

## EREV ROSH HASHANAH - 5780

There is a Hasidic story of a boy who goes wandering in the woods one morning.

When he finally returns home, his worried parents ask him: “Where were you?”

“I went to the woods to pray.” says the boy.

“You know God is the same everywhere,” says the father to his son.

“I know,” says the boy, “but I’m not.”

Tonight begins the Jewish year of 5780. As we enter into the holidays, we step out of our daily lives to gain a different perspective, to see ourselves anew. Like the boy in the story, sometimes we need to change our vantage point, in order to see ourselves more clearly.

As we enter into the New Year together, let’s take a moment to look at the journey we will be taking together over these next ten days. Each holiday in the Jewish calendar marks a moment in the meandering journey of our ancient ancestors in the Torah. Every year as we return to these holidays, we also re-engage with the spiritual framework they offer for exploring our own lives. As we celebrate the holidays and re-enter these sacred stories, we are given an opportunity to explore the themes in our own lives and see the interconnection of the two.

As I wrote about in my newsletter article last month, there is a passionate love story at the heart of the Jewish narrative, a juicy

romance. According to the mystical interpretation, Torah is not history or even myth. Rather it is a love story between God and the Jewish people. A dramatic love story - filled with romance, betrayal, remorse, and reconciliation.

As we read our way through the Torah, we see the many moments of intensity and alienation our ancient ancestors experienced in their relationship to the Divine; these moments are re-enacted through the cycle of the Jewish calendar. Each holiday recalls a significant moment in the Divine love affair. Passover commemorates the beginning, the promise of new love -- a dramatic rescue, song and dance, and the two lovers alone in the desert existing only on manna. This new love culminates in the holiday of Shavuot which commemorates the giving of Torah, in all its earth-shaking drama.

But the first bloom of love cannot last forever and there is a tragic betrayal. When Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to receive the ten commandments, the Israelites build the Golden Calf and it seems as if the relationship is over. The Jewish calendar recalls this moment in the Torah with the fast day of Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year in late summer, which also marks the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem.

But as you know our story doesn't end there (if it did, we wouldn't be here). After the initial turmoil in response to the Golden Calf, the lovers slowly find their way back to each other. Like all lasting relationships, they have to learn that mistakes and forgiveness are an inevitable part of

the package. The Israelites work hard to make amends and Moses acts as the mediator. This period of Teshuvah, repentance, which the Israelites go through is said to have happened during the month of Elul, which precedes Rosh Hashanah, and parallels our own spiritual journey of return.

On Rosh HaShanah, God finally decides to forgive the Israelites and invites Moses back up the mountain to receive a second set of tablets. Ten days later on Yom Kippur, God reveals Godself to Moses and speaks the words we call the Thirteen Attributes which begin: Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'chanun. God of mercy and love. We chant this phrase throughout the day on Yom Kippur to remind us of Moses' encounter with the Divine, the moment of deep intimacy between human and Divine. In the mystical love story, Sukkot which lasts for seven days is seen as the wedding party for the newlyweds. A bountiful harvest of reconciliation, a time of joy, feasting, and celebration.

While it may be hard for some to connect to the image of the Divine that inspired our ancestors, it is ultimately a metaphor about the human desire for connection and transcendence. As we recount each moment of waxing and waning relationship in the Torah, we can explore our desire for a deeper connection to ourselves, to our loved ones, to a life of meaning, and to a sense of wonder that nourishes our souls.

The Divine love story in the Torah echoes the moments in our own lives of creation and anticipation, loss and destruction, mourning and remorse, love and forgiveness, and if we are lucky, joy and intimacy. We recount the mythic journey of forgiveness, reconciliation, and intimacy of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, in order to inspire us to do our personal

work to regain connection to the people and parts of ourselves that are most important.

Our Jewish holidays serve as an invitation and a map for exploring the terrain of our souls. The holidays give us time to review the high and low points of our past year, and an important opportunity to recalibrate our personal trajectory. This 10-day window gives us time for the internal work needed to live our truth, to affirm our values and to aim toward our best selves.

Many of us live on autopilot, plugged into GPS (both literally and metaphorically), running from one thing to the next, barely knowing where we are. The Jewish holidays invite us to slow down, turn off the GPS, pull off the road and contemplate our direction. We're invited to go old-school, analog, to take out the proverbial paper map, open it wide and take a look at the actual landscape of our life. Where were we last year? Where are we right now? If we keep heading in this direction, where will we end up?

As much as I love the convenience of the GPS, sometimes it stops working and you're completely lost. A few years ago, I was driving in the Catskills and my phone stopped working. No signal. And I had no idea where I was and I had recycled the maps in my car years earlier. I panicked, and then slowly remembered I had options. I retraced my steps, and waited for the signal to return, and then like the old days, I

parked, looked at the map on my phone and wrote out the directions on a piece of paper.

Life is the same, sometimes, despite our best efforts, we get lost. We've plotted our course, made our plans and then out of nowhere the GPS stops working, the road is irreparably damaged, or the bridge is closed. Tragedy strikes. We need to scrap the original plan and find a new way forward.

A dear old friend of mine encountered such a detour, let's call her Kim. She was married, raising a child, and part of a vibrant creative community. Of course, she knew nothing was perfect, but life was good and she was content. Then out of the blue, she started having strange symptoms - her foot went numb, the vision in one of her eyes disappeared and she was exhausted. After several months of increasing symptoms and rounds of doctor appointments, she finally got a diagnosis - MS. She was devastated and literally fell off the map, as her plans for the future disappeared.

Slowly Kim began to rebuild her life. She grieved the loss of her old plan, as she learned to accept the new reality of her life. She had to give up her dream of graduate school and learn to pace her energy. She spent several years managing her symptoms, going on with her life and watching her daughter grow, but underneath it all, she was still depressed.

Then one day, Kim threw out the old map altogether. Her daughter had finished High School and she and her husband had separated. Having lived her entire life in the Berkshires, she decided that she was done with winters forever. She googled livable southern cities, packed her bags and moved to Savannah Georgia, sight unseen. There she made new friends, walked everywhere and became healthier than she had been in years. Next thing I know, she and a friend are backpacking through Europe, slowly and with a cane, but still getting in all of the sites.

In the face of her life falling apart, Kim did something remarkable. It wasn't easy or quick, but eventually, she managed to chart a completely new course, and in doing so, found remarkable joy. I imagine some of us here can relate to this experience, maybe not necessarily the exact details, but the experience of life taking a painful and unexpected twist is all too common. If we are lucky, we find the strength, resiliency, and courage to find a new way forward and possibly even to discover entirely new horizons.

Many years ago, when I was in rabbinical school studying in Israel, I took a course in the Historical Geography of Jerusalem. I still vividly remember this class, which met weekly in a different location in the city. Each week was devoted to a different period in history. We climbed in caves with relics from pre-Biblical times. We explored Biblical excavations and examined ruins from the medieval period.

I especially remember the day we walked on two very crowded major roads that crossed in the old city. Those roads were built by the Romans

more than 2,000 years ago and their routes haven't changed in all of that time. That day, as I strolled along those roads in the shuk, the market in the old city, it felt like time stopped as I imagined the countless numbers of people who had walked these roads before me.

The Jewish holidays remind me of those ancient Jerusalem roads worn down over thousands of years -- a tangible connection through deep time with the words, songs, hopes, sorrows, prayers, and rituals of the generations who came before us. As we come together to celebrate the Jewish New Year, we are traveling on well-worn, paths echoing with the steps of our ancestors.

Or perhaps we can imagine the Jewish holidays like retracing or even excavating these ancient spiritual pathways, as we explore the roadways of our souls. As we wrestle with the cycles of our own lives through the holidays, we encounter layers of earlier and future generations, different levels of human understanding and consciousness, historical narratives of the Jewish people, and mystical connections between the human and the Divine. Each year, as we revisit these spiritual maps, we see the ways we have changed or not changed, and can experience all that has come before us, all that will go on beyond us.

Over the next 10 days, we will chant ancient words. We'll retell the stories of our people, sing the melodies, recall all who came before us, and ask ourselves where are we in this sacred journey? We'll reflect on echoes of our earlier selves, trace where we are now compared to where we've been and get in touch with our hopes for the future.

Let's take a moment for time travel. If you're an adult, think about how this holiday felt when you were a kid. If you're under 20, think about how this holiday might feel when you're 'old.'

Now - let's expand the lens of time. Imagine for a moment all the generations that have come before you. Picture your parents, your grandparents, great-grandparents, as far back as you can go. Imagine the faces of people, your ancestors, whose names you may not know. Reflect for a moment on their lives, where they lived, where they traveled, the people they met.

As your mind travels back in time, notice all the people that you are connected to, notice how the interconnections keep growing and growing. Take a moment now to change directions in time, and allow your mind to go the other direction, to begin to imagine future generations, and those who come after us, and the same thing happens, each generation becomes larger, more interconnected. Take a moment to notice that who you are right now is just a brief stop in this vast timeline.

Likewise, science shows how we are interconnected at the molecular level. Matter is never destroyed: from the material that makes up the cells of my body to the soil that nourishes life, to the atoms in faraway stars. All of these are interconnected, constantly changing and being

renewed from our skin cells to the leaves on the trees to the life cycle of the stars.

The Yamim Noraim, the High Holidays, give us a chance every year to step into and strengthen our awareness of all of these profound interconnections. It's our opportunity to connect to this layered, personal, mythic, and historical story that is continually unfolding and that ultimately connects us with the infinite experience of existence. This time together in prayer and contemplation gives us the opportunity to see ourselves against the vastness of time, to reconnect with the mystery unfolding within us and beyond us, and to recalibrate our direction in life.

There is a story about a man wandering lost in the forest, after several days he sees another person. He runs up to him and says, "I am lost and so glad I found you. Can you help me find the way out?" The man replies, "Unfortunately, I am lost too. But we can show each other the ways not to go. Now, come let us search for a way out together."

The Yamim Noraim, the High Holidays, give us the chance to come together and to search for a way forward with one another. Look around the room and you will see many fellow travelers, who no doubt struggle with many of the same things you do. May we all draw strength from each other, as we move into this new year and season of renewal.

May our contemplation over the next 10 days deepen our spirituality, nourish and protect our souls, and help us find our way when we get

lost. And as we explore the circuitous path of our lives, may we ultimately find our way back to the source of love, in ourselves, in others and in the world.