

Home

Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick
 Temple Beth Am, Seattle WA
 Yom Kippur 5782/September 2021

I begin with a story:

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, we lived in a garden, a home where our every need was met. There was lush greenery all around, with plants of all kinds to satisfy us. At the center was a magnificent tree whose leaves offered cool shade, whose flowers released a sweet perfume, and whose beauty was captivating. We were allowed to partake in every pleasure from the tree except its fruit. Still, we picked the fruit and tasted its sublime flesh. With that bite, our senses awakened, and we felt our own power pulse through us. We understood our heights and our depths and (to our astonishment) our limits.

Also with that bite, we were driven out into a harsh desert which required our labor to tame. We were lost. Trekking through the arid terrain, we ached to return to the verdant garden we'd left behind. Here, in the desert wilderness, there was so much to fear, so many unknown threats. Weary from our journey, we yearned for home and could not imagine what might lie ahead.

The desert is spacious, though, silent, and open. In the emptiness of the earth and sky, there is stillness all around. The landscape is so vast that a voice can echo across its canyons, calling, calling. Abraham heard the voice. Sarah too. Generations later Moses, and Miriam, and our ancestors did too. And today, on Yom Kippur, if we listen carefully, we hear it too.

*Atem nitzavim hayom*¹, we stand here today, all of us, to hear a voice:

Calling us to *teshuvah*, arising to our highest selves.

Calling us to *tefilah*, speaking the language of hope.

Calling us to *tzedakah*, establishing justice in our world.

I've told this story before on the High Holy Days but this year my version is different.

This year—you might have heard—we're in the middle of a global pandemic. This year, *everything* is different.

¹ Deuteronomy, 29:9

In ordinary times, I believe most of us leave Yom Kippur services with the best intentions to repair what is broken. Yet in the weeks that follow, we get swept away in the bustle of everyday, and we drift from the promises we make on Yom Kippur. The power of this day floats from our consciousness as we search for our keys, or juggle the grocery bags, or draft another email. We return to old habits of heart and mind. Some of us are selfish. Others, self-loathing. Some fear taking risks. And others are too impulsive for our own good. Some of us numb ourselves with intoxicants of all kinds. Some are filled with apathy, or rage, or envy, or the compulsion to criticize others. Meanwhile, the earth continues its orbit around the sun and months pass, and Yom Kippur arrives once again to remind us of who we are and what we value most.

This year is different though, because we've spent the last 18 months in a heightened Yom Kippur consciousness. Throughout the pandemic, we have been laser focused on serious questions of life and death, with little else to distract us. As we reorganize our lives in the wake of Covid 19, we continually assess our choices: Do they promote health? Are they life-affirming? Meaningful? Enduring? These questions we've asked in response to Covid are also the questions we ask on Yom Kippur.

And the answer is always the same. In the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "For here there is no place/that does not see you./You must change your life."²

We must change our lives. *Hayom*. Today. Now.

We are all those first humans coming out of the garden. We are all shaped by our origins. Wherever we were raised, whether we were coddled or neglected, and whenever we were raised, whatever generation we were born into, each of us emerges out of the garden of our youth, the place that forms us, imprinting its values and lessons on us. Inevitably, there will be moments afterward, when we are lost, alone, looking backward, nostalgic for anything familiar, in search of shelter and companionship. Most of us have felt this at some point in our adult lives, this sense of exile. There's no escaping it. It's part of the human condition.

And yet...what I realize from this side of the pandemic, what I want to share with you on this Yom Kippur like no other, is that the garden was never intended to be our only home, just our *first* home.

Even when we were cast out, even then, the wilderness was a *starting* point; a place to begin. *Atem nitzavim hayom*, we stand here today, on Yom Kippur, to remind ourselves that however lonely we are, however guilty we are, however filled with shame or doubt or anger we are, we are not alone in a barren wasteland. The universe, despite what may have transpired in the last year, is not silent or arbitrary; we are not condemned to a life of ceaseless wandering.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaic Torso of Apollo*

Today we affirm that even in our most desperate moments—especially in our most desperate moments—Judaism teaches that we need not despair.

If we slow down enough, get quiet enough, we can hear the voice that our ancestors heard, echoing across time and space. We can hear the call to go forth to a place of promise. Strengthened by the presence of others who join us on that quest, we will create a new home there, a home built on sacred obligations and covenantal love. And, the voice declares, this home we will create is not far off, not in heaven or across the sea. It's right here, inside us, in our hearts and our mouths.³ It's right here between us, in the space where you and I meet, where we celebrate being bound together by a Source greater than ourselves.

This Yom Kippur *is* different. The year ahead *can* be that place of promise. We *can* build a new home for ourselves, our community, and our world. The pandemic has shown us that we *must*. We must change our lives. *Hayom*. Today. Now.

In ordinary times, it is easy to ignore the call for change, abandoning our Yom Kippur consciousness as the year unfolds. The 20th century Hasidic master Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky, who moved from Belarus to Tel Aviv on the eve of another global cataclysm, World War II, understands why. Berezovsky understands that the work of *teshuvah*, of transformation, is painstakingly hard. He teaches that it is easier to tinker here and there rather than make wholesale changes in our lives.

"The task of a person," Berezovsky writes, "is like that of a person who is building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble. [If we only make minor repairs] the house remains perpetually in danger of collapse...None of these minor repairs will solve the problem until we have the courage to destroy the whole structure of the house; then, we can dig deep and strong foundations. On top of those new foundations, [a person] can build and establish a strong house."⁴

While Berezovsky's image of a collapsed house is shocking, it is also accurate. The urgency of the pandemic has ripped out everything from under us, shaking the foundation on which we stand, and weakening the societal structures around us. Every individual, every industry, every institution (including, by the way, the synagogue) has been impacted by the pandemic. Over the last 18 months, the whole human family has lived with a Yom Kippur consciousness. We have awakened to our own mortality, and to the necessity of community connections, and to the sin of systemic inequities of society.

Berezovsky's teaching has come to pass: There is no time to waste with tinkering about with minor repairs. The home we once inhabited has crumbled. We cannot go backward. We can only go forward. We must change our lives.

³ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁴ Held, Shai. *The Heart of Torah*, Volume 2: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Jewish Publication Society. Kindle Edition.

Atem nitzavim hayom, we stand here today, all of us, to hear a voice that echoes across time and space, calling to us, beckoning us home. Only, this will not be a homecoming, a return, because this home has never existed before. It will be the *creation* of home.⁵ This is the message of this Yom Kippur unlike any other. We *can* change our lives. And if we do, a place of promise awaits us.

Our High Holy Day prayer book has identified three steps to changing our lives, the foundation stones for our new home: *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*⁶—often translated as repentance, prayer and charity; perhaps more accurately described as arising to our highest selves, speaking the language of hope, and establishing justice among all people. These will provide a sturdy base upon which we can build anew.

Let us respond to the call of this day by learning to be at home within ourselves, caring for our bodies and souls, taking pleasure in this world, repairing broken relationships. Now is the time to change our habits, reach out to loved ones from whom we are estranged, focus on what we truly value. Today we hear the call for *teshuvah*, arising to our highest selves.

Let us respond to the call that reminds us we are not alone. Now is the time to build meaningful connections with each other. Together, let us have the audacity to believe we can create a Jewish home here at Temple Beth Am that has never existed before, one where we can meet the existential and moral challenges of the decades ahead. Even in our diversity, it will be a place where everyone can find shelter, a home where we come to nurture our souls, strengthen our hearts, and feed our minds. Today we hear the call for *tefilah*, speaking the language of hope.

And, in our congregation and beyond, let us respond to the call that urges us to clear away the remnants of old societal structures that have upheld systems of injustice. Beyond the walls of Temple Beth Am, it is time to rectify inequities, creating a safer, more righteous home in our city and our nation for all our citizens, especially those who have been relegated to the margins. Building this home will require honesty and sacrifice; it's not incumbent upon us to complete this work, but neither are we free to desist from it.⁷ We engage in this work as an act of *teshuvah* and as a promissory note to future generations. Today we hear the call for *tzedakah*, establishing justice among all people.

On this Yom Kippur unlike any other, we know there is no time to waste.

The Covid 19 pandemic has shown us that we can no longer tinker around the edges. No matter how lost we feel, we must journey together toward a future filled with promise.

⁵ adapted from Miller, Alice. *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, p. 19. Basic Books. Kindle Edition.

⁶ From the *Unatana Tokef* prayer.

⁷ *Pirkei Avot*, 3:16

*Atem nitzavim hayom*⁸, we stand here today, all of us, ready to lay down the foundation stones for the building of a new home within ourselves, with others, and in our world.

We cannot go backward.

We can only go forward.

As the poet says:

For here there is no place that does not see you.

You must change your life.

⁸ Deuteronomy, 29:9