard in the past that Hagar's presentation as a poor, failing creature has to do with her being a woman, a person of color, an Egyptian, a slave. No! We are all Hagar, God help us, we are all Hagar! Did you think you were Abraham! On Rosh Hashanah, on any day, I cannot even imagine aspiring to be Abraham. But on this day especially I can hope to be a better Hagar.

The second unique feature of this Torah reading has to do with the word "hineni." Hineni is used 178 times in all of Tanach. Abraham uses this word three times in the short space of today's Torah reading and Abraham is the only person in all of Tanach who declares "Hineni" to God and to a human. The word 'poh is a statement about geographical proximity; while 'hineni' is a declaration of absolute presence. Abraham announces to God, his son and the angel

of the Lord that he is fully emotionally, cognitively and existentially present for each, while being completely true to his unfathomable self. Of whom else can this ever be said? It is for this reason, I believe, Kierkegaard wrote “I think myself into the hero, but into Abraham I cannot think myself.” For me, one who has never been fully present for anyone or anything or any occasion, most especially these Yomim Noraim, this is an amazement.

I should add that there is a person outside of Tanach who says “Hineni” to God and to humans and that is every baal tefilah who takes up the dread obligation to begin Rosh Hashanah musaf with “Hin’n’ni.” But, if you read the latter part of this invocation carefully, you will see this is not Abraham’s Hineni but one that Hagar might utter: Accept my prayer as if it was uttered by one worthy of this task, as if I was a person of good repute, as if I was pleasant of voice, as if I was beloved by my fellow congregants.

The third unique feature of this Torah reading is easily missed because it does not appear in the translation. At the beginning, in Genesis 22:2 God says “‘Kach nah’-Please take your son...and offer him...” Abraham is the only person in all of Tanach of whom God asks “please.” This is strictly a non-coerced act of free will on Abraham’s part which passeth our understanding. It is striking that there is no word for “obey” in classical Hebrew and in Devarim we read of God saying “May they always be of such mind...” and “What does God ask of you...” and “Choose life.” This is the closest God will come to saying to us “Please, take today seriously” and “Please, take your life seriously.”

The Rabbis, by dividing up a regular parsha in a unique way on a unique day, were trying to enable us to see afresh the potential for viddui and teshuvah. Like Civil War re-enactors, we have become High Holy Day re-enactors, repeating this year what we did last year and do every year. Perhaps, with some effort, we could make the saying of “Hineni” less of a lie this year and then, maybe, we could hear a faint echo of the final use of “Hineni” in all of Tanach, where God says “Here I am.”

Howard L. Berkowitz

LAUGHTER, CRYING, SILENCE:

EVERYTHING OTHER THAN SPEECH

Rosh HaShana 5775 / 2014 – Ron Lee Meyers

1. THE ACCOUNTING.

Our task in entering the new year is to take stock of ourselves. It's our job to do a Cheshbon ha-Nefesh, an accounting of the soul.

Accounting is among the most fundamental of human activities. The most ancient written texts in the human record are accounting ledgers from the flow of Mesopotamian trade. Today we immerse ourselves in a sea of ancient texts to stimulate our effort in the stranger and more difficult accounting of the transactions in our human relationships.

It's one thing to account for inventories of wheat and wine and pottery, or even to calculate capital gains and carried interest, if we should be so fortunate to have them. It's a different kind of challenge to keep a ledger of all the ways we've been personally helped and harmed one another.

We take a first step into this challenge by reciting the Vidui, the collective and encyclopedic confession of the wide range of sins that any one of us may have committed, and that the human community as a whole commits quite relentlessly. The collective voice of the Vidui reminds us that we are each a member of the community and it asserts that we are each responsible for the

community, that the sins of one individual cast their effects in all directions, and that no individual is free from blame in a world where any of these wrongs occurs.

But from day to day, while we live in a community, we live our lives as individuals and among individuals. So at some point, the Vidui is only a start. It addresses the forest, but not the trees. What would it look like if we made a spreadsheet? Or, let's say, a report card, of the gold stars and black checks that we've all earned in our relations with one another through the year? I've given it a try, and here are some of the results. My dear spouse, whom I love and delight in seeing every day and night, pissed me off on 79 days of the past year. And, if I'm honest with myself, I have to report that he found me annoying and overbearing on 87 days of the past year. The bright and devoted young lawyer who works for me and who eases my burdens and saves me from looming deadlines, and who has in fact become a very good friend, has nonetheless shown himself to be incompetent! on 96 days of the past year. And if you asked him, I believe he would tell you that I have been unreasonable on 104 days of the past year. The United States Postal Service has committed *numerous* sins against me, each one with serious consequences. And then there are the contractors who worked on our apartment -- I don't know how to count high enough for that one.

So, good for me, I've made a list. There's annoyance and overbearingness, there's incompetence and unreasonableness. How does this all add up? It doesn't.

It does not add up. The enterprise is doomed to failure. First, for the incommensurability between the sin of lost mail and the sin of malfunctioning light switches, and among any other kind of sin you can think of: the sin of aggression and the sin of passivity, the sin of insensitivity, and the sin of hypersensitivity. And then the enterprise fails for the impossibility of keeping records -- we are all biased to see our own virtues and to see others' faults. And just think of how much it would harm our relationships if we burdened them with constant record-keeping. And even if we could wear a moral Fitbit on our wrists to gather comprehensive data at all times -- what app could process it?

There is simply no way of reconciling all the different kinds of positives and negatives that we all throw out into the world each day. The only way of reconciling them is for each of us to reconcile with each other. The only way forward is to reset the system. And that is what I think we mean when we say Today The World is Born.

2. THE WORLD IS BORN.

We don't say Today the World Was Created. By tradition, today is not the day the earth was created -- that was the 25th of Elul (the anniversary was last Friday). That makes Rosh haShana the climactic Sixth Day of Creation, the day that Mankind was created. When we say "Today the world is born", we don't mean the Earth. We mean what the French mean when they say "tout le monde" -- not all the world, but all the people. But if we don't say "Today the world was created", we also don't say "Today the world WAS born", we often choose to

translate it as "Today the world IS born".

The creation of the world happened exactly once. The birth of the world -- the human world -- happens all the time. People enter and depart the world every day. Even in our individual lives, we don't accept that birth happens only once. We give birth to new versions of ourselves -- learning new disciplines, building new skills. We insist on defeating disease and injury to give ourselves more and more new life.

The acts of tshuva and forgiveness give birth to the world beyond our individual selves. Through forgiveness, we grant life to others by inviting them to live differently from how they lived and acted before. And we grant life to ourselves in opening the possibility of finding goodness where there has previously been offense. By restarting in our relationships, we collectively give birth to a new world for us all to live in.

3. FROM THE DEPTHS.

The only common currency for the accounting of our disparate behaviors is Mercy -- Rachamim. Our willingness to start afresh with one another. Rachamim comes from the same root as Rechem, the womb. It's the feeling that a mother has for her child. But I think the resonance between Rechem and Rachamim is even greater than that. Forgiveness does not come from the mind. The pristine brain likes its accounting, its spreadsheets and its Fitbit. Forgiveness comes from a much deeper place. It's the dark, hot place where the blood crashes about, the

mysterious and irrational part of ourselves where the muscles flutter involuntarily from our emotions. When we have been truly hurt, forgiveness does not come easily. I can recall from my own experiences that the willingness to forgive can take months and years to gestate, that it can arrive only *b'sha-a tova*, in its own time. We must give a great deal of ourselves in its formation, and it may ultimately come forth only with considerable pain. The anger that we hold against those who have hurt us can be very dear to us. Through our anger we enforce the boundaries of what we are willing to tolerate from others, which is a powerful act of self-definition. When we forgive, we let go of that part of our selves, we cut that cord. And by letting go of that piece of our identity, we allow someone else to regain a part of theirs. When I forgive someone, I am deciding that I can get on in my life without that buttress to my identity, and I can let someone else get on in their life by granting them freedom from my scorn. Only half of us are anatomically equipped for childbirth, but we all have the spiritual Rechem to generate new life in this way.

And if the act of forgiveness is fraught with so much difficulty, the act of seeking forgiveness is that much harder. Admitting fault is not something any of us does easily. And who among us ventures easily into the difficult conversation in strained relationship? Forgiveness fails most, I would guess, when it doesn't even start. When the burden of it is too great and we are unable to rise beyond our silence.

The Machzor itself is silent on the how-to of forgiveness and reconciliation. Amid our vast, vast repertoire rituals, there is No Ritual for Forgiveness. We are on our

own to do it. And more to the point, we are on our own to feel it. All the language of the Machzor can only hint at it. And it may be that language is simply not the right medium for the art of forgiveness. As I will discuss in a few minutes, today's readings are all about the ways we express ourselves other than language.

Forgiveness is an interpersonal act that comes from our mysterious depths. The same mysterious depths are the source of the VOICE. *Speech* is a cognitive act, a refined and organized interaction with others. Language is our most sophisticated capacity, one of the our utterly unique human traits, that make us the pinnacle of Creation. Creation itself was effected by Gd's speech, and the human creativity that has built complex civilizations, that has enabled us to rise so very far from or animal nature and from life on the raw earth, has been achieved by language -- from the cuneiform shipping ledgers to the blueprint, to the chemical formula, to the computing code, to the Supreme Court decision.

Speech is thought borne upon the breath. Our most sophisticated cognitive capacity, borne upon the most elemental tidal flow between our pulsating bodies and the world. We are inspired by big ideas, but inspiration starts with the breath -- the gasp (ah!) of wonder. Literally, the word "inspiration" means, simply, "breathing in". And of course, our expiration is the final breathing out. Every inspiration, therefore, is the opposite of death, it's a breath of new life.

The breath creates an exchange between the personal "Inside" and the social "Outside". It reports to the outside what is happening on the inside. It may, or may not, receive verbal input from the brilliant brain. But it is always produced

with the muscles of the head and the neck and the torso, and thus expresses whatever is felt in all those viscera. The voice starts at a place that is far deeper than speech.

Where else, then, should we start the new year, than with readings about the VOICE.

It is often observed that today's readings, about Sarah and Hagar and Hannah, are stories of motherhood, particularly stories of God-granted births to previously barren women. That's certainly true, and central to the theme of Rechem and Rachamim. The Torah reading for both days is from the section that we know during the year as Parashat Vayera, which is often noted for its emphasis on the language of vision and sight. This, too, is powerfully true, especially in Abraham catching sight of the ram, to save Isaac from sacrifice. But what I want to observe today is that our readings are all about the voice. Sarah, Hagar and Hannah show us the full range of communication in every form other than speech.

4. EVERYTHING OTHER THAN SPEECH.

In Sarah's most important moment, she does not speak, she laughs (Gen. 18:12). In the entire story of her life, we see Sarah speaking only four times -- all four utterances are about childbirth, and two are about laughter. It's obvious that she would be filled with delight and wonder upon hearing that she will finally give birth. And it makes sense that she would laugh at the seeming absurdity of it when she first hears about it. But in today's reading, Sarah says, for a second

time, after a full pregnancy and birth, "Gd has brought me laughter; everyone who hears of it will laugh with me." There is no longer any surprise here, the birth is no longer improbable -- it has now actually occurred. So, why laughter? Wouldn't we expect her to say, "everyone will rejoice with me", or, perhaps more poetically, "everyone will sing with me"?

Well, song is made of words, and words are made of thought; song is made of melody and melody is an organized structure. Laughter, on the other hand, is immediate, spontaneous. It's not from the mind, it's from the gut. And I think that the gut is the level of Sarah's feeling, and the feeling that she anticipates in other people.

Laughter is an involuntary convulsion of the breath. You can rejoice or sing on demand -- we do it all the time -- but you can't fake a laugh any more than you can fake a sneeze. Laughter is something that comes only from the body, and, as we are accustomed to saying, from the heart. When an action is so involuntary, spontaneous, you know that it's sincere. Perhaps Sarah yearns for laughter because it is unequivocally authentic.

How comforting it is to be so genuine. We all put on various facades to get through our days; who knows what fronts Sarah had to present to the world in order to endure her life -- tolerating her husband's concubine and her child in the household, being passed off as her husband's sister among the foreigners. After decades of being Abraham's wife, but not the mother of his child, finally having her own child allows Sarah to become more fully herself than ever before. In her

expanding authenticity, the first thing she thinks of is making a authentic connection with others. How dearly she must wish to connect with others! Don't we all? As we read this story, we hear her thoughts for the first time about others laughing with her, but I get the sense that this is something Sarah has thought about for a long time. It may be that she is accustomed to everyone laughing at her -- all the women with their children and grandchildren, looking at the childless old lady. Having them laugh with her is the reversal that she has yearned for.

If there is any act more involuntary than laughing, it's crying -- an even more powerful expulsion of breath from the body. We see Hagar crying in this morning's reading, after she and Ishmael are forced out of the household and she fears for his survival. The text tells us that Hagar bursts into tears, but Gd hears Ishmael's cry. It's not enough to note that Gd hears her cry, without the need for specific, articulate words. Gd is hearing a cry where one may not have even been voiced. Despite the uniqueness of each individual's voice, Hagar is able to communicate through *her* voice not only her own distress but her child's as well. Her cry comes from her depths, just as her child has come from her depths.

When we read Isaiah on Yom Kipur, calling on us to fast by seeing to the needs of the poor and the oppressed, he calls on us to do just what Hagar does -- to raise our voice for those who cannot raise their own. This is not easy to do. Abraham, in the episode that immediately precedes today's reading, has attempted something like it, arguing with Gd on behalf of the people of Sdom and Amora. But to no avail -- Gd *engages with* Abraham's impassioned speech, with

all its eloquence and abstract numerical reasoning, but somehow does not ultimately *hear* him. The conversation ends abruptly and Gd does not hear the plight of the cities through Abraham in the way that He hears Ishmael's plight through Hagar. Gd tells Abraham that a cry has gone up from the cities, but Abraham has not made that cry his own, as Hagar does with Ishmael's cry.¹ Nothing could be more natural, of course, than a mother weeping in mortal concern over her child -- it's a connection that cannot be matched or replicated. We can perhaps never fully rise to Isaiah's challenge; we can only keep in mind the connection that Hagar achieves and plumb our own depths as best we can.

The depth of Hagar's feeling is reflected in the resolution of her story. When Gd reveals a source of water to her, to save Ishmael's life and hers, it could be a brook or a spring. But it's not -- it's a well. A spring is an active source -- it gushes visibly at the surface. It's ours for the taking. A well is deep and hidden. There may be great resources within, but they are far within and can be found only by those who know how to look. Ishmael's need was such a source -- Gd knew how to perceive it in the inarticulate but powerful depths of Hagar's expression.

And no one is a deeper and more hidden well than Hannah. She prays silently, from her overflowingly full heart, not knowing what to say. Now, it's hard enough to express ourselves clearly when we speak in words -- I concluded long ago that

¹ Abraham argues in the abstract. Abstract, not just in the sense that he's talking in terms of numbers. But in the more fundamental sense that he doesn't know any of the people he is arguing for. From this we can derive the principle that charity should start close to home. We are best able to raise lend our voices to others when we can do so from the Rechem, for which a special closeness is required. This principle also pushes us in the direction of creating that closeness among those immediately around us -- if it's our duty to do tzedaka and we can do so best by working within our close relationships, it is important to cultivate the closeness of those relationships.

we are always more likely to miscommunicate than to communicate. It's obviously that much harder to communicate when we don't speak in words. ...*Unless* we are tuned in to the feelings of the silent speaker, in which case no words are necessary. Eli the priest cannot distinguish between Hannah's depth of feeling and mere drunkenness; of course, the point of the story is that Gd can. Hannah's story gives us the promise that on this day when we are given a whole anthology of speech to recite, the inarticulate stirrings within us are heard as well.

There are different kinds of silence, which Eli is unable to discern. In Shakespeare, we find many shades of silence. When Prince Hamlet dies, the stage is littered with bodies, the conflicts remain unresolved except by death, and, as Hamlet says in his final utterance, "the rest is silence". There is no reconciliation, nothing is learned, there has been a pageant of violence and trickery and it has come to naught – silence. At the end of King Lear, there is also a lot of death, but Lear finally returns in love to the one daughter who loved him – tshuva. He comes too late, of course, and dies in heartbreak over his loss and his foolishness. It is a deeply tragic ending – but *it is not silence*. A great distance has been traveled, and the final observation is this: "The weight of this sad time we must obey. / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Hannah does not know what to say, she is not versed in the rituals of what ought to be said. Through her silence, she speaks what she feels -- *as Sarah does in her laughter and as Hagar does in her weeping*. Hannah's silence is a pregnant silence -- literally, as her prayers are answered with childbirth. But also because her silent prayer comes from the Rechem -- they are full of the deepest feeling.

Tomorrow's reading is full of silence well. As Abraham and Isaac climb the mountain where Isaac is to be bound, they exchange exactly one line of conversation, which, in my view, does nothing but avoid the question of how a father could answer the call to sacrifice his son. It's the only sentence that we see them exchange, *ever(!)* in their lives together, and it seems from the text that after Isaac is rescued, they have no further contact, *ever*. The bond between Abraham and Gd may be strengthened, but the bond between father and son is destroyed. The rest truly is silence.

Today is not a day of silence. Today is a day of many, many, many, many words. But all the words are here to help us plum our own pregnant depths and see what we can bring forth. It is about quieting ourselves enough to hear the voices that are gathering within us and seeking expression in some thread of a new life. Quieting ourselves enough to hear the still, small voices of others around us, who may not know how to put words to their thoughts, or may not know how to travel the long, complicated distance from their depths to our ears.

The final exemplar of voice with out speech hardly needs to be pointed out. It's the Shofar, of course. Through the hollow, dead husk of an animal's horn, we amplify our breath into the voice of the shofar: *Baruch Ata...asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu lishmoa kol shofar – Praised is Gd who commands us to hear the voice of the shofar --* so that we can be stirred by that voice. Through the hollow, dead husk of our lives, which have been battered and blustered and blown through the past year, we raise our breath and we find our voice. *Shma*

koleinu, we say -- hear our voice. Perhaps our voice has words, perhaps not. That's how it is when new life emerges. A newborn baby takes a long time to find her words. But she finds her breath, and raises her voice, and with that voice arrives a new life.

The voice from the depths is enough to bring Rachamim forth from the Rechem. The wordless gesture is enough to communicate from the Rechem, if we are able to muster the richness and sincerity of Hannah's silence. And the voice without words is surely enough to rise to Gd's ears. *Haleluhu b'tof umachol, halleluhu b'minim v'ugav, halleluhu b'tziltzelei shama, halleluhu b'tziltzelei trua. Praise Gd with drum and dance, with ringing cymbals and blaring trumpets... Kol ha-n'shama t'halel Ya: All that breathes shall praise the Lord. Every Breath praises the Lord.*

Please join me: *Kol haneshama t'halelya, halleluya.*

Rosh HaShanah 5781

Second Day: Outdoor service in the midst of the Covid pandemic

Shanah tovah. Gut yontif, gut yor.

I try to avoid being an example of what Philip Roth called the “I Have Never Been So Moved Jew.” But I have to say, it’s overwhelming to be with you again, to see you out in the world and not in little boxes on a screen. Before I do anything else, I want to thank everyone on the High Holiday Committee and the Troika for making this happen, and I want to thank all of you for being here and being yourselves. I really *am* moved to be with you and will have to do my best to keep it together.

Over the past months, our community has been traumatized, no matter how you define *community*: our Minyan, our neighborhood, our city, our world. The loss and pain have been deep, they have been wide, and they’re not over yet. If you’re like me, maybe you’ve been giving thanks for having been spared the worst. But even among those of us who are lucky, nobody has gone unscathed.

So, when I began to think about speaking today, I took my copy of the Mishnah from the shelf and opened it to the section about Rosh HaShanah, because I wanted to read the thoughts of another traumatized community. There is no question, the Mishnah compiles the words of rabbis who felt they had lost their entire world. That was also the experience of the wider Jewish population that chose to accept the Mishnah as authoritative. I think it’s fair to say that however much trauma we’ve been through lately, our ancestors two millennia ago went through a lot more.

To them, the disaster they had undergone was the judgment of God. And that’s what I find so surprising about the Mishnah on Rosh HaShanah. We tend to think of this holiday as rising to the high point of U-n’tane tokef, where we imagine passing in review before the Almighty, with several varieties of death on offer. It’s all supposed to be about Yom Din. But when I counted the sentences in this

section of the Mishnah—there are 127 of them—I found that only one speaks about the day of judgment. Just one.

You get plenty more in the Gemara, of course. But here is all that the Mishnah has to say on the subject:

“At Rosh HaShanah, all who enter the world pass before God like troops”—or maybe like sheep, we’ll talk about that—“as it is said...” And here the Mishnah proves its statement by quoting Psalm 33: “God who fashions the hearts of them all, who considers all their works.”

Now, if we want to unpack that idea, we can look at what else Psalm 33 has to say. Because it’s not unusual for the brief quotation in a proof text to point beyond itself and give us more of the rabbis’ meaning. The psalm says that God looks down from heaven and gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth, “God who fashions the hearts of them all, who considers all their works.” And then it goes on to say:

“Ein ha-melech noshah b’rav chayil, gibor lo yinatzel b’rav koach” “A king is not delivered by a large force, a warrior is not saved by great strength.”

Now the theme thickens. The psalm does not imagine God as a king, as we do throughout the Rosh HaShanah liturgy. But the psalm does implicitly contrast God above with a king here on earth, and with the king’s warriors. I believe this image is part of what the rabbis were thinking about, when they quoted this psalm to prove that on Rosh HaShanah, “all who enter the world pass before God like troops.” An earthly king, with his vain power, surveys his warriors. On Rosh HaShanah, the all-powerful heavenly king surveys God’s troops—who are us.

If the juxtapositions in the text tell us anything, then evidently we are not sheep, born only for slaughter or sacrifice. We are arrayed before God like soldiers. But what kind of soldiers?

Well, we know what we usually mean by the heavenly hosts. We mean the angels. But I believe the tzva'ot of Adonai tzva'ot are also the countless stars. The stars are God's troops. That's what William Blake understood, when he wrote the line, "When the stars threw down their spears."

Which is fine. But do we have a Jewish text that brings the stars into this discussion? I think so. Start with Psalm 33, where we learn about the troops under review that "God fashions the hearts of them all and considers all their works." Then go to Psalm 147, where we read, "Moneh mispar lakochavim, l'chulam shemot yikra," Who numbers all the stars and gives each a name. If we are arrayed before God today, like troops before a king, then we're also like the stars, each of us counted and known.

And how can we discover that when the heavenly king counts us, and knows us, that God does so with kindness and love? We learn this from the line right next to the one I've just quoted: "Harofeh lishvureh lev, u'm'chabesh l'atzvotam," Who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.

Follow the thread from that single sentence in Mishnah Rosh HaShanah, and this is the picture you get of the day of judgment. It is not an image of outraged justice hurling down a dreadful sentence. It's the picture of a heavenly king who heals the troops that have been wounded, and who sees this host—this people—as if they were stars in the sky.

I know, I've taken us pretty far afield. But I think this vision is consistent with the source of the Mishnah's proof text, Psalm 33, which concludes, "Y'hi chasd'cha Adonai aleinu, ka'asher yichalnu lach," May we be granted Your mercy, Adonai, as we have hoped in You.

Your mercy. We speak of God as having two aspects, justice and mercy. We tremble to imagine what will be coming to us, if God lets the side of justice prevail. But think about the wounded community, the shattered community, from which the Mishnah emerged. These people had every reason to fear God and despair. And yet when you dig into the image they gave us of the day of judgment, it is overwhelmingly one of mercy.

And now, look at us. We're together again. Isn't that mercy in itself?

As a person who wants to be taken seriously, I ought to tell you that things are rotten—because they are—and that we might as well eat our hearts out. But how can I say no to the worldview of people who saw the Temple destroyed and Jerusalem put to the sword and did not despair? Our sages hint that even though we may look like sheep in our own eyes, in essence we are more like the stars of heaven, and whatever has hurt us, our wounds will be dressed. That is the promise we have been given for this day of judgment—and if we can find in ourselves the courage of warriors, then we should face God and pray with that promise in mind.

For the rest of the service today, we might consider turning around the last verse of Psalm 33, and saying, “Ki yichalnu lach, Adonai, y’hi chasd’cha aleinu.” Because we hope in You, Adonai, we *will* receive your mercy.

A sweet year. A healthy year. A happy year. A peaceful year.

To you. To all of us.

Vayeirah

First Day of Rosh Hashanah, 5782

[September 7, 2021]

On each of these two days of Rosh Hashanah a child almost dies. And who's behind it? God.

In today's Torah reading Sarah wants to kick Hagar and Ishmael out of their home and into the wilderness, where they are likely to die. God tells Abraham to heed Sarah's voice. Tomorrow, in the *Akeda*, God commands Abraham directly to sacrifice, that is, to slaughter his beloved son Isaac.

What kind of God is this?

This isn't just a philosophical question for me. Like Abraham, I have had a child come within inches of death; and another consigned to a deep wilderness known as autism.

Today, despite the fact that it is tomorrow's reading, I focus on the *Akeda* story—the more extreme of the two narratives--to ask about the nature of this God and our relationship to God.

Famously, we learn via our rabbis, that on understanding how close Abraham came to killing their son as a sacrifice to God, Sarah, his spouse, is so traumatized, she dies in the very next *parsha*. Isaac, too, was reportedly deeply wounded emotionally—so much so that he vanishes for several chapters, until Abraham's servant returns from Abraham's hometown with a wife for him, with Rebecca.

But what about Abraham? He continues to follow the Lord he came to apprehend as the one true God—except: He never spoke with that God again. And God never spoke with him again.

This is pretty notable. Prior to the *Akeda*, Abraham and God were on direct and intimate terms, downright chatty, actually. So what happened?

According to Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, his famous meditation on this episode, Abraham proved himself religiously to be a true man of faith in the test that God imposed on him. But ethically, Kierkegaard insisted, he had proven himself to be a murderer. The two sit irreconcilably, he wrote, side by side.

“If faith cannot make it a holy act to be willing to murder his son,” he wrote, “then let the same judgment be passed on Abraham as upon everyone else...The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac. The religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac. But precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless.”

How many sleepless nights did Abraham suffer through, contemplating his action? It seems he couldn't just give up on God. But neither could he carry on chatting with God just as before.

I get this, because I know something about the impact of seeing your child come within minutes of death and then be saved—in my case, not by God, but by a highly skilled pediatric neurosurgeon; And imperiled in my case not by my own hand at God's command, but directly by the One who decides who shall live and who shall die. Our surgeon later told us that our 16-year-old daughter was just minutes from death when he siphoned off the cerebrospinal fluid that was swelling and squeezing her brain as a result of the rare and life-threatening brain tumor he discovered. And she still needed almost two years of tortuous medical treatments after that.

You are never the same after an experience like that. Of course, I was starting from a much lower spiritual base than Abraham. In my case it merely transformed my relationship to God from that of an agnostic into that of an atheist.

Still, like Abraham, I found I still had spiritual needs. Paradoxically, I remain a person of faith in my way. I continue to attend Shabbat services. But there, like Abraham, I don't talk to God; Instead, I talk to J.J. Goldberg and David Fisher.

As for the Shabbat *tefillot*, I don't recite them very often. I kind of let them wash over me as ambient background, soothing and familiar from childhood, while I reflect and meditate on my existence, on the events in my life, or on the preceding week and the state of the universe.

I can't claim that I was a fervent *davener* before my teen daughter almost died of a brain tumor, or her twin brother became autistic and radically regressed at the age of 6, or their older sister emerged with serious learning disabilities. But I can say that after those experiences, I felt even more alienated from our liturgy than before. It's filled with descriptions of God as the God of compassion, of mercy, of patience, of omniscience, of glory and of holiness; of God as the one who supports the fallen, who frees those who are imprisoned and, of course, who heals the sick—but wait—not always! And in the case of an innocent child, why does God strike her with illness to begin with?

All these prayers describe a God who is far from my own reality. It's not that I would purge these descriptions; not at all. I hope that we have all, at some points in our lives, experienced God's blessings and compassion. I know I have. Among my moments, contradictory as it may seem, is my precious daughter's survival from that same aggressive cancer—after four brain surgeries, six rounds of devastating, high-dose chemotherapy, six weeks of daily radiation bursts aimed at her head and four rounds of experimental immunotherapy. But based on that time of trial, I must also ask, where are the references to God's cruelty, God's brutality, God's utter arbitrariness, God's oppressiveness? This, too, is part of my experience of God. But over centuries, the rabbis, seeking succor for a people in exile, rummaged through the *Tanakh* selectively to create a liturgical God stripped of these attributes.

Consider *Shelosh Esreh Middot Harahamim* the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, recited during the High Holy Days' *Selichot* prayers. The verses are all taken from *Shemot*—Exodus, Chapter 36, verses 6 through 7. "The Lord cleanses sin," reads the 13th Attribute. But the prayer leaves out the very next passage that follows in the biblical text: "Yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation."

The *Shema*, Judaism's prime declaration of faith, takes its first section from *Devarim*, or Deuteronomy 34, verses 6-7. There, we are commanded "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." But the prayer cuts off before *Devarim* warns, just a few verses later, of a "jealous God in the midst of thee" whose jealousy, if kindled "will destroy you from off the face of the earth."

This is why I love the *Akeda*.

Our liturgy is a rabbinic product formed more than a millennium after the Torah and reflects a different theology entirely, in which the Hebrew-Jewish God is now merciful—but at significant cost in terms of reflecting our actual lives.

These same rabbis—not to mention the Rambam, Kierkegaard, and many other Jews and non-Jews—came to see the *Akeda* as a "problem"—one that required often acrobatic apologetics.

But for me, the *Akeda* is not a problem—it's a solution.

More than any other episode in the Torah or in prayer, it distills the reality of God—or of life, if you will—into its most succinct, powerful and accurate form. Within mere seconds, God orders a cruel and brutal act, and then redeems it with good, in one fell swoop. This is God, unshorn, seemingly arbitrary, and non-bowdlerized.

The ethical evil that God commands here shouldn't be confused with the arguably over-the-top acts of vengeance God wreaked on individuals like Nadav and Avihu, who committed what might seem like relatively minor transgressions. Unlike them, Isaac is completely innocent. And the fact that he is spared in the end doesn't change the capricious and deeply unjust nature of the terror he undergoes....Kind of like real life.

Some of you may know that a long time ago I lived in Iran for two years. I stayed for half that time in the beautiful city of Shiraz, where I became

good friends with the wife of the local Zoroastrian priest. As a result, I was invited for meals at the Shiraz Fire Temple on many occasions. There, I learned in a rudimentary way how the Zoroastrians struggled with theodicy. Like the Jews, they upheld the existence of one God, Ahura Mazda, and thus claimed to be monotheists. But to solve the problem of the existence of evil and the suffering of innocents in a world ruled by a righteous and good God, they posited the existence of a separate divine force of evil—Ahriman. It is Ahriman, not the good and righteous God, who is responsible for terrible injustice and suffering around us. In fact, Ahura Mazda is engaged in a mighty struggle with Ahriman that will ultimately result in Ahriman's defeat and the triumph of perfect justice and righteousness—a Zoroastrian messianic age.

When I think of the inclusion of the *Akeda* story in the Torah, I can't help but consider that the Jews redacting this version of the story did so under the suzerainty of Zoroastrian rulers during Persia's Achaemenid Empire in the 7th century BCE.

Whether by intent or chance, the *Akeda* is a direct retort to the Zoroastrian concept that God is only the God of the good; that evil comes from elsewhere.

Nevertheless, over time, both Christianity and Judaism were deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism's dualism. It is from this religion that the idea of Satan emerges in Judaism and Christianity. By the time of Job, he's the one behind the evil that God is induced to visit on this poor man. And in the Talmud, centuries later, in Beit Sanhedrin 89b, Rabbi Yohanan says on the authority of Rabbi Jose ben Zimra that it was, in fact, Satan who induced God to test Abraham with the *Akeda*.

But in the time of Cyrus the Great, the Prophet Isaiah addresses the shah on this point unblinkingly. Even as he praises the great king for allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their Holy Temple, he implicitly rebuts the king's own religion.

"This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus," Isaiah proclaims, "I form the light and I create darkness. I create peace and I create evil; I, the Lord, do all these things."

At least, that's how the last part reads in the *Tanakh*:
"yotzer or u-vorei choshech, oseh shalom u-vorei ra. Ani adonai oseh kol eileh.

This God is the one who is so hard for an already oppressed people to live with that when the rabbis appropriate this same line in the *siddur* as a blessing preceding the *Shema*, they, once again, bowdlerize:

"yotzer or u-vorei choshech, oseh shalom u-vorei et ha-kol"
"God forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and *creates everything*."
[*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 107]

But it seems to me that Isaiah's God is the difficult supreme ruler we actually have—if we choose to believe.

Due in part to how I have processed my own personal experiences—"believing" is a cognitive bridge too far for me. But spiritually, in this season of repentance, I am called on to ask God to forgive my sins. They are many. But in that spiritual space, where I seek catharsis and repentance, these same experiences pitch me into a *chutzpadic* covenant with this entity: In order to pray to God for forgiveness, I must first find it within myself to forgive God.

This is hard work. I actually don't always succeed. But I am not the first person to try.

In the 18th century, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, one of the great early Hasidic leaders, is said to have challenged God one Rosh Hashanah to a lawsuit--a *din Torah*—citing God's mistreatment of his own people.

"I, Levi Yitzkhak, the son of Sarah from Berdichev, have come to have a trial with You on behalf of Israel," he tells God in a prayer attributed to him. Marshaling irrefutable evidence, as he sees it, of God's brutality toward God's own people, Levi Yitzhak declares, "I will not move from this place until a miracle occurs and an end to all the suffering comes—now."

Nothing happens.

Levi Yitzhak is given no sign. He realizes he has lost the trial, inevitably, to an entity who is both defendant and jury. But having registered his indictment with all the strength he could summon, he then finds himself forced to--and finally able to—turn, with tears in his eyes, to recite the Kaddish.

Now, having given this *drash*, and registered my own indictment I will try to do the same.

Shana Tova

Rosh Hashanah 1 ~ kavanah
Melanie Schneider, Monday, September 26, 2022

Gut yontuf, Shana tova.

As if standing here to say something that meets this moment of heading into musaf were not enough of a challenge....my task also includes trying to center us, after our minyan's latest innovation - a mid yontuf shmooze, and a "grab and pray" snack!

But Such is my charge, and I will try, with the help of an old book that's new for me, Pema Chodron's Start Where You Are.

During the pandemic, I've been able to dive into an anchoring practice of morning meditation, through our very own JCC Manhattan. And so I am grateful for the constancy of carving out zoom time at 7:30am,, for quiet contemplation, some inspired teaching, a little coffee and a stretch, a new and welcome routine, and Pema Chodron's words. That mashup speaks to me during these *asseret yamei t'shuvah*, the 10 days, of the literal process of reflection, and of asking for forgiveness - the period that caps Elul, the one that begins today.

Truly, I have no choice but to start from where I am, and in looking back, and in writing and journaling, I can see more clearly where my most important relationships really are..., how they've moved, my part of the deal in improving them, or making them more complicated, my process for honestly looking at where I am, and then, what I can do.

Rosh Hashanah and these 10 days are days of "reflection," but I really like to think of them as "days of exploration", and also days of gratitude - for the miracle of our lives. The trick, I think, is to "stay," to "stay in the room, to stay with it, to keep exploring, and to stay with the people, and the time, and the practices that matter"

I know, we all know, when we're bailing out into complacency, maintaining our personal status quo- or my own go to auto pilot and default, episodes of Severance or MSNBC!

But Today is a reminder and an opportunity to do the work. To think of the moments of joy, of what I'm grateful for - to think of the moments of fear and pain- the moments of growth and learning, of effort and of work. To think of the struggle and the progress - to see my stagnation, and also my movement.....To try and see it clearly, from where we are now, and to also give ourselves credit for all of it. Not only where we missed the mark and fell short...but also where we grew, and learned, and became better communicators, experienced joy and connection, and became closer. Where we appreciated how we spent our time and resources, where we acted with chesed.

Start Where You Are....Life Is Now....This Is It....Abide At The Center of Your Being....all of the phrases that essentially mean the same thing. I Am, Here, Now, Hineini.

If I really pay attention, if I am more curious than afraid, others will always show me exactly where I'm stuck and need to change. Through our relationships, we can see our patterns, our habitual tendencies.

The work of these days, and our lives really, is to meet our patterns with honesty, without beating our breast too hard. This is the gift that we are given during these 10 days. Not only to ask "what do we want to do?" but to ask "how do we want to be?" "what is emerging for each of us, and what is on the horizon?"

This is our invitation and time, in the form of 10 days, and the many that follow. We have everything that we need, we are given time, (and we are given lots of time in the form of musaf too!) - to look at ourselves and our relationships...to better understand our spark and how we are realizing it, to begin again, to live consciously, to discern, and to tweak - to imagine and then to take steps to begin the work of making small but significant shifts. Yes, we may return each year with many of the same challenges, but if we look closely, we can also see change.

So in Pema Chodren's words, May you Start Where You Are....may each of us bring all that we are, driven by gratitude for our lives, and for the energy that is this community - to find meaning, joy and discovery in these 10 days. Shana tova.

TODAY THE WORLD IS BORN

Kavana for Rosh Hashana – 5784 / 2023 – Minyan Maat

Ron Lee Meyers

The best wedding that I ever attended – apart from my own – was the second marriage of my widowed uncle. He was in his 70s, and so was his bride, and they were palpably in love and despite their age, they were starting a new life. What chutzpa! What good fortune! And what a surprise it was, to them as much it was to the rest of us.

On that day, we could have said the same thing we say today: היום הרת עולם.
Today the world is born.

If we like to say that to save a life is to save a whole world, then it's no great leap to say that to change a life is to give birth to a new world. We can only live forward, of course, and cannot change the past. But whatever the past may be, we can always forge a new present, which is always what matters most. And surely, it is literally true that a new present gives birth to a new future.

Any yet, this holiday doesn't feel like it's about new things. It is not in the fresh, colorful spring, it's in the chilly, darkening autumn. And while tradition has it that this is the very day that humanity was created, we don't read about Adam and Eve. We don't read about anything young or new. We read about the tired, the desperate, the old, and the rejected – AND specifically, we read about the dramatic, unexpected, improbable, turns in their lives.

Three years ago, David and I were planning a summer trip to Berlin, when the dramatic, unexpected, improbable arrival of a pandemic put those plans on hold. By the time we could finally mobilize those plans again this year, some other dramatic and improbable things had occurred.

My stepfather, Frank Lewinson, had received a letter from a cousin in Germany. A cousin he didn't know he had. Frank had come to New York in 1946 at the age of 11, after hiding in an apartment in Berlin through the entire war. He came with his mother and his sister; his father had stepped out from their hiding place one day and did not come back. Before his mother met his father, she had converted to Judaism – in the inauspicious year of 1932. The rest of the family remained Christian and German and my stepfather has been out of touch with them for the past 80 years. Also for the past 80 years, he was unable to discover what exactly happened to his father.

But now his 80-year-old cousin Klaus was assembling the family tree and went so far as to arrange for a memorial to Frank's father to be placed in the streets of Berlin. You may have heard of the Stolperstein program – over the last 30 years, over 100,000 brass-plated cobblestones have been placed in the sidewalks at the last freely chosen homes of individual victims of the Shoah, engraved with their names and their dates and a brief summary of their fates. It creates a tangible memorial that each of these individuals lacked, and it implants an awareness of the horrible past into the very geography of the city, the country and the world.

If ever there were a past that we cannot change, it's the Shoah. But to preserve the name of Hans Lewinsohn on a cobblestone – which will be seen by passers-by and by successive cohorts of children from the adjacent school and

playground – this changes the future. We can hope it gives birth to a new and very different world.

Meanwhile, the event of laying the stone in July was bursting with new birth. David and I were there, and Marcia, whom we were visiting in Berlin. Frank and my Mom made the trip from Philadelphia to be there, together with his cousin Klaus, and another cousin whom Frank had not seen literally since they played together in the sandbox. Frank has spent his entire life with virtually no family; now, at the age of 88, he was hanging out day after day with his new-old cousin. And Klaus's son, Martin, was there with his wife, and they had us all over for dinner. They're pretty close to our age, and we all got on like a house on fire. So I'm pleased to report that I myself, quite unexpectedly, seem to have a new step-second-cousin-once-removed.

But it gets better still. My new German cousin Martin, is married to Hayriye, a daughter of Turkish immigrants to Germany. So in this particular birth of a new world, a great deal of the world is woven together. Together also with the volunteers from the Stolperstein program – from the researcher who scoured the archives to discover Hans's history, to the stonemason who performed the installation – German citizens who cannot change their country's past but are helping to change its present and its future. And we were fortunate to have Rabbi Gesa Ederberg – whom many of you know and who sends her regards – presiding over the ceremony. She herself is a convert to Judaism, who is helping to give birth to new Jewish life, in the very place where it seemed to have entirely died.

Death is on our minds during these holidays. Shortly we will recite the Unetane Tokef, which catalogs the many kinds of death that may come in the new

year – fire and water, plague and sword, all of which are terrifyingly present in the world today. But rather than dwelling on death alone, I invite you to close your eyes and contemplate the many kinds of birth that may come in the new year.

What gaps will we close? What old, lingering questions will we finally answer? And what new questions will we think to ask?

What old intention will we finally act on? On what long journey will we take the first step? What chance will we take? What leap of faith?

What will we go to the ends of the earth to do? And what will be revealed to us from out of the blue?

What borders will we cross, what barriers will we breach? What bonds will we form?

What *blessed surprises* will come to us? And when they do, will we welcome them, as Sarah did, with laughter and with joy?

Shana tova umetuka!

Torah Reading for Rosh Hashanah, Day 1

Rosh Hashanah is a curious holiday. When the “sacred occasions” are introduced in Leviticus, the month of Passover is called “hodesh rishon”, the first month. The 14th day is prescribed for the start of the holiday and there are many details about the celebration of Pesach as well as the holiday of Shavuot that follows. Then God commands Moses about what eventually comes to be called Rosh Hashana: “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete Rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring a gift to the Lord.” What follows are extensive details about Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Eventually, Rosh Hashana was designated as the first day of the new year and over time accrued its share of rituals and customs. Beginning the year with this cluster of holidays makes sense: the Yom Kippur focus on atonement and pleas for forgiveness have a direct link with Sukkot. This Fall harvest in ancient Israel was absolutely critical, sustaining the people until the fields became productive again, months and months later – just in time for Passover. So getting straight with God was vital.

With the new year moved to the Fall, Rosh Hashanah became a more important holiday, but still unusual. While the Torah texts we read on the other “sacred occasions” abound in details, the original Torah text for Rosh Hashana according to the Mishna was just those 3 verses from Leviticus – actually the shortest Torah reading in the cannon. The Talmud offers a reason for the Genesis text we read today that replaced those Leviticus verses: “...nowadays, when there are two days of Rosh HaShana, on the first day they read Genesis 21 in accordance with the opinion cited as: Some say. And on the next day they read “And God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22), in order to mention the merit of the binding of Isaac on the day of God’s judgment....” This is not a very helpful explanation and it is not at all clear about why we read the Ishmael text. There are obvious parallels in the stories of Ishmael and Isaac but why do we celebrate a new year reading such stories?

Child sacrifice is reported in the history of the Ancient Near East and is explicitly banned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The King of Moab, a near neighbor of Israel, is said to have offered his firstborn son and heir as a whole burnt offering; it is suggested that the Ammonites offered child sacrifices to the god Moloch. The prophet Micah asks: “With what shall I approach the Lord; Do homage to God on

high?...Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, The fruit of my body for my sins?"; and Judges 11 recounts the actual sacrifice of a daughter because her father - the military leader Yiftach – promised God that if he were to succeed in battle, he would sacrifice the first thing to emerge from his house when he returned home.

But child sacrifice was certainly not an issue in Babylonia where Jewish life was centered at the time of the Talmud. So the question persists – why do we read accounts of the near death of Abraham's sons on this holiday? And why do we read a story about Ishmael that is out of sync with the family history; a story that portrays him as a young child when, in fact, at the time of Isaac's weaning, Ishmael would have been about 16. This **puzzles** me although I know that historical continuity is not essential to the Biblical text. We have known Hagar since Chapter 16 of Genesis when Sarah, her barren mistress, gives her to Abraham to provide him an heir. "Maidservant" is the JPS translation for Hagar's role in the household while Robert Alter uses "Slave girl". I didn't want to ignore this point, given the racial issues roiling our nation. Alter argues that the Hebrew terms "amah" or "shifchah" that describe Hagar's role - "imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story." The translation "slave girl" ("slave woman" here in our mahzor) is deeply disturbing. I learned and have taught that "slavery" in the Bible was a status imposed only on captured enemy combatants while indentured servants were able to free themselves after 7 years or bind themselves willingly for further indenture. But this a topic for another day.

When Hagar conceives a child, Sarah's harsh treatment causes her to flee. Hagar encounters an angel of the Lord who promises that the son she bears will be the leader of a great nation. She returns to the family and gives birth to Ishmael. The terse Torah text offers few glimpses into this "blended family" over the years. Had the text been more expansive, a Netflix series could stream this family drama for many seasons: it could read Hagar and Ishmael into the two stories of Abraham passing Sarah off as his sister; they could witness the three visitors who came to comfort Abraham after his circumcision; overhear Sarah talking with God about her laughter; and perhaps listen to the debate between God and Abraham regarding the destruction of Sodom. But we don't "meet" Ishmael until Chapter 17 when God commands Abraham to circumcise himself and all the males in the household, including his son, and promises Sarah that at long last she will also bear a son. Abraham's response to God - "Would that Ishmael might live in Your

favor!" - is surprising and touching because he speaks with such pathos yet we have not been privy to this father/son relationship. God also heard the pathos and takes the time to explain why Isaac must be the heir while reassuring Abraham that Ishmael will fare quite well. Abraham's attachment to Ishmael may explain why in tomorrow's reading God has to clarify which son Abraham must kill: "...your son, your only one, the one you love, Isaac". Perhaps, for Abraham, "son", "your only one", "the one you love", applied to both boys.

At the end of Chapter 17 we learned that Ishmael was 13 years old at the time of his circumcision so we know he is at least 16 when we encounter him at Isaac's weaning in today's text. Sarah is suspicious of Ishmael's behavior but this is no surprise, given her feelings about the boy and his mother. Was Ishmael playing inappropriately with his toddler brother? Was he participating in the mocking about her age that Sarah imagines? What happened? A story that began more than 13 years ago with Hagar fleeing from Sarah's hostility, now ends with Sarah expelling Hagar and her son. Sarah's behavior is not surprising but this expulsion can't have happened when Isaac was a few years old. If Ishmael was 13 at his circumcision, then he is nearly a man as Abraham gives Hagar "bread and a skin of water" and "the child," whom she is able to "fling" under a bush. She then sits at a distance and thinks "Let me not see when the child dies." But Ishmael does not die, because an angel of the Lord appears and Hagar is directed to a source of water and reassured again that God will be with her son.

This is a deeply compelling story when read outside of its misplacement in the family history. The two Rosh Hashana stories are similar to be sure - both sons of Abraham experience near death and divine rescue - but one is a young child and the other a young man. Yet by ignoring these details the rabbis of the Talmud could assign both stories to be read on Rosh Hashana. And it's likely that the Jews of Bavel did not have enough access to the written Torah text to be troubled - as I am - by the age discrepancy! The Ishmael story is so powerful that it's easy to forget how inconsistent it is with what we know about Ishmael's age. On the meta level these two stories do belong together. Rosh Hashana came to be celebrated for two days to make certain that the new moon of Tishrei - marking the beginning of the new year - would be witnessed and announced. If the new moon was difficult to see on the first night, it would surely be witnessed on the next; therefore two Torah readings were needed with themes that suited the holiday. And in a curious way, having the powerful story of Ishmael come first provides

some hope that Isaac will also survive. While the Talmud is hardly explicit about why these two stories replaced those three verses from Leviticus, they capture both the terror that runs through the Yom Kippur liturgy and the seven fold promise with which we end those 26 hours.

On Rosh Hashana we celebrate God's kingship, God's promise to remember, and God's promise of redemption. God is Melech, malchei, hamlachim. The king of the kings of kings. All of God's majesty is celebrated on this holiday. Sacrificing children was known in the Ancient Near East and attributed to the demands of pagan gods but Israel was forbidden to engage in this practice by the God of Israel who could never permit the murder of children. The proof lies in these two stories that confirm God - or a divine representative - will intervene to guarantee that the generations descending from Abraham will prevail. This was a powerful story for Jews living outside the land in Bavel among descendants of Ishmael and would be deeply meaningful when they lived among another people whose God -- about whom they might already have learned -- allowed his son to be killed. So Rosh Hashana grew into a much more important holiday with two very powerful stories of sons whose lives were threatened but who were saved, prospered and came together many years later to bury their father: "And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented: and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron...." While we won't be reading the ending of the Abraham story over the holidays, there is comfort in knowing that these sons come together at the grave of their father.

HAMELECH

In just a moment Ira will chant the word HaMelech with a special Yamim Noraim melody. This time for me has always marked the emotional beginning of the Rosh Hashana davenning. Now the show is really starting. Ira is our guide announcing our arrival in the palace of the monarch as he sings to us: Look, over there, the King sits on His throne. For the next several hours and for the next ten days we are meant to live in His presence. This is not an easy task. Some of us may figuratively see the King and have utter clarity about our work today, and others of us may find an empty throne as we sit here unsure about how to relate to a King who is not there.

And so, for just a few moments, I ask you to close your eyes and to listen to my questions:

Simply notice: how are you feeling about being in this davenning space in this very moment?

What are you hoping to achieve today?

What are you willing to contribute to make this day come alive?

What will make this day meaningful for you?

Whether you believe in the King or not, what accounts do you have to begin settling? Where are the rough edges in your life?

What is your work with yourself?

What is your work of reconciliation with your spouse, partner, children, parents, friends?

How will you know this day has changed you?

Open your eyes, and let yourself enter the sacred space, look around, and become aware that you are not alone, and that you share this journey with fellow seekers.

L'EL ORECH DIN

In a moment we will read the piyyut “lel orech din” that addresses the central theme of today – God's omniscience and judgment of us on this day. God's divinity is obvious and perceptible, and therefore our fealty to Him is necessary and critical.

But there is one voice in our Torah that questions this approach. In the fifth chapter of Shmot, Pharaoh asks Moshe Rabbenu, “who is this God that I should listen to him.?”

Pharaoh's question is a good one...indeed, for many of us, his question silently reverberates throughout our entire davenning.

Who in fact is this God that we are praying to – is He the God of this piyyut, is He the source of literal revelation, is He a commanding presence intuited by our ancestors by us, or is He the projection of our longings, desires and hopes for a sense of meaning and purpose in a disordered world?

Does the answer to this question really matter today? I think not. Over the course of the last 45 years I have embraced each of these positions. What has changed for me over the years is that Pharaoh's question has become less audible. It has been drowned out by the question of “who am I, who are we, and what is my and our task at this moment.” I have grown comfortable in saying, even in my moments of greatest doubt and disbelief, “there is no God and I am His servant.”

What ends are we truly serving and what goals are we pursuing, or as Dylan aptly put it, You're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

And so, I would like you to ask you to close your eyes for a few minutes as I ask you to contemplate the following questions:

What in truth is your top priority in your life?

How are your actions and behaviors both helping and hindering you from servicing this priority?

Recall a moment from this past year when you were of true service to another person.

Recall a moment from this past year when you were of true service to yourself.

Recall a moment when you were of disservice to another person.

Recall a moment when you were of disservice to yourself.

What is your top behavior or attitude that needs to be modified, curtailed or changed in order to make your service be more complete.

Open your eyes, and let yourself enter the sacred space, look around, and become aware that you are not alone, and that you share this journey with fellow seekers.

SHOFAR

We will soon engage in the mitzvah of shofar. Three brief points about this practice.

Rambam teaches that the mitzvah of shofar is about hearing the sounds, the kolot, and not about the act of blowing the shofar

Even though the Torah obligation is satisfied through hearing 30 sounds or kolot
tekiah, shevarim-teruah, tekiah x3 = 12 tekiah, shevarim, tekiah x3 = 9 tekiah, teruah,
tekiah x3 = 9

we in fact sound 100 kolot.

There is an old association between the blowing of the shofar and the theme of compassion. Commentators speak about the shofar blasts as representing a plea for compassion from God for the descendants of Yitzchak who was offered like a ram upon an altar.

What is striking to me is that our tradition is not satisfied in hearing one voice and in fact may not believe that one voice exists in God or people. Indeed, hearing thirty voices is not enough. We must listen to 100 kolot on this day. Only by fully accepting and acknowledging the multiplicity of kolot are we fully able to reach a level of compassion towards ourselves and towards our families and neighbors.

When I think about my own life over the past year, my greatest and absolute worst moments come through the vehicle of my kol, my voice.

As a prelude to hearing Gary's blasts of the shofar, I invite to close your eyes and to listen to actual examples of your own voice:

Hear a voice of praise for a loved one.

Hear a voice of criticism of a loved one.

Hear a voice of optimism and encouragement towards a loved one

Hear a voice of pessimism and disdain towards a loved one.

Hear a voice of strength within yourself.

Hear a voice of fear within yourself.

And finally ask yourself, what voice within you needs to be articulated on a more regular basis.

Rebbe Nachman teaches the the sound of the shofar creates a bridge between earth and heaven.

In a moment we will read the piyyut “lel orech din” that addresses the central theme of today – God's omniscience and judgment of us on this day. God's divinity is obvious and perceptible, and therefore our fealty to Him is necessary and critical.

But there is one voice in our Torah that questions this approach. In the fifth chapter of Shmot, Pharaoh asks Moshe Rabbenu, “who is this God that I should listen to him.?”

Pharaoh's question is a good one...indeed, for many of us, his question silently reverberates throughout our entire davenning.

Who in fact is this God that we are praying to – is He the God of this piyyut, is He the source of literal revelation, is He a commanding presence intuited by our ancestors by us, or is He the projection of our longings, desires and hopes for a sense of meaning and purpose in a disordered world?

Does the answer to this question really matter today? I think not. Over the course of the last 45 years I have embraced each of these positions. What has changed for me over the years is that Pharaoh's question has become less audible. It has been drowned out by the question of “who am I, who are we, and what is my and our task at this moment.” I have grown comfortable in saying, even in my moments of greatest doubt and disbelief, “there is no God and I am His servant.”

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SHABBAT SHUVA

Ron Lee Meyers – Minyan Maat

1 October 2022

In these days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kipur, we have two tasks: to perform *tshuva* between ourselves and Gd – *bein adam l'makom* – and to perform *tshuva* between ourselves and the other people in our lives – *bein adam l'chaveiro*.

Tshuva with Gd is easy. If you're the *kohen gadol*, you need to bathe five times, change vestments five times, slaughter a bullock and a goat, perform three confessions, enter the Holy of Holies three times, and send another goat off into the wilderness.

I don't mean to make light of it – the rituals were complex and exacting, and the entire cosmic relationship between Gd and the people of Israel hung in the balance. But there were prescribed steps, and the task was fully discharged in following them faithfully.

Now that we have prayer services in place of the Temple rites, what we need to do is fast for 25 hours, do two Torah readings from three scrolls, a haftara and a megillah, five amidas and 5 viduis, and the rest. It's laid out for us, literally, in a book. We go from the first page to the last. We blow the final shofar, and we're confident that Gd has forgiven us once again.

And then we're back out on West End Avenue. And then some bagels, and then home, and then back to all of our human relationships.

That is the hard part.

What do we do about our human relationships? In 468 pages of the Machzor, there is no instruction for *tshuva bein adam l'chaveiro*. In 25 hours of ritual and liturgy, in the ten Days of Awe, in the month of Elul and in the seven weeks of consolation, and in this specially-designated Shabbat Shuva – in all of our *immense atonement infrastructure*, there is no structure for human reconciliation.

The structure of the Temple, in space and meaning, was extremely clear. The center of all its rituals – the focal point of all the gathered population, all the priests, all the animals, all the recitations and slaughter and blood, all the gold and crimson and purple and blue – was the Holy of Holies. A perfect cube of perfect darkness and perfect silence. Containing nothing but the Ark of the Covenant – making the kohen gadol's encounter with Gd a reenactment of the primordial encounter between Israel and Gd at Sinai. A return – *shuva* -- to that original relationship, a reset. No words are ever spoken in the Holy of Holies¹ – the *kohen gadol* recited prescribed confessions and prayers on the *outside*, but in the inner sanctum, there were only prescribed ritual actions; the encounter was *ineffable*. As the revelation at Sinai exceeded the bounds of sensory experience, atonement with Gd in the Holy of Holies exceeds the capacity of language.

And in our times, at the center of all of our ritual – all of our fasting and singing and breast-beating, and sermonizing – is **the dark, silent, ineffable core of our human relationships**. It is silent: lacking any of the formulaic language that accompanies

¹ No words of substance, that is – the *kohen gadol* did count (possibly aloud) the blood droplets: one, one and one, one and two, etc.

our other daily actions, from waking up to breaking bread. And it is dark: invisible in any of the texts we recite.

The challenge of our human relationships is our Holy of Holies, which we must find a way of entering.

It's hard. Making amends with the people in our lives is probably one of the hardest things we can do. And I think we are far more likely *not* to do it than to even try.

For one thing, when something is holy, it's rare and special – it draws a special kind of attention and motivation. Our human relations are exactly the opposite – they are ubiquitous and ordinary. There is no single time or place to deal with them. Everything that's ordinary can be put off to tomorrow.

In resetting our relationships, it really would be great to have prescribed ritual language to use. But the thing about relationships, and all of ordinary life, is that they are not prescribed, they are *improvised*. I'm speaking from a prepared text now, but when I talk with you at kiddush I'll be making up my words on the spot, just as we do with all our words – and all our behavior – in daily life. Perhaps if our lives were more scripted, they might have less conflict – who knows. But, formulaic language can't work for relationships because there is no single formula for the myriad ways they go awry.

To address a rift between yourself and another person requires not a general formula but a specific awareness of the problem, a specific awareness of how you feel, and how they feel.

And, of course, it requires the courage to admit error.

Do you know anyone who has difficulty admitting error?

Do you know anyone who *doesn't*? How many of us have the self- confidence to approach someone we've hurt, to enter into a conversation that will force us to revisit our own wrongdoing? And what kind of confidence must you have in the *relationship* to imagine that it can withstand both the damage that's already been done, and also the difficulty of talking it through?

And what about *tshuva* in the other direction? We talk of *tshuva* in terms of someone stepping forward to offer an apology. But how often does that really happen? Maimonides famously imagined a scenario in which a transgressor tried three times to apologize to the person he had hurt, and taught that the harmed person is equally at fault if they refuse to accept an apology.

But I don't really think we suffer from a pandemic of unrequited apologizing. Isn't it more common, in your experience, that people fail to apologize? And that a person who's been hurt has to suffer indefinitely while waiting for a resolution.

Some years ago, I was hurt very badly, and unnecessarily, by someone who knew perfectly well what damage she had caused me. Months later I ran into her in the street and she greeted me cheerfully – *Hi, Ron!* – as if nothing had ever happened between us. But something really had happened, and it really still hurt – and what really had *not* happened was any kind of *tshuva*.

What is a hurt person to do?

Well, I can speak from experience – I have a certain amount of chutzpa with this. On a few occasions in my life, I have felt so badly hurt that the anguish of it burned

me up for months. And on those occasions, I have reached out to the other person to ask that they make amends.

With the person I just mentioned, I eventually received a card saying that she had never *intended* to hurt me. It was a good enough gesture, and it enabled me to close the books on the incident. *But intentions are not really the issue, are they?* We all intend to be good people. We all think we *are* good people. No one, unless you're ordering the invasion of a neighboring country, actually intends to do any harm. *Every single conflict* between people arises, precisely, *in the gap* between who we think we are and who we turn out to be in reality. That is another reason *tshuva* is so difficult – we don't like to see the ways that we fall short of our own self-image. As they say, reality bites – sharply.

I'm happy to say, however, that with a few other people I have had *wonderful tshuva experiences*. In each instance, I asked respectfully to meet for a talk. And the ability to speak and hear and be heard, and to have the other person express genuine regret for hurting me, and genuine concern for my humanity, was deeply restorative. It not only repaired the relationship, it *built* the relationship on new and stronger foundations. Each conversation was an encounter of great depth that brought out the best in each of us.

Of course, you can't expect *everyone* to leap at the invitation to discuss how badly they've treated you. And on the one occasion that my overture was rebuffed, it enabled me and the other person to see exactly where we stood with each other. It solidified my opinion of that person, and I assume it solidified that person's opinion of me. We have had nothing to do with each other since then. That was also a kind of *tshuva* experience, and not an unsuccessful one. It brought a very

useful closure to the matter. Meanwhile, the more felicitous *tshuva* experiences brought both a *closure* to the harm, and also a *new opening* to the relationship.

One last *tshuva* story, this time with me as the guilty party. In my first years out of college, I lived in Boston, and for a while I did a little work with ceramics at an art studio around the corner from where I lived. One night, I needed something to cushion the piece I had made as I took it home in a box, and the instructor allowed me to use a couple of American Ceramics magazines, asking only that I bring them back because it would not be possible to replace them if they were lost. Well, I was a generally responsible kid, but I was moving around a lot in those days and at some point they got lost in the shuffle. It's possible that my name was cursed at that art studio ever after, or maybe no one ever thought of it again; I don't know. But in the back corner of my mind, the awareness of it, and the regret, lived on. Twenty years later, living now in this neighborhood, I walked past one of the sidewalk booksellers one day and spotted a big coffee table book: "20th Century Ceramic Arts in America", or something like that. Not an exact match for what I had lost, but it occurred to me instantly that this was my opportunity to right that wrong. I bought the book and sent it with an explanatory note to the studio. By luck, the studio was still there – and so was the instructor. She received my gesture graciously and with delighted surprise. We both got a lot out of it.

From this I learned a few things. One is that there is no *exact remedy* for any wrong that has been done. A harm cannot be *revoked*, it can only be *healed*. The recompense is never exactly commensurate with the harm. If you have caused the harm, you can't let this stop you from making the effort of *tshuva*. If you have been

harmful, you cannot let this keep you from accepting the gesture. A good-enough tshuva has to be good enough for you – it's the best you're going to get.

The next thing I learned is that we all know perfectly well what we've done wrong. We do not like to admit it, we don't like to remember it, and we don't like to talk about it. But we carry the memory of it around, and perhaps the guilt of it. Out of sight is not out of mind. Everyone you see in this room and out on the street probably is carrying the shadow of some regretted act. I think this has two implications.

The first is that if we are all burdened by our misdeeds, we can all show each other, and ourselves, some compassion. If you've hurt someone, there is no point in adding to their burden, or to your own burden, by holding it all inside. Either we clean these things up in our lives, or we accumulate them forever and spill them out on everyone we meet. We aim to reduce pollution in the environment; let's reduce the pollution in our lives as well.

And the second implication is that if you achieve a successful act of tshuva, *you are a star!* It is rarely done, and no one expects it. You will go down in the other person's book as an uncommonly decent, caring and responsible person, as a real grown-up. And you can bask in your own moral fortitude, as well as enjoying the repaired relationship. To make sincere amends with someone you've hurt is a bold gesture, and the effort will be richly rewarded.

So, as we prepare to dive into Yom Kipur, I suggest to you that our readings for the holiday function as a perfect ramp to jump, like Evel Knievel, into the tall task of *tshuva bein adam l'chaveiro*. We start with Kol Nidrei – the superlatively solemn,

utterly legalistic, profoundly arcane assertion of our intention not to sin. In the morning we move to Leviticus 16 and Numbers 29, the still-arcane but slightly more accessible commandments about atonement offerings. From there, the readings become much richer in human content: Isaiah urges us to fulfill not only to our ritual obligations to Gd but also our moral obligations to one another. This message grows in the afternoon as we now read Leviticus 19, the towering commandments from parashat Kedoshim that outline a framework of *sacred decency* for our lives in human society. Finally in Jonah, we extend our respect beyond the Jewish community to the earnest spiritual acts of the other communities around us. We move from the abstract to the concrete, from the sacred precincts to the street and the marketplace, from the tribal to the ecumenical. And to gain momentum for that lift-off, we have been reciting for the past month at the end of Psalm 27: *chazak v'ya-ametz libecha, v'kavei el Adonai* – strengthen yourself and take courage, and hope in the Lord.

That is the strength and courage it takes to overcome your *many layers of resistance* to the challenging encounter with another person. That is what it takes to step out of the *inner sanctum* of our Yom Kipur services and into the Holy of Holies of life outside – which is to say, the Holy of Ordinaries.

Shabbat Shalom! Gamar chatima tova!

DVAR TORAH YOM KIPPUR-SEPTEMBER 27, 1982

In his Rosh Hashanah drash, Dovid Roskies spoke of the life cycle in terms of a Pirkei Avot set piece in which one of the Rabbis established what one ought to have accomplished at each age from birth through senescence. Dovid examined the metaphor of the "Book of Life" and told us how the Rabbi's conception corresponded to a book composed of discrete chapters. Dovid preferred to view life as a "sefer," that is a book with no beginning and no ending but rather as an ongoing stream in which we immerse ourselves.

Now I think that viewing life as a pre-arranged set of chapters is stifling but it is comforting in that, at least, we are guaranteed our sentences and our paragraphs. Viewing life as an ongoing stream allows for a greater sense of personal freedom yet, at the same time, it is also comforting to think of our individual lives as merged in the continuity of all life and so, though the exact sentences and paragraphs are not clearly discernible, they are, nevertheless, there on a scroll stretching endlessly in both directions.

The truth, I think, is far less comforting than these images suggest. If we were able to grasp that book in our hands and flip ahead of our present chapter, we would be horrified to discover that the pages are blank...that the parchment ahead shows no evidence of the hand of the scribe. The truth is that by our words wisely spoken or sensitively withheld, foolishly uttered or stubbornly retained and by our deeds, courageously performed or ethically forgone, impulsively done or faintheartedly defaulted on, each page and each section of parchment is inscribed. What Yom Kippur does is take a piece of time out of the familiar routine of the year and forces us to examine it.

Arnie Eisen, in his Rosh Hashanah dvar Torah, spoke of the pagan preference for placing the new year before the coming of spring so that the focus is on the future and re-birth while the Jewish New Year is placed so as to impose a period of contemplation before the opportunity for re-birth appears. I have a somewhat different, though related, way of looking at the peculiar fact that the New Year arrives in the seventh month.

It is interesting to note that the Jewish New Year is set at a time of year which is subjectively experienced as the end of something rather than as the beginning of something, just as the Jewish day begins with the setting of the sun rather than with the rising of it. Yom Kippur, in closely following the New Year, takes advantage of this fact.

The Days of Awe come with the waning of the summer. The summer is a peculiar time in the effect it has on us. That is, the summer though fully one-quarter of the year and a season supposedly co-equal with the others is hardly that to us. The summer is experienced as if its chapter font was set in relief-it stands out in time and in mind. It does not feel as if it is part of the continuity of the year.

Only for the summer do we gear up our mental presses; only for the summer do we actively plan; only about the summer do our friends ask “How are you going to spend your summer?”; and only regarding the summer do our friends ask, as they were right up until today, “What did you do with your summer?”- “Did you have a good summer?” And usually, when we think about the summer that has just passed, no matter how good it was, if we are honest with ourselves, we feel it was never quite as good as expected or promised. We always feel as if we failed to make use of the opportunities that summer affords, at least to some extent.

Why is this? It seems to me that the summer is special and mentally bracketed because summer is relatively unstructured time. The normal routines don’t fill it and hide it. Its very initial emptiness makes summer more, not less, visible. We have to actively plan a summer or let it fall by the wayside in default. In planning a summer one scrutinizes oneself for what one longs for and hopes for. Briefly and however distantly we are aware of the passage of time and the importance of putting that time to use. We become aware that at all times we are the fillers of our lives and the inscribers of our Book of Life.

At Yom Kippur it is God who asks: “How did you spend your year?” and “What will you do with the time if I give you another?” I think to God the greatest sin is to squander this, our one and only life. It is for that we are judged.

To members of this minyan, although not for much of the world, it may appear irrelevant to ask “who shall die by hunger and who by thirst, who by strangulation and who by stoning” and we may find it peculiar that at the end of the Avodah service there is still preserved a plea that the residents of Sharon not be killed by earthquake. For us upper West siders Harlow has provided a modern version where he reflects on: “Who shall be truly alive and who shall merely exist, who shall be happy and who shall be miserable, who shall be tormented by the fire of ambition and who shall be overcome by the waters of failure, who shall be pierced by the sharp sword of envy and who shall be torn by the wild beast of resentment, who shall hunger for companionship and who shall thirst for approval, who shall be strangled by insecurity and who shall be stoned into submission...?”

It has been said that the Torah speaks in the language of human beings. Then I think it must be that God acts through the words and deeds of human beings. When we offer love, support, hope, faith and community to another and when we open ourselves to these things, we must be speaking and acting in a way that allows us to approach Yom Kippur unafraid. It may also allow us to contemplate our ends unafraid.

When in his kavanah on Rosh Hashanah, Richie Siegel told us of his harrowing adventure in Maine where he found himself hurtling down a swollen river in a canoe out of control headed for a hydroelectric dam and he thought to himself: “This sort of thing doesn’t happen to my sort of person” only to have that followed by the thought of “Wrong!”, we were hearing not some commonplace remark about how it seemed cinematically inappropriate for a

scholarly city boy to die a daredevil's death, but rather how all of us refuse to think that any of us will die, that all of us are hurtling toward the precipice, that time is running out.

The summer with all its promises of and opportunities for change fades and we again return to the darkness of routine self-deception and rationalization. On Yom Kippur we are reminded that God is infinite and eternal and we are not and that there is no time for the nonsense that keeps us from our potential and from one another.

I sometimes wonder if Yom Kippur is redundant for people who have had the veil stripped from their mortality by having cancer or a heart attack or a very risky surgical procedure and who have had the courage not to replace the veil. It is true that in recent years life-threatening illness has been somewhat romanticized but it is also true that the crisis of a dangerous illness presents an opportunity. I think of a woman in the hospital who endured the pain of chronic pancreatitis for five years only to develop cancer of the kidney and after that was removed she developed cancer of the bowel and now she has metastases to her liver. She was determined to improve and be discharged for the High Holy Days to pray but particularly to hug and kiss her granddaughter. I think of a neighbor who had always been a rather sour, stiff sort of person and who after a heart attack became affable and sought our company. And I think how some months later that neighbor's wife developed cancer of the ovary that had spread so that the chemotherapy could only be a holding action. Now I see that they go for walks, hand in hand, every night. And finally, I think of a scholarly woman who in this room just last week told me that she had recently undergone an operation to have two heart valves replaced. When she found herself alive in the recovery room, she began to ask herself "Alive for what?" She decided she wanted to be part of a community. So she and her husband, both of whom had been relatively isolated, came to join Ansche Chesed.

If death is the impossibility of further possibility, then life represents endless possibility. Today the world is born. The light of summer fades, the days grow shorter and the darkness comes sooner. It is not just summer but opportunity and life itself that fades. As the light fades today and Neila approaches, we all have an opportunity.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Dvar Torah Yom Kippur September 25, 1985

The Torah portion for Yom Kippur begins with: "The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord." This refers back to Leviticus 10: "Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord strange fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when God said: Through those near to me I show Myself holy and assert My authority before all the people.' And Aaron was silent." The Torah reading in Leviticus 16 continues: "The Lord said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will [that is, at Aaron's will] into the Holy of Holies..."

In anticipation of Yom Kippur, I read this as a story of arrogance versus obedience; the exaltation of the self versus the subordination of the self and I was reminded of the dvar Torah we heard on Shabbos Shemini when Leviticus 10 was read wherein the darshan stated that all of his life he could never accept the fact that Aaron remained silent, and was expected to have kept silent, after the death of his two sons. For parshah Beha'alotcha we heard a defense of Miriam and Aaron who "...spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married...They said, 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?'"

In parasha Korach we read of a rebellion led by Korach against Aaron's priestly privilege and an uprising directed against Moses' leadership led by Dathan and Abiram which joined forces with the challenge: "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" In the dvar Torah for that parshah we heard the rebels described as proponents of egalitarianism who wished to re-create ritual without dogmatic rigidity. During that same dvar Torah we were told an admiring story of a college professor who had once commented that if God actually became manifestly visible before him and threatened to reduce the professor to a cinder if he did not bow down, the man would have preferred to die by self-proclaimed choice rather than continue to live in a world governed by God's caprice.

Why do we have trouble with these Biblical episodes? Because we, like that professor, have great trouble acknowledging that we, as individuals, never had control over much of our lives and that to accept leadership, to accept the possibility of Divine inspiration, to accept the possibility of a God is to give up our arrogance and to feel small. We modern upper west side intellectual Jews have much in common with our forebears, the Israelites, who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the thunder and saw the lightning and dense clouds, heard the blasts of the shofar, saw the fire and smoke that descended, felt the mountain tremble violently, heard

Moses replied to in thunder, and said in one voice, "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!" only to soon thereafter worship the golden calf.

Since Revelation meant that the Israelites' newly found freedom would henceforth have to be subordinated to God, God's chosen leader and a system of laws, they spurned that Revelation and sought comfort in the golden calf-the work of their own hands. And we, bitter over never having had a personal Revelation, spurn the question of God and find greater comfort in worshipping the works of our own minds. We, therefore, have reason to pray today, if only to beat our breasts over these lines from the Al Het: "We have sinned against You by misusing our minds. And we have sinned against You by haughtiness. And we have sinned against You through arrogance."

In this minyan there is a tradition, rarely violated, of not openly discussing, much less professing, belief in God. We often refer to God as a theological term and will quote text regarding what God said or did but we are reluctant to address the personal dimensions of God. As befits a roomful of people with two roomfuls of graduate degrees, our divrei Torah have tended toward the analytical and skeptical. But the style of dvar Torah we have grown accustomed to may represent simply what is easier and more acceptable to discuss rather than what it is that actually concerns people and vivifies the minyan. Many of us who are not professional Bible scholars have learned, from footnotes in Hetz and Plaut, some little of the theories of the Wellhausen school of criticism regarding the redaction of the Bible. And though it makes perfect, intellectual sense and is, therefore, generally accepted, it speaks not at all to the issues of Divine Revelation and the existence of God. These theories regard those issues as already dismissed or, at any rate, as not capable of being addressed. Yet these are the compelling and enduring questions. Every time we bow for Borkhu, the Amidah, Alenu or fall prostrate, as we will today during the Avodah service, we are forced to consider whether or not we will concede some omnipotence. The issue is not that that intellectual professor chose not to bow but, rather, why he was no longer capable of worshipping anyone but himself.

But how can you disconcert a minyan of intellectuals enough to effect change? The threat of the Tochacha, the blessings and the curses, will not do and quoting from Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God* would seem like comic relief. What does create unease is the dawning of the possibility that the work which he or she devotes themselves to, the shining works of their own minds, are, in fact, meaningless-that we fill bottles with sand only to empty them again in order to prevent ourselves from feeling the chill of an existential vacuum, a personal black hole from the gravitational pull of which there is no escape.

In this age of anomic individualism, the prospect of subordinating oneself, voluntarily, to another, to a group, to a set of laws-the prospect of forgoing an opportunity to exalt oneself in order to grow in a quieter, stronger way as a person but also as part of a group and the carrier of a tradition-might come as a tonic. In these too affluent, too comfortable, too lonely times people feel the need for some enduring and sustaining commitment.

This minyan provides a transition from self to something more. It is our intermediary between ourselves and God and our means of tapping the power of Yom Kippur. We are a motley bunch in this minyan spanning, as we do, a fair portion of the Jewish spectrum. We are very traditional in some respects and very unorthodox in others. Some are deeply religious and some are deeply skeptical. But all have offered a personal commitment to make this minyan work.

We often think we left our quest for spirituality behind years ago when this minyan was smaller and younger. I think we still seek it but in different ways. As we have grown in size and in age, as we have acquired friends, spouses and children, as we have gone through time, simchas and tragedies together, we have, in becoming part of each other's lives, become part of the cycle of Creation. As individuals we may be gruff, arrogant and stiff-necked but we have thrived as a group because of a willingness on each of our parts to suppress a potentially destructive aspect of ourselves in order to ensure the blessings of community and we have emerged better individuals.

On second day Rosh Hashanah, Boruch Bokser told us of a midrash in which it was claimed that Abraham was seen as so meritorious because when God demanded the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham restrained his ready retort of confronting God with the contradiction of how yesterday God had promised to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven through his son Isaac and today God is demanding Isaac's death. Abraham obeyed and demonstrated the ability of human nature to improve itself, to change through challenge by a confrontation with the Divine. In the same way, Aaron, who had been rebellious, suppressed his tongue and was silent after God killed his sons. And in a less dramatic way, we have all learned at times to bow to some minyan decisions we disliked.

To return to the Biblical quotes with which we began, in any religious group there is an inevitable and unavoidable tension between reason and belief; between communally determined authority and the possibility of divinely-inspired authority; between democratic leadership and anointed leadership; between innovation and tradition; between "low church" participation and "high church" awe. These dynamic tensions can neither be resolved nor dismissed. They must be borne. Neither Orthodox rigidity nor liberal populism can address these issues honestly and painfully and struggle with them.

We, in this minyan, who began with the greatest act of hubris when we declared ourselves determined to choose our own way through the liturgy and through the halacha, must follow that, if we are to be true to our personal mission here, with sufficient humility and courage to bear the consequences: to bear that tension; to be torn; to be ambivalent; to be uncertain; to be open to possibility.

But of whom am I speaking here? We, as individuals, are hardly pressed from heroic molds. Do I seriously maintain that we are capable of such a grand mission? No-not as individuals, but in our collective identity as the minyan we take on new characteristics.

The minyan is, for all of us, a pulley. What is a pulley but something that is suspended somewhat above which multiplies any effort applied to it and which lifts up recalcitrant objects. Ah-but the minyan is a special sort of pulley-one that heals the objects it pulls: Is your strapping sprung? Are your ropes frayed? Is your wrapping coming undone? The minyan can restore the damage. The minyan is also a very special pulley in that it will only take on the burden of objects that consent in some way-perhaps mutely, by showing up regularly. Finally, our pulley is special in that it is capable of hauling selected objects even higher than itself. The Sages knew all this and so only permitted the Kedusha and Kaddish to be said in the context of a minyan.

What keeps the pulley suspended? Why doesn't it fall like a cartoon character suddenly discovering it is over the edge and violating the law of gravity? Because the individual members of the minyan need that pulley up there. We are composed of a spectrum of views, levels of observance and degrees of belief but as a community we are always mindful of the community and that as a community we strive to conduct ourselves better than we do as individuals. The minyan is a pulley levitating out of the necessity to violate the law of modern despair.

From my wife Dina I have learned to love an individual and have tried to learn that that love carries with it responsibilities and obligations without which love cannot be sustained beyond passion. From this community I have learned to love a group and I have tried to learn that love carries with it responsibilities and obligations-one to the other within a collectivity-and that is what keeps the pulley suspended. From the minyan I have begun to learn a number of simple things: that the community has a right to make its claims on us-dues, officership or leyning, attending simchas or funerals; that one gets in giving; that if you attend to the Torah in any way, the Torah starts attending to you; that there just may be a God because I see God's goodness manifested in the attempts of all of us to be good to one another.

That professor I mentioned earlier was certainly arrogant and, worse, wrong in imagining that he ever had the ability to control his life and make one day like the next. Today is proof of that. Today is Yom Kippur. Yesterday was not. He could have no control over its coming and could not delay its leaving by one moment.

On Rosh Hashanah we were delighted to see our new white 'Torah mantle and to see one another in our unaccustomed finery-not because we were approving any claims we might make to affluence, but because we saw concretely demonstrated the possibility of transformation that is the promise within the High Holydays. As Neilah approaches, it is useful to remember that though the minyan serves as a pulley, one must still pull for all to rise up.

Howard L. Berkowitz

I have always wanted to stand here and discuss *Moby Dick*. This should not seem odd given that the Torah endorses the power of narrative art. Deuteronomy largely consists of Moshe formalizing the oral tradition of the Torah as he retells, and even recasts, the chronicle of the leaving of Egypt and the subsequent forty years of wandering for a new generation about to enter Canaan under a new leader. When Moshe says (Deut. 11:7) "...that it was you who saw with your own eyes all the marvelous deeds that the L-rd performed" to an assemblage, most of whom had witnessed only some of the marvelous deeds and some of whom had witnessed none of those deeds, who, in a complex metaphorical and metaphysical sense, accept his statements, as we do, then we are witnessing the power and triumph of narrative art. The rabbis said that "Job never was and never existed, but is only a parable" and yet the story of Job was one of the greatest and boldest additions to the Biblical canon, demanding a response from both the religious and secular perspectives, for whom Job was a living presence. Melville's *Moby-Dick or The Whale* closes on its final page with an epilogue headed by a quotation from Job, "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." I wish to consider this Yom Kippur day the titanic figure of Captain Ahab, who is utterly real in the imagination.

Ahab was fifty-eight years of age when he set out on his final voyage. He was "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" whose father probably died before Ahab was born, and whose mother died when he was but one year old. It was said that his mother named him Ahab as a "whim" but the old squaw Tistig said that the name would prove prophetic. Of King Ahab, First Kings tells us: "But there was none like unto Ahab, who did give himself over to do that which was evil in the sight of the L-rd." King Ahab and his pagan wife, Jezebel, regarded the prophet Elijah with relentless enmity. Elijah had prophesied that: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Navot shall dogs lick thy blood..."

Captain Ahab was raised on the Quaker whaling island of Nantucket. Ahab was very unusual for an islander in having attended college for a time. He became a harpooneer at age eighteen and then spent a cumulative total of only three of his next forty years on land. Ahab wedded just three voyages before his final one and had a baby, but it is uncertain as to whether he ever actually saw the child. Ahab was branded for a special fate having "...a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish" running from crown to sole, a "birthmark" which Tashtego, the Gay Head Indian, said he had not acquired until he was forty.

Ahab had lost his leg below the knee to Moby-Dick on his previous voyage when, after his whale boat had been smashed around him, Ahab had dashed at the whale and relentlessly sought to kill Moby-Dick with a six-inch blade "...as an Arkansas duelist at his foe." Afterwards, Ahab had lain "like dead for three days and nights" and then was beset with sharp, shooting pains in the bleeding stump. Ahab "...at last came to identify with [the whale], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living with half a heart and half a lung." "... all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable

in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.." "Then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad."

The first mate, Starbuck, contends that the whale is but a dumb creature, but Ahab will have none of it, and he replies: "All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks. But in each event-in the living act, the undoubted deed-there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."

Ahab, correctly, will not allow that his wound signifies nothing. In his "wild vindictiveness" he insists that the whale is either a malign, sentient creature, or, as he becomes convinced over time, the agent of a malign and arbitrary G-d. The rabbis of the Talmud also knew to look beneath the veneer of appearances and said, "Be *arum*-[that is,] cunning - (or naked)-in yireh" As the Baal Shem Tov elaborated on this statement, the things of this world appear in different garbs, but the person who is able to see what lies behind these garbs finds yireh hashamayim (fear and awe of Heaven). The very arrogance and pride which cost Ahab his leg cause him to feel mocked by the continued existence of the whale. Ahab imagines that by conquering Leviathan he will conquer his torment over the thwarting of his imperiousness. The search for the whale across the entire globe is an assault on Heaven akin to that of those building the Tower of Babel.

As the pursuit of the whale proceeds, Ahab has moments of doubt about the course he has charted for himself. When told that the oil casks in the hold are leaking, Ahab says: "I'm all aleak myself. Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale?" Hearing the blacksmith welding an old pike-head claim he can smooth any seam or dent, Ahab points to his brow and says: "if thou could'st, blacksmith, glad enough would I lay my head upon thy anvil, and feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes." Ahab tells Starbuck, "I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise. God! God! God! - crack my heart! - stave my brain...stand close to me Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God." Here, in asking G-d to crack his heart, Ahab is echoing Donne's cry in his fourteenth Holy Sonnet in which he asks G-d to batter his heart in order that he be made anew. The Besht said, "In the habitation of the King are to be found many rooms...but the master key is the broken heart." That is, G-d will always consider the plea of the contrite, the broken-hearted, and Psalm 147 refers to G-d as *harofeh lishvuray layv*, "...the healer of broken hearts." But the posture of supplicant does not suit Ahab.

Ahab asks, "What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening hidden lord and master; and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding,, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural

heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" Ahab has some idea of forces at work that compromise the admiralty of his being, but he is unwilling to accept their origins as internal. The yetzer hara, the will to evil and self-destruction, becomes an internal emperor and because of it, as Rabbi Danzig phrased it, "We are astonished at ourselves-how was this abomination perpetrated?"

After quenching in human blood a special barbed harpoon forged to fly straight and true in order to kill the white whale, Ahab baptizes it "in nomine diaboli," in the name of the devil. Rav Soloveitchik reminds us that the word to sin (hata) actually means "to miss (le-hahti) the target." Starbuck had previously told Ahab, "Let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware thyself old man" and not the whale. Pip, the black cabin boy, who had fallen into the sea, Moby-Dick's world, and nearly drowned returns "having seen G-d's foot on the treadle of the loom and he spoke it." The mad Pip serves as an Elijah to Ahab's kingdom of the ship Pequod but is disregarded by Ahab. Just before the final days' pursuit, a hawk snatches Ahab's cap off his head, akin to the birds snatching the bread from the basket atop pharaoh's baker's head in his dream of doom.

Captain Ahab furiously chases the white whale for three consecutive days of close combat, despite his whale boat having been snapped in half by the whale's jaws on the first day, despite warnings and omens. Of Balaam's persistence in wanting to go with Balak's dignitaries to curse Israel, the midrash of Bamidbar Rabbah tells us, that, "From this you learn that G-d lets a man go the way which his heart desires." Ultimately, Ahab brings his ship, his crew and himself to destruction because of his worship of his own defiant nature.

With the specially forged lance challengingly upraised, Ahab hurls at G-d, "I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whence so'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights." In his titanic, unyielding defiance of nature and G-d, Ahab became a literary icon. But we must confess that the baser part of ourselves thrills to the magnificent unrepentance of the man, and it is this part of ourselves we must address on Yom Kippur. But can Ahab be asked to contend with his very "earthquake personality"? Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuvah, insists on the possibility of this saying: "...if there were some force inherent in his nature that irresistibly drew him to that from which he could not free himself...what place would there be for all of the Torah?" Are we subject to irresistible impulses or impulses not resisted?

It may be that Ahab was a nautical Acher. The Gemara tells us of Elisha ben Avuya, a great scholar, who witnessed a boy responding to his father's request to climb a tree and release the mother bird before taking the chicks, as the Torah commands. The reward for this is to be long life, but the boy fell to his death. Elisha ben Avuya thereupon denied G-d and abandoned his faith, so that the other Rabbis referred to him as "Acher," that is, "the other." His disciple, the sage Rabbi Meir, continually visited his rebbe in order to persuade him to return. Acher replied that he could not because he had heard a bat kol stating, "Return, O wayward children...except for Acher!" But this must be taken as G-d's discerning of Acher's unreadiness to repent rather than of G-d's unwillingness to pardon. Rambam, in Moreh Nevuchim (3:36) observed: "If a person believed that he could never rectify his crooked ways he would continue repeating his

error, and he might even increase his rebellious acts, as he would have no remedy. However, our faith in teshuvah will cause us to improve...”

Now the manner of Ahab's death is of interest to us. After Ahab darts his demonic harpoon into Moby-Dick, "...the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove;-ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone." Ahab had followed the advice of Job's wife which Job had rejected; to "curse G-d and die." After using his voice in cursing and defiance, he dies voicelessly whereas his voice might have been used to fulfill Rambam's statement of the requirements for repentance; namely, to say out loud, in words that one has sinned, that one regrets the sin and that one has resolved in heart not to repeat the sin and also to use that voice to appease a fellow human being whom one has injured. As Rav Soloveitchik said, "Repentance contemplated and not verbalized is valueless." Or, as the Zohar puts it, "Nothing is firmly established until it is mentioned aloud and assigned its place." William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, wrote: "For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness."

Towards the very beginning of the novel the narrator, Ishmael, having come to New Bedford, Massachusetts to find work on a whaling vessel finds himself, on his second day in town, in the Whaleman's Chapel listening to Father Mapple deliver a sermon. Father Mapple is a former whaler who wants to speak to the hearts of his seafaring congregation, so he chooses as his text that of their fellow whaleman, Jonah, which we will read during the Yom Kippur mincha service. The Rabbis could not find fault with the essence of his sermon when he says, "And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." Starbuck agrees when he later says, "I misdoubt me that I disobey God in obeying [Ahab]." Ahab, of course, was not present for Father Mapple's sermon. Ahab would not bend his will but today we will bend, bow and fully prostrate ourselves during the Avodah.

What is the mystery of the whale that proves so alluring? Melville, paraphrasing from parsha Ki Tissa, wrote: "But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face." After the episode of the Golden Calf, Moshe asks to behold G-d's presence and G-d says: "...you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." When G-d allows a semblance of G-d's glory to pass by Moshe, G-d utters the Thirteen Divine Attributes, *ayl rachum v'hanun*, which we repeat throughout Yom Kippur.

And what of the "incantation" of whiteness? There is frequent reference in *Moby-Dick* to being "appalled." The seamen in Father Mapple's rendering of the Jonah story are appalled at the irresistible tempest and the nearness of G-d, and Starbuck is appalled at Ahab's intransigence and the nearness of the whale: "Starbuck blanched to a corpse's hue with despair." To be appalled is, literally, to grow white with fear, with awe, with nearness to death and the Divine. At the burning bush, Moshe's hand turned white, the pall bearers carry the *met* enwrapped in the white tachrichim shrouds and many of us here today wear the white kittel as an aid and reminder.

Ironically, Ahab had one distinct advantage over us in that he seemed to have no doubt about his ability to address G-d directly and frequently. However, the price of his stentorian ravings was that they deafened Ahab to the presence of G-d which, as G-d tells Elijah, is not to be found in the wind, nor the earthquake nor the fire, but in “the still small voice” to which the liturgy of Yom Kippur refers. For those who struggle in attempting to communicate with G-d via the prayers provided us; who find their spiritual longings complicated by concerns about intellectual integrity, on this day foremost, perhaps this poem by C. S. Lewis, *Footnote to All Prayers*, in which he employs a number of Jewish concepts may be of some help:

The one whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
 When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring *Thou*,
 And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart
 Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.
 Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme
 Worshipping with frail images a folk-lore dream,
 And all in their praying, self-deceived, address
 The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless
 Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert
 Our arrows, aimed unskillfully, beyond desert;
 And all – are idolators, crying unheard
 To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.

Take not, O Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great
 Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.

The conclusion of the novel hints that Ishmael was the sole survivor of the floating world of the Pequod because of his ceremonial brotherhood and fast friendship with Queequeg, the only true friendship described. Queequeg, utterly reconciled to his inevitable death, had had a coffin prepared in advance and it is this coffin which serves Ishmael, now alone, as a life-buoy: “It was with the devious-cruising [ship] Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.”

Rav Soloveitchik observes, concerning the Avodah which we will read later today, that “...the acquittal afforded by the scapegoat when the Temple existed was not meant for the individual. The individual derived no benefit from this sacrifice. Atonement was for the owner of the offering only, in this case the community as a whole.” He adds: “...as individuals we are capable of descent to the pit of destruction and death, but not when taken as Knesset Yisrael.” To lessen the fabric of the community is destructive, and to not be part of the community is death. Ahab moaned, speaking of himself, that “...he stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors! Cold, cold-I shiver!” And, in a moment of reflection on the second day of the chase, he adds: “Aye,aye, Starbuck, ‘tis sweet to lean sometimes, be the leaner who he will; and would old Ahab had leaned oftener than he has.” Shamefully, much harder than approaching G-d with our sins is the obligation to approach the injured other individual, acknowledge misbehavior in words and ask “Slichah oomichila (pardon and forgive).”

At the conclusion of Yom Kippur we will perform the seven-fold repetition of what the multitude of Israelites uttered when Elijah vanquished four hundred and fifty of King Ahab's prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel: Adoshem Hu HaElokim, 'The L-rd is G-d. But before the contest of prophets and deities, Elijah put to the gathering of people a question that remains for us: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the L-rd be G-d, follow the L-rd.; but if Baal, follow him." How long shall we halt between a better self and a lesser self? Whose voice shall we hearken to today, and everyday?

Is it too great a stretch to liken this group of overly bright people to Ahab in skill at self-torment? The morning *Yehee Ratzon* prayer ends, in the Bokser translation, with the wish that G-d save us, above all, "from disputes with stubborn and unyielding opponents." And who is more stubborn and unyielding and exasperating than we, ourselves, wrestling with ourselves year after year? Perhaps for those who take Yom Kippur seriously and rely on G-d's mercy and on the G-d given ability to choose how one will conduct oneself and who can believe in the opportunity that Yom Kippur represents, year after year, perhaps the dread drops away and, even for the most convoluted intellectual, the simple promise remains.

In these recent difficult days, we have reacquired appreciation of that greeting to which we became numb, but which is the profoundest wish and greatest blessing: shalom. We have been reminded of the truth of what the Pequod's cook tells Stubb, the mate: "All angels is nothing more than the shark well governed." And we must not forget how Psalm 27, which is said daily from the start of Elul, attempts to comfort us: "False witnesses and men who scheme violence have risen against me. Ye[t], I am confident that I shall witness the goodness of the L-rd in the land of the living." An emergency medical technician at the hospital where I work served at the World Trade Center horror. He recalled seeing bodies falling through the air, as he put it, "like a slow drip." This he could bear. What he could not was the recollection of a man and a woman plunging to their deaths holding hands. Imagine-the remainder of two lives compressed into the time of a fall. Imagine, then, that you have more time.

We all face challenges tomorrow, but G-d has assigned us a task for today. It should not be forgotten, though, that in Temple times, the conclusion of Yom Kippur was a joyous time. As Harold Arlen wrote and Judy Garland sang:

Forget your troubles, come on get happy
You better chase all your cares away
Shout "Hallelujah," come on get happy
Get ready for the Judgment Day
Forget your troubles, come on get happy
Chase all your cares away
Shout "Hallelujah," get happy before the Judgment Day

Another great work, *The Divine Comedy*, despite its elaborate meditation on sin and redemption, concludes simply, as Virgil and Dante emerge from Hell, with a very last line of: "And we went out to see the stars again." Perhaps, if we, all, take the possibilities of this day seriously, we might be enabled, at the conclusion of Neilah, to emerge into the night and see the stars again, for the first time.

Howard L. Berkowitz
September 27, 2001

Yom Kippur dvar Torah 2020 Howard L. Berkowitz

When I was young, in 1970 to be exact, I heard the Grateful Dead's song "Truckin,'" which includes the then famous tagline "What a long, strange trip it's been." Being now old and beset by this year of death and perfidy, I now hear "What a strange trip of longing it's been" to arrive at this moment. Longing to see you, my friends, real face to real face, longing to be back in our real space, longing to reset the world, not as it was, but as it could be. In this world out of joint, Zoom connection is a wonderful technological workaround but the clearest reminder of the indispensable materiality of community. In E.M. Forster's only science fiction story, dating from 1909, he describes a dystopian future in which all humans live underground and communicate only by way of a video/audio device, never actually being in each other's presence. In that story there were no communities, only atomized individuals. But we have been able to shelter in community, temporarily virtual as it may be, as the Covid miasma haunts us. But faceless personhood and bodiless presence are not what evolution adapted us for.

In this disrupted, depersonalized world we crave the familiar more than ever. The baalei tefilah, knowing this, will tend to use the most familiar melodies and tend to select the most familiar prayers for the services. One piyyut I always look forward to hearing is *Ki Hinay Kahomer* with its associated melody. The paytan begins with a reference to Jeremiah 18: "As clay in the hand of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in your hand, Guardian of love; Recall Your covenant; do not heed the accuser." In this metaphor, as in all the others used in the piyyut, we humans are presented as helpless victims who take whatever direction God imparts to us. But the poet has taken liberties. Here is the original text.

Jeremiah 18:1"The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: **2**'Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.' **3**Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he was at his work on the wheels. **4**And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

5Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 6‘O house of Israel, could I not do with you as this potter? said the LORD. Behold, as the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel...11Now therefore do thou speak to ... Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying: ...turn ye now everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. “

In desperation for us, in exasperation with us, the 12th century paytan deliberately misrepresents God’s statement as if God is entirely responsible for our natures and, therefore, entirely responsible for our reformation. But Jeremiah has God specifically declining to deprive us of choice. Here is the free-will aspect of teshuvah. So often in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayers we present ourselves as helpless children pleading with a parent we hope will be indulgent. This High Holy day strategy undermines us for the rest of the year when we feel released on our own recognizance because it’s a cheat.

Familiar. You want to know what really feels familiar today, homey even? My failings. Same as last year and the year before. Patiently crouching at the door of the holidays and all year ‘round. Perversely comfortable in their seeming ubiquity; undermining in their seeming immutability. Welcome darkness, my old friend, I’ve come to talk of you again. Jeremiah knows this dodge, as well: “ 12But they say: ‘There is no hope; so we will walk after our own devices, and we will do every one after the stubbornness of his evil heart.’”

If God refuses to be the puppet-master, then why are we so eager to be puppets? It is very difficult to take Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur seriously, to do the work of self-scrutiny, to not delude ourselves “sicklied over with the pale cast of thought” and content ourselves with empty words. It is very difficult to change but denying ownership of the problem surely won’t help. Our problems are not in our stars or in our parents.

For a while I thought there was a perverse upside to the Covid pandemic and consequent isolation. I thought, at least with my limited contact with people, I had limited opportunity to be angry, unkind, ungenerous, impatient, intolerant. But then I realized Covid-time had led me to involute, to withdraw more into myself and neglect others in my larger circle and those farther out in the world, especially with all the unrest of these times. Dickens, in his famous novella, A Yom Kippur Carol, tells us this midrash:

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

[Marley] held up [his] chain at arm's length, as if that were the cause of all [his] unavailing grief, and flung it heavily upon the ground again.

"At this time of the rolling year," the spectre said, "I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down,.."

There has been much use of the term "do-over year," as if this Covid one just doesn't count. But your biological clock knows better and your virus-susceptible biology is taking Unetaneh Tokef more seriously. If we choose to regard ourselves as puppets, whether of God or of our lives as thus far lived, what is the point of this day or of next year? James Baldwin said: "Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again." Teshuvah is to begin again.

Reflections on Yizkor

Judith Shulevitz

9/16/2021

In his introduction to a wonderful book on the history of the yizkor service,
called *May God Remember*,

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman quotes Isaac Bashevis Singer

(though in a nice irony, Hoffman can't remember where Singer says this).

In any case, Singer is said to have said, "We Jews have many faults but amnesia is not
one of them."

Of course, like all generalizations, this is not quite true.

Jews have amnesia like everyone else, or to respond to what Singer actually meant, we
forget like everyone else.

I think it might be more accurate to say that Jews are made particularly aware of their
own forgetting.

If I've become aware of anything in the past year and month since my father died,
and in the five months since my mother died,
it is that the forgetting comes on very fast.

I sense my memories breaking up into fragments.

I don't have access to their totality as people, insofar as I had ever access to it.

We can't have those conversations in which they say, no, that's not how it happened!

It happened like this! Or in which I realize that some judgment I once made was unfounded, because they never turned out to be who I thought they were.

But now they're frozen in place, and I can't make new memories.

So all I have are these shards.

And those are unreliable,

because many of them involve memories I never had.

To give an example: I've been hand-digitizing a few hundred of the thousands of slides my father left.

The earliest ones are of parents I never knew, young and hopeful, my slender mother in beautiful dresses and outfits.

My father in sunglasses and a suit jacket looking like the young Robert De Niro.

These images of them feel new to me, though I know I must have seen them before, and I'm glad to be given a glimpse of my poised and graceful parents before I met them,

before middle age began leaving lines on their faces,

and before snapshots began replacing the more elegantly posed photos of the early Sixties.

These later pictures are more revealing,

and what they reveal are more ambivalent souls,

people more haunted by the choices they made, now that there's less time left to make others.

So maybe these pictures are more honest.

But they are not part of my memory banks, though they are replacing what is in my memory banks.

They are really my father's memories, to the degree that he remembered taking the pictures.

Although I should add that I do have memories of our family watching these slides together after dinner, on one of those big screens you'd pull open and set up, with my father trying to fix the jamming carousels and right the slides that were put in upside down.

So in that sense these slides do live inside me.

Although the photographs I remember from those nights are not the ones I'm looking at now.

So those memories of my father's memories are also being replaced.

Even recollections of my parents' more recent, final years are fading, though some are clearer than others, made more distinct by my inevitable guilt over not being the daughter or caretaker I should have been.

Because as neuropsychology has shown, painful memories imprint themselves more forcefully on our neural pathways than happy memories.

So can Yizkor do something about all this forgetting?

I'm not sure.

As many of you probably already know,

Yizkor did not begin as a way to commemorate family members.

It began as a way of memorializing the faceless and nameless Jews who died in massacres.

The first Yizkor service is said to have been performed in the Middle Ages in Nuremberg to honor the Jews murdered in the Rhineland during the First Crusade. Apparently a list of names was read.

But it can't have been very comprehensive, being as how that Yizkor is said to have happened in 1295 and the Rhineland massacres occurred in 1096.

Over the years the massacres honored by Yizkor grew to include the attacks on Jews in the 14th century accused of causing the black plague, the Chmielnicki massacres in Ukraine in 1648, and now of course the Holocaust.

So I would argue that Yizkor as a ritual is meant to create and reinforce a collective memory.

Yizkor did evolve a great deal over time, and it developed a family component.

But I think at its core its original purpose remains, which is why the custom of leaving the room if you're not saying Yizkor for your own parents misses the point.

Though I am enchanted by the history of this custom, which is apparently rooted in a medieval superstition that the ghosts of the dead swirl around us during Yizkor, and could do harm to those whose parents are alive

But even though I wish that the ghosts of my parents *were* about to join us in this room

I still don't think they, specifically, are what Yizkor is about.

In the Yizkor service in our siddur~I have discovered, researching this, that almost every siddur has a different Yizkor service~there's a long exhortation written by Mordechai Kaplan and two co-authors that is meant to help us remember, as they say, the "real parents who watched over us."

But I don't think that's what Yizkor is about either.

Yizkor, I think, is a way of asking God to do the job of remembering our real parents for us.

As the actual Yizkor prayer goes, at least in the Lev Shalem, "May God remember the soul of..."

Because, as we also say, quoting Psalm 144, we ourselves are "like passing shadows," which is a phrase that evokes, for me, those slides clicking by in their carousels.

We are like our quickly disappearing memories.

And memories of us will be forgotten in their turn.

So it is only God we can trust to remember.

And I could and probably should stop here, because that's an uplifting thought.

But I am a pessimist, so I can't.

For me, since I'm not a big believer in God, and certainly not a God I can trust, Yizkor is more aspirational than petitionary.

When I say Yizkor I'm not really asking God to hold the memories I am forgetting as much as hoping that there is *some* force out there that can hold them,

the way parents hold memories for a child.

I like to think that that force, that memory container, is the Jews as a people, who remember to remember, by way of Yizkor, those who lived and died, especially those who died *because* they were Jews.

I have to be content with the power of corporate memory, which I do believe is powerful and sustaining.

Because as I've come to understand this year, it does leave you feeling rather naked, the thought that there may be no one around to carry forward the memories that you have forgotten, even if the way they are carried forward is not as personal as you might like.

Anonymous as this collective memory may be, it binds us together as a people, and that is its own consolation.

WE HAVE GONE WRONG IN THE PAST YEAR

- we Acquiesce
- we Avoid problems that require our Attention
- we are Addicted to unhealthy foods, substances and habits
- we Believe what we wish to be true
- we are Busy all the time
- we Complain
- we are Complicit
- we are Conventional
- we Capitulate and Concede
- we are Committed to our Comfort
- we Dismiss
- we are Distracted
- we go wrong through Extremism
- we Fail to Face the Facts
- we are Generally Good – but not as good as we could be
- we have gone wrong by Ghosting¹
- and by Holding on to our pain so that we cannot forgive
- we are Insincere
- we Ignore the needs of others
- we Justify our offenses (“I was *Just trying to help!*”)
- we fail to Keep others’ confidences
- we Lack purpose, *kavana*, in our prayers and in our actions
- we are Lazy – in our actions and in our imagination of what is possible
- we are Lax in our commitments
- we Look the other way
- we Make Mountains out of Molehills
- we are Needlessly Negative
- we Obfuscate
- we are Overwhelmed
- we Procrastinate
- we “Protest too much”
- we Quit
- we Rationalize
- we Revert to habitual patterns
- we are Self-centered
- we do Too little Too late
- we Underestimate others’ talents
- we Underestimate our own ability to make an impact
- we Underestimate the dangers around us
- we Undermine the norms and institutions we rely on
- we have gone wrong by Virtue signaling
- we Waste time, Waste resources, Waste our energies on matters that don’t deserve our attention
- we are Weak-Willed
- we Withdraw
- we allow our efforts, and our hope, to Wane
- we are Xenophobic
- we hear people say “Yadda-Yadda-Yadda” rather than listening carefully to their words and meaning
- we Zoom-call when we could meet in person.

¹ Engaging in online correspondence and then disappearing by failing to respond.

WE WILL DO BETTER IN THE NEW YEAR

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ we will Admit our faults ■ we will Accentuate our commonalities and not our differences ■ we will be Brave ■ we will Bear the Burdens of Bold action ■ we will do better through Civility ■ and Curiosity ■ and by Committing to the actions that we Conceive ■ we will Deliver on our promises ■ we will Examine our own behavior critically ■ we will Follow up and Follow through ■ we will do better by Focusing our attention, and Filtering out noise and distraction ■ we will do better through Generosity in material goods and Generosity of spirit ■ we will Go the extra mile; we will Go the extra inch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ we will do better through Pluralism ■ and Pragmatism ■ and by Praising others ■ and by being Punctual ■ we will Put down our Phones ■ we will ask Questions – and listen earnestly to the responses ■ we will be Reliable ■ we will Remember that when we withhold forgiveness, we hurt others and ourselves ■ we will Step up, Speak up, and Speak out ■ we will Sustain the efforts that we commit to ■ we will do better through Self-awareness ■ and through Sustainable development² ■ by Teaching the next generation to choose hope over defeat and despair |
|--|---|
-
- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ we will do better through Humility ■ we will Invest in our Ideals ■ we will do better through Inspiration and Ingenuity ■ through Joy, Kindness, Laughter and Love ■ we will do better by Listening ■ we will make the world better through Music, beauty and art ■ through Nurturing ■ by pursuing, and creating, Opportunity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ by Understanding others' perspectives ■ by Volunteering ■ and through Visionary leadership ■ by Walking a mile in someone else's shoes ■ and through Xeriscaping³ ■ we will do better by saying Yes ■ and by stepping out of our Zone of comfort ■ and we will daZZle ourselves, and one another, with all that we truly can do. |
|--|---|

Ani v'ata neshaneh et ha-olam
 Ani v'ata, az yavo-u k'var kulam
 Amru et zeh kodem lefanai
 Lo meshaneh
 Ani v'ata neshaneh et ha-olam

אני ואתה נשנה את העולם
 אני ואתה אז יבואו כבר כולם
 אמרו את זה קודם לפני
 לא משנה
 אני ואתה נשנה את העולם

You and I will change the world
 You and I by then all will follow
 Others have said it before me
 But it doesn't matter
 You and I we'll change the world

Ani v'ata nenaseh m'hatchala
 Yi'hye lanu ra, ein davar, zeh lo nora
 Amru et zeh kodem lefanai
 Zeh lo meshaneh
 Ani v'ata neshaneh et ha-olam

אני ואתה ננסה מהתחלה
 יהיה לנו רע, אין דבר זה לא נורא
 אמרו את זה קודם לפני
 זה לא משנה
 אני ואתה נשנה את העולם

You and I will try from the beginning
 It will be tough for us, no matter, it's not too bad
 Others have said it before me
 But it doesn't matter
 You and I we'll change the world

² As through the United Nations' 17 goals:
www.globalgoals.org

³ Landscaping using plants that require very little water. (Thanks to Ben Orlove for this one!)

Kohélet

Kohélet in Chapter 5 counsels keeping our lips buttoned, so this introduction had better be brief.

One event missed during the Covid suspensions was the 450th anniversary of the great essayist Montaigne's retirement from public life. After classical study, travel, law practice, distinguished military and political office, Montaigne In 1571 squirmed himself into the tower of his chateau near Bordeaux for years of intense writing. Generations can describe visiting the Montaigne library — criss-crossed with wooden beams bearing painted literary quotations — some beams showing phrases from Kohélet. Anyone here who has done something similar on wood-work at home with Kohélet in mind, or if you have plans with an interior decorator — please speak with me after services.

What makes Montaigne real for today is that his career helps unlock what is so frustrating about Kohélet's prevalent cynicism — Kohélet's message that nothing can really change, that our good deeds will evaporate.

Montaigne's work dismantles this Kohélet-like thinking head on. He starts by appreciating skepticism, agonizing about how a person's most heartfelt efforts often will be futile, But Montaigne rebounds through diverse teaching from classic writers, stoic philosophers, religious scholars, and his own wide experience. Where he comes out is to celebrate legacies built through good deeds. His using the essay medium was original, placing self-dialogue atop ageless wisdom. Montaigne reflects Jewish methods prioritizing open textual discussion — and he must have been aware of having close personal Jewish ancestry; we can claim him as a landsman.

What makes Montaigne so impressive is that he found words envisioning a mixed secular-religious sphere friendly to the coming of modern times. A sphere of this kind would hopefully cancel the religious wars and horrors he witnessed personally. His goals were peace and respect setting the stage for reason and science, while keeping the deeper religious principles.

What is revealing for today is that Montaigne did not find Kohélet limiting, but instead took encouragement. Montaigne's display of Kohélet's words on his ceiling emblemizes that this morning's text does not get stuck on its whimsical sayings, but invites overcoming limitations. Kohélet stirs us to ask: How do we deal with disillusion? When and how do good deeds make a difference in the long run? Isn't negativity a natural obstacle rather than a straight-jacket? Doesn't the work of our community in concert with our neighbors instil betterment for all? Isn't completing the Succot harvest in generous spirit an accomplishment to savor? Kohélet does not deny that larger answers are within our grasp.

And we can fortify ourselves from Kohélet's skepticism. It is no coincidence that today's reading may dampen down feasting during z'man simchatenu — at least a bit. Kohélet's disillusion should not disable but toughen. Kohélet doesn't really wish us to retreat but to

succeed toward deserved blessings extending Jewish legacy. The reading today cautions that in reaching for kiddush hashem in a mixed up world, of course we will meet discouragement. Kohellet is like the director who tells us actors — “if you think I’m being hard on you, just wait until you perform in front of an audience.”

Hopefully, through our getting seasoned wisdom like what we read this morning, our coming reviews can be kind.

Shabbat Shalom, Chag Sameach.

YIZKOR KAVANA – SHMINI ATZERET

Ron Lee Meyers

Minyan Maat – October 7, 2023

I experienced two deaths in the past year – first, David’s mom in India, and then a sort-of distant but very beloved aunt close to home. Neither of them was among my closest relationships, and yet, each death knocked me off my feet. Which made me realize that death puts us into a completely different consciousness that is foreign to the way we experience normal life.

The moment a person dies, we become acutely aware of whether we saw them as much as we would have liked, whether we visited as often as we should, whether we were as good to them as we should have been, whether we treated them fairly, gave them the credit that was due to them, whether we judged them too harshly, whether we treated them dismissively or lovingly, whether we were aware of how much we appreciated them, and whether we made them aware of our appreciation. Did we ask them all our questions? Did we listen to what they had to say? Did we remember or record their stories, or let them go out the other ear?

We don’t tend to ask these questions about the living. But when someone dies, the accounting happens fully, instantly and very harshly. And the questions are suddenly in the past tense; the door is closed to any changes.

Every time someone dies, we learn the towering importance of living our lives fully, of inhabiting our relationships fully and benevolently, of simply being good to one another. We can see so, so easily in the experience of a death that love and joy

are the structure of life, the steel and stone of our relationships, and that disputes and disagreements, grudges and insults, annoyances and inconveniences, are all just paper and dust that burn and blow away in the breeze.

We learn these lessons in our deepest layers while we are in the unique experience of grief.

And then we forget them.

The distractions of life return. The notion of death becomes distant once again; we lose the unique perspective of loss. The habits of argument and enmity, of carelessness in our words and behavior, pick up where they left off. The lessons of death escape us – or we escape them – until the next death. At which point we are lanced again with the squandered possibilities of yet another life, the lost joys, the lost connections, the lost opportunities, the lost love.

When the family gathered in India, everyone cried in grief and loss. These are the inevitable feelings. They are the deepest honor we show to those we have lost. And they are our only possible response when we are standing at the abyss, confronting the unfathomable finality and permanence of death.

And then, when some had finished crying from grief, others continued crying – in regret. Regret is not inevitable. We bring regret upon ourselves. It accrues across a lifetime and then crashes devastatingly when it's suddenly too late to set things right.

Unless we make the effort to live well. Unless we take every opportunity to make things right and set things right. Unless we take Life seriously. Which means

knowing that each of our lives is finite and uncertain. And that the overlap of our own life with anyone else's life is even more finite and uncertain. And that means taking Death seriously.

We live our lives at two levels.

One is the daily obstacle course of life – the seemingly **infinite** series of logistical and economic challenges. Our **hearts** pound and splash to keep up with everything that needs doing.

And then there is the big picture – which we are painting one brushstroke at a time, to make of our lives a single, coherent work, knowing very well that it is framed by the **finite** expanse of mortality. The single long journey of the **spirit** in this limited bodily appearance.

The challenge is to live the daily rush of the heart, *b'chol l'avcha*, while also living the long journey of the spirit, *b'chol nafsh'cha* – and to somehow integrate them *b'chol m'odecha*, with our best practical efforts day by day and year by year.

It is therefore extremely useful to contemplate Death, so that we can calibrate that effort, and orient ourselves correctly to Life. Death is the ultimate bass note of the chord that makes all the other notes make sense – the note that determines whether the other notes are harmonious or dissonant. Death is the plumb line – the heavy weight pointing down to the core of the earth, and to the core of ourselves. It's the gravitational force that shows us, for real, which way is up and which way is down, so that we can set our frame of reference.

I have a little mantra, which you may find silly, but for me it's really profound. I like to say that in the short arc we walk from the **past** to the **future**, our task in each day is to open the present. Open the present that comes to us wrapped in the morning sun and in the love we have in our lives. Open the present moment. Open the present opportunity to connect and to live fully. The presents will not keep coming forever. Do not let them pile up unopened.

Parashat Zachor, *Devar Torah*, 2/27/10, Minyan M'at**Nancy Sinkoff**

Today is *parashat Zachor* when we are commanded to remember what Amalek did to our forebears in the ancient near East. The rabbis designated this section of the Torah to be read before Purim as the evil figure of the *megillah*, Haman, is described as being descended from the Amalakites. In general, Purim is not one of my favorite holidays; I don't like dressing up in masquerade and the parodic narrative in Esther and the chaotic noise that always accompanies its reading doesn't really suit my temperament. I prefer the tortured self-reflection that is required on Yom Kippur and although some compare Purim to a small Yom Kippur (*ki-purim*), I've never really found that very convincing. Purim is a rabbinic holiday commemorating the derring-do of a beauty pageant queen in a topsy-turvy world where the Jews are powerful and the gentiles powerless; its main redeeming feature to my mind are the hamentaschen. So why my decision to give the *derash* this year?

To be frank, I didn't really choose it; it chose me and I think it did as a result of my current book project, a biography of the American Jewish historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz who was, in her own words, the "last witness" to the profound, glorious, complicated, dynamic culture of Polish Jewry, which was irreducibly destroyed by the Nazis in the last century. Whether I wanted to or not, this project requires me to face, almost every day, the terrible truth of being hated merely for existing. This is in the most direct way the meaning of today's haftorah and of the rabbinic injunction to "remember Amalek." Remember, we are told, that you are hated; reenact, we are commanded, the feelings of being overwhelmed in the desert; remember that our history is cyclical, typological, repetitive; remember this lesson by reading *megillat* Esther and seeing how Amalek's descendent tried to destroy the Jews once again. Now in my work, I confront Amalek almost every day.

And there's more to my giving this *derash*, which, again, I did not exactly choose. The command "Zachor" and the meaning of reenacting the biblical drama in the context of sacred

novel, endeavoring as best he could to describe Polish Jewry and the Ghetto uprising in great detail and verisimilitude. He labored for over three years, reading everything available to him in English and listening to the translated transcripts dictated by Dawidowicz and Nowogrodzki from their native Yiddish and Polish. Towards the end of the novel's completion, Hersey employed Nowogrodzki as a fact checker and the archives contain several letters from the young man to Hersey pointing out errors, such as the misspellings of Warsaw Street names, the incorrect time it would have taken a courier to travel from Warsaw to Vilna, the inappropriate description of the army caps worn by a common Polish soldier, the inaccurate use of Yiddish syntax, etc. Let me share one particularly evocative correction with you. In the novel, the main character, Noach Levinson, reads a poem by the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz at a literary evening before the uprising. The poem is called "Campo di Fiori." In it, Miłosz compares the early modern burnings of 'heretics' on inquisitorial pyres to the burnings of Jews. Let's look quickly at the poem together:

In Rome on the Campo di Fiori/Baskets of olives and lemons/Cobbles spattered with wine/And the wreckage of flowers./Vendors cover the trestles/With rose-pink fish;/Armfuls of dark grapes/Heaped on peach-down.

On this same square/They burned Giordano Bruno./Henchmen kindled the pyre□/Close-pressed by the mob./Before the flames had died/The taverns were full again,/Baskets of olives and lemons/Again on the vendors' shoulders.

In a letter dated October 2, 1949, Mark Nowogrodzki told Hersey that his use of the poem was anachronistic. The poem, he wrote, "refers to amusement facilities in Krasinski Square while the ghetto was burning (i.e. after the uprising); [it] was published clandestinely in 1944." The poem, he continues, was published anonymously in the underground booklet, "From the Abyss" -- published by the Jewish National Committee in 1944. An English translation [which he couldn't find] is reported to have been published in New York in 1945, still without the author's name. Then the entire booklet was reprinted in Polish in New York City, in 1945 under the name

Ghetto Poetry by the Association of the Friends of Our Tribune, Inc. The poem was written by a famous (non-Jewish) poet, Czesław Miłosz, published in a volume *Ocullenie* (Salvation) in Warsaw in 1945. Miłosz is now the cultural attaché in DC.”

Hersey, ever zealous about getting things right, wrote to Miłosz, who was, indeed, the Polish cultural attaché at that time, although five years later he defected to the United States, no longer able to tolerate the brutality of Polish communism. In Miłosz’s letter to Hersey, dated October 10, 1945, he writes: “Thanks for your letter. Nobody knows, when writing, what people in what countries had what to read. Of course, your letter gave me much pleasure. The poem was written on Easter 1943 in Warsaw. That was the only thing I could do [for] [?] my dying Jewish friends. . . . The booklet, as I have been told, reached London the same spring and ‘Campo di Fiori’ appeared in the London “Tribune” in English translation though I have not seen that translation. “From the Abyss” was reprinted in New York in 1945. That is the story of the poem. . . I am extremely curious how you treat the subject with which I am acquainted, having spent the years of war in Warsaw. I shall await the publication of your book with impatience. If you are from time to time in New York or Washington I would be extremely glad to meet you one day.” Sincerely yours, Czesław Miłosz.”

Hersey decided to keep Noach Levinson’s reading of the poem in its anachronistic setting before the uprising and strafing of the ghetto. His book, which came in over 600 pages, was published in early 1950 and became an immediate bestseller, laying the groundwork for what we can now call “Holocaust Literature,” which, Yerushalmi’s views notwithstanding, certainly plays a role in creating collective memory. Hersey’s novel became a vessel of a very particular, national American collective memory of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Anticipating Steven Spielberg, the novel ends optimistically, with the 43 surviving Jews, out of a population of 500,000, pondering their futures. You might well imagine, and correctly, that the Yiddish reception of the novel was not as enthusiastic as the English. Nonetheless, *The Wall* did convey to

American readers some of the terror of the Nazi occupation and destruction of the Jews of Warsaw. *The Wall* was most certainly on the bookshelves of most acculturated postwar American Jewish homes. I remember reading it as a teenager and, unfamiliar with the history of Polish Jewry and of East European Jewish culture, recall it making a lasting impression. It showed me that despite my suburban comforts there were people who would hate me merely because I existed. For a non-traditional American Jewish public, then, *The Wall* was a kind of secular *parashat Zakhor*.

Divrei torah are supposed to conclude with some kind of homiletic flourish. So what is the *nimshal* of the little bit of history I've shared with you about the construction of John Hersey's novel of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising?

Nimshal #1:

The *peshat*: remember that we have been and will be hated, merely for existing. The only solution to that existential dilemma is, for me, to know yourself and your history. Reenact your history collectively, metahistorically, among other Jews in consecrated Jewish spaces and within the rhythms of sacred Jewish time.

Nimshal #2:

Teach history. Be enchanted by its disenchantments; remember the assiduous research of Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Mark Nowogrodzki, and John Hersey, and the poetry of Czesław Miłosz who helped make *The Wall* a memorable book for millions of Americans, Jews and non-Jews, for whom Amalek's existence was not self-evident.

Nimshal #3: Remember your teachers and teach their work.

Shabbat shalom and hag purim same'akh.

Dvar Torah for Zachor/Vayikra-March 16, 2019

Having given a dvar Torah on the occasion of my 70th birthday last year, I felt I had nothing compelling to add this year, even though today is my birthday. As one gets older, birthdays seem to come more often, about every three months or so, so this one didn't seem to require public celebration. But then when Bonnie put out the call for a darshan for today, and Dina insisted on making two cakes for Kiddush today and Scotland insisted on distilling single-malt for today, I thought I really ought to at least make some brief remarks.

It is traditional in Minyan M'at to begin a dvar Torah for parshah Vayikra by whining about having to do a dvar Torah on Vayikra. I shall spare you the whining by immediately turning to the maftir portion of Zachor, which is always read on the Shabbos preceding Purim because of the correspondence between Amalek and Haman, a descendant. Amalek came to represent the antithesis of Jewish values in a harsh world. In Deut. 25:17-19 we read:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt-how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you in the land the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

Here we have the seemingly paradoxical remembering in order to be able to forget. We are to remember Amalek so as to strive to eliminate Amalek in the world, so that Amalek can be relegated to forgetfulness, even though that can never actually be realized. This is somewhat like the idealistic Deut. 15:4 stating *There shall be no needy among you...if you heed the Lord* while only seven psukim later in Deut. 15:11 we read the more realistic *For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land...* The endless duplicity and the vicious rapacity, the needless hatred, the persecution of the famished and weary and most vulnerable stragglers continues abroad and, most uncomfortably, at home. But I don't want to make this a political statement but, rather, a personal one. Eliminating Amalek in the world begins, like charity, at home in the most homely form of simple kindness. Zachor specifically mandates the need to remember precisely when we are most comfortable, safely ensconced at home.

I want to take Zachor as an opportunity to recognize the importance of kindness as an aspect of opposition to Amalek. The commandment is to remember and what does one remember? Hopefully, we remember those acts of kindness by others which made a difference to us and we remember those failed opportunities for kindness from us which might have kept Amalek just a little at bay. Is this trivializing Amalek? Robert Louis Stevenson would not think so. Stevenson had been a sickly, peculiar-looking, eccentric only-child, often privately tutored in social isolation, later rejected by his parents for his atheism. His life and the course of his life were often saved by the kindness of others. He wrote: "It is the history of our kindnesses that alone make this world tolerable. If it were not for that, for the effect of kind words, kind looks,

kind letters . . . I should be inclined to think our life a practical jest in the worst possible spirit.” We sometimes refer to ‘kindness’ with the phrase “random acts of kindness,” to contrast kindness with Amalek-like “random acts of violence.” But kindness is never random; it represents a conscious and specific choice to offer or withhold, nor is the recipient random, even if a stranger. As I grow older I better remember the kindnesses done me, which kept my life from going awry, and the kindnesses I failed to offer which might have made a difference. Paul Manafort may have led “a blameless life,” but I have not. I have been in a kindness tutorial with Dina for many decades now and I hope never to graduate.

Consider that we are literally, dues-paying *Ansche Chesed*, a people of kindness. M’at was originally founded as a davening-justified friendship circle and not as an institution. We have tried to maintain an adult Magic Circle in which everyone mostly strives to be their best selves and there is usually a sense of urgency in repairing ruptures in the *shalom bayit* whether in person or online. You have all shown kindness with your readiness to bury the dead, feed the bereaved, visit the sick, offer much sought-after advice online and even occasionally to allow a newcomer onto your Kiddush conversation dance card. But being kind to our own should serve as training to enable us to go out in the world that it may rely more on the kindness of strangers.

At the conclusion of every *shachris* and *musaf Amidah* we read: “...You have revealed to us the the Torah which sustains life, which teaches the love of kindness...” and this is represented in the tradition of *gemilut Hasidim*, the giving of loving-kindness in acts with no expectation of reciprocity. So uncomfortable are we with the seeming absence of kindness that many *Haggadot* and many *seders* have included the *Pour Out Thy Love* manuscript, a fraudulent “discovery” by the known *Neturei Karta* forger Rabbi Hayyim Bloch, alongside *Shfoch Hamatcha*.

Tennyson understood the importance of simple kindness. Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born into a middle-class family, and was not made Baron Tennyson by Queen Victoria for his services over what would be forty-two years as Poet Laureate until the age of 75. He wrote the poem *Lady Clara Vere de Vere* in 1842 when he was thirty-three, apparently as a reproach to some of the aristocrats he encountered. Here are a few modified stanzas:

. Trust me, Clara Vere de Vere,
 From yon blue heavens above us bent, 50
 The gardener Adam and his wife
 Smile at [your] claims of long descent.
 Howe’er it be, it seems to me,
 ’Tis only noble to be good.

Kind hearts are more than coronets, 55
 And simple faith than Norman blood.

*** ***

Clara, Clara Vere de Vere, 65
 If Time be heavy on your hands,
 Are there no beggars at your gate,
 Nor any poor about your lands?
 Oh! teach the orphan-boy to read,
 Or teach the orphan-girl to [know] 70
 Pray Heaven for a human heart,
 And let the foolish [notions] go.

For the old-timers: yes, this is the source of the title of the Alec Guinness film *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Kind hearts are more than smicha, more than doctorates, more than MDs. On yahrtzeits and at Yizkor, I would like to think we are particularly attuned to remembering the kindnesses of those we have lost. As for me, when the injunction to remember to forget inevitably becomes the fate of forgetting to remember and I no longer recall the faces, and the kindnesses and the love, then I hope some kind pneumonia will deliver me and leave behind a little remembrance of kindness.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Devar Torah for Shabbat ha-Gadol, March 27, 1999

Nancy Sinkoff

I am going to begin today with some reflections on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Humanism and Terror, originally published in 1947 as Essai sur le Probleme Communiste, an exposition devoted to the problem between revolution and violence written in the context of the postwar Continental Left, and whether one could remain an adherent of international socialism without falling prey to Soviet totalitarian Marxism or becoming a toady to American capitalism. These questions may seem far from the topic of today's parashah, but in the spirit of shabbat ha-gadol, when all of us are turning towards preparation for Passover, I begin with Merleau-Ponty because it is part of my journey towards self-knowledge and freedom, and what is the Exodus from Egypt if not the Ur-journey, the original typology of a journey towards home and towards freedom? Some of these questions may seem less obscure for those of you who caught the rebroadcast of Joseph Dorman's film, "Arguing the Word," about the New York Intellectuals and their journey from the assured socialism of City College's Alcove One to an ambivalent, if not hostile, anti-Left posture in the post-World War II period, excepting the late Irving Howe, who remained committed to democratic socialism until his death. Or, perhaps the questions will seem more relevant to those of you who were aware of the controversy surrounding the bestowal of the award for lifetime achievement to Elia Kazan, the legendary director who informed on his fellow Left-wing comrades during the McCarthy era.

Merleau-Ponty's conundrum, as he articulated it, was:

We find ourselves in an inextricable situation. The Marxist critique of capitalism is still valid and it is clear that anti-Sovietism today resembles the brutality, hubris, vertigo, and anguish that already found expression in fascism. On the other side, the Revolution has come to a halt: it maintains and aggravates the dictatorial apparatus while renouncing the revolutionary liberty of the proletariat in the Soviets and its Party and abandoning the humane control of the state. It is impossible to be an anti-Communist and it is not possible to be a Communist.¹

Here, Ponty challenged whether or not the revolutionary Terror of the Bolshevik revolution was justified in the pursuit of a new, utopian society devoted to human freedom. In the course of the essay, Ponty decried what was commonplace among many ardent Leftists of the 1930s, that the ends, the freedom to be born under a revolutionary government, justified the means, no matter how violent. Ponty rejected this reasoning and rejected it as the only interpretation of Marxism. Ponty was trying to save what he believed was classical Marxism from its realization on earth in the form of Leninism and then Stalinist butchery. I do not intend, here, to engage in casuistry with my left-wing penchants (although, unlike many perhaps in the minyan, I still find these questions of political theory interesting and even compelling). I begin with Merleau-Ponty for several reasons. First, because I think the conception of freedom as unfettered liberation from oppression is still such a powerful one, as is the concomitant idea of perfecting, even remaking, the condition and essence of the slave which has been oppressed. Third, because I am interested in thinking about the Jewish conception of liberation, which I believe addresses the fundamental question of the relationship between the means of attaining freedom and the end of freedom itself.

Freedom, of course, is not a static concept; its meaning has changed throughout history. We start, as always, with our core text, the Hebrew Bible. At first glance, we see that the process of redemption begins with Terror, for what are the ten plagues but an inexorable chain of constriction, leading ultimately to death. The Torah is explicit about the violence, "And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead" / "vatehi za'akah

¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, author's preface, p. xxi.

gedola bemizrayim ki-ain beit asher ain sham met." (Exodus 12:30) The Hebrew emphasizes the nothingness and finality of the destruction in its repetition of the word that connotes the utter void, ain. But this act of violence, followed soonthereafter by the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, are singular acts. That is, our formative, revolutionary liberation from Egyptian oppression is a unique historical act of God in history, a Divine action which is not based on human means, as the haggadah translates for us, "Then God took us out of Egypt. Not by an angel. Nor by seraph. Nor by a messenger. Rather, the Holy One Himself, in His glory, as it is written, "For that night I will pass through Egypt, and I will strike down every firstborn in Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am God." (Exodus 12:12)

Yet, in contrast to this visceral description of liberation, Israelite freedom, the possibility of making men out of slaves, is absolutely predicated on our acceptance of the yoke of Divine Service after our liberation, as made abundantly clear in the Torah. Once liberated, our future freedom, is predicated on our clear understanding of Divine service, of avoda. This is not arguable. The aggrieved situation of the Israelites in Egypt after the death of Joseph is described by this very word, to show its transformation after the Exodus. Look at Exodus 1:13 which states, "And the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigour; va-ya'avdu mizrayim et benei yisra'el befarekh." The very next verse, Exodus 1:14, repeats the verb avoda four times, "vayemarreru et hayeihem ba-avoda kasha behomer uvilevenim uvekhol avoda ba-sadeh et kol avodatam asher avdu bahem befarekh/And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made they serve with rigor." The meaningless, yet brutal work, in Egypt is juxtaposed by the divine service, signified by the same word in Hebrew (avoda), which is the end, the goal, of the Israelites' liberation. In Exodus 7:26, God says to Moses, "Go to Pharoah and tell him to let my people go, so that they may serve me"/"bo el-Paro ve'amarta elav, koh amar ha-Shem, shalah et ami veyavduni." The subjugation, shiabud, again playing off the same trilateral

root (ayin, bet, dalet), is contrasted with the avoda to be enacted under conditions of freedom.

The haftorah for shabbat ha-gadol reemphasizes the point. God complains that Israel has, typically, turned away from him, feigning a lack of understanding of what is required of this recalcitrant nation, (Malachi 3:7): "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my ordinances, and have not kept them. Return to Me and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?" and later, Israel claims that "It is vain to serve (avad) God (Malachi 4:13)." God assures us, through Malachi, that He will remember those who serve him as a man remembers his son who serves him (Malachi 3:17). "Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not"/"veshavtem ura'item bein zaddik le-rasha bein oved elohim la'asher lo avadu."

Standing where we do today, rabbinically-oriented Jews living in a land abundant with material possibility and oriented towards the personal fulfillment as the preeminent value, what to we understand liberation/freedom to mean? And how, in God's name, does any of this have to do with the obscure references to the arguments of political theoreticians of the first part of the twentieth century?

My point, polemic is perhaps the better word, is that our freedom, the act of leaving Egypt, is never the end of our process of liberation. It is the beginning. So though we spend a lot of time and money preparing for the seder, cleaning our houses, negotiating who is going where, discussing matzoh ball recipes, all in preparation for the great event, the great transformation, in fact, the drama of our lives of Jews begins afterward. Those of us who forget this central point will remain not in a state of half-liberation. Worse those who elide the obligatory nature of Jewish freedom, who stress only the heady transformative moment of freedom, could end up justifying all kinds of heinous behaviors in pursuit of this unfinished goal. This was the central question of Merleau-Ponty's essay: was the successful fulfillment of the revolutionary state the end of the quest for freedom and did its establishment justify all of the means to obtain it? Our tradition answers this question with a resounding "no." The act of liberation,

accompanied by violence, death, blood-letting by God, is a one-time necessity, effected by the Divine alone, in order that His people serve Him. We believe, as rabbinic Jews (perhaps not without some qualifications) that the Law bequeathed to us at Sinai is a covenant of means through which our liberatory state can be fulfilled in our lifetimes as individuals. We believe that the law, both because of and despite its demands, is a moral law. A law that protects us from extremes of terror and the abuse of power. Now I am neither naïve or sanguine about human behavior. I know how capable we are of abusing all of God's gifts. But here I am talking theory. The principle is that service to God, fulfillment of his commandments, uplifts us from a state of subjugation/shi'abud to a state of perfectability through service/avoda to God. The desire to make heaven on Earth, the search for perfectability, is what links the Exodus to the political theory of the Left (Elisheva Urbas mentioned Michael Walzer's study, Exodus and Revolution, here several years ago; and not unrelated, Joseph Dorman's film closes with Walzer's eulogy of Irving Howe) and to the American conception of living in the Promised Land. As rabbinic Jews we know that we're not in the Promised Land, either literally or figuratively. We have not perfected ourselves. But do we stand back from the contemporary American conception of freedom, which seems to emphasize only the directionality of leaving oppression and not the directionality of accepting obligation and law? I imagine, or fear perhaps, that there are those among us who are thinking that I, too, have made the political journey from the Left to abandonment of its hopes. I haven't; that is why I began with Merleau-Ponty, who struggled in the extremist years of the 1930s to carve a humanist third way in the midst of Terror while remaining true to his political commitments in striving to create a more human society. My goal here was to emphasize what many of us know, after all I am preaching to the converted, that the central drama of the Torah is our relationship to God and His law. That is why he liberated us from Egypt.

I don't know how Baruch Bosker, in whose memory this devar torah, was prepared and given, would have reacted to my words. Certainly, these were not

traditional teachings of Torah. But, I like to believe that he would have appreciated the effort and I know that he would have rejoiced at the continued life of the minyan, where he prayed for many years. As David Curzon mentioned last year, as time goes on many of us here will no longer have concrete memories of Baruch. So, how can we relate our words to his person, his teachings? The liturgy for Passover gives us one clue. Sometimes davening makes a lot of sense to me, the rhythm of the words, the closeness of the kahal, the familiarity of the text. On other times, the words seem dull, the kahal unfocused, the familiarity of the text oppressive. But I've come to the conclusion, which is very much in the spirit of this devar torah, that there is wisdom in repetition and familiarity because, over the course of life, different parts of the liturgy become meaningful. Now Hallel is one of those parts of the liturgy that is almost always a delight for me to recite, particularly because one of my closest friends is a Hallel baby, and I think of her when I recite it. But since the death of mother, I have always been struck by one phrase in Psalm 115: "lo ha-metim yihalelu yah"/"the dead do not celebrate God." Encapsulated in this poetic stich is an exhortation, it seems to me, to live life to its fullest because this is our only shot at it. We are admonished to be conscious and to thank God for our life. I would like to close by saying that the phrase speaks to me today, as we evoke the memory of R. Baruch Micha Bokser, our teacher, husband, father, son, and friend. As the Psalm continues, "va-anakhnu nevarekh yah, me'atah ve'ad olam"/"But as for us, let us praise God from this time forth and forever." We honor Barukh and continue his teachings by being here, davening, learning some Torah, and praising God. Liberated by God from the oppression of Egypt, we are now obligated to praise our liberator. That is the way Baruch would have wanted it.

Shabbat Shalom, Hag Sameah, Kasher ve-Ta'im.

Dvar Torah for Shabbos HaGadol- April 7, 1990

Although it was traditional for the drash on Shabbos HaGadol to be concerned with the laws of kashrut for Pesach, I thought our seders might be better served by examining a question which is potentially as problematic as the presence of chumetz; namely, how can we reconcile the repeated statement that God hardened pharaoh's heart with the concept of free will and with the consequences which were visited upon pharaoh and the Egyptian people. Just as we do not celebrate with a full second cup because of the loss of life involved in the liberation, so how could we celebrate Pesach with a full heart if we are beset by doubts about the basic moral stance adopted in pursuing our freedom: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?" This issue is all the more important because with the Exodus, we have the first declaration in religious history that human beings were intended to live in a state of freedom. However, as overwhelmingly important as such a declaration was, it would be offensive if the principle of liberty was established only by depriving pharaoh of his free will. There can be no suspension of the ethical even for God. If God were willing to compromise principle in order to establish the greatness of God's name then, for instance, the story of Jonah might have been told very differently with the king of Nineveh, who was to his day what pharaoh had been to his, having his heart hardened so that he became unable to repent, rather than freely repenting.

Before we proceed, let me address a few issues briefly so that we do not get side-tracked by them. It is simply an error in logic to assume that knowledge of the future, such as God possesses and demonstrates repeatedly, in and of itself necessarily compromises free will and compels action and it would represent an error in our conception of Judaism to imagine that God's omniscience compromises free will. The freedom to act for good or ill is central to any meaningful form of Judaism and so we are told that "all is determined in Heaven except for the fear of Heaven." In Exodus 4 we heard God cajoling and bargaining with Moses to accept his predestined role as leader rather than simply compelling Moses by force. Also, it would be anachronistic of us not to accept that the Egyptian people, most of whom participated in the enslavement and exploitation of the Israelites, must necessarily suffer for the actions of their sovereign. The Exodus story represents a confrontation between God and the would-be god, pharaoh, whose divinity was accepted by all of his subjects.

Now, before we pursue the matter of the nature of the hardening of the heart, let us be clear about what is recorded. From the episode of the pre-plague confrontation involving Moses' rod turning into a snake through the fifth plague, we are explicitly told that pharaoh's heart stiffened without God's intervention. God knows pharaoh's nature yet continues to give him an opportunity to "know the Lord." Indeed, God instructs Moses to ask that the Israelites be allowed to journey only three days into the wilderness, as if they were to return, thus, one would assume, making it easier for pharaoh to grant the request and, thereby, making him appear even more hardened for refusing. God extends the principle that if the sinner will take but one step

towards God, God will come the rest of the way. But pharaoh refuses to acknowledge the true Divinity by taking a step or yielding.

And so, with the sixth plague, God directly hardens pharaoh's heart. Yet with the very next plague, God is no longer active in this regard, as if to give pharaoh yet another chance after this experience. However, for the seventh, pharaoh stiffens his own heart again. With that pharaoh's fate is sealed as he demonstrates that his stubbornness is the product of his own volition and that he is a callous, evil-minded person who must bear full responsibility for his iniquitous acts, freely and knowingly perpetrated. Twice pharaoh explicitly acknowledges having sinned, asks for forgiveness and sins again. God utilizes pharaoh's natural proclivity toward evil and demonstrated inability to repent and change so that for the final three plagues God is again active in hardening pharaoh's heart.

However, we still have to address the issue of what process is involved in this "hardening of the heart." If God can be said to have, in any way, directly compelled a choice on pharaoh's part, however repugnant a person pharaoh may have been, then we might feel that our Festival of Freedom has been compromised. Nowhere is this process of stiffening explicitly discussed but, I believe, the text does hint to us what is involved. When pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart, courtiers and/or magicians are present. When God hardens pharaoh's heart, pharaoh is either alone or not addressed by attendants; the point being that God hardens pharaoh's heart by having pharaoh relatively more separated from either the presence or the words of his fellow human beings, an identity the would-be god resists, so that his nature and decisions remain untempered by those of others for either mercy or severity, so that his determination to not let the Israelites go is most fully his and most fully an expression of his untrammelled free will.

This notion of the potentially softening effect of our natural gregariousness can be better understood by reference to the story of Jonah, which also deals with an inability to repent. I believe the book of Jonah, properly understood, is not a record of God's attempt to employ Jonah to redeem the obdurate king and people of Nineveh but, rather, it is the story of how God used the king and people of Nineveh, whom God knew would readily repent if only they were approached and educated, in order to redeem Jonah, who had developed too rigid and inhumane a notion of God's ways and who had become too remote from his fellow creatures and who wished to see the Ninevites punished.

The story contains no mention of any personal context of Jonah's life-no friends or acquaintances-except that he is the son of Amittai, who never appears in the story. During the storm, Jonah is asleep in the lowest level of the ship taking no part in the struggles of the sailors. Jonah is cast out of the society of sailors and then spends three days in the belly of the great fish, as if to emphasize his life-long isolation from others. Yet Jonah resents the ready and earnest repentance of the Ninevites, thereby avoiding God's wrath. God so despairs of Jonah's inhumanity that God attempts to give him the experience of a relationship and the pain of loss using a gourd! The story ends with that odd sentence which concludes: "...that great city,

wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much cattle” because the king of Nineveh had previously acknowledged the interconnectedness of all creatures when he commanded that “neither man nor beast shall taste anything but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast.” Pharaoh, like Jonah, cared not at all for either man or beast. And Jonah, like pharaoh, is possessed of free will in the matter because the text is silent at the end as to whether or not Jonah responded to God’s instruction.

It is our own God-given gregariousness, a word derived from the Latin for “herd,” which helps temper our sometimes harsh individual natures. This gregariousness, which Jonah would contemptuously dismiss as “herd instinct,” gives us our love of community and concern for the welfare of others.

In today’s parshah we read of the sacred gift of greeting, the zevach shelamim, by which we used one of our fellow creatures to intercede for us in a special sacrifice. While the mincha could be eaten only by priests, the zevach shelamim was eaten by the worshipper along with the priests, in a community which included God as the honored guest. In today’s haftarah, Malachi speaks of how, on the Great Day of the Lord, the heart of the fathers shall be turned to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers to eliminate family and communal strife. In Shir haShirim, which we are to read next Shabbos, we read of a poeticized relationship between God and the community of Israel.

It is to be hoped that when the nations of Eastern Europe chose to no longer live as groups of oppressed individuals and rise up as whole communities that they recall who the true Author of their freedom was and of which holiday they, and all people who have striven to be free, have heard the echo throughout history.

It may be that on seder night, when we gather with friends and family around the symbols of Pesach, that we will be reminded why we were originally commanded to consume the paschal lamb in “chevrusa” and how community shelters us against a hardened heart with which no seder can be Pesachdik because “Ha lachma anya” becomes chometz.

Baruch Bokser, who died July 12, 1990 was an early, but not a founding, member of Minyan M'at who was a professor at the Seminary and who, like all of us, had his personal quirks. He wrote a fair amount in his lifetime but he is remembered primarily for his slim volume, "The Origins of the Seder" on the development of the Passover ritual by early Rabbinic Judaism, which has been mostly out of print. I doubt he is much read nowadays outside of specialists in academia. In M'at today he is probably unknown to the majority of current members who may well wonder about all the fuss every Shabbos HaGadol when the dvar Torah is given in his memory. He was a son, husband and a father, like many, and his passing, while sad at the time, has been receding into the slough of history and his loss has been joined by that of many others since.

No, that can't be what you expected to hear today. Let me start again.

Baruch Bokser, who died July 12, 1990 at the age of 44, was a professor of Talmud and Rabbinics and the director of the Program in Ancient Judaism at the Seminary. He came of a distinguished family, his father having edited the siddur you hold in your hands. Baruch had smicha and a doctorate, he had a massive working knowledge of Talmudic thought as well as the best of rigorous, modern historical scholarship and he was clearly the person in the minyan to go to for all manner of questions. He produced a prodigious amount of work, including three books, in his relatively brief career and the horizon had not yet appeared on what he was capable of producing. He died bravely about a year and a half after receiving what was essentially a death sentence without despair and with his belief that we each have the power to change and to effect change still intact. It was a searing loss for Ann, the boys, Kalya, and this minyan that resonates to this day.

Which view better approximates "the Truth?" Shall we understate for fear of overstating? Shall we allow the fiction of an objective history to cause us to misrepresent history?

With the passage of time I have become more aware of the natural human tendency to gild memory, to round the rough edges and airbrush the warts. I sometimes question my objective knowledge of the very ongoingness of my own life. And yet I realize that to equate what is supposedly "objective" with what is necessarily "true" is a grievous error and that memory is a human construct and that only that which has real emotional resonance lingers.

The focus of Baruch's scholarship was Pesach and specifically the Rabbinic response to the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple and the perpetuation of Pesach and memory by other means. Baruch was observant and deeply believing but trained in modern historical methods and no fool and not apt to devote himself to something he did not believe in. He had been long gone when in 2001 Rabbi David Wolpe, senior rabbi of the Sinai Temple in Westwood, Los Angeles and columnist for The Jewish Week sermonized to his 2200 congregants that the Exodus probably had not occurred and that Moses probably had not existed, primarily because of the lack of archaeological evidence.

We are all sons and daughters of the Enlightenment and we hope that what we profess and the rituals we perform will, in addition to carrying the weight and imprimatur of tradition, be palatably explicable in rational terms so that we do not have to resort to the psychological dodge of a double consciousness severing reason from practice. The Rabbis in the Haggadah tell us "...whoever amplifies upon the events associated with the

Exodus deserves praise” so that we are given the magnification of the plagues into 50 in Egypt and 250 at the Yam Suf. Now amidst a Rabbinic sanction to elaborate we have to decide whether the claims of a supposed Exodus of 3250 years ago are sufficiently compelling so that the adults can conduct a seder with rational conviction rather than as something done for the kinder or for the grandparents or so that others in the community do not look at them askance. As if that was not burden enough, if we are to face the issues of conviction and comfort regarding Pesach squarely, then we also have to consider the matters of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the justification and likelihood of the plagues and the justification of G-d imposing bondage upon the Israelites in the first place. What follows is not some grand synthesis but rather one person’s attempt to provide himself with an intellectually respectable framework so that he need not feel either a fundamentalist or a fool.

First, let us consider the limits of what the labors of archaeologists can reasonably be expected to yield. The pursuit of the proof in stone of the existence of a single individual, unless he was the lord of a great empire, is a fool’s mission. We would not, even in theory, expect to find archaeological evidence for Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. Bear in mind that it was not until 1993 that the first fragment was discovered containing the words for “king of Israel” and the “House of David.” In addition, we know from cross correlation of sources that the pharaohs did not record defeats, repeatedly lied in their inscriptions on public works, claimed the victories of others as their own and effaced the names of others and inserted their own. Further complicating the task at hand is the statement of Dr. Jeffrey Tigay that 99% of all administrative records of the Raameside period, which would be the most likely source to contain the sought-after confirmatory data as opposed to the stelae and such for public display, have been lost, not merely not yet found.

In terms of modern disbelief of ancient texts it is instructive to consider two examples. It was one of the settled matters of modern scholarship that Homer’s reports of ancient Greek mariners sailing far and wide across the Mediterranean for days on end far from land simply were not true because not possible. In 2001 an ancient Greek wreck of the Homeric period was found 200 miles from Cyprus. Similarly, modern scholarship long ago dismissed as false the explanation the ancient Greeks provided for the trance state of the oracle at Delphi; namely vapors rising from beneath the temple floor. In 2002 it was discovered that the region’s oily limestone is fractured by two hidden faults that cross exactly under the ruins of the temple through which intoxicating ethylene passed. So while we shall continue to hope for further archaeological finds, it appears that we should regard ancient texts as perhaps more reliable than we often do.

So, excuses aside, what do we have? Let us consider the Torah and archaeology in parallel.

“Midianite men, traders, passed by; they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver...” (Ber. 37:28) Evidence demonstrates that twenty pieces of silver was, in fact, the average price for a slave in the first half of the second millennium BCE with the price rising to 30 pieces by the second half.

“And it was on the third day, Pharaoh’s birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants and he counted the Chamberlain of the Cupbearers and the Chamberlain of the Bakers among his servants. He restored the Chamberlain of the Cupbearers...” (Ber.

40:20) Archaeological findings inform us that what was called the “birthday” of Pharaoh represented the celebration of his accession to the throne-his divine birth-on the occasion of which prisoners and enemies could be pardoned.

“‘See! I have placed you in charge of all the land of Egypt.’ And Pharaoh removed his ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand. He then had him dressed in garments of fine linen and he placed a gold chain upon his neck.” (Ber. 41:41-42) Many tomb paintings and reliefs, and specifically those of Tut at Amarna, depict officials being invested in a ceremony involving receiving a ring, fine linen and a gold chain.

A high-ranking official, Vizier Aper-el, was completely unknown to modern scholarship until the late 1980’s despite having lived in one of the better documented periods of Egyptian history and having been buried in the most excavated site in Egypt. Joseph would have lived in the late Middle Kingdom to Second Intermediate period for which there is much less documentation and he would have lived in the Delta region which is still under-excavated. Aper-el is clearly a Semitic name, suggesting that such alien people could be appointed to high positions.

“And [Jacob] said, ‘Behold, I have heard that there are provisions in Egypt; go down there and purchase for us from there, that we may live and not die.’” (Ber. 42:2) Further the Torah tells us that the frontier was being monitored because Joseph’s brothers were spotted and brought to Joseph: “Joseph’s brothers came and they bowed to him, faces to the ground.” (Ber. 42:6) From a group of papyri we have the following: “We have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the Fortress of Merneptah Hotep-hir-Maat to the pools of Per-Atum to keep them and their cattle alive...”

Joseph is reported to have been mummified and placed in a coffin. These are Egyptian practices completely unknown in Canaan. Joseph reportedly died at the age of 110, which was considered the ideal length of life in ancient Egypt.

The narrative of Moshe’s birth contains several words that are clearly of Egyptian origin, such as: tevet/basket; gomeh/bulrushes; zafet/pitch; suf/reeds; hayor/river; and safah/riverbank. Moshe being reared at court is possible. Pharaoh Thutmose III (1457-1425 BCE) initiated the Egyptian practice of raising princes of subject kings of Western Asia. Aper-el, the Semite who became a vizier, was referred to as “a child of the nursery.” These nurseries might have housed dozens to hundreds of children.

“Now when Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for G-d said, ‘The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.’” (Sh. 13:17) This statement from the Torah would seem to be supported by papyrus Anastasi V from the end of the thirteenth century BCE. This document reports on the pursuit of two runaway slaves who took the same indirect route that the Israelites did from Raamses to Succot in order to avoid the Egyptian fort of Tjaru in the generally militarized region of Tjeku. The papyrus also states that it is a one day journey from Raamses to Succot, just as in the Torah.

The Shirat HaYam, the Song of the Sea, a song of triumph is overwhelmingly thought to be of thirteenth century BCE origin and one of the earliest pieces of Hebrew poetry, based on comparative sources. That date would correspond to the era of the Exodus.

Finally, regarding the reality of the plagues, let me just mention that Dr. Greta Hort introduced a reasonable theory of successive biologic causation for the first six and regional climatologically rational explanations for the next three in 1957 which Dr. John

Marr confirmed as plausible in 1996 while providing an explanation for a predominance of first-born deaths in the tenth. The elements of these theories operate over the course of a year, which corresponds to the Rabbinic understanding of the length of time involved.

But the mention of the plagues provides a transition to the next concern that a modern Upper West Sider might raise in terms of moral discomfort with what the seder commemorates. Since we insist along with Abraham, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Ber. 18:25), then how can it be that Pharaoh is punished despite G-d hardening his heart and why should the courtiers and the Egyptians be punished generally?

First, let it be understood that neither G-d’s statement to Abraham at the Pact Between the Pieces “...I shall execute judgment on the nation they shall serve...” (Ber. 15:13) nor G-d’s statement to Moshe at the burning bush “Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might” (Sh. 3:19) impact on the matter at hand. That G-d’s omniscience in no way necessarily compromises free will has been well addressed elsewhere.

In reviewing, you will recall that Pharaoh hardens his own heart for the first five plagues. G-d hardens Pharaoh’s heart for the first time with the sixth. For the seventh plague Pharaoh is again free to act and he chooses to reject Moshe’s plea. Thereafter G-d hardens Pharaoh’s heart. Unethical you say for G-d to proceed in such a way and deprive Pharaoh of his free will? However, we read, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart *and* the hearts of his courtiers...” (Sh. 10:1) and yet six lines later the courtiers say to Pharaoh, “Are *you* not yet aware that Egypt is lost?” thereby persuading Pharaoh to summon Moshe and Aaron to court. The courtiers were apparently able to overcome G-d’s hardening and so we have to assume that Pharaoh had the same capability which he refused to exercise.

Well then, how do we justify the deaths of the courtiers? In a reciprocal of the above, in Shemot 14:4 G-d states, “Then I will stiffen Pharaoh’s heart...” but in 14:5 the Torah tells us, “...Pharaoh *and* his courtiers had a change of heart...” The courtiers had chosen their own course. In 14:8, again, we read, “The L-rd stiffened the heart of Pharaoh...” yet all the courtiers engage in the pursuit of the Israelites, as well.

All right then, how do we justify the suffering of the soldiers under orders and the Egyptians generally? First, though it may offend modern sensibilities, Frymer-Kensky reminds us that in the ancient world it was understood that the city or nation is liable for the actions of its ruler. In many sources Pharaoh is referred to simply as “Egypt”, embodying the whole nation, its history and gods. Indeed, this is the very reason G-d confronts Pharaoh.

But the Egyptian people are further implicated in events personally and directly. In Shemot 1:8 we are told Pharaoh addressed “his people” saying, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let *us* deal shrewdly with them...” In Shemot 1:13 we read, “The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites the various labors...” In Shemot 11:3 we read that, “The L-rd disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people...” suggesting that they were not kindly disposed to the Israelites before. And, as subsequent historical events have shown, Pharaoh’s “willing executioners” must be held accountable because even a tyrant and an army cannot impose such immoral behavior on an unwilling people.

Finally, we come to what is the most difficult question to satisfactorily answer and which is also most central to our observance of Pesach; that is, what justified the *Israelite* suffering in Egypt? I would have said “*our* suffering,” but that is the very identification that hangs in the balance with the present discussion and which is the central mission of the Haggadah. It may be that for a more fundamentalist mind serving as a means so that “[G-d’s] fame may resound throughout the world” (Sh. 9:16) is quite sufficient but we would be uncomfortable with that as the sole justification. This question has been considered throughout our history and a comprehensive review of the attempts at answering it would be daunting. I will give a very brief overview of some of the traditional answers.

It has been claimed that at the Pact Between the Pieces G-d was merely informing Abraham of future events and that no cosmic scheme required Israelite bondage but that the Israelites’ attempts at assimilation in Egypt resulted in the enslavement. If one accepts the Amoraic position of “no suffering without sin,” then commentators have claimed the bondage as retribution for Abraham’s sins of leaving for Egypt and not trusting in G-d during the famine, for misleading Pharaoh, for endangering Sarah, or for the lack of faith implicit in asking “How do I know I will possess it?” (Ber. 15:8) Or, perhaps, the enslavement was punishment for Sarah’s treatment of Hagar, the Egyptian slave? Or it might have been that the people inherited the sin of Joseph having been sold into slavery. Or possibly the bondage did not represent a punishment at all but was a Divinely conceived plan to educate and develop the Jewish people. On a theological level, the educational message of Egypt was the Exodus and the message was intended for the world. Or the experience of enslavement was intended to serve as the fountainhead of compassion and moral awareness, given how often mitzvot are preceded or followed by a reference to the bondage in Egypt. Or the enslavement was a protective maneuver intending to save the Israelites from assimilation and to teach them to be “a nation apart.” I have hardly been exhaustive here.

Obviously, all of these attempts at justifying the bondage in Egypt and Israelite suffering will not satisfy modern sensibilities. G-d using us as pawns and a means for a grand theological statement will not do. Certainly the concepts of “no suffering without sin” and that of “chastisements of love” will not serve in a post-Holocaust world.

The only explanation that I have ever been able to generate that made some comfortable sense to me involves the beginning of Parsha Vayeshev which I will present as a concatenation of snippets. “This, then, is the toledot (that is, the story or line) of Jacob [colon] And Joseph brought bad reports of {his brothers} to their father...his brothers, they hated him...Israel said to Joseph: ‘Go and see as to your brother’s [shalom]...’ a man came upon him wandering in the fields...’What do you seek?’ ‘I am looking for my brothers’... {his brothers} saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him...and {they} cast him in a pit...Midianite traders...pulled Joseph up...{and} sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.”

Here the fate of Jacob’s descendants is determined by his children in a context of the operation of free will in which G-d’s active involvement, if any, is limited to the appearance of an agent who affords the brothers a potential opportunity for reconciliation which is spurned with all the natural and inevitable attendant consequences for them and us, because we are the continuation of the story or line of Jacob/Israel. Once that course

was set upon by the brothers' choices, then G-d was free to use the consequences for G-d's purposes in this world, as with Pharaoh's unregenerate heart.

I think this approach converts a seemingly superfluous scene into a poignant encounter. I refer to Bereshit 46: "So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheva...G-d called to Israel in a vision by night: 'Jacob! Jacob!' He answered, 'Here.' And G-d said, 'I am G-d, the G-d of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation.'" The language of this text echoes the previous encounters with the Divine of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and that yet to come for Moshe at the burning bush. Jacob is encamped at Beer-sheva, just at the border with Egypt, struggling at night, as he once had years before, knowing he is being drawn inexorably by his love of Joseph but also knowing that in entering Egypt he will be fulfilling the prophecy made to Abraham, thereby condemning his descendants to enslavement. It is this fear G-d reassures him about. Jacob understands that, twist and turn as he may, G-d's word will be fulfilled by the inevitabilities of human nature. And so, resigned, he turns towards the border...and history.

In my view, if at a minimum at the seder we were talking about how a small, ragtag bunch of Semitic nomads with a loose kinship connection was transformed by a common experience of some sort of oppression from which they escaped under circumstances regarded by them as unusual so that they developed a common identity which resisted lapse and loss for over three millennia often under the most trying circumstances so that the resultant people and its remembrance of Pesach survived down to this day and so that the seder commemorating their origins remained the oldest continuously observed annual ritual on earth, I would embrace this and say –Dayyenu- it would be enough to celebrate. I would hope, in addition, we would have the ability to perceive an aspect of Divinely ordained purpose to this astonishing group survival.

I was not present that last Shavuot Yizkor Baruch was able to appear at this minyan. I heard from many sources on many occasions how he prayed and wept, with what thoughts in his heart one trembles to consider. His tears and supplications were communicated to all those in the room. I have thought about that scene many times over the intervening years and elaborated on it so that while I know I was not present sometimes I feel as if I had been. I chose not to visit Baruch during his last hospital stay for reasons I can no longer recall because I could no longer fathom them. I was not present for those last days when, I have been told, in his cachectic exhaustion, he continued to struggle to put on his tfillin. I have tended to embroider that image in my mind and while I know I was not there sometimes I feel as if I had been. And so we are reminded that the Haggadah tells us: "In every generation every person shall regard himself or herself as having been personally redeemed from Egypt." In death, as in life, Baruch taught us about Pesach.

Gerald Edelman, the Nobelist and expert on neural Darwinism, has said that no brain event ever happens the same way twice. Even memory, he says, is always a variant, a recreation and never a repetition. So shall all...all be swept away in a Heraclitean flux? No, because the vagaries of the individual neuron are saved by the summation of the whole brain just as the unreliability of individual memory is salvaged by communal and cultural memory.

So what is the truth about Baruch? Did "flights of angels sing him to his rest?" I doubt it. But he was a good son, husband and father, a friend, a scholar who was the first

of the real core members of M'at to die and he did so much too early leaving painfully young children behind. His death left a subliminal scar in this minyan, similar to how a post-shiva attempt to repair the laceration of a lapel delivered at the funeral, however skillful, always reveals the loss. The M'at, and now Ansche Chesed, Hevra Kadisha was founded in anticipation of Baruch's death to serve him and it continues as a memorial.

As Rabbi Silber has observed, memory is an ethical category. You new members, you who never met or saw Baruch Bokser, have the greatest investment in preserving his memory. You chose to join this minyan the collective character of which was formed by the cumulative experiences we have undergone. We no longer have a temple where we can do the viddui bikkurim, a statement of who we are and where we came from as a people. The seder is its substitute. Every amidah, every kiddush, every mezuzah reminds us of our leaving Egypt. Every Shabbos HaGadol reminds us of Baruch's leaving this world. If we forget Baruch, we are lost as a minyan. If we forget Pesach, we are just lost.

Howard L. Berkowitz
April 4, 2004

Baruch Bokser Memorial Devar Torah
Shabbat HaGadol 5777
April, 2017

Ha-Rav Baruch Micah ben Ha-Rav Ben-Zion v'Kalia Bokser.
מורינו, רבינו, חברינו.

Baruch Bokser passed away in July of 1990. He left behind his wife Ann Wimpfheimer and two sons Ben and Yoni. He was 44 years old, the first actual member of Minyan Maat to die. We remember Baruch every year with a devar Torah on Shabbat Ha Gadol because of his scholarly work about the Passover Seder and rabbinic texts connected to Pesah.

I am pleased to be able to give this talk for many reasons. Baruch was my colleague on the faculty at JTS and my friend. He and Ann lived right across the street from Bethamie and me, the apartment where Ann still lives. Oddly enough there is another, older connection with the Bokser family, something we discovered some years after Ann and Baruch first got together. We discovered that many years ago Bethamie's father was the educational director of the school at Forest Hills Jewish Center where Baruch's father Benzion served as rabbi for many years. Around the time of our wedding Bethamie's father actually found the letter that Baruch's mother wrote to Bethamie's father on the occasion of Bethamie's birth—Bethamie's family was already living in Cleveland at that time. Kalia, Baruch's mother, was a regular at Minyan Maat and I recall that when Bethamie introduced herself to Kalia. Kalia was visibly touched by this connection from the long ago past.

So of course I'd like to talk today about Passover in general and the Seder in particular. And I'd like to do that from the perspective of a person who is an education professor to see if that perspective might yield some ideas about the Sederim we are about to participate in.

Baruch's overarching insight was that the ritual of the Seder was an extended attempt to deal with the loss of the Temple. Not only that but to deal with that loss in a particular way. He wrote: The Seder is outlining a "process which aims at continuity and cannot acknowledge the existence of change, but which at the same time is motivated by a desire to express a new meaning. The need to demonstrate conformity with the past indicates that the framers of the Mishnah are still affected by the traumatic loss of the cult. But in structuring the rite on a new basis and in adding new features, they are coming to grips with the crisis. Moreover, the very construction of this altered reality to some degree enables the framers of the Mishnah, and those who follow the Mishnah, to experience a sense of closure."

Baruch's view is from the vantage point of 15,000 feet. He is addressing the big picture, but how does the ritual of the Seder get played out at ground level—how do people experience the Seder in a more granular way?

When I was a teenager I had the great good fortune of having a teacher who influenced generations of students. He was then the assistant rabbi at my synagogue and he was in charge of youth activities. He organized the youth groups; he created the teenage Shabbat morning service where the kids essentially ran the davening and where I learned a good number of the synagogue skills that I've carried with me over these years.

Oddly enough he later—many many years later—became my colleague in the education department at JTS. That was Joseph Lukinsky z”l.

In addition to the USY group at the shul, Joe also created a LTF group. We would meet at his home after dinner on Friday nights every other week and study with him. It’s where I first studied Talmud and Midrash. Around Pesah-time one year we started learning the Haggadah with him and he said something that may now seem quite obvious but which was to us, his group of followers, quite remarkable. The Passover Seder, he said, is not a “service”; it is instead meant to be a discussion. My experience of the Seder had been nothing like that. Some years after that I went to a Seder at a friend’s home which was even more traditional than what I had experienced. But that was also not a discussion. There they—and here I mean pretty much the men—*davened* the Haggadah, aside from the ritual actions that take place during the Seder. That too was not a discussion. Even less than what I was used to.

Discussion is of course what people in my field call a “pedagogic practice.” Like lecturing or teachers asking questions or students filling out worksheets, etc.

It has become almost a cliché to talk about the Passover Seder as a great Jewish educational idea and there is much to be said for that. But, as I like to say to my students, it is an educational venue unlike most that we come across. Mostly because the guests at the Seder—let us call them “the learners”—all come with different expectations, different backgrounds, and different desires. You have the ones who want to talk—but not about the Haggadah at all; the ones who are just waiting for the eating part to happen; the ones who are really into it and would be happy to discuss the Haggadah until it’s time for kariat

Shema in the morning—just to choose a random hyperbole. So the leader of the Seder—let us call him or her the “teacher” is faced with a complicated situation at the very least.

Which leads me to share a concept or fantasy of my own which I like to call “The Platonic Seder.” (There is a bit of joke in this phrase of course because of the supposed connection of the Seder to the Greek practice of the symposium—Baruch actually downplays the role of the symposium in the invention of the Seder.) What I mean by “The Platonic Seder” is the ideal and idealized Seder. It’s the Seder in which everyone comes with similar hopes and expectations, a shared level of experience and knowledge, and a desire to participate and contribute. It is a bit like the Passover version of Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average. Only here it’s where all the cooking preparations are easy, all the conversation is insightful and all the little children aren’t cranky.

Over the years I have told people about the Platonic Seder and asked if they had ever attended one. It’s surprising how many know exactly what I’m talking about and how few of them have been part of such a Seder. And it’s not just that they often go to a Seder where no one is involved with the Haggadah; it’s also the flip side—the Seder where people are too involved in the Seder, where your tolerance for discussion has just run out.

In the field of education scholars have laid out various formulations of what we mean in using the term “curriculum.” It’s not so simple. Sometimes people say “curriculum” and really mean a list of topics to be studied. Sometimes people simply repeat the name of the subject matter. “My curriculum is algebra 2.” Or, in my world. Question: “What’s your curriculum in this class?” Answer: “Sefer Shemot.” How much

of Shemot, what the emphasis and goals might be, what the pedagogic practices will be, what the time allocation will be—all this is left unspoken.

So education scholars have come up with a variety of concepts to help us think about “curriculum.” I have simplified one design that I like for our purposes here. There is:

1. the idealized curriculum or formal curriculum (i.e. what’s written down)
2. the perceived curriculum (how the teacher sees and understands the idealized curriculum)
3. the enacted curriculum (how the teacher actually does it)
4. the experienced curriculum (how the learner experiences it)

All these domains are in play at our Passover Sedarim. The Haggadah lays out the **formal or idealized** curriculum. It walks you through what “it” wants you to do and to learn. It does this in some interesting ways, as I’ll try to suggest shortly.

The **perceived** curriculum is the way that the leaders of the specific Seder decide to deal with the idealized curriculum. For example, it’s what you choose to skip when you’re thinking about the Seder in the days (or hours!) before it begins.

The **enacted** curriculum is what actually happens—how you make changes on the fly. One famous education scholar said that a lot of teaching is “thinking on your feet” and that’s true when you are leading a Seder. Oy—the meal is ready earlier than you planned; Oy—the kids making too much noise; Oy—the discussion is going off on a tangent (should I let it go or should I break it off), etc.

And the **experienced** curriculum is what you and all the participants actually walk away with.

I can't say much about the last three elements but I do want to say something about the formal curriculum, namely, the Haggadah itself and its own educational perspective.

I didn't grow up with singing the "Kadash Urhatz..." song at the beginning of the Seder but it is what education folks would call an "advanced organizer" or, in ordinary speech, "you tell the people what they're going to do before they do it, so they get 'organized' in their minds to absorb what's coming." It tells you what is in the formal curriculum.

What's fascinating to me about the formal curriculum is that it is an interesting mixture of words and symbolic actions. What comes at the very beginning? The words of the Kiddush followed by the silent hand washing. We then say a berakha and then we eat the karpas (a symbolic action).

And then comes the four questions. Words again, but these words set the tone for entire enterprise. Michael Paley pointed out to me this year that the Haggadah plays around with the ambiguity of the numbers four and five. We call them the four questions but actually there are five questions (mah nishtana being the first); there are four cups of wine but actually there are five (Elijah's cup). I've come to a different conclusion. The curriculum of the Haggadah is all about only one question mah nishtana. The four questions are not questions at all—they are only attempts to answer that one big question: Why is this night different? Which is why none of the four questions gets answered.

Don't worry: I'm not going to walk us through the entire Haggadah—you get to do that Monday and Tuesday night! But I just want to point out a couple of the educational features that we encounter:

Soon after the four questions we get the story of the five rabbis in Bene Berak. Or as I like to call it “Rabbi Akiva’s Havurah.” The purpose of this story in the curriculum is “Now that we’ve shown you that the Seder is about question asking and discussion (i.e. that’s the content), NOW we are going to show you the “model Seder”—if you do it right like these Jewish stars of the past, you’ll be up all night long. This is truly the Platonic Seder, as our tradition has handed it down to us. But I have a bone to pick with Rabbi Akiva and his gang: it’s exactly a story like this that leads to the flip side of the Platonic Seder: guilt. The guilt is MY Seder did not live up to the ideal Seder we learn about in the Haggadah. Or what your friends tell you the next morning. I’ll come back to this at the end.

We soon get the section of the four sons (children). If we first learn about the content (thinking about why is this night different) and then we get the image of what the Seder should ideally look like (the Bene Berak Seder), now we get the pedagogic principle that is supposed to be behind the entire Seder: each child learns in a different way so, we are told, the way we conduct the Seder needs to think about who the learners are (the guests) and build the Seder around that principle.

And then we get the long Midrashic explication of biblical verses. I think the Haggadah is telling us this: in OUR world (the world of the early rabbis) the way we try to engage with big questions is to explicate biblical verses. In a way the Haggadah seems to contradict itself. It tells us first that we need to be attuned to who the learner is and

then it goes off and gives a complicated and arcane dive into rabbinic Midrash. But perhaps it is actually suggesting something else: that's the way WE did it, says the Haggadah-- after all we were the **החכמים**—and like the **חכם** in the Haggadah we were interested in all the details. But perhaps that is the solution to the guilt of the Platonic Seder: namely in the world all of us today live in the principle of what the learner can absorb has to be more powerful principle.

And if we circle back to the idea of the Haggadah as being the formal curriculum of the Seder it brings to mind the work of an important curriculum scholar from Israel named Miriam Ben-Peretz. Her influential book called *The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter* talks about “curriculum potential.” One scholar describes that concept as the idea that curriculum “permits teachers to adapt, invent, and transform as they confront the realities of classroom life.” And that I believe is what we all end up doing as we use the Haggadah in our own sedarim.

Many years ago, when our kids were quite small, we used to replace the Maggid section of the Haggadah with a puppet show telling the story of the Exodus using the kids' stuffed animals. I loved doing it but felt Platonic Seder guilt about it nonetheless. After all, what we just did is not really the Maggid section. Our friend Noam Zion had recently published his terrific *A Different Night* Haggadah and I told him about my mixed feelings about the puppet show Maggid section. He said something that has stuck with me all this time. The real and fundamental mitzvah, Noam said, is **לבנך הגדת**. *Tell your child*. And that's what you're doing. The Haggadah itself gives you the answer too. Rabban Gamaliel tells us that you have not fulfilled your obligation if you haven't spoken about three things you haven't fulfilled the mitzvah. And then we hold up the symbolic

foods of Pesah, Matzah and Maror—with both words AND actions we address these symbols. That little ritual of the three symbols and the explanation of them is the ultimate minimal Seder.

I often say to students that the way to think about curriculum is that underneath there needs to be a narrative line. And the Haggadah gives us that. It is only after we've finishing fulfilling Rabban Gamaliel's dictum that we get the punch line we didn't realize was coming. All of the questions and lifting up the plate and drinking the wine and eating the matzah, maror and haroset and hiding the Afikomen and saying many many words and later on singing songs...all of this is one great curricular drama so that somehow each of us can come

ממצרים יצא הוא כאלו עצמו את לראות
To see yourself as if you had come out of Egypt.

I want to end by telling you a dream that I had a long time ago. A few weeks after Baruch died 27 years ago I had a dream that I was staying late in my office at JTS. In those days I was co-director of the Melton Research Center and so my office was down on the first floor right outside the entrance to Melton. As of this year that whole part of the building where Melton was has been knocked down but back then there was a fairly large room that we used for meetings there. It had a big table and a bit of library as well. Well, in this dream I was quite late in my office and I was leaving I noticed there was a light on inside the Melton office. So I unlocked the Melton door and walked toward the conference room where the light was coming from. When I walked in I saw Baruch sitting there. He had large book on the table and obviously was studying the book.

I said, "Baruch, how can you be here"?

And he said, “I come here late at night just to see how things are.”

“What are things like for you” I asked him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I have my books and I have time to learn and I can watch over everything where I am.”

That was it. I woke up. I felt relieved. I don’t think I ever told Ann about that dream. At any rate I know I didn’t at the time. I’m not much of a supernaturalist and I know that any reasonably competent therapist would tell me that this dream was my way of comforting myself in the light of the trauma of Baruch’s death. But there is a part of me that likes to see that dream as a message from, as the rabbis would say האמת העולם. The world of truth. Baruch remains with us—even for those here who never knew him—because through remembering him each year it is, like the Seder itself כאלו as if we knew him. May we all see ourselves as if we had come out of Egypt. And as if we have experienced the Platonic Sedarim of our dreams.

Shabbos HaGadol – April 4, 2020 v.5

The ship of Theseus problem. King Minos of Crete decreed that every seven years seven Athenian young men and women had to be sent to Crete as a sacrifice for the Minotaur in the Labyrinth. Theseus sailed with them and, using Ariadne's thread so as not to lose his way in the Labyrinth, he was able to kill the Minotaur. Plutarch wrote: "The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place; so much so that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers for the question in logic as to things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending it was not the same." This problem of the metaphysics of identity preoccupied philosophers through Hobbes and Locke, down to the present day.

The Japanese believe their Emperor is directly descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, whose cultic home is at Ise. Her shrine is said to have been first built in 4 BCE so that the goddess could dwell among the people. The shrine buildings are reconstructed every 20 years and have been for at least a thousand years. While the shrine stands, its replacement is built nearby and the replacement, through death and rebirth, is said to be the same as the original.

On October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts entered the one-room school house in the Amish community of West Nickel Mines and shot 10 girls. The grieving community tore down the old school house, built another school house with a different flooring pattern nearby the old site and declared it to be entirely different.

In Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* about a dystopian future in which a dictator has declared books to no longer be permitted, rebels memorize whole books about which they are passionate and declaim them as they walk through the rebels' forest commune, feeling in every way they are the books, though the originals no longer exist.

The 1907 Tin Building, one of only two surviving structures from the old Fulton Fish Market was taken apart in 2018 and is being reassembled a few feet from its original site but it contains many new materials, a new interior configuration, and new entrances. Is it the same building as the original? The question doesn't really exist because no one actually cares.

The Tin Building question is somewhat like the tedious question for professional philosophers of how many grains of sand does it actually take to qualify as a "heap." Happily, questions of personal and group identity are human determinations, based on human needs and are not abstract philosophical matters. When Moses, in his farewell, said to the Israelites, "You have all seen with your own eyes what God did to pharaoh in Egypt..." it just was not true. Most of the Israelites present had witnessed none of the events and virtually none had seen all of them. But Moses insists it was so and so it is by the end of the seder. When Moses says, "I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our God but also with those who are not here today," how can that be? And yet it is.

The Rabbis engaged in the greatest sleight of hand, the boldest and most preposterous salvation operation in religious history after being confronted with the colossal disaster of the destruction of the Temple and the paganization of the land for an entirely Temple-based observance in a land-based religion. This posed a radical state of religious and psychological crisis. The word 'radical' hardly does justice to what the Rabbis achieved and then endorsed. The alternative was for them, and us, to dissolve into history. No wonder the Dalai Lama, having lost his land and temples, wanted to learn from the Jews. Eliot, after the unimagined carnage and destruction of World War I in an attempt to perpetuate a sense of civilization, wrote in *The Wasteland*- "these fragments I have shored against my ruins." The Rabbis had a much more ambitious solution.

Baruch Bokser, in his seminal *The Origins of the Seder*, provides his answer to the Ship of Pesach problem. Baruch wrote: "...the structure of the Passover seder is based upon the description in Mishnah Pesachim 10. Surprisingly, although this account diverges significantly from that of the Bible, the Mishnah writes as if the elements of the celebration had not changed since Temple days.

An analysis of the Mishnah indicates this anomaly is intentional and that it reflects the overall purpose of the Mishnah, which is to create a precedent for the observance of the celebration without the temple and the Passover sacrifice....the implication being that the experience of God was not contingent on the temple.” [p.1] He added, “According to the Mishnah, one is to believe, the only difference between a temple and an extra-temple observance is that in the temple people ate from the Passover sacrifice. Everything else was supposed to be thought of as identical!” [p.88]...He further stated, “One must conclude that the need to show continuity with a cultic background is the operative principle. [p.94]...The seder constitutes one of the most effective products of early rabbinic Judaism. It provides examples of the central rabbinic institutions of prayer, blessings, study, acts of lovingkindness, and fellowship...available to all Jews...” [p.99] This, sadly, concludes Baruch’s voice.

In Exodus 12, before the tenth plague and the leaving of Egypt, God speaks to Moses and Aaron and tells them this is to be a day of remembrance for all time and this is to be achieved, in part, by centralizing matza. Matza, which prior to this was only mentioned as a quick bread for Abraham’s and Lot’s guests, which was never claimed to be slave food anywhere in the Exodus narrative, which is never referred to as slave food in any archaeological record, is here presented by the Torah purely as a usable symbol for “remembrance” “...when your children ask...” We were invited by God to invent Passover and so we assumed we had the right to re-invent it.

We distinguish between Pesach Mitzrayim, the specific rituals and events referred to in the Torah narrative pre-Exodus which were never to be repeated, and Pesach Dorot, the Passover as we would evolve it across time. Passover has changed, we have changed it, but always to observe the prime mandate, to preserve our sense of communal and religious identity whenever and wherever we found ourselves. If Rabbi Levisson could develop a statement to be said by the inmates around him over the chumetz they were about to eat in Bergen Belsen on Passover, then we surely possess memory, identity and purpose coupled with what must remain an essential adaptability. In the time of Covid-19, we will innovate again, adapt again. We will change in order to remain the same.

Baruch Bokser was a professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS who died on July 12, 1990-thirty years ago- at the age of 44. He was one of the earliest members of Minyan M'at and seemed possessed of comprehensive knowledge, both ancient and modern. He was a vegetarian, an outdoorsman and he was always easy to approach. It is pitiful to reduce the schooner that was Baruch to these bare struts.

So, is this the same Minyan M'at ship Baruch knew? Absolutely not! Half of those now in M'at never met Baruch and Baruch was never on the fifth floor on a regular Shabbos. Is this the same Minyan Ma't Baruch knew? Absolutely yes! Baruch would recognize the style and tone of the davening and of this dvar Torah immediately. Continuity is determined by use and feeling and memory, and not by specific structures. There is a plaque in Baruch's memory by the door of M'at hardly anyone notices. The plaque is not important. The annual retelling of Baruch allows us to maintain and re-invent Baruch. Annually we retell the story of Yitziat Mitzrayim so we remember who we are and where we came from, and that changes a little each year. So, whether you follow the House of Hillel or the House of Microsoft, in your house, despite the viral plague, there will be a real Passover.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Michael Paley has privately confided to me that even he doesn't care for this parashah. So I will instead speak of Pesach. An appropriate thing to do on this Shabbat, which, apart from being Shabbat haGadol, also marks the *yahrzeit* of Baruch Bokser, one of the great scholars of the seder.

Though I did not know Baruch well, and we were in *galus* in western Massachusetts during the time of his illness, I do know that he loved nature, even unto the least of its creatures. And it is of the least of its creatures that I will speak.

The phrase *Shabbat shabbaton*, a sabbath of complete rest, is applied in the Torah to three things: the Sabbath day, the Sabbatical year, and Yom Kippur. On a *shabbat shabbaton*, not only do we rest, but so, to varying degrees, do our domestics and domesticates. On Shabbat, *lo taaseh kol m'lachah*, etc. [Exodus 20:8-11]. In the *shmittah* year, not only our domesticated animals rest, but our domesticated plants — in fact, the land in its totality. On Yom Kippur, an older domesticate is commanded to rest: sin. "Sin coucheth at the door... but you shall rule over it." Cain belatedly learns this lesson. When he properly domesticates sin (greed, lust, the will to power) he becomes the founder of cities and civilization.

Pesach is not called *shabbat shabbaton*, but I believe it should be. Not because we slouch at the table instead of sitting up like a *mentsch*. But because on Pesach the commandment to rest is extended to one of the oldest of our domesticates, one of the smallest and least conspicuous.

Anyone want to guess? No fair if I already told you.

I speak, of course, of yeast.

What sort of domesticate is that? Unseen, unheard, so self-effacing that for thousands of years we didn't even know it was there, though we did know its effects. But that, of course, is practically a help-wanted ad for the perfect domestic. And thus the perfect domesticate. (In fact I was thinking of doing a spinoff of P.G. Wodehouse called Bertie and Yeast, but my agent was discouraging, I'm not sure why.)

Of course, the anaerobes in our guts have been with us, both serving and on occasion dissserving us, since before we were human. But that's symbiosis, not domestication.

My personal theory is that yeast is the oldest of all our domesticates. I suspect that beer was brewed by hunter-gatherers using wild grains. For while it is possible to imagine beer without hunters, it is impossible to imagine hunters without beer.

In any case, it was not until 1680 that someone saw a yeast organism — Leeuwenhoek, looking through his microscope — and not until 1860 that Louis Pasteur demonstrated

that these were the microorganisms that converted sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide, thereby making possible le pain and le vin, as well as beer and single malt.

(The reference to single malt is a sop to Howard Berkowitz, who wanted me to elaborate on my Viagra e-mail. I'm not doing that, but I am talking about something that makes things rise.)

So, let us describe yeast in a nutshell — which I understand is part of the secret process by which Samuel Smith makes its Nut-Brown Ale. (Not one of my favorites, I confess; but then, to talk about favorite brews at the very instant they become taboo would be cruel — to me, and doubtless to many of you.) Yeast in brief: It is ancient. It is everywhere. It swiftly forms new colonies. It is rootless. It lives in or on others, deriving its physical sustenance from them. It is sometimes seen as a parasite — though, except in a few cases, such as *Candida albicans*, the charge is technically untrue, and certainly unjust. Unjust because yeast makes a crucial contribution to its host, transforming it almost beyond recognition. Transforming it — most of us would say — for the better. What was flat becomes contoured, textured, many-dimensional. What was mere starch becomes heady, intoxicating, fizzy with possibility.

Does this remind you of anyone?

Does it, perhaps, remind you of a people, a nation, near and dear to your heart?

On Pesach we celebrate freedom. We assume it is the freedom to be Jewish, but what if it's just the opposite? Freedom *from* being Jewish. Freedom from the destiny of yeast.

The age-old, hate-mongering view of the Jew as parasite can be turned on its head. Yeast, too, is a parasite, in the sense that it can't make its own food. It lives on the starch of others. But rid yourself of this parasite, cleanse yourself of this alien agent, and you find yourself impoverished, flat and tasteless, unable to catch a buzz. Boring as Colt 45.

When Jews leave a country, they leave it flat. I remember a piece in the NYRB by either Amos Elon, or possibly Amos Oz — some famous Amos or other — in which he paid a visit to Vienna. Browsing in a bookstore, he struck up a conversation with a Viennese who said, "If only the Jews would come back. Then it would be possible to live here again."

[Purple prose warning.]

Freud: yeast. Marx: yeast. Einstein: yeast. Freud made the flat pita of ego blow up, or down, into endlessly receding chambers of fantasy and ambiguity. Marx's ferment led to violence, then torpor, as alcohol often does; but from his bottle sprang a spirit of liberation no one has quite been able to squeeze back in. Einstein took a three-dimensional world and soufflé'd it into four. Schoenberg released the hidden dimensions coiled, superstringwise, in the crevices of the diatonic scale. Proust dipped a madeleine in a tisane of lime flowers and it exploded, expanded madly — as in a shmura mashgiach's worst nightmare — into six loaves as big as the universe, as subtly textured as thought. Kafka, Benjamin, Derrida, Trotsky, Mahler, von Neumann, Niels Bohr, Gershwin, Dylan, Roth, Rothko, Levi-Strauss, Levi Strauss, the late lamented

below — love them or hate them, you can't deny their effect on the dough, the hops, the malt. Yeast, yeast, yeast. And let's not forget that other Baruch, the one who ground lenses in Amsterdam. (I won't call him Benedict; sixteen of those is plenty.) Or the Jew from Nazareth who said, "Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened" (Luke 13:20-1).

And these are just the big names, the macro-microfungi. The biggest tiny toadstools in their fields. The effect of thousands of tinier ones may be greater still.

Of course, the dough doesn't always like being leavened. The wort — yes, that is the word for the concoction of water, hops, and malted barley upon which the yeast do their work — doesn't always like being fermented. We take their simple, flat lives and complicate them. We take the sugar, the sweetness of their age-old folkways and turn it into something sharp, astringent, even bitter.

But, like the Viennese in the bookstore, many welcome this complicating. In 1926, Nikos Kazantzakis, walking with a young Zionist woman at the foot of the Mount of Olives, told her that he hoped Zionism would fail. It was contrary, he said, both to the nature of the Jewish people and to the interests of the human race.

"The Jews have this supreme quality: to be restless; not to fit into the reality of the time; to struggle to escape; to consider every status quo and every idea a stifling prison. With this poignant quality of theirs they save mankind from his contrived efforts at contentment — that is to say, from his impasse. This spirit of the Jews shatters the equilibrium, pushes evolution further, sparks off the proudest element of life: never to be satisfied, never to stop anywhere, to leap from plant to animals and from animals to man and again to torment man, as though wanting to go further still."

The woman responds: "Our fathers in the land of Canaan were farmers; rooted in their country they created their civilization."

"That was the nature of your race then. The Jews didn't always have the Lucifer quality of rebellion. They acquired it. The persecutions, the slaughters, scorn, exile, all the things you call Diaspora, hammered away at the Hebrew race for two thousand years and forged it, against its will, by force, into the leaven of the earth.....

"Thus, scattered over the world for so many centuries, the Jews suffered, trembled and were killed. And this dyed their soul indelibly and created in them the hatred for every tyranny — either from individuals or from systems or ideas. This is why they agitated nations, undermined the status quo and set fire to all the old ideas. This is their fate; without them the world would rot."

"Thank you for the role you assign us," the woman says. "I must confess we are greatly honored to be slaughtered, to be forever restless, to make others restless. But we don't want to any more."

Kazantzakis is unrelenting: "Diaspora is your country. In vain you struggle to escape your Fate and you seek out happiness and security in this out-of-the-way province. I hope — I hope, because I love the Jews — that sooner or later the Arabs will drive you out of here and again scatter you all over the world." [*Journeying*, pp. 179-181]

Later, in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Kazantzakis would tempt his Jesus with the dream of settling comfortably into the ¹⁰⁸⁷gently undulating life of the Mediterranean peasant — the matzah of ordinary life. His Jesus would not succumb.

Passover is the sabbath of sabbaths, then, not only because the microfungi known as yeast rest, but because the macrofungi known as Jews rest, too. We rest from the work of leavening. That's why we lounge like Romans.

But as we sink into the pillows, disquieting thoughts arise. The purging of leaven, the burning of leaven: what if this is really an enactment of Jewish self-hatred? Or perhaps, self-discomfort? An effort to rid ourselves of ourselves, so that we can be a nation like other nations? To free ourselves of the yoke — not of Pharoah, but of Joseph: the burden of difference, of restless invention, of transforming the very ground on which we stand. The yoke of dreaming. The yoke — if I can say this without turning stomachs by evoking yeasts and molds of an unhealthy nature, possibly growing on the very eggs of the seder plate — the yoke of many colors.

Joseph and his tiny brothers. Dreaming the dough into bread. Imagine the yeast microbes as microscopic Josephs, silently snoring. Breathing in, breathing out. Filling the world with air. With tiny bubbles of fantasy. Pockets of possibility. Negative space. The *tohu vavohu* in which creation begins. And in their dreaming, awakening the world.

This may be too kind, or too Aquarian, a reading of Joseph. Isn't he — to be perfectly honest — more a control freak than a fomenter of chaos? Indeed, if the Bible is to be believed — [*stage whisper*] which of course it isn't — he leavened Egypt's relatively flat social structure into a social pyramid, a feudal struffalo or taigelach mound. My Egyptian is rusty — though I do know how to say "Is there a rest room in this pyramid?" — or else I would use the word for the conical loaf of bread that was the Egyptian showbread, an image of which constitutes the glyph for "give" or "given." Put the loaf on a reed mat and the glyph means "offering."

By the way, according to Delwen Samuel of Cambridge University, "beer, together with bread, was the most important item in the diet of the ancient Egyptians. Everyone, from Pharoah to farmer, drank beer and no meal was complete without it. ... In a cashless society it was used as a unit of exchange... Offerings to the gods or funerary provisions included beer, either real or magical." Beer may have been supplied free of charge to those who worked in the temples. Perhaps we should picture the Hebrew slaves kicking back with a six-pack after a long day on the Pithom construction site.

But back to Joseph and his dreaming. It is a fact about dreaming that once it starts, you don't know where it will lead. What responsibilities, or irresponsibilities, it may begin. Once the dough starts rising, you don't know how far it will go. Marx is a case in point. So is Einstein.

No wonder we want to be free of this burden, this burden of yeasthood. What else can explain the fanaticism with which we go at it? A fanaticism far exceeding the strictures of mere halakhah?

Because no Ma'at d'var torah is complete without a display of Judaic erudition, preferably from untranslated sources, I will adduce an obscure passage — so obscure, indeed, that some scholars question whether¹⁰⁸⁸ it even exists — from that colossus of 16th century rabbinics, Rabbi Gamliel ben Gershom, better known as the Ragbag. [*Pulls out*

nuge, juke-leutner-bounu, talmudic-looking wine.] NOW DEAL WITH ME, AS I AM TRANSLATING IN real time, for the sake of realism. The Ragbag asks: Why do we use... I should have brought my Jastrow.... Yes, contact paper. The Ragbag asks: Why do we use contact paper when even David Kraemer says it's not necessary? He answers: For the same reason that the gentiles burn witches when simply confiscating their brooms would be sufficient.

I have no idea what the Ragbag means by this remark, but I feel that it supports my point. Because, if it didn't, why would I have gone to the trouble of digging it up?

We want to be flat. We want to pure, unleavened, unleavening Jews. Flat as we think other nations are. Or as we think they would be if we were not among them. To be purely ourselves — and thus like all the others. Who, we assume, are purely themselves, or would be if we didn't get in the way.

Every Pesach we enact a temporary exodus from the larger society in which we reside. Not by sitting at the seder table and reciting the tale of the exodus from Egypt, but by not sitting at other tables. By not breaking bread with the goyim. Which may have been part of the point, and surely was one effect, of year-round kashrut; but in our time and place, for all but the most observant Jews, Pesach does the job much better.

La-shanah ha-baah b'yerushalayim, we sing at the end of the seder: for, in this sense, the seder's logical extension is Zionism. In particular, the kind of Zionism that would make us a nation like all nations. In which Jews are photosynthesizers, not fermenters.

But perhaps I am guilty of a jingoism as jangly as any Zionist's. My microbial humility hides a megafaunal pride. Instead of saying, "who has chosen us from among all the nations," I am in effect saying, "who has scattered us amongst the nations to leaven them." And though this does perhaps answer the question implied by the quatrain of William Norman Ewer — "How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews" — it is both chutzpadik and historically on shaky ground.

To portray the nations as inert dough, and ourselves as the only leaven, is a gross oversimplification — history done with a rolling pin. Since prehistoric times, racial, ethnic, and cultural purity has been a fiction. All monolith are myths. Peoples have always mixed, mingled, swirled one within another like chocolate in the babka, like smetana in the borsch. Not only Jews but countless other peoples have played the role of yeast. The microfungi may not be entirely fungible, but to a degree they are; of the spores riding the planet's air streams some have been Hebrew but others have been Greek, Indian, Arab, Chinese. Or British: it was a blow to my Jewish hubris — my Jew-bris? — no, that's something else — not to be confused with a Lyss-bris, which is coming up on Wednesday — it was a blow to my Jewish pride, shall I say, when I realized that for centuries the Brits made up as small a part of the world's population as the Jews, yet contributed at least as mightily to the arts, sciences, and industries. Of course, to be fair you'd have to count only emancipated Jews, who alone had an entrée into world culture. But still... I haven't checked it out, but I've read that a single college at Cambridge, Trinity, has produced more Nobel laureates than France.

Which is not to say the Brits are always right. When Kipling said that yeast is yeast, and

the rest is the rest — he was wrong. And by the way Mandalay is nowhere near the Bay, and if it were, the place where the dawn comes up like thunder wouldn't be China, it would be Thailand, Cambodia, or Vietnam.

To claim that we are the unique yeast is to be guilty of the sin of pride, which leaven represents in some rabbinic homilies and for which Pesach atones: eight days of flat hard bread and water, these to be kept in separate cells and allowed contact for no more than eighteen minutes.

We were leavened by Egypt. We learned not only how to make golden calves — a useful counterweight to our iconophobia, or, to put it less kindly, our tin eye — but, perhaps, the efficient if somewhat daft idea of worshipping only one god. That is what it means when it says we despoiled the Egyptians. We took with us their treasure, their leaven. Perhaps it's that leaven we're trying to expel when we clean house — when we wash the slipcovers, scrub the oven, sweep the floor with a feather by candlelight. If so, it's so much wasted elbow grease. Even if we succeeded — at the cost of many things dear to us — we could hardly hope to expel all the yeasts that preceded or succeeded that one: the Sumerian, the Akkadian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian, the Persian, the Greek, the Roman, the Iberian, the Islamic, the Gallic, the Teutonic, the Slavic, the Yankee... Every time that cut-rate, two-zuz kid is swallowed, every time it wanders to some new pasture, it learns new tricks.

This reversed perspective applies to right-wing Zionists, too. They too are trying, in a more literal way, to expel the leaven from their midst. Arab and otherwise. To become a nation flat and bland and guarded — *shmurah*. Their attempt to bring all Jews to Israel, and cast all Arabs out, is a sort of *bedikat chametz*. If successful, it would leave Israel -- and the world -- unleavened.

But if, on Pesach, we attempt to escape the destiny assigned to us by Kazantzakis — and, perhaps, by God — we embrace it, too. Let me conclude, more or less, with a passage from Baruch Bokser's book *The Origins of the Seder*. Describing the transformation of the Pesach from a pilgrim festival centered on sacrifice to a family holiday centered on the table, he writes: "... The exodus,, more than a unique event in the past, takes on a mythic quality to a far greater degree. The ritual emphasizes this quality and adjusts its account of the past redemption to show that the present is a stage between darkness and light. It helps people to continue to believe that a new social and national order can and will come about."

If the seder is an escape from yeasthood, it is also the perfect petri dish for yeast. The perfect breeding ground, hothouse, and incubator. The perfect nursery of ferment.

And by imagining a world in which even yeast — that most inconspicuous and uncomplaining of our servants — is no longer enslaved, we turn our messianic energy up a notch or two.

On the Sabbath, we return to primal chaos, to wildness, to non-doing, only to return to doing with new energy, new vision. On Pesach, we escape from our yeasthood only to return to it with a vengeance.

As Neil Young said, rust never sleeps. Neither does yeast.

Shabbat shalom, chag kasher v'sameach.

Comments on Deuteronomy 26:5

On my father's first Yartzeit - Second night of Pesach 5752
Leon Hoffman, M.D.

I began to think about this dvar Torah quite a while ago as I thought it would be an appropriate way to commemorate the first Yartzheit of my father. Since Pesach is the quintessential time of redemption my thoughts went back to a Yom Kippur a long time ago. Sitting in shul I asked my father, "How long will the fast last?" His response was, "der Yiddishe golus zol zein aso lang." "The Yiddishe golus should be so long." How long will the Yiddishe golus last? As a matter of fact, how do we define golus? How do we define redemption? Did my father die without ever being redeemed? Did he really die in golus?

During my early musings on this dvar, I discussed my ideas with Miriam as we drove home from work and school one evening. My answer was clear. One's true redemption really comes through what one leaves behind: one's children, one's work, one's good deeds towards fellow humans. There is no question of the power of my fantasies that Miriam and Liora will accomplish that which I will not. It is only through this sense of continuity (as Howard Berkowitz stressed on Shabat Hagadol) that one can reconcile him or herself to the fact that our own particular time line is very limited. This sense of continuity is expressed in its most sublime way during Pesach. We do with our friends and family what our parents did with us and what their parents did with them. Our children will do with their children what we do with them.

One Saturday night shortly after we joined the minyan, Anne and I went on one of our wanderings into Shakespeare and Company. If there is anything I love to do is buy books. I certainly don't read all of them, maybe not even most of them. But I know that someday I will get to them. (Will that be the end of my golus?) In any case, I came across this book on the Origins of the Seder. It seemed utterly fascinating. Anne said to me, "Baruch Bokser is in the minyan." I didn't know who he was. It turned out that this was not a book that found a permanent niche on our shelves. I read it in one or two sittings. In trying to understand how one copes with loss, whether the loss of a parent or the loss of a nation, Baruch's thesis prompted me to re-read his book just now. Baruch stresses the genius of the Rabbis in fostering a method to maintain continuity for the people of Israel. In order to overcome the loss of the temple, the loss of a state, they created a ritual which they then conceived to be continuous with what happened before. Christian writers assumed that the Jewish people would disappear as a result of the loss of the Temple. Instead of disappearing into history, the ritual's basis in continuity helped overcome the profound sense of loss. A piece of concrete, no matter how revered, could be replaced, especially by study. Could one conclude that symbolic thinking superseded concrete thinking?

I continued my own inner wandering in trying to create this dvar. I read the various parshyot for all the days of Pesach and then began to read the Haggadah. I came to the sentence: "An Aramean tried to destroy my father." It jarred my ears. I had never noticed this phrase before. My memory was: "My father was a wandering Aramean." I have always loved this sentence. In fact, when I filled out the 1990 census, I responded to a question about family origins with:

"Wandering Arameans." Obviously, that phrase has extreme personal meanings to me: My parents truly were wandering Arameans and to a lesser extent I wandered before we reached the Golden Medina. Is that where golus ends? Apparently not.

I became fascinated, or is obsessed a better word, in trying to understand the significance of the ambiguity of the phrase, "Arami oved avi." Why does the Chumash translate it the way I recalled it and the Haggadah translate it exactly the opposite? Gunther Plaut states that the translation I remember dates back only to Ibn Ezra (1962). The Hebrew words are grammatically ambiguous.

Scholars have asked why the mishnah instructs us to study this particular text at the seder. This formulaic prayer was to be recited when the pilgrim offered the first fruits to the temple on Shavuot. Plaut states that this is "the first obligatory prayer of recorded Jewish tradition." Baruch notes that this prayer aims to "draw the participants [of the seder] into a relationship with the specifics of slavery and liberation" (page 87). Shlomo Riskin states that this text was chosen rather than a text from Exodus because the text in Exodus is phrased in the 3rd person while the Deuteronomic text is phrased in the first person by a native of the land of Israel. "Though the Exodus from Egypt may be far in the past, and though his verbal recitation is a formal one, this man fully identifies with his people and its history" (page 71-72). Deuteronomy 26 states that when you enter the land which God gives you, you shall take some of the first fruits from the land which God is giving you, go to the priest and say, "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us." After the priest takes the basket, the pilgrim recites: "Arami oved avi. He [refers to my father] went down to Egypt with meager numbers, became great, the Egyptians dealt harshly, we cried to the Lord. He saw our misery, He freed us, He brought us here and gave us the land flowing with milk and honey. That's why I bring the first fruits." In other words this is a short synopsis of Jewish history. By focusing on this formula at the seder, participants, generation after generation, re-experience the transition from slavery to freedom. This idea of creating a continuity with past goes back to the original Deuteronomic tradition. The book of Deuteronomy is the text that scholars believe was "found" during Josiah's Deuteronomic reform in 621 BCE after a reign of idolatry when Manasseh "seduced the people into doing more evil than the surrounding nations" (Anderson, 291; II Kings 21:9). With the "discovery" of a text, there was also a rediscovery of the lost Mosaic tradition.

But why the ambiguity, why does the Haggadah tell us that the Aramean refers to Laban who tried to kill our father Jacob? As a matter of fact why do the Rabbis consider Laban worse than Pharaoh? Finkelstein claimed that the Haggadah's interpretation of the passage dates to pre-Maccabean times when Palestine was under the domination of the Egyptians whose enemy was Syria. It would have been impolitic to consider our father a Syrian. Other scholars have refuted this notion. So who is this Aramean? Is he our father who had to escape or our potential murderer who chased us? I think there is absolutely no contradiction. This Aramean, both the wanderer and the attempted murderer, refers both to our ancestors as well as to ourselves. Plaut has a very similar conclusion based on a textual analysis of the prayer.

In addition to Plaut's analysis, there is evidence in the Gemarah and Haggadah to substantiate the conclusion that the power of the Arami oved avi prayer is derived from its ambiguity. In

Mishna 10:5 of Pesachim, just before the instruction that we expound the Arami oved avi, the Tannaim instruct that "he starts reading with the disgrace section of the Bible and ends with the glory." There are two opinions in the Gemarah with regard to this directive. One is that "disgrace" refers to the actual physical enslavement by Pharaoh and the other that "disgrace" refers to spiritual enslavement when we were idolaters. Freedom then refers to both actual physical freedom in our own land as well as spiritual freedom. In the Haggadah we follow both opinions. The first part of the maggid begins with "avodim hoyinu l'paroh b'mitzraim...." and the second with "mitchilah ovdei avodah zarah..." - "at first our forefathers worshipped idols, but now God brought us near his service..." The detailed exposition of the wonders in the second, or more spiritual section, ends with the Hallel. The Arami oved avi passage occurs within this latter section describing the transformation in our fathers from spiritual enslavement to spiritual freedom.

Riskin cites the Zohar's derivation of the word mizrayim from the word, mitzarim, narrow straits. Regina Stein pointed out to me that the word, straits, in English refers both to an inner emotional state as well as to a physical landmark. In the Hallel, we recite from the psalm, "min hametzir korosi yo." In other words, freedom from mizrayim refers to an inner freedom. Our avi had within him an Arami who tried to destroy as well as an Arami who constantly tried to reach personal freedom. During Pesach, when we participate in the ritual, we not only place ourselves within a historically continuous time line but we also acknowledge the struggle within ourselves--the struggle of the Arami within ourselves. On one side we seek personal redemption and on the other we have to contend with powerful self-defeating forces.

So lets go back to my father's comment of 35-40 years ago. When will the Yiddishe golus end? At times of actual physical danger we have to remember Amalek, Pharaoh, Laban and do all we can to survive physically. For my mother and father the Arami was not a metaphor but a real threat - that Arami was a descendant of Amalek, Pharaoh, and Laban. Therefore, even though he did reach physical liberation after years of wandering, my father's psyche was dominated by the dangers he faced, the afflictions he survived, and the memories of those who were not redeemed because they were "stragglers in the rear." For my father, rearing his children in freedom provided him with his opportunity for the end of his Yiddishe golus. One kiddush during Baruch's illness, he, Howard Berkowitz and I were discussing his situation. After he walked away, I said to Howard, "Isn't he amazing?" Howard said, "I don't know how he feels about all this, but he sure makes ME feel more comfortable." Baruch had to capitulate to his physical golus. But we all saw him show us how one attempts to redeem oneself from a Yiddishe golus.

Can we reach the end of our Yiddishe golus? Some say that there is physical danger lurking. However, when we live in freedom, it is psychologically difficult to be vigilant and anticipate events which are out of our individual control. But we can attempt to gain greater control over our everyday lives. Freud said that when analysis relieves neurotic suffering, one can better tolerate the suffering of every day life. Sometimes our own Yiddishe golus seems interminable. It is that internal pain, that inner golus that we have to constantly contend with. This inner anguish can be much more intense than any physical agony that we have to endure. Each of us has to find the most appropriate way that will enable him or her to spend more and more time outside his or her personal mizrayim. Chag sameach

Seventh Day of Pesach 1994
Pesach 1994
Leon Hoffman, M.D.

I had intended to give a dvar torah today about the four sons in the haggadah in honor of my father's third yarzeit on the night of the second seder. That talk, however, will have to wait for another day.

The tam asks "ma zot?" "What is this?" I did not know Stephanie Rogoff but when Adina called on Thursday evening, I asked her, "what do you mean?" When I spoke to other people they all said, "What?" When I hear such news I want to know what happened? How did it happen? Who was there? Did it have to happen? Why is that such an important question? My father's time had come. He was well beyond his three score ten and the end was expected by all. Hearing about Stephanie's death reminded me of my best friend, Rick.

Rick died 20 years ago come this May. When a friend called at 7 that morning 20 years ago, I asked, "what do you mean?" Even if someone has a chronic illness they are not supposed to die. Rick had Hodgkin's disease which was in remission. However, he had had radiation to his chest which apparently affected his coronary arteries. Susan, his wife, described the ride in the ambulance to the hospital when he was instructing the attendants on how to treat him. He knew he had an MI and he knew he was in pulmonary edema. He knew what to do and how to do it. But, he couldn't pull it off though.

When I thought about this yesterday afternoon, I was shocked to realize that I only knew Rick for less than four years. However, those were very intense years as we did our psychiatric residency together. Being together the whole first year on a ward, sharing anxieties, worries, successes, and failures, established a bond that is hard to fathom from the outside.

In his introduction to "Origins of the Seder," Baruch wrote that although people usually define the meaning of Pesach in terms of freedom, an analysis of the mishnah indicates that the overall purpose of the mishnah, and the passover celebration in particular, was to create a precedence for the observance of the celebration without the temple and without the passover sacrifice. The seder was part of the community's attempt to cope with the great national tragedy of the violent destruction. How do we cope with the horror of personal tragedy? We have our prescribed community rituals as well as our personal rituals. I ask questions. I think of different possibilities. I intellectualize. I think of the pathophysiology of the illness and the cause of death.

On November 22, 1963, I was in anatomy class. At lunch we had heard something about something that had happened. We went back to our cadavers. We were dissecting the back muscles so the cadaver was lying face down. At one point the professor, Oliver P. Jones, rang the bell and said, "Gentlemen", there were only a handful of women, "Gentlemen, the President is dead." There was silence. I looked at the dissection table and saw the back of Kennedy's head. That evening, a Friday evening, my roommate went to the movies with his girlfriend. I couldn't understand it. At some point I called my mother who said, "Life must or will go on." I

couldn't understand that either. There are some deaths that one can understand and there are others that one cannot. How do we cope with such tragedy?

As our minyan has grown in age and size we have learned how to cope with each other's personal losses. The wonder of the minyan for me is that personal tragedy, and as a matter of fact personal joy, does not remain personal, but is shared by all. Joy and sorrow must be shared. Baruch stressed the genius of the Rabbis who were able to foster a method, the seder ritual in particular, which would ensure the continuity of the people of Israel. In order to overcome the loss of the temple, the loss of a state, they created a ritual which they constructed to be continuous with what was done before. Christian writers assumed that the Jewish people would disappear as a result of the loss of the Temple. Instead of disappearing into history, the ritual's focus on continuity helped overcome the profound sense of loss.

The first part of pirke avot reads as follows, "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the Elders to the prophets; and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment; develop many disciples; and make a fence for the Torah" (i.e. a protective boundary). **Our minyan with its rituals is a result of our collective genius and is our protective boundary.** We will be here to share each other's sadness and rejoice in each other's joy.

Shabat Shalom and Chag Sameach

Minyan Ma'at
8th Day of Pesach, 5755 - April 22, 1995
Leon Hoffman

Hoffman/Pesach 5755

Last shabat, Dovid Roskies pointed out the uniqueness of the pesach ritual. Unlike other national rituals which memorialize past events, the pesach ritual that we have come to celebrate is explicitly spelled out in the torah. Rather than assuming an evolution over time, the ritual is prescribed to those very people who are participating in the redemption and who will be therefore remembered by future generations when they participate in the ritual.

But who are those people who experienced that first pesach? Dovid's comments last week reminded me of Benyamin Cirlin's dvar torah of a few months back when he told us of meeting Shlomo Carlebach for the first time. Reb Shlomo said to Benyamin, "Haver! Didn't we meet before?" "No," Benyamin answered, because this was his first time in Reb Shlomo's shul. Reb Shlomo then said, "No, No! I mean we must have met at har sinai." So, if we were all at har sinai, were we not all at that first pesach?

Humankind has been privileged to receive a unique gift: memory, language, and a higher order of consciousness that allows humans to subjectively experience a continuity of time: of themselves from young to old, of the past, and of the future. On the one hand humankind is relieved of the burden of being bound to the immediacy of perceptual consciousness. Yet, on the other hand people need to find methods to attenuate the painful feelings imposed on them as a result of this gift of knowledge. Every gift requires a price to be paid. Once one remembers that a loved one has disappeared, for example, one experiences the pain of mourning.

Whether one maintains that evolution or God is the source of this gift, as well as the source of the price we have to pay, all must agree that the author or authors of the pesach ritual were brilliant God-like or God-inspired creatures. How else to explain the genius necessary to create this beautiful unifying myth: that all generations were present at sinai simultaneously? How else to explain a passage such as:

"You must keep this ritual as a law, for you and your children forever. When you come to the land that God will give you, as he promised, you must also keep this service. Your children may then ask you, 'What is this service to you?' You must answer, 'It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'" (Ex. 12:24).

In this passage the text addresses all generations. Yes, the text points out that God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt--that was then--but the text also says that he spared our homes--that is now. Past and present occur simultaneously. The memorialization of the past event is in actuality a re-experiencing of the event in the present. Is this part of the answer to Dovid's implicit question and the answer to the question as to why Pesach is the most widely celebrated holiday in the Jewish calendar? The past event is not an excuse for a celebration or a day of joy. The past event has become the present experience. We use our unique human

capacities in order to subjectively experience the drama of the past in the present and experience ourselves present in the drama of the past.

The chacham, the tam, and the sheenu yodea lishol, all re-experience the past in the present and the present in the past in their own ways. The rasha on the other hand, and that is why he or she is a rasha, denies that very capacity which humanizes all of us. The rasha is not interested in others or being part of the collective group, the rasha is only concerned with the present, with his or her immediate perceptual consciousness. In modern lingo, the rasha might be called a sociopath. Such a person denies the human connection with others because all others are dehumanized. For such a person, only the present moment is considered significant. Past, future, other people are irrelevant unless they are of use to him or her at the moment. When the rasha says, "what did God do to me?" we need to imagine the infinite number of permutations and variations that this phrase signifies and the damage that it inflicts on humanity.

But why do we need to use an event of the past to cope with the tribulations of the present? Human misery affects all of us, sometimes closer to home and sometimes farther from home. Freud, who by the way must have been smart because he was really a galicziener, said that psychoanalysis merely converts neurotic misery to normal human misery. One cannot compare the magnitude of the misery of one person with the misery of another. A reporter on CNN the other night made a psychologically naive statement when she said that human tragedies as a result of natural disasters such as earthquakes are easier to accept than the tragedies as a result of terrorism as in Oklahoma City. To the individual survivor of the earthquake, his or her loss is as great or as minor as the loss of the individual survivor of an act of terror. We each have our own internal and external tragedies and use our own mechanisms to attempt to cope with them.

Because part of our humanity involves our ability to bond with others, group rituals enable us to add to our own personal mechanisms to cope with tragedies and triumphs. I have given divrei torah in order to honor the yartzeit of my father's death at the second seder 4 years ago. Last year at this time we were affected by Stephanie Rogoff's sudden death and I remembered my friend Rick who had died 20 years before. This year, I found myself writing poetry for several months as a mechanism to master my feelings of loss at my mother's death at the second Chanukah candle.

All these rituals of expression involve the sharing of thoughts and feelings with other people. Feeling and expressing those feelings in language, that uniquely human condition, is the essence of the seder. At times of joy and freedom we are thankful that we are not suffering and hope for those who do suffer; at times when we ourselves do suffer we hope that we will not have to endure the suffering for long. We share the sorrows and the joys together at the seder at a special place, a maqqom.

Over the last few months I have become intrigued with the word maqqom, when it is translated as omnipresent, i.e., as a designation for God. This is a word that is used frequently in the haggadah, such as in the phrase, baruch hamaqqom, baruch hu; yet, maqqom as God hardly occurs in other liturgical contexts. I have become aware of two such places where the word maqqom is used to designate God: the mi sheberach that is recited for those who are called to the torah and the incantation with which a mourner is comforted when a person leaves the

house of mourning. Maqqom as God is a post-biblical appellation, really a post-second temple phrase. Did this become a word for God when the place of his presence no longer existed? Once the literal concrete maqqom of God no longer existed it was as if God became the maqqom. In any event, the three contexts in which maqqom is used liturgically, the seder table, the torah, and the house of mourning, all share an important characteristic: the place itself has become a maqqom--a transcendent place--not simply of the realm of the present. In this maqqom the past and the present exist simultaneously. When the visitor says hamaqqom y'nachem, the comforter implicitly communicates that the mourner should be comforted by his or her memories which are activated as he or she sits in that particular maqqom. During the shiva for my mother, in my mind--i.e., in my subjective experience--she was both not there and there at the same time.

At the seder, the past and present also occur simultaneously. This simultaneity includes the juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular. In the midst of the recitation of the Hallel, for example, the participants of the seder consume the meal. Hallel is begun, the meal is eaten, and Hallel is continued. In other words, eating, which is as present an activity as any could be, eating the meal, particularly foods rich with symbolic meaning, in that place, in that maqqom, is no longer simply a secular present-moment activity. Thus, when we say "baruch ha maqqom" we are thankful for being in a maqqom, in a place, where we can participate in a ritual which helps us maintain a connection between the past and the present. We teach others how to conduct the ritual in the future, b'chol dor vador. Thus, we not only remain connected with the past generations but we also insure a connection with the future generations who will remember us.

Shabat shalom and Hag sameach

Amalek, Egypt, Kosovo, and us:

Dvar Torah on Shabat Chol Ha Moed Pesach 1999

Leon Hoffman

Now in the time of Kosovo and Serbia and ethnic cleansing with seemingly futile attempts to counteract these vilest of human rights violations, how can we conceptualize a response to these events in the time when WE are living out the command to re-live our liberation from slavery to freedom. How can we achieve freedom without impinging upon the rights of others? Is that humanly possible?

In Exodus Chapter 17, God tells Moses to write "for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Reading this a while back, I was struck by the irony and the paradox of this statement. Isn't the text saying, Remember to forget? Looking at the section in Deuteronomy, which we read on Shabat Zachor (the shabat of remembering), we read that we are to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget." Again, we are told to erase from our memories by not forgetting.

Certainly a simple understanding of the text is possible. One phrase refers to one action (don't forget to do the deed -- to blot them out) and another phrase refers to the people themselves (blot out the memory of the evil Amalekites). Since our rituals are full of enacting memories--after all, the seder is not simply a symbol for the Exodus but an actual participatory enactment -- I wouldn't even use the word re-enactment because in

order for the mitzvah to be fulfilled one has to experience oneself and one's children as being liberated at the moment.

Similarly, when one reads about the need to remember to blot out the memory of the evil Amalek, one is asked to participate in an action in the present--to remember to forget. Clearly an impossible command to fulfill -- the more one commands one to forget the more one remembers.

Are these merely mystical musings and word plays? Am I creating a problem where there is none? Isn't it all pretty straight forward? The good guys (us) are being delivered from the bad guys (them - the Egyptians). There are other bad guys, very bad guys as a matter of fact (the Amalekites), who pounced on our lame and our weak stragglers. Isn't it simple retributive justice for memories of their existence to be wiped off the face of the earth? Shouldn't the same thing happen to all the evil doers in the world, whomever and wherever they are?

But, if we stop and think, can we always identify the evil ones? Do the good guys always wear white cowboy hats? That image, of course, belongs to another era. Now we realize that the shades are blurred between the good people and the bad, between good deeds and evil deeds, and, most importantly, between those aspects of our selves which are considered good or bad or indifferent.

Seven years ago on this same shabat, I gave a dvar Torah in honor of the first yartzeit of my father's death, on the night of the second seder. In that dvar, I spoke about the arami oved avi prayer, one of the oldest prayers, that has a double translation--a wandering Aramean was my father and an Aramean (i.e. Laban) chased my father. At that time, I said that the ambiguity in the prayer could be understood to refer to the Aramean within all of us. That is, the evil is not only out there, in someone else, but also within us. In thinking about today's dvar Torah, since reading about Amalek many weeks ago, I discovered that the section in Devarim, at the end of Chapter 25, where we are commanded not to forget to forget Amalek, is immediately followed by the section where we are commanded to bring the first fruits to the temple and recite the arami oved avi prayer. This commandment is to be fulfilled once we enter the promised land and, of course, has been incorporated into the Haggadah.

Is this juxtaposition of these two commandments a simple coincidence? Remember to blot out the memory of Amalek is followed by remember your roots as a wandering Aramean when you enter the promised land. Is there an Amelek within us too?

At Pesach we celebrate freedom and we strive, in our current age, for freedom with a minimum of aggression and a minimum of incursions on others' freedom. Do we believe that any aggression towards our enemies is well deserved? We certainly would not commit genocide like the Serbians against the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo. Would we ever engage in the horror of ethnic cleansing? Surely none of us in this room would. But consider the words that we read in today's parsha from Chapter 34 in Exodus? "Behold I

will drive out before you the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Perizzite, and the Hittite, and the Jebusite." And what about the staggering multiplication of plagues that we recite in the Haggadah? One midrash tries to understand the reason for a list in which we seem to relish with pleasure in the aggression that was inflicted on the Egyptians. This midrash explains the hyperbole to be a result of a wish that those very same plagues be inflicted onto the Romans, the evil Romans, who ruled the world when the Haggadah was first written and would have retaliated if they had understood the coded message.

We, who live in freedom and democracy and who have the opportunity to focus on the individuality of the person, cannot imagine the aggression that gets built up in those who are oppressed. Thus, when the oppressed become free, that very aggression can easily become directed at the former oppressors or at surrogates or at other, weaker, people.

My parents, who left Europe in June 1939, always had to figure out ways to keep their aggression under control. Their wishes, however, to hurt their former oppressors were expressed in an unanticipated way. Years ago, during the time when Solidarity first came to the front in Poland, unlike the rest of us, my parents felt zero sympathy for the Polish workers who suffered at the hands of their oppressors. Promoting human rights and freedom for all people was not their operative psychology. To them, the Polish people were simply the people of their youth who tormented the Jews of their shtetl. To them, those people were their Amalekites whose memory needed to be blotted out.

If we remember not to forget to blot out our old enemy, can we ever forgive? In last week Times, I read that "for the Serbs, Kosovo is their Jerusalem, the holy touchstone and center of their existence as a nation despite all the defeats and travails of history. It was in Kosovo, in 1389, on the Field of Blackbirds, that Serb forces lost a mighty battle to the Ottoman Turks, who then ruled Serbia for the next 500 years. But the Serbs regard themselves as having kept the flame of their nation alive, with Kosovo as its bleeding heart. They regained Kosovo by force in 1912, in the First Balkan War, when the crumbling Ottoman empire was defeated." Sadly, the memories of the Serbs lead them to play havoc with other people.

Do we, as human beings, have the capacity to allow memories of humiliations and slaughter to recede? How do we deal with our wishes for revenge? Can we re-work our painful memories in such a way so that we can understand the perspective of the other person, not simply as the evil other but as one who has a humanity of his or her own? The Bible and the Haggadah are quite realistic when viewed from the perspective of the oppressed or the recently liberated from oppression, like my parents in the not-so-distant past. We may want to do to the Egyptians who enslaved us in the past and to the Romans who enslave us in the present what they did or continue to do to us. But we also may want to, in fact we may have to, forgive.

With the ambiguity of commanding us to remember to forget Amalek and with the ritual of relishing in God's wondrous aggressive actions against our oppressors, while also diminishing our cups of wine, for example, we can see that we always will have to

struggle between remembering in order to retaliate with vengeance and remembering in order to control the cycle of senseless retribution.

Shabat Shalom and Chag Sameach

SHIR HASHIRIM

Being that Shir Hashirim is so much about moving beyond talking, and with anticipation of a shabbat afternoon in front of us, this introduction had better be brief. The physical in Shir Hashirim is an important part, but that does not explain why our sages cherished these verses as an indispensable bridge for the house of Israel to travel toward high purpose.

The long affection held by Jewish people for today's reading — in its lush and intimate scenes — comes from two touchstones wrapped up in our history and character.

The first touchstone is that we enjoy Shir Hashirim's invitation in feeling arrived — something Jewish people are by nature shy about. We evade resting through thoughts of comfort or accomplishment. We resist feelings of fulfillment or completion, even when deserved. History has crammed into us too many agitating k'nenehurras. And on the positive side, Jewish heads are constantly filled with planning for and doing our next mitzvot. Even when the shofar is sounded at last on completion of Yom Kippur, we have Ma'ariv to doven and a Succah to start building. On Simchat Torah, when we celebrate completing the reading — we immediately celebrate starting again.

Today while Shir Hashirim is chanted, Pesach lands us in delectable space. Finally after all the preparation, after performing the Mitzvot at Sedar, and after completion with the fourth cup of wine — when even we know we've earned it — Shir Hashirim carries us away. We see right here Pesach's lesson of Hotzianu Mi'Mitzraim joining the blessing of Hichnisanu L'Eretz Yisrael. We envision, k'nenehurra, finding a Jewish enchantment.

The second touchstone resonating for our people — gleaned by the sages — is that in spinning us with these favored figures, Shir Hashirim mirrors the textured relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem. Like between Israel and Hashem, the couple here is long term — they don't really project as kids starting out. The language is too elegant; the poetry too deep in expressing experience together; reverence for the surrounding land with its gardens and fragrances is too seasoned for first bloom of youth.

Like between Israel and Hashem, this couple shows a shared history — their connection made stronger by having touched complexity. Some verses chanted today express that love is elusive and must be earned, needing to be searched for in fields and alleyways. Shir Hashirim's reflection of the bond between our people and Hashem, spans the generations.

Sentiments like these about bonds strengthening from varied experience, are expressed not surprisingly in other literature. Jane Austen in her novel "Persuasion," tells of two people facing complications and doubts, who delay perhaps too long before finally finding their way to mutual devotion. Austen gives great comfort by showing how out of love they summon the will to overcome, and in so doing, enhance each other.

Invited today by Shir Hashirim, we can imagine undisturbed well-being. Drawing from today's poetry from Pesach's softer personality, may we find such a place. May we see ourselves to be — in Austen's words: "more exquisitely happy...more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth and attachment; more equal to act, more justified in acting."

Shavuot Study – Minyan M'at – May 19, 2007

Traditional focus is on preparing for Matan Torah – the revelation at Sinai; we stay up all night in anticipation and to stay in the appropriate posture for receiving Torah

Ex 19:11: *v'hayu n'conim l'yom hashlishi ci ba'yom hashlishi yered H. l'eynei cal ha'am al har Sinai. – Let them be ready for the third day....*

My own preoccupation getting ready for the third day - the tikkun at the JCC caused me to hesitate when Benjamin asked me to do this study session; then I remembered that early on in rabbinical school I'd done a presentation for a liturgy class with Neil Gilman on the Torah service. So I found my notes and the good news is that I know more now that I knew then. But the bad news is that the nature of this presentation is more frontal than others of these study sessions. So please jump in when you have something to share!

Every since my Jewish life began, it's been clear to me that the Torah service is the not to be missed part of Shacharit and I always tell those who are coming new to Judaism or new to the synagogue experience ~~to~~ to try shul on Saturday largely because of the Torah service since it is during the Torah service that you get to see the community in action – doing both God's business and its own

But what's become clear as I've worked on this subject is that while we see the seder shel Pesach as the enactment of Jewish historical experience par excellence, in reality it is seder shel Torah ~~which occurs 4 x each week as well as on holidays~~ that is perhaps an even more profound re-enactment

(*B'kol dor va'dor hayav adam lirot atzmo k'elu hu haya b' har Sinai*)

+ that we can accomplish this objective 4x weekly and on holidays

In the scheme of things, I don't know how to rank the importance of the Jewish sense about history as a critical component of Jewish identity but I think it ranks up there – the idea that God acts in history creates all kinds of theological problems, but it is a profound idea that enlivens Jewish tradition and makes it real, at least in a religious sense

So...for me the power of the Torah service – apart from the reading itself – is the idea that ~~it is~~ ^{it is} on some level a recapitulation of Sinai, ~~that we perform 4 times a week and even more when there's a holiday~~. And the more I look closely at this liturgy the more clear it becomes that there was a very deliberate crafting of the Torah service to give us the sense of continuing revelation through its overall structure, choreography and language

The Torah service – as many other parts of the liturgy – is performative – both through choreography and text we act out the assertion that “we were all at Sinai” – “*atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*” (**Deut 29:9-13**) – This is the equivalent of the Haggadah's command that we see ourselves “*c'elu yatza me'erezt Mitzrayim*”

And it's from this perspective that I'd like to look at the **texts** which present the “historical” precedents for our regular re-enactment of the Sinai revelation (comment

about quotes around "historical"). This remarkable liturgical unit places us in the chain of history each time we perform and recite our experience of revelation *contained in*

TEXT SHEET HERE : *what's the "take away" the Torah service in each?*

Whatever we make of the historicity of these texts, it is certainly clear that we are engaged in recapitulating them each time we embark on hotazzat ha Torah

at least some aspects of

The Torah service as we know it – or at least the skeletal Torah service – is well attested in rabbinic literature beginning with the Mishnah; and it is been embellished throughout history at different times in different liturgical rites and in different countries

While there are significant variations I want to focus on its essential qualities as re-enactment (Using the Bokser siddur – plenty of material here!)

As Ismar Elbogen, a scholar of the liturgy points out, in all siddurim since that of Amram Gaon in the 9th century, it is the Torah itself that is honored; we read from it and from all of Tanach, AND the experience of receiving Torah is recreated through the meticulous selection and arrangement of texts

*Prelude to the Torah service

Eyn ka mocha (Ps 86:8) - This verse announces the forthcoming theophany by emphasizing the sharp divide between revelation and what came before; a summary of what's come before, followed by other verses from psalms

Malchutechah malchut c'olamim (Ps 145:13); *A. Melech* (Ps 10:16); *A. Malach* (Ps 93:1) : These verses affirm God's eternality as distinct from pagan gods

A'yimlokh l'olam v'ed (Ex 15:18) - *Shirat haYam* which connects the re-enactment of Sinai with what came immediately before Sinai and which also has messianic overtones

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יֶחֱדָה - Not T.

A' oz l'amo yiten; A yibarekh et amo b'shalom (Psalms 29:11) – about the future

Av Harachamin heitivah birtoncha et Tzion; tivneh homot yerushalayim (Psalm 51:20): Messianic overtones in a post 70 CE context; or at least redemptive ones

Vayahi b'nsoa haron va'yomer Moshe, Kuma A. v'yafootzoo oveycha....A clear statement of re-enactment as the ark is opened – **Numbers 10:35** – here in the voice of a third person narrator who enjoins God to get up and vanquish Israel's enemies just as we arise to re-enact the revelation; we are at one with the wandering Israelites as they start traveling with the ark; followed by *Ki m'tzion Torah*.... (Redemptive language again)

Isaiah 2:3

And important to note: The next verse in **Numbers - 10:36** is the first line of the ending of the Torah service – *u'bnucho yomar*.... These two verses form an inclusio or a parenthetical construct in which we begin and end with re-enactment.

In the opening of the ark, **Numbers 10:35** is followed by **Isaiah 2:3** with its vision of coming up to the Temple when it has been rebuilt; something that takes on messianic overtones: *Barukh shenatan Torah*; revelation and redemption are again connected

not B. language - but an explicit statement about revelation

*the ark would travel
↓
the ark would come to rest*

Berikh Sheme – from the **Zohar**; reflects influence of the Kabbalists on the development of the Torah service

***Torah Service as Performance**

The re-enactment now shifts to the first person plural; we are now the participants as opposed to the bystanders to whom God's glory has been announced and who stand by while Moses speaks; and here we see even more dramatically, the re-enactment of the first recorded public reading of the Torah by Ezra as described in the book of Nehemiah

We recite the words of the *Shema*, followed by a short rabbinic text “*ehad*” – **Soferim 14:14** (very rare non Biblical text) and then a verse from **Psalms (gadlu)**; **I Chronicles 29:11** (*L'cha hashem*) where David announces that Solomon has been given the privilege of building the Temple where the ark will reside and then *Rommemu* (**Psalm 99**) at the point where the revealed text is literally brought into the kahal; another reference to the Temple which takes on a messianic flavor after the destruction of the 2nd Temple

And the words that precede the first reading are striking: “*v'atem hadvekim..... hayimm kulchem hayom*” – They appear in **Deut 4:4** – just before that book's account of the revelation & emphasize the fact that we were all at Sinai and we are all here again, today! So here's the linguistic equivalent of *B'kol dor va dor*

***Torah Reading**

Huge amount of material about the history of the Torah reading and the many and varied customs who was called to the Torah, how much was read for each aliyah and by whom, as well as how the annual Torah reading cycle was divided, etc., etc.

But in terms of the subject of this session, the crucial point is the inclusiveness of the Torah service: all parts of the kahal traditionally called – kohanim, levites and Israelites

And while the occasions upon which people are called for aliyot have certainly expanded in recent years, it's all about observing life cycle events: auf ruf, baby namings, benching gomel, bnei mitzvah, yahrtzeits, anniversaries, graduations, etc., etc., etc.; and also the custom of reciting a mi sheberakh for those for are ill, reading yahrzeit lists, etc.

How appropriate that we should communicate with each other about our lives as we re-enact the revelation. Perhaps our ancestors did more than build a golden calf!!!

There are also customs during the Torah service of reciting *El Male Rachamin*, prayers for the government of the country, for Israel, for scholars, for the kahal, for the martyred among the house of Israel, not to mention announcing the new moon! So that while we are all assembled we are also attending to the communal agenda....

At the end of the reading there is a re-enactment within the re-enactment as we lift the Torah scroll, display it to the kahal and ready it for its second procession among the people: “*v'zot ha Torah asher sam Moshe lifnei b'nai Yisrael*”: **Deut 4:44** – which

immediately precedes Deuteronomy's account of the revelation and is connected to the words "*al pi ha shem b'yad Moshe*" – from **Numbers 9:23** – where we read that the Israelites would make camp at a sign from God and break camp also at a sign from God as communicated by Moses which signals that we are – in effect – about to make camp again, having experienced the revelation of Torah

Haftorah – Significant for our purposes in that it includes the prophetic texts, adding to the breadth of Biblical text that is included in the Torah service; the full revelation!

D'var Torah – A perfect analogue to the verses in Nehemiah about the exposition of the Torah! Plus ca change!

*Return of the Torah

The revealed Torah is once again brought into the kahal for its procession among them but now because we are going to make camp and, figuratively, God's presence will descend upon the ark in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night

And so we celebrate the Torah with the singing of a psalm and reverse the process by which the Torah was "revealed" at the start of the service

We begin with the words from **Numbers 10:36** - *u'bnuch yomar: "And when it halted he would say, 'Return, O Lord, You who are myriads of thousands'"* – this verse describing how the ark would come to rest follows the one with which we began – *vayahi binsoa haaron* – Numbers 10:35 which describes how Moses would call upon God to break camp and scatter Israel's enemies

For me this is always the most profound moment in the entire Shabbat service as we reluctantly return the Torah to the ark, while we urge God to go to the mishkon or the Temple or to hover over the ark, the resting place of the Torah

These verses also echo the KUMA of the opening of the Torah service; there we were asking God to arise and advance against enemies; here we are asking God to arise and go to God's resting place as the Torah service ends – ~~be it in the mishkan, the Temple or here, hovering over the ark.~~

And we await the next revelation with words from **Psalm 132:8-10** that have strong messianic overtones, referring as they do to the sanctuary, the priests and above all, David, God's anointed

We pay our last respects to the Torah with words from **Proverbs 4:2, 3:18 and 3:17**, one of the wisdom books, asserting that the Torah is a "good teaching" and a tree of life to those who hold fast to it and emphasizing that the revelation includes all of Tanach And, perhaps curiously, we end with the penultimate words from **Eyicha**, the book of lamentations for the destroyed Temple with its overtones of messianic redemption in the wake of the destruction of the Temple: we ask God to take us back to the days of revelation, to renew our days as they once were – that is, to bring us back to the immediacy of revelation. Fortunately for us, this immediacy is accessible only a few days or a few hours later as we once again call the Torah forth from the ark!!!

Back to the 3rd person namanah

the following

of the Torah

וְיָשָׁב יְהוָה מִיְּהוּדָה וְיָשָׁב יְהוָה מִיְּהוּדָה וְיָשָׁב יְהוָה מִיְּהוּדָה

Shabbos/Shavuot Havdalah dvar Torah-May 30, 2020

Shavuot is the only holiday which is not given a specific date of observance in the Torah but is to fall seven weeks after Pesach. Of course, that works out to be the sixth and seventh of Sivan but there is obviously an implied connection between these two holidays. Passover represents Isaiah Berlin's negative liberty, which is a state of the absence of constraints and oppression, while Shavuot represents his positive liberty "when there is the possibility of taking control of one's life and realizing one's fundamental purposes." Passover represents freedom from, while Shavuot represents freedom to.

There is also an odd little connection between Pesach and Shavuot. At the seder, the final line of Dayyenu is always translated as "Had God not brought us to Israel and not built the Temple for us-Dayyenu." The Hebrew text, however, does not use the word for Temple but, rather, uses "bais habichirah," the chosen House. Where does this come from?

On this second day of Shavuot we read the latter third of parshah Re'eh. Unique to this parshah are fourteen variations on the statement "in the place God will choose," referring to where offerings are to be brought and sacrifices are to be made. The text is clearly establishing the primacy of the Temple in Jerusalem. Our reading today included ten of those fourteen.

When the giving of the Torah at Sinai is read on the first day of Shavuot, had we been together, as we long to be, we would have stood together. Shavuot is the day of choosing; choosing what to accept and deciding how to live your only life. In this we have autonomy, autonomy being from the Greek roots for self-law. It is a very fraught and dangerous and critical thing to decide what is to be the law for ourselves and how we shall conduct ourselves in this world.

During this plague time we here are particularly fortunate to have homes and food and to have been spared or to have survived this virus. I certainly don't believe this crisis is a punishment decreed by God but is the result of natural processes abetted by human duplicity and incompetence. That this time might be experienced as if a punishment, on a day to day basis, would not be surprising. But could this not also be an opportunity? Obviously, no one would have wished for this plague besetting us but what if, what if, we thought of the bais habichirah that has been chosen for us is the confining apartments, the claustrophobic rooms, these entrapping Zoom boxes.

Bill Murray, in the movie *Groundhog Day*, is a contemptible, manipulative, sexist newscaster who discovers he is trapped in an eternal re-do loop, always awaking to the same time on the same February 2nd. He tries alcohol and suicide to avoid the weight of that single day but eternally returns. Eventually he surrenders to the day across years and attempts new ways of being and new interests, becoming a caring person in the process. Murray is not released from the loop of time until he can get one day right.

And confined in the places chosen for us, with one day barely distinguishable from another, staring wistfully out the window at a world from which we are now largely cut off, trying to decide whether to narcotize ourselves with more cat videos, we may remember that Re'eh begins with "See this day I set before you blessing and curse..." and wonder if our daily lives demonstrate we know how to choose. Havdalah ends Shavuot but not the possibility of change. Whether this unwished-for confinement is used as an adult's precious time to re-create a piece of ourselves or a child's punishing time-out to sulk is really up to us.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Introduction-Yizkor-Shavuos-2021

We have been exposed to a lot of numbers lately. Three days ago, we began the book called Numbers and learned that on the first day of the second month in the second year from the Exodus a census determined there were 46,500 Reubenites and 59,300 Shimonites and 45,650 Gadites and 74,600 Judahites, and so on. Numbers so little capture people. Who were those people? There have been 585,000 US dead from Covid thus far. Who were those people?

To reduce living individuals to mere numbers was forbidden except when God decreed a census. King David was punished for daring to count his people without God's warrant. To reduce the dead to numbers and anonymity is worse. In terms of literary effect, one of the reasons we react to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu is not just because Aaron was silent but because the Torah is silent regarding the names of the dead in Leviticus 10 at the time of their deaths and in Aharei Mot when the presumption of "the two sons of Aaron" is condemned. Not recording their names is intended as commentary.

Yesterday we received the Torah again and each one of the Ten Commandments was enjoined upon us in the Hebrew singular. The Torah speaks to each one individually in life and we hope our singularity will be recognized with dignity in death. In death, the minhag has it that the Titkabal section of the Kaddish Shalem is not said in the house of a mourner because that sentence reads "May the prayers and supplications of the entire household of Israel be accepted...." The tradition was sensitive to the fact that with one, just one, member of the House of Israel missing, we have to acknowledge the House is diminished with this tiny gesture.

At the 92nd Street Y, for his announced last public appearance, Philip Roth read the section from *Sabbath's Theater*, the personal favorite of his works, in which Sabbath is walking through the Jewish cemetery where his parents are buried. He walks all about the grounds reading the inscriptions on the gravestones and observes: "It looks as if no one beloved gets out alive." So very true.

Fourteen of our people died since Yom Kippur. Here are the names of the loved ones lost to us since Yom Kippur: Henry Dicker, father of Shira; Stanley Urbas, father of Elisheva; Zion Namdar, father of Ruby; Grace Glasser, mother of Dorothy Weiss; Sonia Dobrejcer, mother of Anny; Herbert Weinberg, father of Elana; Beverly Greenspan, sister of Joni; Ellen Brown, sister of Nancy Dubler; Solomon Fishman, father of Eric; Dorothy Greenbaum, mother of Nancy; our friend Frances Degen Horowitz; Harold Cantor, father of Richard; Ron Israeli, brother of Gil; and Marion Shulevitz, mother of Judith.

Howard L. Berkowitz 5/18/21

As Elul approached this summer, I felt confident that I knew what I needed to do to set right my relationships among the people in my life. But in the run-up to the Days of Gd's Remembrance and Gd's Judgment, it was less clear to me what I could do to set right my relationship with Gd.

It seemed like a question I had never seriously considered before. For decades I have made the 10 days between Rosh Hashana a time of extra prayer. And though I don't believe in a Gd Who orchestrates the good and bad occurrences in our lives – at least I don't *think* I do – I have always imagined Elul as a kind of a Lent, a time to be on better behavior and perhaps refrain from certain indulgences, just in case Someone's actually up there keeping a list. But a friend pointed out to me that the self-denial we exercise on Yom Kipur and Tisha B'Av is not a feature of Elul. The call of Elul is the call of the shofar; the imperative is to awaken. The question, then, is: awaken to what? And once we're alert, what does that demand of us?

As we come to the end of Elul now, I feel that the month itself has been calling to us. Gd has been feeding us the answers. Force-feeding.

In Elul we have seen the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and without broaching the politics of it at all, it calls on us to reflect – not only as a nation on the world stage, but each of us in our lives and families and communities:

What are our strengths?

What are our vulnerabilities?

What are our obligations? And do they extend beyond our own interests?

What does it take to act successfully on our good intentions?

Do we know what is right? Can we impart it to others? Can we impose it on others?

How do we deal with failure? How do we move on from humiliation?

Can we rethink our long-held beliefs when they turn out badly?

Do we learn the lessons of our failures? How hard do we try to learn? And what are the lessons?

What do we owe to those who have depended on us?

How do we as individuals share in our communities' burdens? To whom do we assign the hazardous tasks?

Are we justified in assigning blame? And even if we are, what good does it do?

Can we tolerate the waste of our resources? Can we tolerate the waste of lives?

What is leadership? What is courage?

What can I do? What can We do? What role do I play in the We?

This Elul has brought floods in Belgium and floods in Tennessee. Fires in California and in Greece and Italy and Turkey and Jerusalem. Cities rebuilt from storms and earthquakes in recent memory have been blown apart again. Unetaneh tokef is no longer an annual poetic reflection, it's the nightly news.

We have no idea Who Gd is, or where or what S/He does or thinks or intends. All we know is that we occupy this earth, in overlapping and concentric communities, and that we have to make the best of it.

Across the dining table and across the oceans, at every scale and scope. Everywhere there is room for improvement, and in many places, urgent, screaming need.

Tshuva, T'fila, Tz'daka – this is what we can do. At least it's a start. It's a template for what else we might – must – mobilize ourselves to do.

We call on Gd, *Sh'ma Koleinu*, hear our voices. We need to return the prayer, we need to hear the voices of Elul.

Dvar Torah for Elul 2022 (9/16/22)

Toby and Chloe are not here with us tonight as they are busy trying to avoid Covid before their wedding on Sunday. As you know, every wedding day is considered a mini-Yom Kippur so that the couple begins their lives together with all sins forgiven. That won't work for us, however.

Exactly seven weeks ago today, I voluntarily retired after over forty-five years as the director of the consultation-liaison psychiatry service at Maimonides Medical Center. I was the senior physician in the entire hospital. I was asked to stay but I chose to leave. Whenever I tell people I have just retired, the inevitable response is "Congratulations!" But for what? For living to collect my annuity? For getting out of some presumed coal miner-like job? For the expected move to Margaritaville with Jimmy Buffett? Biblical tradition is not very helpful as regards retirement in that Moshe was a workaholic who never retired and was carried out of the office feet first by the boss. And that was a second job after having been a shepherd. I admit in part, I wanted to retire before I screwed up in the hospital. I wonder what would have become of Moshe if he had retired before he hit that rock instead of speaking to it.

Usually, when people retire, they want to both move away from something and toward something else. True, I no longer wished to bear the moment-by-moment decision-making, the responsibility for residents' training and the patients' welfare nor the being pulled in three directions at once on which I used to thrive. But what was I leaving that for? Certainly not for a thwarted career as an artist or a long-wished-for hobby of fly fishing. Not at all. There was just a barely articulated sense that it was time. Literally for fifty years my day, my life, had been structured by clinical needs and strict hospital routine. It was a functional, productive, admirable structure but one which proceeded almost of itself. I thought it time I took responsibility for my day, without actually even understanding what that meant.

The meaning of a life working in a hospital flowed directly from the days in the hospital, that is, in a way, effortlessly, and the days had intrinsic value. Now I would be responsible if I black-holed a day on the internet. How to proceed with my days? Remembering a youthful infatuation, I thought of Thoreau's *On Walden Pond* and his retirement from the world for inspiration: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of

life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

When young, with Holden Caulfield-like immaturity I thought Thoreau a “phony” once I learned Thoreau’s mother often did his laundry and cooked for him and Thoreau in his supposed isolation was often surrounded by picnickers and often had friends over for dinner. Once upon a time, I felt betrayed by these facts. Fifty years on, I realized Thoreau lead an actual life in the real world, as Judaism insists we must. There is no purity in philosophical withdrawal or monasticism. But how does one live life deliberately when there is no hospital *zichut* to draw on and there is garbage to be taken out?

My home desk and the floor around it filled up with boxes from my hospital office and so many little tasks had to be attended to that I felt behind in retirement and felt behind in life. So fearful had I been of having nothing to do in retirement, that I had made up in advance a three-page list of things I could busy myself with and then I wasn’t getting to those either. I saw that time tends to dribble itself away; that nature abhors a vacuum of time and so daily chores and email and distractions will always fill the void in a day. I had been given eleven more hours per day, yet now I couldn’t imagine how I had ever found time for work. The weeks have been flashing by...as did those 45 years in the hospital... as did those 38 years for the Israelites which go unmentioned in Bamidbar and the virtue and purpose and meaning of being in the hospital have to be replaced. True, I had, over many years effort, come to eat the carrots in my chicken soup and the beets in my borscht, which would have pleased my grandmother very much, but that didn’t seem a sufficient achievement, Jewish landmarks though they may have been.

When David Shapiro asked me to deliver some remarks at this dinner, he was probably surprised that I uncharacteristically agreed immediately. That was so because retirement and Elul, and the High Holydays to come, ask the same question: so, what are you to do with the days which remain to you? In our conversation, David referred to Rabbi Alan Lew’s book *This Is Real and You Are Totally Unprepared*, which is about our state in regards to life, in general, and the High Holy days in particular. This is the most anxiety-provoking title possible for high-functioning people. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud regarded the explanation of anxiety-laden dreams of unreadiness and being exposed as central to his project. Unreadiness and exposure-those are the stock-in-trade of Elul, the anxiety-laden gateway to the Holy Days. These days say- “Congratulations, you

made it to another Elul! So, what have you done with your precious time? Are your prayers as empty as they were last year? Are you no better a person than you were this time last year?" Retirement and Elul take us away from one job, in order that we may confront another.

Oftentimes, the five-fold repetition of the Viddui can seem mechanical and stale. But, of course, that depends on what we bring to the confessional. You have to find the parts of the Viddui which speak to you, so you can dwell on them...year 'round. The English translation in the Etz Hayim is contemporary and the sins readily recognizable. My personal favorites needing work include "empty confession...foolish speech...clever cynicism...rashly judging others...superficiality...[and] succumbing to confusion." During the services, I should dwell on lived examples of these failings instead of speed reading the davening. Deciding how to be and what to do apply to everything, including the seemingly trivial. Why would I ever conclude a formal letter to a stranger with "sincerely," when I should be striving to be sincere with you whenever we speak. In the haftorah for the morning of Tisha b'Av, Jeremiah tells us to "...act with kindness, justice and equity in the world for in these God delights." Every time we speak to a spouse, a friend or the fruit and vegetable guy, every time we are about to be hurtful to ourselves, we get another chance

But how do we know when we are doing a good job, given that the job performance evaluation can be so murky during the year? Since no day above ground can ever be a day without potential value, what are we looking for, what feeling do we seek by which we decide if a day has been worthwhile? Rabbi Sidney Greenberg made a comment years ago which has been coming to mind recently. He said "insufficient use of self" makes for disappointment with the self. We have to make an effort to be and to do to be content with the day.

Miss Peggy Lee was reaching after this question in her signature song:

"And as I sat there watching
I had the feeling that something was missing
I don't know what, but when it was over, I said to myself
Is that all there is to the circus?

Is that all there is, is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is."

Even the circus requires that you bring something to it or else one is suffering from “insufficient use of self;” a deadening of the agency of the self. The authority of Elul, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur tell us that what we come in with is not all there is. For those fortunate enough to experience Elul and the Holy Days as “the penitential season,” even to the least degree, restructuring of the day after remains possible.

Hayom harat olam, “today the world is born,” we say after each set of shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah. But every day you wake up is a day for a new birth. Every day we should be saying; Mah nishtanah **ha yom** hazeh mikol **hayamim** because this day is different because it is here now to be used. “Every day we are called to the present moment of our lives.”. Elul and retirement ask the same question: “What is the rest of your life for?” That was the question which was always there. As Dina has said, no one on their death bed ever spent their time regretting not getting one more cashmere sweater. I find it remarkable and hopeful that God’s holiest name YHVH can be accurately translated as “I will be what I will be,” and we are told to emulate God.

But there is simply no time to waste, as Kurt Weill’s September (though really Elul) Song reminds us: “Oh, it’s a long, long time from May to December/But the days grow short when you reach September/When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame/One hasn’t time for the waiting game.” Of course, we cannot be free of our circumstances and our personalities, but these Holy Days insist we have agency to better ourselves. If not heeded, we run the risk in the end of lamenting with Richard II: “I wasted time and now doth Time waste me.”

Howard L. Berkowitz

Rabbi Kalmanofsky noted in his call for Elul submissions that “Islam records a tradition that there are 99 names of God, and they even compiled a list.” In a 1953 short story titled *The Nine Billion Names of God*, Arthur C. Clarke has a Tibetan lama hire a huge computer to be applied to printing out every possible name of God using a Tibetan alphabet and certain rules of permutation “...until the last star burns out and the wheel of time is broken.” The unbelieving Western engineer in charge of the project is startled, at the very end of the story, when “Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.” But our tradition, most especially at this time of the year, is more concerned with the attempt to improve ourselves and this world, rather than to escape both and to enter into a relationship with God, rather than to escape from one.

The partial list of names our tradition has developed for the manifold aspects of God, varying with our focus, which Rabbi Kalmanofsky provided includes a variant form of the name which has always drawn my particular attention. It is listed as Karov L’nishberei lev and translated as “One close to the broken-hearted.” I prefer the formulation drawn directly from Psalm 147: Harofeh lishvoorei lev or “the Healer of the broken-hearted.” It is not that, as a psychiatrist, I would like to claim God as a colleague in this endeavor, but rather that this sentiment finds its way into the High Holyday liturgy via Psalm 51:17 “a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.”

Many of us have difficulty in approaching the High Holydays as the shofar of Elul calls us thinly and distantly. Many of us have difficulty with a concept of a God who is out there to receive us in some way, who is out there receiving prayer so that we may try, once again, to become better than we have been. May it only be then, that we actually care enough so that we are able to approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur absolutely heart-broken over our conviction at the anticipated failure of the day and of ourselves. Since we are told by many traditions “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” then may it not be that if broken-hearted, some form of a Healer will appear?

Howard L. Berkowitz

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When Binyamin asked – wondered why me, I have not suffered the loss of friends or family this year and my association with the talk before yizkor is those who have sustained a recent loss

Went home – to find yahrzeit notice for father, to conversation with Dianne about her father's shloshim, to terrible news of the death of the wife of one of my son's college roommates

Reminded – we are all always suspended between life and death – always, hopefully, choosing life, but always in some relationship with impending death – even if it is only the sure knowledge of our own mortality

So I've been thinking about the subject of loss and remembering my own losses – of parents, of friends

Three weeks ago – when I officiated at the funeral of a woman who died at 93 ½ I was struck once again by the unfairness of my own father's death at the age of 57, only 1 ½ years after the birth of his first grandchild, an unfairness that stays with me because he would have reveled at the birth of his next 5 grandchildren and would have been an extraordinary grandfather. My children and my brother's children never knew this infuriating and hilarious life force that was my father, z"l

And of course it reminds me of the unfairness of the death of my two friends named Pamela within a few months of each other in 2002; Pam Sheppard my pal from our turbulent days at the SAJ and my theatre going partner who never shrank from leaving at intermission if the play was bad and who died in her early 60's after years of struggling with lupus. Pam Brumberg, a member of this minyan and a dear friend for nearly 20 years, who died after an 18 month battle with pancreatic cancer and whose first grandchild will be born this summer. My list of those who died too early or suffered too grievously goes on and on and I'm sure we each keep a list in our hearts of similar untimely, excruciating losses.

But I don't want to talk about theodicy – of why bad things happen to good people; when I teach Jewish theology I argue that if you don't believe in an omnipotent God who controls life - and death – you don't have a *theological* problem with suffering or evil or the death of the innocent or untimely death; you don't approve of it, certainly, but you don't have a theological problem with it

And perhaps that's why Jewish tradition is pure genius when it comes to death and mourning; perhaps it's because we have no catechism with dogmatic explanations for why people die too young or too horribly, that we focus so exquisitely on taking care of the dying, preparing the body and watching over it until burial, and then taking meticulous care of the mourners. In explaining why I converted to Judaism, I always cite the way in which Jewish tradition deals with death and mourning as an important motivation.

My first up close experience with death was naturally with Christian practices. When my grandfather – my mother’s father – died he was laid out for three days and when the funeral ended family members were invited to file past the open coffin to say their final goodbyes. I was just out of college and I have vivid memories of standing at the back of that room with my father the iconoclast who refused to participate in this ritual. He loathed that kind of emotional manipulation and resented the way it played on my mother’s grief at her father’s death. I trace my own iconoclasm – and my rejection of the Christianity with which I was raised - to his; a Jew by disposition, if not by birth, my father questioned everything.

When my father died several years later at the age of 57, I had already converted to Judaism and begged my mother and brother to keep his casket closed because it was so clear that he would not have wanted to be “laid out” for viewing. To my enormous relief, they knew that to be true and we were able to preserve his dignity in spite of the objections raised by extended family members. But, of course, there was no shivah and I have vivid memories of the day after we buried him. There were no visitors to comfort us – they had been there for us before and just after the funeral but then they were gone and we proceeded with secular rituals on a day when it poured rain – going to the bank, the insurance company and the motor vehicle office, taking care of business.

When my mother died nearly ten years ago, I was much more secure in my Judaism and in the rituals of death and mourning. My mother, of course, was buried as a Christian but she was eulogized by her grandchildren at the funeral and to my everlasting relief, my brother agreed that it was really better to have a closed casket. Then, after prayers at the cemetery, instead of walking away and leaving the casket on the bier surrounded by floral arrangements, I insisted on following the truck with my mother’s casket to her grave and my brother thought it made a lot of sense to follow Mom to the end. So my kids and I said kaddish and we all shoveled dirt after the casket was lowered into the grave – my brother included. It wasn’t a Jewish burial and there was no shivah – just informal visits from friends – but it was so much more comforting than it might have been.

So while I can find no theological consolation around death and dying, I am more than ever an advocate of the Jewish way of burying and mourning. My first experience with this Jewish way was when the mother of a high school classmate died and I made a shiva call. I can still see myself going up the walk of that suburban house, enormously scared about being in a shiva house, trying to concentrate on not saying hello or goodbye as I’d been instructed. My next experience was the death of my husband’s grandfather. The plain pine box, the simplicity of the funeral, the shivah during which I headed off to the kitchen to hang out and smoke cigarettes with the great aunts whenever the rabbi with a very long beard came for minyan. The shivah meal with the hard boiled eggs and the cans of tuna fish. It was sad but it was also warm and comforting and so exotic. Of course, Benjamin Rosen lived a long life and had had many years with *his* grandchildren.

So while I have found no resolution to the problem of the timing or the circumstances of death, our tradition provides consolation even for those iconoclasts like my father and I and probably many of you. The only words of consolation that I can offer mourners are those that speak of having been there during the loved one's life, having been there during illness and dying and the great comfort that memory provides. Memory can be a curse but also a great blessing. My daughter asked me not long ago how I could bear not to have my mother with me any more. I could say nothing consoling about meeting again in heaven someday; I could only reassure her that my mother is always with me, inside me. My children like to say to me with particular emphasis: "**Your** mother was a saint." And so it is that my mother's yetzer prods me to be kinder, more patient, more tolerant. But my father is inside me too and while my children never knew him, they know his influence - it's the yetzer that makes me inquisitive, judgmental, irreverent.

May the memory of my parents – Dorothy and Charles Nienstedt – be for a blessing. And may all those who mourn find comfort in memories of those who are gone but live on in us.

A meditation for the 41st day of the Omer,
Yesod shebeYesod
Benyamin Cirlin

It seems that of late we have all been locked up in prison, subjected to scenes of torture and abuse. A few days ago my wife Miriam called me at home several minutes after leaving for work, and upon lifting the phone I heard her crying. "What's the matter?" I urgently inquired, and in a voice filled with pain and fear she replied, "I just saw a picture in the newspaper of a man about to be beheaded," and she continued to cry.

In moments like the above, the world most certainly is devoid of *Yesod*, foundation. Nothing is solid: indeed, the felt experience is of abyss and *hefkeroot*, pure and total anarchy.

And thus, at times like the above, Yosef, the quality of yesod, the first Jewish prisoner,

becomes our teacher and lifeline. He, more than any other character in the chumash, has lived in that abyss: “Then they took him, and cast him into the pit; the pit was empty, no water was in it.” Rashi, quoting the Talmud in Masechet Shabbat, tells us that this pit, though empty of water, was full of potential death and destruction, for “there were serpents and scorpions in it.”

How does Yosef survive in a pit empty of water, of Torah, of meaning, a pit in which life-sustaining forces are absent?

Yosef, I believe, teaches us that there are times when it is essential to be the anti-Ram Dass, to “not be here now” exclusively, to not solely be in the moment. Yosef, yesod, is that quality that allows us to ascend a narrow and creaky bridge from which we may view a time when water was more abundant. Yosef teaches that accessing memories of what was allows, but does not

guarantee, for the possibility of what might yet be. Yosef is thus the quality of sustaining hope in a dark time via healing memories. May it be so for all of us.

A FEW WORDS FOR THE SHABBAT OF PRIDE WEEK

Ron Meyers

19 June 2020

A quote from Heschel has stuck in my mind since I first read it decades ago:

“When I was young,” he said, “I admired people who were clever; now that I am old I admire people who are compassionate.”

I first heard that when I was young, and as I’ve gone through life I’ve found that it rings true. Compassion, I think, is a very adult emotion. It requires, first, enough maturity to know that life can be difficult. And then it requires the further awareness that other people’s lives can be difficult, and that they may be difficult ways that are different from yours, in ways that you can’t see, or can’t relate to. And this leads eventually to the ultimate realization that every single person out there – the movie star and the vagrant on the street – experiences their own life with as much feeling, as much urgency, as much investment, as much hope, frustration and effort, as you experience your life.

The awareness of our human commonality can be hard to achieve because it’s layered under so much difference. As soon as we start life, our identities become more and more particular. You may be as young as eight days old when your particular religion is inscribed on your body. By the time we’re in middle school, we’ve gravitated to kids of a similar socioeconomic background, by high school we flock with kids of similar interests, by your mid-20s you may have acquired an identity as, say, a lawyer, and by your 30s you might introduce yourself as a litigator, for real estate matters, on the landlord side – oh, and that’s commercial

real estate, not residential. You reach a point where you forget even the different identities that you used to have, or that you might have had if things had played out differently.

And it's that much harder to imagine the identities of people who have lived very differently. How can you imagine the life of someone who had to struggle for something that you take for granted? How can you imagine the life of someone who experiences their body differently – who has a different number of fingers than you, or who gets moody or tired because of their blood sugar levels, who has a physiological compulsion to drink alcohol, or has sexual feelings that you can't imagine having yourself.

A bodily experience that I personally can't imagine is: eating cucumbers. It's a physical revulsion for me and I don't understand how it's a pleasure for anyone. No one will be served a cucumber at my house – and I hope you will treat me kindly if I decline the cucumber soup at your house. ...And if we have to dance a little delicately around the cucumber issue, then there's a lot of delicate dancing to do around religion and race and sexuality.

That's why the rainbow flag is such a potent symbol. It reminds us of the full spectrum of humanity. David Dinkins used to refer to that spectrum as a "gorgeous mosaic"; others call it a tossed salad (which, davka, includes the cucumbers!). It takes an open mind and an open heart to appreciate the differences. We have to be Ansche Chesed – people of compassion – to appreciate all the different ways there are to be human. To borrow another phrase from Heschel, we might regard human diversity with radical amazement – to marvel at the fact that "*yesh k'zeh b'olamo*", that all of this exists in Gd's world.

But what's even more important than celebrating the differences is to feel the similarities. And that means: considering what life actually feels like for another person. I don't know what it's like to feel that your body is mismatched to your gender, but I know that people do feel that way, and it must be a very great challenge. I don't know what it's like to live in fear that a cop, or some random self-righteous vigilante, might harass you for no reason, or rough you up, or kill you, just because you're black. But George Floyd, and Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and Philando Castille have taught me that. And my humanity demands that I perceive their humanity, demands that I care when their humanity is damaged.

In 1986, the Supreme Court not only rejected the idea that people of the same sex have a legal right to private intimacy, the Court disparaged the claim as, quote, "facetious, at best". Twenty years later, people all over the country didn't think it was facetious, they wondered why their nephew wasn't allowed to marry that lovely young man he brought home to Thanksgiving dinner. They wondered why their child's playmate at school wasn't legally the child both her moms. Once people started to feel a connection to other people's humanity, big changes came with remarkable speed.

[And this week – an even more conservative Supreme Court recognized how much our understanding of humanity has changed since then.]

In 2014, David and I had been together for 17 years, and we finally made ourselves a wedding. I didn't know that it would be the first same-sex *aufruf* at Minyan Maat; I think I only found that out later. The day before the *aufruf*, I was talking with one of the gabbais, who said that he would try to lead people in

singing “*siman tov u-mazal tov*”, since “*kol chatan v’kol kalla*” wasn’t quite on-point. And I thought that was a fine idea. But when we finished our aliya, people burst spontaneously into the song that you always sing at an aufruf: “*Od yeshama, b’arei Yehuda u-v’chutzot Yerushalayim....*” As you know, the end of that phrase is “the voice of joy, the voice of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride”. ...Well, people sang on: “*kol sason, v’kol simcha, kol chatan, v’kol.... chatan!*” It was a great moment: the voice of the groom and the voice of the groom! Everyone sang, everyone caught themselves, everyone changed the word right on the spot, and we had a great laugh.

And that, my friends, is what it looks like when we achieve our civil rights: we stop arguing over how great our differences are, and instead we can have a laugh together over how small our differences really are.

Most of you will be familiar with a book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which deals with Rabbi Harold Kushner's experience trying to deal with the death of his son from progeria. As an oncologist, I'm particularly interested in how we prevent bad things from happening to good people. By this I don't mean behaviors such as quitting cigarette smoking, or taking statins for high cholesterol, which are certainly effective ways to prevent medical problems. Instead I mean the psychological and social and religious behaviors by which we routinely try to protect ourselves from those events that, as every oncologist knows, happen to people who deserve better.

There are many such behaviors, ranging from phrases we automatically say to actions that we take without thinking deeply about them. If you were to trip on the stairs hurrying to get to the 5th floor services, God forbid. If you were to fail that exam next week, knock on wood. If your body were taken over by a dybuk, kein ayin hara. Today I'd like to explore with you a particularly Jewish way that we try to protect ourselves from evil events, one that has strong connections to Pesach, which is the reason to speak about this now.

We all use this protective device, yet it gets relatively little attention in the non-Orthodox Jewish community. I'm speaking, of course, about the mezuzah, which we put on the doorpost of our houses, or, in New York City, on the doorpost of our apartments. Data from a number of studies compiled by the North American Jewish Data Bank shows that in various American cities between 40 and 87% of American Jews put up a mezuzah, with the median being 65%. To give some perspective, this rates a bit below the rate of American Jews who usually light Chanukah candles, but way above the rate of those usually lighting Shabbat candles. The mezuzah, like all symbols, has a wide variety of meanings, and I don't intend to explore them all today, instead focusing on one. The word mezuzah actually means doorpost, although in normal discourse we now speak of a mezuzah as the case and the parchment that is affixed to the right hand doorpost of our apartment entrance, as well as on the doorpost of each room of our apartment. The parchment in the

mezuzah case has written upon it 22 lines, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, although it's not an acrostic. The text, consisting of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, is part of the Shema, and includes the command to "k'tavthem al mezzot be'techa v'sharecha", to "write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates".

It's worth noting that not all Jews have interpreted this commandment in the same way. The Karaites interpreted the commandment as a metaphor – similar to "write them as a tablet on your heart" and thus rejected the practice of both t'fillin and m'zuzot. The Samaritans interpreted the phrase "k'tavthem al mezzot be'techa v'sharecha" literally, as noted by our good friend from Philadelphia, Jeff Tigay, in the commentary on T'fillin and M'zuzot in the back of the Etz Hayim. Thus they would write Biblical phrases directly on their doorposts and gates. Jeff writes that "For an unknown reason, at some point in the late Second Temple period, Jewish law modified this practice, ruling that the inscription was to be written on parchment, rolled up, and inserted in a case."

Why do I call the mezuzah a protective device? We often think of it as a symbol of Jewish identification, which it certainly is. Or a predominantly religious symbol, as expressed by Maimonides who wrote "By the commandment of the mezuzah, man is reminded, when entering or departing, of God's Unity, and is stirred into love for him. He is awakened from his slumber and from his vain worldly thoughts to the knowledge that no thing endures in eternity like knowledge of the "Rock of the World." This contemplation brings him back to himself and leads him on to the right path."

Perhaps. But clearly the mezuzah recalls the story of Pesach where smearing the blood of the Pesach offering on the doorposts and lintels of the houses of the Hebrews protected those houses from the angel of death who that night killed the firstborn of Egypt. When we put up a mezuzah we psychologically and religiously link back to that event.

In Talmudic times the mezuzah was often regarded as an amulet, magically guarding against evil. In his fascinating book *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* which was published in 1939, Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg boldly states that “Descended from a primitive charm, affixed to the doorpost to keep demons out of the house, the rabbinic leaders gave it literally a religious content ... in the hope that it might develop into a constant reminder of the principle of monotheism – a wise attempt to reinterpret instead of an unavailing prohibition.” In one story from the Jerusalem Talmud, Judah ha-Nasi received a gift of a pearl from Artaban, a pagan king of Parthia. Judah ha-Nasi reciprocated with the gift of a mezuzah. Artaban was outraged, saying that he was insulted as he sent a gift of great value and, in return, received a gift of no value. Judah ha-Nasi responded that “the gift I received is so valuable that I will need to guard it, but the gift I sent you will guard you, even when you are asleep.”

We can test the hypothesis that a mezuzah can prevent bad things from happening to good people. Since I make my living designing and managing clinical trials, a clinical trial is the answer. All we have to do is to get a couple hundred American Jewish families willing to be randomized to either put up a mezuzah or not, and then follow them for a year or two. The best way to do the trial is to make it blinded – put up mezuzah cases for all the participants but leave half of them without parchments. That way no one knows whether they have a kosher mezuzah or not. But since that falls into the category of clinical trials that are never going to get done, we have to use other approaches to evaluate the effects of mezuzot.

Instead we can examine what happens when mezuzzot are defective. The story is told of a pious widow who lived in Safed who suddenly began to speak with the voice of a man. It became obvious that a dybbuk, a wandering spirit, had taken possession of her body. She sought help from the disciples of the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria. With a special formula, the dybbuk was forced to leave the woman’s body. The next day the mezuzah on the woman’s door was checked, and there was

no parchment, which was considered to be the reason why it did not prevent the evil spirit of the dybbuk from entering her house and her body.

There are several websites that document the effects of defective mezuzot. One particularly striking internet story is that of a family whose son was complaining of headaches and sharp pain in the eyes, which led to the decision by an ophthalmologist that he must be operated on as soon as possible. Later that day, at the suggestion of their rabbi, the family had their mezuzot checked. The mezuzah from the son's bedroom was found to be no longer kosher, and the mezuzah was immediately replaced. Shortly thereafter in what was clearly a miracle, the son's headaches and eye pain began to improve and the doctor decided that an operation was no longer necessary. He recovered completely. It turned out, of course, that the mistake in the mezuzah specifically involved the eyes, with text that read "vhayu l'totafot bein anaychem" instead of "vhayu l'totafot bein anecha".

The concept of a mezuzah as an object providing protection has been taken to extremes with the suggestion that even events outside of one's home can be caused by failure to follow this commandment to the letter. Thus, after the rescue at Entebbe, a Lubavitch student group suggested that "Due to the fact that most of the mezuzot in the homes of hostages, upon examination, were found to be defective, improperly placed, or not on every door post, all Jews should check their mezuzot immediately."

Interesting as they are to relate, the problem is that these stories don't resonate for us, for liberal Jews in the 21st century – they clearly cross the line separating religious practices from magic. To claim that a mezuzah functions in the same way as a secure door lock or a potent medicine strikes us as absurd. I'll come back to this issue in a minute, as I believe it's a key one for understanding the real power of the mezuzah.

There are two additional levels of protection built into the mezuzah. On the back of the parchment, Shaddai, Shin Daled, Yod, one of the Biblical

names of God is written, and the Shin is often on the outside of the mezuzah case. Shaddai is also an acronym for Shomer Daltot Yisrael, Guardian of the doors of Israel. There's also a medieval German Jewish custom to write on the back of the parchment, opposite the words Adonai Eloheinu Adonai that are on the front, the phrase "Kozo bemochsaz Kozo" which is a Caesar cipher – a one Hebrew letter shift of the words on the front. This presumably was done to provide protection from the "evil eye", reasoning that if God's name is disguised then the evil spirits can't find God, and can't lessen God's protection of us. Which led Rabbi Trachtenberg to conclude that "during the Middle Ages the mezuzah acquired all the trappings of the legitimate amulet, becoming one in actuality as well as by reputation. No wonder that Jews regarded it with such respect."

In *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, Stuart Vyse writes that "The pervasive human desire for control is an important motivation for superstitious behavior. Superstitions provide a sense of control over the uncontrollable." There's no question that those Jews during the Middle Ages lived at a time in which relatives and neighbors died suddenly without apparent rhyme or reason, when Jews were blamed for the mysterious occurrence of plague despite the fact that they suffered and died from that disease just like everyone else. Every physician, and certainly every oncologist, understands the extent to which we still live in such a world even though, because of amazing medical advances, we have the luxury of pretending otherwise in our normal, everyday speech. We don't believe in magic, but we still have the need to try to protect ourselves from a world in which bad things still happen to good people. So we continue to put up mezuzot, both to express our need for protection, as well as to indicate that we belong to a community that believes that the only real protection that we can have from bad things happening to good people, comes from the shared values with which we lead our lives.

Prayer for the United States

Navah Harlow

December 3, 2022

Minyan M'at

When Sheryl asked me to deliver the Prayer for the United States, I began to think what does it mean to be a citizen of the United States?

And I began to muse...

I want to share several of my musings with you.

I thought about my Aunt Oudie, my mother's sister, who was a first grade teacher in Lynn, Massachusetts.

She loved her work, she loved her pupils and often said, "If I teach a child to read, I know that I have set them on a course to help them succeed in Life ".

But then she began to think about the parents of her students. Lynn was a melting pot. A shoe factory town, near Gloucester, a fishing town. Immigrants from Greece, Italy, Portugal and Eastern Europe lived side by side.

My Aunt Oudie decided she had to worry about the parents of her first graders and began to teach, what was then called Night School---naturalization classes. And she taught adults to prepare for their naturalization, to become citizens She encouraged them, nurtured them just as she did their children and accompanied them to the day they became citizens of the United States.

Coming before a judge to gain citizenship surely was a daunting experience. My musings took me to Sioux City Iowa, where, as you know, Jules was born. His Zeide, Sam Lipman arrived there from Ukraine in the early 1900's and quickly established himself as a leader in the Jewish community. Sam Lipman was the President of the chevra kadishah, President of two synagogues, Orthodox and later Conservative, President of the Cemetary organization, and self-appointed President of the Jewish businessmen's association . The story is told in Sioux City that when a Mrs. Greenberg had completed her naturalization classes and was

going to appear before the judge, she was terrified, sure that she would forget everything that she learned. The first question asked of her by the judge put her at ease. “ Do you know the name of the President ?”

Her face lit up, she smiled and proclaimed , Yes---Sam Lipman !!

I then began to muse about my father, Cantor David Chasman . After his death, in going through a folder of his most important and cherished documents, I found an exercise book which contains his homework for his naturalization classes and English language class.

This was a man who read Bialik and Tchernechovsky in Hebrew, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in Russian, great Yiddish literature , attended the Kiev Conservatory of Music and taught me a Russian translation of an aria in Verdi’s Aida...and he was writing I go, I went, I will go.... I catch, I caught, I will catch.....

One assignment was to compose sentences of words that end in “ less”

He wrote:

Abraham Lincoln was childless

An uneducated man is thoughtless

More poor people are homeless

To insult a government officer is lawless

When I arrived in this country I was helpless

He saved that exercise book along with his other most precious documents....

And I remember how, on each Election Day he and my mother, dressed perfectly, went **early** to the polls to exercise their right and responsibility and privilege as **citizens** of the United States.

And then my musings took me to my Elementary School in Malden Massachusetts, standing in my second grade classroom , beginning the day each morning with a Salute to the flag---

Placing my hand over my heart and proudly reciting:

I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands

One nation, **Indivisible** ,with liberty and justice for all.

And so my prayer for the United States today is that we all **soon** are able to recapture the pride and confidence of the second grader , her Aunt Oudie's countless students, , Sam Lipman , and Cantor David Chasman the confidence In being a citizen of the United States of America--- One nation, indivisible ,where liberty and Justice for all abounds. -----bimheirah b'yameinu

Melanie Schneider

Shabbat shalom and thank you for the opportunity to offer a Prayer for our Country.

Sasha's graduation from UC Berkeley's Goldman school of public policy, and its commencement speaker, Tennessee State Representative Justin Jones - offered what to me, is the perfect inspiration for a prayer for our country, especially in this moment.

Jones spoke of committing ourselves to social justice, and to challenging the power structures that have been hostile to people of color, women, LGBTQ communities and other long marginalized groups. Just last month, Jones and fellow lawmakers led a protest of students and others who came to the state capitol to demand action against gun violence...just days after a mass shooting at a private school in the city left 6 dead, three of them 9 year olds.

He spoke on Mother's day, to those who lost mothers, to mothers who've lost their children, and especially to those who lost loved ones due to the proliferation of militarized guns in our community. He spoke of the urgent need for disruption - that each generation, out of relative obscurity, must discover its mission, it must fulfill it or betray it. And in order to dismantle the systems of injustice, we have to name what's broken - policy decisions to bow down to the contributions of gun manufacturers and extreme interests like the NRA; policy decisions to protect white supremacy by banning books and banning history; policy decisions to subsidize the fossil fuel industry and to enact policies of erasure that target LGBTQ community members; and the policy decisions that led Jordan Neely to be murdered on a subway in NY and allowed him to suffer a mental health crisis and a vigilante to take his life.

Representative Jones made a point of the need for discovery...discovery of new models by which to live - not through memory alone, but through hope, that there ARE better models by which to live.

May we be inspired to use our resources, our power and our energy, to break the state of decorum and force ourselves to see that we must do things differently, and not the way we've always done them.

Together, in this way, we can build up a new world for our children and our grandchildren, for ourselves, and for those generations yet to come.

Mazel tov graduates!

I felt the need to write this yesterday in anticipation of coming here today and David Fishman was good enough to indulge me.

Mincha occupies a special psychological space in that it looks backward to remind us that the day and the week are passing and will die with the darkness but looks forward to the potential of the days of the next week by giving us a preview of the parshah to come. Today the reading began with "...after the death of the two sons of Aaron..." The return of the repressed. Just as Aaron was silent about these deaths, so the Torah has been silent for two parshiot. The Torah has a larger narrative to convey and does not dwell on these losses. But for us here, we who have been reading this text for most of our lives and for whom the characters populating the Torah have become living companions and for whom the lacunae in the text serve as bait for thought, we imagine the stone Aaron carried in his heart.

January is named for the two-faced Roman god Janus because it, too, simultaneously looks back on the previous year and forward to the next and gives perspective. This past year was not one any of us wanted or could have anticipated. At the conclusion of the Avodah Service, over a year ago we read The Prayer of the High Priest For the New Year-you remember, Yehee ratzon milfanecha...shnat osem. What we prayed for then seemed to have been mocked by a virus: a year of song; a year of rest; a year of consolation; a year of peace and tranquility; a year of assembly in Your holy place. Even that final statement for the people of Sharon-that their homes not become their graves-took on new meaning for people sick with Covid at home.

The sadness at the losses of this Covid-time does not just go away. There was an eruption of memories for me at the prospect of Mincha here today, just as the Torah could not succeed in containing the mention of Nadav and Avihu. Though we as a community have been very, very fortunate overall and we tried to maintain ourselves as a community-in-being on Zoom, yet it was not the same at all. Zoom is I-It; Kiddush is I-Thou. I really do know the difference between a lost loved one and a lost Kiddush, but I have missed being here, I have missed all of you. This year of caesura in our communal life, in our davening, in our Shabbos dinners, in our contact will remain as a stone in our history.

Howard L. Berkowitz 4/16/21

“It was twenty years ago, today...Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play...” The Beatles wrote that thirty-five years ago. In the ‘60’s, to a songwriter in his twenties and to audiences in their teens, twenty years must have seemed a great deal of time. Now, with already two of the Beatles unable to ever sing “When I’m Sixty-Four” from the perspective of that age, perhaps the understanding of time has changed for most of us who listened to those lyrics for the first time many years ago.

It was, indeed, twenty-five years ago today, Rosh Hodesh Iyar, that Dina and I were wed. It was nearly thirty-five years ago today that Nancy and Walter Dubler were married. It was twenty-three years ago Minyan M’at was founded. It was twenty-two years ago Elana was born. It has been eighteen years since Ariella’s bat mitzvah. It was fourteen years ago Etan was born. It was ten years ago we last shared an anniversary kiddush with the Dublers. Who appreciates that “death is the mother of beauty” and that every moment is precious, when they are nineteen? Youth does not comprehend the gratitude expressed by the *shehechayanu* prayer for having been permitted to reach this season. Nor does youth appreciate how the arrow of time can only be reversed by memory.

The fixing of time was a great achievement of the ancient world. The observance of Rosh Hodesh was the first commandment given to us as a people. It was given on Rosh Hodesh Nisan before the instructions for Pesach were provided and before the blow of the tenth plague was delivered. It is the commandment from which all sense of Jewish time flows and without which all other holidays become unknowable. Its centrality was apparent to the Syrian-Greek tyrant Antiochus who banned its observance in Maccabean times. And Rosh Hodesh has always been associated with women because of its monthly periodicity.

Our sense of the passage of time might be said to be exemplified by the two holidays we stand between: Pesach and Shavuot. Pesach is fixed at the fifteenth of Nisan while Shavuot has no fixed calendrical date and is observed seven weeks from the start of Pesach. A child is born nine months after conception into a specific birthdate whereupon the family tends to date events in the family from the birth of the child on the basis of personal time. The cycle of the Jewish year is littered not only with the major holidays and observances but also with the Seder Olam derived dates for all sorts of human events; eg. the dates of Moshe’s birth and death or the date of Miriam’s birth. Calendar time is fixed like a butterfly on a pin while human time is more extended and diffuse. A digital watch offers the illusion of exact time while an analog watch offers an approximation of time. Of the three categories of laws (*edot*, *chukim*, *mishpatim*) only the latter commemorate specific events in time. Shabbos exists crystalline and absolute and would exist even if we did not exist to observe it, while the Shalosh Regalim exist only because we exist.

People’s personalities may come to parallel the types of time perspective they favor. Some are linear, fixed and legalistic while some are expansive, indeterminate and socially matrixed. Jacob’s daughter, Serach, represents the latter. Given that she was the only woman mentioned in the Torah among the seventy people of Jacob’s household

who went down into Egypt to join Joseph, the Midrash elaborates on her qualities. When a child she was asked to hint to Jacob in her playing and singing that his son Joseph was still alive, so that Jacob would not be fatally shocked. But, more to our purpose, she was the only member of Jacob's family to live until the Exodus and so she served as a matriarchal communal memory when fixed dates and documents were lacking. She was the only one who could recall the special formula of words that G-d's true liberator would employ in approaching the people when the time for the end of the oppression had come. And so it was because of her that the Israelites accepted Moshe. She was also the only one living who recalled where Joseph's bones were buried so that Moshe could fulfill Joseph's request to bring his bones up with the people as they left Mitzrayim. Moshe was concerned with pledges and law while Serach served as a social glue and his sister Miriam was concerned with sustenance, maintenance and celebration.

There was a Rabbinic debate over whether Sukkah was a greater mitzvah than Shabbos because it completely surrounded and contained the observer. However, it was concluded that Shabbos was the greater because it exists abstractly in time and is not constrained by space. By way of strange analogy, the great question of how one could know where one was on the great face of the earth, east or west, the great question of longitude was resolved once it was realized that difference in place was merely difference in time. The British Admiralty offered a huge reward to whomever could develop a clock of great exactitude that could survive the rigors of sailing. The prime meridian of longitude for all the world was set at the center line of the British Naval Observatory at Greenwich which was also the keeper of time for the British Isles. Greenwich was place and time.

In Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907, Adolph Verloc is an agent provocateur paid by a shadowy foreign government embassy to infiltrate England's anarchists and revolutionists who are constantly plotting but never acting. He had been a sleeper agent for years running a small business and living with his wife Winnie, her retarded brother Stevie and his mother-in-law. One day, Mr. Vladimir, the first secretary of the unnamed embassy insists that he agitate and create a situation intended to bring the police down on the anarchists and bring about a repressive atmosphere in which England was to come to realize its peril. Mr. Verloc heartlessly uses his retarded ward as the carrier of a bomb, relying on his utter trust in a happy outcome. Stevie is blown up, Winnie is overcome with rage, kills Mr. Verloc and ends up a suicide when she is betrayed by one of the anarchists who claimed he loved her. The central point here is that Conrad has Mr. Vladimir select as the target for his terrorism the Observatory at Greenwich, the keeper of time and place, and, in effect, of all memory and history. Winnie Verloc is Conrad's most fully realized female character of any of his novels. She is victimized by the cruelty of all the men in her world.

The viciousness of Mr. Vladimir who would like "to throw a bomb into pure mathematics" if he could is equaled by that of the anarchists who wish "to discard all scruples in the choice of means" and to "enlist death in the service of humanity." The character of Comrade Ossipon, one of the anarchists, has topical relevance when Conrad describes him thusly: "With a more subtle intention, he took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity, and revolt." This is contrasted with Stevie's

“tenderness to all pain and all misery,” Winnie’s compassion for her brother and her mother’s willingness to sacrifice her own welfare for that of her children. Conrad’s greatest contempt is reserved for the anarchist known as the Professor who keeps a bomb on his person with the detonator in his pocket at all times. Conrad concludes the novel with the following: “And the incorruptible Professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable-and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.” The fanatization of women in our time would be the most terrible of outcomes.

To say that the woman makes the home is neither Rabbinic sexism nor modern sentimentalism. Even with all the multifarious responsibilities of the modern Jewish woman, it is still true. Parasha Emor prohibits the Kohanim from contaminating themselves “...except for the relative who is closest to him, to his father and to his mother, to his son, to his daughter, and to his brother; and to his virgin sister...” The Torah text does not refer to a wife at all but the Rabbis understood the word for “closest” (lishayro), which implies a complement to refer to one’s wife as the closest possible relation. And the explicitly stated “may contaminate” was understood as “must contaminate” for one’s wife. Yeats agreed when he said that no man could be as close a friend to a man as could a woman.

I would like to conclude by reading Robert Frost’s poem *The Master Speed* for Dina, in the certainty that it refers to her and the hope it refers to us.

No speed of wind or water rushing by
But you have speed far greater. You can climb
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,
And back through history up the stream of time.
And you were given this swiftness, not for haste
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
But in the rush of everything to waste,
That you may have the power of standing still-
Off any still or moving thing you say.
Two such as you with such a master speed
Cannot be parted nor be swept away
From one another once you are agreed
That life is only life forevermore
Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

Howard L. Berkowitz
April 13, 2002

Baby Naming

As many of you are aware...how can I put this delicately...I was not opposed to having a grandchild. However, you have been spared some of the pitiful details until now. Over ten years ago, when Etan was in college, I understood that, as with any overly-full breast, the only solution to having more love to give is to find more people to love. Now this was long before Ed and Elana had ever met. So I imagined I had a little grand-daughter and I would walk to shul with her. Eventually, I began to reach down to hold an imaginary hand and would walk along that way briefly and surreptitiously. When I made the mistake of telling Dina this, she told me, in no uncertain terms, that if I continued doing that, she would have me committed. But, as Viscount Morley said, "Just because you have silenced a man does not mean you have converted him," Dina! So I just went underground with my grand-daughter. I still have a ticket stub I retained from a forgettable movie from December of 2008, the title of which was "I've Loved You So Long."

We read the very beginning of the Book of Samuel as the haftorah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. In that story Hannah had been unable to conceive for some years and so she goes on the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, which was where the tabernacle and ark were at that time. She prays fervently at the tabernacle and we are told she "prayed in her heart" so that only her lips moved and no sound emerged. The High Priest Eli sees her and thinks she is drunk. Hannah explains and Eli then asks that her prayer be answered. The Torah tells us she said she prayed for "a" child and promised to dedicate him to God. Three years later, after her son Samuel is weaned, Hannah brings him to the tabernacle to remain with the High Priest. She reminds Eli who she is but this time she says it was for "this" child she prayed.

I think the Torah is alluding to the general parental wisdom of knowing that whichever child you receive is the child for you. But here Hannah is going beyond that and saying she realized hers is the very child she prayed for. And so it is with Ella; she is the very child I walked with and talked to. L'havdil, to paraphrase Jeremiah 1:5- when you were not yet formed in the womb, I recognized you. Since I have known this girl over ten years, imagine my surprise when she emerged so small! I recognized her immediately but look at the baby just lying there all innocence, saying nothing as if she doesn't remember any of this. But maybe that is because in Midrash Tanhuma we are told that all babies once knew all the secrets of the past and future and all human and animal languages but an angel touches them on the upper lip before birth, making that impression we all have, so that they will forget everything and have to learn the world all over again. Helping teach Ella about love and about the world are tasks I will eagerly join her parents in.

Nothing is as "actual" as a new life- a baby. We are altered forever with concentric circles of impact. Nothing has the absolute "present-ness" of a baby: a poopy diaper has to be changed now; a hungry baby must be fed now. It is the closest we ordinary people come to 'hineni.'

Ella has been born into a world where women will have to continue to struggle with those forces which and those people who seek to hold them back. Elana might not have been aware of the tiny victory regarding the very terminology of giving birth. Until relatively recently, based on clinical data, every woman received an EDC- an expected date of confinement. Why confinement? Because for centuries this term reflected the belief that child birth was sinful and shameful and should be hidden away as much as possible. Now we have the EDD-the expected date of delivery. Herodotus described Cleomenes, a 5th century BCE king of Sparta, as having "...died childless, leaving only a daughter named Gorgo." This is offensive to my granddaughter. This throwaway Gorgo was not only the daughter of a king but the wife of king Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae, and the mother of a king, Pleistarchus, and made them both what they were. But, as through much of history, Biblical and otherwise, this woman's power derived from her reproductive abilities with her political wisdom considered secondary, if at all. Ella, as the reproduced, will I trust, given her mother and grand-mothers and great grand-mothers, move the ball farther down the field. I say this because Jewish women are formidable stealth weapons keeping men, and the world, on track.

I should confess that I have, with the kind forbearance of Ed and Elana, attached a red thread to Ella's carriage, crib, car seat and rocker/sleeper. While once upon a time a rational person, the arrival of children convinced me that my Auschwitz-survivor mother-in-law Rose was quite right; that if the red thread had a one in a billion chance of protecting the children, those were good odds for what was invested. When Etan was born I began my remarks at the bris by saying we can't thank God enough for the safe birth of a healthy child. I had not said that at Elana's baby naming being too young and stupid to realize the stakes; I am neither now. The Romans, as anxious then as we are now, had dozens of gods believed to be responsible for every aspect of sex, conception, gestation, birth and development including separate gods specifically for strong bones, strong muscles, speech and counting. The Romans had baby namings, as we do, with Plutarch saying "It is a fact that the female grows up and attains maturity and perfection before the male" so that a girl was named on the eighth day and boys on the ninth just as we have a bat mitzvah a year earlier than bar mitzvahs. That Ella must be precocious is proven by her deciding to be born on November 1st, thus avoiding Halloween birthdays forever and just in time to make a mockery of her parents' expectation of getting an extra hour of sleep at the end of DST.

To think it is our due to exist at all, grow up, be safe, have enough to eat, get an education, marry, have healthy children, enjoy decent health and not die prematurely but in reasonable comfort is preposterous because the list I presented represents the maddest fantasy and most extreme blessing of which life is capable. To have seen my wife looking at her daughter after giving birth to Ella wearing the silk night gown her mother had worn after giving birth to Dina and which Dina had worn after giving birth to Elana can be no one's due but only an unearned gift, like Ella herself.

I have already noticed since the birth of Ella I spend less time wondering where I am going and what I will do, that on days when I am to see Ella the very sky seems brighter, that while watching Ella sleep and listening to her tiny puffs of breath I better understand the Rabbis

saying “The world is maintained by the breath of school children,” that the time of my waning days will contribute to the filling of her waxing days, that the heart is a womb in reverse, taking a baby in, that a baby grows in the deepest core of a mother where the child will remain forever, that returning after such a long hiatus to the children’s section of Barnes and Noble filled my eyes with tears but also my heart with anxiety at seeing all the titles about allergies, ADHD, making a child a genius and making a child happy, happy, happy.

Grand children can never be entirely separated from existential dread and the hope of a surviving legacy. E.L. Doctorow captures the dread in this passage (p.453, *Billy Bathgate*): “...as if there was no history of our life together...as if discourse is an illusion, and the sequence of this happened and then that happened and I said and he said was only Death’s momentary incredulity, Death staying his hand a moment in incredulity of our arrogance, that we actually believed ourselves to consequentially exist, as if we were something that did not snuff out from one instant to the next, leaving nothing of ourselves as considerable as a thread of smoke, or the resolved silence at the end of a song.” But E.B. White captures the hope in his poem *Conch*:

Hold a baby to your ear
 As you would a shell:
 Sounds of centuries you hear
 New centuries foretell
 Who can break a baby’s code?
 And which is the older-
 The listener or his small load?
 The held or the holder?

But Ecclesiastes (5:19) reminds us “For they are not many, let him remember, the days of his life, but God provides him with the joy of his heart.”

For Deborah's Shloshim

July 26, 2012

Deborah, with her impeccable taste and timing, had Hukkat as the parsha during her shiva which speaks of the mysteries of death and the red heifer, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, the premonition of Moshe's death, the deaths of Canaanites by war, the deaths of Israelites by serpents, the deaths of the Amorites in battle and the death of the king of Bashan. Her shloshim parshiot then reminded us of how goodly our tents can be O Israel, the inevitable death of one generation and the coming of the next, the eternal cycle of the holidays, the coming to an end of the book of Bamidbar, the start of Devarim which consists of an old man's reminiscences before he dies and the Three Weeks and the Nine Days culminating this motzei Shabbos with the mourning of Tisha b'Av. Deborah was a distinguished editor and she could not have written this better.

But most striking and almost eerie to me in Deborah's parsha of Hukkat is that one perek in, suddenly, with no warning and easily missed, the narrative abruptly shifts thirty-eight years from the second year after the Exodus to the fortieth year and the end of the beginning of our people. Thirty-eight years gone without a word; where did the time go? Where does a friend go?

The formal aspects of mourning are designed for the immediate family. What are friends to do? We join ourselves to the family's shiva, but in Deborah's case that was curtailed because of the family heading to other parts. We cannot allow thirty-eight years or more of friendship, for some like Burt, or twenty years, for Dina and me, or whatever number of years for those who were blessed by entering Deborah's circle of friends for any time at all, just be let go without formal remembrance. And so we, Deborah's friends, who know very well that the relationship did not end with her death, have taken this shloshim as our time for a communal summing up and summoning up of the spirit of an irreplaceable friend.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah said: "Make for yourself a teacher and acquire a friend...." I think it closer to the truth that one, as we usually say, "makes" a friend. One does not passively "acquire" a real friend who goes the distance with you, however much shorter than you would have liked that turns out to be. As you know, Deborah regarded herself as having been blessed with a second life, a second career, a second chance for happiness to which all of you materially contributed. She was devoted to her friends and she worked at being a good friend with emotional support, good counsel and, truly, acts of loving kindness. When she was ambushed by this dreadful disease, the objective fact was that her friends did an astonishing amount to help and maintain her and she knew it. Deborah accepted the care with grace and equanimity and without embarrassment because she understood it was not the product of a sense of obligation or calculated repayment but it just was and would abidingly be. If we think of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* as *Our Minyan*, then one of the Stage Manager's opening

statements surely refers to Deborah in those last months and weeks: "The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go."

I remember with satisfaction Deborah recalling, a few days before she went to hospice, how I had once said, many years ago, that when I grew up I hoped I would be worthy of a friend like her. The highest award I have ever received, given my high opinion of women, was when Deborah officially declared me to be an honorary girl some years ago. This was because I had learned to dish gossip and describe outfits to her when she was not at shul on Shabbos and because I had tried to learn to keep people actively in mind and to stay actively in emotional touch. Let me tell you, it is exhausting to be an honorary girl and, as it turns out, more painful.

Deborah's loss has reminded me of the selfish aspect of mourning: I just want my friend back and the hole in my life filled. I know that retaining Deborah in my cell phonebook seems like *The Year of Magical Thinking* but I see no more reason to delete her from my phone's memory than to attempt to pluck her from my own.

Deborah was repeatedly accorded one of the greatest distinctions the publishing world has to offer; at Viking, at Penguin and at Roaring Book Press she was not only a senior editor but was granted her own Deborah Brodie imprint, which would appear on the title page. I treasure the books of hers which now grace my library. I look forward to slipping into the embrace of her easy chair which we have adopted. But most of all I, and we, are sustained by the Deborah Brodie imprint upon our hearts.

Howard L. Berkowitz