Kol Nidrei 5785

The Baal Shem Tov tells the story of a king who wanted his beloved son to be a fine and worthy leader. “You must know and understand the people,” he told the prince, and sent him far from the palace to travel to other countries to learn different kinds of wisdom. As he traveled, the prince chased desire upon desire – spending his wealth so that eventually he had to sell everything he owned.

The prince continued his journey to a land so distant that his father was unknown there. When he told them that he was the son of King so-and-so, not only did the people not believe him, but they didn’t even recognize his father’s name. Meanwhile, the king sat every day by the palace window watching for his son’s return.

After many years, the prince became dispirited, and when he saw that there remained no remedies to enliven his soul, he decided to go home. However, it had been so long that he couldn’t remember how to find home. And when the son did finally reach his country, he’d forgotten the language. He tried to signal the palace guards that he was the king’s son, but he became a joke to them. How could it be that the son of such a great king would be so ragged and worn? The prince began crying out loudly so the king would recognize his voice. And when the king heard his cries, he said, “That is the voice of my son crying out in his distress!” The king’s love for his son awoke and he brought him into his home and embraced him and kissed him.

The last time I gave a sermon about G d on Kol Nidrei, I received more complaints than about any other sermon. Some of you told me that you were disappointed because you wished that on a day as important as Yom Kippur I would have spoken about something relevant, something that matters.

You want me to speak about what matters, and G d is about everything other than matter. Therefore, the topic seems unimportant. But I wonder if tonight I can try again? Can we, for a moment, suspend disbelief and imagine: what if G d might be the most relevant topic of all?

In his book, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew relates that Buckminster Fuller, the 20th century American architect, inventor and theorist, was asked to name the most significant figure of the 20th century. He didn't say Einstein. He said Freud. Sigmund Freud, he said, was the one who introduced the single great idea upon which all significant developments of the 20th century rested: *the invisible is more important than the visible.* Einstein's thinking became possible because Freud convinced the world of this first, Fuller said.

It may be no accident that both Freud and Einstein were Jewish. This was, after all, the innovation of 3,000 years ago, when our ancestors challenged the universal practice of idolatry by declaring that G d must not be confused with a physical object. *The invisible is more important than the visible*. Torah devotes fifteen chapters to the construction of the Mishkan, or Tabernacle, as an alternative to the golden calf. The Tabernacle is designed to feature empty space, intangibility, invisibility at the center.

It's not exactly that I want to talk to you about G d tonight. I want to talk to you—whether you are an atheist, agnostic, a devout believer, full of doubt, never think about it, or actively wrestle with G d—I want to talk to you about the fact that our lives are going to end; and we're not quite living right. We spend most of our days trying to prove our worth; and we think we need to perform in order to be loved – to be brilliant or funny or powerful or important – when in fact, we're already loved, when in fact, we're already worthy.

What I really want to talk to you about is religion, the religious practice of Judaism. That's even less popular than G d. But why are you here? Because you're a Jew and this is what Jews do. Why do we do this? Because our lives are fleeting, and we're confused, and as much as we

think we know, there's a shore where the land meets the sea, a shore beyond which we do not know.

The ways we're living, they're not serving us. The United States is consistently ranked the most individualistic culture on earth, which means that people value self-sufficiency above all else and feel embarrassed to ask for help. Add a competitive economy, new technology, fraying social bonds, and it's no surprise that we are not OK. Our kids are experiencing a mental health epidemic. Suicide is the second or third leading cause of death of everyone aged 10 to 35. Fully one-half of American adults describe themselves as lonely. Stress-related illnesses are the leading causes of death. When surveyed, seventy five percent of Americans say that in the last month they experienced a physical or mental symptom of stress. Forty-eight percent of parents say they're overwhelmed by stress most days. Add to that post-pandemic trauma and the year of October 7th, and we are not OK. We cope by numbing ourselves with alcohol, drugs, phones, social media – to calm our nervous systems, to distract us from the emptiness.

When we live our lives as if the material world is all there is, we're left wanting. When we don't attend to the inner life or the connections between us, we're left wanting. And when we allow our wanting to be filled with the realm of matter, we are never satisfied.

On the other hand, we live in a time when certainties about G d – distortions of the G d idea – are being used as a weapon. Women are dying in America today because of that weapon, because of the misuse of religion. LGBT people are dying because of the misuse of religion. Israel is threatened in no small part because of that weapon, because of the misuse of religion. Devotion to G d is dangerous. There are good reasons to stand against and apart from religion. There are also good reasons to create counter-examples of what religion could be, what religion should be.

I'm not interested in convincing you or anyone that there's a G d. I want us to move beyond the question of G d/no G d. I want to make the case for the ongoing, regular, sustained practice of approaching that shore beyond which we do not know. I want us to trade the hollowed out, numbed, deadened emptiness of a sick culture for the vibrating vital living emptiness that is within and between all things. I want us to regularly gaze from that shore toward that dark sea, toward that mystery.

About forty members of our community recently gathered at the shore to immerse ourselves in the traditional practice of mikveh before Rosh Hashanah. The sea was turbulent that day, its force and scale overpowering. Some put their ankles in, some swam directly into the waves. All emerged renewed and a little bit awed from an encounter with grandeur.

Often on a Shabbat morning, a visitor will come to speak with me after services, effusive with praise and gratitude, saying they didn't know religion could be like this. They didn't know what it could feel like. They didn't know that the air could vibrate with a different kind of joy, a different kind of togetherness than they'd ever felt before.

I have a problem. I've had too many experiences – raw, direct, overwhelming, repeated, irrefutable experiences – that there is more going on here than the material world. I cannot deny it, I know it to be true, and yet I doubt it every day. I often live as if the invisible is not real. I've dedicated my life to serving G d, but I live many moments of every day as if G d is not relevant. Because I have to function in the realm of the material world every day, as we all do. If I didn't have religious practice, I'd be like that prince in a distant land. I'd be lost. Even believers, we forget often, we adapt to this virtual reality that tells us that materiality is all that's relevant and real.

One of my favorite names for G d is Ayin. Ayin means nothingness. Joseph Gikatilla (thirteenth-century Kabbalist) said, “The inner power is called Ayin because thought does not grasp it, nor reflection. Concerning this, Job said, “Ve-ha-hokhmah me-ayin timmatse, Wisdom, where is it found? Wisdom comes into being from Ayin” (Job 28:12) 18th century Hasidic master Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezrich, said, “Think of yourself as Ayin, as nothing, and forget yourself totally. If you think of yourself as something, then God cannot clothe Godself in you, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless you think of yourself as Ayin.”

Our eyes are miraculous organs, but they’re just organs interpreted by our brains. They’re not the arbiters of truth. We know that our visual fields only catch a tiny fraction of what exists. We just lived through covid – invisible yet definitely real. We’re a couple of centuries past Freud, quantum physics is an accepted field. But in important respects we live still as if the visible is most important. We necessarily prioritize that which will house, feed, and protect us and the people we love. But that’s not all there is. To know that, you only have to believe in science.

A regular Jewish religious practice puts our lives in perspective, helping us remember who we are and who we’re not. It turns out that you and I are not the center of the universe, though we live with that delusion every day. Religious practice right-sizes us, puts us back in scale. It locates us in time and space, in the chain of generations, on planet earth, between subatomic particles and galaxies. It shows us that for millennia others have been asking the same questions we have. We’re not the first to try to make our mark on the world, to question authority or seek it, to want to be remembered, to yearn to be of use. No matter how important we are, how heroic, how legendary, we are miniscule, gone like [snap] that. A broken shard, withering grass, a passing shadow, a fading cloud. Understanding this is wisdom.

We pray in company with others so that in a lonely world, we remember that we are not alone. Our fellow travelers are equally mortal, equally pulled between material necessity and the longing of the soul. Our prayers remind

us that we are not only independent, but also interdependent, and dependent. To have a Jewish religious practice is to come together in community – a minimum of ten – to show up for one another, to care for one another, to see ourselves in connection with others.

A regular Jewish religious practice affects the stress we carry in our bodies. First of all, it revolves around the healing power of rest. Torah tells us that rest is built into the very design of the world. Shabbat and every holiday enforces, entices, beckons us to rest. In this frenetic society relentlessly goading us to do more, be more, push harder – pulling our attention to just one more message, one more post – religious practice says stop. STOP. Enough. Your sweet tender soul needs rest. Take a break. Pause. Please, be quiet. Please, be still.
Also, we were raised on superheroes. We think we're masters of the universe. If you have a distorted sense of your power (I do), you are going to try to control the world using every bit of effort and tension in your body. You're going to analyze and strategize and think and think and think and impose your will, and when you find you cannot control the world, you'll feel like a failure. Parker Palmer calls this functional atheism. It doesn't matter if you believe in G d, if you're a functional atheist you go through life as if there is no G d, as if you are G d. You think you're responsible for other people's actions, for the fate of organizations, even the society. But to the degree you are in charge, your control is limited. All you can do is use your effort to live out your purpose with the limited power you have. We need regular religious practice to remember that.

A regular Jewish religious practice can change how you treat others and yourself. Rabbi Shai Held recently wrote a book called *Judaism is About Love*. In it, he points out that modern people tend to find it difficult to hold onto a stable sense of our worth. So we look around at others and compare, and if we find any metric by which we favorably compare, we feel better. Schadenfreude, the pleasure at another's misfortune, is not something we're proud of, but it's how most people learn to feel good about themselves.

Our prayers and rabbinic teachings are trying to tell us every day that we are loved just because we exist, that our worth is infinite just because we exist, that everyone else's worth is infinite just because they exist, that our uniqueness is evidence of the magnificence of creation. If we could believe that, even just a little, we wouldn't need others to fail to feel good about ourselves. The world we want is one where everyone thrives, right? Our need to be better than others is a major obstacle to the redemption of our world. That feeling – wanting equality as long as my kids come out on top – knowing that I'm worthy because I'm better than others – that is the essence of our collective problem. It cannot be solved only in the realm of policy. It has to be solved in the inner life.

We are infinitesimal and infinitely loved. Our lives are the briefest flash of light with infinite worth. Not easy concepts to grasp, or believe, or remember. That's why it takes practice.

Religious practice reminds us of our purpose. What is your life about? Judaism is telling you that you are loved by a great and enduring love. Shai Held puts it beautifully: your job is simply to live up to that love. By loving as you are loved – loving your neighbor (those who are like you), the stranger (those who are unlike you), and G d (the Oneness interconnecting all). You are to love with all the days of your life to the best of your ability. Through both emotion and action. To act with compassion for those who are hurting and in need. To serve G d with words and deeds. To apply your entirely unique self to healing and repairing this world.

Rabbis throughout Jewish history have taught that each of us has been given a unique mission by G d, a specific task that is ours to fulfill, a calling. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the founder of Lurianic Kabbalah, argued that every individual has a particular mission related to the repair of the world. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik argued that what it means to have been created in the image of G d is to have been assigned a specific task unique to our time and place.

Tomorrow afternoon we will read from the Book of Jonah, the story of the prophet whose task is to go to Nineveh, the corrupt seat of the Assyrian empire, and to call them to repent for their sins. It seems that we read this story on Yom Kippur to encourage us to repent: if Nineveh could repent, we can too. But Rabbi Held suggests that we read Jonah not primarily to identify with the reformed Ninevites, but to identify with the prophet himself. Jonah is running away from his calling. It's only when he finds himself in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the sea that he becomes willing to live out his assigned mission, to fulfill his unique purpose. We too have a tendency to avoid that which we know we must do, that which is tugging at us, calling to us.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook interprets a section of the Amidah that we say on this day to be about that tendency we have to avoid our calling. We say, "My God, before I was born I was of no worth, and now that I have been born, I am as if I never was." What we confess on Yom Kippur, says Rav Kook, is not our lack of worth, but precisely the opposite: we confess that we insist on living as if we had no worth, as if we were not urgently needed to repair the world. He explains the prayer in this way: "Before I was created, …there was nothing in this world that needed me….But now that I have been created, the time has come [to be of use]." He encourages us to change the words of the Amidah in our Neilah service, to "My God, before I was born, I was of no worth, and now that I am alive, here I am, send me."

We just lived through the most difficult year to be a Jew that most of us have ever lived through. We don't know if it's going to get better or worse. Many of you have been doing it with one hand tied behind your backs, without the treasury of spiritual wisdom handed to us by our forebears. These gifts are meant to sustain us, to strengthen us, to guide us, to comfort us, through all of the vicissitudes of our world. That's how our ancestors did it. Why would we not avail ourselves of their insights? Why would we not lean on their intuition? They were pointing at something true. They used words you might not use, metaphors that might not work for you. But the essence of what they were saying and doing is as relevant now as

ever. Prayer is a pouring out of the heart; a reaching beyond self; a surrender into embrace. Haven't we needed that this year?

Many Jews have written about prayer, but none as lyrically as Abraham Joshua Heschel. These are excerpts of his writing: "Public worship is an act of the highest importance. However, it tends in our days to become a spectacle, in which the congregation remains passive, inert spectators. Prayer is action; it requires complete mobilization of heart, mind, and soul. Prayer is either exceedingly urgent, exceedingly relevant, or inane and useless. … Such prayer involves an abundance of inwardness. Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home, the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home. Weary, the soul, after roaming through a world festered with aimlessness, falsehoods and absurdities, seeks a moment in which to gather up its scattered life…in which to simplify complexities, in which to call for help without being a coward. Prayer serves to save the inward life from oblivion."

Imagine if you decided to become a Shabbat morning regular, and greeted one morning a week with songs of gratitude, sat with new friends, simply breathed, and gave your soul a home. Imagine if you decided to light the Shabbat candles each week, circling your arms, covering your eyes, hearing the blessing in your own voice, looking at the flames and pausing there, feeling for a moment a thickness in the air, a kind of holiness. Imagine if the next time you climbed a mountain or stood by the ocean all by yourself you talked to G d in your own words.

There are many opportunities in this place to grow your own regular Jewish religious practice. The invitation is wide open. Tomorrow afternoon members of this community who have found themselves, often to their surprise, engaged in regular Jewish religious practice will reflect on why they do it and what it's meant to them. The people who are here regularly are awesome. You will love them. They will love you. And maybe you'll remember who you are: a neshama, a soul. Within a community, within a people, within humanity. In the chain of generations, on planet earth, among the stars. Infinitesimal yet loved. Alive right now. Finitude within infinity.

We have traveled far from the palace. We've gone out to see the world. We've spent what we have on desire upon desire. *But we know that there is something important we're forgetting.* When we find no remedies to enliven our souls, it's time to return. We forgot our country's language or how to get there, but this is the day we remember. This is the day we cry out. This is the day we're embraced. This is the day we come home.

Gmar Chatima Tova.