

Redeeming Lost Objects  
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Please quote b'shem omro. Thanks! And feel free to contact me at [jeffsalkin@gmail.com](mailto:jeffsalkin@gmail.com)

My motives in studying midrash are not pure. I am a raider of the lost ark looking for treasure. – Geoffrey Hartman
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“What are you reading?”

Michael Walzer, In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible

Colin Woodard, American Nations

Meir Shalev, Beginnings

Yehuda Kerzer, Shuva

William Kolbrenner, Open Minded Torah

Zev Maghen, Imagine: John Lennon and the Jews. As if David Wolpe, Leon Wieseltier and Dennis Miller had a child together!

One of the best quotes:

**You, my sister or brother, spiritual daughter or son of Sarah and Abraham, you are blessed with the opportunity to connect with and benefit from a sprawling, boundless, spatial and temporal network, suffused with the deepest secrets of the ages, humming with the love of countless generations, a love that was always channeled directly and unhesitatingly at you. By tying into all of this...you indeed achieve a great deal: You add innumerable new intellectual and emotional dimensions to your life, as you absorb, melt down and refashion in your own image the fruits of untold centuries of evolving Jewish thought and churning Jewish tumult; you teach yourself the syntax and vocabulary of a timeless language, which you can use—as it were—to communicate with all that went into creating you, and all that you will one day create; you partake in a four-thousand- year-long journey of savage struggle and jubilant exultation, of unimaginable sacrifice and ineffable beauty, an adventure recently rekindled in a phoenix-like flash of incandescent splendor the likes of which human history has never seen; and eventually you burn, my brother and sister, you burn with the light and the fever and the strength and the passion of the magnificent and undying people of Israel, the bush that burns, but is never consumed.**

**Try getting that from bowling.**

What is the rabbi's job description?

1. R. Hayyim of Brisk, the greatest Talmudist of the late 19th century, defined the rabbi's task as follows: "To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor." I would add: when we are redressing the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, we might want to add God to this list. God has been abandoned and alone, and my rabbinate has been about teaching people how to keep God company.

2. Maggid of Mezerich. He started his career as a teacher in a humble little one-room schoolhouse cheder. This is what his students said about him.

"He pushed us and pulled us. He asked us questions and listened to us. He waited until each one of us told him his own story about what it was like to go out of Egypt and to cross the Reed Sea. And he waited until each one of us told him his own story of what it was like to stand at Mt. Sinai and accept the Torah."

Buber's description of the historical task of Hasidism—to teach the secular world that holiness *exists* and teach the religious what holiness *is*.

### In the Kingdom of Lost Objects

When it comes to the art of losing or mis-placing things, I am a Rembrandt. I have misplaced, on numerous occasions: my car keys; and my check book; and in large parking lots, my car; and my library card, and credit cards.

I mention all this because one of the sweetest, simplest, and most profound mitzvot of the whole set of 613 is the mitzvah of returning lost objects to their rightful owners. In Exodus chapter 23, verse 4, we read: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, bring it back to him." (Please note: even if the owner is your enemy).

And in Deuteronomy 22 it says: "If you see your brother's ox or sheep going astray, you must not ignore them, you must return them to your brother. If your brother is not near you, or if you do not know who the owner is, you must bring it home and keep it until your brother identifies it, whereupon you must return it. You must do the same for a donkey, an article of clothing, or anything else your brother loses and you find; you may not remain indifferent."

What did we say when we were children? "Finders keepers, losers' weepers." That may or not be an effective way to live, but it's not Jewish.

Finding and returning lost objects has been such a Jewish obsession that our sages dedicated the Talmudic tractate Baba Metziah to it. It teaches us that in the ancient Temple, there was a Stone of Losses. There, people who had lost things and people who

had found things would go. There in the holiest place in the world, the finders would bring what they had found and the losers would go to find what they had lost.

Now, understand: This mitzvah is not only about stuff. It is not only about tangible things. It's about anything that gets lost. If someone loses their way in life, you must help them find their way back. If someone loses their health, then you must heal them. This is the essence of the Jewish mitzvah to heal. It is why Jews become doctors; if health is a lost object, then you have to restore it. For human character is not forged in the big things, because those things do not happen very often. Human character is forged in the small deeds – like returning lost objects.

It is even true...that if a Jew is lost, this mitzvah can help that Jew become found once again.

A few years ago, I was in a store and I found a twenty dollar bill on the floor. So I went to one of the salespeople and I asked him to announce that there was an ownerless twenty, and could the owner please come and claim it. The man looked at me like I was nuts (a look to which I have become accustomed over the years), and he said: "Don't you think that everyone in the store is going to come running over here?" "Maybe," I said, "but this is what we have to do. Or at least, I am going to give it to you and you do what you need to do. But here's the thing...as a Jew, I am obliged to try to return lost objects. That is Jewish law."

So the salesman looked at me, and then he smiled, and he said to me, "You know something, I'm Jewish. I haven't been to synagogue in years. And you tell me that's Judaism – to go around looking for someone who lost a twenty?...If that's Judaism, I gotta give it one more try." We never know what mitzvah will bring a lost Jew back home.

Now, why is it that we Jews are so concerned about lost objects? It is because Judaism is the story of an eternal lost and found.

Stay with this, and you will see what I mean. Adam and Eve lose their way back to Eden. Noah loses a world and finds a new one. Abraham almost loses Isaac and then finds him again. Jacob's sons deliberately lose their brother Joseph, only to find him again. When the daughter of Pharaoh finds Moses, he is a lost infant (and here is something that I never considered: Moses is the name that SHE gives him, which means that his original name has been lost).

And while we're on the subject of lost names – the name of Cain's wife, and Noah's wife, and Abraham's mother, and Pharaoh's daughter – they must have had names, but all their names have been lost. The book of Deuteronomy started its literary life as a lost scroll. In the transition between Moses and Joshua, the Talmud says that we lost no one knows how many mitzvot. Job lost his children, and beyond the bounds of all logic, at the end of the book that bears his name, he has found a new set of children who are even more wonderful than the first.

Somewhere in history, we lost the Ten Tribes. In the year 70, we lost our independence as a nation; in 1948, we found it again. Our national anthem, Hatikvah, is about the hope

for the Land that we have never lost – *od lo avdah tikvateinu*. Somewhere in history, we lost the pronunciation of the Four Letter Name of God Yud Hay Vav Hey. Lost and found and lost again is the story of our people.

We lose our loved ones to death. We lose relationships -- sometimes willfully and vindictively; sometimes accidentally, with people we lose on the path of life, through no one's fault. We lose jobs. We lose opportunities. Sometimes, we lose entire careers, and businesses, and our investments. When people lose their houses, which means their homes, which means their stories and their memories.

Our children grow up and we lose our roles as parents of young children. We age and we lose our youth, and there is the body image that we lose and the health that we lose and the dreams that we lose.

In the Sharper Image catalog, I once saw this item. "Now You Can Find It!" Wireless Electronic Locator. Always misplacing your glasses? Keys? Remote? Cell? The "Now You Can Find It!" locator puts a pager on all elusive things!"

But you and I know that there are too many lost things... for which this little device would be utterly ineffective.

We lose ourselves when we forget what we stand for. We lose ourselves when we respond to another's demands because they are another's demands, and not because we recognize their essential truth.

Anna Quindlen. Acts of bravery don't always take place on battlefields. They can take place in your heart, when you have the courage to honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations and yes your soul by listening to its clear, clean voice of direction instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world. So carry your courage in an easily accessible place.

And there is a second thing that some of us have lost. Some of us have lost God. The Zohar puts it this way: We are all children from the chamber of yearnings. This world is a chamber of yearning for God.

I know that there are times when God seems to be hiding from us, when God's very presence seems to be in eclipse.

But in the game of hide and seek between God and humanity, we started it. We are children of Adam, who hid from God in the Garden of Eden.

There is a midrash that comes from the period after the destruction of Jerusalem. A rabbi wants to pray and decides to pray in a ruin.

Leon Wieseltier says that Judaism is the history of what can be accomplished in a ruin. And why does that rabbi choose to pray in a ruin? Because there, he says, his heart is broken. When your heart is broken, the lock on the soul is broken as well. And it is through that door that God enters.

There is a story about Franz Kafka that I have always loved. One day, Kafka was strolling in a park in Berlin. There he saw a little girl crying. She had lost her doll.

Kafka's heart went out to that little girl. He told her that her doll had gone on a trip, and that he had just seen the doll and he had spoken with it. The doll had promised Kafka that it would stay in touch with the girl and would send a letter to her from time to time. Kafka told the little girl that if she met him every week at the park, he would bring her a letter from the doll.

So this great writer sat down at his desk...and he took on a new project. He wrote letters to the little girl, and he let her think that the doll had written them...and they would meet every week.

Eventually, Kafka got tired of writing to the little girl (I think he had to get busy working on *The Trial*). So he sent the little girl a new doll. The girl noticed that the doll was different. Kafka re-assured her that this was truly the old doll...but it looked different because of the great adventures she had had.

This is, of course, a parable. The doll is really -- religious faith. The old doll/the old faith has changed. As much as we might want to, we cannot get the old doll/the old faith back in its pristine, naïve form. But by struggling with our faith, by learning, by being engaged, by engaging, we can find a new path to God.

And the third thing that too many of us have lost...is hope. I have often said that we Jews invented hope. But everything else that we Jews invented are outgrowths of hope.

The story of the Exodus is the hope that we can leave Egypt behind. The idea of Torah is the hope that each generation hears the voice of God anew and afresh. The idea of the world to come is the hope that beyond the grave, there is a reality that we cannot see. The idea of the Messiah is the hope that behind this age, there is redemption. We Jews have had many messianic disappointments. And yet, after each messianic disappointment, we have gone on to new heights of creativity. Even the great secular Jewish inventions are evidence of hope. Psychoanalysis is the hope of freedom from the malignant pieces of our pasts. In the words of the prophet, we are *asirei tikvah* – we are prisoners of hope. We have no choice. We are hopelessly hoping.

Rabbi Hugo Grin, *alav ha-shalom*, was a child in Auschwitz. There, one Hanukah, he saw his father collect particles of butter, to use for lighting the Hanukah lights in a makeshift menorah. "Papa, why are you doing that?" he asked. "Shouldn't we be eating that butter?" And his father said to him: "Hugo, you can live for a long time without food. But you can't live a moment without hope."

And so it is that this night and this coming day is about lost and found. It is about naming what you have lost, and it is about the hope that you can find it all again.

The last rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto (and this April is the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising) was a man named Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira. He was, in fact, the last Hasidic master in all of Eastern Europe, and as you might imagine, his teachings were

lost – until a construction worker found them by accident after the war while digging in the rubble.

The rebbe knew the stresses that his Jews were facing. In the streets, German soldiers were shaving the beards off Jews – and far worse thing than that. He knew that his Jews were struggling with the demons of despair and depression.

In one of his final sermons, the rebbe says these words: “O my children, when an object is lost, the owner returns to search for it, to find it, and to lift it up. We are the lost objects. God will search for us and find us.”

Lost objects – sermon ideas from popular culture

A Generation’s Vanity, Heard Through Lyrics

By JOHN TIERNEY

A couple of years ago, as his fellow psychologists debated whether narcissism was increasing, Nathan DeWall heard Rivers Cuomo singing to a familiar 19th-century melody. Mr. Cuomo, the lead singer and guitarist for the rock band Weezer, billed the song as “Variations on a Shaker Hymn.”

Where 19th-century Shakers had sung “ ’Tis the gift to be simple, ’tis the gift to be free,” Mr. Cuomo offered his own lyrics: “I’m the meanest in the place, step up, I’ll mess with your face.” Instead of the Shaker message of love and humility, Mr. Cuomo sang over and over, “I’m the greatest man that ever lived.”

The refrain got Dr. DeWall wondering: “Who would actually sing that aloud?” Mr. Cuomo may have been parodying the grandiosity of other singers — but then, why was there so much grandiosity to parody? Did the change from “Simple Gifts” to “Greatest Man That Ever Lived” exemplify a broader trend?

Now, after a computer analysis of three decades of hit songs, Dr. DeWall and other psychologists report finding what they were looking for: a statistically significant trend toward narcissism and hostility in popular music. As they hypothesized, the words “I” and “me” appear more frequently along with anger-related words, while there’s been a corresponding decline in “we” and “us” and the expression of positive emotions.

“Late adolescents and college students love themselves more today than ever before,” Dr. DeWall, a psychologist at the University of Kentucky, says. His study covered song lyrics from 1980 to 2007 and controlled for genre to prevent the results from being skewed by the growing popularity of, say, rap and hip-hop.

Defining the personality of a generation with song lyrics may seem a bit of a reach, but Dr. DeWall points to research done by his co-authors that showed people of the same age scoring higher in measures of narcissism on some personality tests. The extent and meaning of this trend have been hotly debated by psychologists, some of whom question the tests’ usefulness and say that young people today aren’t any more self-centered than

those of earlier generations. The new study of song lyrics certainly won't end the debate, but it does offer another way to gauge self-absorption: the Billboard Hot 100 chart. The researchers find that hit songs in the 1980s were more likely to emphasize happy togetherness, like the racial harmony sought by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder in "Ebony and Ivory" and the group exuberance promoted by Kool & the Gang: "Let's all celebrate and have a good time." Diana Ross and Lionel Richie sang of "two hearts that beat as one," and John Lennon's "(Just Like) Starting Over" emphasized the preciousness of "our life together."

Today's songs, according to the researchers' linguistic analysis, are more likely to be about one very special person: the singer. "I'm bringing sexy back," Justin Timberlake proclaimed in 2006. The year before, Beyoncé exulted in how hot she looked while dancing — "It's blazin', you watch me in amazement." And Fergie, who boasted about her "humps" while singing with the Black Eyed Peas, subsequently released a solo album in which she told her lover that she needed quality time alone: "It's personal, myself and I."

Two of Dr. DeWall's co-authors, W. Keith Campbell and Jean M. Twenge, published a book in 2009 titled "The Narcissism Epidemic," which argued that narcissism is increasingly prevalent among young people — and possibly middle-aged people, too, although it's hard for anyone to know because most of the available data comes from college students.

For several decades, students have filled out a questionnaire called the Narcissism Personality Inventory, in which they've had to choose between two statements like "I try not to be a show-off" and "I will usually show off if I get the chance." The level of narcissism measured by these questionnaires has been rising since the early 1980s, according to an analysis of campus data by Dr. Twenge and Dr. Campbell.

That trend has been questioned by other researchers who published fresh data from additional students. But in the latest round of the debate, the critics' data has been reanalyzed by Dr. Twenge, who says that it actually supports her argument. In a meta-analysis published last year in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Dr. Twenge and Joshua D. Foster looked at data from nearly 50,000 students — including the new data from critics — and concluded that narcissism has increased significantly in the past three decades.

During this period, there have also been reports of higher levels of loneliness and depression — which may be no coincidence, according to the authors of the song-lyrics study. These researchers, who include Richard S. Pond of the University of Kentucky, note that narcissism has been linked to heightened anger and problems maintaining relationships. Their song-lyrics analysis shows a decline in words related to social connections and positive emotions (like "love" or "sweet") and an increase in words related to anger and antisocial behavior (like "hate" or "kill").

"In the early '80s lyrics, love was easy and positive, and about two people," says Dr. Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University. "The recent songs are about what the individual wants, and how she or he has been disappointed or wronged."

Of course, in an amateur nonscientific way, you can find anything you want in song lyrics from any era. Never let it be said that the Rolling Stones were soft and cuddly. In “Sympathy for the Devil” the devil gets his due, and he gets to sing in the first person. In 1988, Bobby Brown bragged that “no one can tell me what to do” in his hit song about his awesomeness, “My Prerogative.”

Country singers have always had their moments of self-absorption and self-pity. But the classic somebody-done-somebody-wrong songs aren’t necessarily angry. When Hank Williams sang “Your Cheatin’ Heart” he didn’t mention trashing his sweetheart’s car, as in “Before He Cheats” by Carrie Underwood: “I took a Louisville slugger to both headlights.”

Some psychologists are skeptical that basic personality traits can change much from one generation to the next (or from one culture to another). Even if students are scoring higher on the narcissism questionnaire, these skeptics says, it may just be because today’s students are more willing to admit to feelings that were always there.

Dr. Twenge acknowledges that students today may feel freer to admit that they agree with statements on the questionnaire like “I am going to be a great person” and “I like to look at myself in the mirror.” But self-report bias probably isn’t the only reason for the changing answers, she says, and in any case this new willingness to brag is in itself an important cultural change.

The song-lyrics analysis, published in the journal *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, goes up to 2007, which makes it fairly up-to-date by scientific standards. But by popular music standards, 2007 is an eon ago. Could narcissism have declined since then?

It would take a computerized linguistic analysis to be sure, but there are reasons to doubt it. In 2008, the same year as Weezer’s “Greatest Man That Ever Lived,” Little Jackie had a popular song titled “The World Should Revolve Around Me.”

The current Billboard chart includes the Cee-Lo Green comic ode to hostility with its unprintable refrain (for the Grammy television audience, he changed it to “Forget you”) as well as Keri Hilson’s paean to her own beauty: “All eyes on me when I walk in, no question that this girl’s a 10.” Regardless of whether the singers really mean it, there’s obviously a market for these sentiments.

“The culture isn’t going to change wholesale overnight, and neither are song lyrics,” Dr. Twenge says. But she has some time-honored common-sense advice for people who want to change themselves and their relationships.

“As much as possible, take your ego out of the situation,” Dr. Twenge says. “This is very difficult to do, but the perspective you gain is amazing. Ask yourself, ‘How would I look at this situation if it wasn’t about me?’ Stop thinking about winning all the time. A sure sign something might not be the best value: Charlie Sheen talks about it a lot.”



Paul Simon, Working On My Re-write

The song is called "Rewrite."

I've been working on my rewrite, that's right  
I'm gonna change the ending  
Gonna throw away my title  
And toss it in the trash

Every minute after midnight  
All the time I'm spending  
It's just for working on my rewrite  
Gonna turn it into cash

I've been working at the carwash  
I consider it my day job  
Cause it's really not a pay job  
But that's where I am

Everybody says the old guy working at the carwash  
Hasn't got a brain cell left since Vietnam

But I say help me, help me, help me, help me  
Thank you!  
I'd no idea  
That you were there  
When I said help me, help me, help me, help me  
Thank you, for listening to my prayer

I'll eliminate the pages  
Where the father has a breakdown  
And he has to leave the family  
But he really meant no harm

Gonna substitute a car chase  
And a race across the rooftops  
When the father saves the children  
And he holds them in his arms

And I say help me, help me, help me, help me  
Thank you!

I'd no idea  
That you were there  
When I said, help me, help me, help me  
Thank you, for listening to my prayer

I challenge you to find a more profoundly Jewish statement in contemporary popular music.

Because what is Paul Simon singing about?

Paul Simon is singing about a man who understands the insight of the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. "Adulthood," he writes, "is when it begins to occur to you that you may not be leading a charmed life."

The man in "Rewrite" did not live a charmed life. If he had great dreams, he left them somewhere in a rice paddy in southeast Asia. He returned from the war, broken and shattered. Maybe you know people like that. He's working in a car wash. That's not what he once wanted to do, but that's where he is now. Every day he works for nothing. He is soaked with suds. His customers can only cluck their tongues and whisper about the guy who lost it in the war, the old guy who hasn't had a brain cell left since Viet Nam.

And so, the man in the song came home from Viet Nam with what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder. Here's a grim statistic: every day in this country, eighteen veterans commit suicide. The man in the song had a nervous breakdown. He left his family. Someone once said that dreams don't make noise when they die. No, they don't have to. But they die nonetheless.

The man in the song wants to pull those dead dreams up on the computer monitor, and he wants to highlight them and delete them. He wants to rip them right out of his life. He can imagine a more heroic way of having lived.

It's not that he left his family. Absolutely not. In his preferred version of his story, he imagines that he is a character in an action film. He imagines a car chase. He imagines saving his children from some unseen or unknown disaster or danger, and fleeing with them in his arms across the rooftops.

The man in the song wants to re-write his book of life, his *sefer chayim*. In the song's chorus, he turns to God and almost in the voice of the ancient Psalmist, the man says: I had no idea that You were there. How could I have known? My life has been wretched. I have experienced my life as being one massive void, a spiritual vacuum. But in the process of even wanting to re-write my book of life, I found You. Or, You found me. Thank you for listening to my prayers. Thank you for being there.

For only in the moments when I try to go beyond myself, only in the moments when I reach beyond myself, only in the moments when I confront the I that I am – that is when my I is filled with your *Anochi*, O God -- your supreme and sublime I that helps me re-write myself.

Once upon a time, the man is probably saying to himself, I believed that real heroism was to be Bruce Willis and to become an action hero. Now I realize, he is probably saying to himself, that the real heroism is not fancy driving, but in the driving of ourselves, that incessant voice within us that says: You can be better. You can be whole. Your book of life is not finished. It has not gone to print. I'm working on my re-write – that's right.

I've been humming that song for months. It's on Paul Simon's latest album, "So Beautiful Or So What." It's worth listening to. It's a beautiful album, especially considering that it comes from a guy who is past seventy.

When I first heard the song "Rewrite," I found myself thinking – believe it or not – of a man who was never on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. He was one of the greatest spiritual heroes of modern Jewish history. He was the last rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, and his name was Kalonymus Kalman Shapira.

When the Nazis invaded Poland, in the first days of the German bombings, Rabbi Shapira witnessed, in sequence, the death of his son, and then of his daughter-in-law, and then of his sister-in-law. A few weeks later, his mother died.

When the Nazis established the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Shapira refused to leave his people. He worked in soup kitchens. He set up a secret synagogue, where he would teach Torah, week in and week out. They say that he was physically imposing, "handsome and well groomed, distinguished and elegant."

During the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the rabbi remained in the ghetto. After the uprising, he was captured and sent to the Trawniki work camp near Lublin. He had the opportunity to escape, but he refused to leave his people. On November 3, 1943, all the remaining Jews in Trawniki, including Rabbi Shapira, were shot to death.

Sometime after the war, a construction project was laying the foundation for a new building on the site of the destroyed ghetto. A construction worker found a buried container. It contained the texts of all the sermons that Rabbi Shapira had delivered in the ghetto. Inside the container, there was a note from Rabbi Shapira: "By the grace of God, I respectfully request the honored individual that will find my writings to take the trouble to forward them to my brother, Rabbi Isaiah Shapira, who lives in Tel Aviv in the Land of Israel. When, with God's compassion, I and the remaining Jews will survive the war, I request that everything be returned to me."

A few years later, those sermons were published under the title *Eysh Kodesh*, The Holy Fire, and you can find them on Amazon and you can read them and you can say to yourself: This is what it means to live nobly and this is what it means to live heroically. These are sermons delivered in the presence of people who, in fact, would try to save their children, and would hold them in their arms, and who would, in fact, race across the rooftops of a burning Warsaw Ghetto.

On Rosh Ha Shanah, 1941, just two weeks before Paul Simon was born in Newark, New Jersey – Rabbi Shapira spoke these words in the secret synagogue in the Warsaw ghetto.

“The time for repentance is Rosh Ha Shanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world,” Rabbi Shapira said.

And then he went on to explain why it is necessary for people to start the process of repentance on Rosh Ha Shanah. It’s because repentance itself requires a kind of creativity. We return to who we are meant to be, but whom we have not yet become. Who we are, and who we are meant to be, lie dormant within us – just like a finished sculpture lies dormant within a block of stone.

And so you see that two great Jews who could never have known each other, two great Jews who lived in very different times and places, two great Jews who had two very different world views – those two great Jewish souls have reached across the decades and continents that separate them, and they are singing the same song: We need to return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become – and that is the ultimate act of creativity.

What do you do with your book of life, with your sefer chayim? What does it mean to work on your re-write?

Even before you work on your re-write, you have to open that book and you have to interpret it. There is that great Hasidic story of a man named David Lilov, who is about to die, and his friends gather around and they ask him, “David, our teachers have said that when the righteous die, in the world to come they study a holy text in a seminar where God is the teacher. What book, what holy text do you think that you are going to study in the world to come?”

This is what David Lilov said: “As for me,” he said, “I do not expect to study the Talmud, or any of the mystical texts. The book that I will wind up studying for eternity will be Sefer David Lilov – the Book of David Lilov. All my life, I have been writing that book. All my life, God has been writing comments about that text in the margins of my life. And now, God and I are going to study it together.”

Our sages say that when you study Torah, that there are seventy facets of Torah, seventy ways that people can interpret the Torah. And since each of us is a Torah in miniature, then I daresay that it is possible that we can each interpret our own lives seventy ways.

Each of us is a sacred text that cries out, as ancient holy texts would cry out: Darsheini! Interpret me.

And then, you work on your re-write, that’s right.

And so, will the man in Paul Simon’s song “Rewrite” be successful? Will he change the ending? Will he turn it into cash?

We don't know. Perhaps Paul Simon will re-write "Rewrite" and call it "Rewrite, Part Two."

But I will say this. The worst Jewish heresy I know, the worst Jewish denial of faith I know is the heresy of saying that what is, is.

The worst Jewish heresy I know, the worst Jewish denial of faith I know, is to believe that it is impossible to work on your rewrite.

The worst Jewish heresy I know, the worst Jewish denial of faith I know, perhaps the worst Jewish sin I know is the sin of despair, of thinking this is it and I cannot change either myself or the world.

A great, unnamed Jewish mystic writes that God forms the world through three things: two books and a story. The first two are the books of the world through which God reveals himself: the book of the natural world, and the book of the Torah.

The third is a story. It is the way that we reveal ourselves to ourselves. It is the story that each person writes for himself or herself.

I'm working on my rewrite, that's right. How about you?

Lost objects.....finding a new definition for sin

Can "Sin" Be Redeemed? In Search Of Some New Metaphors For An Old Problem (adapted from my essay in Lawrence Hoffman, ed. We Have Sinned (Jewish Lights, forthcoming)

Mrs. Hall: How do you plan to spend the holidays, Mrs. Singer?

Mrs. Singer: We fast.

Mr. Hall: Fast?

Mr. Singer: No food. You know, to atone for our sins.

Mrs. Hall: What sins? I don't understand.

Mr. Singer: To tell you the truth, neither do we.

-- Woody Allen, "Annie Hall"

And, to tell you the truth, neither do we.

I cannot be the only contemporary Jew who has a problem with "sin." The problem is not with the reality of human sin; it is with the word "sin" itself.

Like “repentance,” “redemption” and *olam ha-ba* (or its baptismal name, “heaven”), “sin-talk” seems Christian. Say the word, and it conjures up Catholic school or an evangelical preacher channeling the early American preacher Jonathan Edwards delivering his famous, fiery sermon “Sinners In The Hands of An Angry God.”

I sense that there are many Jews today who would like to find a different translation and definition of *cheit*, the most Days of Awe’s most prominent term for “sin.” We have been quick to relate *cheit* to its original connotation of “to miss the mark,” as when an archer misses the target. This might still work -- if more people played with bows and arrows.

How, then, should we understand “sin?” Where are all the good metaphors?

In *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Gary Anderson paraphrases George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Paul Ricoeur in noting that the most effective way to understand how a culture imagines sin is through the metaphors that it uses for such an act, as well as the act of forgiveness. Jews, throughout their history, have had a surplus of such metaphors, including *stain*, *debt*, and *burden*.

In particular, sin as “burden” gets top billing on Yom Kippur. The traditional Torah reading for the morning of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) depicts the ancient High Priest symbolically transferring the people’s sins to a goat and sending that goat out into the wilderness, which was under the domain of the desert-demon Azazel. For the ancient Israelites, the transfer of sin was no mere metaphor; it was a reality. The ancient Israelites *carried* their sins (*nose avon*), and the scapegoat was a veritable beast of burden.

How do we find a new, or perhaps, old metaphor for sin? We start not with a text, but with a gesture – the rhythmic beating on the heart during the *al cheit* confessional on Yom Kippur.

The question is: Why do traditional Jews do this?

We might start with what we, as Jews, know about the heart. Biblically speaking, the heart is the seat of the intellect. When Exodus speaks of Pharaoh’s “hardening of the heart,” it means neither a surplus of cholesterol or a numbing of the emotions (despite our way of speaking of a “heart of stone”). It means the failure of the intellect to guide the individual in making the right kinds of decisions. So, a ritualized beating of the heart is the “freeing up” of the hardened heart, and the act of forcing it to “jump start” its potential for moral introspection.

But the heart is also the seat of the passions. By beating upon the heart, we are attacking the very organ that is the seat and source of sin (Midrash, Kohelet Rabbah to Ecclesiastes 7:2).

Or, perhaps we are not *beating* on the heart. Rather, we are *knocking* upon the heart as we would knock upon the gates of heaven. In the words of Joseph Soloveitchik: “God is referred to as ‘He [sic] Who opens the gate for those who come knocking in repentance...unless one knocks on the gates loudly and continuously, repentance and confession are impossible. The entire liturgy for Yom Kippur, from beginning to end, is geared to this one goal: knocking upon the gates, again and again, crying out over and

over again: ‘Oh, I beseech Thee!’” (Pinchas H. Peli, trans. *Soloveitchik On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984, 78).

Or, perhaps the beating upon the heart is a way of symbolically breaking the heart and preparing it as an offering to God. In the words of theologian Louis Jacobs: “The beating of the breast denotes that God accepts the broken heart and the heart responsive to the cry of the oppressed and the unfortunate” (Louis Jacobs. *The Book of Jewish Practice*. New Jersey: Behrman House, 116).

Others might say that beating on the heart is simply another Jewish version of self-flagellation. That self-flagellation moves into the New Testament: “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’” (Luke 18:13). From there, it migrates into the Mass of the traditional Christian liturgy, in the Roman and Eastern rites, in which the penitent beats on the breast three times: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us”—*mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. From there, it will make an appearance in American literature’s understanding of New England Protestantism. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents the reader with the image of the guilty and tormented Reverend Dimmsdale secretly flagellating himself. The scarlet letter A appears on his chest.

But, in fact, the beating on the heart might be even more powerful, and more suggestive, than we had once thought. Beating on the chest appears to have been an outward manifestation of mourning. The Sages (Midrash, *Bereshit Rabbah* 96; Talmud, *Shabbat* 148b, *Megillah* 3b) refers to the beating on a chest at a funeral as a sign of mourning. The Talmud states that when Rabbi Eliezer died, Rabbi Akiba beat his breast until it bled (*Sanhedrin* 68a).

So, it is fair to say that the ritualized beating on the chest during the al cheit confession symbolizes that someone has died.

Who?

You.

How do we have the audacity to imagine sin as a miniature death?

It is hardly far-fetched. In fact, if we look at only the scriptural readings for the Days of Awe, we would discover that their overarching theme is *death* and *resurrection*.

On the first day of Rosh Ha Shanah in the traditional synagogue, we read the story of how Sarah prevails upon Abraham to expel the handmaiden, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, into the wilderness (Genesis 21). Abraham does so, giving them only a skin of water for the journey. Hagar stumbles through the desert with her son. “Let me not look on as the child dies!” she pleads, and so she casts the lad under a thorn bush (Genesis 21:16). At that precise moment, an angel of God opens Hagar’s eyes to the presence of a well of water. Ishmael drinks from the water and survives.

The *haftarah* (prophetic reading) for the first day of Rosh Ha Shanah features the barren Hannah, praying for a child (I Samuel 1). God hears her prayer, and she becomes pregnant. Barrenness is itself a miniature death; pregnancy and subsequent childbirth is a resurrection.

On the second day of Rosh Ha Shanah, Abraham brings his beloved, long-awaited son, Isaac, to what should have been a certain sacrificial death on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22). In a “repeat performance” of the scriptural reading from the first day of Rosh Ha Shanah, an angel comes to stay Abraham’s hand. Like Ishmael, Isaac survives.

In the *haftarah*, the prophet Jeremiah imagines the matriarch Rachel weeping for her lost (that is, dead) children; God says that her children will be restored to her.

The pattern continues on Yom Kippur. As we have seen, in the traditional Torah reading for the morning service, which takes place “after the death of Aaron’s sons,” one goat is sacrificed, and the other is sent, alive, into the wilderness. Some interpreters have even suggested that the ritual is a mime of the twin stories in Genesis: Ishmael, the “goat” sent out into the wilderness; Isaac, the “goat” who is almost sacrificed. The reading for Yom Kippur morning in the Reform lectionary is Deuteronomy 29 and 30, with its natively-Jewish insistence that we “choose life.”

And so the pattern continues – all the way to the final Scriptural reading of the day – in which the reluctant prophet Jonah is thrown into the sea, devoured by a “great fish,” and then regurgitated onto dry land to continue his prophetic mission. Death and resurrection.

And through it all, we encounter and experience our own death. We wear white, in order to “try on” the burial shrouds in which we will someday be buried. We wear no leather; we fast; we abstain from bathing and sex – we become our own corpses. In the most physically vulnerable hour of the day, we remember the deaths of loved ones (Yizkor), imagining our own fragility as well.

Finally, at the end of Neilah (the closing service for Yom Kippur), we utter the Sh’ma, as if we were on our collective deathbed, and then comes the final shofar blast – the cry of the new born child that is, in reality, each of us.

On a day that is redolent of death, there is every good reason to imagine sin as a miniature death – a death of the spirit. "But if only we make the effort to turn, every force of goodness, within and without, will help us while we live, to escape that death of the heart which leads to sin" (Chaim Stern, ed. *Gates Of Repentance: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978, 106).

When we pound on our chests, we are mourning our own inner deaths. And perhaps we might also say that the beating of the chest is not only an act of mourning for ourselves, but also a kind of spiritual CPR?

How, then, would this come out in our prayers? We might choose to translate *al cheit she-chetanu*, normally rendered as “for the sin which we have committed...” as “For the death of the spirit that comes from.....”



True: it is an utter mis-translation of the Hebrew prayer. But contemporary liturgists have committed far more adventurous translations.

And, *teshuvah*, then?

It would be nothing less than a re-birth of the soul.

Lost and found...if we need new metaphors for sin, then we also need new metaphors for *teshuvah*.

1. Restore Default Configuration. Go back to zero. Clean slate. Fresh start.
2. Control alt delete.
3. Return to home plate: Zionism.
4. The problem with your cable television when the picture gets weird. It pixelates or tiles. Picture gets broken or distorted. Calling the cable company and they say: Unplug the box, plug it back in.
5. Or: if it is really bad, they will say: We will send a refresh command to your cable box. Sit there and be patient. *Teshuvah* is when God sends a refresh command to your soul's cable box, so that the picture of yourself that you have been seeing on the television screen of your life is no longer distorted, so that it is no longer pixelated, so that it is no longer tiled, so that it no longer looks like you are broken up in pieces – but that you are at-one.

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Redeeming lost objects – a lost text from the Shoah

I have spent the last thirty-five years of my life in an intensive journey through higher Jewish learning. I had thought that I had heard of every Jewish thinker and every Jewish philosopher. But I had never heard of Otto Weiss, and it was Otto Weiss who would turn out to become one of my profound teachers – and almost no one knows about him.

In fact, it is fair to say that no American congregation has ever heard his name and no American congregation has ever heard his words – until today.

I first “met” Otto Weiss (so to speak) through my colleague, Rabbi Walter Rothschild in Berlin. He first shared with me a manuscript that he had been reading.

The manuscript was called “And God Saw That It Was Bad,” and its author was a man named Otto Weiss. He wrote the book with his daughter Helga. Every day, Otto would write a little bit of the book, and then get the pages to her to illustrate. He was like a Jewish Scheherazade – telling one more story to keep her alive. It worked. Otto Weiss died in Auschwitz in 1944, but Helga is still alive and she is now in her early eighties.

This is the book.

God wonders why fewer prayers than usual have been reaching Him (you should pardon the masculine pronoun).

These are Otto Weiss's words:

“On the earth a war was continuing to rage. Not even God's power had been able to prevent this war. Mankind had stopped believing in Him, and bowed down now before other gods.”

And so, God comes down to earth to see what is happening to our people. God disguises Himself as a Jewish man, and takes the name Aaron Gottesman, Aaron, the man of God.

God comes to Theresienstadt, and the ghetto policemen take him into custody, and he winds up living in the ghetto. There, God sees what is happening with the Jews. “And God Saw That It Was Bad.”

In Theresienstadt, God contracts typhus – and there, if it is possible to say such a thing – God dies, and the name of Aaron Gottesman winds up on a rabbi's kaddish list.

I am going to ask that we not focus on the wrong detail of this story. The whole idea that God can come to earth and become human and suffer, and even die – this doesn't sound particularly Jewish. If anything, it sounds like Christianity.

I would instead ask that we focus on the real point of Otto Weiss's fable.

When Otto Weiss wrote that God died in the ghetto, it's not that he believed that God really died.

What Otto Weiss meant was that a particular view of God had died. And because that view of God has died, that death has liberated us to believe new things about God, and it has liberated us to have a richer and deeper and even more powerful relationship with God.

And you might ask me: What view of God died in the ghettos and in the camps?

What will not die is our belief that God is all-compassionate.

What has died is our belief that God is an all-powerful.

Do you know that nowhere in the Jewish tradition – absolutely nowhere – does it say that God is all-powerful, or that God is (that popular American epithet for God) – the Almighty?

I am going to tell you why God is not all-powerful. It's something that you will understand immediately.

As soon as you enter into a relationship with someone – at the precise moment that you enter that relationship, what happens to you?

You become vulnerable.

Lovers are vulnerable to each other. Parents and children are vulnerable to each other. Teachers and students are vulnerable to each other. Employers and employees are notoriously vulnerable to each other.

If you don't want to become vulnerable, I have the perfect solution for you: Don't ever, ever, ever enter into a relationship with anyone.

We have a relationship with God. That relationship is what we affirmed this morning in our Torah portion. It is the covenant, our eternal *brit* with God.

As soon as God entered into relationship with us, what happened to God?

God became vulnerable. God lost a little bit of power.

God gave us Torah? Fine.

God gave us moral laws? Fine.

But we are free to reject the word of God. Recall what Otto Weiss said in his book: "Not even God's power had been able to prevent this war. Mankind had stopped believing in him, and bowed down now before other gods."

God wants us to choose the good – that's what our Torah portion says: "Choose life, that you and your children might live."

But God cannot force us to choose the good.

That's human freedom for you.

There is something else that Otto Weiss was saying to his daughter: "Helga, do you think that we are utterly alone here in this ghetto?"

"Let me tell you, Helga. The world might have abandoned us, but God has not abandoned us, and God will never abandon us.

"God is with us – yes, God is with us here in Theresienstadt. God is with us in our pain and God is with us in our suffering and God is with us in our vulnerability.

Otto Weiss goes one step further, and I am with him all the way – and so is our tradition. This is scandalous. When we suffer and when we are in pain, God also suffers. God is the Great Heart of the universe, and that Great Heart feels our pain.

As Otto Weiss figured out – Otto Weiss did not invent this idea – it was there all along hidden like a gem in our sacred literature: when we went into the ghettos and the camps, we did not go alone; God went with us.

When we went into slavery in Egypt, we did not go into slavery alone, says the midrash; God went into slavery with us.

When the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple, we did not mourn alone, says the midrash. God mourned with us.

When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, we did not go into exile alone, says the midrash; God went into exile with us.

What does it mean that God is in exile? It means that God is somehow not at home in the world. The great Hebrew poet Chayim Nachman Bialik imagined that God was lonely. And why is God lonely? Because God comes to synagogue, and frequently finds no one there.

How does Bialik put it?

**“I alone am left to find myself beneath the broken wings of God’s Presence.  
God’s Presence hides in a corner of the synagogue, sitting in a shadow.  
And what will happen afterwards, after the synagogue and the house of study  
Are completely empty and there is no one left?  
What will God do afterwards?”**

So, if you want to be part of the great cosmic mission of bringing God back from exile and into the world – here’s what you do: You pray.

If you want to be part of the great cosmic mission of bringing God back from exile and into the world – here’s what you do: you study Jewish words and ideas.

If you want to be part of the great cosmic mission of bringing God back from exile and into the world – here’s what you do: you do mitzvot that affirm that human beings are created in the divine image.

Lost and found....the concept of shanda

I like to experiment with different sermon forms.

Modern midrash: the Akedah through the eyes of Isaac, Sarah, the ram, the knife. (Sh'ma issue last year).

The open letter.

The newspaper article. The Death of Shanda

Shanda, the traditional Jewish sense of shame and embarrassment, was found dead in a condominium unit in Delray Beach, Florida. Authorities estimate that her age was approximately twenty five hundred years old.

Shanda was found dressed in a simple white bathrobe, stretched out on a sofa with a floral pattern.

Responses from around the country and the world were immediate and varied.

“I had no idea that she was so old,” said her downstairs neighbor, Sidney Levine, who was interviewed while playing golf at his country club. “Wow! She always looked so good.” When the interviewer asked Mr. Levine the last time he saw her, he said, “Gee, hmnn, well, now that I think about it, I really don’t recall her leaving her unit for quite some time. I used to knock on her door and offer to bring her some bagels from the local deli, but to tell you the truth, I hadn’t really kept in touch with her for quite a while. Sad.”

“I knew this would happen,” said Rabbi Lisa Cohen, who serves a congregation in Los Angeles, California. “We were in touch with her for quite a while, me and my congregation, but in recent years, I don’t know, it just kind of fell apart, y’know? Wow. Really terrible thing. I’m really sorry. Are there any survivors for me to send a note to? Are they sitting shiva?”

There are survivors, say some unnamed sources. One survivor is named Past Nischt, a Yiddish phrase that apparently means “There are some things that Jews simply don’t do.” Mr. Past Nischt, who is of indeterminate age, is now in a long term care facility in the Bronx, and apparently has been known to go for months, sometimes years, without saying anything.

Authorities say that Shanda had been ailing for a while, and in fact, rarely left her condo unit. Occasionally, said her next door neighbor, Mrs. Fern Berkowitz, you could hear her phone ring, and it was clear that someone had called, and Shanda could be heard through the paper-thin walls of the unit talking animatedly, and then she would fall silent.

“It was kind of funny,” said Mrs. Berkowitz. “All that time we lived next door to each other, and we rarely saw each other. Oh, sometimes she would stop by the clubhouse and play canasta with us. But she was always muttering underneath her breath, sort of like a crazy woman. Very upsetting.”

As for the cause of death, authorities are examining all available leads. “Yes, it might have been plain old age,” said Sgt. Chaim Rosnofsky of the Delray Beach Police Department. “But if it wasn’t, well, I think that if you did some real investigation, you would find a list of – as it says at the end of the movie Casablanca – ‘round up the usual suspects.’”

This reporter spent a significant amount of time at the Palm Beach County Medical Examiners’ office to find out what the autopsy revealed about the death of Shanda.

“The autopsy shows multiple blows,” said one examiner. Here’s one blow – the fact that there are many Jews who simply ignore Yom Kippur. I mean, simply ignore it. It’s like it’s not even on the calendar.

Another investigator chimed in. “Yes, the damage to Yom Kippur was terrible. No doubt about it. But there are other wounds as well. Look at this scar over here.” He pointed to a long line on Shanda’s corpse.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That, my friend,” the investigator said, “is the scar from people ignoring Pesach. Totally ignoring it. No seder, or if there is a seder, no Haggadah. Turning it into the Jewish springtime Thanksgiving, you know what I mean? Oh, sure, it’s great to get the family together. But I don’t have to tell you this – those Jewish families have a story and what happens if they don’t tell the story?”

I could see where he was going. “Yes,” I said. “It’s a shanda.”

“You got it.”

The Palm Beach County medical examiner’s assistant chimed in.

“Or, how about this? You know how people used to take pride in being learned Jews, in knowing sacred texts or at least being interested in sacred texts? I’m not talking about Ph.ds or professors or rabbis. I am talking about average, every day Jews. Yes, there are places out there where they’re doing that, and there are many Jews out there who are doing that. But my own forensic research reveals that many Jews are simply abandoning their rich intellectual heritage. And for what? Really – for what? What’s occupying that mental space? Kim Kardashian, Justin Bieber, reality television shows. That was what did in Shanda, if you ask me.”

“You see,” said one policeman, “as I understand the Jews, there was a time, and it wasn’t that long ago, when it would have been a shanda for a Jew not to be a member of a synagogue. I mean – it simply wasn’t done. Oh, sure, maybe they didn’t go all that much. But to not support your local synagogue or temple – or your federation, fer cryin’ out loud – that would have been a shanda. But now....well, that’s what did in Shanda.”

“How did it happen?” this reporter pressed on.

“As near as I can tell,” said another policeman, “Shanda started to lose it about two hundred years ago. You see, ever since the Jews came out of the ghettos in Europe, they decided that Jewish culture and wisdom was somehow inferior to what the rest of the world was learning. They started to devalue who they were.

“That’s where Shanda starts to decline. Funny thing is – speaking as a gentile – I gotta tell you: you people, without your traditions and your wisdom and your rituals and your ethics – what else you got, really? I mean, sheesh – you think God chose you for nothing?”

“So,” he continued, “you got yourself your ‘cultural’ Jews, or ‘just Jewish’ Jews – they didn’t help keep Shanda alive. It turns out that there wasn’t enough Jewish Velcro. Not enough Jewish glue. Not enough Jewish capital. A religious culture needs that. A people needs that. And a people needs Shanda, too.”

“Is there going to be a funeral?” this reporter asked.

“It’s too soon to tell. I don’t know if I’m the one who should be telling you this, but this is what I think. I think that Shanda is not totally dead yet.”

“Do you mean to tell me that there is a possibility that Shanda could come back to life?”

“I can’t say that Shanda will come back to life exactly as Shanda. But Shanda could come back to life with a different name. A Hebrew name, this time, perhaps. Shanda could come back to life as Mitzvah.”

“Imagine,” the medical examiner said. “Imagine if Shanda could come back as Mitzvah. Maybe the negative message of Shanda’s life worked once, but it doesn’t work now. Maybe what you Jews need is a sense that there are certain things that you do in a community that are mitzvot, and that those mitzvot keep your people alive.

“You know what they are, because the failure to do them essentially killed Shanda. But imagine a community where people knew that it was a mitzvah to observe the Jewish festivals.

“Imagine a community where people just took it for granted that it was a mitzvah to observe the Jewish holidays.

“Imagine a community where people just took it for granted that it was a mitzvah to observe Jewish rituals of mourning.

“Imagine a community where people just took it for granted that it was a mitzvah to engage in ongoing Jewish learning, and to be part of a prayer community, and to strive for ethical excellence and to seek shalom with the world.

“Imagine a community where people knew that it was a mitzvah to actively support the state of Israel, and to support Jewish institutions.

“Yes, Shanda is dead. But Mitzvah could be alive and well.”

As for this reporter, I have to say that I am tired of just covering the bereavement beat. Put me on births, for a change, I say. If Mitzvah gets born, or re-born, that’s the story that I want to cover.”

Lost and found....a new way of hearing an old sound

### **Mrs. Sisera and The Shofar**

I remember the tale of the great Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria. When Luria was a young man, growing up in Egypt, he used to walk along the banks of the Nile...listening intently.

One of his companions approached him and asked: “What are you doing?” Luria replied: “I’m listening.”

“What are you listening for?”

“I am listening for the cries of the infant Moses. Moses drifted down this river when he was an infant. And if you ask me why I am listening for the cries of the infant Moses, it is for this and for this alone...”

“Only the one who hears the cries of the infant Moses is capable of teaching the Torah of the adult Moses.”

Let me take you back six months ago to Rosh Ha Shanah. There are many names of that day.....but the oddest one is....

Yom Yevava – the day of weeping. For you see, the Talmud records a debate about the exact nature of the shofar blasts. One rabbi said that it should be like one long sigh. Another said that it should be short, piercing cries – like the cries of a woman.

But which woman was it?

The Talmud continues and says that the crying woman was the mother of Sisera.

There are vast segments of even the Biblically-literate population who have never heard of Sisera – much less his mother. He is one of those Biblical characters who are likely to show up in the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, 14 down, six letters, Canaanite general.



Sisera makes a brief, cameo, and ill-fated appearance in the book of Judges. He led a coalition against Israel. This is one of the great Biblical stories about assertive women. The great woman judge and prophetess Deborah defeated that coalition. Another woman, Yael, personally killed Sisera *in flagrante delecto* (which is not an Italian restaurant in the north end) by luring him into her tent and then smashing his skull.

In the Song of Deborah, which is one of the oldest songs in the world, the poet imagines Sisera's mother waiting for him to come home.

***“Through the window peered Sisera’s mother, behind the lattice she gazed  
Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?  
The wisest of her ladies give answer;  
She, too, replies to herself:  
‘They must be dividing the spoil they have found...’”***

But the reader knows what Sisera's mother does not yet know, or what she cannot yet admit even to herself. He is not coming home. When his mother discovers that her son is dead, she wails – and the ancient rabbis believed that her wails were the origins of the shofar blasts.

Sisera's mother is not what we would call an endearing character. Where I come from, mothers are supposed to get nachas from their sons being good students or great violinists – not from having sons who are going to go out and destroy a Jewish army. She was already gloating about the spoils that her son would take.

Any reasonable person might ask: Why should we give a...about Sisera's mother? Mrs. Sisera was the mother of a barbaric Canaanite general who came after us with brutality and with treachery. She was the mother of a low-grade Iron Age terrorist wannabe. And we should care about her?

1. In a time of renewed anti-Semitism and of anti-Israelism, it is beneath Jewish dignity to argue for our acceptability.

But: if the nations of the world were to ever politely inquire -- What kind of people is this? Who are they, really? What do they believe? What do they hold most dear? ... We would have to say that we are a people that tells a certain kind of story about the shofar blasts. We are a people that cares even about the pain of a woman who was our enemy.

There is a midrash that says that that the descendants of Sisera actually study Torah in Israel. That they converted to Judaism! Ask yourselves: Why would the sages teach something like that – if not to say that we can redeem the shards of brokenness in the world?

2. Try as I may, I cannot get it out of my mind. It's that image of Sisera's mother waiting at the window. We know what she's thinking. Where is that boy? He must be out pillaging. He must be dividing the spoil. A few hours later – He must have stopped off

with the others to get a drink. A few hours later – Where could he be? Why didn't he call?

And then, I imagine that she sees the messenger coming. He is on horseback, and the horse's hooves are kicking up sand. He draws nearer. She sees the look in his eyes...and she knows.

Sisera's mother feels...I think that this is how we must say it...the trauma of uncertainty...that overwhelming sense of the unknown.

Like the girl waiting for that cute guy to call.

Like the seventeen year old waiting by the mail box to see if the college acceptance letter has arrived.

Like the father at three in the morning, pacing in his bathrobe, waiting for his daughter to come home, worried sick because she had gone out with that kid who just got his license and who has a reputation for partying.

Like the job applicant waiting in the outer office for the interview...and then by the phone or by the mail box or by the computer for the email.

Like the patient with the persistent cough, or the lump, or the bleeding, or the pain, or the mole that has changed...sitting in the waiting room (how aptly it is named!), reading old issues of National Geographic and People magazine...waiting for the doctor to give the report that will name the disease and the prognosis and to give a face to the future.

This is what it means to hear the voice of the shofar on Rosh Ha-shana. The book of life is open. The Unetaneh Tokef does not say that we can overturn the future, whatever it is. All we can do (and it is more than we think) is to TRANSFORM the way we will view that future. All we can do (and it is more than we think) is to transform ourselves. To turn inward through *teshuvah*; to turn upward through prayer; to turn outward through *tzedakah*...and to know that those holy acts will somewhat sweeten whatever bitterness there is in life, and make more meaningful those things that are wonderful and holy in life.

3. And there is yet a third thing that Sisera's mother evokes for me. It is a mischievous idea. It is a radical idea. It may even be a heretical idea.

Sisera's mother is actually God in drag.

Think of it. Sisera's mother waited at the window, patiently, gazing through the lattice for his return. That's the way it is with God as well. God gazes through the lattice work of the world, and God waits for us to return. *Ad yom moto techakeh lo*: Until the very day of our death God waits for us to return. Where are they? Why are they taking so long? Perhaps they are busying themselves with all the distractions of the world and they have forgotten Me, waiting here at home.

The midrash says that before the creation of the world, there was not nothing. It was not all chaos and void. The midrash says that there was a heavenly voice that went out: *Shuvu, shuvu v'nei adam!* Return to Me! Return to Me! That is the first thing that God ever really says – even before “Let there be light.”

Some say: This is all that God actually ever says to us. The entire Torah is a commentary on those words: Return to Me! I am waiting. I have always been waiting. Return to a world in which we hear the cries of our enemy’s mother with as much clarity and depth as we would hear the cries of our own infants. Return to a world in which there is such a thing as holy waiting. Return to returning. And you will ask me, correctly, when and where did that world ever exist? And I will say to you that it has always existed. It has existed in the mind of God and in the eye of God...and God has been waiting for us to return and to make that world, anew, afresh, out of the broken pieces of these flawed lives we lead.

How did Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the great sage of modern Orthodoxy, put it? The whole essence of repentance is longing, yearning, pining to return again.

How did the late Shlomo Carlebach put it? Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul. Return to who you are. Return to what you are. Return to where you are. Return to the land of your soul.

And so it is that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, once threw a contest to see who would be the shofar blower on Rosh Ha Shanah. For you see, in his time there were secret prayers associated with the blowing of the shofar...and in order to truly blow the shofar you had to know the secret prayers. Comes a contestant to blow the shofar, and try as he can, he cannot remember the secret prayers and he cannot blow the shofar. And so he weeps. Loudly. Finally the Baal Shem says to him: Alright, you’re hired. Me? said the man. Me? Yes, you. For your tears welled up as the waves of a mighty ocean and they crashed against the gates of heaven, and now the gates are open.

### **Finding Ishmael**

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

Second Day Rosh Ha Shanah 2010

Sitting seductively next to the checkout counter in Barnes and Noble, there is a stack of books with a tantalizing title: *1001 Places To See Before You Die*. As I thumb through the book, looking at various places I have visited or want to visit, one place grabs my eye. Someday, I say to myself wistfully, I will return there. I will return there, because I am looking for a little Bedouin boy. Fifteen years ago, for fifteen minutes, he was my teacher.

The place is Petra, an ancient city in central Jordan, about sixty miles south of Amman. It was one of the greatest construction projects of the Nabateans, a tribe of spice merchants.

At its height in the third century before the Common Era, the Nabatean kingdom stretched from the Mediterranean throughout the Negev and well into the Sinai peninsula.

Petra was a very wealthy city, for it stood at the intersection of every major caravan route in the ancient world – routes that came out of Syria and Eilat and Gaza and the Mediterranean. The Nabateans carved Petra out of the inside of a canyon. It was the location of the final scene in the movie “Indiana Jones and The Final Crusade.” It is truly on the runner up list of the wonders of the ancient world.

In order to get into Petra, you must ride on horseback into the gorge, and then you have to begin a long walk into the ancient city.

This brings me to the young Bedouin boy, who led me on his trusty Arabian stallion. In some ways, he was like a New York City cab driver; he had become adept at the art of small talk.

“So, what do you do?” he asked me. (Obviously, he was networking. Smart kid.)

“I’m a rabbi,” I answered.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Now, this was a new one. Throughout my career, I had often explained the rabbinate to many people, but never to a Bedouin boy in the middle of the Jordanian desert.

“Well,” I began tentatively. “A rabbi is like an imam for the Jews.”

He thought about this, and he pondered this for a moment.

“That’s a good job,” he said with sincere admiration. “What do you do in your job?”

How does a suburban American rabbi explain the essence of the rabbinate so that a Bedouin child will understand? “Well,” I said to him, “I tell stories.”

He wasn’t letting go. “What kind of stories?”

“What kind of stories?” I was scrambling. “I tell stories about Ibrahim and Yakub and Yusef and Musa and Daoud.” I was rattling off the Muslim equivalents of every biblical character that I could remember – Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David – for those characters appear in the Koran as well.

He listened to me, and he nodded his head thoughtfully.

Then he asked me: “Do you know the stories of Hajarah and Ismail?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Yes, I know those stories.”

To which he responded: “Those are the best stories of all.”

“Yes,” I responded. “Those are the best stories of all.”

And the lad turned from me, and he looked out into the desert, as if he was looking for something.

That is why we have shuffled around the Torah reading for today. On this second day of Rosh Ha Shanah, we decided to go slightly out of order – and to present this Torah reading, which is the Torah reading for traditional Jews, on the second day of Rosh Ha Shanah rather than the first.

We did so because I believe that this story is one of the most important for us to hear.

The young boy called them Hajarah and Ismail. They are, of course, Hagar and Ishmael.

Let us admit that this story of Hagar and Ishmael is a bit of an embarrassment. No one looks good – not Abraham, Sarah, or even God.

The feminist biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible, calls this story one of the “texts of terror,” and testifies that “to neglect the theological challenge the story presents is to falsify faith” (Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives, Augsburg Press, 1984)

Trible is not alone.

A biblical scholar named Pamela Tamarkin Reis writes about a feminist conference in which participants referred to the story of Hagar as an example of everything that is bad about the Jews and Judaism.

One black feminist scholar accuses Sarah of representing all the wealthy well-educated white Jews and Hagar, the downtrodden black woman.

Then, a nun arose to talk about all the “Sarahs” in her life and how each one had oppressed her.

It is hard to escape the fact that this story has not been “good for the Jews.”

But I ask that we turn our attention to Ishmael.

When we think of how the Jewish tradition treats Ishmael, we find ourselves quoting Rodney Dangerfield: He don’t get no respect. Jewish lore and legend has much to say about Ishmael, and much of it is bad.

To put it simply: Ishmael was the ancestor of the Arab peoples, and there is – how shall I put this kindly? – a sort of historical tension between our peoples.

So, because of that tension, many of the Jewish oral traditions about Ishmael are, frankly, quite negative.

But let me put that material into its historical context for you. Most of it comes after the seventh century, after the Muslim conquest of the land of Israel, at a time when Jews would tend to be bitter about the Arab descendants of Ishmael who were spreading Islam by the point of the sword.

Starting with the Muslim conquest of the Middle East in the seventh century of the common era, and continuing through the Middle Ages, “Ishmael” becomes a code word not only for the Arab peoples, but also for “Islam,” a faith that was militant and expansionist. In the Zohar, the cardinal text of Jewish mysticism, we read these words: “The exile under Ishmael is the hardest of all exiles” – that the cruelty of militant Islam in the Middle Ages was particularly harsh.

So, let us be clear. Every fear that we have about militant Islam in our time – our ancestors had as well. The most astounding thing was that there wasn’t more fear, especially among the Jews who lived in Arab cultures. The great sage Maimonides, whose family fled from the murderous ambitions of militant Muslims, actually had very good things to say about Islam – even when he didn’t have to do so, even when experience would have prompted him to utterly condemn Islam.

But, let us leave Ishmael for a moment, and let us go to, of all places, our very shoulders.

For a brief moment, let us go to the tallit.

Everyone here knows that there is a blessing that we are supposed to utter when we put on the tallit. We thank God for commanding us *l’hitatef ba-tzitzit* – for wrapping ourselves in the *tzitzit*.

But there is an additional meditation for the tallit that somehow didn’t make it into the standard prayer book – and it is utterly amazing.

That meditation emerges from the mind and soul of Israel Meir Ha-kohen Kagan, and he wrote it in Vilna, sometime between the years 1894 and 1907 (or, at exactly the same time that my ancestors, and many of your ancestors, were leaving Vilna for these shores. Today Vilna is Vilnius, and it is the capital of Lithuania).

Kagan was also known as the Hafetz Hayim, and he is considered one of the most saintly figures of modern Judaism – and with a teaching like this, it is easy to see why.

The teaching says that when you put on your tallit, you should let the tallit wrap around your head for just a few seconds.

Why? So that the tallit should, for just a few seconds, resemble traditional Arab headdress -- *atifat Yishmaelim* – in Kagan’s words, “as Arabs protect themselves from wind-driven sand.” (I am grateful to Larry Kushner and Nehemia Polen for teaching about this meditation in their book *Filling Words With Light*, published by Jewish Lights)

This is utterly amazing. Think about this for a moment.

Eastern European Jews are telling themselves to adorn themselves in their prayer shawls so that it looks like they are wearing Arab *kaffiyehs*.

Even more amazing -- they were teaching this to themselves decades before the making and the release of the classic epic film “Lawrence of Arabia.”

Let us wonder aloud: how did they know about Arab garments?

Had they ever seen Arabs? Maybe some photographs from the old Ottoman Empire had made their way back to Vilna. Maybe some traveler came back and said, “You know, I saw some Arabs, some descendants of Ishmael, wearing these...*shmattes* on their heads...”

What does it mean that when you prepare to pray, you must take a few seconds, and for those few seconds, you must deliberately resemble an Arab?

This meditation emerged out of a traditional Jewish community, living in a traditional Jewish time, living with traditional Jewish values.

It came out of a community of Jews who never heard of liberalism, or multi-culturalism, or diversity, or inter-religious dialogue. We all have our interreligious credentials. We all speak in churches or in seminaries, and we invite our Christian and Muslim colleagues and partners to do the same.

But the Catholic churches in Vilna didn’t invite my great-grandfather’s rabbi to speak in their churches. There is no Yiddish word for kumbaya.

And if they didn’t have open dialogue with Christians – you can be one hundred and ninety percent sure that they didn’t have dialogue with Muslims in Vilna, either.

And yet, our ancestors in Vilna were able to imagine themselves, for a few nano-seconds when they prayed, to be not only children of Abraham, not only children of Isaac – they imagined themselves to be children of Ishmael.

Now, I am not saying that this is what I expect all of us to do when we put on our *tallitot*. I am not saying that I expect all of us, for those few sacred moments, to imagine that we are Arabs – though, to quote Seinfeld, not that there’s anything wrong with it.

But I am saying this:

When the world accuses Israel and the Jews of being anti-humanistic, and racist, and xenophobic...

And when doubts assault us or our children or our grandchildren...

And if we or they should ever start to doubt the humanity and depth and pathos of our own texts and traditions...

All I ask is this:

Just think of this Eastern European teaching that says to the worshiper: Imagine, for a second, that you are not only an Arab, but that you are Ishmael himself.

Imagine what it would be like if Jews and Muslims could start talking – the way that Jews and Christians have been talking for more than a half century. No, we wouldn't start with the big subjects. We would not need to discuss the I word, which is Israel, or the P word, which is Palestine. No, we could just start with our texts and with our sacred personalities, and ask the simple question: How do you see these texts and these people?

And the lad turned from me, and he looked out into the desert, as if he was looking for something.

For the past fifteen years, the faraway look in the Bedouin lad's eyes has haunted me. What was he looking at? What was he looking for?

Can there be any doubt? He was looking for Ismail.

Abraham and Sarah exiled Ishmael into the wilderness.

But for a few split seconds, when we pray, it is as if he never left.

It is as if he is here.

It is time to invite him back.

Lost and found – a small prayer and a new way of understanding it

Elohai netzor is the most basic statement of Jewish spirituality. Its author was Mar bar Ravina, a Babylonian sage who lived in the fourth century of the Common Era, and who had a remarkable reputation for saintliness.



And yet, I confess that for years I have been mis-reading it and mis-understanding it.

It says that there are times when silence is a mitzvah. There are times when you don't have to say everything that you are thinking. The Talmud says that if your teacher is angry with you, it is a mitzvah to be silent. The Talmud also says that even though everyone knows why the bride and groom enter the bridal chamber, if someone talks about it obscenely they will get seventy years of misery.

Or, why Jonathan loved David, according to Andre Neher (The Exile of the Word): Who is that young man? David could have said: What do you mean, you loony tunes?!?! I have been giving you music therapy all this time. But he didn't, because he knew that the people would have torn Saul to shreds. So he kept quiet. That's why Jonathan loved David.

Vilna Gaon:

“For every moment that a man holds his tongue, he merits the hidden light, beyond the imagination of any angel or creatures.”

I thought that the entire idea of my soul being dust for everyone meant that I should not protest too loudly if people treated me – forgive me – like a shmatta. That I should not fight back against insults.

I confess that for a while I tried to live that way. “...and to those who curse me may my soul be silent...” I would say to people: If you promise not to tell lies about me, then I will promise not to tell the truth about you.

Though let me be very clear: While this is how I felt about myself and my own personhood, it was not how I felt about the Jewish people. Say anything you want to about Jeff Salkin, I believed, but when it comes to the Jews, watch out.

It worked, for a while – this way of not resisting insults. I will live with equanimity and I will live with inner peace.

There was something Zen in it. Something Buddhist in it. And, I thought, something deeply Jewish about it.

Let my soul be dust for everyone.

And now I realize that I have been mis-reading, mis-interpreting, mis-understanding and even mis-living this prayer.

“May my soul be as afar for everyone.” Afar means dust – and I had interpreted afar to mean dust, in the sense of dirt.

Yes, afar means dust – but why does it have to mean dirt? Does that mean that I or anyone must so totally put our own needs aside that we have to think that we are dirt?

Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Afar also means soil, and afar also means earth.

So, are you ready for what this verse really means?

It's not "make my soul into dirt." It's "make my soul into soil." Make my soul the soil that will fertilize other souls.

Make my soul count; make my soul useful; make me fertile ground – this is what this prayer asks for.

It's not about humility. It's about sustenance.

Each and every soul has the power to sustain others; each and every human being has the potential to raise students; each and every human being can help those in need and to be of value beyond the limits of the self.

That's why soil and dust and earth appear so prominently in the promises that God makes to the patriarchs.

God says to Abraham: V'nivrechu v'cha mishpechot ha'adamah..." – "And the families of the earth shall be blessed through you, because of you, in you..."

God says to Jacob: V'haya zaracha ka-afar ha-aretz – Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth – which, as a child, I thought meant that we would get into people's nostrils and make them sneeze (an interesting theory of anti-semitism, I should say), and which RASHI says that just as it is impossible to count the grains of soil, so, too, it will be impossible to count the Jews.

But it means so much more than this: We, the Jews; and we, each of us – we can be the nourishment of each other and we can be the nourishment of the world.

So, as I repent of my sin of misunderstanding this prayer – let me ask you:

How can the Jewish people nourish the soul of the world?

How can you nourish the soul of the world?

In his seminal work *Orot Ha-Kodesh*, "The Lights of Holiness," Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of modern Eretz Yisrael wrote these words.

The four stage song. Each Jew should aspire to be able to sing four songs in parallel: the song of your own soul -- shir-hanefesh; the song of your people; -- shir ha-am; the song of humanity – shir ha-olam; and the song of all living things shir ha-beriot.

The aspiration of the Jew is to be able to sing all of those songs simultaneously, though it is very hard to do. But it is our aspirations.

Lost and found – an idea that we Jews could offer America during election season.

The utter impoverishment of public discourse. The rejected Romney campaign, in which Obama's middle name was highlighted; and in which Jeremiah Wright was going to be resurrected. The ad campaign proposal begins with a problem for Republicans: Voters "still aren't ready to hate this president."

Hate?!? It is not enough that we defeat this president. We must hate him.

Shnayim Ochzin

For thirty years, I have been searching for the text that truly and totally sums up Judaism's attitude towards the world. Please understand what I don't mean; I don't mean the text that truly and totally sums up Judaism. I mean something different and maybe something deeper. I have been searching for the Jewish text that totally describes how Jews think about life and about truth.

I believe that I have found it. Now here comes the warning. If you were somehow expecting something earth shattering, something glistening, something on fire like the bush that Moses discovers in the desert – I am sorry to disappoint you. No, in fact, my luminous text is a little tidbit from Jewish law. On its surface, it is small and petty. But that is only on its surface. It is actually very big. I think that it might be the biggest Jewish idea of them all.

This teaching comes from the Mishnah, the great Jewish law code that was compiled in the second century of the Common Era. It is from the section of the Mishnah called Baba Metzia, which does not mean my grandmother is a bargain. Rather, Baba Metzia is the section of the Mishnah and the Talmud that deals with issues of ownership and the laws of lost property – those very small drops of paint in the great impressionist painting which we call Judaism.

Here it is.

Shnayim ochzin b'tallit. Two people are holding onto a garment, a tallit. One says: I found it. And the other one says: I found it. One says: All of it is mine. And the other one says: All of it is mine. One shall swear that he does not own less than half of it, and the other one shall swear that he does not own less than half of it, and then, they shall divide it.

Yes, it might even be all yours. And you might have even found it first. But more important than “mine” is the fact that we can live together in this universe – and therefore, the mishnah says that we must divide it. Yachlok.

The ability to compromise and to deal with complexity. We believe that at the core, no single idea can exhaust authenticity. No single idea can be the total truth. This is not the same as relativism, which says that everyone has a truth and therefore nothing is really true. No – this means that I have a piece of the truth. It means that there might be more than one truth.

Naphtali of Ropschitz once dreamed that when he was still in utero, an angel came and showed him two tablets that contained all the rules for behavior, each one derived from a classical Jewish source. On one: If a man wishes to make the Torah his own he must be as cruel to his family as the raven is to its young. On the other: A man must care for his family beyond his strength and love and respect his wife more than himself. On one: A scholar should burn with the fires of righteous indignation. On the other: That the hereafter is guaranteed by being meek and humble. On one: Be cunning in God's service. On the other: Be simple hearted before God. On one: A man should be satisfied with a bare minimum, like Hanina ben Dosa who survived on beans. On the other: A man will be called upon to render an account for every legitimate pleasure that he denied himself. The Rabbi said that his soul was profoundly disturbed by the fact that when he came to earth he would have to fulfill both lists. How could he possibly reconcile them? But as he was pondering this question, he suddenly heard the words: A child is born! Ever since, he has been pre-occupied by this question.

**The secret of Judaism is to realize that Judaism is not either/or. It is both/and.**

Let me explain to you precisely what I mean by that.

Let's start with just some basic Jewish questions about how Judaism views the world. Is Judaism this-world oriented, or is it focused on the World to Come? Certainly, it is fair to say that biblical Judaism focuses on this world, and yet the rabbis were fascinated by the potential of eternity. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

Is Judaism particularistic in its focus – mostly concerned with this particular people, this Jewish people? Or is it more broadly universalistic? Does it care about the larger world? In the Haggadah, there is a famous passage in which we curse the nations who came against us to persecute us. But the Haggadah also has a blessing for those nations who helped us as well. Once again, it's not either/or, it's both/and.

Let us ask the same question about God. Is God avinu or malcheinu, intimate, loving parent or distant, demanding monarch? Is God dayan emet, the true judge, or harachaman, the compassionate/womblike one? The ancient rabbis said that God is like a statue that we can perceive from many different directions, and each time we can perceive something else. Tomorrow morning, when we read and confront the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, we will confront the question: Did God command Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, or tell him not to? Once again, and again and again: it's not either/or, it's both/and.

Let's consider some of the great issues of our time, and the way that Judaism responds to them. Is Judaism in favor of capital punishment, or is it opposed to capital

punishment? At the risk of greatly simplifying a very difficult topic, it is safe to say that biblical Judaism tended to be in favor of capital punishment, but that the rabbinic tradition is opposed to capital punishment – largely because Jews were so often its unjust victims. So, the answer is not either/or; it is both/and.

Let me push it a little further. Do Jews have ultimate rights to the land of Israel, or do Palestinians, as well, have rights to the Land? At the risk of simplifying a very complex issue, it is fair to say that we will find peace when both peoples can say: It's not either/or. It's both/and.

And, of course, the great question that confronts us during this precise season in the American calendar: does Judaism point us towards being liberal, or towards being conservative? The great either/or! But let us not succumb to the seduction of certainty. On some issues, we might say that Judaism embodies, or even predicts, a liberal social spirit. On others, we might say that Judaism embodies, or even predicts, a conservative social code. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

The true intellectual father of either/or-thinking was the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. He so much believed in either/or thinking that he actually composed an ode to it:

Either/or is the word at which the folding doors fly  
open and the ideals appear—Oh, blessed sight!  
Either/or is the pass which admits to the absolute,  
God be praised. Yes, either/or is the key to heaven ...  
both/and is the key to hell.

But no, in fact, it is not both/and that is the key to hell. In our time, either/or has been the key to hell. Why is either/or thinking so seductive? Why does it seem that contemporary religious life – whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim – is so enamored of either/or thinking? Keep all the mitzvot or why bother doing any. You can only have a full Jewish life in Israel. Jesus is the only way to salvation. There is dar al-salaam, the realm of Islam, or there is dar al-harb, the realm of the sword.

Because there is a piece of us that craves absolute certainty. No weasling allowed. Banish forever from your vocabulary words like “however,” or “but” or “on the other hand.” What's the worst thing we can say about a politician? That he or she waffles. That he or she changes her mind. That he or she blinks. As if the complexities of the contemporary geo-political situation should breed within us, first and foremost, absolute certainty.

But this is precisely what we as Jews can bring to our national conversations – on so many issues – conversations that are all too often shrill which work over time at utter discounting other voices. Judaism is obsessed with the other voice, with the second opinion, with the struggle between tradition and modernity, between the old and the novel, between the text and the commentary on the text.

I once took a Christian colleague into a yeshiva. He watched and listened for a few moments, watching the students arguing with each other and pounding on their volumes of Talmud. As we left, he turned to me and said: “You know, I never realized something about Judaism. You have a very noisy religion!”

Ours is a very noisy religion. Just take a look at a page of Talmud. It's a very noisy page, with differing opinions and arguments. Take a look at a page of the rabbinic bible – and you will see the biblical text in the center of the page, and it is surrounded by commentators who lived within hundreds of years of each other, in different places, with different world views – and the opinions are all there.

There is that wonderful teaching that says that a rabbi could not find admittance to the ancient Sanhedrin unless he could find forty-nine ways of ruling something kosher...and then another forty-nine ways of ruling it treif. There is that wonderful teaching that says that certain questions of halacha are *teyku* – questions that only Elijah will be able to resolve when he announces the coming of the Messiah. It's as if there's a halachic hold button that has been flashing for centuries.

And why does it have to be Elijah who will come to give the final answers to our deepest questions? After all, when the Messiah comes, all the dead will be resurrected (this, too, is a controversial question). If all the dead are going to be resurrected, then why not just wait around for Moses to answer all those questions? Isn't he the greatest rabbi of all time?

Well, yes and no, said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. Moses was good, but after his death he lived only in the nether world, only in the heavens. The difference between Moses and Elijah was that Elijah actually never stopped walking the earth – and therefore, his final decisions will not be those of heaven, but those that emerged out of his own confrontation with the lived realities of human beings.

Judaism loves ambiguity. I have always loved this Hasidic teaching about what to do about, well, lascivious thoughts during prayer – which you will not be surprised to learn, was a unique interest of Hasidism. There is a teaching that says that if a sage tells you that he has the answer to the problem of what to do with inappropriate thoughts during prayer, then he is not a sage. For some things there are simply no good answers.

Let me be absolutely clear. Judaism doesn't believe that anything goes. Judaism has absolute certainty about many things: about moral integrity, about the call of conscience, about the utter rejection of idolatry, about the utter affirmation of life and hope and purpose, about the need to live a life filled with the possibility of holiness. But the artistry of Jewish living is, in fact, in the grappling with the grey areas of life.

I am going to tell you who my greatest teacher was in this regard. It was my father. For most of his life, my father was a professional photographer. He got his start doing aerial photography in India during World War Two, and then he worked for the newspapers, where he photographed both plane crashes and famous politicians. From there he went into commercial photography, shooting photos for catalogues and advertisements. His studio and his darkroom were in the basement of our house, and I can still smell the chemicals, and I will always remember coming home from school and finding him in the darkroom, and I would knock on the door, and he would say, "Come in, quickly!" We

would have conversations, all too often about my less-than-stellar academic career in high school, as I would watch the glowing second hand on the clock, which would be the only piece of light in that room.

My father had a very particular aesthetic sense. He reminded me that all the great photographers, whether Alfred Eisenstaedt or Walker Evans or Diane Arbus -- had one important thing in common: they all worked in black and white. That was my father's preferred way of doing his work as well. My father believed that anyone could photograph a sunset or autumn in New England and have it look great. That was no challenge, because nature supplied the colors. My father believed that too much color could beguile the eye. He believed that the true art emerged from the subtle interplay of black and white, of light and shadows. In this he never realized that he was teaching me the most powerful lessons of life imaginable: That the true art of life comes from the shadows, from the contrasts between light and darkness, in the countless gray areas of existence, in what we call in Hebrew the *beyn ha-arbayim*, the dusk moments of life. And it was not lost on me that my father's trade taught him to spend countless hours in the darkroom, with only the pale suggestions of lights, in order to create. So, too, he taught me: That much of life is spent in the darkness. And if you labor with love in the darkness, you can create beauty.

I am engaging in this act of memory because we have been talking about going from either/or to both/and – and why it is important for us as Jews to do this. But it is also crucial for us as human beings to do this as well – and not just with lofty theological issues, but in the way that we live our lives, and in the way that we imagine our lives.

I believe that one of the most redemptive things that we Jews can offer America during this election season is a new mitzvah: Find someone who intends to vote totally differently from you and open a dialogue. Tell me what you believe and why you believe it.

The oldest inscription in Jerusalem is the one found at Hezekiah's tunnel south of the temple mount. It is now in the Museum of the Ancient Orient in Istanbul. Goes back to seventh century BCE.

*And this is the way that the tunnel was cut through: Each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, there was heard the sound of a man calling to his fellow, and there was an overlap in the rock on the right and on the left. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed the rock, each man toward his fellow, axe against axe, and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1200 cubits.....*

Cutting through the rock in the tunnel that divides us.

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

*by Yehuda Amichai*

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 יצמכו 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.