Boker tov - good morning!

This is our third encounter together, and as you're getting to know me, rabbinically, there's something you may or may not have noticed about my temperament, which Matt has encouraged me to share with you outright. It's nothing serious, nothing terminal or idolatrous, but I should disclose to you - sooner than later - that I'm a little . . . bit . . . Buddhist.

Okay, maybe not a little, maybe a lot. It's more than a flirtation, it's been an ongoing affair of many years.

In general, I'm a deeply interfaith kind of guy. I've always enjoyed studying Scriptures and visiting houses of worship of all faiths, and these learnings have been indispensable to my rabbinic formation. Quaker Meetinghouse has been especially seminal, 2nd only to Zen Buddhism - like most secular Reform Jews who went to Liberal Arts College.

It's possible that Jews were already doing Zen thousands of years ago, as it's written in the Mishna: the *chasidim ha'rishonim*, the earliest pious ones, would *sho'heen*, "wait" for an hour before and after praying. Rashi interpreted this "waiting" as *meditation*. And Philo, in his journal on the Therapeutae, a Jewish monastic sect outside Alexandria, writes at length on how they spent their days meditating in solitude.

The most spiritually formative chapter of *my* life was an apprenticeship for half-a-year at a monastery called Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, in northern California.

For brevity's sake, I'll try to describe Green Gulch with a haiku:

[count syllables with fingers]

I chop chard at dawn

Sit, smell moss, hear waves, roses

Emerald light on lichen

Because I'm not Buddhist but Budd*ish*, and therefore verbose, my haikus have an extra syllable.

I want to share with you one topical insight from my time at Green Gulch. Five amazing words that my boss, Jeff, once said to me.

After college, I felt professionally called towards food, so I had spent many months volunteering on farms, avidly reading the gastronomy classics, *staging* (i.e. working for free) at fine restaurants, and home-cooking for friends incessantly.

I came to Green Gulch for its monastic training as much as its kitchen, which has been the breeding ground for a number of the greatest vegetarian farm-to-table chefs.

One evening, the head chef, Jeff, and I were drinking tea and talking, and he said these five wild words to me.

(Weird thing is, Jeff spontaneously left Green Gulch the next day, to go care for his dying mother overseas. Has that happened to any of you before, that a pivot point of advice came not from close friends or family, but from a brief encounter with a near stranger? It's funny how that happens.)

I was telling Jeff of how I'd been trying to figure out if food was my vocation or my avocation, and then he said these 5 words:

"Maybe you just want reverence." [Repeat, slower and out of time, ponderously.]

You don't hear that word much anymore. Reverence. It's [sic] taken on such a tenor of earnestness that we only use it for hyperbole.

Something like: "Oh, little Johnny really looks up to his older brother, he practically 'reveres' him."

Perhaps like many of you, I had three classic criteria for my career search: something I'm passionate about, something that serves others' needs, and something that pays the bills. But Jeff's five words uprooted my long held notion of categorizing time into work vs play. I was struck that maybe the reason we're very briefly here on earth is not necessarily to "change the world" or "be happy" or "find success," but to everyday pursue an even-greater reverence for the inconceivably numerous and numinous wonders - woven into the mundane - that we never asked for, that we were just given, and which we too easily take for granted.

I'm telling you all this because I think we need to understand reverence in order to understand sacrifice, and we need to understand sacrifice in order to understand Leviticus, and we need to understand Leviticus in order to grasp the sensibility of Yom Kippur. That's today.

We read earlier from the Book of Leviticus, which many people think is the most boring book of the Bible, but that's simply not true.

Chronicles is the most boring. Chronicles, the last book of Tanakh, which basically retells everything we already learned but in less interesting prose, is the most potent sleep aid yet invented by mankind. Yes, Chronicles is older and more potent than any dose of melatonin or xanax.

Anyhow, Leviticus is a comprehensive manual for animal sacrifice, and I think about animal sacrifice a lot. Probably too much. I ponder it because, we Moderns often look at sacrifice from a cold, anthropological distance: [shrugging] "Sacrifice was this archaic institution that was done way-back-when for God-knows-why and boy-do-we-know-how, and 'those people' had a narrower understanding of how the world works, so when 'we' became more informed and enlightened and less barbarous, we stopped sacrificing."

In the history of Judaism, there's a consensus that, "After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE - our central altar - the rabbis replaced sacrifice with prayer, which could be done in any place. And this rabbinic innovation was revolutionary."

That said, I don't buy any of that, for two reasons:

First, oral prayer is not spiritually equivalent to animal sacrifice. Singing and chanting blessings to God is great, but it does not perform the same might of spiritual efficacy as publicly setting aflame and then eating your most valuable financial asset in public.

Here's how I picture a contemporary equivalent: Imagine the CEO of Trader Joe's is a member at CBE - our MVM, Most Valuable Macher - and 90% of his assets are frozen - literally, as in 90% of his capital comprises frozen food. Once a year, he fasts and begs to God for atonement all day and, for the big finale of his renunciation, he sets an entire Trader Joe's franchise on fire

and then invites all of us to break fast on the previously frozen, now perfectly cooked banquet. Can you imagine that?

The second reason I don't buy the prayer-replacement theory, is that animal sacrifice was a *universal* institution of antiquity, one of if not the only. In Mesopotamia, China, Indigenous America, Greece and Rome, India and beyond, every large and complex human civilization devised elaborate procedures for animal sacrifice.

For me, this begs the question: what primal human need - what itch - did sacrifice scratch? And with what do we scratch that same itch today? Or, if we don't scratch that itch, what are the consequences? And, most prescient, is it possible that the big intractable issues of our time - climate change, economic inequity, imperial violence, mass incarceration (from here onwards, I'll refer to these in shorthand as "our great tzuris") - might any of these stem from our unmet, primal need for sacrifice?

Now, I'm not the first person to recreationally ponder sacrifice's less obvious motives.

In the 12th century, Maimonides wrote in his *Guide for the Perplexed* that sacrifice was a holdover from pre-monotheistic idol worship, and because sacrifice was so baked in to Israelite culture, God decided it would be easier to *redirect* animal sacrifices solely in service of Him rather than forbid the whole institution. In Maimonides's view, sacrifice was always transitional, a divine compromise in preparation for eventual oral prayer.

French philosopher George Bataille called sacrifice a "sacred economy" - we traded deliberate excess for awe, and modernity has replaced this with endless accumulation. Rene Girard's complementary theory, the "scapegoat mechanism," argues that sacrifice was a way to channel inherent violence. Other theorists propose that sacrifice has been "replaced" by glorified warfare and nationalism, the tribalism of professional sports, even certain kinds of theatre in which artists "sacrifice" themselves onto the stage, or, the communal feast: According to JSF's *We are the Weather*, 96% of American families eat turkey on Thanksgiving, making it our most common civic activity. It beats out voting, reading, and even tooth brushing by an incredible margin (this

might explain some things about our great nation). The sheer enormity of turkeys we kill and consume on Thanksgiving makes Leviticus's one sacrificial goat look like chopped liver. Are "we" really so different from "them"?

In any case, there's no one explanation for sacrifice, but on Yom Kippur, I'd like to focus on a particular function that I believe is related to our great tzuris - reverence.

The first verse of today's Torah portion reads:

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקָרְבָתָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיָּמֻתוּ:"

God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons who died when they drew too close to God."

I want to draw your attention to two phrases here.

The first is *kravtam,* a form of *korban*, the Hebrew word for "sacrifice." Its root is *karov*, which means "to draw close to." In this sense, the *korbanot* - the "sacrifices" - of Leviticus don't mean "to give something up." The best translation for *korban* is "intimacy." Once you get past the graphic nature of Leviticus, at its heart, it's a book about a fellowship of estranged people trying desperately to speak an impossibly foreign love language. To note, for most of Jewish history, children studied Leviticus first (strange, since Genesis seems like the obvious place to begin). In the 5th century commentary *Leviticus **Rab**bah*, Rabbi Asi explains that the crux of Leviticus is *tahor*, purity, and because children are pure and *korban* - intimacy - is pure, it is only fitting that children occupy themselves with purity.

The second phrase I want to draw attention to is *achrei mot*, also the name of this parasha. Judaism says little about the afterlife, but it says much about the after*death*, "achrei mot."

I propose that if the afterlife is a theory of what happens to us during the eternity on the latter side of life, then the afterdeath is a periodic rehearsal of eternity *within* life: that's Yom Kippur.

In this text, Aaron goes through a role-change that initiates today's rituals. Prior to *Achrei Mot*, he has served as the keynote speaker to the Israelites. God commands and revelates to Moses, Moses (of poor speech) tells Aaron what to say, and Aaron broadcasts the message. In this

way, Aaron has always been a walking paradox - he does all the talking but never speaks his own words. He is the picket signs with tried-and-true slogans, the door-to-door canvassing script targeted for a neighborhood's demographic, the talking points of a morning news interview. Or, to put it another way, God is the world's expanse of information, Moses is the laptop connected to wifi, and Aaron is ChatGPT.

Achrei mot, "after the death" of his two sons, Aaron is infamously silent. Stupefied. A more accurate translation of the word used in that passage, *va-yidom*, might be "awed into speechlessness." It's finally Aaron's moment to speak his own words, and he's mute. Muted by remote astonishment.

But then, instead of talking the talk, he walks the walk by heeding the elaborate instructions of the first Yom Kippur and its mighty goat sacrifice. Aaron's change in career coincides with an Israelite change in consciousness: Aaron goes from mindless words to intentional, tacit action. Animal sacrifice, fasting, refraining from bathing, attending shul - unlike words, unlike sermons, these rituals can*not* be performative. A person cannot fast more eloquently or convincingly than another. The reward of fasting is . . . well, the experience of fasting. Just as the reward of reverence is reverence itself.

I posit that Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus form and recount a dialectical history - thesis, antithesis, then synthesis - of how a group consciousness, that of the Israelites, came to be. Genesis, the thesis, is all about abundance: God creates the cosmos, Abraham fathers a people who will outnumber the stars, Jacob launches the 13 tribes, Joseph turns Egyptian famine into surplus, and so on. Unlike prophets of other major religions, the patriarchs of Genesis are not ascetics, such that their spiritual grandeur rises in direct correlation with their economic prosperity.

Exodus, the antithesis, is all about scarcity: Pharoah oppresses the Hebrews not for their creed or culture, but solely because they are "too numerous." Every step of their revolution requires

giving something up. And when they're finally free, they enter the *midbar* - which doesn't mean "desert," but "*wasteland*."

Leviticus is the synthesis of Genesis's abundance and Exodus's scarcity: it codifies the sustainability institution of sacrifice.

In short: Genesis is Creation; Exodus is Conservation; and Leviticus is Creative Destruction.

This all might seem abstract and literary, but it couldn't be more practical.

Louis C.K. has this story of being on an airplane some years ago when, right before takeoff, the pilot announced that they could use WiFi in the air. (Wow.) This was a first. Who would've ever thought it possible to use WiFi on a plane? Then, an hour later, the pilot said that they're having some trouble with the WiFi connection, and the guy sitting behind Louis C.K. groaned, "Uh, ridiculous." (*What?!)* How do you already feel entitled to this thing that you didn't know existed until this morning?

Now, I've spent much of my life studying the root causes of our great tzuris. You could point your finger at a few slimy billionaire CEOs. You could point your finger at the imperialist racist capitalist etc etc etc patriarchy. You could point your finger at God. Or you could point your finger at the death of God. And countless others. There's no single right target, but I, as clergy-to-be, point the finger at myself, and I urge you to, as well - not to blame ourselves, but to empower ourselves.

In light of Louis C.K.'s story, I don't think it's reductive to suggest that the ills of our great tzuris share a common cause: our ever-expanding consciousness of entitlement, one that has swelled to such enormity that we, members of the post-capitalist West, bear demands that exceed the supply of what the market, the earth, and international labor can produce without exploitation. To address our great tzuris, we must detract our consciousness of entitlement - the one that asks, "how much more could we have?" - and expand our consciousness of reverence, the one that asks, "how much more could we not have? How much less do we deserve?" And in turn, after destroying your choicest flock, you'll actually have more pleasure, more bounty, because

prosperity has no correlation with how much we possess; rather, as Pirkei Avot tells us, “Happy is one who is satisfied with their lot.” Perhaps if we sacrificed more, we would waste a whole lot less.

Jews have always been a deeply interfaith kind of people. Historians call this “syncretism”: Genesis shares nearly identical myths with Mesopotamia and Canaan; in the 1st century, theologians like Philo incorporated Greek and Stoic philosophy into Jewish thought; in medieval Spain and north Africa, Jews and Muslims wrote and recited sacred poetry together at courtyard salons; from the Renaissance through the 19th century, Jewish and Christian mystics in eastern Europe engaged in rigorous dialogue; and American Reform Judaism was made in the image of Protestant Christianity. I could name many more examples, but the important thing is that syncretism is never copy-and-paste; you could say that Jews organically *integrated* their neighbors’ ideas, but what syncretism really does is *draw out* something golden that is already within Judaism, and has fallen by the wayside over time.

JuBus - Jewish Buddhists - are numerous because we’re thirsty for a contemplative, God-intimate offering of Judaism, which had died in the Shoah. Many friends asked if I would talk about politics today. Originally I said no, but now I realize just how political this sermon is. Because, even though it will never make headlines, your greatest political contribution to the outer world will be the ego you sacrifice in your inner world.

I really believe that a more monastic kind of Judaism - a shift like that of Aaron, seeking divine intimacy via intentional destruction - this could cure our great tzuris. I don’t yet know exactly “how.” I would love to be thought partners with you all - ritual partners, a modern-day fellowship of priests - in figuring out how to harness the neglected genius of *korban* for our era. We won’t have answers tomorrow. But to move towards a more expansive, Levitical kind of consciousness, starting this moment, in the year-to-come with all its tzuris and beauty and mystery and delight and horror, and blossom - and blossom - what if, maybe you were to just want reverence (and nothing more)?

*Tzom shalem v' g'mar chatim**a** m'mash tova*! May you have not an easy fast but a fulfilling fast, and may you all be inscribed in the really, really, really Good Book of Life.