

“Folsom/Fulsome Prison Blues”

Erev Rosh haShanah

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A zis un gut gebentsht yohr – leshanah tovah u’metukah tikatev v’tichatem.

May we have a good, sweet and blessed year.

Shabbat Shalom.

In the Talmudic tractate Rosh Hashanah, our sages speak of this day when we were released from prison. While that may sound overwrought, our release from incarceration has less to do with our good behavior than it does with the Biblical Joseph, who was released from an Egyptian prison on Rosh Hashanah. Why is Rosh Hashanah considered to be the day when we are released from prison? Why do our ancient teachers single out this day as freedom day, and also the day when our enslavement in Egypt also ceased to be? As we know our stories in the Hebrew Bible, we, the Children of Israel, are rarely good rule followers. Rather, as our Psalms teach – *hotziah mimasgair l’hodot et sh’mecha – my soul is freed from prison so that I may praise Your holy name*. We are released from prison today in order to sing unto God. Now, we are out on bond to participate in the Amen Chorus, singing and tripping the light fantastic, grateful to God with all of our might, at least until our upcoming court date scheduled for Yom Kippur.

It is on this day, when our calendars update to 5787, that we break our bonds of fear, that we build up a highway and clear away the debris from our soul so that we have fewer stumbling blocks before us. We see life anew, out of the ruts of our conditioning and habits. We gain a new perspective today, regarding the world with fresh eyes. Today, past the prison walls, is the new me; the new we. In our freedom we return, we return to our truer depth and greater breadth, poised to be better than we have been before. With our release from prison and from enslavement, we are to be released from bondage before the exodus on Passover and our full redemption. Freedom comes before safety. Freedom and safety are not the same. Freedom occurs before fixing. This is a strange freedom. It’s a freedom before the story ends. Today, we sound the shofar in this prelude, in this cause for celebration.

In 1960 two jazz musicians, Oscar Brown Jr. and Max Roach wrote a musical suite called *We Insist!* One of the songs in this suite is entitled *Freedom Day*. Some of the lyrics as impatiently and urgently sung by Abbey Lincoln go like this: *whisper, listen, whisper, listen, whisper, say we're free. Rumors flying, must be lying, can it really be? Can't conceive it, can't believe it, but that's what they say. Slave no longer, slave no longer, this is Freedom Day.*

Indeed, it may seem odd that we are free today. The question of *Freedom Day* is also our question. What has changed since yesterday? I still see the grimness and the gloom of the world around us. As we acknowledged this past summer on Tisha b'Av, *oy, meh hayah lanu. What has become of us?* I still see life indirectly through an *ispaqlarya she'einah me'irah*, through a lattice or through a glass, darkly, and at times it is an effort to bring my voice forward to praise God. I can suddenly be thrown back into the clink for my recidivism, if my voice wavers or is judged as insincere. How can I pray and praise the Holy Name when everything seems so unjust all around us, and many of us live or see others who live with the menace of uncertainty? That at any moment, lives can be irrevocably changed, and detention centers for our physical bodies and our emotive souls loom in the back of our minds? In our perception, the opposing side, whatever it may be, already threatening, has their knives drawn. Is the rumor of our freedom greatly exaggerated?

Our prophets call out that if we extend ourselves, God will lift us up – God will revive our lowly spirits and renew within us our breath of life and it will be well. *Shalom, shalom l'rachok, v'lakarov – it shall be well with those of us far away and with those of us nearby, and all of us together shall be healed.* This is what freedom makes possible. We lift our voice and either in a sudden bolt out of the blue, or in a gradual, almost unseen, effort of one small act after another over time, we will be healed. And yet, it is hard to summon the energy to always mean what we say. That's why on Rosh Hashanah, we are to concentrate on our breath. Sound the shofar today. This sounding on Rosh Hashanah is a testimony for Joseph when he left his incarceration. The shofar is the buzzer that allows the prison gates to clang open. The shofar reminds us too that we are alive. While breath remains, death loses claims. We are alive. Today is what we have; therefore today, on this New Year, and in fact, every day, even if we feel imprisoned, we are actually free.

Earlier this year, Dara Horn wrote a provocatively titled book called, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living*. In her latest book, Dara Horn boldly argues that antisemitism is built upon a lie, a lie weaponized by tyrants and bad actors seeking power. We also do ourselves no service by focusing on education that does not honor and uplift living Jewish culture and identity. She states that we must not act just like everyone else to be accepted – that will not work. Jews have a long history of non-conformity. We are a two Jews three opinions people. So, we are to show out – and proclaim our lives connected to the Divine as a sweeping, epic love story that places us, with our astonishing, extraordinary legacy, our compelling theology, and our joyful culture boldly and singularly in the world.

I am proud of our sacred community and of the ideals that we uphold, including in our affiliation as Conservative Jews. We are unapologetically honest and forthright as we study and as we dare to call out to God. The very generator of our continued existence is our striving to be more literate in our texts, and to promote joy in our counter-cultural rhythms. At the same time, despite the risks, our community strives to be radically welcoming and unblushingly inviting. We regard Judaism as a robust and demanding sovereign civilization, neither a side hustle, nor a weekend hobby, and absolutely not a perpetual reaction to trauma. We don't need an external crisis to justify our existence. We don't rely on theological certainty. This wrestling with doubt is our superpower, and it's not one that we invented outright. Far from it. This existential uncertainty is baked into the recipes of our ancient honey cakes. We are almost obligated to cross-examine the universe.

Our Yiddish tradition inherited this ancient Jewish posture of putting God on trial. As the great singer Paul Robeson sang in Yiddish, most notably at Carnegie Hall in 1958 – *a gut morgen dir, Ribono shel Olam. Ikh bin gekumen tzu dir mit a din toyre fun dayn folk Yisroel. Vos hostu tzu dayn folk Yisroel? Un vos hostu zich ongezetst oyf dayn folk Yisroel? A good morning to You, Master of the Universe. I bring a lawsuit against you on behalf of your People Israel. What do you have against us? Why have you so oppressed us?* This argument is the mark of true freedom.

And I've heard that freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. There are many examples of this kind of vulnerable honesty in our tradition. Our ancestors regularly leaned into uncertainty, fear, and crisis, supplementing more

formal prayers and even developing new systems of connection when the existing system felt limiting or stale. When we are in survival mode, when our stress can seem unmanageable we remember the spontaneous prayer Jacob offered at the lowest moment of his life, when he is overwhelmed by all that is around him, as if he is first leaving the prison of his choices and realizes that he must live a life of responsibility. He doesn't pray a serenity prayer. Rather he prays conditionally, as a negotiation tactic – *im yihiyeh Elokim imadi ushmarani baderech haze hasher anochi holeich* – *if God remains with me, protecting me on this journey that I am making, and I return safely home, then the Eternal One shall be my God.* A prayer that is a quid pro quo.

Our tradition also set up a worthy practice of improvised, aspirational prayers that reflect particular and current circumstances of our lives. These prayers give permission to begin with the end in mind. These beautiful prayers present the mental creation that puts the intention of each sage into the world. I invite you to do the same. Before Yom Kippur, take some dedicated time to write your own brief intention – maybe it's a prayer, maybe you consider it more of a mission statement. Regardless, it should reflect your core values and principles and it should give you the invitation to see if the steps that you are taking in your life lead in the same direction. And if not, what you can do to align your steps more accurately.

These ancient prayers are inspiring. Take that inspiration seriously and let your faith or faithlessness flag wave. To do so demonstrates our freedom. It reflects *chutzpah klapei shemaya* – a profound fearlessness; a spiritual audacity. Rabbi Elazar prayed: *y'hi ratzon milfanecha, may you set our portion in the Garden of Eden, may we have good companions and a good inclination in this world.* Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi prayed – *Y'hi ratzon milfanecha, may you save us from the arrogant and from bad people, and from harsh opponents.* Rav Safra prayed: *y'hi ratzon milfanecha may You establish peace in the heavenly entourage of angels, whose infighting causes unrest on earth.* And Rav Hamnuna prayed – *Ribon HaOlamim, may it be Your will that we be delivered from the yeast in the dough and the subjugation of the kingdoms.* And Mar concluded his prayer with the words *yihyu l'ratzon imrei fi v'heg'yon libi l'fanecha Hashem tzuri v'goali.* – *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor before You, God my Rock and my redeemer.*

We are leaving the prison yard. The gates are wide open in front of us. What kind of world do we envision can yet still be? Let us not get distracted by ever important issues bubbling all around us that take us away from our connection to God, imperfect as it is. Let us not devote our lives to work that does not fill us with vitality and our highest purpose. In direct and even in unflinchingly honest form, we can offer both hopeful and also accusatory prayers to God that speak about our condition. Job accuses God as treating humans as enemies. Jeremiah curses the day he was born. Our Psalms demand that God wake up – *urah lamah tishan Hashem!* and Psalm 88 ends in utter abandonment, tremendous distance from God, with a soul left in darkness. Can we hold the spiritual agency, the conviction that Elie Wiesel has provocatively written about – that God is guilty. Yes. And so, nu, God is guilty. Now let us pray.

This is extreme freedom. We praise God's holy name without assurance that God exists or even that God has our best interests at heart. This realization, while vertiginous, can be refreshingly honest. God is not a cosmic squishy. God is the ravaging void as we do the holy work of keeping this world intact while looking out to not get swallowed by the giant cracks in the moral universe. We demand of God – this is not acceptable. You promised us otherwise. And that protest, that confident swagger even when you know you may not win is the deepest prayer, the greatest expression, and the most prized freedom of all. And despite it all, let us continue to build Jewish life, day after day. Let us continue to passionately advocate for our interests and our community. Let us continue to envision an improved future. Freedom equals these responsibilities – building, advocating, and imagining.

As Samuel Beckett wrote, I can't go on, I'll go on. Today, we are released from prison into the wilderness. And while we are not specifically safe, we are free and we keep moving, encouraged by the depth of our tradition despite no easy answers or fairy-tale ending. Freedom is not the assurance that everything is safe. Freedom is the ability to live when there are no guarantees. After his release, as Joseph lived with conviction, let us too live with conviction. With Yom Kippur approaching our own trial is coming up. And today we can counter-sue. As we do, I'd wouldn't want to be anywhere else other than our energizing, noble, and big-hearted community this evening. Today's verdict? Guilty. Guilty-shmilty. Nu, let's pray.