Yizkor Drash 2021 by Maggid Elias Ramer

Picture a little boy growing up in a three room apartment in Queens, New York. He and his baby brother share the small bedroom. Their parents sleep behind a bookcase in the living room. Picture that little boy as far back as age three, remembering – having lived on a tropical island, in a desert, high in some mountains he's never seen – as his family never goes on vacation, or to the movies, and can't yet afford a television. But oh, the big old house he remembers living in, with his two older sisters, parents, grandparents, and their servants, a big house unlike any that he's ever yet seen.

When that little boy, me, was around four, he asked, "Mommy, what happened to my other parents?" The look of horror on her face told me everything, and I never talked about my memories again. But had we been living in another time, when a belief in gilgul – reincarnation – was common in the Jewish world – my mother might have said, "Sweetheart, tell me about them. Maybe I knew them too. And, what were you like? What kind of house did you live in?"

There are no references to gilgul in the Tanach and only brief mention in the Talmud, but it's an essential element of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, in the Zohar and other core texts. Some religions teach that we're sent back as punishment for our sins, but in Kabbalah we're taught that we come back through our own free will – sometimes to make amends, sometimes to learn more, and sometimes to share our wisdom. According to one old teaching, Moses came back centuries later – as Rabbi Akiva. But you don't have to take this literally. I invite you to consider reincarnation as a metaphor, in this season of teshuva, return. The leaves that fall from a tree don't come back the following spring. New leaves emerge. As in some parts of the Jewish world parents name their children for those who died, as new leaves on their tree of life.

Some people say "died," some say "departed, passed on, passed away." And when we go to the cemetery, it's our custom to leave a pebble on their gravestone. Long ago, when our ancestors lived in the Middle East – where the soil is rocky and it's hard to dig a deep grave – they'd place stones on top, to keep animals from digging up the body. And when we left there, we took that practice with us – put stones on a grave.

Rocks, stones, pebbles. On a grave they're stable. Tossed in water they send out ripples.

The dead we're here to name today are a pebble dropped into the pond of our remembering. And from that pebble a first ripple will extend outward, as a kabbalistic question. Were you here before, in another body? Were they, who you remember? Is a love of Chinese art, Gregorian chants, African drumming, Peruvian food, vacationing in Bali – none of which were a part of your upbringing, or theirs – are they clues to who you were before, who they were, to where perhaps you knew each other before, in different bodies?

Pond. Pebble. Another ripple. Have those you're remembering – come back? Will you be walking down the street tomorrow and pass a baby in a stroller – smiling up at you

with joyous recognition? As for a moment you make eye contact. As in that moment – some part of you remembers too. Gilgul. Returned. In their stroller. Gilgul. Which in Hebrew means “cycle” or “wheel.” Gilgul. Remembering. In a beaming face. A song they loved that's playing in the store you walk into. Sitting with them in a dream, in a café in a city you’ve never seen before. In the image of them that’s tattooed – on the inside of your heart.
We have times for remembering. At the cemetery. When we say kaddish. And now, together, as we recite yizkor. For with loss comes the hope of nechemta, comfort. All of us holding each other, in spirit, in our hearts.

And now, another ripple. How do you come to yizkor, in this time of Covid? For some of us this is a reminder of our lives with AIDS, familiar, and yet different. And how do we come to yizkor in fire season, in this time of climate change? Our people have faced disaster – all through our history. But nothing like this, which threatens all of life as we know it.

I invite you to take a slow deep breath with me – as you feel yourself sitting here – on this afternoon of yizkor. If you’re comfortable – place your hands on your heart, and feel it beating.

We’re more than 70% water. Close your eyes. Turn your senses inward. And feel the river of life surging through you. The stories, the memories, your dreams.

Pond. River. Lake. Ocean.

Who and what are you remembering? However this season feels to you, in our shared journey of teshuva, returning – I invite you to ponder this. That we are all more than we seem. That our long history and its unfolding – is more than it appears to be.

And with your hands still resting over your beating heart, I invite you to feel and know that we are all held, always, in the vast infinite outermost loving ripple – that’s shining on the surface of the eternal ocean we call God – the Source, HaShem, the creator of all that is.

Pond. Pebble.
Rock. River.
Lake. Love.
Infinite ocean.
Holding us all.
Here, in yizkor.
And always.

9/7/21 Drash – Shawn Matloob

Moadim Shalom.

Rosh Hashanah Persian style. As Persian Jews, we celebrate both nights of Rosh Hashanah, as one of the two most important Jewish celebrations, by having seders followed by a Persian dinner with relatives. Unlike the other important Jewish celebration of Pesach, Rosh Hashanah's Persian seders have a lot more eating and a lot less reading. Last night, I had the pleasure of observing Rosh Hashanah Persian style after a one-year break due to Covid. Once again I had the honor of directing my much younger cousins in Tiburon to say the blessings for the items on the Persian seder, starting with apple dipped in honey, followed by leeks, beans, dates, squash, lamb's head, beets, a cow's lung or popcorn and end with pomegranate, each symbolizing a wish for the new year.

The only other year that I couldn't observe Rosh Hashanah this way was when I was 14 spending the two nights of Rosh Hashanah crossing the desert from Iran to Pakistan while escaping my birth country, leaving my parents and brother. I've previously and proudly shared my experiences of those two adventurous nights, the following month and a half in Pakistan, 10 months in Austria, arriving in the US as an unaccompanied minor refugee thanks to HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), and being welcomed by Uncle Davood, Aunt Afsaneh and a large extended family in the tight-knit Jewish-Persian community in Los Angeles. I've also shared proudly that a few weeks after my arrival, Uncle Davood and Aunt Afsaneh told me the wonderful news of expecting triplets, which still is one of the best news of my personal life, considering I prayed for about nine years for them to have a child. A few of you may have even heard that I shared a bedroom with the triplets during their first five months. However, what followed I've never shared publicly before because I didn't want to give any negative impression of Uncle Davood and Aunt Afsaneh, to whom I owe my new life in my new country. Even over 30 years later, I still want to avoid creating any negative impression of them. They accepted the responsibility of a difficult teenager without reservation and with the best intentions, not knowing if they'd have their own child. And, then the miracle happened times three.

Understandably, with the arrival of my adorable cousins, Tiffany, Michael and Desiree, our living situation changed. Overnight from three of us sharing a two-bedroom apartment, there were seven of us, including a baby-sitter. Many challenges followed and as a result, I realized I needed another place to live. I couldn't turn to my extended family or anyone who knew Uncle Davood and Aunt Afsaneh for the same reason I haven't shared this difficult part of my refugee story before. So what was a 16-year-old supposed to do?

First, I turned to my high school teachers for help, even my math teacher, Ms. Yamada, whom I wasn't that close with. Then, I walked to the nearest American synagogue, Temple Emanuel, on Burton Way. Everyone listened but didn't offer any help. Obviously, I couldn't turn to any Persian synagogue because they'd know my family. I even wrote to a cousin, who had no contact with my family in LA but never heard back.

I tried to stay out of my uncle and aunt's way as much as possible. For example, I took an evening piano class at Fairfax High School. One evening after class on my way

home, I must have spent too much time in West Hollywood because Uncle Davood was worried and as a result very angry when I got home. So angry that I decided it was best for me to leave and I left in the middle of the night without knowing where I was going. Recently, I've been wondering what would have become of me if I had returned to West Hollywood that night. Fortunately, I'll never know because instead I stayed in the same neighborhood until three of my uncles found me.

One of them, Uncle Nasser, gave me a new home even though he and Aunt Dokhy had their hands full with adorable four-year old Jasmine and a few-months-old Jason, who could be louder than the triplets combined. Uncle Nasser initially had no intention of accepting the responsibility of a difficult teenager but I'm lucky and forever grateful that he did. Not only did he provide me with a private room in his home till we found a suitable alternative, but when I was moving on he told me that I'd always have his home to go to for Shabbat dinners and paid for most of my expenses for the remainder of high school and first two years of college without ever asking for anything in return.

I am inspired to share this difficult part of my refugee story thanks to the generosity of my dear friend, Sha'ar Zahavnik Ron Lezell, who has once again opened his home to host another gay Iranian refugee, this time someone who doesn't even speak any English and Ron patiently communicates with him via Google Translate. Of course, there are other generous Sha'ar Zahavniks, including Ora Prochovnik, Beth Ross, Michael Chertok and Erika Katske, who have similarly opened their homes to LGBT refugees. After four years of very few refugees being allowed to enter this country, finally the gates have reopened and many, including Afghans, have been arriving in the Bay Area, thanks to HIAS, the Jewish Family & Community Services of the East Bay and other non-profits, which can use all the help we can provide.

On this Rosh Hashanah, a time for reflection, introspection and repentance, just as I'm grateful to my uncles Nasser and Davood for my life in the US, I'm also grateful to our governor, Gavin Newsom, for many aspects of our lives in California and as an immigration attorney. He has been a champion for the rights of refugees, immigrants, and especially the LGBT community like no other.

As we begin 5782, I commit to do everything I can to support refugees, immigrants and our leaders who support them. I hope you do the same. Shana tova!

YK 5782/2021 Drash - Ericka Katske

I was afraid to write this *drash* more than a day in advance. Given the past 2 years, who *knows* what would be happening *this* week? Change happens all the time; it's true. But usually, it's gradual, often imperceptible. This past year? Not so much.

For the past few years, I've been working towards a PhD at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. It's a *big* change from my 20-year career in community organizing. But I returned to school because of a nagging sense that my social change work needed different questions. We weren't shifting systemic problems. I wanted to dig into how bigger change happens – particularly economic change. More than policies, though, I am curious about how beliefs, theologies, and understandings of morality shift.

So, I read a lot (of fairly esoteric stuff) about change. And I was *still* astounded by how life changed in 2020. Transformation seemed to happen overnight: my classes and *all* of my partner's many workplaces moved entirely online; our school debt was frozen; our health insurance premiums went *down (like a lot)*, and suddenly, vaccines and COVID testing became available to everyone – for free. My neighbors, who barely make rent in normal times, were so relieved when evictions were prohibited; The US government deposited *thousands* of dollars into *my bank account – I bet yours too*! Hmm…seems all those changes that I and we had been fighting for *were* possible.

Under non-pandemic circumstances, we are generally *less* open to sweeping change. Intellectually we know that things could change, but we don't live that way – maybe we can't. Our bodies are *designed* to maintain stability. Complex feedback systems keep our temperatures constant, for example, even as the weather changes or as you move from one San Francisco microclimate to another. Our internal states *don't* change because our bodies are equipped to respond to outside change. Right now, we are all calibrating away, adjusting to minute shifts in our environments.

On a conscious level, most of us desire stability as well. **Individually**, we construct daily routines to organize time. We tell stories about how our lives will progress; we make plans, sync calendars, get degrees, invest money. We buy insurance to cover the unexpected.

Collectively, we construct larger networks – often helpful things, like banks and mortgage companies, schools, governments, borders. Even money: green slips of paper that have tangible, collective meaning. All these things exist – but only because ***we agree*** they do. We create them so that we can rely on them. Through them, we experience a security – ***that only exists in our minds***.

That sounds grim. But isn't that the message of today? Yom Kippur is Jewish tradition's annual reminder that the elaborate stories and institutions we create for and among ourselves – as essential, and even awe-inspiring, as they can be – are products of our individual and collective imaginations.

Yom Kippur challenges stability. We use the shofar to wake us; we fast; we wear burial shrouds. We recite words that we know, logically, to be true: this coming year, some of us will die; for others of us, our lives will become unrecognizable because of fire, flood, or disease; because of good luck or new love; because of job changes or the loss of someone close.

And even while we observe this day – this whole season – we resist. "Yes," we think. It is important to remember how little we know! And, by 5:30, I need to get the

bagels in the oven for break-fast; my report for tomorrow still needs editing; and the kids? they probably have more homework…

In the busy-ness, stability returns; we feel a sense of purpose, direction; things become knowable, reliable. And, if you are like me, sometimes, frankly, it's a relief. Because what do we have if we don't have our make-shift stability?

We do have something else, though. Underneath our routines and management tools, as we reach for *something* that won't change, we are expressing a deep and common *desire* to trust that we are something more than our finite-ness. This reaching is theological, a raw expression of belief and hope; an innate tendency towards *faith*. It is our stubborn ***insistence*** that an Infinite exists – and we insist on it long before the word "God" gets in our way.

Dr. Noelle Vahanian teaches that theology is the way we talk about the desire for permanence. It's the study of our *longing, our need, for meaning and hope* and the strategies we use to navigate our lives as spiritual, self-reflective, and yet mortal beings.

For thinkers like Vahanian, theology is the process of discerning the ideas, evidence, beliefs, and imaginaries we will trust. Theology is important because it offers a way of asking *explicitly* and collectively if ***what*** we trust reflects our values, communities, and traditions. [pause]

During the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, when I was working as an organizer, an Imam, with whom I worked closely for years, came to me with an idea. "What we need to do," he said, "is organize a march to the Golden Gate. We need to throw every one of our mortgage agreements into the Bay at the same time. **But we need to do it together!**"

He was doing theology. That act would have allowed us to call the banking bluff and to collectively question a key object of societal trust. But that kind of change is hard and scary! It requires sitting in all the anxiety that lurks behind the fictional *things* we hold sacred. It reminds us that those things aren't things!

These days, I am working to understand theology not as a set of answers, but as a way of bringing into consciousness the mostly unconscious process of committing my – our – trust. Doing theology means examining what I believe is infinite and making sure it aligns with my tradition, my experience, my values, my actions. Theology becomes a *practice* – a process that requires regular evaluation as we change and the world changes. And Judaism offers so many tools! Here we are *today*, like every year, collectively examining ourselves and committing to change. And we have other tools to combine with our Jewishness – 12-step programs, yoga practices, time among trees or at the ocean. Theology is not limited to religious doctrine.

That march to the bridge didn't happen in 2008. I still believe **deeply** that the way we handle housing and homelessness in this country is immoral. So today, I repent – again – that I have not yet thrown the deed to my house into the Bay. We hold *so tightly* to that which offers stability. We resist changing those things – I resist – even when they don't align with who *I* want to be and even when *we* know that changing them is *exactly* what's *needed*.

What would it look like to allow even just a little more room for theology, for questioning what we trust and why? What if we started to hold a little less tightly to the beliefs and structures we've created for and among ourselves?

Whether we are talking about a personal struggle, a family tradition, or the environment; whether it's housing policy, racial inequity, or gendered bathrooms, I believe we could use a theological approach – one that allows us to see the desire for something infinite and unchanging that's operating underneath. Yom Kippur invites us to jump into that theological work, that living faith, with both feet and to push ourselves and each other to extend our hope beyond what we think is unchangeable. It's the work of cultivating change, but it also cultivates us.

Dr. Vahanian writes: "There are biologists and there are nuns, and each seeks the truth, each seeks reassurance, each seeks faith in a different way… I**n both cases," she says, "there is a measure of reason and a measure of faith. And in both cases, it is not the object that makes life worthwhile ([whether we are talking about] cells or [the Divine]), but the subject, [the biologist, the nun, you and me,] who express wonder even amidst lament." (p.6)**

This day, like 2020, reminds us how little we know. It also asks us to choose community and hopeful action anyway. In the anxiety of not-knowing, individual and collective f**aith become *more* evident, *more* necessary. We choose and act and change and then choose again – less because we *know* and more because we hope. And, as the Imam said, we have to do it together.** *That,* I think, is what it means to experience something eternal. **G'mar Chatima Tova.**

2ND DAY ROSH HASHANA DRASH - Shoshana Levenberg

When the rabbi called to ask if i'd give the 2nd day rosh hashana drash, I was stunned into total honesty: absolutely not, I'm not on speaking terms with the torah. But when the rabbi asks, one must at least consider. I thought of my attempts to live with kavanah, with intention. And what is more terrifying and thrilling than to publicly think about one's spiritual quest. So I said yes. And then she told me the parasha was vayera and I wondered if I could still weasel out of it. I hadn't opened the chumash in 50 years and am not learned. The akedah, the binding of Isaac, seemed utterly foreign and irrelevant to the questions of my life. I could promise only that I would read a little, study a little, and write honestly of what comes up for me.

I grew up orthodox and went to yeshiva as a kid. I loved the framework that learning torah gave a life, the sense that there is a right and wrong but that it can take a lifetime to figure out which is which. I loved the search for meaning thru words and the intellectual rough and tumble. Yet I chafed at the rigidity and intolerance of the orthodox world and could not live within its confines, despite my love. At puberty when I was to take my place behind the mechitza, the curtain that separates the men and women when praying, I announced to my mother in all of my adolescent arrogance and certainty that I was fed up with all of this jewish stuff and would no longer participate. My mother, who is a very smart woman, was silent for a long moment, then said, ok, darling, whatever you want, but it's too late, you're already a jew. I spent the majority of my adulthood fully aware that my jewishness informed a huge part of who I was but could see no path to live jewishly that fit me.

One of the obstacles that lay between me and the torah, now and then, are the characters: killing and cheating, lying and scheming. In this parasha alone we have Abraham, willing, not for the first time, to sacrifice his wife to a rapacious ruler to save his own skin, Lot willing to abandon his daughters to a mob of rapists, sarah scheming to kill hagar and Ishmael, not to save her son's life, but to ensure his dynasty and Abraham, again, whose ultimate responsibility as a parent is to protect his child, ready to literally sacrifice his son. Couldn't we find some better ancestors, just a little more heroic? Many torah scholars, folks I respect, find torah vital to their lives despite our deeply flawed ancestors. But my first reading of the parasha left me cold: I just couldn't forgive them. How can such damaged and damaging people guide me? I had to think about how and why I returned to the practice of Judaism.

My jewish renaissance began in cuba a number of years ago. I went to see a babalao, a santeria priest, with a friend, who was going for a reading. The priest then turned to me and asked if one of my parents was dead. I replied yes, my father died some 30 years before. And he said well your father wants a mass said for him. The conversation was in Spanish so I thought maybe I misunderstood: my father, the orthodox jew, with whom I had had a difficult and estranging relationship, wants a mass said for him. But he was saying la misa, mass. Ok, fine. But as I left the room, a thought blinded me in its powerful clarity: my father had never had kaddish said for him. I was an only child, a girl at that, not permitted to say kaddish. When I returned to the states I came to csz for yom kippur. It was the first time in 40 years that I entered a shul. I wore my uncle's tallis, and said kaddish for my father, weeping in the realization that in order to be part of l'dor v'dor, the generations, in order to have my perfect, beautiful toddler

grandson, I had to accept and forgive my less-than-perfect father. There is no picking and choosing of ancestors, near or far. And so my jewish renaissance began.

This year, this time, it's not my less-than-perfect father that slams me into the wall of slichot, of forgiveness. I judge our ancestors and find them wanting and behind that judgment hides a mirror that reflects the harm I have done in my lifetime and finds me wanting. This year, this time, the slichot is for myself. That moment of softness, of self-acceptance opened for me the possibility of the way back to our foremothers and forefathers, of forgiving them their imperfections. We are told "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses, therefore, v'charta b'chaim, choose life."

And that's what our ancestors did: brawling and sprawling, so-less-than-perfect, they chose life. Avraham, hearing god's voice, or hallucinating it, chose isaac's life. Lot's daughters, in a fury of life, wresting control, founded nations with the seed of the father who offered them to rapists.

Now I could begin to think about this terrible story, the akedah, the binding of Isaac. I realized during this process that for me the point isn't the sacrifice, it's the binding. To me the akedah symbolizes Isaac as the first generation of jews bound to our tradition. We are a people thousands of years old, tied together by our torah, our laws, our profoundly ethical morality, and our god who requires us in each generation to complete her. This binding, terrifying for Isaac, the son, heart-wrenching for avraham, the father, it's not an easy thing for any of us. We are bound to each other in a less-than-perfect community. We are bound to our less-than-perfect ancestors in a less-than-heroic founding biblical story. We are bound to a god who often angers and confuses us.

As a child, tho I loved the jewish traditions and felt myself in the stream of the generations, I felt tied up, tied down, tied in knots by religiosity. I couldn't breathe. I saw my father, a would-be baseball player in a family of rabbinical scholars, deeply damaged by religiosity. In response I became a dedicated and inveterate rulebreaker. Tradition, rituals, rules, were all the same to me: soul crushing bonds.

For a short time I belonged to a conservative shul that required the men to wear yarmulkes. It thought of itself as an egalitarian congregation and allowed women to wear yarmulkes and tallises, as well. It greatly saddened me to see all of the little boys with their kipot, their head coverings, but only a few of the girls. It took me a while to figure out why this bothered me so much. Then I realized that it is the requirements that bind us to our heritage. To make a rule mandatory for men and voluntary for women loosens our ties, tells us we are not as important, or capable.

Here we have these opposites: being bound to jewish life in a way that can stunt and fossilize or being unbound in a way that sets us adrift. Isaac's binding, our binding, it is not an easy thing. Binding that becomes sacrifice or binding that connects us. Unbinding that frees us or unbinding that sets us adrift. Is it possible to be bound, to our families, our community, our jewish practice, in a way that does not sacrifice the most cherished parts of us, that enables us to forgive ourselves and each other our imperfections, to choose life in all of its messy splendor?

I was at a jewish meditation retreat and a woman there showed me how to put on my uncle's t'fillin. I put on the t'fillin slowly, ritually and as the long leather strap encircled my arm, my hand, my finger, my forehead, I felt connected, not suffocated, and I did not struggle. I davened, prayed, and for a brief moment I felt the feathery touch of

ruach, of spirit on my cheek. Tho I never again wore t'fillin, I know it is possible to bind ourselves to our truest natures.

But after the epiphany come the moment-to-moment choices that make up a life. True binding, connection, to each other, to our heritage, that does not fossilize, does not sacrifice our truest selves, is not a one-off choice but requires us to look with new eyes at our connections, again and yet again. We must struggle in our course corrections, re-examining, re-committing, re-defining, returning.

And so during these chagim, these holidays when we perform t'shuva, when we turn inward in search of our heart's longing, I pray that each of us, unique as a snowflake yet bound together in our imperfect humanity, becomes who we are supposed to be, does that which only each of us can do, this year, at this time, with this breath, v'charta b'chaim, therefore we choose life, for the world depends upon it.

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