

Carol Zemel, High Holy Days, 2017

***Shabbat Shalom, and gut-yontif everyone.***

I am honoured by Rabbi Goldberg's invitation to speak with you today. I am an art historian; I study and write about modern Jewish art. This morning, however, I want to focus on and think out loud about a bigger picture, and the ways in which Yom Kippur—with its lengthy, repeated confession and the possibilities of repentance and forgiveness--always challenges me.

But first, a personal—and somewhat relevant—anecdote. When I was a graduate student at Columbia, living on New York's Lower East Side, I had a good friend, Lionel, an observant Jew, and sort of a hippie speed-freak. I was fascinated by his Jewish learning, which in our lengthy conversations he shared with me. When I fretted about my jealousies—those were kind of wild times--this is how Lionel counseled me. In the book of Exodus, he reminded me, the Israelites are puzzled by God's declared name: JAWEH (or Jehovah), [the Hebrew letters YUD, HEY, VAV, HEY], which is an acronym for was-is-becoming. The Israelites ask God to say more, to describe himself. "What are you like?" they want to know. God answers, "you shall have no other gods before me, for I am a Jealous God." If jealousy, Lionel said, is the only thing God says about himself, maybe you can be jealous too.

I tell this story today, in another context, because it was both comforting and enabling. It enabled me to think seriously about the human capacity that I share with God, how I am made in God's image, and how to forgive.

#### 1.CONFESSION & REPENTANCE

Let me start with confessing. Thankfully, there are these prayers and rituals for repentance. Lake Ontario swells with my sins. On Yom Kippur, I immerse myself in the

declaration of *Asham'nu* (*we have sinned*); the chant is beautiful, so stark and declarative. I'm

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grateful not to do this alone, but to voice it aloud as a collective—in the company of fellow Jews, in a community I am part of: we have trespassed, slandered, scoffed, blasphemed, gone astray—yes, all of these.

But, the *Al Khet*, the confessional said in silence, one hand pounding my heart: now I'm uncertain—and somehow uneasy about this catalogue of over 54 sins, repeated 10 times during the course of the day. *"For all these," we pray, "...pardon us, forgive us, atone for us."* Still, the list of sins is so encompassing; must I confess to all them? Have I really committed bribery? scheming? embezzlement? Rather than address my guilt, their number seems to taunt me as I pronounce each line. "Did I really do that?" A rather defensive attitude for someone seeking forgiveness. 'Well, you don't always know—or recall,' I'm told. And so I proceed through the litany, worrying that my declaration of repentance doesn't exactly fit, or falls short. Of course, that may be a last ditch protest of innocence: I pronounce each transgression anyway, struggling to find myself, and to voice that difficult self-recognition as part of the community. Thankfully, then, there are these prayers and rituals for repentance. These are voiced in silence, but not alone.

## 2. FORGIVENESS

But how to forgive? When I was little, I would test God's power or readiness to forgive by taunting: "I hate you, God." Nothing happened. Did God even hear me? How was I to know? The anger was real, but I knew, somehow, that the test was meaningless. At that age, I didn't

yet understand a God who let unprovoked bad things—like the death of a parent--happen. I could not find comfort. And I sensed that raging at God seemed to be an empty gesture.

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Being the Princess of Righteous Anger, however, is tiring and a tiresome way to be. If God can hear our prayer and forgive—why can't I? Too often, I know, I hold on to and (sanctimoniously) polish my wound. Forgiveness—TESHUVAH-- feels difficult, and hard to resolve.

So, I am uneasy on Yom Kippur: I confess, and I hope I am absolved. But can I forgive? Where is my compassion? “Forgive me, for not being forgiving,” I think, as I ricochet between congregational prayer and private thoughts. Luckily, wise Jews have commented on everything, and their guidance helps.

There are, the rabbis explain, three forms forgiveness or TESHUVA: *mechilah*, *selichah*, *kapporah/tahorah*. Framed this way makes it easier to think about, and hopefully to forgive. MECHILAH (forgiveness), the first level of forgiveness is forgoing or relinquishing the “debt” or hurtful deed, but it is not necessarily reconciliation. Like a pardon, it requires nothing from the one who performed the hurt; the action comes only from oneself—the presumably injured party. The second level, SELICHAH (deliverance), is more challenging--it involves compassion. Empathy for another’s situation does not necessarily mean identification with them, but it allows us to forgive. We consider the human situation; we are concerned about the troubledness that gives rise to the pain. The third and most difficult forgiveness, KAPPORAH and TAKORAH (atonement and purification)—involves the erasure of all sin, where the slate is wiped clean. This, I’m somewhat relieved to learn, is enacted only by God. Supremely forgiving,

### 3. JONAH

Which brings me to JONAH, the Biblical prophet who lived during the 8<sup>th</sup> c BCE and whose story we read Yom Kippur afternoon, at *Mincha*—as the day starts to draw to a close. I admit I never paid much attention to this tale--- I dismissed it as a sort of children’s tale of foolish flight, adventure, repentance and rescue. (In fact), I rarely even heard it read: my family took a break from shul at that point in the day, and mainly tried to decide if, when we all returned, we could stand for the chanting of *Ne-ilah*.

Jonah’s story, of course, is more than a good fish story. Although he is a preacher, Jonah is not very likeable—he seems mean-spirited, grumpy, and very unforgiving. God tells him to warn the people of Nineveh to repent and end their sinful ways. Jonah doesn’t want the job—why not, what’s he afraid of?—and so he runs away from God and hops on a boat to Tarshish; we’re not sure where that was, but it’s seems to be the periphery of the then known world. As we know, a powerful storm comes up, the ship is doomed, and the panicked crew ask Jonah to pray to his God to calm the waters. But Jonah, still running away, takes another step—down to the (aptly named) ship’s hold, where he falls asleep. The ship capsizes, but Jonah does not drown; rather he is swallowed and finds refuge—still alive--in the belly of a giant fish. What is this fish---or Leviathan, as the Hebrew text names it? It is, of course, a form of God, who really seems to want Jonah back. Inside the fish, Jonah repents and after three days, he is disgorged, alive, on a beach. [

Restored to land and life, Jonah finally does warn the sinful citizens of Nineveh, all of

whom—including the King and his court--repent and are saved. But of course, the story does not end there; it takes us again, into the all-too-human depths—or shallows—of Jonah's

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character. Because Jonah is still troubled and confused about forgiving. This time, instead of fleeing the country, he moves to the eastern edge of the city, makes a small booth for himself—his shelter of doubt and petulance--and sits there to see what would happen to the city. God plants a fast-growing vine that shelters and shades Jonah in his tiny refuge. Then God interrupts Jonah's side-line retreat, sends a worm to infect and destroy the vine, and when Jonah, who of course complains, God answers that Jonah cares more-- has more compassion--for the vine (which, of course, sheltered him alone) than he did for the people of Nineveh.

The example of Jonah—who despite his claims to virtue, has little compassion and runs from God—and society--is both puzzling and peculiarly reassuring. He's one angry and self righteous guy. And, of course, he's unforgiving. Do we, like Jonah, run from ourselves when we turn our backs on others? Can we find the compassion to forgive? And why should God bother with this guy? Or why bother with Nineveh? God says:

And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?

The text ends with this question. And of those who live in Nineveh, God does not mention the king or the city's elite, but only the lowliest, the unknowing, and the animals. I want to briefly cite two scholars, Aviva Zornberg and Maya Bernstein, who comment on this story. Bernstein [[www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)] reminds us that by afternoon, "we are all Jonah." It is hard to

push through to *Neilah*, at the end of this day.

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In her remarkable book *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (2009), Aviva Zornberg suggests that the Book of Jonah presents enigmas or riddles that are “not to be solved,” but are, perhaps, at the core of prayer.

They,” she writes, referring to Jonah’s righteous anger and indignation: these issues and questions “remain; God invites Jonah to bear them, even to deepen them, and to allow new perceptions to emerge unbidden. In a word to, to stand and pray.”

These, then, are really difficult dilemmas: to endure and acknowledge the tenacity of anger, to let go the comforts of indignation—as we struggle to find compassion, and forgive. Jonah--like some of us--has a hard time forgiving. But enduring anger has bitter taste. Bernstein] reminds us that, like Jonah’s confusion, this unsettling combination of anger, fear, and flight are steps on a difficult and challenging journey that begins, we note, in the belly of the beast.

Shana Tova

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