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Season of *Teshuvah*: Creating a Spiritual Community

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Shanah tovah! While I know that I still haven't learned many of your names—despite having been told two, three or perhaps more times—as I look around the room tonight I see many individuals I've come to know over this past year. We've met in this sanctuary, in my office discussing bar or bat mitzvah and other joyous and sad occasions in your lives, at Torah study, Kee Tov family night, nursery school Shabbat, religious school and at other activities of our congregation and in the community. I remain grateful daily for the sacred honor of being called to lead this congregation and I look forward to getting to know — and deepening my relationship with— each one of you in this New Year and in the years ahead.

In the synagogue where I grew up, there was always a special reading for the High Holidays that began, “Now is the time for turning.” It is by Rabbi Jack Riemer. Some of you may recognize it:

Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.

For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again, and this is always painful. It means saying, 'I am sorry.' It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways. Help us to turn from callousness to sensitivity; from hostility to love; from pettiness to purpose; from envy to contentment; from carelessness to discipline; from fear to faith.

Turn us around, oh, God, and bring us back toward you. Revive our lives as at the beginning, and turn us toward each other, for in isolation, there is no life.

This is indeed the season of turning...it's been a month of back to school nights and returning to fall projects, and, although it has been hard to ignore it for the last eighteen months, reportedly we are now *really* turning our attention to this important election...As the passage I quoted teaches, in the natural world it is indeed a time of turning. But, I must say, for most people who live in a Mediterranean climate, I don't think, in fact, that “the leaves are beginning

to turn from green to red to orange.” Let’s admit it, mostly, they’ve been brown for a while. This vision of the High Holidays is just so...New England-centric...

OK, I have to admit my prejudices—I was born in Oakland and, except for a few miserable years in grad school, have spent my life in California. I began to work on these remarks in late summer when I was at Tassajara, in the dry chaparral inland from Big Sur. While there, I read a wonderful book about the chaparral eco-system which explained that, in most of California, there really are just two seasons—spring and drought. Before the rains come, there is a long period of dormancy—when that which is not essential fades away; when energy is stored up for future growth; when there is contraction before expansion.

I have come to recognize that the dormancy, and sometimes even the drought of our California weather can serve, too, as tokens of this season of *teshuvah*. Increased awareness and renewed commitment often follow periods of quietude and, yes, dormancy; when rain does come, after a period of dryness, we are caught off guard by the sudden burst of new growth and color. When we are in a personal dry period or drought or grief, the color and vibrancy we once beheld sometimes seem all but unimaginable, and yet, for most of us, it does return.

Some of you have come from other climate zones and have told me how you miss the contrast and changes of the seasons that mark the course of the year there. The passage I read about the leaves turning colors and the birds migrating reminds you of how “things are supposed to be”—and this is not unreasonable, for so often “what we are used to” does become “the way it is supposed to be.”

One of the ways we manage the prospect of the new is by taking comfort in the old and the familiar. Even as we gather here for this New Year, preparing to let go of the past which has held us down, and to move on into the new, we come to this place eagerly anticipating our reconnection with so much that is old and familiar. But, for anyone who has been present at Beth El longer than I have—so much is new and different.

Many of you remember the pew where you sat in the sanctuary at Arch & Vine, but perhaps haven’t yet quite established a tradition of where your family sits in this sanctuary. You look around tonight: The rabbi is different, the cantor is new, the prayer book is unfamiliar; despite our best efforts, many of the songs are either new or just not being done the way you remember them... Scanning the room, people who used to be part of our community are no longer present...some have moved in different directions but others have died...We lovingly recall our members, Bob Forster, Isaac Pirnazar, Maggie Sontag, and Ernie Alexander, along with grandparents, parents, siblings, children and friends whose beloved presence we recall, but whose absence, this year, is even more vivid.

Despite these many changes... we come to these High Holidays, open our books to find the same words and many familiar melodies, hallowed and cherished over the generations. Our God, the Holy One, blessed be, has not changed, and is still awaiting us and summoning us closer. Even our world—despite all the ways that it has changed—is the same world.

What about you?

Are you the same, or are you different?

Each Shabbat in our sanctuary we ask: what was your week like? Where were you when the week began the previous Sunday—can you remember?

Where were you last Rosh Hashanah? Where have you been this past year? In what ways are you the same, and in what ways have you changed? What was on your spiritual and personal agenda last Rosh Hashanah, and what is this year?

This synagogue, this congregation, is called Beth El, the House of God. The name, Beth El, comes from a story in the Book of Genesis. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, Abraham and Sarah's grandson, flees the wrath of his angry brother and father and sets out on a journey. He unexpectedly stumbles on what he thinks is a random patch of ground in the wilderness and, in the course of the night, has a spiritual awakening. In the morning, he wakes up and declares: *Ha-Elohim ba-makom ha-zeh V'anochi lo yadati...* Surely God is in this place and I did not know it! So he called the name of the place Beth El, the house of God.

In 1944, eight families gathered together in Bob Fischer's living room and founded Congregation Beth El. Their first part-time rabbi was Rabbi Joseph Gittin, who was then the Hillel director at Cal. The following year, Rabbi Gittin helped start the Sisterhood, today called the Women of Beth El, charging its members with organizing the Religious School and "encouraging their husbands to attend Shabbat services regularly."

For sixty-five years, Beth El has been a place of gathering. Three generations of families have marked their most important occasions here. This year we are celebrating the 40th summer of that Camp Kee Tov *ruach*; our congregation is justifiably proud of its long commitment to education, both in our own Religious school, Nursery School and Midrasha programs, and in the community; in 1968, Beth El members were in the forefront of efforts to become the first city to voluntarily integrate its public schools, and in 1979, Beth El families were the founders of Tehiyah Day School and have been part of its leadership ever since. Beth El has been and continues to be a place where the commitment to social justice and advocacy are at the core of who we are and what we do; this year, I hope you will consider volunteering at our monthly homeless meal, at the YEAH Homeless Youth Shelter, attending our upcoming phone bank against Proposition 8, and taking part in other projects of our social action committee. I could go on... there is so much to be proud of and, yes, plenty waiting for us to do...

Still, as so many of you have told me, there also has felt like something is missing. For many people who have part of this congregation over the years, the story about Beth El has been more on the lines: "God is in this place? I certainly didn't know! Frankly, I had no idea. Rabbi, are you sure?"

The language of Jewish spirituality does not come easily to many American Jews. Some of us come from generations of German Jews who were firmly Jewish but for whom talking about faith was not in their repertoire; others of us grew up in leftist, Israeli or secular families where Jewish identity was strong, but religious practice and language were uncommon or even scorned. Others of us grew up in non-Jewish homes.

For early generations of immigrants, the synagogue was the place, in a new and very foreign land, where they didn't stand out as different, but instead could just fit in. For almost all

groups, religious community is the immigrant generation's clubhouse. For their children—which is to say, ourselves and our parents—the synagogue was the place to hang with “our people,” just as Bnai Brith was founded to provide a place to go for those who couldn't join the Masons or the Elks. They had the DAR and the Garden Club, we had Hadassah. As historian David Kaufman explained in his history of American Jewish synagogue-centers, *The Shul with the Pool*, for most American Jews over the last century, the synagogue was a place to belong, to send their children, connect with heritage and history.

Now, I want to honor that heritage. In our ever busier and more privatized lives, community, connection, and history are more important than ever. Many of you are here, in significant part, because you yearn to be part of a community that provides meaningful connections now and will endure for generations to come. Some of you have only come to Judaism and to the synagogue as adults; whether your family of origin was Jewish or not, you are now on a personal spiritual journey and you are seeking a community of fellow travelers on your Jewish path. Regardless of how you came to be here this evening, I invite you to join me now in imagining what this synagogue would be if we were to fully become—in addition to a gathering place, a school, a summer camp, the place we celebrate our most joyous occasions—what would it mean to fully realize our mission as a Jewish spiritual community? A place where each of us, and anyone who walks in the door, regardless of where they might be on the theological continuum, could affirm that “God's presence is in this place”?

What would be the same? What might be different? What changes in our culture would be required? How do we transform who we are and what we do, so that our synagogue becomes a place where the presence of God is disclosed?

Rashi, the preeminent medieval Jewish Bible commentator, asked, “What does Jacob mean when he says, ‘God was in this place and I did not know’? What would be different?” Rashi, who lived in France in the 12th century, answers: “You know, if I had known this was such a sacred place, I never would have gone to sleep!” Rashi invites us to wake up. In Jewish spiritual imagery, prayer is often an act of waking up. The beginning of a Jewish spiritual community is wakefulness—a shared awareness of awe and wonder, an openness to the transcendent, to the presence of the sacred.

Some years ago, in her show, “The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe,” Lily Tomlin channeled a bag lady named Trudy on the streets of New York:

On our way, we stopped to look at the stars. And as usual, I felt in awe. And then I felt even deeper in awe at this capacity we have to be in awe about something. Then I became even more awestruck at the thought that I was, in some small way, a part of that which I was in awe about. And this feeling went on and on and on...my [friends] had a word for it: ‘Awe infinitum.’

Suddenly I burst into song: “Awe...sweet mystery of life at last I've found thee,” and I felt so good inside and my heart felt so full, I decided I would set time aside each day to do awe-robics.¹

Waking up to the awe, naming and celebrating it – this is at the heart of a Jewish spiritual practice. *Ha-elohim ba-makom ha-zeh!* God is in this place! Naming our experience of the transcendent, recognizing that we are connected to and part of that which is beyond our capacity for language, beyond our lifetime, beyond our capacity to fully grasp – that which cannot be bounded by language— this is what Jews call prayer. Prayer is the invitation to, and the experience of, waking up to wonder. It is the awareness of what we find; it is gratitude and awe-robics. The modern Jewish prophet Abraham Joshua Heschel taught:

We may doubt anything, except that we are struck with amazement. When in doubt, we raise questions; when in wonder, we do not even know how to ask a question. Doubts may be resolved, radical amazement can never be erased. There is no answer in the world to [our] radical wonder. Under the running sea of our theories and scientific explanations lies the aboriginal abyss of radical amazement.

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious person's attitude toward history and nature. . . . She knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; she is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate her sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. . . .²

Sometimes at our Shabbat services, I get overwhelmed by the words on the page, and I turn to the congregation and say, Let's compose a new prayer right now: Tell me, what you have you seen? What have you noticed? What has given you cause for wonder? I will confess...sometimes I'm a little disappointed about how few people respond. Are we too polite to share excitement about the miraculous that we encounter in each moment each day? Perhaps, sometimes, we are too busy to notice? Our rabbis taught: Prayer begins with life itself, for the first and every subsequent breath is a moment of prayer.

The sound of the shofar, according to Maimonides, cries out, "Wake up, you sleepers," summoning us to greater awareness and reflection.³ So I invite you this evening, as the first stop on our exploration of how we can become a deeper and more fully realized Jewish spiritual community, to open yourselves to prayer. Some of you, I know, are uncomfortable with that suggestion. I challenge you to spend some time during the course of these holidays with the poems and silent prayers, with the newly revised questions in the Amidah, with yourself and without your Blackberry – and to open yourself to wonder and waking up, reaching out and reaching in.

In his book, *God Was In This Place & I, I Did Not Know*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner reflects on how ten different Jewish commentators understood the verse about Jacob's dream.⁴ According to Rabbi Kushner, Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch read our verse as: "God was in this place because "I" got out of the way – my 'I,' I did not know."⁵ Dov Baer, one of the first disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov in the late 18th century, taught that our self-consciousness can often be a barrier to our spiritual awakening. I want to be careful here. We place a lot of value on self-awareness, on being in touch with our feelings and our needs, and learning to express them and ask for what we want. We already learned from Rashi that spiritual awareness is about waking, not sleeping. So it is not the negation of the self that is called for; rather, I would suggest

that the “I” which gets in the way is the I of excessive self-conscious, unwarranted self-criticism and the fear of others’ judgment.

Rabbi Mikhal of Zlotchov explained the verse in Deuteronomy chapter 5: “*Anochi omed ben Adonai u’veynechem*— I stand between Adonai and You” in a wonderful, creative midrashic rereading of the verse: the critical, self-conscious, self-censoring and restraining “I” gets in the way between God and the self.⁶

How many of you have told me: I would like to come to Torah study, I would enjoy participating in the services, I would like to be more connected, or there are other things in my life I am waiting to do—but I don’t know enough, I am embarrassed about this or that, I am not ready yet. Do you still your voice, because you don’t want to let other people hear you sing? Do you hold back from speaking your own truth for fear of embarrassment or criticism? This is the ‘I’ that keeps us from God. We say at the end of the v’ahavta at every service, “*Adonai Eloheichem emet*” – The Eternal our God is “truth” – and by speaking and living our authentic truth do we become the vessels of and experience the reality of God.

What would be different in our lives, and in our lives here at Beth El, if we sometimes stilled the inner chatter and opened ourselves to the truth of the moment? Might these services be different if we made room for each of us to let out all of our deepest prayers – our laughter and our tears, our joy and our pain? For two thousand years, our people have brought their most heartfelt prayers to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Here, in our sanctuary, behind me in the back wall of the *bimah*, is our companion prayer wall; it has a small opening at the top. I invite you, during the course of these holidays, to write down your prayer and slip it in. The opening is small, it is hidden, it is private; this is a path to prayer and to God.

What would be different in how we interact with one another if we spoke to each other from a similar place of truth and openness? Martin Buber taught that the route to the knowledge of God is when we meet the other in authentic dialogue. He called this meeting the I-Thou—me and you.⁷ We have all experienced the I-Thou. Let me tell you about the time I went to the theater to see a movie. Well, we were a little late, and the only seats were down on the front and there was a big green EXIT sign right there. I said to myself: I’m going to be miserable throughout the movie with this sign there and then the previews started and I was so right...and then all of a sudden the movie was over and I saw the sign again...but for two hours my field of vision had been filled by the movie.

When have you gotten so engrossed in an activity that you have “lost track of time”? Because you were fully present and engaged? Now, when has that happened in your relationships with people? When has another person so filled your vision that the moment and in the encounter fully engaged you? For Buber, the first part of the I-Thou is being present; but it is realized when we recognize and honor the whole of the other with whom we are in dialogue. That happens when we stop trying to analyze, or beginning to frame our response, or dismiss them because, you know, “I know this person.” In the I-Thou conversation, we are open, responsive and present to who the other is as a whole individual, not reducing our dialogue-partner to a type or a role or a set of expectations. It is of such true dialogue and meaningful encounter that the Talmud says, “When two people speak words of Torah between them, the Shekhinah is present.”⁸

What gets in the way of such sacred conversation? Surely it is the multi-tasking “I,” the judgmental “I,” the “I” who already knows and therefore cannot truly listen: Said Rabbi Mikhal: “*Anochi omed ben Adonai u'veynechem*: my ‘I’ got in the way between an experience of the divine in true meeting.”

So this is my vision, my dream, my goal for our community: that Beth El becomes a place of the true I-Thou meeting on every axis: that this sanctuary be a place of authentic prayer, of the opening of the heart and the soul, in which we reach—whether stretching upward or deep within, where, as individuals and as a collective, we seek to discern our deepest truths and speak our prayers with the greatest sincerity; while on the horizontal plane, our meetings with one another are of a quality and an honesty that truly make the Shechinah present; that we can leave this place and say, “The sacred was here and I surely did know it.”

There are many different routes by which we can experience the reality of God’s presence at Beth El. On Yom Kippur, the prophet Isaiah will caution us in very strong words against any private or communal spiritual practice that is not equally engaged with social justice. With the help of the Union for Reform Judaism’s Just Congregations initiative, we are learning about how can build a “Congregation-based community organizing” process to build deeper relationships among our own members and with other congregations affiliated with BOCA, Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action, across lines of faith, class, and race. Through building these relationships, we can identify deeply and broadly held concerns about injustice and then bring our collective power towards successful and transformative action. I hope that we will be able to report on our progress on furthering our mission as a community committed to justice activism as this New Year unfolds.

Studying and wrestling with Torah, in all its richness and dimensions, has been for more than 2,500 years a core Jewish spiritual practice; I had two recent experiences that illustrated what how we might engage in Torah study as a part of our becoming a spiritual community. Just last week, I was invited to speak to the Men’s Club of Beth El. While my prepared talk was uneventful, the much more powerful part of the evening was an unplanned dialogue about our identities; we only began our conversation but it seemed clear to me that there is a both a thirst for the reflection and engagement that took place and a call for us as a community to create forums where the most important questions and issues that shape who we are and how we live our lives can be respectfully and substantively engaged. On Tuesdays, I teach our bar/bat mitzvah students; I am honored to have 36 of them this year. As part of our class, we have a Shofar circle; during the Shofar circle, only one person speaks and we practice respectful listening. In our first such conversation together last week, I was deeply moved listening to our young people asking, speaking and respectfully responding in their own dialogue about profound spiritual issues. At another time, I will return to address how both activism and Torah study can be places where our spiritual community is lived and deepened.

For this evening, I want to conclude with one more invitation to how we might nurture spiritual community here at Beth El.

The *leitwort*, the theme word, of the High Holiday season is “teshuvah.” In her poem, “Change,” in your *mahzor*, poet Ellen Bass contrasts the inner turmoil of spiritual transformation with outward calm:

This is where I yank the old roots from my chest

*like the tomatoes we let grow until December, stalks
thick as saplings...*

Terror grips me like a virus

and I sweat, fevered,

trying to burn it out.

Teshuvah, the fearless and searching moral inventory that is at the heart of the spiritual practice of this season, is often a disruptive and disorienting experience, as we come to terms with how unbalanced we are...and struggle to get back into equilibrium, within ourselves and in our relationships with others. But, as Bass tells us, the world doesn't honor this experience:

This feat is so invisible. All you can see

is a woman going about her ordinary day,

drinking tea, taking herself to the movies,

reading in bed. If victorious

I will look exactly the same.

What would it mean for us, as a community, to take this season of teshuvah with greater commitment? The Mishnah teaches: "For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; but for transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until we have reconciled with the person." Whether in synagogue or in therapy, I've been trying for my adult life to find the courage to name my own truth, to speak out about my own hurts and those I have inflicted, and to re-covenant with others when trust has been lost or violated. As you know so well, it's rarely easy. What keeps me from having the conversation?

First, I have to say, it's so much more satisfying to be right and offended. I inevitably find—if we do have the honest, I-Thou conversation—that there is more to the situation than I imagined, and that your experience was not the same as mine. So my internal narrative about the offenses done to me itself requires *teshuvah*. But before we can get to an honest place of rebuilding trust and connection...well, I just know that you are incapable of actually hearing me; of being different than who you are; of taking this topic seriously; of listening without taking offense; I don't want to hurt you...so, let's not go there. Instead, I'll just hold on (and maybe replay it again and again in my head).

In my short tenure as your rabbi, I cannot tell you how much hurt, disappointment, and offense I have seen being hoarded and held by the members of this synagogue. Are you ready to give it up?

Teshuvah, repentance, spiritual turning, is necessary when the trust relationship between two people has been compromised in some fashion. When we have lost our readiness to trust, the covenant of intimacy, of friendship, of connection has been violated. And the process of *teshuvah*, then, is the re-establishment of relationship, the renewal of the covenant.

So my vision for our spiritual community here at Beth El is a place where our *teshuvah*, internal and interpersonal, is honored and respected. Let's be a place where, during this High Holiday season, the language and practice of *teshuvah* shapes the sensibility of our congregation. I ask you now to ask yourself: what do I need to do to make myself ready to welcome and listen to another's *teshuvah*? Can you move, if appropriate, from an armored and defensive place to a spiritual posture of openness and possibility? With whom do you wish to be reconciled in this year, and what first steps can you take?

Elohim ba-makom ha zeh v'anochi lo yadati – God is surely in this place! We have only begun to touch on the paths and places where we can encounter and we can bring the reality of the sacred to our lives and to our community. Writing about awakening to the transcendent, author Jack Kornfeld titled his book, *After the Ecstasy, The Laundry*. Ellen Bass wrote: This feat is so invisible.... If victorious, I will look exactly the same." The transformation about which we have spoken this evening is profound yet subtle; it is a call for change in posture, in attitude, in possibility – yet powerful enough to shape the character of our communal life. The Bible speaks of encountering the Shechinah in the intimate places of the heart, the heartfelt conversation, the quality of our live together:

*Behold, the Eternal passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Eternal; but the Eternal was not in the wind: and after the wind, an earthquake; but the Eternal was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Eternal was not in the fire: and after the fire...kol d'mama dakah – a still small voice.*⁹

¹ Jane Wagner, *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (New York : Harper & Row, 1986). Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig taught me this text.

² Adapted from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York : Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951), p. 13.

³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:4. "Wake up, wake up, you sleepers, wake up from your sleep! Sleepers, wake up from your napping and examine your deeds, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator!"

⁴ Kushner, Lawrence. *God Was in This Place & I, I Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning*. (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights, 1991).

⁵ Kushner, p. 83, cites Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, the Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) Kushner cites p. 107 but doesn't mention edition.

⁶ Kushner, p. 101, quotes Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, the Early Masters*. New York: Schocken books, 1973. (p. 149 but doesn't cite edition).

⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY : Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁸ Talmud, Berakhot 6a.

⁹ *I Kings 19: 11-12.*