As we seek meaning and significance in our lives – as we aspire to renew ourselves in this New Year — our tradition shakes us, jarring us awake, exclaiming that it’s not that easy – to just show up for a few hours, pray a few prayers, see and be seen, and with a lingering sweetness of apples and honey on our satisfied breath, be good until next time. Right there, hiding in plain sight are the themes of these days, demonstrated in our holy texts – the cries of our children and the sobbing of parents.

In this time when rabbis are beseeched not to be political or are alternatively accused of shirking their responsibility if they are not doubling down on a particular, contemporary hot button issue or two, the ancient wisdom of our liturgy makes it quite clear that we are to see the vulnerability and the burden of those squarely in front of us before we can optimistically write ourselves into the Book of Life for the New Year.

As we are to personalize and own the experience of being a slave freed from Egypt during Passover, here in this time, we are to actualize the sufferings of Ishmael and Isaac – and Hagar, Sarah, Hannah, and Rachel – and we are to implore God to remember us, to show us mercy and to love us, as God remembered our ancestors. And beyond relying exclusively on God for respite, we see that it is the adults in these stories that put their children at risk and who are deficient in protecting their children. Both Sarah and Abraham are seen here as broken parents – and the accusation then is clear – that on Rosh haShanah, we stand with the 19th century Hasidic master Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev to accuse God for failing us, as God’s children.

A song, attributed to Reb Levi Yitzchak, is called A din Toyre mit Gott – The Lawsuit, or the Kaddish of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak, which mixes the liturgical Aramaic words of the Kaddish with the vernacular Yiddish of the rebbe’s time. In this song, Reb Levi Yitzchak pleads with God – what do you want of Your people Israel? What have you demanded of Your people Israel? All the other nations have set up a king or a sovereign for themselves and are living in prosperity – and what do I say? Hamelech hayoishev al kisei rom veniso — You are God who sits upon the throne.

What kind of a world do we live in, and how entitled or disenfranchised do we feel to stand before God with our concerns? For some of us – perhaps many in this sanctuary this morning – even the concept of standing before God is challenging to contemplate and may feel disingenuous. Part of our task in these Holy Days is to remind God to show us mercy – to not forget us – and we sound the shofar, not just to wake ourselves up, but to wake up God from a Divine repose. As our tradition boldly asks, as an open question – if we cannot show mercy upon children, then what right do we have to claim God’s love? Before accusing God, our children depend on our responsible behavior.

And how are we to be? How do we decide to act in this world – we can’t possibly dwell on every issue that concerns us – for much of our everyday lives already leaves us exhausted. We cannot be an authority on many things – so how do we sharpen what time and energy we do have to make an effective difference in the comportment of our lives?
As we chant the Shema Yisrael, we are centered in the idea of God’s sovereignty. We realize that all of us have come from our diverse places – from our different perspectives and views – and have agreed to proclaim together that God is one. We also know that the last letter of the word shema and the last letter of the word echad are often highlighted, spelling out another word that is embodied within this assertion – that word is aid, or witness.

We are to bear witness to God’s unity as we make our way in the world. Indeed, bound up in the idea of God’s wholeness is our life – our proclamation that this is so – and we offer this awareness at least twice a day, and most intensely on our deathbed, when the final confession, or viddui is chanted, which concludes with the Shema.

To witness means to state that we are here – that we see what is going on. To witness gives credence to someone else’s experience, and unlike the viewpoint of the early Christian writer Tertullian, who states that one of the chief pleasures of heaven is watching the tortures of the damned, a Jewish perspective on witnessing is that it is a religious act — a giving of agency and investment in someone else. To witness is not to offer a chance gaze – rather presence is constructed with intentionality – magnifying our investment in someone else’s well-being and their creation in Divine image.

Further, to witness is to publicly enact our values and communicate deep convictions – and to hear and feel the suffering of others. We are asked to do this on these days of renewal – as we bear witness to the hapless children and the broken parents of our sacred texts – and it is the shofar, rousing God awake as it expresses pain and wailing – as, according to the Talmud, the shofar conveys a mother’s shattered heart for her son who will not return – and it voices the suffering of all human beings – and reminds us that God will startle if we startle awake – so it is a spiritual imperative to expose ourselves to the pain – especially in this time when we grapple with meaning and the significance of our own lives.

Our tradition wonders about someone on Rosh haShanah, who happens to pass by a synagogue on that Holy Day and hears the shofar – do they fulfill their obligations of listening, even if they didn’t intend to do so? The Mishnah concludes by stating that two people can hear the identical sound with only one having done the mitzvah – because only the one who has the intent of heart to hear what was being sounded, does so – the other person heard, but did not listen.

Our Talmud teaches that Joseph left his Egyptian prison on Rosh haShanah, based on a beautiful reading of Psalms 81 – the shofar is sounded at the New Moon… — when Joseph went out through the land of Egypt. The idea is that Joseph noticed the sounding of the shofar – he recognized the suffering in the world – he heard it and took it to heart, and even in the knowing of this fracture, the wounds in the center of our existence and that populate our relationships – in acknowledging the dark beauty of an imperfect spirit – he was able to cultivate empathy, sensitivity, joy, and generosity as he acted on behalf of the weeping children and the distraught adults. He was freed as he witnessed and realized what the world was really like.

I am afraid. I ponder what I choose to do with my life as I lead this congregation. Not this congregation in particular, but as I dwell on the trajectory of organized Jewish life in America. I yearn for everyone’s life to overflow with the wonder and delight of Judaism. I want everyone to learn and pray and eat and sing and teach and laugh and cry and show up here, again and again. I want this place to matter, and I want everyone to matter in this place. I want both/and. I wince when I think that I am falling short of my potential and letting this community languish in a chummy coterie of comfort and self-satisfaction, without engaging the existential issues of our sacred texts and of our responsibilities to act in this world, which includes a mature and committed relationship with the state of Israel.

I don’t want us to be content as we happen to hear the shofar sounding as we walk on by, or as we drift in and out. I want us to have skin in the game and to stay on the field – and all of the other clichés — to stand like Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and plead not only for our lives and for the lives of Jews around the world, but for the lives of waylaid children and parents out in the world, who are crushed by
the legacy of racism, hate, fear, and all kinds of oppression. This is not a political stance – this is the cultivation of a Jewish heart.

So what can we do? First, let us not be distracted. Let us not seize upon some spicy morsel of salacious information or gossip in some news cycle that distances us from our commitment and adjuration to pursue holiness. Yes, let’s keep our eye on the ball. Second, who lives around us – who are our neighbors, and what is their experience? Can we see suffering? Do we know the hopes and dreams of others? How do they intersect with our own? Together, let us not be lost souls swimming in fish bowls, year after year. Third, do we know where we come from? As the American historian, Jill Lepore, writes – to study our past is to unlock the prison of the present. Each of us is Joseph, and our release date is today. We are free, and on Rosh haShanah as the shofar is sounded, we come home.

This summer, with the talents of many in our community, we led an asylum witness trip to Laredo, which included seeing detention facilities that are run by for-profit industries, one piece of a multibillion dollar business of immigration enforcement – we witnessed procedures in Federal Court taken against those who are undocumented in this country and also conditions in various unincorporated areas on the US-Mexico border, where communities are rallying and helping those recently arrived. Many on the trip have written movingly about this – these observations are collected on asylumwitness.org.

It is my hope that this is but one of the acts that we will take together as a community. So many of us are already involved individually in particular causes – and there is a power for our community to continue to witness and experience together, in order for us to bring strength down from the supernal realm so we can together address the questions of why we are here and what we are doing with our lives. The authorities in Laredo – the bishop and the Border Patrol each beseeched us to change the laws if we want different results from what are presently occurring. Register to vote, and then vote.

In a moment, my friend, Rev. Daryl Horton, from Mt. Zion Baptist Church, is going to share his observations about the road trip that we took together, about six weeks ago – we recorded our experiences on social media – in a Facebook group called Rev and Rabbi Road trip – Summer, 2018, which you are most welcome to view, as we witnessed the Holocaust Museum in Houston, and visited place after place, museum after museum, and met with different people, trying to unlock and be present to the stories and the trauma that are imprisoned there – history and human experience that is also integral in the founding and building of our extraordinary country – with the bleak realization that we are still living in the long shadow of our shortcomings — for a nation borne in revolution will forever struggle against chaos. As our Torah teaches, some things are just ingrained in our society – and as we continue to work towards decency, honesty, and affinity, we will forever struggle against the plagues of poverty, suspicion, and systemic inequality – and thus we will confront anger, conflict, antagonism – and chillingly, the most bitter proclivities of our own nature. On this day, in this time – how do we sear our souls? How can our tradition keep us aware? In this New Year, how do we effectively witness, to hear and concentrate on the shofar sounding, in order for the gates of our prison to melt away?

[Daryl Horton]

Thank you, Rev. Horton. We will be sharing further on Tuesday evening, 9 October at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden – as part of the Interfaith Action of Central Texas event, Night Under One Sky. Most regrettably, this is the same night as Israel’s Ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, will be speaking in this sanctuary. This night is a cornucopia of riches – and as we learned in our time together, trying to fit everything in – we’ll make it work – and we hope everyone here does, as well.

There is a midrash that states that the wise men of Sodom were pleading for their salvation before God – and God told them that their city will be destroyed because they attempted to justify the evil – not because of the evil, itself. We must do the work to lift us up from the inclination to do whatever makes us happy in the moment and just to accept what has been. We must constantly negotiate good and bad in community to see what animates us and how we can and cannot be moved. This year, let us take Reb Levi Yitzchak of Bereditchev as our example – and that doesn’t mean that we all have to learn Yiddish to do so.
May the Book of Life remain open for us to add our names, and the names of those seen and unseen – those who determine our path, and those who have disappeared from the world’s view. May we see that this Book of Life is not exclusive – it’s not an A-list — there are not a certain number of reserved spaces. May bountiful hearts match the bountiful time in which we live, and when we are held to account for our actions, can we speak about how we lifted the burden – how we mollified the cries of our children and the sobbing of the parents? And may we carry on, in the words of the poet Dylan Thomas, may our words be as forked lightning, and as we face the long goodnight, rather than rant and rave, may we be proud of how we have lived.

Shanah Tovah u’Metukah
Ketivah va’Hatimah Tovah