

**Facing the Future:  
A Search for Meaning with the Torah of Tomorrow  
Yom Kippur Morning 5777; October 12, 2016**

Where have all the flowers gone? Life and death, legacy and memory, that which lasts and that which fades, who we were and who we want to be, morality and mortality, yesterday and tomorrow. This day is a spiritual portal that lives on the edge of forever, forcing us to face ultimate issues, with a penchant for asking questions not easily answered.

**On this, our last Yom Kippur together, I commence with a tale from the past, and will conclude with a vision for the future.**

Once more, we turn to the Talmud. Again we encounter a rabbi named Yochanan – but a different one, not the sage whose story I shared with you last week. This is the life-story of Yochanan ben Zakkai, a leader whose quick thinking literally saved Judaism. But we'll get there. We begin, instead, at the end of a life, with the scene as it appears in Tractate Berachot:

*When R. Yochanan ben Zakkai was sick, his students came to visit him. When he saw them, he started to cry. His students said to him: "Lamp of Israel, why are you crying?" He said to them: "If I was brought before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, if he becomes angry with me, his anger is not eternal; if he imprisons me, it is not eternal imprisonment. And he is human; perhaps I could appease him with words or bribe him. And yet even so I would cry. Now I am brought before the Ruler of Rulers, the Holy One, who lives for all eternity. If God is angry with me, it is an eternal anger, if God imprisons me, it is eternal imprisonment. And I cannot appease God with words or bribe God with money. Not only that, but I have two roads before me: one to Gan Eden and one to Gehinom, and I do not know on which one they will take me. Is this not reason enough to cry?" (B T., Tractate Berachot 23b)*

Now, never mind, for the moment, all the allusions to life after death, hints of heaven and hell, which we talk about very little in Jewish life. If you are interested in that, ask me another time. For now, let's focus on his feelings, the fate and state of his soul at the end of his life. Because, look, Yochanan ben Zakkai... this was the man who saved our entire tradition! And he... *he* doesn't know, he has such uncertainty about where he is headed? Why would this great man...have such questions? And such doubt?

The psychologist Erik Erikson viewed human development as a series of tests and pivot points. How we respond to each shapes us ever after. Food and love freely found or sought in vain as infants makes us basically trustful, or distrustful. Meaningful relationships or loneliness as young adults move us towards intimacy, or isolation. Productive work in mid-adulthood gives a sense of generativity, or stagnation. And in our later years, Erikson observed, we look back on our lives. We review, assess, enter what one retired colleague called our "anecdotalage." At this stage, there seem to be two stances we may take. Either we feel a flow, a purpose, a sense that everything has moved towards meaning, a thread in a tapestry, or we do not. *Bashert* – it was meant to be. Or *bizbuz* –we wasted the world we were given. We feel broken, or we feel whole. How we look at our story leads us to a sense of integrity, or despair.

At the end of his life, one of the greatest heroes of our history feels broken. He is on the verge of despair. Why? What could possibly trouble him so much?

Perhaps [Ruth Calderon, AIPAC Day of Rabbinic Learning] the key to this story lies in something embedded within his very act of heroism. At the flowering of greatness is sewn the seed of doubt. What happened?

Here, then, is the moment when history blinked and God laughed and an almost inevitable outcome was turned aside: It was the middle of the Great Rebellion. Convinced that God would save them, a group of Zealots sought to take the fight right to the Romans. The few versus the mighty; after all, it had worked once, not that long ago -- against the Greeks!

But the Romans were not the Greeks, and the situation was dire. Jerusalem was besieged. The city had prepared: there were stockpiles of food, enough to resist for some time. But the Zealots saw waiting as passive and weak. [They never got that the Romans were the Borg of their day. "Resistance is futile."] Radical and rash, in a brazen act they burned the stores of food. They brought the crisis to a head: we would fight, or we would starve.

Yochanan Ben Zakkai was a sage whose nephew was a leader of the Zealots. But the sage could see the city was doomed. Hoping to salvage something, he enlisted his nephew to sneak him out of the city. He faked his own funeral, and hid in the coffin. The sentries, it is said, stuck spears through the casket, but miraculously missed him.

Emerging from the coffin, he is seized and brought before Vespasian, the Roman commander whose troops surrounded the city. There, in a trampled

field with but a few stray sprouts of growth reaching back to the surface, the rabbi greets the general with these words: “Peace to you, O mighty emperor!”

Vespasian was enraged. And frightened. To be addressed thus was its own form of treason. Ready to kill the rabbi, the general draws his sword.

At that very moment a messenger arrives. The Emperor has died. And the Senate has just named Vespasian... the new emperor.

The general looks at the rabbi. The rabbi looks at the general. Finally, Vespasian proclaims: “Because you were the first to address me as Emperor, I will grant you one wish.” And Yochanan ben Zakkai unexpectedly, and famously replies: “*Ten Li Yavneh, v’Chachameha*. Give me Yavneh, and its sages.” Give me this isolated, remote coastal town, south of Jaffa, north of Ashdod. We will leave the world of power and politics to you. We will study, and we will adjust, and we will stay out of your way.

Vespasian grants the modest request. Jerusalem falls. The Temple is destroyed. With this new blow to our heart, this second surrender of our spiritual center Judaism, logically, should have come to an end. The song of the soul, over and done. Instead, though, it is radically recast, transformed and revised -- not by the priests of the Temple cult, but by the rabbis who re-read and rewrite and re-envision the entire tradition. What eventually emerges is the Mishna, reorganizing all of Jewish life. You know this from Pesach, if you make it past the meal to the songs at the end of the seder: “*sischa sidrei Mishna*. Six orders the Mishna has.” Judaism is saved...because of this story.

So again, why is he so distraught? Alright, sure, yes, he's about to die. But this is more than that. Focused on how he will be judged, he despairs.

Using other sources, I think we can answer the question. The rabbi had a chance, and he made a choice. A magic wish – from the most powerful person on the planet. And at a singular moment, when this god-like figure was feeling particularly generous. In theory, he could have asked for *anything*. What he chose... was functionally pragmatic. He asked for what he thought would work, what he believed would be granted.

But he has to wonder: what if? Shoulda, woulda, source of so much pain! What if he had shot the moon? What if he asked for the Temple, for Jerusalem, for his way of life to be spared? Yavneh? Great! But couldn't he have done more? And he, and we, and all of us, will simply never know.

**My friends, we stand between brokenness, and aspiration; between dreams and wishes, between what we could have done, and what we may yet achieve. As a *kahal*, as a North American Jewish community, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times. We are in the midst of crisis, and renaissance, all at once. We are witness to an amazing revival of Jewish spirit and energy and creativity. And we face unprecedented challenges in numbers, resources, patterns of interest and affiliation, demographic trends and future prospects. What is realistic and achievable given where we are? What should we reach for? Should we preserve and protect, or should we innovate and strive?**

**We are asked, at this time of year, to look backwards. On Yom Kippur, with hope and with worry, wondering whether the entire tradition will have to be revised and recast and re-envisioned once again, today, I want to look towards the future.**

When we, as a community, when the Jewish people, when Judaism itself comes before the Holy One, where are we heading? How will we be judged? What will we look like? Could we have done more? Integrity, versus despair. Wholeness, or brokenness.

And perhaps... it is even the parched and shriveling fear of despair, the realization on this Day of Atonement that all of us are broken, maybe it is the broken heart that opens us up to the quickened hand, and the nimble mind.

We could cry from not knowing which road leads where, or what is to come. Predicting the future is a risky business; not only does change come fast, but even the pace of change is picking up.

People who look at the landscape of Jewish life wonder what will be here a few decades from now. From “bowling alone” to customized consumption of information, from a world with lowered limits, faded barriers, and open social circles no longer confined to our own Jewish community, what will pull us here? Will there still be synagogues? Will there exist, outside of an enclave of the isolated and devout, strong centers of Jewish life?

I am convinced, and I am committed to the idea that the synagogue, which has seen so many centuries, will remain the central spiritual address of an ongoing Jewish community. And, with humility, knowing I might be wrong, I think I see parts of what will prop us up as a people, sustain our communal life. I see five foundations for the synagogue of the future.

**These five pillars are: T.T.I.P.S. Torah. Tikkun Olam. Israel. A Judaism that is Personal. An experience of the Sacred.** [partly inspired by Sidney Schwartz, *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*]

**Torah:** Jewish tradition has, does and still will rest on a life of learning. To put Torah at the center means a pre-commitment to the meaningfulness of our text, as a touchstone of our lives. It means a living and evolving link to an ancient tradition.

But what we need now is not the Torah as it was studied, by either of our Yochanans. I mean a Torah of inquiry and asking questions, a willingness to test boundaries, to push against the borders of what others might think.

An open Torah welcomes seekers and skeptics, honesty and integrity. It means you can come as you are, who you are, even if you live with more questions than answers. Only an unrolled scroll will be able to shield and shelter, to write in the incredible, even unprecedented diversity of who we are, what we believe, what we want, and how we relate to Judaism. Your mark in the scroll, your letter... that ink has yet to dry. To me, Torah as pursuit of wisdom and knowledge must even include... the sanctification of doubt.

**Tikkun Olam:** At the funeral last month of the late, great Shimon Peres, his children did something extraordinary as they stood to recite the Kaddish. It is actually almost identical to words we have in this *machzor*, this High Holy Day prayerbook, but it was practically unheard of in Israel. They added a phrase in the last sentence! After the words “*al kol Yisrael*,” they added “*v’al kol B’nai Adam*.’ In the midst of a plea for peace “for all Israel,” they added “for all human beings.” Journalists reporting this recognized it as a reflection of the universalism so characteristic of Shimon Peres.

In this, Peres may have been more in synch with North American Judaism than some of the more narrow voices in his own country.

Our eyes behold, our heart tells us, and research confirms: the old boundaries of the shtetl, the narrow confines of community pull less, hold less appeal, barely a factor in our globally connected lives today. For many of us, and more so for the Jews who will come after us, care and concern for the world as a whole, all human beings, all creatures, the planet itself, this pulls as strongly as any tribal tug. This aspect of Jewish life, nascent and nurtured in our movement, will be a defining foundation for all non-Orthodox Jews, in what may keep us coming in this next chapter of our story. [May be a factor...]

**Israel:** And, yet, still, with all our openness, with this welcome and wonderful stepping into our orbit of many not originally or even officially Jewish, we remain a people. What is this people? What defines who is a Jew?

One of the funniest things I heard all year was the scholar Yehuda Kurtzer using Lenny Bruce for text study. Some of you may remember the routine – it was the comedian’s take on Jewish-Goyish. “Kool-Aid, goyish. Pumpernickle is Jewish; White bread: very goyish. Instant Potato: very goyish; Black Cherry Soda: Jewish. All fruit salad: Jewish. Lime jello: goyish. Lime soda: very goyish.” [Sorry for the food references. And this reminds me of the later SNL game-show quiz with Tom Hanks and Al Franken: Jew/Not A Jew?]

But to share this routine with younger Jews today – they find it utterly baffling -- or outright offensive. Whatever cultural sensibilities once lay beneath the surface of this routine, they are just... gone.

So what does it mean to be a Jew today? And what will it mean tomorrow? Is it, Kurtzer asks, ontological – something in our status which transcends behavior or belief? Is it contingent – dependent on some standard... in which case, what and which one? Is a core part of who we are to be counter-cultural, to have a perspective on life which comes from the historic experience of marginality? In which case, does full assimilation threaten our essential nature?

To struggle with who we are in the world is not new; it is an ongoing feature of Jewish life. And now this includes who we are here, in relationship with a reborn state at once close and far away, a place in which Jewish values that developed as theoretical speculation over centuries of powerlessness have a chance to play out in the realm of a Jewish public square.

We are Jews. We are Israel. We are a people. And to wonder what that means... that is and was and still will be part of being Jewish.

**A Personal touch:** To ask what it means to be Jewish may be an old tradition. But the prominence of the individual, the turn to self, the expectation of personal meaning, that, I think, is new.

There is a long standing tradition in Reform congregations: everyone rises for the Mourner's Kaddish. Most people would say, I think, that we do this because in the Holocaust whole communities were swept away, and there are countless souls with no one to stand up for them. The problem is that this custom in our congregations... pre-dates the Shoah by decades.

So, well, I might be wrong. But here is what I think is behind this custom. I think we grew uncomfortable watching only some people stand. Or it felt weird to do it, yourself. It seemed too exposed, too public, too much a sense of being isolated and standing out. I think we *all* stood up because we *didn't want* anyone to stand out.

And basically – in a world of selfies our comfort zone has changed. Here, as you know, I modified the custom, and introduced a mixed model – you stand, if you choose to, as a family name is called – then we rise together. Otherwise, how would the rest of us know that you are here that night to honor a loved one?

And a community that cares should know... about what its individuals are going through! A Judaism that works will be one which welcomes any and all of us, sharing our own stories, a Judaism which finds a space and a place for our separate selves, which... not quite caters to every whim but crafts ceremonies which reflect our own needs, and, above all, which helps us give voice to our values. I believe – I have tried to enact this here, through teaching, through the way we approach B’nai Mitzvah and Confirmation, through study with adults... I truly believe that creating a safe space, allowing for personal expression... if that happens *in a Jewish setting* it will help us cherish our tradition throughout our lives.

**An experience of the Sacred.** We welcome, we honor, we embrace everyone as they are. And at the same time, there is a sense, here, of something more. As Ruth Gilbert said to Milton Berle: “let’s not fight this. It’s bigger than both of us.”

We are here for you. And we also teach... it ain’t about you. And, perhaps, it is this me/we, self/other, both/and paradox, this embrace of what is and pursuit of what ought to be that hints at the heart of what a synagogue does.

This is the least replicable aspect of what we do: come in, and see out. Like the Tardis of *Doctor Who*, it’s bigger on the inside. Whatever it means, what we do here touches on the realm of the sacred.

**My friends it is far too soon to write the obituary, or plan the funeral of the Jewish people! A new and vibrant life lies before us!**

**Give me Yavneh, and the start-ups of tomorrow. The Mishna of modern times: Torah. Tikkun Olam. Israel. Personal Meaning. A Sense of the Sacred. To me, these are the five foundations, the seeds of synagogue life. They are the pillars I hope will hold up your holy house, and mine, on all of our journeys, in space and in time.**

Relying on the resilience and creativity we have shown before, with uncertainty but cautious optimism, from the crossroad on which we stand, we step forward into the future.

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

### **The Place Where We Are Right**

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים.  
לא יצמחו לעולם  
פרחים באביב.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים  
הוא רמוס וקשה  
כמו חצר.

אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים  
את העולם לתחוח  
כמו חפרפרת, כמו חריש.  
ולחישה תשמע במקום  
שבו היה הבית  
אשר נחרב.

And, in a quote I heard in Hebrew first, only later learning it was originally written in, well, Chinese, in words I once thought were from Rabbi Akiva but which turned out to be from Chairman Mao: “*vayifrach elef prachim.*” May we flourish, may we blossom, may the seeds we plant grow strong and tall. “*Vayifrach elef pr’achim; let a thousand flowers bloom.*”

*L’shanah Tovah.*