

Erev Rosh Hashana 5782

We have heard this hopeful preface so many times - “when things get back to normal...”

We should NOT go back to normal. This seems clear. After 17 months of fear, too much loss, upheaval, isolation, uncertainty, disappointment, and frustration. After 17 months of realizing that the trappings of our lives, that we so easily took for granted, our jobs, our kids' schools, our entertainments, our ability to gather with community and family, can all be lost too easily. After 17 months of a glaring light shining on our societal inequities, racial and economic injustice, the dehumanizing treatment of the ‘essential workers’ on whom our society is built, our broken health care system, our politicized governmental organizations that we trust to protect us and the seemingly unbridgeable divides between people in this country. And, on a personal level, after 17 months of many of us being stressed and stretched way beyond our limits, being broken down and broken apart with each new loss, each new restriction, each impossible decision, we can now see clearly, understanding more deeply than ever before, that we each have but one precious, fragile life.

We are therefore primed to enter into these Yamim Nora'im like none other in my lifetime, in true awe, wide open to exploring what is possible, and a willingness to consider new paths to living our truest, best, holiest lives.

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, often referred to as ‘The Ari’, or ‘the Lion’ shared with the Jewish world in his Kabbalist teachings a dazzling metaphor of creation. While the actual teachings are extremely complex and esoteric, the simplified version can give us great insight into the meaning of our lives. In the beginning, there was only Adonai filling up infinity. But Adonai wanted to be in connection, so God contracted into Godself and shattered. Those shattered sparks of divine light became our world; every part of G-d's creation is imbued with these sparks. This shattering was the plan from the beginning, Adonai's way of making humankind partners in creation.

Our job in this partnership is Tikkun, gathering and collecting and freeing these sparks by learning Torah, living according to the Mitzvot, and finding our unique mission on earth. We are created B'tzelem Elohim, in G-d's image, and within

each of us live these sparks of the divine. According to Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, these sparks within us are our true selves, they hold all of the information we need to follow our unique, divinely inspired paths. The Ari taught that no two sparks are alike, they are as unique as fingerprints.

Divine providence doesn't mean we lack free will or that G-d is a puppeteer pulling strings on earth. Rather, it means that we are each blessed with a divine blueprint of the life we are meant to live, our true purpose on earth - we simply need to learn to heed it. This is Teshuva - our mission during Yamim Nora'im - returning to our true selves and living in accordance with our divine purpose.

We have probably all heard this story at some point, but it bears repeating today. Once there was a brilliant but desperately poor scholar named Rabbi Isaac Yekls of Krakow. Over the course of a week, he had nightly dreams where he was digging up a glorious treasure under a bridge near the palace in Prague. He decided to follow his dreams and traveled to Prague with a shovel, where he planned to commence digging to find his treasure. The bridge was heavily guarded and though he kept looking for an opportunity to dig, he was thwarted. Finally, one of the guards who noticed him lurking came over to ask his business. The Rabbi explained his dreams and the reason for his presence. The guard laughed heartily, saying, "Man, if I listened to my crazy dreams, I would be in Krakow right now, digging for a treasure under the stove of some Jew called Rabbi Isaak Yekls". The Rabbi took his leave and headed home. Sure enough, he found treasure right under his very own stove.

I used to think this story was like the 'Wizard of Oz', teaching us that there is 'no place like home', or that the grass isn't greener elsewhere. However, now I believe it teaches us that we need to excavate ourselves to find the treasure, the holy spark, within us. We hold our own treasure! Yet, lack of clarity in our lives makes it extremely difficult to dig it up.

Even before this pandemic, some of our lives were often whirlwinds of chaos. Our jobs, long commutes, the technology that feeds us endless distractions and keeps us tethered to our obligations 24/7, the non-stop challenges of raising kids, caring for parents, dealing with health issues, the constant barrage of tragic news, the feeling that we must keep busy and achieve at all costs, volunteering, protesting, learning, keeping up our image both for others and for ourselves. All of this takes

its toll, year after year, and it gets to a point where we are going through the motions, barely taking time to experience anything deeply, or figure out if we are happy or fulfilled. We push through stress and pain and heartache, meetings and deadlines, dinners and bedtimes.

Maybe, if we are lucky, we get a reprieve, a hike in the forest to feel the glory of nature, a peaceful Shabbat morning of prayer, stopping to watch a beautiful sunset, cuddling with our children, parents or partners for a few minutes when we can forget our looming to-do list. But this is not enough to sustain us. Each year, the day to day grind of life, our unthinking habits, and our necessary defenses for survival build up, ossify around us, and make it harder and harder to get to our core, to be in touch with our divine spark. This was our normal. And we don't want to go back.

The High Holy Days, coming after a full year of living and a month of targeted introspection, are meant to be a disruption to our regular lives. Multiple chagim, rituals, services are there to shake us up, help us see things in a new light, and hopefully, lead us to better understanding of ourselves and how we want to change. The High Holy Days are predictable, at times peaceful, communal, joyful or intense, contemplative and slow and they can be effective at helping us achieve some level of Teshuva. I'd like to challenge us all to look at Covid, this horrific pandemic, these past 17 months where our world was turned upside down and inside out, as an extended disruption, one exponentially more unsettling than our High Holy Days, and use this to achieve a Teshuva exponentially more transformative than we have ever experienced before.

How do we do this, excavate for the treasure within us? How do we shed the layers we've accumulated over the years to clarify our divine spark and find our purpose in this life?

1. Being present, feeling the full spectrum of life - actually feeling each emotion and bringing your full attention to it! Without distraction, numbing with food or alcohol, sleeping it away, working through it, or ignoring it. Actually sit with it, name the emotion, notice what each emotion does in your body. Sometimes I even talk to it - "hi anger, I see you are making my chest tight and my breathing shallow and my hand clench" or "Hello anticipation! I notice I can't stop smiling and I feel light and energetic". I encourage you to do this liberally

over the next 10 days and beyond and see how much more connected you are to your inner self.

2. Reflection. When was the last time you felt that vibration that something was utterly right in your life. When you easily felt joy, excitement, motivation, passion, or fully alive. When you jumped out of bed in the morning, eager to do something. This is your spark speaking! Listen. Other questions to consider (and I recommend writing the answers down some time in the next 10 days):

- a. When do you feel in the flow of life
- b. When do you feel your happiest, freest, your purest form of YOU?
- c. When do you feel like you are most living in integrity with your values?
- d. When do you feel angry, stifled, frustrated?
- e. When do you zone out, use food, alcohol or technology to distract yourself?

What are your answers? Think about how you truly want to live your life. What brings it meaning? What is your divine spark asking you to pursue?

3. We breathe. With intention. According to Rebb Nahman of Bratislav, “If you want to do teshuvah, you must make yourself into a new creation. You can do this with a sigh... every exhalation is the death of the moment that has passed, in preparation for the birth of the new moment”. One type of breathing is especially helpful for the type of introspection needed to get in touch with your spark. This pattern turns off your sympathetic nervous system (your fight or flight stress response) and turns on your parasympathetic nervous system, allowing for calm and relaxation. I’d like to invite you to do this with me. We are going to breathe in for 4 seconds, hold our breath for 7 seconds, then breathe out for 8 seconds. 4-7-8. Please close your eyes, imagine a glowing spark of light inside your belly and as you breathe in, this spark gets brighter and brighter until it fills your entire body. When you hold your breath, focus on keeping the light as bright as possible. While breathing out, relax your eyes, your jaw, and your shoulders while keeping the light glowing. We’ll do this three times together..... This is something you can do any time, any where you need to relax or get in touch with your true emotions.

After this pandemic, let's not 'go back to normal'. Our role on earth is to be Adonai's partner in creation. Let's use the upheaval of the past 17 months, and our bone-deep realization that we only have this one precious, fragile life, as our impetus to return to our true selves, discover our divine purpose and be guided by our unique, holy sparks of light.

I'll end with a poem, a Conversation Between G-d and Me by John Roedel

Me: Hey God.

God: Hello.....

Me: I'm falling apart. Can you put me back together?

God: I would rather not.

Me: Why?

God: Because you aren't a puzzle.

Me: What about all of the pieces of my life that are falling down onto the ground?

God: Let them stay there for a while. They fell off for a reason. Take some time and decide if you need any of those pieces back.

Me: You don't understand! I'm breaking down!

God: No – you don't understand. You are breaking through. What you are feeling are just growing pains. You are shedding the things and the people in your life that are holding you back. You aren't falling apart. You are falling into place. Relax. Take some deep breaths and allow those things you don't need anymore to fall off of you. Quit holding onto the pieces that don't fit you anymore. Let them fall off. Let them go.

Me: Once I start doing that, what will be left of me?

God: Only the very best pieces of you.

Me: I'm scared of changing.

God: I keep telling you – **YOU AREN'T CHANGING!! YOU ARE BECOMING!**

Me: Becoming who?

God: Becoming who I created you to be! A person of light and love and charity and hope and courage and joy and mercy and grace and compassion. I made you for more than the shallow pieces you have decided to adorn yourself with that you cling to with such greed and fear. Let those things fall off of you. I love you! Don't change! ... Become! Become!

Become who I made you to be. I'm going to keep telling you this until you remember it.

Me: There goes another piece.

God: Yep. Let it be.

Me: So ... I'm not broken?

God: Of course Not! – but you are breaking like the dawn. It's a new day.

Become!!!

L'Shana Tovah and may you find your spark and be written in the book of life.