"Elephants in the Room"

Yom Kippur -- Kol Nidrei
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https://www.facebook.com/theaustinsynagogue/videos/1210646020823093/
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G'mar Hatimah Tovah. I am honored to stand before you this evening. Thank you for your trust. Thank you for your presence. May we receive strength from each other and uplift each other as we enter into these contemplative hours of Yom Kippur. And tomorrow night, after we sound the final blasts of the shofar, may we indeed step into a better world that will be transformed by our prayers and by our attention. May we deepen our awareness of the Divine force that serves, keeping us animated and the world in motion. To review themes that I have presented on Rosh Hashanah: may we continue to practice for ourselves cognitive liberty and before things get to a point of no return, may we see the ram in the thicket when it wasn't apparently there before. May we practice new and inventive ways of regarding the world and not get stuck in ruts or give away too much of ourselves to technology in pursuit of our convenience and ease. May our practices of Judaism help us with all of this. With a full heart may we all say: *kein yehi ratzon.*

The last time I was in Israel, a little less than a year ago, I found myself quite unexpectedly in a Bedouin tent in the Negev, attending an awards ceremony for the winners of the first legal camel race held in Israel. I was with my friend Shachar, who has been in our community a few times and is the founder of the Israel-based NGO, SmartAID. We were touring the Negev as guests of the Ramat HaNegev Regional Council, and before driving back to Tel Aviv that night, we were looking to say goodbye to our hosts, who included the mayor, Eran Doron. His staff told us when we stopped by his office, that he was at this awards ceremony, so we showed up unannounced, and saw a diversity of people representing Bedouin and Israeli societies. There was speech after speech.

I quickly learned that this event was very special. This was the first time that Israel officially recognized camel racing, an important facet of Bedouin culture. It elevated and legitimated camel racing and the entire Bedouin community, not

only the winners of the races. Everyone was filled with immense pride as they shared their excitement, celebrating the strengthening of ties among the various Bedouin communities in the Negev and with Israeli society. During this event, Shachar snapped a picture which, based on the uniforms that people were wearing, reflected the range of folks who were there. Government officials, various branches of the military, police, and public safety, and a wide range of various Bedouin representatives. Nobody wanted to leave. Did I mention there was speech after speech. All present for mutual advancement and the vibe.

In conversation with some of the participants, I discovered what the win-win was. The Bedouins got to celebrate an important part of their culture with official sanction, and Israel got to inoculate the camels to prevent the outbreak of sickness and disease. That was the deal. To see the shining faces, not only of the winners as they collected their cash prizes, but of most everyone in the tent who for a cool single evening, felt that they mattered, and that cooperation was possible, and that this ancient land admitted and sanctioned their belonging. It was a big tent.

I have long been thinking about the idea of home. What constitutes home? Where do we feel most like ourselves? As some of you may know, I have been studying SY Agnon's writings for many years. SY Agnon was a writer who was born in Galicia in Europe and lived in the Yishuv and in Europe before finally making aliyah to pre-state Israel in 1924. He was a joint recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966. For generations, his Hebrew language stories have been part of the literature curriculum in schools in Israel. His stories generally blend tradition with modern themes. Deceptively simple, they are deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and are a great way for anyone to discover Jewish texts and cultural background.

Years ago, with a bit of help, I translated one of his previously untranslated stories, called *Kisui haDam*, the Covering of the Blood into English and wrote a thesis annotating the various Talmudic and rabbinic sources contained in it. The term Kisui haDam is a mitzvah found in the Book of Leviticus that requires a community to cover the blood of a slaughtered animal with earth after it has been slaughtered. As understood by our tradition, this was done to underscore the Jewish priority revering life. While there is a lot happening in this story, it can be read as an allegory about Jewish exile, spiritual paralysis, and communal decline. The blood that is uncovered can be read as the blood of the *galut* –

generations of European Jews whose lives were uncertain and who could be detained, uprooted, or murdered at any time by a fickle or hard-hearted regime. The idea was that no one was safe, even if a community or even a family had been in a region for generations.

At the end of *Kisui haDam*, the act of finally performing this mitzvah, to cover the blood, is insufficient. In Agnon's story, atonement is not possible, and rituals cannot mend a world that is fundamentally broken. The mitzvah is not enough. The sacred act itself has become corrupted. And all of this takes place in exile. According to Agnon, perhaps the antidote to such disappointment happens when Jews return home, when they make aliyah to Israel.

Many of us may know of the medieval poet and philosopher, Yehuda Halevi – while living in exile in Spain, he wrote passionately about his longing for Zion, summed up in the famous words: *libi v'mizrach v'anochi b'sof ma'arav – my heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the uttermost West.* We quote this poetic line often, demonstrating that we are pulled towards an idea that the Land of Israel is our home and is the place where we can truly be ourselves. There, we imagine, as Halevi did, we don't have to worry about the jackboot of the marauder. It is a place where we can sort out how we live among ourselves. *Eretz Yisrael* is an idealized place, as HaLevi writes in his elegy, *Tzion halo tishali*, where the air there is clearer and charged with the Divine spirit, the *ruach haKodesh.* As a land flowing with milk and honey, the landscape is charged with a sublime beauty and depth found nowhere else in the world. It is a place when the sun rises, and just by being there, one automatically opens the metaphysical gates of heaven, the *sh'arei Shechina*. This is a place where God speaks to us directly if we are willing to engage. It's a local call. Obviously this is a land which HaLevi is smitten by and deeply in love.

Beautiful – however, here's the end to Halevi's story that we may not know. He put his money where his mouth was. In 1140, he left Spain and traveled to Egypt on his way to *Eretz Yisrael* to stand before the *sh'arei Shechina.* After a year in Egypt, he finally set sail to reach the Holy Land and then our knowledge about his fate is unclear. Some say he died at sea. Another legend maintains that when Halevi finally got to Jerusalem he prostrated himself onto the city's stones in gratitude for his successful journey. Those of us who have been to Israel know that people clap upon landing. What happens when you stand in Israel for the first time? This overwhelming sense of solidarity, of family, of coming home. That's how he felt. He was there on the stones, kissing the stones while he was

bent over in rapturous connection, reciting the words of his love song to Zion, *Tzion halo tishali*, he was immediately trampled and maybe stabbed to death by a Bedouin horseman. Brutal. So much for actualizing our dreams. Dreams deferred seem safer.

Not in *galut*, not in *Eretz Yisrael*. So where do we go to feel at home? I've spoken to many of you in this past year, who are thinking about or in the process of getting passports from other countries. Our beautiful sanctuary, this place where we enter at important times, including this evening, as we prepare to enter into the *sha'arei Shechina* and each of us stand face to face with God as we plead for mercy this sanctuary itself is even built on a question mark. What do I mean?

Last week, about 60 architects who work for the firm Lake Flato came to visit us. Lake Flato is the architecture design firm who designed our space back in 2001. The next generation of architects were curious about the design and use of our space. Many of the visitors were shocked and pleasantly surprised upon discovering that I was here back then and involved when we designed this sacred space over 25 years ago, and that I could give them a first-hand account of our intentions.

A lot of thought went into the design and the aesthetics of this magnificent space. We wanted to build something that was unique, but also directly connected to the Jewish experience in the world. On the ark doors you see a circle that represents a calendar, filled with signs of the constellations as we showcase the Jewish year. This design was inspired by the writings of the rabbis and the synagogues in Babylon, a place that once represented the greatest of Jewish civilization. Now, Babylon, or as it is known in our day, Iraq, is not such a Jewish place.

These ark doors, made of copper, were fabricated in Europe – Germany to be precise. In addition to their grand style and refinement, they also represent Jewish life in Europe. And we know how that has tragically gone. And finally, we stand here, in sacred space deep in the heart of Texas, and a question that arises naturally for us is, when does the next shoe drop? When will it be that we no longer can safely inhabit this space and we will take our designs and our ideas and our quest for home to somewhere new, if we are welcomed – anywhere that we can squeeze in. Like a seashell, a relic from a history not passed, the sighs of the residents of Anatevka echo loudly in our ears.

I have had the privilege of traveling enough in my life the way I like to – without varnished and frenetic tour groups or much built in comfort, to know that it is common, especially in an unfamiliar place, to not feel at home. Even to not be made welcome and to be taken advantage of. When we are in a setting when we don't know how things work, or when we are not in a familiar cultural milieu, it is easy to stand out, to make mistakes, and to be an easy mark for trouble. This tension is part of the allure for me. How can I survive – whether in the natural elements or in a totally different setting, and how quickly can I adapt and find a way that gives me fungible street cred and a way forward?

The world is often so challenging. Our ancient creatives likened our world to a palace that is on fire. This is different from Moses turning aside and seeing the burning bush that was all aflame yet not consumed. This palace is being consumed and when Abraham sees it, he calls out – where is the owner of this palace, it's on fire? And God responds, it is I, I am the owner of this palace. And yet the flames grew higher and higher and Abraham realized that this fire was created by our inhumanity, and it is we who need to extinguish it, not God.

Perhaps a more modern midrash of the story of the burning palace is the series I recently saw called The Pitt. Maybe you saw it also? It is a 15 part series that is a gritty chronicle of life in the Emergency Department at the fictional Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center during a single day shift. The senior attending physician on the show is named Dr. Michael Robinavitch, nicknamed Dr. Robby, played by Noah Wyle. This Emergency Department seems to represent the world as we know it. It is chaotic, tense, and unpredictable. Dr. Robby's job is to organize the department for all that comes its way, and he negotiates various trials, tribulations, systems that breakdown and people who are pushed too far. He and his medical team operate on the razor's edge of life and death, trying to put out the fire that rages. His staff experiences unrelenting demands, and scared and extremely vulnerable patients. The series is punctuated by moral ambiguity, emotional breakdown, and unrelenting institutional pressure. In the heat of decision making there is a constant chance of performing what is known as a prisoner's dilemma, where often cooperation leads only to suboptimal results. Robinavitch's staff is trying to help, to do no harm, and to emerge unscathed. It is easy to imagine that sometimes we too live in a world such as

this. A palace, a world on fire is an Emergency Department and this is our world and we react, struggling to not be overwhelmed by every crisis.

At a certain point towards the end of the series, Dr. Robby collapses in the pediatric wing which has been turned into a temporary morgue because of a mass shooting incident, oh, spoiler alert, sorry -- and lying crumpled on the floor says the *Shema Yisrael,* a prayer that we recognize which is said twice a day, before you die, and at the end of Yom Kippur. These times are all connected. From here, he reenters the fray, directing triage in the Emergency Department in frantic times. At the end of the shift, he addresses the staff and says that when we experience the worst of humanity, it can bring out the best in us. I will add – it must bring out the best in us. He says this place will break your heart, but It's also a place of miracles. And because of its intensity, none of us are going to forget today. So, let yourselves cry. Crying is just grief leaving the body. The fiery palace. The pit. A dumpster fire. *Va'ya'aleini mibor sha'on miteit hayavin, vayakem al selah raglai konein ashurai.* As the Psalmist teaches*: The Divine Power lifted me out of the chaotic pit, lifted me from the viscous clay and set my feet on a rock steadying my legs.* That rock is our home.

This is a perfect message for us as we begin Yom Kippur. Our world seems to be dancing a macabre dance between life and death. Israel too, which beyond its current diminishing status in the world, seems to be fighting a civil war without arms. As we attempt to hold our beloved, broken country in our weary arms, we hear the anguished question from our friends who live is Israel: when is war a war and when is it only maddening revenge that picks us apart, soul by precious soul?

Back into the Bedouin tent: Is it possible to enter into a larger tent and in more than one remarkable evening across our diversity and beyond our simple yet abject grudges, see each other, hear each other, and honor our various stories? As the poet Lucile Clifton wrote: *they ask me to remember/but they want me to remember/their memories/ and I keep on remembering/mine.* Purpose gives direction and belonging gives connection.

On my next trip to Israel, I would like to reenter that Bedouin tent and maybe take in a camel race or two, but more importantly see how the bunny trails of acknowledgment and perhaps burgeoning familiarity help build the more durable paths of mutuality, cooperation, compassion, warmth, and rapport. For telling

our story and hearing someone else's story gives us worth and allows us to go beyond ourselves and perhaps abandon our petty fights while reserving ourselves for the ones that absolutely matter.

As we begin the Day of Atonement, ask yourself: What purpose will you serve? Who do you belong to? What story will you tell? Who will you reach out to beyond yourself? How will you put the fire out, or organize the emergency department to choose life as much as possible? Are we able to enable the work to continue beyond ourselves in this world, so that our lives can be worth the cost inflicted upon them?

On Yom Kippur we make two sacrifices, one to Hashem and one to Azazel. On this day, like Jacob did, we wrestle with death and with our irrelevancy, our futility. This past Shabbat I spoke about Moses, on the last day of his life, intentionally spending the day visiting each of the twelve tribes in the camp before he lay down and was finally gathered to his people. On this day, we visit both with Hashem and with Azazel. For really, there is only one little goat, *had gadya*, and we are it. This is the way forward. This is the epic of return. We are to acknowledge the different stories, even though we may not agree with them. We are to keep a go-bag, a bag packed near the exit and have it represent our active preparation, our hope for a future *moshiach*, and also, so we are ready if we need to leave our home in a hurry. As unaccustomed as some of us are to think this way, we should think of our homes and our so-called permanent dwellings as tents: sturdy, yet portable. So, where is home? The Festival of Sukkot points the way -- helps us with this important spiritual practice of impermanance. On any day, on every day, we are just passing through.

And yet, each day that we are merited to breathe, we yearn for spiritual renewal. *Lo ma nishtanah* -- there is no day that is different from any other day, in this regard. In all that we do, at our root, we are seeking to move from exile to redemption. This has been the wish of Abraham and Sarah, and this continues to be our wish. We get to redemption, not by arguing over who gets the bigger mitzvah like Agnon cautions about. Rather, we get there by believing that other people's problems have relevance to our lives. We get there by feeling that we have a tangible role in offsetting the grief and the pain of others. We get there by quietly bestowing kindness. The world will continue to burn. The emergency room will continue to admit more patients with overflowing waiting rooms.

What I learned in the Negev in the Bedouin tent is that it is possible, beyond the crackle of the headlines that assault and alert us every time we pick up our phones, that we can be valued for who we are, if we have the desire to listen, communicating what is important to us and if we have the capacity to do so for others. We strive to not have our belonging nor the belonging of others be contingent, or dependent upon conforming or maintaining certain beliefs or attitudes to get by. Agnon wrote a lot of stories and in another one called *In the Heart of the Sea*, or in Hebrew, *B'leivav Yamim,* which is a phrase taken from the Book of Ezekiel, a story published shortly before modern Israel was founded in 1948, he writes lyrically about the journey from the Diaspora to the Holy Land which is filled with hope, even a mystical hope that grounds us in a return to our spiritual roots. Let us be inspired by this possibility of our return to these deep wellsprings and defy what might be tomorrow. We celebrate the bravery and the follow through of Yehuda HaLevi who took this brave journey. While his ecstasy was suddenly stifled, both his soul and his body found meaning in his reciting the rapturous words of his poem, *Tzion halo tishali.* This poem expresses his bliss and enchantment, and were his last words as he was cut down in the land of his dreams. Perhaps because of this, we traditionally recite Halevi's poem to this day, the longing of his heart and the end of his life, we recite it on Tisha b'Av, the saddest of all of our days.

In all that we seek to accomplish and in all the days that we live, let the *sha'arei Shechina,* the Gates of Presence, be constantly open to us in our physical and spiritual environment, where God speaks to us directly if we are willing to engage. Let us be smitten and deeply in love with this land that we're in, in these days, and simultaneously continue to pine away for the homeland, the *Eretz Yisrael,* that we desire. It is there, in these gates, that we find our heart.

Inspired by Halevi writing his poetry to record his peak feelings, my son Elijah has written just last week in a poem called *The Burning Palace:*

I.
To Him outside of time, time is a place:
A frozen music in an endless space,
An orchestral cathedral omnipresent,
Through which you roam like some astonished peasant.
To Him outside of space, space is a song:

A dance of insubstantial forms along
The insubstantial voice of what invents them –
Bat-like, He sings to feel the void against Him,
Where does He dwell? A still sound in our minds,
A temple no one leaves, nor ever finds.

II.
But He who hears all cannot hear all things.
To such an ear, the oscillating strings
Of time and space and birth and death create
A faultless harmony. It is His fate
To never know a dissonance, the friction
Of clashing sounds which is a mortal fiction
Born of the limitations of the flesh.
The minor and the diminished, these are ours,
Who sing and die like bees among the flowers.
To hear our music is His only wish.

III.
We are ablaze in time, Siddhartha said,
And Heraclitus, weeping for the dead.
But Abraham, who saw a palace burning,
And screaming people fleeing and returning,
Called out: Who owns this house? And in reply,
The flame itself came roaring: It is I,
A sound like shrieks and choirs intertwining.
The place was not burning, it was shining.

Ketivah va'Hatimah Tovah
Tizku l'shanim rabot nei'mot v'tovot