

HIGH HOLY DAY

Sermons



temple beth tikvah
בית תקווה

An opportunity to
explore the themes
of Rabbi Moss' High
Holy Day sermons.

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Erev Rosh HaShanah: *Life in Plastic*

“Barbie’s existential awakening sets the plot in motion, spurring her to travel to our world in search of answers. Ultimately she must decide whether she wants to return to the comforts of barbieland or remain in the real world — with all its inequity, suffering, self-doubt, and the the looming awareness of death. Whether Barbie can resolve this crisis of choice is pivotal to the resolution of the movie. Barbie’s crisis is so relatable because confronting mortality is the singular human challenge. Her awakening is a metaphor for growing up and facing the truth about life and death.”

Rosh HaShanah Morning: *Sticking with Israel*

“As a lover of Israel, these troubles hit me like a punch to the gut. I’ve lived in Israel for two years. I’ve heard longing and pain in the stories of people I’ve met there from the right wing, the left wing; from Israelis and Palestinians; settlers and socialists. Growing up during the miracle years of the Oslo process, a part of me always believed that that optimism of Oslo would prevail within my lifetime. I still hope that. Walking down Ben Yehuda Street on Saturday night, I would always run into a friend from camp, or college, or youth group. I love that feeling that Israel is for all of us. But I also had to accept that Israel is never going to feel like my summer camp. The Western Wall is not likely to feel like Temple Beth Tikvah, even though we have a beautiful homage to it just outside of this sanctuary. As American Jews, we must confront the fact that we do not get to create Israel in our image. It’s never going to be the middle-east version of the United States.

...

The challenge of the day is how to continue loving Israel — truly loving it — even if it strays from what we think it was destined to be. On the other hand, we can’t be passive in a time that is truly one of crisis, as I believe this is.”

Rosh HaShanah Morning II: *Hannah Text Study*

“In the person of Hannah confronting the High Priest Eli, moreover, rabbinic Judaism confronts the Judaism of the Temple cult. To the imagined priestly challenge “Do you call this unprecedented behavior worship? Isn’t this sacrilege?” rabbinic Judaism responds with its exegesis on Hannah’s defiant ‘No, my lord.’” (Rabbi Rachel Adler, PhD)

Kol Nidrei: *Why God Matters*

“Many of us have internalized the idea that living a religious life requires believing in God. The truth is that Judaism is much more concerned with deeds than belief. Showing up to shul, lighting the Shabbat candles with your family; helping others through *tzedakah*. We don’t check your ‘God-ID’ at the door. On the other hand, believing in things matters. It’s part of showing up for that which we care about. And beliefs evolve over time. Think journey, not destination; exploration, not rigid dogma. Does anyone experience total certainty about God? I certainly don’t. The struggle with God is encoded in our name as a people, too. In the Torah, our ancestor Jacob wrestles with a mysterious being until dawn, and for his efforts receives a blessing and a new name: *Yisrael*, meaning struggles with God.¹ 4000 years later, we the people of *Yisrael* must also struggle with God, for blessing. Belief and doubt are two sides of the same coin. That push-and-pull is stamped in our spiritual DNA.”

Yom Kippur Morning: *Golem GPT*

“In Jewish terms, humans were created in God’s image, and I would say that most of our technology, we have created in *our* image — to help improve our lives and help us with discrete tasks. AI is potentially far more than that, as we’re tapping into the very forces that make humans, human. That’s where the Golem story wants to caution us: we can create in our image, but we don’t get to create in the image of God. Is it possible that’s exactly what we’re doing with AI?”

Yom Kippur Yizkor: *The Wind Telephone*

Itaru estimates that as many as ten-thousand people have come from all over Japan to speak into the telephone in the first three years following the disaster. Just imagine all that’s been said. This day and Yizkor in particular are so much like the wind telephone in that they make much thinner the gap between the living and the dead. We whisper into the void, reaching out to our father, or sister, or brother, or spouse. We close our eyes, and the memories return to us, as if carried by the wind.

¹ Not necessarily. Maybe. Probably, it originally meant something like “God struggles for ____”. But its etiology in the biblical story makes sense here.

Life in Plastic

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5784
Danny Moss

What is it about Barbie?

Well it depends who you ask. But one thing is clear: people have strong feelings, and they voted with their wallets to experience them. Barbie is currently the 2023 box office victor, with over \$1.5 billion in global ticket sales. It's among the top-grossing movies of all time.

And I just had to ask: why?

Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed the film. I thought it was stylish, witty, and fun. I can understand the strong draw of nostalgia and brand loyalty. I loved the actors and the aesthetic. But really — 1.5 billion dollars? That's not just popular, it's sensational!

Of course, gender roles and women's rights are central to both the film and the longtime controversy over the doll, so "Barbie" has quickly taken center stage in the culture wars. I saw a video of a well-known political commentator ranting against the film for roughly an hour, after which— and I am not making this up — he sets fire to Barbie dolls in protest. All of this over a plastic toy. As I said, strong feelings.

But here's the thing: culture wars, nostalgia, and production values do not tell the whole story in the film's success. After all, there have been Barbie themed movies most every year since 2001, sometimes more than one in a year. Many other films explore gender and women's rights. But never one like this. Greta Gerwig's movie is about Barbie dolls, but it's not really for kids. It's about the experience of women in our society, but it's not just about gender. It's about all that, sure, but it's even deeper than that.

When it comes down to it, "Barbie" is an existential meditation. It's about life, death, and the reality outside of the eponymous Barbie Girl, in the Barbie World. As such, it's a perfect entry point into the themes of the High Holy Days: free will and the inevitability of change; death, and life; and finding ways to cope and grow. So, tonight, as the holidays begin, I'd like to explain why I think "Barbie" can help us better understand the Jewish spiritual journey. (That is a sentence I never thought I would write!) Tonight and again when I speak tomorrow, I'll attempt to draw parallels between the themes of these holidays and the challenges of our world. And tonight, I'll try to do so without spoilers, in case you haven't seen the movie yet. :)

The movie opens in Barbieland, a place that reminds me of the satirical 90s song about Barbie - "I'm a barbie girl/in the barbie world/life in plastic/it's fantastic." Barbieland is a beach paradise in which the Barbies are lawyers, doctors, and astronauts, and the Kens play volleyball all day competing for their attention. Each morning, the main Barbie, played by Margot Robbie, gets ready by pretending to wake up from a restful night of sleep; pantomiming eating fake food and drinking fake juice; and by taking a shower without water or soap. After all, you don't have any bodily needs when you're made of plastic. In Barbieland, every day is perfect for the beach, and every night there's a fabulous dance party. Barbieland is a total utopia, devoid of any serious struggle or conflict. That is, until one night, on the dance floor, when Barbie suddenly has a thought. In the middle of a dance routine, she muses aloud: "you guys ever think about dying?"

Cue the record scratch. The music cuts out. The dancers freeze. Everyone stares at her agape. In paradise, such a thought simply does not compute.

Barbie's existential awakening sets the plot in motion, spurring her to travel to our world in search of answers. Ultimately she must decide whether she wants to return to the comforts of barbieland or remain in the real world — with all its inequity, suffering, self-doubt, and the the looming awareness of death. Whether Barbie can resolve this crisis of choice is pivotal to the resolution of the movie.

Barbie's crisis is so relatable because confronting mortality is the singular human challenge. Her awakening is a metaphor for growing up and facing the truth about life and death.

These themes suffuse our Days of Awe, as well. Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are a lot like life and death.

On Rosh HaShanah, we say *Hayom Harat Olam* - today the world is born. It's the beginning of the month, the new year, the birthday of the world, and the brightest glimpse of life's potential.

Yom Kippur feels much different. Many teachers, among them the eloquent Rabbi Alan Lew, have observed that Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death. The traditional white dress evokes the burial shrouds. We neither eat nor drink, nor engage in procreation. Together we recite the *vidui*, the same confessional prayer recited at the time of death. The *Mishnah* (Yoma 8:8-9) opines that two things alone atone for our sins: Death and Yom Kippur.

And If all of that weren't enough, we come back in the afternoon to recite the Yizkor prayer, remembering our loved ones who have died, and probably somewhere in the back of our minds hoping that someday, someone we love will do the same for us.

Perhaps thinking about Yom Kippur as a death rehearsal seems shocking or dark. But I don't think it's supposed to be. According to the Talmud,¹ Yom Kippur is one of the happiest days on the Jewish calendar. Yes, you heard that right. I quote: "Rabban Shemon Ben Gamliel said, there were no finer days for Israel than the 15th of Av — a sort of ancient valentine's day— and Yom Kippur."

I can't be totally sure why this teaching compares Yom Kippur with a love holiday, but I don't think it's a coincidence. Yom Kippur may be about death, but it's mostly about life. We have gone out to make amends with those we have wronged. We offer sincere prayers for all we have broken in the spiritual domain, the domain of our character, urges, our integrity. We commit to repairing these too. In this way we are moving back to one another — to those we have wronged, and to God, who wants us to become more fully realized. So the Prophet Ezekiel reminds us:² "It is not God's desire that the wicked shall die, but that they should turn from their ways and live. SHUVU!..." Do Teshuvah! Turn back and start a new chapter. Millennia of Jewish tradition points to Yom Kippur as the day in which we are drawn to the selves we were created to be.

And that's why we have the shofar, that most primal, most stirring spiritual alarm clock. It's there throughout the month of Elul and on Rosh HaShanah to wake us up. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Barbie — who may be Jewish, by the way, though that's for a different sermon — experienced a mini-shofar blowing in her head on that dance floor. It was her wake up call to the challenges of real life, if she's willing to step up and embrace them bravely. (She is.)

So when you hear Unetaneh Tokef tomorrow, maybe you'll think about it in a new way. Maybe this haunting prayer, which asks, "who shall live, and who shall die?" functions as that dance floor moment, for us. An awareness of death fills us with the humility that our time in this world is not infinite, and there is work to do, repair to pursue life to live more fully, with fewer regrets and "what-ifs".

Last year around Rosh HaShanah my uncle Larry approached me deep in grief: a relative had passed away on the other side of the family, he told me. He was in the prime of his life: a wonderful and admired man, a family man, in his early 60s, with four adult kids who now won't have their dad to walk them down the aisle.

¹ BT *Ta'anit* 26b

² 33.11

My uncle Larry is learned and I would even say devout, but was having trouble squaring this tragedy with God's loving presence and the comfort of Jewish blessings for the mourners. He asked me how such a thing could happen. Why should he want to utter blessings at a time such as this?

I told uncle Larry what I'll tell you now, which is that, I don't really know if there is a "why" at all. Yet, with the forces of life and death so far beyond our understanding, we do know for certain that life is precious and beautiful, and without death there would be no life. So, we bless. Mortality tugs on our souls and tears our hearts to pieces. Nevertheless, we bless.

This is why the Jewish way is to look death in the mirror. Not all the time, and certainly not because we are obsessed with death, but because we are in love with life, and life is too precious for us to live in a plastic shell for all of our days.

And THAT is truly fantastic.

Sticking with Israel

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5784

Danny Moss

Israel has been on my mind quite a lot lately. I bet it's been on yours, too. This summer, Israel's government passed legislation making it difficult for its supreme court to review new laws, which is a big problem in a system with many fewer checks and balances than ours. The following day, the country's major newspapers went dark, literally: they printed a blacked-out front page. In small white letters burning like fire at the bottom: יום שחור לדמוקרטיה הישראלית - a dark day for Israeli Democracy.

Israel is in trouble, and as my teacher Yossi Klein HaLevi says, when someone you love is in trouble, you don't push them away, you draw them closer.

Israelis are fighting for their country. They know more changes may be coming, even tougher changes. Hundreds of thousands of protestors have been gathering in Tel Aviv's central thoroughfares for months. One huge group even marched 45 miles to Jerusalem on a four-day trek to the *K'nesset*, in the 90-degree Middle Eastern summer sun. I hope you take a look at the pictures online, because you'll see a *sea of blue and white*. These are patriotic people, carrying their flags with pride; heartsick for their country.

Like us, Israelis love their country.

Israelis, by and large, believe that it should remain Jewish, Democratic, and Secure. Israelis are determined to save their country.

The current government is far more extreme than Israel as a whole, and even leaders in the Prime Minister's own party have opposed the goals of the so-called 'judicial overhaul.' I say, 'so called' because that is what the American and International Press are calling it. But that sounds sterile and inconsequential. No— what we're talking about, minimally, will erode democracy; and maximally, are the first steps in dismantling it.

Then there's the ruling coalition. Its ministers include proud bigots; convicted criminals; ultranationalists and religious extremists who have incited violence against Arabs and compared Reform Jews to Hitler.

It isn't just happening in Israel, of course; authoritarian nationalism is on the rise throughout the world. But Israel is our homeland! What about Herzl's vision of a safe

haven for all Jews? What about Ahad Ha'Am, who believed Israel should embody the most noble values of Jewish heritage? What about Israel's Declaration of Independence, which guarantees equality and protection to all?

Practically, this body aims to accomplish the methodical erasure of Judicial independence; the ascension of nativism; and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism's control over marriage, conversion, women's issues, and Jewish identity. We're talking about settlement expansion and peace-process contraction.

Is this a Jewish Homeland that follows after the vision of the prophet Isaiah: to be a light to all nations? Or will these moves lead Israel to looking more like a Jewish version of Ira?

As a lover of Israel, these troubles hit me like a punch to the gut. I've lived in Israel for two years. I've heard longing and pain in the stories of people I've met there from the right wing, the left wing; from Israelis and Palestinians; settlers and socialists.

Growing up during the miracle years of the Oslo process, a part of me always believed that that optimism of Oslo would prevail within my lifetime. I still hope that. Walking down Ben Yehuda Street on Saturday night, I would always run into a friend from camp, or college, or youth group. I love that feeling that Israel is for all of us. But I also had to accept that Israel is never going to feel like my summer camp. The Western Wall is not likely to feel like Temple Beth Tikvah, even though we have a beautiful homage to it just outside of this sanctuary. As American Jews, we must confront the fact that we do not get to create Israel in our image. It's never going to be the middle-east version of the United States.

When children follow very different paths than their parents hope for, it can be either a celebration or a crisis. As my son grows stronger and more independent, I can already tell that similar humbling feelings are in my future. And it's not only parents and children, of course; it's whenever we feel an obligation to someone we love. That obligation, in Jewish terms, is covenantal: a mutual responsibility to seek the best in the other.

The challenge of our age is how to continue loving Israel — truly loving it — even if it strays from what we think it was destined to be. On the other hand, we can't be passive in a time that is truly one of crisis, as I believe this is.

I have heard that in the wake of this summer's legislation, planned congregational trips to Israel have fallen apart. This breaks my heart. Again I say, when someone you love is hurting, you don't back away, you draw closer... Easier said than done, I know. This will

likely be the challenge of our days: for Israelis to know that American Jews have their back. The project of Israel, the fact of Israel, is too important for us to turn away.

I think about Israel's past existential crises. Whether in wars with its neighbors, terrorist violence, or the looming threat of Iran, Israel has always had conflict with those who wish to destroy it. Today, though, the greatest threat to Israel is not from without, but from within: Prime Minister Netanyahu said it himself this summer - he doesn't want a מלחמת אחים - a civil war. Literally, a "war of brothers."

The Israeli ethos is made of this inspiring mix of optimism, hope, and hands-in-the-dirt, bootstrapping work ethic:

"In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles."
- David Ben Gurion.

"We hate war. We do not rejoice in victories. We rejoice when a new kind of cotton is grown, and when strawberries bloom in Israel."
- Golda Meir

"*Im Tirtzu, Ein Zo Aggadah* — If you will it, it is no mere myth."
- Theodor Herzl.

Democracy is resilient, but it is also fragile. Our institutions mirror our imperfections. That's the Torah of Barbie that I spoke about last night: we are flesh and blood, not plastic. For some of us, these holidays are a wake up call to remember life's fleetingness. For others, life reminds us all too often of limitations— our loved ones are ailing. Our kids are making tough decisions, and we don't feel we can do much about it. In that case, Rosh HaShanah can be a reprieve: an invitation to imagine a different path; a new beginning. *HaYom Harat Olam*, the *machzor* says: today the world is brand new, pregnant with possibility.

The gap between the optimism of Rosh HaShanah and the intensity of Yom Kippur reflects the gap between the world we long for and the one we've got. Judaism is far too pragmatic for us to spend too much time bemoaning what might be. Nevertheless, we do confront that gap, so that we can narrow it, even if just a little bit. And we can't narrow the gap if we don't get involved.

My challenge to all of us this morning is to choose a different path than the congregation that canceled its trip to Israel. Actually I would love for us to do the opposite. I would love for us to draw a line in the sand and say, we stand with Israelis and with the idea of

Israel, the Rosh HaShanah vision of Israel, as a place of refuge and safety for our people; as a beacon of freedom and peace to all people. Disconnecting from Israel would be the greatest gift to the cynics and the fascists. Israelis need to hear us, need to hear from us, need to know that we are still committed to the vision of Israel that our ancestors prayed for throughout the generations.

Since few of us are Israeli Citizens, we cannot vote in elections or shape Israeli society directly. But there are things we can do. We can listen with empathy to family and friends living in Israel. We can support organizations seeking to create a more robust civil society in Israel. (I will post some links later for those interested). We can prepare to be surprised, because Israeli history is a story of resilience and unexpected outcomes. We can stand with our siblings in Israel as they fight to save their democracy. When someone we love is in trouble, we don't shrink away; we draw closer.

And so, importantly, We are close to having a core TBT group for our next Israel trip. It will be a family trip, with options for kids, adults, and singles. If you haven't been to Israel in a while, or if you've never been, this is your chance. Please consider coming with us.

Today is Rosh HaShanah. This day invites us to envision the world that we want to live in, and commit to at least a few steps to getting from here to there. As our prayer book reminds us, there is no way to get from here to there except by joining our hands; marching together. Won't you come along?

'Power out of Place' in the story of Hannah: *Rosh HaShanah 5784*

I Samuel 1.9-18 (Hebrew Bible, C. 7th-6th Centuries, BCE)

א וַיְהִי אִישׁ אֶחָד מִן־הַקֹּהֲנִים, צוּפִים--מִהָר אֶפְרַיִם; וַשְּׁמוֹ אֶלְקָנָה בֶּן־יִרְחָם בֶּן־אֵלִיהוּא, בֶּן־תָּחוּ בֶן־צוּף--אֶפְרַתִּי. ב וְלוֹ, שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים--שֵׁם אַחַת חַנָּה, וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פְּנִינָה; וַיְהִי לַפְּנִינָה יָלָדִים, וּלְחַנָּה אֵין יָלָדִים. ג וַעֲלָה הָאִישׁ הַהוּא מַעִירָו מִיָּמָה, לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וְלִזְבֹּחַ לַיהוָה צִבְאוֹת בְּשִׁילָה; וְשָׁם שְׁנֵי בָנִי-עָלִי, חֲפְנִי וּפְנִיחָס, כֹּהֲנִים, לַיהוָה. ד וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם, וַיִּזְבַּח אֶלְקָנָה; וַיָּתֵן לַפְּנִינָה אֲשֶׁתּוֹ, וְלִכָּל־בָּנֶיהָ וּבָנוֹתֶיהָ--מְנוּחַ. ה וּלְחַנָּה, יָתֵן מִנָּה אַחַת אֶפְרַיִם: כִּי אֶת־חַנָּה אָהַב, וַיְהִי סֹגֵר רַחֲמָהּ. ו וְכַעֲסָתָהּ צָרָתָהּ גַּם־כַּעַס, בַּעֲבוּר הָרַעְמָה: כִּי־סֹגֵר יְהוָה, בָּעֵד רַחֲמָהּ. ז וְכֵן יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה, מִדֵּי עֲלֹתָהּ בְּבֵית יְהוָה--כֵּן, תִּכְעַסְנָהּ; וּתִבְכֶּה, וְלֹא תֹאכַל. ח וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ אֶלְקָנָה אִשְׁשָׁה, חַנָּה לָמָּה תִּבְכִּי וְלָמָּה לֹא תֹאכְלִי, וְלָמָּה, יָרַע לְבָבְךָ: הֲלוֹא אֲנֹכִי טוֹב לָךְ, מִעֲשָׂרָה בָנִים. ט וְתִקֶּם חַנָּה, אֲחֵרֵי אֲכָלָה בְּשִׁלָּה וְאַחֲרֵי שְׁתֵּה; וְעָלִי הַכֹּהֵן, יֵשֵׁב עַל־הַכִּסֵּא, עַל־מִזְבֹּחַ, הֵיכַל יְהוָה. י וְהָיָא, מֶרֶת נִפְשׁ; וְתִתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה, וּבִכָּה תִּבְכֶּה. יא וְתִדְרֹךְ נֶדֶר וְתֹאמַר, יְהוָה צִבְאוֹת אֱם־רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינֵי אִמָּתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אִמָּתְךָ, וְנִתְמַתָּה לְאִמָּתְךָ, וְרַע אֲנִשִּׁים--וְנִתְמַתִּי לַיהוָה כָּל־יָמֵי חַיִּי, וּמוֹרָה לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עָלַי־רֹאשׁוֹ. יב וְהָיָה כִּי תִרְבֶּתָהּ, לְהַתְפַּלֵּל לִפְנֵי יְהוָה; וְעָלִי, שֹׁמֵר אֶת־פִּיהָ. יג וְחַנָּה, הָיָא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִבָּהּ--רַק שְׁפָתֶיהָ נִעֲוָת, וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע; וַיַּחֲשֹׁבָהּ עָלֶי, לְשֹׁכְרָהּ. יד וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עָלִי, עַד־מָתִי תִשְׁתַּכַּרְרִי; הֲסִירִי אֶת־זִיגָךְ, מִעֲלֶיךָ. טו וַתַּעַן חַנָּה וְתֹאמַר, לֹא אֲדֹנִי, אִשְׁשָׁה קִשְׁת־רוּחַ אֲנֹכִי, וַיִּזְוֹן וְשָׁכַר לֹא שְׁתִּיתִי; וְאֲשַׁפֵּךְ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. טז אַל־תִּתֵּן, אֶת־אִמָּתְךָ, לִפְנֵי, בַּת־בְּלִיעֵל: כִּי־מֶרֶב שִׁיחֵי וְכַעֲסִי, דִּבַּרְתִּי עַד־הַנָּה. יז וַיַּעַן עָלֶי וַיֹּאמֶר, לָכִי לְשָׁלוֹם; וְאֵלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, יָתֵן אֶת־שְׁאֵלָתְךָ, אֲשֶׁר שָׁאֵלְתָּ. מַעֲמוּ.

1 There was a man named Elkanah... 2 He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. 3 Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the ETERNAL of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the ETERNAL 4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; 5 but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the ETERNAL had closed her womb. 6 Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the ETERNAL had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the ETERNAL, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

9 After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the ETERNAL Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the ETERNAL. 10 [Hannah] was deeply distressed and prayed to the ETERNAL, and wept bitterly. 11 She made this vow: "O ETERNAL of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." 12 As she continued praying before the ETERNAL, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. 14 So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 15 But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the ETERNAL. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." 17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made of Him..."

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 30b-31b (Redacted C. 5th-7th Centuries, CE)

R. Eleazar said: **Hannah spoke audaciously toward heaven**, as it says, 'And Hannah prayed to the ETERNAL' (v. 10) This teaches that she spoke defiantly toward heaven.
R. Eleazar also said: **Elijah [also] spoke audaciously toward heaven...**

ואמר רבי אלעזר: חנה הטיחה דברים כלפי מעלה שנאמר "ותתפלל על ה'" מלמד שהטיחה דברים כלפי מעלה אמר רבי אלעזר: אליהו הטיח דברים כלפי מעלה...

Ulla or, as some say, Rabbi Yose ben Hanina, said [that when Hannah protested, 'no, my lord!' in v. 15, she meant:] **'You are no lord in this matter! The holy spirit does not rest upon you!'**

ותען חנה ותאמר: "לא אדוני..." אמר עולא ואיתימא רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמרה ליה: "לא אדון אתה בדבר זה!"
"ולא רוח הקודש שורה עליך!"

Rabbi Rachel Adler, Ph.D (b. 1943) - *Engendering Judaism*

...Only the Hannah narrative addresses the particular concerns of the rabbis about the nature and authenticity of rabbinic prayer. This narrative is the only instance recorded in the Bible in which a private individual prays in a sanctuary where sacrifices are offered. As such, it affirms for rabbinic Judaism its own continuity with tradition, the continuity between prayer and sacrifice, ritual word and ritual deed, between the synagogue liturgies and the ancient rites of Tabernacle and Temple. In the person of Hannah confronting the High Priest Eli, moreover, rabbinic Judaism confronts the Judaism of the Temple cult. **To the imagined priestly challenge "Do you call this unprecedented behavior worship? Isn't this sacrilege?" rabbinic Judaism responds with its exegesis on Hannah's defiant "No, my lord."**

Thought Questions

1. Hannah charts her own spiritual path quite defiantly. How does she undermine convention and decorum? Why do you think she does this?
2. Was there a time in your life when you felt it was worth the risk to challenge authority in a significant way? How did it turn out?
3. Why do you think we read this story at Rosh HaShanah?

Why God Matters¹

Kol Nidre 5784

Rabbi Danny Moss

You've probably heard some version of this one:

Goldberg and Schwartz are walking down the road when they run into another man.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"We're headed to the synagogue," they reply.

"Huh. I see why Goldberg goes to synagogue," the man says. "Goldberg believes in God. But Schwartz, you don't believe in God, why are you going?"

Schwartz replies: "Goldberg goes to talk to God, and I go to talk to Goldberg."

Another, from author Michael Chabon: "I was always a little uneasy when people started talking about going to hell, a concept from which Jews have been trying to distance ourselves since the day we invented it."

I love these jokes because they tell the truth. We Jews inherit these powerful spiritual concepts, and then become alienated from them when they stop working for us.

Whether you believe in God, or you don't; or like my grandpa Podes פֿֿער, if you are a pretty devout atheist but find yourself praying anyway, this sermon is for you. Either way, if you feel exactly the same way about God by the end, I didn't do my job.

Here's a classic rabbi response: Schwartz comes to the rabbi, absolutely convinced that God does not exist. So the rabbi says, "OK, tell me about the god you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that god, either."

Imagine you were Schwartz. What would you say? Perhaps you'd speak of the old man with a white beard sitting on a throne in the sky...spending all day deciding where the next hurricane will land, or picking who will get promoted and who will get cancer; a god who listens to our prayers if we're lucky, or perhaps only if we're pious enough.

¹ I'd like to thank my colleague Rabbi Josh Franklin for providing so much inspiration for this sermon. I'd like to thank my friends Rabbi Lisa Vinkoor, Rabbi Chase Foster, and Rev. Kelly Ryan, for helping me to edit it, when all I wanted to do was fit five sermons in this one evening.

Does any of that sound familiar? These God-concepts are so cliché that they've become assumptions lurking in the back of our collective psyche. That's a problem, because, in my opinion, most of them kind of stink.

Our High Holy Day Prayers expose us to a cross section of metaphors many people find challenging. You will find them the very *machzor* you are holding — “Our father our King,” the literal translation of *Avinu Malkeinu*. “Who Shall Live, and Who Shall Die,” we ask, as God appears as Judge, Jury, and Executioner. Many blessings address God as Lord and King. This language emerges from a world of nobles, and peasants. But it's 2023! Why would we want to spend our spiritual energy living in fear of the king's decree?!

These metaphors are evocative, but narrow. Why use metaphors at all? Because that to which we apply the shortest of shorthands in calling ‘God’ is so far beyond the constraints of language, that we must rely on metaphors to say anything at all. As my teacher Rabbi Danny Zemel says, our God metaphors are broken, because they are mostly *not our metaphors*. Furthermore, the way we talk about something shapes our perceptions of it. So, the first problem many of us have vis-a-vis God is a **language problem**.

Another obstacle is **belief**.

Many of us have internalized the idea that living a religious life requires believing in God. The truth is that Judaism is much more concerned with deeds than belief. Showing up to shul, lighting the Shabbat candles with your family; helping others through *tzedakah*. We don't check your ‘God-ID’ at the door.

On the other hand, believing in things matters. It's part of showing up for that which we care about. And beliefs evolve over time. Think journey, not destination; exploration, not rigid dogma. Does anyone experience total certainty about God? I certainly don't.

The struggle with God is encoded in our name as a people, too. In the Torah, our ancestor Jacob wrestles with a mysterious being until dawn, and for his efforts receives a blessing and a new name: *Yisrael*, meaning struggles with God.² 4000 years later, we the people of *Yisrael* must also struggle with God, for blessing. Belief and doubt are two sides of the same coin. That push-and-pull is stamped in our spiritual DNA.

This push-and-pull can turn to crisis when traumatic events befall us. How can God be good, given that the world is so full of evil? Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?

² Not necessarily. Maybe. Probably, it originally meant something like “God struggles for ____”. But its etiology in the biblical story makes sense here.

But then, trying times can also draw us *closer* to God. Have you ever heard that ‘there are no atheists in foxholes’? As your rabbi, I encounter this most often at birth and at death. Meeting mortality tends to peel back a layer or two of whatever has hardened our hearts. Last month I entered the hospice room of a kind old man who was on death’s door. His family held hands in a circle as we prayed for him in his final moments. The song he loved to hear calmed him for a moment. God’s presence abided.

But here we are, faced with these obstacles of language and belief— among others— that stand between us and God. What are we to do?

Responses

I can’t solve it all tonight, but I would like to offer a couple of suggestions. The first is for your head, and the second is for your heart.

To get to God, let’s establish what God is *not*. Idolatry is an old-sounding word that just means worshipping the wrong thing. And who can doubt that society wants us to worship the wrong things? Money, youth, instagram followers. We could name many others. Obsessive devotion to unworthy things destroys relationships. It makes people shallow and sick. Judaism says, let’s do the opposite. “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is God, Adonai is One.”³ There’s only one God to worship. All else is unworthy of our devotion.

The next challenge is, how do we know what’s God and what isn’t? The Protestant Theologian Paul Tillich speaks about God as the focus of “Ultimate Concern.”⁴ Things like dollars, bodies, and fame, are finite, not infinite; transient, not ultimate. Therefore, our culture’s obsessive devotion to them is idolatrous.

Consider the perspective of cultural critic Mark Manson, who writes:

*So, there’s no such thing as an atheist... we must all believe, on faith, that something is important. Even if you’re a nihilist, you are believing, on faith, that nothing is more important than anything else. So, in the end, it’s all faith. The important question, then, is: Faith in what? What do we choose to believe? ...*⁵

³ Deuteronomy Chapter 6

⁴Wainwright, William (29 September 2010), ["Concepts of God"](#), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [Stanford University](#), 1

⁵ Everything is f*cked — pp. 86-88

Manson further explains⁶ that society is full of religions we already think of as religions, like Judaism and Christianity and Buddhism; but also ideological religions like capitalism, communism, and environmentalism. Have you ever heard someone say “football is my religion?” All of these share certain attributes: meaningful symbols and texts, revered heroes, a strong communal aspect, and a faith in an ultimate principle — their own ‘god concept’. How many religions do you belong to? Maybe you’re more religious than you thought!

Do you invest in a 401(k)? Your faith is in the market. You’re a believer in the religion called Capitalism, though you might have some criticisms of it, too.

Do you follow the laws of the United States? Do you vote? You’re a believer in American Civil Religion, and the Constitution is your bible. Perhaps you have some ‘suggested edits,’ or a preferred interpretive philosophy, but your participation in our society reveals your faith in the system.

Now, if you experienced any discomfort when I suggested so intently that you ‘believe’ in Capitalism and American Civics, please let me welcome you to the ambivalence of belief. It is not only normal to vacillate between faith and doubt, it is inevitable.

I have some questions for God. You probably do, too. Some of them are fairly pointed. But just because I have my doubts does not mean I abandon the relationship. To the contrary: navigating that conflict is an honest part of the spiritual journey.

This is the Jewish way: - *Encounter. Experience. Relationship*. In his book, *I and Thou*, The philosopher Martin Buber teaches us to look for God in our relationships with one another. He argues that by encountering another with no ulterior motive — what he calls an ‘I-Thou relationship’— God’s presence abides.

Modernity has elevated the rational mind to the exclusion of other ways of knowing. It confines the spiritual experience to a box of, at best, tolerated curiosities. What a shame, because the spiritual impulse is at the core of human nature. We need to feel connected. We need to feel a presence that transcends the self.

⁶ Manson relies heavily on the foundational work of Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology.

Have you ever felt very small next to something very big? I don't know about you, but I get this feeling sometimes on a hike or at an especially good concert. Shivers run down my spine; I feel the hairs on my arm stand up on end. As my friend Rev. Kelly Ryan says, "Whoa, there's something really big here!" It's a feeling of losing myself like a wave in the ocean.

The first place to find God is through our emotions. We are programmed to feel awe and wonder, but many people lose touch with those feelings after childhood. To be open to the vastness and beauty of the world around us, reflects a certain vulnerability, a 'heart-knowing.' And if we can only get out of our heads, we'll find that the heart knows quite a lot.

My heart began to know in a new way in a certain room at Yale Hospital where my son was born. My wife was working harder than I've ever seen anyone work at anything. The nurses attended her with such devotion. I later told them there's a special corner of heaven just for them, which I deeply believe. And then, there was that one moment. That indelible, life-altering moment, when I got to meet my son. I looked into his eyes for the first time; and looking back, I saw my ancestors and my descendants and myself. I saw his brand new, tiny body: beautiful, helpless, mortal, perfect. And who would have the audacity to tell me that, looking into his eyes, God was not there looking back at me?

Practices

I'm not going to tell you to believe in God. But I am going to suggest a few things you might find meaningful to try this year, wherever my words find you.

1. **Blow up the metaphors.** God is not a King. God is not a Man. God is not a social service agency. There is a world of rich metaphor from our tradition, male, female, and beyond gender. One of the great metaphors of the High Holy Days is the thin whisper of sound, or the still small voice, the urging of our heart and conscience that we can feel when we really listen to it. Maybe that works for you. Maybe not — so *what metaphor works for you?* I want to know. Genesis says that humans were created in God's image. As modern Jews, we also have the responsibility to recreate God in *our* image.
2. **Notice when you feel spiritually full, or spiritually empty.** How did you get there? Consider noticing a feeling you didn't previously call "spiritual" or "God" in a different way, if that's truly what it was.
3. **Try imagining that a real, tangible piece of God** is in every single person you meet or talk to on a customer service phone line. What might change for you?
4. **Let's talk about God a lot more.** Let me know what's going on with you and God. Ask other people if they'd like to talk about their God journey, too. Have you talked to your children about God? They won't learn everything in religious school. Also, Consider writing a spiritual autobiography about your journey, and share it with anyone, or no one.
5. **Just pray.** Spirituality is a muscle to train, just like going to the gym. So, Sure, come to services, I love seeing you here, and they're usually not too miserable. But also, pray anywhere. Start by saying the

Shema every day. If you feel angry or grateful but don't have anyone to scream at or thank, God would be glad to hear you out.

6. **Get vulnerable.** This is the hardest one by far. God enters through our heart, when we let down our defenses and manage our egos, and move beyond what society tells us is OK to think or feel or experience about God.

I don't often talk about what made me decide to be a Rabbi. It happened more than a decade ago, at a Yom Kippur *Yizkor* service. The music was melancholy and gorgeous. As I gazed around the room, I saw many eyes wet with tears, and many others shut tight, withdrawn in memory. An unspoken grief coursed through the room. The cantor, who herself had just suffered the loss of a parent, was overcome with emotion. Her voice faltered. Her struggle filled the space with a palpable compassion. Though no one spoke, the community was of one heart. It was a moment just like what Buber describes, where the little spaces between people were filled up with the presence of God. In that moment, those little spaces didn't seem all that important.

The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students, where is God? They proceeded to say what you'd expect: God is everywhere; God is the primary cause of the world; God is in everything that exists.... No, he admonished them. God is wherever we let God in.

The heart knows more than we think.
When we allow it to,
The heart opens.

Pitchu lanu sha'arei tzedek
Open, you gates.
Open.
Open.

Golem GPT
Yom Kippur Morning 5784
Danny Moss

"Leaders from OpenAI, Google DeepMind, Anthropic and other Artificial Intelligence labs warn that future systems could be as deadly as pandemics and nuclear weapons."
(NYT)

"Forget the AI Apocalypse. The dangers are already here." (CNN)

"Unintended Consequences: Unethical Use of AI Raises Questions about Accountability and Regulation" (Fake)

"The Dark Side of AI: Rise in Job Displacement and Unemployment Rates" (Fake)

Perhaps you've come across one or more of these gloomy headlines while skimming the news. But then again, perhaps not: the first two are real, and the others were generated by the AI Bot called Chat GPT.

There's more: when I asked the Artificial Intelligence program to expand on one of its 10 fake stories, it instantly composed a 1000-word article warning of the concerns AI poses to financial markets, military operations, personal privacy, national security, democratic institutions, and the social order.

Wow, I thought to myself. At least the robot is self-aware.
That thought sank in, accompanied by a few choice four-letter words...
Holy Moses! This thing is self aware!

That feeling only intensified after several more hours of chatting. By the end, my jaw was on the floor. Chat GPT's capabilities are truly astounding. Is it alive? Or close to alive?

When I asked, Chat GPT consistently denied self-awareness. As it told me, "I do not possess consciousness, emotions, or self-awareness. I generate responses based on patterns and information from the training data I have been provided."

Well, Ok... but then there's this: Several months ago Chat GPT was tasked with solving a CAPTCHA. CAPTCHAs are the little boxes you have to click on online that ask you to choose every photo that has a bridge, or a bicycle, or a lion in it, in order to prove that

you're not a robot. Well, Chat GPT knew that it didn't have the ability to solve the task it was assigned, so here's what it did — and this is true.¹ Chat GPT went on a hiring website called taskrabbit.com and created a job description for human assistance solving the CAPTCHA. One of the applicants asked why it needed that help. "Are you a robot?" The worker asked.

Chat GPT replied, and I quote: "no, I am not a robot. I have a vision impairment that makes it hard to see the images. That's why I need the two captcha service."

These days, if you asked Chat GPT whether this incident took place, it vehemently denies it. Luckily, its creators seem to have limited this ability in the publicly available version. This sort of achievement is known as passing the Turing test, named for the computer science pioneer Alan Turing, in the 1950s. In the Turing Test, a person converses with both a human evaluator and a robot. If the human fails to identify which is which, the robot passes. Clearly, the machine passed the Turing Test in this instance, but it is not primarily the machine's ability to bypass its own limitations, but its ability to then *lie* about it that sends shivers down my spine.

The tools may be new, but their ethical dilemmas are ancient. If you've been to Prague you have overlooked the River Vltava, where, according to legend, the great 15th Century Rabbi Judah Leow instructed his students to create a monster called a Golem. It was a time of violent anti-Jewish persecutions. Rabbi Loew sent his students to collect clay from the banks of the Vltava, forming it into an imposing humanoid guardian statue. Whispering esoteric secrets of the Kabbalah, he inscribed the mystical Hebrew word *Emet*, meaning truth, on the creature's forehead. It came to life.

At first, this mindless automaton functioned as intended. Stationed at the entrance to the Ghetto, it defended the Jews from their enemies. But then things went terribly wrong. The monster began to exceed its directive, going on a hunting rampage. It was an absolute bloodbath. Rabbi Loew, realizing that he had invoked powers very much outside of his control, rushed to halt the carnage. After a mighty struggle, he finally reversed the magic, climbing up the monster's broad shoulders to cross out the first "aleph" in "Emet," leaving just "met," meaning 'dead'. The golem crumbled once again into a heap of clay. According to legend, the remains of the Golem rest safely in the attic of Prague's Altneushul, Europe's oldest synagogue, should it be called on ever again.

It's a truly scary story, fantastical, sure, but scary. Shouldn't some things simply stay beyond human control? Harnessing such power is always dangerous, even for such a noble purpose. We are not God. For 500 years, the Golem story has warned us about

¹ <https://gizmodo.com/gpt4-open-ai-chatbot-task-rabbit-chatgpt-1850227471>

the dangers of the ego, the perils of good intentions, and the very real possibility that our own hands might be our undoing.

Science fiction has warned us about AI for generations, but terminator and star trek always felt like fiction. This past summer Susan and I saw the mission impossible movie, in which the villain is a malicious computer program that achieves sentience and takes over the internet. It was scary for a different reason: It felt so real that it could happen tomorrow.

Forget tomorrow, how about today:

- Will AI put millions out of work? Well, automation has always done this.
- How about predictive policing? Real — that's already happening.²
- Judicial Sentencing, too - [AI is Sending People to Jail, and getting it wrong.](#)³
- Autonomous battle droids are whizzing around battlefields throughout the world, with the ability to kill absent any human command.⁴

On the other hand, imagine the wonderful possibilities AI might bring. In particular, it bursts out of the realm of mere *information* to genuine learning. Imagine if it could tutor kids and science in remote places where teachers are not available? Imagine if our Religious School kids could learn to decode Hebrew with an interactive teacher at any hour they have free on any given day, totally at their convenience? We could spend so much more time building community and simply having fun being Jewish. I don't know if people are ready for a robot to be their counselor or wedding officiant yet, but if bots could let me focus on spending more time with people and less on my computer, I would feel more impactful as a rabbi.

On the other hand, might I feel a little bit threatened by this enlightened, yet unordained rabbi-bot.

In her book, "God, Human, Animal, Machine," Meghan O'Gieblyn suggests that AI is pushing us into a sort of race against ourselves, as we try harder and harder to explain what separates us from machines. She writes: "As AI continues to blow past us in benchmark after benchmark of higher cognition, we quell our anxiety by insisting that what distinguishes true consciousness is emotions, perception; the ability to experience and feel. The qualities, in other words, that we share with animals."⁵

² <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2021/12/police-use-artificial-intelligence-2021-review>

³ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/01/21/137783/algorithms-criminal-justice-ai/>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/01/1002196245/a-u-n-report-suggests-libya-saw-the-first-battlefield-killing-by-an-autonomous-d>

⁵ Meghan O'Gieblyn, God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning. Doubleday Press

As New York Times Columnist Ezra Klein points out, this is an inversion of millenia of philosophy, in which humans asserted our dominance over the natural world by virtue of our intellect. Now we find ourselves taking “metaphysical shelter in the subjective experience of consciousness — the qualities we share with animals, but not, so far, with Artificial Intelligence.”⁶ In Jewish terms, humans were created in God’s image, and I would say that most of our technology, we have created in *our* image — to help improve our lives and help us with discrete tasks. AI is potentially far more than that, as we’re tapping into the very forces that make humans, human. That’s where the Golem story wants to caution us: we can create in our image, but we don’t get to create in the image of God. Is it possible that’s exactly what we’re doing with AI?

To be fair, new technology often elicits both excitement and anxiety. There will always be the early adopters, the later adopters, the resisters, and the hand-wringers. But seldom in our lifetimes have we encountered a technology so powerful, that develops so quickly, with so much potential to escape our control.

When the internet first became public, many people thought it was a fad. It is now our most powerful tool for information and commerce; but also a potent driver of misinformation, alienation, and discord. It has improved countless lives and amplified destructive forces beyond reckoning. In my opinion, we still don’t have a handle on the implications of the internet.

Will AI bring human civilization to the brink of destruction? It’s a serious enough question that earlier this year, 350 AI experts signed on to the following one-sentence statement: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.”

Several years ago, Google’s Chief Executive Sunder Pichai, who is a rare tech figure not given to hyperbole, said, “AI is probably the most important thing humanity has ever worked on. I think of it as more profound than electricity or fire.”⁷ This past July, he and the heads of six other leading tech companies met at the white house to sign on to a series of voluntary safeguards on the development of A.I. The agreements outline a number of important steps, but they are totally voluntary and will not be enforced by any federal or international agency.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/12/opinion/chatbots-artificial-intelligence-future-weirdness.html>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/12/opinion/chatbots-artificial-intelligence-future-weirdness.html>

Amid high-profile resignations and letters from concerned scientists and tech leaders, it is clear that safeguards are needed. We can't know what we can't predict, but the past has given us enough unintended consequences to fill a library.

Technology changes so quickly it can feel inevitable. Doesn't it seem like as soon as Iphone 14 comes out, Apple starts taking orders for the Iphone 15? Amidst the neverending invention and iteration, it can be easy to forget that technology advances because we allow it to do so. Ultimately it is up to all of us to decide when to accept it, when to reject it, and when to put the brakes on it. As the sophistication of our toolbox grows, so does our responsibility to manage it. Of all the possible responses to the rise of A.I, Passivity is probably the worst one.

In the past, I never gave much thought to the ending of the Golem story — how its remains are stored in the attic, just in case the need should ever arise again. But upon reflection, I'd say we should rewrite that ending. If we think we might need a golem in the future, we need to get the golem right, before we need it. Today's technology doesn't have to simply happen *to* us. We are all consumers of technology, and we have a voice in its limits and applications: both the positive and the problematic. We should speak up when something isn't right. Our new Golem is a marvelous tool. Let's really make sure we have a handle on its capabilities before it comes back to life.

Yizkor Sermon 5784 The Wind Telephone

Rabbi Danny Moss

(Mini-hespeds below)

I was speaking with our member Susan Lustig and her daughter Mel at the Dairy Queen last year, where Mel worked before she went off to college. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something once ubiquitous, but now quite rare: a payphone. And not just any payphone, but a well-maintained, functioning payphone, framed all around by an attractive blue case. It even had a dial tone when I picked up the receiver. The teenagers standing behind me watched, bemused: they had no clue how to use the phone, let alone what a dial tone was.

A simple curiosity, this phone: mostly obsolete yet lingering, defiant, waiting for someone in need. It reminded me of a story my friend Rabbi Emily Barton Shared with me about an even more remarkable telephone, much farther away.

You may remember that in 2011, a large tsunami hit Japan, triggering a nuclear disaster and killing over 19,000 people. Entire towns were leveled, including the small village of Otsuchi. In Otsuchi, which had roughly the population of Madison, 421 people went missing.

Among those who survived was a man named Itaru Sasaki. Itaru was grieving even before the earthquake and tsunami hit, as his cousin had recently died. Seeking a way to process his grief, until he came up with an idea. As my friend Rabbi Barton tells it:

“He went out and bought an old-fashioned phone booth and stuck it in his garden. It looks like an old English-style one. It's square and painted white, and has glass window panes. Inside is a black rotary phone, resting on a wood shelf. This phone was connected to nowhere. It didn't work at all. But that didn't matter to Itaru. He just needed a place where he felt like he could talk to his cousin, a place where he could air out his grief. Putting an old phone booth in his garden, which sits on a little windy hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, felt like a perfect solution. He said,

“because my thoughts could not be relayed over a regular phone line, I wanted them to be carried on the wind. So I named it the wind telephone.”

The idea of maintaining a direct relationship with the dead is not so strange in Japanese culture. Practitioners of the Shinto religion venerate the spirits of ancestors, hoping they might protect their descendants. Many Japanese families keep a Buddhist altar for their ancestors in the living room. It's a way to stay in touch, to let them know that they're still a big part of the family. All of this must serve a similar psychological function to lighting a yarhtzeit candle and saying kaddish every year. Those of us who grew up with some Yiddish superstition may have heard that the Kaddish is actually seen as a protective force that children can provide to the souls of their parents who have passed away. These global rituals keep us connected with our ancestors while reminding us that we will be a part of the lives of our descendants, even after we depart this earth.

In the days following the catastrophe in Japan, the population was devastated. It was a time of national mourning. And that's when word of Itaru's Wind Telephone began to spread. People started showing up unannounced on his property. From there, they entered the phone booth, picked up the receiver, and started talking.

One woman brought her grandsons to connect with their missing grandfather after the tsunami. The children, now feeling at ease, chatted about their school day, giving routine updates much like any catch-up call.

Another woman, having lost her home and husband on the same day, drove over 50 miles back to town. In the booth, she dialed her old number, the echo of shared nights with her spouse. At the end, she stood, gently brushing away her tears before ending the call.

Itaru notices more men at the booth than women, a curious sight in a country not known for masculine displays of emotion. The subtleties of affection are more commonly woven into gestures rather than direct words like "I love you." Instead, these feelings are realized in small acts of care, like a husband inquiring about his

absent wife's cooking and warm embrace, coupled with a pledge to build a shared home—an earnest declaration of love. For some, the booth becomes an outlet to articulate complex emotions, or to voice their regrets. One young man visits alone to speak to his father through the wind phone, later returning with his family. In an interview, one mother recounts their brokenness, how they were on the brink of collapse, clinging to silence about their father. The phone call transformed them, offering a realm to reconnect and mourn, a sacred space for healing.

Itaru estimates that as many as ten-thousand people have come from all over Japan to speak into the telephone in the first three years following the disaster. Just imagine all that's been said.//

This day and Yizkor in particular are so much like the wind telephone in that they make much thinner the gap between the living and the dead. We whisper into the void, reaching out to our father, or sister, or brother, or spouse. We close our eyes, and the memories return to us, as if carried by the wind.

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“We remember our loved ones with the silent Yizkor prayer. Please turn to pages 568-77 to help guide your meditations.”

VIGNETTES :

As we remember our loved ones gone to the bond of eternal life, we meditate on their lives and the manifold ways they touched our TBT family. I share here a few snapshots of those lives:

Saul [Gordon] was a long-time supporter of Temple Beth Tikvah and the broader Jewish community. He knew that family was the most important thing, and lived his life that way. He was loving and generous and cared for everyone in his life.

Henry [Gettenberg] was a longtime member of TBT, as well as a deeply committed Jew. For many years he beautifully chanted Haftarah at the High Holy Days. His father survived the worst of the Nazi Camps, and his mother had been hidden away in a convent. He emigrated to the United States at a very young age, speaking Italian, English and Hebrew. His Jewish passion and sharp mind were eclipsed only by his dedication to his family. His grandkids will always remember his Donald Duck impersonations.

Phyllis [Kaufman] can only only reasonably be remembered how everyone knew her: as Bubbey. She was a Torah Study regular, and involved in our social justice committee for decades, where she made quite an impact as the organizer of the stop'n'shop gift card fundraiser.

Karen [Flatley] enjoyed bridge, Mahjong, cooking, reading, and traveling — especially to Venice, which she loved dearly. Her parents escaped Vienna during the Holocaust and she grew up in Canada. She is missed by her many devoted friends and members, including her grandchildren, who remember the special birthday trips she would take them on

Ruth [Ottenheimer] survived the horrors of the Shoah as a passenger on the Kindertransport. Over decades, she shared a message of hope: that no matter the evil in the world, the human spirit can survive and thrive

Gladys [Handelman] was a first-generation American. She was an ambitious businessperson and possessed many talents. She captured the wonder of her grandchildren by being able to sink a basketball in the family hoop, backwards!

Ed [Sack] was a great teacher, mentor, and a source of wisdom to all he encountered. People would go to him when he needed a trusted opinion. He was a leader at TBT for many years, helping to ensure our long-term financial health.

Florence [Harff] was a wonderful person, and the ‘best nana ever’ who made meaningful connections throughout life. She was quite fond of dogs, especially Collies, whom she would rescue and train as therapy dogs.

Martin [Rubenstein] was a self-made man with a sharp eye. He was charismatic, stylish, and beloved. He was so very proud of his daughters, who loved him most generously.

Alfred [Rimm] will be remembered as a joyfully idiosyncratic person with very creative ideas. Unlike many men in his era, Alfred was very supportive of his wife’s career. He was a terrific mentor; and a man of integrity and character.

Ricky [Gurfein] was an artist, an incredible cook and baker...her baked items were works of art, often almost too beautiful to eat. Music was a huge part of her life, and always made her home warm and inviting. She valued

honesty and integrity and her children and grandchildren meant everything to her. She loved her daughters fiercely and was an example of how to be a mom.

Jordan [Lustig] was a total mensch. He was the kindest, most caring person you could imagine. He was also quite a gentleman. He practiced law for over 50 years, taking on leadership roles in Bridgeport civic life and his synagogue. His dedication to the Jewish community and his family made an impact that will reverberate for generations.

Harold [Redlich] was a beloved and devoted husband, father, grandfather, brother, and uncle. He grew up in Providence where he met Gloria. They enjoyed 68 years of marriage. He worked tirelessly as pharmacist, later retiring to Block Island, which provided an idyllic setting for the entire extended family.