

**Open Letters
To My Students:
A Collection**

(March 2020 – May 2022)

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In an Age of Pandemic—“Black Swans, Black Holes, and Why We Matter”

We are in the midst of a situation that Jewish tradition captures nicely as “ones.” Even though the transliteration looks like WUNS, it is, of course, pronounced OH-ness: a general term implying “force”—as being forced into a situation against our will. Most appallingly, the term denotes rape. Less appallingly, it is used legally to characterize a certain degree of liability. Suppose I let you use my home while I go on vacation. If you enjoy a candlelight dinner but accidentally set the house on fire, you are responsible. If a lightning bolt out of the blue burns down the house while you are out buying the candles, you are not. The cause of the latter misfortune is said to be ones: force majeure (in legalese), “an act of God” (the insurance companies say). The proper pronunciation is apt: OH-ness, as in “OMG: OH My God, how did this happen?”

Another term for the pandemic is “black swan,” a metaphor used humorously as early as 1694, when an anonymous work with the lengthy title, *Ladies Dictionary, Being a General Entertainment for the Fair Sex: a Work Never before Attempted in the English Language* gave as its example, “Husbands without faults (if such black Swans there be).” More seriously, it is used by economists to denote a totally unpredictable event that all the computer-generated algorithms in the world could not have foreseen. Black swans suck the stock market downward into dizzying depths—making financial black swans like the astrophysicist’s black holes: regions of space that absorb all light, leaving ever-growing blobs in space of deep dense darkness. That’s us, in the middle of the covid crisis: a black swan (Oh God, how did this happen?) and a black hole (so much darkness, when there used to be light).

Even black holes generate wisdom, however: in our case, how everything leads to everything else. When we close schools, children stay home; if children stay home, parents miss work to care for them; if they are poor, their income disappears. Alternatively, major league baseball can’t start on time, so the soft market of ushers, vendors, ticket sellers, kiosks, restaurants and bars close down, maybe go out of business altogether. You get the idea. “The head bone’s connected to the neck bone; the neck bone’s connected to the shoulder bone” and so on. Ezekiel got it right.

We Jews say kol yisrael arevim zeh vazeh, “All Jews are responsible for one another.” Actually, the humanity worldwide is responsible for one another. We are all intertwined, we children of Adam and Eve. Why did the Torah teach about Adam and Eve? In order to assign all humanity a single set of parents, the Rabbis say. We are all family, it turns out. One of the

reasons I chose to be specifically a Reform Jew was my admiration for classical Reform rabbis who insisted on this radical universalism. As the corona virus spreads, I pray for everyone (not just Jews), especially those who live on the margins of society and get routinely dropped off the real-life society page—left behind as historical footnotes that had to fend for themselves.

We also fear for ourselves, of course—at least, older people like me do. Early on, doctors warned me to avoid the gym, get groceries delivered, cut my own hair, attend no meetings—and I am one of the healthy ones. A woman I know is sick, maybe in the early stages of dying. Quite naturally, she asked to see her grandchildren. Should her daughter, the kids' mother, take the kids to see her? What if their parting gift to their grandmother turns out to be the virus which assures (if not also hastens) her demise?

“Family systems” we call it. “Do not separate from the community,” Hillel reminded us. We do have a special connection to our own family, but we are increasingly a single “family system,” a single community, from which we could not fully separate even if we wanted to!

So much for the macrocosm., How about the microcosm—you personally, I mean? Personally, how are each of you doing? Black swans do more than drive the stock market downward. They fray our emotions, uproot our certainties, drive our state of mind downward into ever deeper eddies of vertigo. Acrophobia is “fear of heights”; aquaphobia, “fear of water”; agoraphobia, “fear of open spaces”; and now, we have, ones-ophobia, “fear of black swans,” of things spinning out of control—the discovery that we are not actually in charge down here—in a word, ones.

Tradition lists a very specific case of ones, however. The state of being affected by ones is the Hebrew passive-participle form, anus. When Jacob is forced by the famine to go down to Egypt where Joseph guarantees food, he is said to be anus al pi hadibbur. “forced by the word of God.” It is as if, sometimes, the hand of God can be found even in a black swan—an “act of God,” in a sense, after all.

I do not mean to say that God causes suffering so that we can benefit in the end, or even that we may learn something useful as a consequence. God just doesn't work that way. But for those of us who will gratefully ride this swan to its bitter end, without ourselves or those we love getting hurt; for those of us who, thankfully, do not lose a job or have to wonder where the next month's rent will come from; for you, my rabbinic and cantorial students, you who are charged with learning Torah not just from texts on parchment and paper but also from the vagaries of real life—you will that the dibbur, the voice of God, can speak to us in the depths of swirling vertigo no less than on the peak of Mt. Sinai.

Like the rest of the world, I too read the mainstream media to get the news. But those sources alone can cripple us. They only exacerbate the feeling of helplessness, endlessly reiterating the inevitable constriction of the social noose around our lives. In such an environment, it is our job to tune into another source of wisdom, the one that will never make the papers, the wisdom of Jewish tradition that becomes ever more necessary when all else fails.

Highest on my “alternative-wisdom” list are basic values like truth, kindness, decency, and love, that we used to think were as American as apple pie, until we discovered that the apples in the pie were increasingly rotten. We need to say out loud, over and over, to everyone who

will listen, that truth is not relative, expedient, alternative and fabricated; that ethical and scientific certainties are not just so much quicksand. We need to blow the whistle on a national ethos and rhetoric that has swamped kindness under a tsunami of cruelty and meanness. We need to combat the situation where no one even expects decency anymore, least of all from those we elect, those with power; where, everywhere we look, love of others has come to mean others “who are like us,” just our own tribe.

The very heart of the monster is indeed tribalism, even as the very heart of the pandemic is the obvious demonstration that pathogens have no tribal map to instruct them where to go and who to spare: they are “equal opportunity deployers”; they spread their poison indiscriminately. Yes, there are enemies in the world; there is actual evil, God help us. But an enemy of Jews is an enemy to us all; evil toward others is evil toward Jews, sooner or later. America cannot stand alone: it too needs allies, friends, more outstretched hands—like the hand of God: *Atah noten yad laposhim* we say in that final moment of truth that arrives as each year’s Yom Kippur at N’ilah. *Poshim*, mind you, “sinners”—all the more so, the good guys. But sinners can be good guys just as good guys can be sinners. In viral crises, we no longer get to hold people’s hands; we can all be good guys, Godly even, if we reach across the mandated 6-foot personal boundary as God does: mutually extending hands to one and all.

For in the end, we are all merely mortal. We will never know it all. We are not in charge down here. We should not be surprised by surprises. But equally, we should not despair, for modern Judaism, anyway—Zionists who founded Israel, and, once again (for me, anyway) my Reform forebears who charged into the morass of medieval Jewish prejudice and did away with it—yes, modern Judaism, anyway, has taught us that we are actors in history, not just passive recipient sufferers of the random black swans that interrupt the way we thought the world worked.

I believe with all my heart that the uniquely placed “we” who is ourselves—we cantors and rabbis, that is—are not powerless. We have been charged with the task of reminding people that God breathed a soul into us all. As the rest of the world falls apart, as even our very bodies are at risk, we at least have the certainty of our God-given souls, the part of us that rallies to provide truth, kindness, decency and love; the part of us that is buried so deep within that it can reach nowhere else but out, out into the world where we are all children of the single God, in need of one another more than ever.

Take your enforced time at home not just for zoom calls; use it to rediscover your soul. When you’ve had enough of the saturating sadness that makes the daily headlines, just stop reading it. Replace it briefly with the prayer book or with Psalms, to find some single line of eternity that you never knew was there—sometimes, even, something familiar that had its eternity tarnished but that now leaps off the page with new-found urgency, fairly shouting at you, “Don’t you see? This is really true! It really matters! It can sustain you.” Sing it, if you can; melodies sink deeper, faster, into our being. Share it on those zoom calls before and after meetings. Be grateful for the opportunity to be a rabbi or cantor whose expertise is the eternal verities that we call Godly, and the human soul that intuits them.

Plagues and Exile, Healing and Home

In 1947, still fresh from serving in the World War II French underground, Albert Camus completed his classic novel, *The Plague*. The story pictures a modern-day outbreak of the Bubonic Plague in the other unremarkable Algerian city of Oran. The protagonist, Dr. Rieux, tends daily to the plague's victims, until at last, having taken its toll, it passes.

"The tale he had to tell" the book concludes, "could not be one of final victory. It could be only the record of what had to be done and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror... by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers." At the end, Rieux learns two things: "that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good," and that, with people, "There are more things to admire than to despise."

Early on, Camus establishes another theme, "exile." The plague-infested city of Oran is closed off to outsiders, and practically shut down to those who live there. People stay home, afraid to venture out. The government dithers; it won't admit the situation's severity; doctors and nurses lack vital equipment; hospitals run out of beds; corpses pile up; the sick and dying are housed in a football stadium. Sound familiar?

With the whole world apparently toppling, Camus pronounces the city's inhabitants as living in exile.

Interpreters of *The Plague* sometimes see it as a parable for political oppression, the true plague that returns with regularity, the Nazis being but the latest example. It can also be just what it says, however: an actual plague, like our Covid-19. In either case, whether medical or political, we are there now: a murderous virus is running rampant; we are unprepared; with a president who gives us no good reason to imagine that he understands the situation or would do the right and moral thing even if he did.

Sociologists define terror not simply as unimaginably bad things happening, but the sense that they happen without rhyme or reason, with no predictability, no way to know what tonight, tomorrow, or the very next hour will bring. The problem is, of course, the suffering and dying, the enforced loneliness and idleness, the stock market in free fall, the work we cannot do and the food we cannot get. But it is more: it is the irrationality of it all, the never knowing where the dreaded bacillus lurks: in the smile of a neighbor who passes too close beside us, perhaps; on a park bench that we inadvertently touch during risky morning walks. It is the terror of it all that never leaves us.

Camus was prophetic: we here face again what he called “the never-ending fight against terror”; and while we face it, we are indeed like exiles in a world that goes merrily on its newly twisted way without asking our permission or even notifying us in advance. Like *The Plague’s* Dr. Rieux, we are “unable to be saints, but, refusing to bow down to pestilence, we strive our utmost to be healers.”

But how can we be healers while a virus metastasizes through our streets like a sci fi nightmare, and we dare not read the morning news lest we be cruelly reminded of the political and moral morass of incompetence at the top? How can we be healers in exile?

Well, we Jews know a thing or two about that. Jewish history is precisely about exile. The theme of exile appears at our Bible’s very outset—Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, which we should see as dramatic foreshadowing for the Babylonian exile with which our entire biblical history virtually ends. The entire Bible in between is mostly about exile: Abraham and Sarah, driven from their comfortable home to a Land that God will show them; the announcement that even from their new home, their progeny will face a centuries-long exile; then Egypt itself. Exile is Israel’s master theme.

Yet our Bible doesn’t stop there. The final message is not the exile. It is Second Isaiah’s *Nachamu, nachamu ami*. “Take comfort, take comfort, my people”: words of healing! Enough is enough. The constrictions of exile will eventually open wide to the expansiveness of restoration, revival, recovery—so many words for healing!

Camus describes the Oran “exiles” as uncertain about their future, panicked over their present, and fixated on memories of the past. But he departs from the Jewish script when he concludes, “They came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles, which is to live with a memory that serves no purpose.” That’s where he is wrong. Memories can be precisely where we find our purpose in the first place.

If terror is the pure irrationality of it all, Jewish memory is the guarantee of a larger pattern beyond the immediate patternlessness. That larger pattern is not scientific so much as it is metaphysical, a matter of faith that Jews have managed to acquire because we take our historical memories seriously. Every Passover we review them: the calm but sobering lesson that every generation unleashes forces bent upon destroying us, but that in the end, we will prevail. Way back in 1964, *Look* magazine ran a famous article called “The Vanishing American Jew.” Well, we haven’t vanished; we’re still here; never mind that you can’t buy copies of *Look* anymore.

We become healers in exile when we champion our memories as models. In an unredeemed world, we say, there will always be recurrent exiles—for everyone, not just Jews. But exiles pass; restorations arise in their place.

When we once again see friends whom we have missed for a very long time, Jewish liturgy has us say, *Barukh atah Adonai, m’chayei hametim*, “Blessed is God for reviving the dead.” Alas, in every exile, there are those who really die, those whom we will not see again. But this our history promises; this we know for sure: The Covid-19 exile will end; and we will say for

so many others who emerge to greet us as they always did, “Barukh atah Adonai, m’chayei hametim, “Blessed is God for reviving the dead.”

Isaac Bashevis Singer is credited with saying, “We Jews have many faults; amnesia is not one of them.” We Jews love to remember, because these times of trial, these moments of plague and exile, are not the only things that come redundantly; so too do times of healing that follow. We were slaves in the Land of Egypt; but we found our way home. All America, all the world, is now enslaved. But we too will find our way home.

A Symphonic Meditation on Meaning, Complete in Four Movements

Movement 1: That's Not the Point, But How Would We Know?

“That’s hardly the point of Passover” says Michael Isaacson, objecting to my Facebook poem, beginning, “The point of Passover is the Spring.” Spring, he continues, is “just a side perk. The point of Passover is to turn slaves into aspiring Jews!”

Michael’s thoughtful objection made me wonder, “Do I really believe what I said? Or am I just being ‘poetic?’” I think I do believe it, but then how do I answer Michael?

“Turn slaves into aspiring Jews,” I presume, is Michael’s updating of the biblical account that portrays God freeing Israel so that they might serve God instead of Pharaoh. But doesn’t that mean that if Egyptian slavery hadn’t prevented our serving God, it would have been alright?

How would we know? How does one even answer questions like this? How do we decide what the point of Passover “really” is?

Movement 2: How Do We Decide? Turtles All the Way down?

In the premodern world, the preferred way to interpret a biblical narrative was midrash, similar to what we might call a sermon today. But midrash is to sermons as poetry is to essays, in that the point of essays and sermons is the content or message being conveyed; whereas in poetry and midrash, the message is largely secondary to the art form that conveys it-- which is why we study midrash just for the fun of it: discovering how the midrash arrived at an interpretation even if we find that interpretation useless, banal, or even offensive. Even the Rabbis who wrote it never intended it all to be used equally to guide human life. When we want to cite, sing, or teach a midrash, we sometimes read through pages of examples before finding one we can use—at which time we choose it judiciously; and then outfit it with our own interpretation so as to make our point.

Early Reform rabbis replaced midrash with scientific biblical criticism. If midrash on the Bible didn’t tell us what the Bible really said, maybe scientific study could, they hoped; and in fact, it often did. But in fact, as well, it couldn’t tell us what the point of the Bible was, because the Bible’s point wasn’t necessarily our point—that’s the nature of canonized writ: even fundamentalists read and interpret it selectively. We do not live by what we preach so much as we preach what we know we want to live by.

We now know, for example (from scientific criticism), that Passover was originally two festivals, chag hamatsot followed by chag hapesach. Also that the root p.s.ch does not mean “pass over” so much as it means “protect” (as in Isaiah 31:5). In Exodus, the blood of the pesach daubed on the Israelite homes “protected” them from the angel of death. But we do not, on that account, decide from now on to eat matzah for just one day and then offer up something for a holiday renamed “Protection.” Don’t get me wrong. I enormously value biblical scholarship; I love knowing what this or that ancient text originally meant, and sometimes, I do use that knowledge for my own interpretive ends. But I know that in the end, it is the interpretation that matters.

As to the point of Passover, it is indeed, by my reading, setting the slaves free (I’ll get to “Spring” later); and, in Michael’s favor, they are indeed set free so as to serve God, not Pharaoh. But all by itself, doesn’t that imply an ideal social structure of mastery and servitude, the only difference being who the master is—making Passover the reclamation of the servant-people Israel from Pharaoh back to God? None of this is likely to make it into our explanation of freedom because we abhor the idea of servitude as an ideal human condition, even if the one being served is God. We use the word “serve” in both cases (Pharaoh and God), but we hardly mean the same thing by it. We should reject the servitude metaphor altogether, and in fact, we do! We pick and choose among contending theories, ignoring the banal, bypassing the problematic, and highlighting the useful. There is no way out of this dilemma. Before we adopt an interpretation, we already have some idea of what counts as a good versus a bad one.

The art of interpretation is called hermeneutics; the problem of more or less knowing in advance what will count as a good interpretation and then finding one that looks good by those standards is an example of what is called the hermeneutical circle. There is no way out of the circle.

A biblical story is itself an interpretation of whatever the Exodus was; both midrash and biblical scholarship are interpretations of that interpretation. Our own reading is an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation. Remember the cosmology of the earth resting on the back of a turtle, and that turtle sitting on the back of another turtle, and so on—so that reality is turtles all the way down? Replace “turtles” with “interpretations”: the meaning of things is interpretation all the way down.

Movement 3: A Tale of Two Horizons

Alternatively, think of texts as if they are points in space, geographical locations. From no point in space can we see the whole universe: we never get to see it all. What we do see, we call the horizon of our sight line. But another horizon matters just as much, the horizon of what we bring to the task of seeing in the first place: the product of our own imagination, upbringing, class, gender, education, and so on. Meaning comes from the point where the two horizons meet. So too with texts. What seeing is to geographical locations, interpretation is to texts. Interpretations vary with the text’s horizon and with our own.

So what is the real point of Passover? That depends on two things: the text's horizon and our own. Can the point of Passover be "spring"? Legitimately, it can, as long as "Spring" is within the horizons of both text and interpreter. Now, as it happens, Passover is inextricably linked to Spring: we gerrymander the lunar/solar calendar to make sure it never falls in winter. So much for the text's horizon. As for our own, we need simply ask what Spring symbolizes to us, if not hope, new life, regrowth, and a way out of death and despair. Can it also be an end to slavery? Yes, if spring can be interpreted also as a successful metaphor for freedom.

Ah, but Nicole Roberts, writes from Sydney Australia, to say that the "Spring as freedom" metaphor does not work for her, and that does give me pause. Her interpreter's horizon differs from my own. If we had a few hours together, we might come up with an interpretation of my interpretation of the biblical/rabbinic interpretations of the biblical interpretation and find some common ground. Alternatively, she would choose her own, but in any event, what Passover means is not simply a matter of reading our texts more carefully. It is always about our interpretive artistry.

And so, to my point: interpretive artistry!

Movement 4: Artists Never Copy Wholesale

I am in awe of the way we teachers of Torah practice the art of interpretation. The one thing I know is that artists never just copy wholesale: composers write "variations" on other composers; poets, says the late great literary critic Harold Bloom, write in anxious response to prior poets; Alfred North Whitehead says all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. We inevitably beg, borrow and steal from our predecessors, but we never just copy them.

Dutch artist, Han von Meegeren (1889–1947) so successfully copied the style of Dutch master Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) that for years, no one knew the difference. But if a Von Meegeren actually looks like a Vermeer, why isn't it as valuable as a Vermeer? Because it was just a copy, a good one, mind you, almost a perfect one, but even a brilliant copy is just a copy.

What originals have (that copies lack), said philosopher, writer, and critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), is a surrounding aura, the sense that by encountering it, we are encountering, as well, a unique cosmic moment, so to speak, a unique insight into life that a singularly qualified artist gives us. We return to the museum again and again not just to see the painting, but to be gathered into the aura of the artist doing the seeing. And we leave, with our own "take" on what we just saw. That is our "value added," our original artistry, that we can gift to others. The aura of the art work constitutes its authenticity; the aura of our interpretation is our authenticity.

We teachers of Torah strive for that authenticity—coming up with an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation (it's interpretation all the way down, after all) and presenting it so artistically that it links our own horizon of meaning to the horizon that our listeners bring with them—they see something in what we saw because their horizons overlap with ours.

To be an interpreter of Torah is to love our people enough to invite them into our art salons—in the hope that they will become artists in their own right.

Humanity, at its best, is an expanding community of artists, where everyone gets a paintbrush; or a musical score; a thesaurus or two if they work in words; some space to occupy, if they like dancing or building or interior design. And a life: yes, they all get one life, itself a work of art that the other works of art are meant to nurture, and from which their own artistic masterpieces get their own aura of authenticity.

I like to think that all the arts come most beautifully together in the liturgical arena we call prayer. But that's another story.

Never Happy or Good?

Sometimes a poem gets it “Oh so right!”

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

In this case, it is W H Auden’s lament over Hitler’s invasion of Poland: entitled September 1, 1939.

It became a staple at funerals during the AIDS epidemic (Auden himself had been gay), and it was widely cited after 9/11 (for its references to New York City).¹ With Covid-19, it returns to haunt us—especially in its even more dramatic fifth stanza.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

At least metaphorically, isn’t that us? The lights of life darkened; the music silenced? And not so metaphorically, here we are, quite locked away—not in forts we imagine as homes, but in homes that have become forts.

I wonder, however, about the last line: We are indeed reduced to “children afraid of the night,” but have we “never been happy or good”?

Where did Auden get that idea?

Auden’s devoutly religious family of origin had instilled it in him with the belief in original sin and a suspicion of pure enjoyment. As an Oxford undergraduate, he rebelled, by embracing Freud, Marx and Berthold Brecht, but by 1937, he was already beginning to despair of his youthful left-wing hopes and flirting with a return to his Christian roots.

In December 1939, with America still neutral in the war, he attended a movie in New York City’s “Germantown” (the Yorkville area, around East 86th St.). As a newsreel showed German soldiers taking Polish prisoners, the German-American audience erupted in shouts of, “Kill them! Kill them!” Auden was stunned.

On what grounds, he came to wonder, did he even have a right to expect anything better of those around him? His inability to answer this question, he explained, “brought me back to the Church.”

But he was already on the way back, after visiting Spain in 1937, and seeing civil war there tear apart his leftist ideals. Then Hitler invaded Poland, and by the fall of 1940 he was going to church again, and would affirm the Christian faith for the rest of his days.²

Auden’s rediscovery of original sin, the view that we had “never been happy or good,” was a commonplace event for intellectuals of his day. In 1908, G. K. Chesterton wrote an entire book to explain his return to the Christian fold, putting it down to “the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes” and “the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”³ Auden himself admired Kierkegaard’s view that “Before God we are always in the wrong.” September 1, 1939 was cited in an introduction to Paul Tillich’s theological masterpiece *The Courage to Be*, because for all his modernism, Tillich too taught that the ultimate experience is the despair of guilt. The “courage to be” is the courage to affirm oneself in spite of it.⁴

Is that the lesson we are to draw from our plague of the moment? That the lights have gone out, the music has stopped, and we realize now that all along, we have never been happy or good? Because after all, we are inveterate sinners? Really?

It is not Christianity to which I object. Most Christian thought has nuanced the concept of sin—it’s hardly as black and white as I have portrayed it—and anyway, you see a different form of it in medieval Judaism too, including medieval Judaism that persists, here and there, today. Evangelical Christians were not the only group to defy the social distancing rule so as to pray in droves for a divine end to the pandemic; some Haredi Jews did too, not out of concern for “original sin,” but because of “ordinary sin,” the sin that makes us Jews at least “primally” sinful, if not “originally” so—to the point that plagues may be divine punishments that we deserve. This is the attitude that blamed the Shoah on the victims for not putting *m’zuzot* on their doors. If that is true religion, then spare me from it.

I see another response to the Covid debacle, a reaffirmation of the more mainstream Jewish belief that human beings, at our core, are really a mixture of bad and good—not essentially sinful, as Auden, Chesterton, and Tillich presupposed. I love Auden the poet, Chesterton the writer, and Tillich the philosopher, but try as I may, I see the world differently.

I think that locked away in “our dives on 52nd St.,” the lights out and the music silenced, we are indeed “children afraid of the night,” but all the more frightened because we know we have indeed been happy and good, and we wonder if we will ever be so again.

I do worry about American society and the American dream that I have come to know and love. It is April 2020, not September 1939, but we too might rightly claim to be watching “the clever hopes expire/ Of a low dishonest decade.” And so far, the next decade doesn’t look all that much better, not if we judge tomorrow by the headlines of today: the uneven impact of our plague upon the have-nots and left-behinds; and the bailout efforts gerrymandered to favor corporate banking favorites, for example.

But yesterday, here and there, amidst the April rain and gloom, a rainbow majestically appeared. We are, God help us, ordinary dust of the earth, alive all too often to just our personal well-being, our own self-enrichment, our own creaturely comforts—as much of them as possible before we die, and others be damned. But we are also, equally, and maybe even usually, the love and light of God’s presence, the purity of soul breathed into us at the beginning, our better natures that do come out in the midst of a storm to shine like the sun: the self-sacrifice of hospital workers and first responders; the folk who buy groceries for elderly neighbors and sew makeshift masks because our government cannot get them for us; the phone calls we all make and get with people we haven’t spoken to in years. In the middle of this April winter of our discontent, the support staff at Hebrew Union College in New York, who double as professional singers and work for us in between their gigs in operas and musicals, sent around their version of the priestly benediction (<https://vimeo.com/405088660>). I see promise where others see defeat.

And even Auden, back in September, 1939, still had his doubts about the human incapacity to, at least partially, save ourselves, because he ended his masterpiece in a poetic flourish that defies despair:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Exactly. We seem “defenseless,” feel “beleaguered,” but are charged now more than ever to “show an affirming flame.” Things can change. Tomorrow can be better than yesterday. “The Just can exchange their messages.” The happy and the good can prevail.

The Ordinees of 2020

“I knew in an instant that everything would be alright.”

—*Naval recruit, Ludovic Kennedy,
after hearing a broadcast by Winston Churchill,
in the midst of a crisis a thousand times worse than our own.*

It was the opening days of World War II. In a “lightning-like” Blitzkrieg, Hitler’s army had swept across Belgium, overrun France, and trapped the British forces on the beaches of Dunkirk. Miraculously, the British were largely rescued by a veritable armada of naval vessels, private yachts, and tiny fishing boats; but British joy was tempered by the realization that it would be equally possible for a German armada to go the other way—a Dunkirk in reverse, as it were.

At the Prime Minister’s 10 Downing Street address, in Buckingham Palace itself, and in every British city, town and village, nerves were frayed, fears were rising, spirits were low. Then came the speech that Kennedy remembered with such clarity.

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight on the seas and the oceans.... We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

A private secretary to Churchill, John Martin, got to the heart of the matter when he described Churchill’s leadership genius as the ability to convince people that they were “protagonists on a vaster scene and champions of a high and invincible cause.”*

This, dear ordinees, is what we have been preparing you for all these years of Bible, Talmud, history, theology, liturgy and nusach: the certainty that we human beings are protagonists on a vaster scene and champions of a high and invincible cause.

You might think that here, in America, where your ordination is taking place, people must already know that. But we don’t: we haven’t known it for some time now. The official national rhetoric has mired us in just the opposite supposition: that the only thing of consequence is our own national interests, not any principles at all; and within those interests, it is increasingly the interests of the rich and powerful that have mattered, no one else’s. Even as I write these words, one-fifth of America’s children may not have enough to eat, and a senate majority is refusing to expand long-term food-stamp relief.

* Quotes Kennedy and Martin are from Eric Larson, *The Splendid and the Vile*

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” wrote Emma Lazarus, for an America that she personified as “The Mother of Exiles.” There’s a “high and invincible cause for you”—imaged right out of Jewish tradition. America as Shechinah! The Great Seal of the United States portrays the providential eye of the divine, with the hope that America will be a “a new order for the ages” (Novus Ordo Seclorum), our undertakings earning the favor of God (Annuity Coeptis). How much will the mothering presence of God smile upon an America that won’t feed her children?

And here we are today, in a blitzkrieg of disease, bunkered in the four walls of our respective homefronts, dependent on our own armada of “required workers” and volunteers—hospital staffs, police, firefighters, ambulance drivers, lettuce pickers, proxy shoppers, and more. They are indeed saving us: a new and American Dunkirk is under way. We all know, however, that the war isn’t over; we may be in this for a longer run than we care to imagine. So we wait to hear not just that we will survive (we pretty much know we will) but that the fight is worth it because in the end, we are “protagonists on a vaster scene, champions of a high and invincible cause.”

And we wait in vain: because our dominant governmental voices do not even know how to frame sentences about a higher cause, a nobler vision, an America of kindness, gentleness, and elemental human decency.

Who, then, will remind us of all that now? Who, if not you? You graduate this week with the most ethereal of degrees, something called “ordination.” You sport no degree in medicine, law, or accounting; you have no elected office. You might think that you are powerless. But precisely there, you are wrong. You have the enormous power of moral suasion. You are exactly what we need right now, because you are the keeper and transmitter of the “high and invincible cause” that we inherit just by being human.

You will very shortly discover that your work as cantor or rabbi is far more onerous than what you are used to as a student: you must be pastor, priest, and prophet, all rolled up into one. A pastor to care for the well-being of those you serve; a priest to invoke God’s presence at every marriage, birth and death, at public worship, and at study of Torah; a prophet to speak the truths of Judaism’s moral certainties—and in between it all, you will manage the office, wade through daily to-do lists, and negotiate the politics that are inevitable in human affairs.

You will be tempted to think that success can be defined as honorably clearing your desk of such responsibilities, but if you do, you will wear yourself out even as you wear yourself down, because each new day brings just another set of tasks, and eventually you will wonder whether it is all worth the effort. You too need to remember that you are “protagonists on a vaster scene, champions of a high and invincible cause.” And in so remembering, you have to remind us—not just “us” the people you serve; but “us” the body politic, that has forgotten that there is any “vaster scene” or “high and invincible cause” altogether.

Remember, therefore, how much we need your regular reminders of the higher scheme of things. There will be times when everyday banalities completely fill your days; when bureaucratic interests harden your institutional arteries; when the official rhetoric of injustice and untruth starts sounding acceptable; when affairs of business and of state, important as they

are, begin eclipsing affairs of the human soul. In all such cases, you are the keeper of the sacred, the source of inspiration that will save us. When we are mired in the muck of hopelessness, lift our eyes to the sky; in the perennial affairs of the moment, remind us of the momentous.

Every step of your journey to become rabbis and cantors has been in service to the inherent nobility of human life, the decency that marks us at our best, the high and invincible cause of goodness and holiness, love and compassion, justice and truth. May these certainties sustain you—that you may sustain us.

Protest, Change, and Doing What We Do

I didn't travel to New York to join the protests this week; I wish I had; I couldn't. And I wonder how many other people feel that way. I'm 77 years old with an underlying heart condition. My wife has cancer and is on chemo. Were I to contract Covid-19, I stand a pretty good chance of dying. Were I to infect my wife, she would almost certainly not survive. So I stayed home. Call it white privilege, if you like—I could afford to do it. But there it is.

I am also, I admit, just not the marching type. I don't do well in crowds, am inherently non-confrontational, and have an irrational fear of violence. I loathed the rough-and-tumble boy-culture of my childhood; and the only semi-contact sport I ever played was intramural high-school basketball, which I dropped when its aggressive nature so rattled me that the first time I got the ball, I headed in the wrong direction and scored against my own team. No doubt all of that played a role in my decision.

So what does someone like me do, as the early summer swelters with the stench our country's rotten underbelly, in the form of George Floyd's murder?

If I don't habitually march, I do obsessively think, so I have been thinking. If I play no role in the today's street, might I find my proper place in tomorrow's aftermath? And might you, dear students, friends, and colleagues join me?

Begin with what we want to prevent: a real-life rerun of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo's reflection on Europe's abortive 1830 and 1848 revolutions. The operative word is "abortive." People marched and were killed and nothing changed. Nor do we want another French-style revolution with a bloody "reign of terror" (already there are calls to disband the police, as if the police per se are the root of our problem). But we dare not return to where we were with some social band-aids here and there, until someone else is murdered and we start all over again.

How do we get peaceful revolution: an evocation of the national conscience that finally ends racism; that invests seriously and heavily in reversing past injustices; that uproots obscene discrepancies in education, wealth and opportunity; that resurrects respect for decency; and guarantees the simple joys of work and of play and of safety, food, and shelter?

Such change may begin in the streets, but it doesn't end there. If my place lies not in the streets, then it may lie somewhere else.

According to the classic study of revolution (Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, 1956), societal change begins when conditions of injustice are sufficiently transparent for more than just the underclass to say, "No more!" There must also be a catalytic crisis to ignite the moment, usually a series of them, with one culminating blow that is just too much to bear. That's where we are today: a president who encourages white supremacy and spews hatred

enough for even our military leaders to express their horror; America hovering on the brink of fascism; the Covid crisis, that reveals how sick society is, how unprepared and undefended we all are—and this latest and culminating ignominy, one more black man murdered in cold blood and the president teargassing protesters so he can hold aloft a Bible in front a church.

The underclass and middle class joined in common cause? Check.

A catalytic crisis beyond our wildest fears? Check.

That's what makes these protests different. That's why we harbor hope that they will not be in vain.

But protests alone have insufficient staying power. Eventually—in a week, a month or a year—they exhaust themselves; people necessarily return to jobs, families and school. As frustration builds, the leaders who remain become increasingly radicalized, frightening off yet more of the coalition, until the powers that be intervene with force or buy off the revolutionaries with promises that never materialize.

Hence, the necessary next step: spreading the moral urgency beyond the streets into the very fabric of society, where those with power, means, and opportunity can carry the torch of reform. And that is where we clergy come in. We are the bridge beyond the protests in the streets. Religion through time has been rightly criticized for using the bridge to hold change back—part of the problem, not the solution. No wonder those who dream of a better age have nothing good to say about organized religion and those who represent it,

But clergy can equally be the moral force that sears the cause of the street into the conscience of the nation. We hold bully pulpits, and are trusted to tell truths that no one else will. We are the last best bet to keep the hope of change alive when the street dies down.

So what do we do, if you, like me, cannot or do not see the streets as your sole or major contribution? The answer is, we do what we were called to do: we speak, and sing, and argue the moral truths of our tradition. We hammer home the reality of America's ethical decay; we condemn fascism in the making; we say that black lives matter, that immigrant lives matter, that the life of our planet matters, that education matters, that science matters, that children matter; that hate-filled alt-right evil is dangerously afoot in our land, aided and abetted by knowing winks from the White House and by partisan elected officials who are cowed into compliance; we insist on ethical and compassionate leadership, in league with America's sacred best not its unholyest worst.

I spent yesterday listening to sermons by colleagues who are rising to the occasion and telling these truths, sometimes at risk to themselves. I join my voice to theirs. We may not hold the power to effect deep change ourselves, but we are the bridge from the street to the people who do.

Jewish Wisdom About Monuments of Oppression

1. Tradition and the Rule of Creepy Crawly Things

How do we use Jewish tradition to help us navigate life's challenges? Just like love, tradition is a many-splendored thing, but its wisdom comes liberally mixed with age-old prejudices, superstitious nonsense, and downright stupidity. Thirty years ago, while researching an article on the subject, I asked my teacher and colleague, the late Harry M. Orlinsky, to define "tradition" and he replied, "Tradition is just a lie going back at least a century."

That pithy definition made it into my article, along with my equally jaded observation that as much as tradition is often a very good thing, the wrong traditions, like the wrong food, can kill you; the wholesale recovery of Grandma's favorite ethnic recipes turns out to be less wholesome than we expected.

Another metaphor made it into my book on circumcision, when research dug up various medieval traditions that I found abhorrent. It occurred to me that tradition is like a high-rise apartment building where each generation lives atop the abandoned apartments of earlier generations who occupied the floors below. From time to time, we walk nostalgically through the places downstairs, looking for old and dusty ancestral pictures to resurrect, refurbish, and reframe as our own. Often, however, what our ancestors admired simply embarrasses us.

The basement can be particularly disturbing; it's where our forebears deposited what even they considered the detritus of their times. And for every grimy picture we find there and choose to redisplay back home, there are a hundred that we are happy our ancestors got rid of. We don't readily even admit they are still there. That every tradition has an embarrassing basement is what I call "The rule of Creepy Crawly Things."

It's worth frequenting tradition's basement on occasion, not to find what is recoverable but to admit what is not: to see what we once were, to remember how we have improved, and to keep in mind the likelihood that we probably still have a long way to go.

2. A Short List of Continuities

I think of this analogy whenever people ask me what Judaism has to say about things, because everything depends on what part of the Jewish apartment building we investigate; and what antiquated basement specimens we choose to dredge up. Tradition's mixed bag of goods should come as no surprise, mind you. Nobody would seriously ask, about some matter of

moment, “What is the position of western philosophical thought?”—as if everyone from Plato and Aristotle to Immanuel Kant and Bertrand Russell must have a single point of view. Why do they imagine Judaism must be any more homogeneous in content?

Traditions on their own (whether religious or philosophical) can teach us nothing: they are layer upon layer of interpretation, some interpretations properly relegated to oblivion, others deserving renovation, but “relegation” or “renovation” is a matter of subjective judgement.

Still, as I wander through my Jewish apartment building looking at all the generational dwellings below my own, I cannot help but notice some things that pretty much everyone valued and pretty much no one repudiated as disgusting basement rubbish. These are what we mean by “Jewish values,” Jewish tradition’s attitudinal continuities that are more likely to prove lasting.

My short list includes Five Principles:

1. Learning: the supreme regard for learning, reason, and argumentation “for the sake of heaven,” to get at the truth. We question everything, preserve minority opinions, have no hierarchy we must follow, encourage debate, answer questions with more questions, and love learning for its own sake.
2. Truth: we have, by and large, welcomed truth from all quarters, not just Torah but the world of science and the arts as well. The Talmud valued the physics, astronomy, and mathematics of its time; medieval rabbis became physicians, philosophers, and poets. The best of modern rabbis too are widely read and convinced that science and philosophy matter. Truths may be eternal, but our knowledge of them is not: as we grow in knowledge, we see the truth of things more clearly.
3. Justice: a passion for justice, and the absolute horror at the idea of a social order without trained, compassionate, and thoughtful judges, dedicated to arriving at the truth by reasoned and impartial investigation. The worst that can be said of a society is, “There is no justice and no judge.”
4. Political realism: the realization that without government, we would “swallow one another up alive” (Avot 3:2); balanced by the caution that people in power will usually sacrifice principle to the furthering of their own interests (Avot 2:3).
5. A mistrust of violence, especially mob violence: not because Jews were the ruling parties protecting their own monied interests, but because they knew how easily mob violence settles for scapegoats and achieves no substantive change.

Given the Rule of Creepy Crawly Things, we can easily find exceptions to all of this: the very rabbis who warned against abuse of power could be powerfully abusive themselves. Israel’s ultra-Orthodox elite are hardly committed to the open-minded search for truth. Left to their own devices, rabbinic “true believers” too resort to violence to achieve their ends. But overall, my Five Principles have adorned the various levels of Jewish tradition enough to make them “continuities.” They are my starting point for thinking about what to do with the monuments of oppression, now under attack across America.

3. Monuments of Oppression: A Museum of the American Amalek

Principle 3 (Justice) demands we do something about these monuments because we see now how injustice is perpetuated by them. That we never saw it before should not blind us to what we see now, because Principle 2 (Truth) leads us to welcome revisions of truth based on new evidence. Alas, Principle 4 (Political Realism) reminds us that politicians and power brokers will not always do the right thing; they are likely, instead, to do what their interests dictate. However, Principle 5 (Mistrust of Violence) warns us not leave it to mobs on the street, not even the mobs we like; the last thing we want is on-the-spot decisions to tear things down violently, especially because it will be easy for people with power to sacrifice a monument or two and do nothing to correct the actual injustices. Principle 1 (Learning) recommends empowering a process of study to decide the best course of action. If nothing happens, there are other principles that kick in, including ways to change the governmental order through nonviolent means, wherever possible. But in fact, despite outliers to the contrary, we already have widespread acceptance that something must be done. We have made great progress in just the last few weeks.

I suspect I will not make anyone's short list of the thinkers charged with the decision on the monuments, but I do have a piece of Jewish wisdom that I would recommend. I am thinking of the biblical arch-enemy Amalek who attacked the fleeing Israelites as they struggled to make it out alive in their trek across the wilderness to the Land of Israel. Instructed ever after to eradicate Amalek's memory (Exodus 18:14), Jews dedicated an annual Sabbath to reading the Bible's indictment of him (the best way, ironically, to perpetuate the memory we want destroyed).

The idea seems to be this: only by retaining our worst memories of cruelty can we be assured that humankind will not again revert to the very same cruelties again—hence, the Holocaust Museum in Washington and the National Lynching Memorial in Montgomery. I would, therefore, dismantle the offensive statues and remount them in a Museum of the American Amalek, a series of rooms dedicated to showing how even the greatest of American heroes went terribly wrong, how generations then perpetuated their wrongdoing, and how at last we dedicated ourselves to doing the right thing.

A Pre High Holy Day Tale (Not To Be Missed)

Here's a High Holy Day story, a ma'aseh shehayah: it really happened. You will especially appreciate it if you are young and entering a current High Holy Day assignment with anxiety over what might go wrong. But even if you are not, read on. You'll like it.

In days of yore, when I entered HUC, there was no Israel program. To the extent that we learned any Hebrew at all, we learned it here, and there were so few students, that we received High Holy Day assignments in our very first year, sometimes (if the holidays arrived early) even before school began, when we knew virtually no Hebrew at all, and certainly no liturgy. Before I had even stepped foot in HUC, therefore, I was assigned to a nursing home for seniors—an “old-age home,” as we called it back then—just a short train ride out of Manhattan.

The faculty member doing the assigning explained that I was to lead a traditional service, but pared to an hour and a half—that being the most that the elderly congregants would sit for. I had been chosen for this dubious task because of all the entering students, I was the only one who had attended an Orthodox shul as a child. I could at least read Hebrew. Besides, they understood that when I was ten, I had been in a High Holy Day boys' choir; I must know some melodies. What I didn't know, I could fake.

After endless hours paging through the hundreds of pages in the traditional machzor, I somehow made a list of what to do and what to skip, and arrived ready to chant services in some made-up nusach of my own, mostly from the Shabbat morning service, which I actually did know; and facing away from the congregation, of course.

The evening went fairly smoothly, I thought, but by morning, from behind my back, there soon arose a few anxious murmurs of dismay, largely by one man in particular. I ignored him as best I could (there is something to be said for not facing the congregation!); then somehow finished the ordeal, and left to take the train home.

On the way out the door, I ran into the nursing-home director, who asked me how things went.

“Well,” I replied, as honestly as I dared, “I am afraid I did not live up to the expectations of these people. They really know the traditional service, and I am just learning it. One man especially was quite vocally upset.”

“That must be Mr. Schwartz,” she replied. “He can be difficult. But don't worry, Rabbi. He'll feel better about you by Yom Kippur.”

“Yom Kippur?” I thought. I had forgotten that I had to come back. And did she really call me “Rabbi”?

After ten hard days of anxious planning, not to mention learning to sing Kol Nidre (more or less), and never mind writing two sermons with no prior experience in homiletics, I did, in fact, return.

This time a gentleman from the congregation opened the door. It was Mr. Schwartz, who broke into a broad smile and the assurance, "Rabbi, we are so happy to have you back; and we are looking forward to another lovely service." God alone knows what dire threat the director must have levelled at him!

But the next day did go moderately well, until I got to musaf, polished off the shortened Torah reading (with some mistakes of course), and then, feeling my way on the home stretch (we had dispensed with N'ilah), I launched into the last bit of davening.

That's when it all fell apart.

From behind me, I heard first one voice, then another, and finally a rising chorus: yoyeni, yoyeni, YOYNI, YOYNI, Y O Y N I !! And then I got it. It was Yiddish for "Yonah, Yonah, Yonah, Jonah, Jonah, Jonah" I had completely forgotten the haftarah, the one thing that pretty much everyone in the room knew and was waiting for. What should I do? Interrupt musaf to go back to the haftarah? Ignore the crowd and forge on?

Before I could decide, a sound rang out, like a veritable voice from heaven, so loud it overcame the rebels!

It was Mr. Schwartz to the rescue! "Sha! Quiet! You hear me? Who is the rabbi here, you or him? HE is the rabbi; YOU are not. Whatever HE says goes."

And with that, I finished the davening, ran through a final Kaddish, ended with Adon Olam (or some other song I knew), and left for home. On the way out, Schwartz made sure to congratulate me. "Well done, Rabbi," he lied; and then added, "You have a fine future ahead of you."

Shortly after, I entered HUC; and went on to become an expert in liturgy!

Here's the moral. Do your best leading services over zoom or however you have to do it. But no mistake you make can prove fatal. And whatever you do, remember: you have a fine future ahead of you.

The Theology of Covid

A classic short story by Jack London (“To Build a Fire”) relates the chilling tale of an experienced Arctic hiker who dies while traversing the Yukon at fifty degrees below zero. He died, says London, because “he was quick and alert in the things of life but only in the things, and not in the significances.... He had no imagination.” He knew it was cold—knew, in fact, how cold it was. But he did not then “meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man’s frailty in general... and from there ... to the conjectural field of immortality and man’s place in the universe.”

Here are two levels of imagination. Elemental self-preservation requires the first: “to meditate upon our frailty as a creature of temperature.” Theology raises the second: “our frailty in general... and the conjectural field of immortality and our place in the universe.”

Think of Covid as a viral version of Jack London’s fifty-degree-below-zero Arctic. A theology of Covid is an imaginative search for “significances”—what Covid might mean about “frailty, immortality and our place in the universe.”

London had his story; I have mine:

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, with special attention to human beings, made in God’s own image—with self consciousness and a moral conscience, that is. Oddly enough, God placed them in a garden of perfection, where nothing was off limits except a single tree of knowledge a tree right in the middle of the garden, where all roads converged, so they couldn’t avoid seeing it. This was like telling a ten year old to eat anything in the house except the chocolate cake with icing at the entrance to their room. God later provided on to the book of moral instruction, warning against “placing a stumbling block in before the blind,” and included in that category tempting people to sin by, say, making lumber available to idolaters who are busy constructing a wooden idol (Talmud Nedarim, 62b).

How could God warn humans off of knowledge but plant the tree of knowledge where they could not miss it, unless God wanted to force us out of paradise from the very beginning—so that we could practice our God-like capacities of imagining the best and striving for it. Hence the charade of the tree, an object lesson that taught us to appreciate knowledge as the rarest of all treasures that we must strive mightily to attain. Hence the charade of the tree, which God wanted us to eat from the beginning.

We don’t tell stories about a jealous God who punished Prometheus for giving humanity fire. Our parallel is the story of our exile from the garden, which we do not call “the fall.” We just grew up, and entered a world where indeed, we would work hard and suffer pain, but we

took the tree of knowledge with us, transplanting it wherever we settled, that its fruit might nourish our natural curiosity, the curiosity with which God endowed us.

In the Talmudic story of the oven of Akhnai, rabbinic debate triumphs over the rival testimony of a divine voice from heaven. Upon hearing that human logic has bested divine decree, God is pictured commenting, with a smile, “My children have defeated me.” It is as if, at creation’s origin, God planted a tree that was destined to be eaten; and a universe outside the Garden which runs by inexorable laws of nature for which God planted clues—like so many pieces of afikoman—for humans to find. God smiles down upon us whenever we uncover them.

Covid is just part of these laws of nature, no different from earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters, but also the same as gorgeous sunsets, blossoming flowers, falling in love, and enjoying a parental good-night kiss. The universe is amoral: sometimes rewarding, sometimes cruel—but (a very big “but”) obeying laws that human beings can discover.

Science is a divine calling, a constant return to the tree in the middle of the garden. There wasn’t much science in Talmudic days, but whatever there was, the Rabbis studied. Look at the astronomic detail behind lunar-solar calendration. Jochanan ben Zakkai, we are told (poetically, to be sure), knew even the language of palm trees. Medieval rabbis were doctors; we point proudly to modern-day Jews with Nobel prizes. If God created the universe, then learning about God’s universe is sacred.

Here is the first answer to what Covid might mean for the imaginative search for “significances”—what Covid might mean about “frailty, immortality and our place in the universe.” Frailty? Covid drums home the reality of human frailty! But also, it illustrates our place in the universe as the only species with knowledge enough to fight off Covid ventually; and imagination enough to think we can to do so in the first place.

But what about immortality?

Covid has killed some 850,000 people so far, but the flu of 1917 killed 50,000,000, and the Black Death some six centuries earlier killed four times that. Science accumulates knowledge in the very long run. We are getting better at fighting disease because knowledge grows through time. So too, our immortality is tied up with identifying the limited purview of our own life-cycles as part of the much larger human longer narrative through time. To this day, I associate Kol Nidre eve with holding my father’s hand as he waited his turn to give charity before entering the synagogue. I learned that we give for those who come after us, just as those who came before us gave for us.

Put differently, we can see evolution as baked into creation, and ourselves as having evolved with the taste of the tree of knowledge in our DNA. We are a quantum leap forward in evolution’s path, a path toward wisdom—yes, and goodness too, godliness, even. We can emerge from Covid wiser, better, more humane and decent than before.

I am outlining a theology of human goodness and promise, of the sacred pursuit of science, of a God that neither causes Covid nor cures it, but who created a universe with laws that are discoverable and a human mind that can discover them. We need such a theology because

without it, we may fall into believing one of two alternative theologies of Covid that are surreptitiously at work already, neither of them desirable.

The first is a story of sin and punishment. It underlies the anxious demand in some churches and synagogues to pray as never before, to meet in a minyan no matter what, to gather en masse in churches—even at the cost of further infection. Since God is the cause of all things, the story goes, God must have caused Covid too, in which case, like the expulsion from Eden (for Christians), like the fall of the Temple (for Jews), like the ten plagues of Egypt (for us both), it must be punishment for something or other. Sin breeds punishment, but punishment is allayed through prayer. Pray hard enough and the plague will vanish.

The second hesitates to blame God. But if God is not the culprit, some force of evil must be: Chinese labs that invented it, perhaps, or the liberals who want it to be worse than it is. We must ride it out; but we will prevail and then punish the evildoers. This is just a rerun of old-fashioned Gnostic dualism, which Judaism flirted with but rejected.

We still have remnants of the sin-and-punishment theology, however, especially in High Holiday liturgy, and it is time we gave it up. With Covid killing innocents all around us, the picture of human suffering caused by God is appallingly cruel. We may not know much about God, but, surely, whatever God we care to picture doesn't work that way.

Theological stories presuppose metaphoric images of the universe.

In Theology One the universe is a gigantic court of law. God is judge and jury. We human beings are either children lacking self-control or recidivist criminals called back to court each year. We plead our case through prayer and beseech the Almighty for mercy, but we never learn our lesson.

Theology Two is Star Wars: a universe divided into good and bad, where history is a fight to the death, with threats to us good guys masterminded by the bad guys on the other side. Watchfulness matters most; we keep ourselves armed; the apocalypse is coming.

But what if all of that is nonsense? What if, instead, we inhabit an endlessly expanding universe of opportunity and growth? We are mortals who glimpse immortality in the vision of our little lifetime as just a chapter in a longer human narrative. There are indeed killer surprises like Covid; and killer people too, with whom we must contend; but in the very long run, the good will win. The universe is no courtroom where we plead our guilt; history is no dualistic fight to the finish. We inhabit a cosmos marked by scientific order, human purpose, and—even in Covid—the God-given gift of hope.

Warning: This Posting Has Been Labelled H (Heretical)

I would have made a terrific religious heretic. In fact, I probably am one. I cannot imagine being answerable to a bishop or institutional hierarchy. Back in the 1980s, against the objections of the CCAR leadership, I wrote an article questioning the exclusion of non-Jewish parents from lighting Shabbat candles at Friday night services of their children's bar/bat mitzvah. I was horrified (some years later) to discover that HUC students were being asked to sign guarantees that they would not date non-Jews. And when the faculty was polled about the possibility of admitting students who were in relationships with non-Jews, I voted to accept them.

No wonder, I have had a love affair with modernism, the original heresy of our time. Modernism replaced medieval metaphysics with the Enlightenment's faith in reason and science. In contrast to medieval religious particularism that fostered human divisiveness, persecution and war, the Enlightenment spawned a modern-day vision of universal human decency and progress.

Unfortunately, even as I was discovering modernism, academia was celebrating post-modernism: a rejection of the entire Enlightenment project. It was an intellectual reaction to the two world wars—World War II especially, if you were Jewish. German-speaking countries had been the academic Enlightenment center, went the theory (think just of philosopher Emanuel Kant and physicist Ernst Mach); and Germany gave us Hitler. So much for the Enlightenment guarantee that reason and science would save us.

Post-modernity came in two forms, academic and religious.

The academic version revisited Enlightenment idealism and found it wanting. Enlightenment texts were relabeled as mere "narratives" that had to "interrogated" to surface their cleverly hidden biases in favor of the authors' class interests. They were all about white men; they omitted women, supported colonialism, defended a bourgeois power structure. New "narratives" were written to include the excluded and give voice to the powerless. I was part of that process when it came to Jewish liturgy. It was a necessary corrective.

The religious version faulted Enlightenment reason for abandoning traditional faith. Post-modern theologians urged a return to the God of our ancestors, to our religious texts and practices, to a new forms of orthodoxy labelled "neo" to differentiate them from the old medieval versions. Mordecai Kaplan was a modernist, through and through; Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig were post-modernists. My teacher, Eugene Borowitz, devoted his life to

providing a reasoned and compelling form of post-modernist Jewish faith. Generations were raised on it.

But here's the rub. Great ideas get misstated, misconstrued, and misused, by less-than-great thinkers and causes. Academic post-modernism morphed into the absurd idea that if everything is just a narrative, and if all narratives are political, then there is no absolute truth at all. Morality too becomes relative. I have my version of things; you have yours. Modernism replaced wars of religion with human solidarity; post-modernism replaced human solidarity with wars of identity: blacks against whites; the haves against the have-nots, the oppressed against the oppressors. Modernism's insistence on human reason and dignity sought to bridge divides; post-modernism collapses the bridges and reestablishes the divides. Modernism saw human history as moving—at least haltingly—toward the betterment of humanity; post-modernism sees it as necessary identity warfare, us against them.

Religious post-modernism too has become a twisted version of what it was meant to be. Buber, who revived faith in Israel the People and its own unique covenant with God was also the humanist who fought for a binational state of Israel for Arabs and Jews alike. Borowitz reveled in a return to the reality of God and God's covenant, but without abandoning universal reason and the hope for humanity writ large. In today's environment, by contrast, the rejection of modernism has brought back given religious orthodoxies, a kind of medieval religious warfare without the actual armies. America was founded on Enlightenment principles. Extreme Evangelical Christianity (not all evangelicals, mind you!) would set up a theocracy, if it could. So too with ultra-Orthodox Jews (not all Orthodox, mind you!) would do the same in Israel.

These two abuses of post-modernism generally occupy the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum. The academic variety dominates university campuses, left-wing secularism, and too many liberal religionists. The religious kind motivates right wing religion and too many arch-conservatives. They despise one another, but agree on one thing, the very opposite of Enlightenment modernism: they are both tribal. On the right, we have religious ultra-orthodoxies who want to foist the absolute truths of the tribe—their tribe!—on everyone else. On the left, we have moral relativism, and the morass of warring tribal narratives, identity politics, and distrust across gender, religious, racial, and ethnic lines.

To all of this, I protest. If that is where post-modernism leads, count me out. Give me back instead my original heresy of modernism, with its universalism, humanism, and hope for progress—properly corrected to account for biases, of course, but hardly thrown into the trash heap. My God is still the God of all humanity; my Jewish People still has a primary duty toward a human community, and to peace and well-being for all; my country, America, still stands for inclusivity, opportunity, elemental human decency; for kindness, compassion, justice, reason and hope. My Jewish homeland of Israel is the place where Jews will be safe from post-modernist threats from the right and the left; but not at the expense of our own return to post-modernist orthodoxies and self-interests.

Part of my modernist heresy is the faith that it will outlive its critics. Truth and human progress will not go quickly into the nights of despair.

On a High-Holy-Day High

These High Holy Days were game-changers. As to place, most of us videoed from the sanctuaries, rabbi here and cantor there, musicians and choir (if there was one) scattered or dubbed in. Some had real congregants in place, masked and at safe distances. Others did it all by toggling back and forth from private homes: cantor here, rabbi there, Torah read from somewhere else.

As to time, most people videoed some of the services in real time, but along with backdrop readings, imagery and music prepared in advance. Others videoed everything in advance, and became congregants to their own prerecorded services.

But place and time were secondary to the real issue: our first serious foray into post-print culture.

Liturgy is always a product of technological competence and the culture that technology permits. In the Rabbinic oral culture of late antiquity, worship was like jazz: an agreed-upon outline of an underlying liturgical structure, but dependent on the local artistry of the prayer leader, unencumbered by a book with fixed wording. There was no davening, for example, because no one had a book to daven from; most people listened to the prayer leader and made short responses—repeating a line or saying Amen. Liturgy was as hoc, local, face to face, unmediated.

With print, words became fixed, and with fixity, came detailed halachic or theological strictures (which themselves required writing down for study and for reference). Worship went beyond the immediacy of the prayer leader's artistry to include the private experience of engaging with a book. Print also expanded experiential residue: the oral prayer was not capturable, except in individual memory. Print provided a permanent prayer text and endless written commentaries on it.

For some time now, we have been flirting with the post-print culture; but just flirting. These "covidic" High Holidays have forced the issue.

I saw three responses to the challenge:

Double Down: Some congregations insisted on doing the service as if these were ordinary High Holy Days but with congregants at home, zooming and livestreaming. Those of us who love services as they always were got them again, just that way: long sermons, a full Un'taneh Tokef, all those confessions, and the music that we know and love. Especially on Yom Kippur, that worked, I imagine: sitting there fasting, what was there to do but follow the service from beginning to end? And there was comfort in the familiar, not to mention a sense of proud defiance, doing it all despite whatever the enemy named Covid could throw at us.

Adapt: Other congregations adapted the usual service to fit Zoom limitations. They included what they could but scaled down in size—like "the best" of an opera for people who want the arias and story but not all five hours of it.

Reimagine: Some people did more than allow for the new technology; they embraced it, and reimagined the liturgy for it. Check out, for example, two Temple Micahs: one in Nashville and another in DC. They reconfigured the liturgical staples; added imagery and video; translated captions of moving Hebrew songs; had an artist paint an ongoing mural to reflect the prayers being said. They reshaped and repackaged it all to accent the High Holy Day themes—for a global congregation attending from around the world.

Cultural evolution is expansive, like the expanding universe itself: new technologies, that is, do not replace old ones; they enlarge them, the way quantum mechanics didn't replace Newtonian calculations, but just accounted for phenomena that Newton couldn't. Worship in the oral culture of the Rabbis who started it all was immediate, face to face, and unrepeatable—it could not be saved, revisited, pored over for meaning, and passed along from generation to generation. Worship in the print culture that we are leaving behind was still face to face, but it was mediated by a written script that shaped it. The script developed halachic strictures; rules multiplied; verbal creativity died and musical inventiveness did double duty: same old words from one Shabbat to the next, but an infinite possibility of musical settings.

Covid has exposed the limits of print-based worship, where a single text becomes sacrosanct even if much of it is outdated, aspiritual, and unmoving. Our diminishing core of regular worshipers love that text, but for twenty years or more, we have been playing to fewer and fewer regulars who come less and less and are older and older. The goal, in any event, was never to venerate the text; it was to facilitate the experience of prayer, and that experience can still be enormously compelling—as we learned from the reimagined worship on the post-print technology these High Holy Days.

The new technology which is virtual does for print what print did for orality: it further expands our reach and our capacity to archive and even relive it. Most important, the worship performance itself becomes critical; not just the written script for it.

Equally significant is the fact that the expanded worship network on Zoom, Vimeo and Facebook, challenges us to redefine what “congregation” means. We have always had two congregations: the regulars and the rest, but now we reach a virtual congregation of untold hundreds or thousands from virtual platforms that we are just beginning to appreciate.

Print culture took half a century to mature. The stodgy printing technique of Johannes Gutenberg (circa 1450) made prayer books possible. But it took mechanization, the steam engine, a rotary press, and much much more, to create the multiple prayer books of the last two centuries. And only now, do we have multi-colored prayer books with aesthetically designed layouts, and accompanying art.

Our 21st-century zooming is like the 15th-century Gutenberg press! It is far too early to imagine fully where virtual worship will go, but wherever it goes, we will get there faster, now that Covid has forced us into its early stages. We will surely return to congregational worship face to face, not just virtual participation at a distance; and we won't utterly abandon print. But virtual presence (with its worldwide web of worshipers) beckons, and we would be fools not to invest our time, means, and creativity in it.

Seriously Speaking

We Jews should be reading the recent encyclical (October 4, 2020) by Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, “Brothers All,” more precisely “Little Brothers, All.” The title was chosen to accord with the language of St. Francis (whose name and legacy the pope adopted): he considered himself a “little brother” within his religious order.⁵

Jews are likely to wonder why a papal encyclical should concern us. It is, after all, part of no Jewish-Catholic dialogue, but, rather, Catholic-Sunni rapprochement, following conversation between the pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt. And weighing in at just under 43,000 words, it is no quick read!

It is, however, a very significant document. It implicitly reaffirms serious Catholic-Jewish dialogue for its own sake, and (with remarkable rhetorical power) it urges joint efforts at demanding human dignity, combatting authoritarian regimes, and saving our planet.⁶

The backdrop for it all is the half century or so since Vatican II, the momentous convocation that reversed decades of theological defensiveness and launched the Catholic Church into modernity. As part of that effort, on October 28, 1965, the Church promulgated its historic document *Nostra Aetate* decrying “hatred, persecutions, [and] displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone” (para 4). To be sure, the statement did not go as far as it might have—Church conservatives watered down the original draft;⁷ but for its time, it was a phenomenal breakthrough, and more was to come.

In 1980, Pope John Paul II said expressly that “the old [Jewish] covenant” has “never been revoked by God,”⁸ a claim repeated in the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church (para 121). In 2015, the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Church proclaimed that it “neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews.”⁹ The same document assigned the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue “special theological status”; denied the old supersessionist theory that Christianity replaced Judaism; and called on both religious communities to work together—for mutual religious enrichment, to combat anti-Semitism, and “in joint engagement throughout the world for justice, peace, conservation of creation and reconciliation.”¹⁰ Francis himself has said, “We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked...we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion.”¹¹

Fratelli tutti continues the positive approach to Jews. It expressly honors rabbinic tradition by, for example, attributing Jesus’ golden rule to “Rabbi [sic] Hillel” (from the Talmud, Shabbat 31a). It goes out of its way to warn (para 247), “The Shoah must not be forgotten”; then pays “homage” to the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and expresses “horror” at the “slave trade

and the ethnic killings that continue in various countries”(para 248). Jews can only applaud the conclusion, “Nowadays it is easy to be tempted to turn the page, to say that all these things happened long ago and we should look to the future. For God’s sake, no!” (para 249).

What stands out about this incredible encyclical is its universalist call for all good people of faith to join hands in opposing social evils. But even more impressive is the tenor of the piece: it is not just exhortatory; it is also deeply thoughtful; it is both pious and profound, a passionate and informed discussion of economics, politics, globalization, the social media, and even the Covid moment and what it portends—no surprise, of course, for a pope who has consistently voiced universalistic concern for “poverty and vulnerability... the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly... [victims of] human trafficking” and who has insisted that in all of these, “There is greater complicity than we think.”¹²

The clarion clarity of Fratelli tutti is everywhere in the document:

- On Covid, for example (para 7): “Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned is the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.”
- On the building of walls (para 27): “Those who raise walls [will thereby] end up as slaves within the very walls they have built,” if only because “They are left without horizons.”
- On the loss of common decency (para 45): “Things that until a few years ago could not be said by anyone without risking the loss of universal respect can now be said with impunity, and in the crudest of terms, even by some political figures.”
- On intellectual seriousness (para 50): “Wisdom is not born of quick searches on the internet.”
- Particularly significant for Jews is Pope Francis’s appreciation of universalism (on one hand) and the particularism of peoplehood (on the other). With only the first, he says, we get “caught up in an abstract, globalized universe.” With just the second, we become “a museum of local folklore” (para 142).

To be sure, I disagree with some things the pope says; and I think he overstates some others. His reading of culture is altogether too conservative for my liking.

But that is not the point. The reason we should read this is that it exemplifies religious seriousness. It is a reflective overview of the human landscape and the role of religion within it. If we want to change the world, we are unlikely to do it on our own. We will need religious allies, and not just our obvious ones, the ultra-liberal religious communities with whom we have a natural affinity.

Progressive Jews are painfully aware of our differences with some Catholic teachings. We sympathize with those Catholic women who level feminist objections to Catholic doctrine and polity. We have profound disagreements on issues of sexual ethics, birth control, abortion, and same-sex marriage. We have painful memories over Vatican policies regarding the Shoah and the early days of Israel.⁽¹⁰⁾ As there are all kinds of Jews, moreover, so too there are all kinds of Catholics—Francis’s encyclical is not necessarily what gets preached in the local church

around the corner from our synagogues. Empirical studies in Germany, for example, demonstrate an ongoing positive correlation between churchgoing (both Catholic and Protestant) and anti-Semitism, even today.¹³ I do not make light of any of this.

But our Jewish moral imperative of *tikkun olam* (“correcting the world”) is a political project, and politics requires coalition-building. Extraordinary issues face us if the planet is to survive, if the ugly rise of totalitarianism around the globe is to be defeated, if hatred and superstition are not to win the day. Fratelli Tutti is an outstretched hand for help from a pope who represent the positive flow of history as regards both Jewish-Christian relations and the universal call to righteousness. How can Jews not rise to the occasion and offer our hand in return?

I do not mean to say that we Jews have been oblivious to interfaith efforts at countering evil. I am not the first or only Jew to read Pope Francis’s words. But interfaith energy is at a very low ebb these days, and, having no centralized hierarchy and no Jewish “pope” of our own to call us to action, the onus falls on each of us, locally, to take the necessary initiative. As long-term Speaker of the House of Representatives (1977–1987), Tip O’Neill, famously said, “All politics is local.” I write this, and you read it, as “locals,” able to effect change wherever we are—and not just with Catholics. The neighborhood is full of potential allies whose religion we do not share but whose voices might be joined to ours in this supreme hour of need.

We should all be elevating religious dialogue on our agendas, not because it is “good for the Jews,” but because it is good for the Jewish mission, which is why we are here in the first place.

MABA: Make America Beautiful Again

Shortly after 9/11, I wrote a liturgy for a Hebrew Union College Board of Governors. It ended with the especially passionate singing of “America the Beautiful.” The Trump passion, by contrast, was to “Make America Great,” a far cry from making it beautiful. “Great” measures power: how we can make things be, even if they ought never to be that way. “Beauty” measures perfection, how things ought to be, even if they are not fully that way yet.

Greatness leans into a zero-sum game: one country’s greatness at the expense of another’s weakness. Beauty has neither winners nor losers: the beauty of Grand Canyon does not diminish the beauty of the Mojave Desert. Greatness crushes our opponents; beauty has no opponents to crush. Greatness is fine, if exercised in the cause of beauty. God is great but God is holy, and we speak of the beauty—not the greatness—of holiness.

Truth be told, to descendants of slaves, as to other perennial have-nots, America hasn’t looked all that beautiful, but millions of people for whom it is beautiful would like to make it so. “The other side,” as it were, the most extreme of the Make America Great stalwarts—racists, misogynists, white supremacists, and their fellow travelers—will not go down in history for making America beautiful for all its citizens. They will be remembered instead for taunting, threatening, and menacing; for inciting hatred, embracing dictatorship, trampling truth and trashing the planet. So much for greatness untethered to beauty.

When I say “the other side,” I carefully exclude those Trump supporters who voted for him because they feared for their livelihoods, suffered the disdain of liberal elites, or were naively taken in by disinformation. I most especially do not include people of good faith, even faith I do not share, fiscal conservatives and evangelical Christians, perhaps, who see things differently than I do but are not on that account “the other side,” a term which the Kabbalah (on one hand) and Star Wars (on the other) reserve for the truly evil.

Still, there was plenty of truly evil in the last four years: not just systemic racism, for example, but the empowerment of people who like that system as it is. Making America More and More Great was making America Less and Less Beautiful: all that vitriol, the regression into barbarity, the war on the most vulnerable among us.

“War on the most vulnerable” deserves special mention, especially for Jews who know that the Rabbis reserve that reproach for Amalek, the biblical arch-enemy who killed off the weakest of the Israelites, the stragglers who fell behind on their trek through the wilderness. This election was not about voting Democrat or Republican; liberal or conservative; “left” or “right.” It was a referendum on Amalek, the man who thought good people could belong to a mob shouting “The Jews will not replace us!”; who tacitly condoned an attempted kidnapping

of a governor; who wouldn't denounce white supremacy; who proudly abuses women, and leaves immigrant children to die on our borders. How could half the country willingly vote the Amalekite ticket?

I am Canadian-born, and whenever I alight from a plane on Canadian soil, I feel myself back home. But equally, I identify with my adopted America, and I think, now (with the Trump nightmare [I hope] in the rear-view mirror), I know why. I fell in love with the American dream: not its tawdry defects like militarist manifest destiny, but its Pledge-of-Allegiance ideal of "liberty and justice for all"; its Abraham-Lincoln principle of "malice toward none, charity toward all"; its Emma-Lazarus, Statue-of-Liberty, embrace of the "tired," the "poor," the "huddled masses yearning to be free." All of that resonated so clearly with my Jewish upbringing: the biblical promise of redemption; the rabbinic commitment to truth and to justice. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Jews who invented Superman, knew what they were doing when they created a hero whom the 1942 radio version could herald as the guarantor of "truth, justice and the American Way."

I grant you, the fullness of the American dream is not yet a reality, not for people of color, certainly, but dreams, in Jewish tradition are called the stuff of prophecy (Rashi to Joel 3:1), visions that evoke the godly, the beauty, of what still can be. The Trump years made the American dream a nightmare: boogaloo boyz, QAnon conspirators, assault rifles in record numbers, militias on the ready. And that nightmare is still with us.

When nightmares do not evaporate with the light of day, Jewish tradition (Talmud, Ber. 55b) advises us to acknowledge them publicly. Those before whom they are acknowledged are to assure us that "God transforms lament into dancing" (Ps. 21:12); "mourning into joy" (Jer.31:12). Dancing and joy are measures of beauty not of greatness. Nightmares unacknowledged freeze us in fear. Nightmares acknowledged invite transformation.

So we start by naming our nightmare: the worship of raw power in pursuit of a greatness that cares not one whit for the beautiful. From naming, to hoping; from hoping to action; from the American nightmare back to the American dream. Not marching in the streets with torches and guns; but singing in the streets to the words and sentiment of America the Beautiful.

I do not demonize well-meaning voters who did not see the Amalekite in Trump, but I am not blind to those who did see it and liked it. I will name this nightmare again and again, the way I read about Amalek again and again—to remember what Amalek looks like, whenever he comes again. And meanwhile, I am reigniting my love affair with the American dream and its prophetic capacity to encompass everyone. We can Make America Beautiful Again.

True East

I sometimes compare my own seminary education with what today's students receive—not as an exercise in nostalgia, but to learn something important about being clergy in our world. I speak only for the NY campus which I attended; Cincinnati graduates may have their own story; there were no LA graduates yet.

HUC of the 1960s was not even remotely the same school as it is now, roughly half a century later. There was, for example, no Israel program, so unless we knew Hebrew already (or took a year off to go to Israel on our own) our modern Hebrew competence was pretty much non-existent. Our five-year-long lockstep curriculum was heavy in text, but the only Hebrew grammar most of us knew upon entering was whatever we had picked up from a single summer preparatory course. We spent the next five years “deciphering” texts, word for word, with minimal success.

Part of the problem was the text teachers, giants in knowledge, but a generation for whom modern pedagogy was not so much a lost art as it was an art not yet discovered. I can only imagine their own frustration, having to put up with students like us. I recall one professor struggling to coach one of my classmates through just a few lines of Talmud; and then plunking some coins down on the table with the sardonic request, “Please go to the payphone; phone Bellevue Hospital; reserve a room for me in their mental ward.” Nowadays, he might be reprimanded for a microaggression, but we took his remark in stride. Given the chance, we might have booked rooms for ourselves.

What I didn't learn in text, I more than made up in history and theology because of two outstanding teachers who changed my life forever: Eugene Borowitz, zikhrono livrachah, and Martin Cohen, yibadel l'chaim. They made massive reading assignments and held us responsible for them. For roughly one semester a year (and for five years!) Dr. Cohen assigned up to a book or article a week—and tested us on it every Friday morning. Dr. Borowitz assigned Baeck, Buber, Kaplan, Rosenzweig and more—incessantly; in just the introductory course alone, we wrote three lengthy papers, redoing them if we did not live up to his formidable standards of acceptability. Both professors lectured back then—an era when we appreciated great lectures from which we filled our notebooks and our minds with organized synopses of data we could never get in any other way. I was ordained immensely knowledgeable in Jewish history and thought.

More significant, however, is something else that I learned from these two teachers—and from others too, whom I have not mentioned: what we nowadays call “formation.” All the history and theology—and even the text skills that I did not learn until later—are beside the point if they are not guided by “formation.”

Formation is a combination of character, vision, depth and commitment. It is the seminary equivalent to what Bill George, the noted Harvard Business School professor from 2004 to 2014, called our “true north.”

“True North” he writes, “is your orienting point—your fixed point in a spinning world—that helps you stay on track.... It is derived from your most deeply held beliefs, your values.... It is your internal compass, unique to you, that represents who you are at your deepest level.”

Formation is the way seminary education helps us locate our “true north.” It is the internalization of a deep and lasting sense of “mission”: not the details of “what we do” (teaching, counseling, preaching, etc.) but the big picture of “what we are doing in the first place” and “why it matters that we do it.” It confirms our linkage to something necessary and profound. Once internalized, it fortifies us for life.

Given Judaism’s traditional preference for facing East (as if Jerusalem, Jewish history, and even God, inhabit some metaphysical east, no matter where on the globe we actually live), we might call it our “True East.”

Formation of the Jewish True East happens around the edges: not just in formal lectures, but in hallway conversations, in communal prayer, and in meetings (planned or unplanned) with professors. It comes from observing the commitment and calling of our teachers, seeing in them the character and passion that we then emulate.

Looking back, I see more clearly what I attained from my student years at HUC, certainly from Rabbis Borowitz and Cohen, but also from others: my exceptional thesis advisor, Dr. A. Stanley Dreyfus, and even some of the professors whose absence of pedagogical skills I have lamented. HUC cemented within me the foundation for my true-east formation: honesty and compassion, faith and fortitude, empathy and truth; love of Jewish learning and of Jewish peoplehood; respect for other paths to God (not just the Jewish way); a certain selflessness in pursuit of the common good; and the certainty that Judaism has a mission in the world—that the world would be impoverished were Jews not in it to make it matter.

These remain today. At moments of vocational confusion, doubt, or despair, these have rescued me.

Two particular components of this True East need special mention, because I consider them critical, and they are under attack.

First is my commitment to the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, the faithful pursuit of goodness, nobility, progress, beauty and truth. As much as we immersed ourselves in Jewish classics, we had teachers who were equally at home in what 19th-century critic Matthew Arnold called “the study of [human] perfection.... the best that has been thought and said.” My Talmud teacher, Dr. Atlas, was also a formidable interpreter of Kant. Dr. Henry Slonimsky—a magisterial classroom presence, if ever there was one—taught an elective in Nietzsche, to help us confront the scourge of nihilism. Dr. Fritz Bamberger taught 19th-century idealist philosophy as the intellectual milieu in which Reform Judaism had emerged. To be sure, we now expand the Enlightenment “canon” to include women and cultures whom Matthew Arnold did not recognize, but the goal has not changed. I was formed to see Judaism

working hand in hand with the richness of the human spirit. That intellectual, ethical, artistic and spiritual partnership remains part of my True East, and I am richer for it.

Second was my teachers' commitment to Reform Judaism as that form of Judaism that has historically, and most clearly, articulated the Jewish partnership with universal wisdom. To be sure, especially in New York (where our founder, Stephen S. Wise, had instilled the love for Clal Yisrael), we valued modern Judaism of all stamps: the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements too, of course, but secular Zionism also.

I saw my place, however, as a proud interpreter of Reform. The Second Temple's fall had not doomed us to exile; it had raised the curtain on a world stage where we could pursue a role that was the whole point of Judaism, its unique contribution to human betterment. Ethics mattered most; I could not escape my conscience. Reform had worked in the trenches (so to speak) of modern life: it was the first to embrace the need for change, sometimes radical change: worship reform; authentic but non-halachic Judaism; full inclusion of women and then LGBTQ+ identities; expanding our musical canon; inventing the modern cantorate as clergy partners with rabbis; insisting on an American religious presence in Jerusalem.

The record is not all successes; we have had our failures as well; and the details of Reform as we understood it would change with time, but that we had a historical mission and a historic role in history I have never doubted. I have regularly seen myself standing on the frontiers of history, developing Judaism for every new tomorrow, but always in line with my Jewish wisdom and conscience wed to universalist values, and motivated by the divine purpose of human endeavor in the first place.

In this era of radical choice, we need strong Jewish addresses all along the Jewish spectrum—who knows where seekers of Jewish wisdom will find their home? But no single person can live everywhere; so we must each take our own personal stand somewhere on that spectrum. I study with, work with, and value equally all who labor for their own responsible Jewish address, whatever that address may be. I need them, and they need me; we need one another; it is my job to offer the best Jewish depth and insight that my Jewish address allows me to see. If I fail in that, I let everyone down. If I succeed, I become a partner with Jewish teachers everywhere, all of us striving for our elusive, but real, true east.

My Big Mistake

Tell you what, Rabbi,” he said, “I’ll give you a million dollars to start a mega-synagogue!” The “he,” in this case, was an evangelical church-going Christian, who, however, was the manager of a Jewish philanthropic fund. I will call him Brian (not his real name).

It was the 1990s, and I was fundraising for Synagogue 2000. For readers who don’t remember those days, Synagogue 2000 was an initiative I cofounded with Conservative Jewish educator, Ron Wolfson, to transform synagogues into “spiritual and moral centers for the 21st century.” We were funded by wonderful people and foundations, but we were always seeking other funding partners, and that is what brought me to Brian.

“Why would I support synagogues?” Brian asked. “They are a lost cause, like most churches. What you want is a Jewish renaissance, which is what we Christians have, but only in the novel form of megachurches. I belong to one myself—with 12,000 attendees! Give up on synagogues as they exist today. Think big. Start a megasynagogue, a Jewish version of my megachurch, and I’ll fund it handsomely.”

I already knew a lot about megachurches—Ron and I had visited and studied them, as examples of entrepreneurial religion with much to teach us. More than just big churches, the megas are big ideas—doing church differently. “You don’t have to be mega or church,” we told the synagogues with whom we worked, “but the megas know something about American spiritual yearning that we can apply authentically to ourselves.” I therefore appreciated Brian’s touting of megachurches. But start a Jewish version myself? That seemed altogether absurd.

The next day, I looked up the overall population in Brian’s city, then the number of attendees at his megachurch and figured out the ratio between the two. I then applied that ratio to the same city’s Jewish population. If my hypothetical megasynagogue were to attract the same percentage of Jews as Brian’s megachurch did Christians, I calculated, I would have 39 members. Of course, a megasynagogue was a silly idea.

And that was my mistake.

Here’s why.

I have come to see that Judaism has a universal message, born of Jewish principles, informed by Jewish texts, nurtured by Jewish culture, grounded in Jewish religion, and continuous with the Jewish experience with history—an experience that speaks profoundly to the human.

By Jewish principles, I mean the obvious ones, like justice and compassion, but also the Jewish love of learning, our trust in truth, our faith not just in God but in science, the Talmudic insistence on dialogue to arrive at insight, our balanced view of human nature, Jewish optimism (not for nothing is Israel’s national anthem *Hatikvah*—“The Hope”). I like also our belief

that there is nothing wrong with making money (ethically), as long as you give lots of it away. There is also Jewish Peoplehood: at its best, a global endeavor to perfect a broken world; but anyone can join it, and we respect other religious traditions as having their own unique and precious covenants with God.

By Jewish texts, I mean the whole gamut, from Bible and talmudic literature (and even pilpul, which I think of as Jewish poetry); to Yehudah Amichai, Philip Roth, Marcia Falk, and Anzia Yezierska (if you haven't read her *Bread Givers*, you should).

By Jewish religion, I include the best of what we have, but shorn of the worst. No religious tradition can claim honestly to include the entirety of the past—nor should it. I mean evolving religion: worship that touches the soul; healthy home ceremonial to strengthen loving families and friends. And don't forget a religious calendar that rehearses the values that make us human: High Holiday moral consciousness; Sukkot thanksgiving; a weekly day off from work and worry; Yom Hashoah lament but the Joy of Simchat Torah.

By Jewish culture, I mean the richness of Jewish music, but also Jewish scholarship; Hasidic insights into human nature; classical Reform's reminder of the prophetic heritage; the best of Israeli creativity; our welcoming of heretical wonder (we get to question and even argue with God); our insistence on living life to its fullness (*L'chaim*); and even Jewish humor, the way we laugh at ourselves.

Finally, there is the Jewish experience with history. We know (better than most) the pain of suffering, but also the promise of being the eternally rejuvenated Phoenix who sees things through to a better time. We are a people outfitted with a memory that gives us veritable centuries of perspective, and virtual eons of hope.

But we've never managed to think big. We are like the poor but righteous protagonist in Y.L. Peretz's classic tale, *Bontsche Schweig*, whom God rewards with anything his heart desires. He could have brought the messiah, but the best he can imagine having is a warm roll.

Brian was asking me to think big; and I didn't.

Our world today is increasingly filled with laypeople who think bigger than religious leaders do. We have mistakenly concentrated on our "Jewish message" for Jews alone, rather than a "Jewish way" that speaks to spiritual seekers of all kinds. We should reconceptualize Judaism as a conversation through time, touching upon everything that is precious to the human mind and heart. I spoke recently to Rabbi Karyn Kedar, who does think big, and who wondered, "Why do we settle for the same 100 people at services, or 50 people at a class?" Double it, triple it, quadruple it, if you like. It's still a pittance, if you are a successful large synagogue with maybe 1000 family units. And most synagogues I know would be thrilled to have 100 people every Friday night, not to mention 50 in a class.

So I wonder, "Why didn't I jump on the chance to start a megasynagogue that would reach out to everyone, not just Jews, with the message of a Jewish Way?" Why did I assume that my megasynagogue "market" was just the Jews?

I have no desire to convert people, no yearning to capture anyone who finds meaning in traditions other than my own. But every single day sees more and more people leaving religion entirely because they find no meaning there.

I don't have Brian's million dollars, but I do have a million-dollar idea: megasynagogues which may not even have to be big, but that do synagogue differently. They will open their doors and feature the Jewish conversation—Jewish principles, text, religion, culture and historical consciousness, all of them fully Jewish but fully human as well, an invitation to all who wish to find their way to human meaning by exploring the Jewish Way of being in the world.

Kol dikhfin yeitei vyeikhul, we say at seder time, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." Let us open wide our doors, so that all who want their humanity to have meaning, all who want purpose, hope, progress, love, and joy can see what the Jewish Way has to offer.

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Follow-Up: A word on tribalism and Jewish Peoplehood.

The issue emerges from the exceptionally healthy discussion of my last post. Thank you all for joining in the dialogue, some of it on my blog page, some of it here, and some of it in personal letters to me.

"Tribalism" comes up in the question of what I think will happen to the Jewish People if (as I suggested) we encourage spiritual seekers to experience "The Jewish Way."

"Won't that dilute Jewish Peoplehood?" people ask. Others echo the hesitation of Jews whose "tribalism" is suspicious of all those potential newcomers.

I care deeply about Jewish Peoplehood. It is central to my understanding of our mission in the world. It is a strength that most other religions lack. But it comes in various forms, one of which is tribal.

I differentiate Peoplehood (a theological category played out on the world stage) from tribalism (a form of primal ethnicity). Peoplehood is positive, outward looking, intent on a universalist theological purpose, and welcoming of others who share that purpose. Tribalism is protective, inward looking, motivated by mere continuity of the People with no larger purpose at all, and suspicious of anyone who is not "of our tribe."

Some years back, an impressionistic study was made of church members who had converted from Judaism; and of synagogue members who had converted from Christianity. The converts out of Judaism said they had lots of Peoplehood, but only the tribal/ethnic variety, with no thoughtful purpose behind it. They missed theology, which, they said, rarely (or never) received deeply serious attention from their rabbis and fellow congregants. Despite their conversion, they still felt (and wanted to feel) part of the Jewish People. They hadn't converted out of that. Christianity gave them purpose for their Jewish Peoplehood.

Those who converted into Judaism said they missed community. They had their local church community, but loved the idea of something more concrete and wider in scope: a global community dedicated to God's purposes. The Jews had Peoplehood and joined Christianity to get theological purpose. The Christians already thought theologically; and easily embraced Jewish theological purpose regarding the Jewish People that they were joining. Peoplehood did not suffer by admitting them. On the contrary. It gained a deeper perspective, a theological one, that rabbis generally fail to discuss with their ethnic Jewish members.

Tribalism is cheapened Peoplehood, an approach that is elemental, rooted in my tribe vs yours. We should do away with it. Peoplehood beyond tribalism is profound. It calls us to value the Jewish People as a precious thing with a mission to advance God's goodness in the world—and to welcome all who share that mission and want to pursue it through The Jewish Way.

Let's Hear It For Jewish Food!

This Purim, I remembered my Aunt Susie, a spectacular woman, who died somewhere in her nineties, her faculties horribly impaired by multiple strokes. She retained her lucidity by locating herself in the seasonal flow of Jewish holidays. My last visit with her was the week after Purim. She was blind by then, as I recall, and couldn't follow much of what people were saying. But out of nowhere, somehow, she managed to remind her daughter, "Purim is over; start planning the Seder."

Most rabbis and cantors, I suspect, measure time by prayers. "New month falls this Wednesday; must say new-moon prayer this Shabbat." "Rosh Hashanah starts Monday evening this year, so Selichot service is two Saturdays back, not just one."

Regular people don't do that; they measure time in other ways—if they are lucky, by the food. I grew up loving the Jewish year because I ate my way through it: Rosh-Hashanah honey cake, Simchat-Torah apples, Hanukah latkes, Purim hamentaschen, my mother's Passover meringues (a family tradition), and Shavuot cheese blintzes. Yom Kippur was the day you couldn't eat at all, except for the break-fast which was great for kids who got to eat it without having to fast first.

When I grew up, I discovered sefardi foods as well, not to mention other excuses to eat differently (like Tu Bishvat, which no one in our little town observed).

Either Napoleon or Frederick the Great is said to have left us with the caution that "an army marches on its stomach." I don't know from armies, but I am an expert on religions, and let me tell you, with just its liturgy but no ritualized eating to go with it, the Jewish People does not march very well at all.

Gastronomic Judaism (as it is usually known) has been often, and cruelly, maligned—in part by me, a sin for which I readily repent, and probably would have repented sooner if there had been a repentance food to remind me to do it. I didn't actually mean the holidays, mind you. I had in mind Sunday-morning lox and bagels; not to mention Chinese food on Christmas, neither of which is Jewish at all. Probably the best bagels I ever had came from a Cincinnati bagelry owned and operated by an Irish Catholic, and serving people on their way home from Sunday mass. The Christmas-eve diners at your local China Lion or Lichee Gardens are there because it's the only place open, not because they are necessarily Jewish.

I repeat: I didn't mean authentically Jewish holiday fare; my repentance a moment ago was probably an overreaction.

A woman once dared me to ask her why she had converted to Judaism, and then, without waiting, answered her own question. "For the food!" she said.

“You converted for the food?” I asked, trying not to sound amazed.

“Yes,” she assured me. “My parents were Roumanian and I missed my mother’s cooking, but then found that Jews still eat it.”

So I know that most Jewish food was never Jewish to begin with. We borrowed ethnic foods from the peoples among whom we lived, usually the poorest food, because we were all poor together and had to make do with what we all, equally, didn’t have enough of.

“For the food” may not be the most sophisticated response, I grant you, but I heard the story in the first place only because the woman giving it was attending my visiting lecture at her synagogue. She converted for the food, but she eats it with appropriate ritual, it turns out, and attends synagogue as well.

What I was (and still am) opposed to was empty ethnicity—for three reasons.

First, it deteriorates into nostalgia, which is not lasting: it is hardly compelling for people who did not grow up with it.

Second, writer Svetlana Boym describes two versions of nostalgia. The warmly “reflective” nostalgia that I am describing may be harmless—no one in my family ever wanted to return to the “good old days” in Polish shtetls. But it easily becomes “restorative” nostalgia, the romanticization of those “good old days” and the attempt to recapture them at the expense of the people they victimized; like the Polish Law and Justice Party that glorifies Polish nationalism, and its anti-Semitism; like those southerners who yearn for Old Dixie—not just its Southern Cross battle flag but the burning cross of the KKK restored.

Third, even reflective nostalgia isn’t altogether harmless. If Judaism is nostalgia, it locks out anyone who wants to join it but who has no nostalgic memories to qualify.

For those three reasons, I have steadfastly opposed a Judaism of pure ethnicity, a long-held conviction I neither recant nor repudiate.

Equally, when I call for something deeper, I by no means belittle the sensory enjoyment under which all that depth lies buried, and without which, none of it may ever be unearthed. How shallow would be a seder with my mother’s meringues, but no mention of freedom from slavery; or her honey cake but no prayer for a good and sweet year.

And how headily worthless would be the opposite: just preachy sermons on slavery and learned truisms on how a new year with joy is better than one without it.

The point is, holiday food comes with ritual: it is symbolic. Symbolic food that loses its symbolism becomes just food. But theology unsymbolized devolves into academic sterility.

Traditional food without theological underpinning is the flesh of religion without its bones—you finish the meal (literally) with nothing left behind to chew on (metaphorically). Theological principles with no culinary traditions to hold them are the bones of religion without the flesh: solid academic argument with nothing to sink your teeth into.

Have I mentioned the fact that last week we celebrated Purim? Aunt Susie would have told you to finish up your hamantaschen and start planning your charoset. I actually preferred my mother’s meringues. But you get the idea.

Seder Plates, Cufflinks, and Ashtrays

In my last letter, I applauded Jewish food as a symbolic route to Jewish values. “But what makes it Jewish?” people asked. “You yourself say Jewish food is just food that Jews once used alongside everyone else—remember the Romanian woman who converted because of the food?”

Good question; and it leads us to broader questions of Jewish symbolism.

Among the many ways to look at symbols is the highly creative approach by psychologist C.G. Jung.

Jung differentiated symbols from signs. He read off a list of words, and asked people to respond to each of them with another word, the first one that came to mind. Unknown to his subjects, he was less interested in the association they offered than the time it took to offer it. When subjects took an inordinate amount of time responding, Jung suspected that the word in question carried unconscious emotional baggage that was preventing a quick response. “Red,” for example, might easily evoke “stop” or “rose,” but someone who regularly frequented the city’s red-light district might hesitate, as his defense mechanism struggled to prevent his saying “prostitute.” Similarly, “Bible” might evoke “book,” but strong believers might struggle for just the right word to convey the depth of their Protestant faith.

These highly charged items (positive or negative) Jung labelled symbols. Everything else, he called signs.

Religion depends on such emotionally laden symbols, which then attract rational explanations of what they “mean.” These are their sign values: meanings that are culturally available as convenient ways to explain the symbols’ importance.

Symbols, then, depend on direct emotional appeal, usually by stimulating our senses: touch, taste, smell, and so on. If our sensory reaction is neutral, we make no special note of the experience. If it is strongly positive or negative, we associate it with the situation that gave rise to it. If the situation is Jewish (Shabbat dinner, for example), something about the dinner (Shabbat candle-lighting, perhaps) is likely to become a Jewish symbol. Eventually, we ask what the candles mean, an explanation that we memorize to justify our strong feelings about them.

A woman once told me proudly that she had faithfully kindled Shabbat lights every week for over 50 years, because “Light is the symbol of the divine.” That’s the last thing I would have thought of, but she had read it in the old Union Prayer Book (p. 7). Wanting something to explain her love of lighting candles, she latched onto what the prayer book said.

Imagine two immigrant women arriving in America and attending 4th of July fireworks. One woman came just to marry her American fiancé. The fireworks are nice but have no

emotional claim on her. She may or may not attend next year. The other woman fled across the border to escape persistent rape in her home country. As the fireworks brighten the sky, she is overwhelmed by the pure sheer joy of American freedom. She will attend July-4th fireworks ever after without fail. For her, fireworks really symbolize.

If asked what the fireworks symbolize, both women will say something like, “America,” or “independence.” For the first woman, that is just the culturally assigned meaning that she has internalized as part of American lore. Fireworks are just fireworks. For the second, these fireworks are like no others. They symbolize for her. “Symbolize” is an intransitive verb. Symbols don’t symbolize anything, at first. They just resonate deeply within us. We then attach culturally assigned meanings to explain our feelings.

Years ago, I asked people in focus groups to bring (or bring pictures of) their favorite Jewish symbols. Most people brought the usual stuff: Shabbat candlesticks, an old tallit, a Jewish recipe book, and so on. One man surprised us by bringing ordinary cufflinks, and explained, “My grandfather gave these to me on my bar mitzvah.” He owned a kiddush cup too, I discovered, but it had only sign value for him. He didn’t bring it because he knew instinctively that it wasn’t really symbolic.

Traditions devise highly complex treatments of these assigned meanings—the Magen David, the “Star of David,” for example. A six-point star is just a six-point star, but sometime in the Middle Ages, Jews started using it on their tombstones (as did Muslims, actually, who called it a Star of Solomon). Kabbalists enhanced the star’s Jewish association because its six points tallied nicely with the way they counted the six lower-level divine emanations (the sefirot) that carried blessing from the three upper-level ones to the final tenth one, the feminine emanation whence blessings flow to us. When modern synagogues were built, architects wanted a simple Jewish design to etch into the stone exterior—like the cross on churches. The older, more authentic, symbol, the seven-branch candelabra, was too hard to chisel in, so they chose the Star of David.

This Magen David eventually impacted Seder plates. Some plates are designed to hold five seder foods, and some six, because the bitter herbs (maror) were sometimes called chazeret and it wasn’t clear whether you needed separate entities for each one. The six-food version won because it corresponded to the six points of the star, allowing kabbalists to count the three pieces of matzah as the upper three sefirot; and then label the seder plate (from which we take the symbolic food) the tenth sefirah, the feminine nourishing one.

You don’t, however, have to know all this sefirah stuff for the seder plate to mean something symbolically to you. You might just like eating the sweet charoset and be happy remembering how your mother used to feed it to you before you fell asleep in her lap.

The compelling quality of my colleague, Ron Wolfson’s, pioneer work in relational Judaism is the fact that positive emotions are likely to arise from warm relationships of belonging. Judaism rooted in relationships provides the emotional ground for attachment, out of which symbols are born.

Here’s a story I told many years ago: it’s about a man named Harry.

Harry was an older man who had worked all his life as a storekeeper on New York's Lower East Side—in the days when it was still largely Jewish. It became his habit, day after day, year after year, to have lunch with other store owners. It became a ritual: same restaurant, same surly Jewish waiter, and so on.

Eventually, the area was gentrified. Under new ownership, the old restaurant was slated to undergo construction. There would be harsher neon lighting to get people in and out more quickly; and rectangular tables crowded together, instead of the old inefficient round ones. The old waiters were quitting. Harry's friends, already beginning to retire anyway, met one last time.

On his way out, Harry pocketed one of the old beat-up ashtrays.

"Why did you take the ashtray?" people asked. "You don't smoke."

"No," said Harry, "but those lunches were the best times of my life. I wanted something to remember them by." When Harry downsized to a small retiree apartment in Miami, he took the ashtray with him, his beloved symbol of years gone by.

The day people leave our synagogues to retire elsewhere, and pocket prayer books to take with them, we will know we have succeeded.

Seder Spirituality

The old “Baskin” Haggadah, advertised the Passover message as “From Degradation to Dignity,” a brilliant alliteration by Editor Herb Bronstein (it should really be called the “Bronstein” Haggadah). The idea came from a close reading of the Mishnah (circa 200 CE) the earliest rabbinic account of the seder. It is the most basic summary of the seder’s message: namely, *matchil big’nut um’sayem b’shevach*—in Bronstein’s terms, “begin with degradation and conclude with dignity.”

The alliteration took some poetic license, however. A more faithful translation would be, “begin with degradation and conclude with praise.” The seder begins with Israel’s degradation and concludes with praise [to God] for delivering us from it. And there is more to it than that!

The Hebrew style of the verbs and their objects, *matchil ... um’sayem* (literally, “The [the seder leader] begins with X and concludes with Y”) is telling. Several paragraphs later, the advice continues: *v’chotem big’ullah*, “and he [still the seder leader] seals [the whole thing] with redemption.” “Degradation” and “praise” are just two-thirds of the recipe for seder success. There is “redemption” as well.

Once you put them all together, you see the parallelism. In Hebrew: 1. *matchil big’nut* 2. *um’sayem b’shevach* 3. *v’chotem big’ullah*. And in English: 1. We begin by remembering Israel’s degradation. 2. We then praise God for delivering us from it. 3. And we sum up the evening’s message by naming the miracle involved: Redemption.

Redemption is a fancy theological word that encompasses deliverance from disaster, freedom from plague, new-found liberty, a new beginning, a fresh start. It is the love and nurture, the dignity and integrity, for which human beings naturally yearn, but then despair of finding, only to find they are possible after all.

The Talmud discusses “degradation.” In one opinion, degradation came from slavery in Egypt: it was externally enforced. There are degrees of enslavement however: not just actual slavery, as in America until the Civil War, but a modified form of terror under Jim Crow afterward—and still going on today. People worldwide are oppressed from without, victimized by the color of their skin, by their gender, their tribe, their immigrant status, their caste, their religion. Others are externally oppressed by disease that weighs them down; and, for mental illness, say, they are further oppressed by society’s attitude toward them.

But there is also the second opinion: degradation from self-imposed attachment to idolatry: degradation, that is, that we bring upon ourselves. Even those of us who are externally free, may be internally enslaved: by addictions, unhealthy relationships, wanting always to please others, and uncritically believing of ourselves whatever others say about us.

The point of redemption is that we all need it, from one thing or another, and the older I get, the more I recognize this escape from degradation (external and internal) is what we mean by the word “miracle.” The odds that America will come to grips with its inherent racism are not very high; the chances that society will embrace those who are mentally ill are not much better. How many people celebrating a seder feel the crush of old age or chronic illness, as if they will open the door for Elijah and admit the angel of death instead. Overcoming poverty, racism, prejudice, illness, addiction, traumatic relationships, or the bleakness of a life that seems to be going nowhere, are not run-of-the-mill probabilities. When, in fact, we do rise above such circumstances, it is a miracle. And the point of Passover is that such miracles do happen.

Miracles are not exceptions to nature’s certainties; they are unusual combinations of those certainties that somehow work for us rather than against us. A crippling disease suddenly turns around; out of nowhere, we discover a way out of financial crisis; we end an abusive marriage; find a new job, wake up one fresh morning and feel empowered rather than beaten down.

It is the possibility of redemption that ultimately prompts hope when all seems hopeless. That is why we need to reclaim the last third of the rabbinic recipe for a successful seder: Yes, start with degradation, Israel’s of old, and your own and others’ today; let your lips form the natural response to seeing freedom’s possibilities, praiseful gratitude; and sum it all up with the acknowledgement that redemption is possible. It happened once; it can happen again.

This year, especially, don’t feel you have to say every last prayer in a Haggadah that is already too long; that would be enslavement to the very ritual that celebrates freedom. Don’t obsess over when you wash, how you break the matzah, how much wine you need, whether to sit or stand. These are minutiae. And don’t lose your own opportunity to find the seder’s hope because you feel obliged to entertain little children every spare moment while you are on the screen. Focus instead on the message of redemptive miracles; and when little children ask what you are doing, give them a hug and a smile, and tell them you are celebrating the most important miracle in the world: the miracle of hope. The best Seder gift you can give them is the model of the adults they love most taking redemption’s promise seriously; and knowing that they can aspire to be like you.

The Genealogy of “More”

Genealogy is not just family history. It can also be as “a fictional narrative, an imagined developmental story, which helps to explain a concept or value or institution, by showing ways in which it could [have] come about” (Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 2002, p. 31).

So here is a genealogy of “More.” It starts, of course, with “Once upon a time...”

Once upon a time, with the human race just dawning, we discovered there was “more,” in ways that other animals did not. Our contemplative consciousness of time and space revealed the universe as more than just a place to satisfy our needs. Ruminating on relationships with other tribal members, we said, “There is more than just myself.” When exploring the terrain and never running out of space, we thought, “There is more out there than we will ever get to.” One simple glance at the heavens told us that however much we imagined more, there would always be more than even that. When people died, we wondered if there was a kind of “more” beyond our earthly lives as well.

So important was the “more,” that we appointed priests to be in charge of it. They explained the heavens, pronounced moral rules for tribal relationships, told us there was more to us than meets the eye, assured us that we matter even after we are dead, and used music and ritual to elevate our imagination. These kinds of “more,” they explained, exemplify the “More of Being”: the marvel of life itself, the miracle of loving and being loved, the spaciousness of the human mind, the depth of the human soul, and the wonderment of being part of eternity. They described it, sometimes, as “sacred,” our intimations of the Divine.

We were hunter-gatherers then, in small bands that hardly ever encountered other tribes like ourselves. Our needs were few: we lived in caves or moved around wherever water was handy and food plentiful. We had no need of possessions.

With the dawn of agriculture, however, we settled down to farm and became aware of property. As our numbers grew, we needed more land, and when our expansion ran into similar expansion by other tribes, we decided to appoint kings to protect “our” more from “theirs.” With royal power came the right to palaces and riches. But the kings also organized a government, won wars, and minted coinage, thereby creating something called the “economy,” and bringing us wealth beyond our basic needs. When we saw what the coins could buy, we wanted more of them.

Thus was born a second kind of more: not the “More of Being,” but the “More of Having.”

Over the centuries, this More of Having accelerated exponentially, especially with the marriage of science to technology, and the invention of more things to own than we had ever imagined. To facilitate buying, trading, selling, and saving those things, we created advanced

economies with a financial sector in which even money could make money. The range of goods and services, treats and toys, that money could buy seemed as infinite as the heavens that once had captured our imagination; and, ironically, the air pollution that came with the production and use of our things prevented our seeing the heavens anymore anyway.

At first, the priests had done pretty much everything: they were also our doctors, lawyers, scientists, and teachers. Because evolution proceeds with ever-great complexity, however, the non-priestly roles were absorbed by other specialists. Priestly healers bourgeoned into corporate medical, pharmaceutical, and insurance mazes so convoluted that no one completely understood them. Priestly judges gave way to an equally tortuous judicial system, and priestly educators morphed into a labyrinth of institutions that mostly served the vast infrastructure of “having,” and the lucky few who were the biggest “havers.”

The final blow to the old-time priesthood had been the demise of bloody sacrifice. The ancient Jewish Temple mutated into synagogues, where expert “religionists” (rabbis, cantors, educators, executive directors, and so on) sought valiantly to fight our intoxication with the More of Having by remembering the More of Being.

Help came from (of all places) philosopher Emanuel Kant, who famously declared, “Two things filled the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” But religionists were not alone in claiming expertise in these two fields. Astronomers mapped the heavens with planets and stars that physicists explained with mathematical equations; psychologists reduced Kant’s moral law to an unconscious that psychotherapy sought to uncover.

As scientists successfully claimed ownership of both “the starry skies above” and “the moral law within,” the liberal religionists, at least (those who most appreciated science), began wondering what was left for them to do. By the late 20th century, lots of them kept busy as ritual functionaries, running through worship books on calendrical occasions and maintaining a monopoly on life-cycle ceremonies. Others specialized in the somewhat inchoate art of healing, relationship-building, small-group formation, and meaning-making. Still others threw themselves into social-justice causes. All three solutions were meritorious.

But the More of Having proved addictive. The computer era promised not just things but ever-updated versions of them. Even bar/bat mitzvahs and weddings became experiences we might “have.” Soon synagogue membership declined, because religionists who promised the More of Having could always be outclassed by others who offered the same sort of things and experiences for less. The market for self-help books, meditation classes, and destination weddings boomed.

Then came the game-changer: a thing called covid. With so many dying daily, we remembered that life is tenuous. Why had we been running so hard to get more and more of the More of Having? It had all worked well when we could keep on running, because the More of Having depended on constantly having more of it. But when we found ourselves locked away in our homes, with the fun places boarded up and the economy shut down, the More of Having failed us. Life, we saw, is a state of being not of having.

With all that carbon-spewing production and transportation shut down by Covid, we could actually see the stars again. The zoomed faces from around the globe brought recognition of human continuity beyond our own tribe. Once again, we took seriously the More of Being: the miracle of being alive; the challenge in raising our children—differently, perhaps, than we were raised—with more appreciation for God’s universe, more time for family and friends, and the desire to perfect the soul through thinking and conversing, artistry and imagination. Instead of counting our possessions, we would count our days—and make our days count. We would affirm human dignity, save the planet, and grow the world’s kindness and comfort.

As these thoughts dawned on us during Covid, we began attending synagogues again (albeit virtually), and by late 2021, we were told we could return in person. More and more people did: not just the regulars, that is, the people who had always attended whatever the synagogue offered, but new faces, people who had never given synagogues a thought, some of them not even Jewish. They wanted to find out if synagogues had something to say about the More of Being.

Here ends the Genealogy of More, up to Sunday April 25, 2021, the 13th of the Hebrew month of Iyar, 5781. There is more to the story of More, but alas, genealogies are retrospective, not predictive.

As of this writing, most synagogues are focused on the technical business of opening up safely, and of producing High Holy Day worship both in person and on zoom screens. But everyone knows the real questions lie beyond all that. Once we know how to open, we will have to demonstrate why it is worth our opening. And that raises the question of whether we are wise, willing, and bold enough to restructure our synagogues as tomorrow’s Jewish well-springs for the More of Being.

A Horse Named Hebrew

As a cheder child, I learned to gallop on a horse named Hebrew.
Sitting backwards, mind you—Hebrew ran the wrong way.
I won all the races.
Bah beh buh, buh beh bah beh buh:
The first line of my Hebrew primer.
I remember it to this day.
Ah, the joy of it!
Reaching the finishing post at line's end
Before the other kids in class,
who never were very good at it,
Whereas I,
I was to become a prize-winning jockey
In the Triple Crown
Of Hebrew riders.
I abandoned Saturday morning TV and pickup sports with friends,
To enter the Shabbat shul Sweepstakes.
No more simple bah buh beh.
I was adopted by the best,
Gristled daveners all,
Veteran riders who'd trained since birth
For all I knew.
They looked alike.
They were all old men.
Their first name was Mister.
They jockeyed for position from the time they donned their tallis,
Then ambled round the track through the first 70 pages,
Just to get their bearing,
Before moving to the starting post,
For
Borkhu!
And they were off!
They raced through whole clumps of pages,
Sitting, standing, standing, sitting.

A Shacharis that came and went,
An entire k'riyah faster than a speeding bullet --
Superman-like alacrity.
They rounded the final turn with a bruising Haftorah,
Then a Musaf Amidah at lightning speed,
Alenu as they crossed the wire,
And some Kaddishes of praise for the winners.
A veritable Belmont Hebrew Stakes,
One and half miles,
The Test of Champions.

• • •

One day
The rabbi let me in on a secret:
Hebrew spoke in a language I could learn to comprehend.
I could be more than a daredevil rider;
I could be a horse whisperer,
Bound for a winners' circle with garlands of roses:
I was still a long shot: 30, 40, even 50 to 1,
But the smart money was already coming my way.
That's how I went to rabbinic school:
To ride atop Hebrew into racing glory.
God help me,
Belmont is for three-year olds,
Whereas Hebrew, I found out,
Had been running for centuries,
It's every utterance, it seemed, had been captured and saved
For horse whisperers like me to understand.
And worse...
I discovered that
Over time,
My horse had curiously played around
With different sorts
of neighs and snorts
That they called Aramaic.
Of Hillel, it was said
Af hu ra'ah gulgolet achat shetsafah al p'nei hamayim, amar
I got that: the familiar Hebrew horse talk, after all:
"When he saw a skull floating on the face of the water, he said..."
But then:
Al d'ateift atifukh v'sof mtahy'fayikh y'tufun.

“Because you drowned others, others have now drowned you,
And those who drowned you will someday be drowned by others.”
I had to look it up.
My trusty Hebrew only takes me so far,
But I manage.
And managing is itself an accomplishment.
I’ve given up winning the race.
Because
Winners of races just inherit more races,
Until eventually, they lose.
Let no latter-day Hillel come along one day and say of me,
“Because you beat others in races, others have now beat you,
And those who beat you will someday be beat by others.”
Far off the race course,
I now take deep breaths,
And linger with Hebrew,
Still my horse of choice,
Enjoying the landscape it has seen and heard and felt,
And whispering in its ear,
“You know more than I do.
Tell me where to tarry along the route that you have taken.
Teach me how to see what it all might mean to me,
That I may pass the gift of meaning to others.
Let Hillel say of me,
“Because you are a blessing to others, others will be a blessing to you.
And they who are blessings to you will have others as blessings to them.
No races; no laurels; no winners; no losers.
Like the myth about turtles...
The good life is blessings all the way down.

The State of Grief

When my father died, my mother died too, but a little bit at a time, the victim of unremitting grief that I never understood. My father had been a dedicated podiatrist, who (way back in the 1950s) was pioneering “inlays,” his early word for what later became known as orthotics. But he knew nothing about running a practice, and he began making ends meet only when my mother became his receptionist, bookkeeper, and all-around business head. Yet when he died, she inexplicably descended into relative incompetence. Three years later, she died too.

I was in graduate school at the time, and my mother came regularly for extended stays to see her grandchildren: I could almost chart her decline from one visit to the next. “How could this be happening?” I wondered. Here was a woman of the world; a woman, moreover, whose natural warmth and kindness had won her countless friends; a woman finally, with a sister and sisters-in-law who lavished empathy, love, and care upon her. How could she have taken the slow and steady path to her own dying, as everyone around her was quite certain she did?

Gayle, my wife of only nine years, passed away a little over six weeks ago, and I now understand my mother better. I do not intend to follow her example, but I newly comprehend her despair. Over my fifty some-odd years of being a rabbi and a scholar, I have read countless tracts on death and dying; world literature on mourning; and, as you can imagine, whole collections of Jewish wisdom on the subject. But now, as an actual mourner—and still early on, as mourning goes—I know first-hand what had eluded me before. I am not yet on the fabled balcony from which one achieves total perspective on what is transpiring below, but even a few steps up the ladder to the balcony, I can say something about grief that I think will resonate with very many people, who (like my mother) might still elect to die, or who (like me) is choosing somehow to live.

Many years ago, I wrote an article on the subject of illness, drawing on essayist Susan Sontag’s trenchant claim that when we are born, we are issued two passports, one to the Land of the Well and the other to the Land of the Sick. We pocket the first and put aside the second, determined never to use it. But the day comes, for some of us earlier than others, when we exchange passports, and (inexplicably and against our will) are transported across a river to a land and culture not our own. To this spectacular metaphor, I added the liturgical concept of “inculturation,” the way religion can be transported into another culture but only with full acceptance of its indeed being another culture. Pastoral care is a sort of inculturation, where well-meaning people make boat trips across the river to the sick, but without realizing how meaningless their normal religious language may sound to residents there. How do we speak

meaningfully, I asked, to people for whom ordinary sentences, even well-intentioned ones, may seem hollow?

I believe now that the two “lands” are better understood as “states”: the State of Wellbeing and the State of Sickness, because wellbeing and sickness are existential states of being. The State of Wellbeing feels so normal, that when you are in it, you hardly notice it. Not so the State of Sickness, where you notice almost nothing else. When you enter the State of Sickness with a serious, chronic, and maybe even fatal disease, you are forced to admit that you have a passport to remain in that state, from which nothing looks the same anymore.

Having attended the horror of my wife’s final stages of cancer, even holding her hand here at home as she breathed her last, I finally understood my own article. I know now that it is one thing to read—and even to write—the truths of illness or of death; and another to experience them. As Gayle’s condition worsened, as our days were filled with chemotherapy, doctors’ visits, MRIs, and endless pills, salves and supplements to counteract the cancer and its treatments, it dawned on me that I was not just visiting across the river; I was living there; if I hadn’t actually accessed my passport to the State of Sickness, I was at least in possession of a Green Card.

Now that Gayle is gone, I am trying to get back home to the other side. From where I sit, I see my friends in the State of Wellbeing waving welcome balloons from the riverbank, in anticipation of my return. Increasingly, I have been spending whole days in a canoe that I have fashioned, paddling furiously to reach them, only to find that by nightfall, the current carries me back to an area adjacent to the State of Sickness, but its own independent state, a breakoff, apparently, from it, a state of deep-down sadness called “Grief”; and what I want to say is that grief is more than just a feeling, an emptiness, and an indescribably terrible heartache. It is its own existential state of being, the State of Grief, just a short walk away from that part of the State of Sickness where the people you loved have died. It is a state that quarantines its victims in loneliness (even when people visit) and in memories that are painful rather than comforting (however much people say they will be comforting, someday).

When Gayle died, my Green Card to the State of Sickness was automatically cancelled; but the announcement of its cancellation came along with an unexpected passport to The State of Grief. Some small print on my passport says that most people quite properly take up residence there for a while, but then sail back home to the Land of Wellbeing again. The print is not just tiny, however, but lighter as well, and it carries the warning that it fades with time. Some people, like my mother, never was able to operationalize the escape clause. She kept that passport to the end: it expired when she did. It was not her fault. Living in the State of Grief myself, I have seen how hard it is to leave.

They say it is healthy to live here for a while, as long as I don’t actually settle in so long that the small print fades utterly away. But I am anxious now to trade in my Grief Passport for the Wellbeing one that I left behind somewhere across the river. On a clear day, I can see every detail of its shoreline, even the tiny wharf from which I once sailed away. It is also where my new little boat will land. But I cannot yet fully imagine reaching it. The State of Grief is a

marshland. The trails are barely marked; it is easy to get lost in the jungle of despair. Worse yet, at some point the marsh becomes quicksand. Look away, for even a second, from the promise of deliverance on the opposite bank, and you risk stepping into the quicksand, and then sinking into deeper and deeper desperation, rather than holding out hope for dry land again. I suspect my mother died there.

I am among the luckier ones. Hundreds of people have wished me well just on Facebook alone, never mind the emails and handwritten cards. I am enormously indebted to all of you reading this posting, because I took great comfort in your virtual presence. In addition, I have received many visitors who let me share my condition with them. But when they phone me, after their visit, it is a long-distance call to where I sit: across the river, still.

I am muddling through, however, thanks to wonderful friends and family who have not abandoned me, but mostly through some unknown factor having nothing to do with what I deserve—call it the grace of God. Why, after all, do I suspect I will someday cross the river, whereas my mother, who had friends and family also, let the quicksand have its way?

Did I just say “let”? I apologize, Mom. No one “lets” the quicksand swallow her up; no one “chooses” to sink deeper within it. For you, however, Mom, I see that life without Dad had become overwhelming, intolerable. You did your best. It was all you could do at the time.

God willing, I, however, will make it across the river. Through all the tears, and despite the insistent memories of Gayle worsening and then dying before my eyes, through all of this, I see my strength increasing to the point where I will paddle successfully beyond the current that impedes my repatriation. I am packing my canoe with memories of course—they won’t go away anyway—but whereas now they are painful, they will look more consoling in the Land of Wellbeing.

Meanwhile, I think, endlessly, taking mental notes on my condition—that’s what scholars do, I guess. And I continue to learn. I may have more to say in future posts.

The State of Grief 2 (Angels, Oars, Visas, and a Little Theology)

Thanks to so many who wrote me with consoling words of hope—no, not just hope; faith is more like it, faith that I would eventually find my way back home to Wellbeing. Faith and patience, actually, because the word “eventually” looms large.

The mind is an amazing thing. Out of nowhere, I found myself remembering a tenth-century rabbinic responsum I used to teach—would you believe it? For those who did not go to rabbinic or cantorial school, let me say that a responsum is just a rabbinic answer to a legal question. This one is about pidyon haben, “redemption of the first-born boy,” a ritual that (for several reasons), is not universally observed nowadays, so some readers may not have been at one. No matter. The section of the responsum that I somehow conjured up is no longer part of the official ritual anyway.

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1. Angels

In medieval times, the ritual gave thanks for the healthy baby by including a statement of rabbinic embryology. It is a poetic fiction of course, an imaginative attempt to capture the miracle of embryonic formation and a baby coming successfully into the world. With no medical science on which to rely, the prayer draws instead on quotations from the Book of Job (Chap 10), where Job looks back on his embryonic existence, and says (among other things), “You [God] granted me life and loving-kindness” (*chayim vachessed*). From this, the prayer deduces, “God appoints angels to watch over the foetus in the mother’s womb.”

The “proof text” (Job 10:12) is itself rich with implications. Reasonably enough, Job recalls being granted life throughout his gestation, but why loving-kindness?

The lesson I draw is that to be human, you need two things: not just life but the capacity for loving-kindness as well. An embryo that does not develop into life is an anomaly that (we say) “is miscarried”; a baby born with life but not loving-kindness is equally an anomaly, a type of person about whom we wonder, “How can someone be so unfeeling, even cruel?” Think of Jaubert in *Les Misérables*, for example. Jaubert is alive; he is human—but not humane, not the way people are meant to be.

What amazes me equally, however, is something else: the play on words, by which the prayer interprets “life and loving-kindness” as the names of the angels, as if God summoned two angels named Chayim (Life) and Chesed (Loving Kindness), to watch over the proper development of the foetus. Naming is a concrete way of bringing lofty ideas down to earth.

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2. Oars

“Don’t even try to comfort the bereaved while their dead still lie before them,” the Rabbis say. Good advice. When loved ones die, they lie before you long after the funeral. Only eventually, do you heal sufficiently to hear what people say, and only then do you begin paddling back across the river that divides the State of Grief from the State of Wellbeing. What I have learned since my last letter is this: what you need most for that journey are faith and patience: faith that you will someday get there; and patience until you do.

If a foetus could write a blog, I suppose it too might urge “faith and patience,” to get through the nine months until birth. It strikes me, then, that the in-betweenness of floating between Grief and Wellbeing is womb-like: I am in the process of being born again; this gestation of mourning will not quickly end, just because I wish it would. I should never have imagined that I could just jump into a canoe and paddle home without being repeatedly turned back by the tide. The Rabbis think that waiting for the Messiah is another period of gestation, and they say of it, “You cannot force the end.” So too with mourning. Canoes are sleek and speedy, but speed is not my friend at the moment.

So I ditched my canoe and paddle and traded them in for a rowboat and oars—two oars, mind you, which I have named: not “Life and Lovingkindness,” but “Faith and “Patience.”

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3. Visas

What I like about my clunky rowboat is that, unlike a canoe, it must be rowed slowly, just a bit at a time. When the effort exhausts me, I sit on the gentle waves for a day or two, before rowing some more. On one of those periods, quite close to Wellbeing’s shore, I observed that whenever I got this close, the current would draw my little rowboat back into the river’s depths again. Now, patience is a fine thing to help one wait, but waiting is itself an opportunity, not just to vegetate but to look around and see things differently, so I pondered the problem and discovered my mistake. I was fixated on the jetty from which I had left the State of Wellbeing in the first place. I had forgotten the advice of a friend who had gone through this before me: “When you return, you will find yourself landing on a different stretch of beachfront.”

Sure enough, by expanding my horizon, I could see several jetties along the beach. The State of Wellbeing, it turns out, is not a single thing. It is divided into provinces, each with its own beachfront. The beach from which I left has no landing jetty at all; you can leave from there, but you must return to some other province, which requires its own visa. These

provincial visas come with asterisked caveats in small print, “Wellbeing, even though....” I am rowing once again, still patiently of course, but this time, I am heading toward the province set aside for returnees to Wellbeing (*Even Though They Have Suffered a Devastating Loss).

Everyone copes with something or other, eventually—several somethings or other over the course of a lifetime. If we flip through the pages of our passports, we will see them stamped with stages of our life that we have visited, and a record of the various visas we have had to obtain along the way: each major disappointment, each terrible sadness, each character flaw that made us do something of which we are not proud—each of these has its own jetty for return; each one demands a visa. Wellbeing, then, is not just “wellbeing because”; it is equally “*wellbeing even though....”

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4. A Little Theology

I hate to quote truisms, but some truisms deserve attention, and this is one of them: You can't go home again. Each step we take disappears into eternity, never to be trod again. Theologically, we might say that it disappears from us, but not from the mind of God, that sole point of view that sees time the way we see space (time and space being, as we know, a single continuum). We think of eternity linearly, as if it is just that part of a straight line that goes on without any end. But eternity isn't linear. It is cumulative. It contains all that will happen as well as all that has already come to pass.

Imagine our expanding map of space. Human mapping began with just our neighborhood; then bits and pieces of the globe until we had explored all around the world; and now we are extending it, endlessly actually, to include however far we go into the ever-expanding universe. Take a spacecraft out to Jupiter, and you no longer see the earth; but the earth is there. So too, with time. What happened long ago is still “there,” but only God can see it; because only God sees time the way we see space. God sees “everything” (space) all the time, *sub specie aeternitatis*, “from the aspect of eternity,” as Spinoza phrased it.

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So much for patience, my first oar. It's taken some patience for you (and for me) to get this far into the story. But then there is faith, my second oar, which is its own chapter, and will have to await another posting.

How's Your Faith?

“How's your faith,” a woman asked me just before my daughter underwent her first brain surgery for epilepsy. She was the mother of the patient down the hall, a hulking teenager, multiply disabled beyond his epilepsy, who spent each day watching cartoons and repetitively stuffing a nerf ball into a basketball net affixed to the foot of his bed. “If I didn't have faith that he will someday sit at the right hand of God, I don't know how I could get through each day,” the mother explained. “But I figure, if he is good enough for God to love, then I can love him too.”

“That's real faith,” I thought to myself. “I wish I had it.” But I didn't. I didn't know any Jews who did. In five years of rabbinical school, faith was rarely discussed, never expected, and frequently disparaged.

Faith had been a major topic in medieval Jewish philosophy, however. Maimonides himself (1138–1204) established thirteen principles of faith; Joseph Albo (1380–1444) emphasized three. But modern scholarship tended to dismiss their efforts, as if faith was just for Christians, not for Jews. Back when I went to school, for example, we were assigned two turgid philosophical textbooks, one by Isaac Husik (from 1916) and one by Julius Guttmann (from 1933). Both authors went out of their way to downplay faith: Maimonides (they pointed out) never included his principles in his philosophy; Albo was portrayed as a dogmatic anti-intellectual. Husik's *Index*, does not even list “Faith” as a topic.

To this day, that modern scholarly bias has hampered Jewish discussions of faith. Faith has indeed been more central to Christians than to Jews, but it is not as if Jews never had it or do not want it.

We are so deeply biased against it that discussions of faith are awkward, unproductive, and rare. Do you believe in God? In prayer? In an afterlife? If we answer “Yes,” we risk being judged as people of faith, but quaintly antediluvian, like the Cheshire cat of *Alice in Wonderland*, who practiced believing six impossible things before breakfast.

Faith need not imply dogmatic belief, however. The word “faith” has many other meanings as well. We can put our faith in someone; we can have faith that something will happen; we can show good faith of our own. “In faith” says Shakespeare (*Sonnet 141*), meaning just “In truth.” We can be “faithful” and believe nothing whatever. If our conversations about faith are to get us anywhere, we need a new way of talking about it.

When I say, therefore, that my journey home to the State of Wellbeing was helped along by faith, you should properly ask me what in the world I am talking about. That, at least, is what I have been asking myself, and I have come to the following conclusion. Faith is not something you have; it is a strategy you follow.

Life vacillates between hardship and comfort, disappointment and elation, trauma and healing. Mostly, it is none of the above, neither highs nor lows. It is usually just suiting up and showing up: to work, to family, to responsibility, to exercise, to dinner with friends. None of this happens without strategies in place, usually those we adopt unconsciously as children, and then modify as adults. Faith is such a strategy, a counter-strategy to the less helpful ones, a strategy we can elect, if we wish.

The “election” process is more complicated than it looks, however, because it is not the case that I see a strategy out there called faith, and then decide to adopt it. It is the other way around. Having experimented with various strategies for life, I look at the one that has proved to be most promising, and then I decide what to name it. I find optimism better than pessimism; trust better than suspicion; truth better than falsity; kindness better than cruelty. The world is a glass, half full and half empty, but I customarily do better when I live with the half-full part. “Faith” seems to me an eminently apt name for all of this.

Among the many accepted meanings of “faith,” the Oxford English Dictionary lists these: “The quality of fulfilling one’s trust or promise; fidelity, loyalty, trustworthiness; the duty of fulfilling one’s trust; firm trust or belief in or reliance upon something; a set of firmly held principles, ideals, or beliefs; in truth, really, truly.” All of that is a pretty apt description of how I try to manage my way through life.

More importantly, perhaps, it is how I want to manage my way through life. Like everyone, I have tried other strategies too: anger at the world, despair at feeling powerless to fix it; distrust of others, when too many people fail me; guardedness when vulnerability proves hurtful. But overall, I have found those strategies disastrous. When I descend into them, I try to remember the benefit of faith.

I have been guided by William James, who says words have cash value; Thomas Dewey, who thinks words are utilitarian; and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who likens words to tools in a toolbox. The name I adopt for my strategy must have value and utility as a tool to help me lead a better life.

I have rejected the more secular word “hope,” for example, because as a tool for handling the world, it is too modest, hardly the same cash value as “faith.” The Judaism of the Rabbis is hopeful, of course, just as I am hopeful, but rabbinic hope, and my own, are rooted in the much richer approach that is better captured by the word “faith.” Faith is more robust; it points me toward a greater possibility of certainty; it opens the door for my Jewish heritage in ways that mere hope does not. And it allows me to name the things of my experience with religious language that elevates the conversation and myself, as I do the conversing. I name things “godly.” I look at friendship, beauty, love, and kindness, and say, “That’s what I mean by God.” I love what Elizabeth Barrett Browning says in *Aurora Leigh*:

Earth’s crammed with heaven;
and every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.

So many States in the existential Map of Being (the State of Grief, the State of Despair, the State of Anger, and more) depend ultimately on whether you think we are alone on the narrow bridge of life. Through pure, sheer, regularized use, I have memorized Psalm 23:4, “Even while walking through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me”; and from Adon Olam, “In God’s hand I put my soul, when I’m awake and when I sleep; and with my soul, my body too. God is with me. I need not fear.” I pray each night (from Hashkiveinu): “May God lay me down in peace and wake me up to life,”—a full life; in my case now, a life renewed. I wait each year for Yom Kippur’s concluding service (N’ilah) and its most important prayer: “You [God] reach out your hand to sinners.”

And if to sinners, then all the more so, to sufferers, those against whom the world and its ways have sinned. The premature death of my wife Gayle, by a rare cancer that we do not as yet know how to cure, was a sin committed by nature. In my State of Grief, I walked through that valley of deep darkness, but somehow remembered an outstretched hand of God, the image our prayerbook offers for the assurance that we are never alone. Without that helping hand, I would never have picked up the oars to start rowing home to Wellbeing in the first place. I almost never believe literally in the stuff that popular culture considers matters of faith. But the strategy of faith has invariably saved me.

A Hanukah Lesson—“These lights are holy....”

Perhaps the most distinctive core value in Judaism is holiness. It is everywhere you look: God is holy, so we should be (Lev. 19:1); “Holy holy holy,” the angels sing out to God (Isaiah 6:3). We have holy time (Shabbat), holy space (the Temple of old), and holy people (the priests, the kohanim). The opposite of holy (kodesh) is the everyday or ordinary (chol).

The Rabbis see holiness as sometimes rippling out, in concentric circles from a source, and lessening in intensity with each ripple, until eventually, it dissipates and becomes the everyday: from the Temple to the Temple Mount, for example, then to Jerusalem, and to the Land of Israel altogether, but becoming “ordinary” outside of the Land’s borders.

It is also envisioned as being transferable by analogy: Not just the Temple, but the synagogue; not just the priests who conducted sacrifice, but the rabbis and cantors who lead prayer, the k’lei kodesh, “vessels of holiness,” as they are called.

Classical Christianity too featured holiness (although not quite as centrally) and as Christianity permeated western culture, holiness infused literature in general, but at the expense of losing its core meaning. John Donne (1572–1631) composed nineteen Holy Sonnets in which “holy” describes “discontent,” “mourning,” and “dropsie,” by which he means love sickness. In 1955, beat poet Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) said “everything” is holy—“jazz-bands”; “cafeterias”; his friends, lovers, and other beat writers (Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and William Burroughs); anatomical body parts that I refrain from mentioning here; but also, “the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!” From a 1787 poem of Robert Burns, we get “Holy Willie,” meaning “hypocrite.” An 1883 story by G. W. Peck gave us a mischievous child as a “Holy terror.” J.D. Salinger thinks a preacher is a “Holy Joe.” After Napoleon’s defeat, Russia, Austria and Prussia became the Holy Alliance. We also get holy cow, holy Moly (originally, “Holy Moses”), holy mackerel, and holy smoke. We admire people who are holy, as long as they are not “holier than thou.”

When a word means everything, it ceases meaning anything; but we ought to wonder what “holy” meant when it still meant something.

The usual way out is etymological, asking what the Hebrew root for holy (k.d.sh) connoted. Seminary students often learn, therefore, that “holy” means “set aside for special use.” Hekdesh is anything set aside to be given to the Temple, in service of God. Kiddushin, the ceremony of betrothal (and first step in marriage) must mean “setting aside” one particular person for an exclusive love relationship. There is some truth to that of course, but etymology is not always reliable. Joel Hoffman, my son whose doctorate is in linguistics, directs me to

the Oxford English Dictionary, to see that glamour comes from the word grammar; grammar denoted (in part) language formed perfectly enough to cast sacred spells—which were an instance of glamour. But how many people who studied grammar, Joel asks, think it was glamorous?

Three modern thinkers made holiness a favored topic in the scholarly study of religion. The first was Emil Durkheim (1858–1917), a Jew. Coming from a rabbinic family (his grandfather was a chief rabbi) he was conditioned to see holiness as important. He preferred the word “sacred,” from the Latin, *sacrum*, meaning that which belonged to the gods, like the ancient temples and their sacred rites; he contrasted “sacred” with “profane,” from the Latin *profanum*, meaning the space outside the Temple precincts. Profanare was the act of bringing the offerings to the Temple site—before, that is, they became sacred. But Durkheim was a scientist, so he explained the sacred sociologically as the way groups underwrite their morality by projecting it onto the divine.

Durkheim wrote in 1915; just two years later, a German Lutheran, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), made history by composing *The Idea of the Holy*, where (unlike Durkheim) he claimed that the holy is a category of actual experience, no projection at all. He described it in Latin: the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery before which we tremble, yet to which we are attracted because we find it fascinating. The Latin loses something in translation. Just murmur the Latin out loud a few times and you get a pretty good inkling of the feeling provided by traditional Lutheran worship, and, for that matter, classical Reform Judaism as well.

The last great pioneer of the sacred is Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who was raised in the Romanian Orthodox Church, but who studied practically everything thereafter and is often considered the founder of the discipline called History of Religions. Eliade threaded the needle between Durkheim (the sacred is a human construct) and Otto (the sacred is real). He saw it as both. The reality of the sacred can be seen in anything: a humanly made object (a cross); an ancient text (Torah), a rock (the one in the Dome of the Rock), and not just famous things and places, but ordinary things as well. The sacred presents itself by bursting forth in what he called a hierophany (from the Greek *hieros*-, “sacred,” and *phainein*, “to show”). But it takes human readiness to recognize it. It is as if we actualize its existence by our own capacity to appreciate it.

Ah yes, maybe, but what is it?

Here is where Hanukkah candles come in handy.

To this day, many Jews light candles and sing *Hanerot hallalu kodesh hem...* (“These lights are holy...”), which is cited in an 8th-century work (*Massekhet Sofrim*), where it is not a song but a proclamation. “These lights are holy; we may not use them. “Not using” does not mean “having no function.” They have their own function: we are to put them in the window “to proclaim the miracle” of Hanukkah.

But they are non-utilitarian; we may not otherwise use them for anything. We may not, for example, read by their light, or use their light to find lost objects. We cannot light one Hanukkah candle and then use that one to light the others (we need an extra non-holy candle to

do that). The holy, then, is the non-utilitarian, the opposite of “the ordinary” which we spend our lifetimes dreaming up how to use.

A whole host of other Jewish laws now make sense. Because Shabbat is holy, we cannot work on it. Because Torah is holy, we cannot “use it as a spade to dig with.” Rabbis may not get paid for teaching Torah. They do have to earn a living, however, so we use a legal fiction: rabbis get paid for what they would be doing, if they weren’t teaching Torah. An early law about synagogues forbids making a shortcut through them. They are holy, like the Temple, so you cannot traipse through them to save time.

Ultimate holiness resides in God; so prayer is permitted, but not magic, because that would be using God. Kiddushin (the first step in marriage, remember) is holy, because we cannot use the people to whom we are in relationship. But so too of other relationships: all relationships are holy—we call each one a brit, a sacred contract. They may have a function (I pay you for what you sell me) but I cannot use that understanding for my own benefit beyond what the contract allows: I cannot cheat you by using the small print against you. For that matter, we cannot use other human beings altogether. Human beings are made in the image of God. That makes them holy. We cannot just “use” them.

Holy things have their own intrinsic purposes. Shabbat reminds us of creation; we live by Torah; kiddushin enables marriage; the synagogue is for prayer and study; Hanukah lights proclaim the miraculous. But none of them are utilitarian, mere opportunities for us to bend the holy to our own ends: to make use of them.

That’s not a bad lesson for our time, when people inevitably wonder, “What’s in it for me?” The answer, sometimes, is “Nothing.” We are capable, at our best, of being God-like, appreciating holy things simply as what they are.

With a sparkle in her eye and a smile on her face, my grandmother used to chide me when I was mischievous by calling me “a good for nothing.” Maybe she was onto something.

“Announcements, Announcements, Announcements”—“Holy, Holy, Holy”

You’ve surely seen those movies of Victorian households where daily life is punctuated by the butler’s announcements of guests. Without the benefit of phones, people regularly made social calls, although never informally, and never before 3:00 in the afternoon, to give the hosts plenty of time to finish their work and dress properly to receive the callers. The point of calling was, in part, simply that you could, a confirmation that your own status was such that the hosts would admit you. Calling cards were left to pile up on a silver calling-tray, as an iconic display of status, yours and theirs. Everyone who dropped by was announced, and if invited for dinner, you were announced twice: once, upon arrival, and then again on your way into the dining room, so that you could be conveniently informed of who was who—and of Who’s Who, in which just being there made you happily included.

These Victorian announcements were an extension of medieval court etiquette. Nobles visited back and forth among one another, but only some of them got to visit the royal court, in which case, they were announced before entering. Without an extraordinarily good reason, rulers did not visit back—hence their several massive palaces, space enough to pursue their royal lives, without having to leave home. When extraordinary reasons did present themselves, rulers arrived at their subjects’ castles, fiefdoms, and cities with an equally extraordinary announcement of who they were—not just another noble, but the king or queen to whom all the nobles owed allegiance.

Announcing royal visits goes back farther still, at least to 1st-century Rome, with the rise of the all-powerful emperors, from Caesar Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) on. These emperors were increasingly deified (augustus is an added appellation meaning “revered”—frequently used in opposition to *humanus*). Throughout the empire, there grew up an imperial cult, replete with holiday processions featuring statuary of the emperor-gods being carried into ritual religious spaces. Choirs called “hymnodes” sang hymns of praise that announced the imperial presence. Our own ritual processions as we march down the aisle for one reason or another (weddings? ordinations? academic convocations?) are descended from the imperial ones.

By the end of the first century, the Roman empire had seen several exceptional emperor-gods, some of them competent, all of them cruel. In the year 96, a certain John of Patmos (a city in Asia Minor), a Jew who had joined the Jesus movement in a time when religious identity was fluid, lashed out at the imperial world around him by writing a treatise that became the last book in the Christian Bible, Revelation. Perfectly familiar with the way emperor-gods

were greeted in cities like his own, he envisioned the God of the Bible as the patron deity of another city, Jerusalem. As God appeared, the city elders, playing the role of hymnodes, announced God's arrival. What they sang (Revelation 4:8) was the angelic praise of Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy"—an announcement, originally, of Isaiah's vision, "the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne, with the train of his robe filling the temple."

We now understand the prominence of "Holy, holy, holy" in our Jewish liturgy, the form of which is much indebted to Greco-Roman sensibilities. The very word "liturgy" (from the Greek leitourgia) meant, originally, an office, or duty, discharged for the public good; including the "public work" of sacrificing to curry favor with the gods. The Hebrew equivalent for our Temple cult—avodah—meant the same thing. When prayer replaced sacrifice, the word avodah travelled with it, and is still the name of the 17th blessing in the Amidah, where we ask God to accept our "public service"—meaning the Amidah we are just concluding, the prayer where we stand, as one would, when in the presence of a monarch. We still bow at the beginning and end, taking three steps back and forth, as if symbolically approaching and then taking leave of God's throne.

That blessing follows thirteen others, the petitionary prayers, that presuppose the Roman system of patronage, whereby people relied on powerful patrons to grant their wishes. Even patrons had patrons more powerful than themselves, culminating in the highest patron of all, the emperor, who was not just a king of some petty kingdom, but the king of kings. Our divine patron is more powerful still—not just the king of kings, but the king of kings of kings (melekh malkhei ham'lakhim). Patronage was inheritable, in that children of those who had enjoyed access to a patron's grace could claim the right to continue it. So before the thirteen petitions (in case our Divine patron does not recognize us), we announce who we are: descendants of ancestors who concluded a covenant of patronage with God at the very beginning. There then follows acknowledgement of the patron's power to grant our requests. Other patrons, even the emperor, are powerful enough even to kill at whim. Our patron can go one better—resurrect the dead.

And then we offer the hymnodic praise that we saw in Isaiah and (more contemporaneously to our liturgy's early years) in Revelation: "Holy, Holy, holy"—Our God is not just powerful like the emperors, but holy as well.

All of which is interesting, but it is more than that, because the Roman model of a procession carrying statuary of an emperor-god (and of hymnodes announcing their arrival in song) is echoed profoundly in a midrash (Deut. Rab.4:5), which envisions each human being as the statuary of the divine. The midrash begins with a Hebrew word, okoniah (a variant of ikoniah) from the Greek eikonion, "statuary"; more specifically, the statuary of the emperors carried in procession; but by extension, just the procession itself. "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: A procession (okoniah) goes before a human being, and what does the procession say? 'Make way for the image of the holy blessed one,' for what is each and every human being, if not the image of God. And who are in the procession? They are the angels, reenvisioned as hymnodes, the same ones who announced God with "Holy, Holy, Holy" and now announce us as well.

We are unlikely to have God call upon us directly down here, but we do get calling cards that are worth saving in our memories the way Victorians saved calling cards in their silver tray. Walt Whitman rhapsodized over them: "In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass, I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name." From the midrash, we learn too, that we carriers of God's image are announced by angels. All those Victorians, those kings and queens, and even the Roman emperors have nothing on us.

Imagine That!

Jack London's famous short story ("To Build a Fire") tells the chilling tale of a solitary hiker traversing the Yukon at fifty degrees below zero. He is an experienced guide, knows all the tricks of survival, has trekked the freezing wilderness again and again; but this time, he miscalculates, runs out of matches, cannot light a fire, and dies. "He was," says London, "quick and alert in the things of life but only in the things, and not in the significances.... He had no imagination." He knew how cold it was. But he did not then "meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon human frailty in general...and from there, to the conjectural field of immortality and the human place in the universe."

Here are two levels of imagination. Elemental self-preservation requires the first: to meditate on our "frailty as a creature of temperature." Religion raises the second: "human frailty in general... and the conjectural field of immortality and the human place in the universe."

Religion is a sort of imagination. It is the study of significances. It is a flight of fancy, but not fantasy. It is the positing of a connective tissue behind and beyond phenomena, what used to be called metaphysics—which is why religion fell out of favor altogether, when science came into being. In London's story, human "frailty as creatures of temperature" is physics; "the conjectural field of immortality and the human place in the universe" is metaphysics. It is precisely metaphysical significance that religion stops to ponder.

Take the quintessentially Jewish field of Halakhah for example. On the surface, it is just a set of rules for life. But it is much more. When a halakhic mind encounters a mountain, says the Rav [Joseph B. Soloveitchik], it calculates "the measurements which determine a private domain: a sloping mound that retains a height of 10 handbreadths within a distance of 4 cubits." At stake is the Shabbat regulation against carrying things—a form of "work." We may carry within a private domain, our home. But we may also (for example) link together lamp-posts with a wire, as an imaginary artificial wall surrounding a larger space that contains our home, and in theory extends it. A mountain cliff as part of that surrounding wall will do as well, but when does a hill with a slope become a mountain with a cliff?

The athletic imagination sees the slope as a potential ski run: that's physics. But carrying from private to public domains as forbidden Shabbat work? A mountainside but not a hilly slope as a valid boundary to the private? Pure metaphysics.

Once you get the idea, examples proliferate. Food is not just healthy or unhealthy, but also permitted or forbidden. And time is not empty. It comes loaded with responsibilities: when to pray or light candles; when funerals can be held but not with eulogies; when marriages are permitted or forbidden.

I have always had a high regard for this. I have loved the idea of a world filled with divine secrets, both the scientific kind, and the parallel track, if you like, for Jews to calculate. But I could not convince myself of the metaphysical truth behind the halakhic system and I was unwilling to live by it just because it is “tradition.”

That is precisely how Reform started some 200 years ago. Science and reason had stripped away the believability of the halakhic metaphysic. In sociologist Max Weber’s famous terms, the world became “disenchanted.”

But those very same founders retained—indeed, they insisted on—another kind of metaphysics, the matters of ultimate meaning: Why are we born? What is the point of life? How do we confront tragedy? What can we say about God? Do we have a soul? Without the Halakhic metaphysic, they doubled down on the Theological one—whereas our generation has thrown out metaphysics altogether. Our congregants are becoming like London’s hiker: out loud, at least, and in public, they fail to meditate on “human frailty in general... and from there ... to the conjectural field of immortality and the human place in the universe”—but only because their synagogues are places where such questions are rarely entertained.

Yes, a handful of people take a course in God or ethics. But you can attend services a very long time, without ever encountering the Jewish metaphysical substratum upon which Reform Judaism is built; and without it, being Reform is just a matter of taste: you like the music; the people are nice; you have fun Friday night. I worry that we have domesticated Reform Judaism; it’s a nice pet to have around.

It should be clear by now that the metaphysic I am talking about *is Theology (with a capital T), by which I mean three things.

1. theology (with a small t): what we think about God—what Protestant theologian Paul Tillich nicely labelled, our “ultimate concern”
2. religious anthropology: human nature.
3. religious cosmology: the kind of world in which we find ourselves and in which we must make our way.

Are there moments in life when we have experienced something we might call the presence of God (theology)? Are people good or bad? Does life have a purpose, or are we just accidents of nature (anthropology)? Is the world friendly to our aspirations? Are the laws of ethics absolute like the laws of nature? Do the Jewish People have a role in human history? Does history even matter? Is there such a thing as progress (cosmology)?

I do not delude myself into thinking that everyone we meet walks around with heavy Theological questions driving their day. They want a Judaism that is joyous and synagogues that embrace them. And to our credit, we have spent almost forty years developing both: joyous services where greeters welcome newcomers; the clergy smile; the band plays klezmer; people yell out mazal tov moments. We are a healing community too; we pray for the sick and suffering. This is all to the good. People want and deserve all this: at a minimum.

But the synagogue must be more than minimum: more than a good time on select Friday

nights, more even than classes for which few people have the time or patience. It must reflect religion's promise of "moreness": the reality of transcendence, the centrality of history, a purpose behind Jewish Peoplehood; an ethic to guide and sustain us; the imperative of hope (even, and especially, when reasons are scarce); and a way to meet death when it comes (as it most assuredly will), with tranquility of mind.

Our synagogues must engender, and our clergy must personify, the Jewish Theological imagination—not as dogma, but as depth. We do need a caring community; but a caring community that cares enough to invite and to embody questions of ultimacy.

The Jewish Gold Standard

We all know the word “capital”: a synonym, roughly, for our assets, usually the financial kind, what we calculate to decide our economic worth. But there are many kinds of capital, the way there are many kinds of worth. Social capital, for example, comes from influential social standing; cultural capital depends on whatever a culture values as educational accomplishments, artistic standing, and social class.

So too, there is “Jewish capital,” what we take to be our Jewish “worth.” For some 2,000 years, Jewish capital has been measured by “Talmudism”: knowledge of the Talmud and the literature it has spawned (like commentaries, responsa, and codes); and a halachic lifestyle derived from that literature. More than anything else, these two things, Talmudic knowledge and halachic practice, have functioned over time as the measure of Jewish worth, a determiner of Jewish status and what counts as Jewish authenticity.

The proper economic analogy would be gold: Talmudism is the historical Jewish gold standard.

Under the gold standard, a country is worth whatever gold it has. Paper money, by itself worthless, accrues value only insofar as the country issuing it can back it up with gold. Alternatively, governments can determine the value of their currency by legal fiat: the British pound, the American dollar, the Japanese yen and so on, now rise or fall relative to one another, without regard to how much gold a country stockpiles.

Just as most countries today no longer feel obliged to measure their economic wealth by gold, most Jews today need no longer measure their Jewish worth by Talmudism. To be sure, gold is not a bad thing to own, and Talmudism is not a bad thing to master, but knowledge of Talmud and fealty to halachah are not the only ways to measure Jewish worth.

There were always other forms of Jewish capital: philosophical or kabbalistic expertise in the Middle Ages, for example, but under the prevailing gold standard of Talmudism, these were always secondary to Talmudic/halachic loyalty, without which, regardless of intellectual acumen or personal piety, one was religiously bankrupt.

All that changed in the 19th century, when an explosion of alternative Jewish capital occurred: academic Jewish scholarship, Zionism, and religious (but not halachic) Judaism. That explosion continues, with creative Jewish ritual for example: feminist rosh chodesh groups and novel life-cycle events, where those creating them do not worry overly much about what—or even whether—Talmudism has anything to say about them.

When ultra-traditionalists insist that a Jewish state be halachically based, they are arguing, in effect, to retain the Jewish gold standard, without conceding that we are in an age of fiat

capital. Governments proclaim their euros or yuan as legal tender, and as long as we agree to honor them, they function as actual wealth. So too with Jewish culture, Judaism as religion, and even Talmudism itself: these are all forms of fiat capital nowadays, for those who decide to honor them.

But old ideas of capital die hard. Jews who say they are not “religious” (i.e., “they do not use the currency of Talmudism”) may be devotees of other Jewish capital instead. The negative consequence of denying authenticity to them is staggering. No matter how frequently people visit Jewish museums, travel to Israel, read Jewish books, and zoom Jewish programming, they will get the message that they lack “real” Jewish worth.

When the gold standard came under attack in the late nineteenth century, it was the eastern banking establishment with mastery of old-school capital who insisted that gold alone was real wealth. So too, it is the Jewish religious establishment—rabbis and halachah-keepers, by and large—who are most likely to argue that Talmudism is the only real form of Jewish wealth. They have spent lifetimes mastering it, after all. They, as it were, own big chunks of it.

When I say “they,” I also mean “me,” because I too was raised to value Talmudism as the only real Jewish capital. To be sure, I am Reform, and never was halachic, but for my doctorate, I almost majored in Talmud; I still read it avidly; if I had to choose a single “book” to take with me to a desert island, it would be The Babylonian Talmud. But I have come to admire other forms of Judaism as valid capital too. I am not unique in this realization; this is not news to most of the serious Jews I know.

But still, I worry: because not just anything goes. The purchase value of fiat currency fluctuates with the underlying health of the economy for which it stands. Take Talmudism itself. Supporting an argument by cherry-picking Talmudic snippets taken out of context doesn’t count for very much. If such “convenience quoting” is Talmudism’s currency, it is debased currency, a kind of Talmudic inflation that drives the worth of talmudism down. So too with other forms of Jewish currency. They too must mirror enough Jewish depth to guarantee their worth. Worship services in Reform synagogues, for example, must be more than rote reading of prayers and a pleasant guitar sing-along. If services are not just a case of following the Talmudic standard of what has to get done (these prayers, that Torah reading, and so on), then what are they, if not an artistry of their own, which has yet to receive very much attention?

We Jews have no “Fed” to oversee our fiat currency. We largely still trust rabbis and cantors to do it. But laypeople too bear responsibility for making sure that our offerings do not flood the market with counterfeits. Economies are supply and demand. Let synagogue boards demand only the best, and give their clergy the mandate, budget, and time to produce it. Shallow Judaism may still attract some people, but in the end, counterfeit is counterfeit. Serious people will go elsewhere. And the world will be bereft of a messianic Jewish presence.

This messianic Jewish presence (for lack of a better metaphor) is what ultimately makes Jewish capital more than monopoly money or pokemon finds. In one way or another, Judaism has always promised a transcendent purpose for human life, and dispatched Jews into the world to fulfil it. In the gold standard of Talmudism, mastering Talmud pages and mitzvot are

the means to bring the messiah. Every alternative Jewish capital—religious reform, Zionism, even Jewish socialism—substituted its own preferred currency, but remained true to Judaism’s messianic purpose. In their own way, Ahad Ha’am’s Jewish state and Reform Judaism’s “Mission of Israel” are equally redemptive. Their forms of capital were new, but the final resolve was not. Authentic Jewish capital provides the currency for the Jewish People to address the human condition and attain a better world.

F for Freud; R for Religion

I discovered Freud and Peyton Place at about the same time. Peyton Place was a runaway best-seller because it was the first sexually explicit novel that featured teenagers like me. Libraries wouldn't carry it and by the time I heard about it, censors had banned it, so my friends and I shared a single contraband copy that someone had smuggled into class. It was 1957, and I was 15. Need I say more?

Freud was not as juicy, but at least he wasn't banned, and he explained so much about the world—not just our own sexual awakening but the foibles of the adults against whom we were in temporary rebellion anyway. I read one book after another. Eventually, however, I encountered his claim that as a boy, I suffered from an Oedipal Complex that originated in prehistoric primal herds where sons rivalled their father for the sexual favor of their mother. That was too much for me. I filed my Freud books under “F” for “Fiction.”

Years later, as a rabbi, I came to see that even when geniuses are wrong, they can be wrong profoundly, and in that more appreciative frame of mind, I returned to Freud, this time refileing him under “F” for “Freud.” His claim that religion is an “illusion” (*The Future of an Illusion*, 1927) gave me pause: was I selling people an illusion? My fears increased when I came to *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), where he called religion a “delusion” (*Wahn* in German), which seemed to me a whole lot worse.

Delusion is altogether negative. Illusion is not. We have delusions, not illusions, of grandeur. You can be deluded, not illuded. “Illusionism” is a label proudly used by historians of western art to describe painting from the Renaissance until modern times—a centuries-long experiment in rendering three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional canvas, by using techniques like foreshortening, light, and shadows to make the painting look like the real thing. Surrealist Rene Magritte plays with illusion when he paints a perfect pipe but tells us, “*Ceci n'est pas un pipe*” (“This isn't a pipe”). Expressionist artist, Edvard Munch, paints *The Scream* to give us the illusion of seeing into the screamer's tortured soul.

All of this is illusion, not delusion. Philosophers too use the word “illusion” positively. Knowing that our eyes can fool us (we see tables and chairs, not the atoms that make them up), they label the naive trust in our perceptions as an illusion, but not as something to give up; it works quite well to sit down for breakfast every morning.

So maybe Freud is right: religion is an illusion. The important question is what it is an illusion of, and that is where Freud and I part ways. Freud called religion an illusion because he thought it was infantile projection to help us face life's inevitable suffering, the accidents of fate over which we have no control; and for some people, it may be that. But artistic illusions provide

compelling two-dimensional impressions of what cannot be captured in all their three-dimensional reality. Religion captures spiritual realities the way painting captures three-dimensional ones. They are both illusions, but not the infantile kind.

An incredibly realistic still-life painting looks exactly like the fruit bowl on our kitchen table. Similarly, the impressionists teach us to see how light changes the way an object appears: Monet's Rouen Cathedral, for example, where, sure enough, were we in France, we could watch the real thing changing with the sunlight. But there is this important difference. Realist painting reproduces an object that we already know. Monet teaches us to see what we otherwise had never noticed. Sometimes illusions are revelatory. Even if they never quite picture what is unpicturable, they reveal reality in ways we never noticed.

What if religion is that sort of illusion? Not a projection of infantile fear; not even just a spiritual rendering of what we already know; but a revelation of what we otherwise would have missed.

But here's the rub! If we otherwise would have missed it, how do we know it is real? That is what must have gone through Freud's head. He relabeled religion the way I relabeled him—but went the other way around. Religion as illusion might still be filed under R for "Religion"; religion as delusion suggests filing under R for "Ridiculous." How indeed do we go about proving that a purpose to life or a transcendent meaning of any sort, say, are as real as the fruit bowl and the cathedral?

That is where theology comes in. Theology makes statements about God, history, human nature, and the cosmos in a way that asks our assent to what those sentences say. But it always comes after the experiential fact: the moments in life that stop us in our tracks from time to time and challenge us to ponder what they mean. I'll never know what it is like for my own body to house what will someday be a baby, but it's hardly something a new mother takes for granted. I do know what it was like to fall in love, and to lose the partner whom I fell in love with. I know also the fear of Covid, and the loneliness of attending weddings and funerals on a zoom screen. These are peak or nadir experiences—highs of amazement and joy or lows of heartache and loss—that evoke thoughtfulness, in, I suspect, pretty much everyone. Theology is a particular kind of after-the-fact thoughtfulness.

Religion is not all that different from art, philosophy and science, in that those who nurture a love for any of these find themselves getting stopped in their tracks more regularly—not just at highs and lows, but at the usual stuff that other people count as ordinary. A gorgeous downy woodpecker visited me the other day; the sun is setting noticeably later now; my parents died at 60, while I am 79 and still going strong. Our solar system is apparently traveling in the middle of a "bubble" of emptiness because 14,000,000 years ago, exploding stars cleared a pathway of stellar dust and gas that is 1,000 light years wide. Some of these things I experience directly; some of them I read or hear about and integrate into who I am.

Religion is its own illusionist attempt to grasp realities that stare me in the face, in a revelatory sort of way.

Home Sweet Home

When the going gets tough, who doesn't yearn for the comfort of home? Well, a lot of people, actually, for whom "home" was not so wonderful; but the image of a home worth returning to may be the most powerful image ever devised. "Homefree" in tag; "stealing home" in baseball. Home is "Father, Mother, safety, hugs, and hot milk," says novelist John Braine (*Room at the Top*). Elvis Presley sang "Home is where the heart is" a line first coined in 1829, or maybe even (some people insist, without evidence) 1st-century Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder. "Home sweet home" goes back to a British cleric, Joseph Beaumont (1616–1699), who meant it, however, as the place we go to when we die; it was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that transformed it into as a slice of perfection here on earth, albeit a Protestant slice: "a belief in God and trust in Providence" that "encircles the heart as with a golden cloud of protection and confidence." The Jewish version is *chadesh yameinu k'kedem*, "Renew our days as of old," from *Lamentations*, and then, a concluding line to the synagogue ritual of returning the Torah to the ark.

Who wouldn't want to go back to that kind of home again! How awful of Thomas Wolfe to name a book *You Can't go Home Again*, especially when you want it most, when you "come to the end of something and to the beginning of something else."

This is the sort of thing I have been pondering as I consider my wife Gayle's death exactly 6 months ago today. You may recall my writing then of the difficulty rowing home from the State of Grief and finding landing in the State of Wellbeing, albeit not exactly at the spot where I had left. But I am feeling more "at home" finally. I have indeed returned home, I now know, but paradoxically, Wolfe was right as well. Having "come to the end of something and to the beginning of something else," I can't altogether go home again, and much as I can "renew my days," I cannot do so "as before."

I am still surrounded by residues of that "before," the leftovers of a life unraveling and the traces of dying: the vials of pills; the piles of adult diapers that Gayle resisted until the end; the buckets and the mouth swabs. What I could, I gave away or recycled; the rest, I threw out.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas would have called it all "dirt." What counts as dirt, she pointed out, varies from culture to culture. But everywhere, dirt is "matter out of place." We either find it a place (so it is no longer dirt) or we get rid of it—or even hide it at the back of a closet (like sweeping it under the carpet)—so our place is "clean."

But mostly what Gayle left behind are the traces of a life once lived, a sort of upscale "dirt," in that with Gayle gone, there is no rightful place for it all: her clothes, in general; the hats she

loved to wear; the books she read or never finished; the pretty tea cups that she loved; even her car that she kept in tiptop shape and watched over like a hawk.

There are also all those gizmos, doodads, tchatchkes, and whatchamacallits to which we become attached or that attach themselves to us, in the ordinary course of a lifetime, especially if we have enough means to buy or to be given stuff we don't really need in the first place. To prevent it all becoming ordinary dirt (matter out of place) that must be thrown out, we give it a place (the garage, attic, or basement). The best of the stuff gets labeled "family heirlooms" (great-great grandpa's medal from World War I), "antiques" (some Vintage Old-Lock Bronze Steampunk Skeleton Keys), or even "art" (grandma's cross-stitched tablecloth)—in which case, it gets a place where everyone can still see it.

We all die eventually, leaving traces of our life behind. Someone will surely want this, we say: my daughter, my son, my someone, will want Aunt Yetta's brooch, the antique vase on the table, the leather-bound works of William Shakespeare. But the thing is, nobody does want most of it. Our heirs trundle off with what appeals to them or what they haven't the heart to trash. But they throw a lot away and bundle the rest for Goodwill.

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What is left of us, I wonder, when we die, when all the things that symbolized who we were belong to someone else, or even to no one at all? That was the question of Ecclesiastes, who ups the ante to include accomplishments as well: not just the books we owned but the books we wrote; even, maybe, the families we raised—they too will grow up and old and be gone. If we're not Plato or Einstein, William Shakespeare or Jane Austen, how long will any of us be remembered? I don't mean as an alphabetized name on a memorial list, mechanically intoned and possibly mispronounced with no one knowing it. I mean really remembered. Everything disappears eventually, doesn't it?

I have come to believe that we do get to go back home again: to the "home sweet home" of Joseph Beaumont, actually; or, in Jewish tradition, the bet almin (eternal home) or bet olam [haba] ("home of the world to come"), as we call our final resting place, not just of a perishable body, but an imperishable soul. Yes, "soul," an entity that is indefinable because it isn't really an "entity"; it's a word that we use by default, to affirm a certain "moreness" to life—more, that is, than just its physicality. It is a verbal "placeholder" for a concept that no other word seems up to the task of describing. Religion specializes in these placeholders—"God" being the most important. We do not know exactly what God is, but we do not on that account give up the word, because it too points us toward the moreness that we intuit beyond the merely material—a pointer toward ultimacy.

We are well familiar with the metaphor of "footprint." Some people leave a heavy footprint in their wake; others do not. Our carbon footprint will impact the planet for centuries. I think there is also a "soulprint" of what the soul bequeathes to future generations. There are old souls, known for their wisdom; evil souls too, alas, who spew hatred and violence; but loving, kind and helpful souls as well, whose soulprint of goodness lasts far beyond the death of the

person whose soul it was. The soulprint of the good only grows in luster. The material traces of our lives are quickly forgotten: but not the quality of our soulprint, the deep and impactful way that we were in the world.

So, here I am, back home, six months after. The collected traces of the life Gayle lived will be given away, claimed by others, or remain resident on my shelves as tangible reminders of her. But it is the intangible that sustains me: her soulprint that is everywhere. As the days go by, I sometimes feel alone and saddled with the solitary task of having to break new ground; but equally, sometimes, my soul meets hers as I slip softly into the soulprint that she left behind for me.

In addition, until the post-war years, the great universities had acknowledged Jewish quotas. In 1939, when literary critic Lionel Trilling received tenure at Columbia, the department head announced, “We have room for only one Jew, and we have chosen Mr. Trilling.” The great Marshal Sklare, who founded American Jewish sociology, received his doctorate in 1953, but then worked for the American Jewish Committee because universities did not consider the sociological study of Jews a legitimate academic field. Our professors grew up in that era. It left its mark.

It is wrong to imagine either Judaism or Christianity as preaching any single and unnuanced doctrine of sin, but still, overall, sin is far more central to Christianity than to Judaism, especially here in America, where strict Reformed theology was so formative. Think of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) preaching sermons like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and hammering home the message of human beings born into “depravity,” our very “carnal nature” being “the foundation for the torments of hell.” Our teachers seized on that sort of Christianity as a far cry from whatever Jews have to say about sin.

But more was involved as well: the American embrace of psychology in post-war America—not the Freudian kind that would have had no trouble recognizing evil as deeply embedded within the human psyche, but a more domesticated variety, like Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman’s *Peace of Mind* (1946)—a runaway New York Times best-seller that was read by everyone—and Abraham Maslow’s *Humanist Psychology* of the 1950s. Both Liebman and Maslow were Jewish, as were many others teaching liberal views of human nature at the time. It was a very simple step to combine the orthodox Freudian view of human nature (against which they were in revolt) with the Christian doctrine of depraved humanity; and to oppose both.

On a TV program introducing the High Holy Days in the 1970s, a prominent psychiatrist of the time, with whom I was in dialogue, urged me to give up the word “sin” on the grounds that it smacked of religious fundamentalism. Our teachers were doing just that: effectively eliminating sin from our theological vocabulary by demoting it to a human error in judgment, an attempt to do better, but missing the mark. Here was a view that was compatible with humanistic psychology, while also a demonstration (contrary to Christian claims of the time) that the “Old Testament” Jewish understanding of sin was more enlightened than the “New Testament” Christian one.

I told the psychiatrist then, and believe even more strongly today, that regardless of the psychological explanations for human evil, we still need a word to underscore the specially repugnant nature of at least the most hideous of those acts, and I think the time-honored word “sin” does just that.

I do think we need to differentiate Jewish and Christian views on the subject. Jews never accepted the classical Christian view of sin as “original,” a term derived from Augustine of Hippo, 354-430, but rooted in the teachings of Paul himself (Romans 5:12–21), who saw it going back to Adam and Eve.

But even if sin is not “original” it can still be “primal”; not a permanent part of our DNA, that is, but a primal mode of behavior to which some people, some of the time, actually do sink. Putin’s brutal and wholesale murdering of civilians is no mere missing the mark; it is a sin.

AFTERWORD

...וְהָיִי שׁוֹתֵה בְּצִמָּא אֶת דְּבַרֵיהֶם...

...And drink in their words with thirst. (Pirkei Avot 1:4)

An Open Letter to Our Teacher,

Your words have been water. Your sentences, sustenance.

When we felt helplessly pulled into the darkness of the black hole, you reminded us that *“We are a people outfitted with a memory that gives us veritable centuries of perspective, and virtual eons of hope.”*

When we felt unprepared to meet this moment, you charged us with *“the task of reminding people that God breathed a soul into us all.”*

When we were struggling with language, you encouraged us to *“to find some single line of eternity”*.

When our worlds became too small, you implored us to *“embody questions of ultimacy.”*

When we felt desperate to arrive at a better future, you taught us that *“In Judaism it is forbidden to rush the messiah.”*

When we, too, were wading through waters of grief and despair, you handed us a way through, *“a rowboat [and] two oars,...named: not “Life and Lovingkindness,” but “Faith and “Patience.”*

Thank you,

Your students

(The Tisch/Star Alumni)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ian Samson, "The Right Poem for the Wrong Time: WH Auden's September 1, 1939," *The Guardian* (August 31, 2019).
- 2 Alan Jacobs, "Auden and the Limits of Poetry," *First Things* (August 2002).
- 3 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908: Image Books ed., 2001), pp. 4/5.
- 4 Peter Gomes, Introduction, Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 2nd edition, (New Haven: Yale University press, 1952).
- 5 For criticism of the gender-exclusivity, see, e.g., Joshua J. McElwee, "Catholic Women Criticize 'Mansplaining of Pope's Masculine Encyclical Title,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (Sept. 24, 2020).
- 6 Ecology and climate change are treated extensively in Francis's prior encyclical (2015), *Laudato si'* ("Praise be to You", from the opening line of the Canticle of St. Francis), an evocative call that likens the earth to a sister being ravished for the pecuniary profit that is part and parcel (in Francis's view) of consumerism.
- 7 The original had Jews at the center and expressly denied the crime of deicide; the final document addressed relationships with all non-Christian faiths and blames at least some Jews of old for killing Christ. It also stopped short of an express two-covenant theology that would have granted Judaism parity with Christianity as its own licit covenantal religion with God.
- 8 Nov. 17, 1980. *Address to Representatives of the Jewish Community in Mainz, West Germany*.
- 9 "The Gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable": *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate* (No. 4), Para 40.
- 10 *Ibid*, Section 7.
- 11 *Evangelii Gaudium*, "Relations with Judaism," para 247.
- 12 *Ibid*., "Concern for the Vulnerable," paras 210/211.
- 13 Katharina von Kellenbach, "In Our Time: Civil Rights, Women's Liberation and Jewish-Christian Dialogue Fifty Years After *Nostra Aetate*" *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 10 (2015), p. 19.

