

Yom Kippur 5780: A Nursery of Pine Trees

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*Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop,  
when the wind blows the cradle will rock.  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall.  
And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

“Rock-a-bye Baby”...what’s not to like?

Well...maybe *the words*?

(But other than that, the lyrics are great!)

I’ve been told that the text dates back the 18th century, which makes me wonder:

Why have been singing these words for 300 hundred years to our most precious living beings! The words are haunting! It's doesn't belong in the musical repertoire of a nursery; it belongs in Game of Thrones, Episode 1. (Not that I’d ever watch such a grotesque and gripping series.).

You know what I find most disturbing about “Rock-a-bye Baby”? The unspoken prequel, the setup: the image of someone putting a baby in the cradle with one hand, and then climbing a tree with the other... Don’t we have warning labels that say things like, “not intended for treetops”? Or "Caution: when the wind blows, please remove from wobbly places... including tree tops!"

In fact, nursery rhymes and lullabies are often gloomy, and sometimes for very powerful reasons, non-rational underpinnings that usher dark lullabies into our culture. Ethnomusicologist Andrew Pettit describes lullabies as, “the place to say the unsayable. You’re alone....Nobody is listening and you can express the feelings that are not okay to express in society.”<sup>1</sup>

In the case of “Rock-a-bye Baby,” the unsayable may be the vulnerability of an infant, or, perhaps, the vulnerability of all human beings since that’s how we all begin.

Music therapist Joanne Loewy, who directs the world-renowned Lois Armstrong Center for Music and Medicine, says, “this makes sense, as the first years of life are fragile.”

In our tradition, we can read *with* a text, or *against* a text. Reading *with* the text, we can learn about ourselves, human beings. After all, we’re the ones who put the lyrics into the nursery in the first place—there’s a lot going on there. Reading *with* the text is fruitful. But I’m not done yet reading *against* “Rock-a-bye Baby”!

I feel obliged to call attention to just one more element of this nursery rhyme, a secondary victim of literary malice: the tree. The poor tree! The tree is set up for catastrophic negligence! And could there be a more basic symbol of life itself than a tree, sprouting upward from earth to heaven?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/many-lullabies-murder-ballads>

Every time we take our Torah from ark, we sing from Proverbs:

*Etz chayyim hi l'machazikim ba,*  
“the Torah is a Tree of Life to those who embrace it,”  
*v'tomcheha m'ushar,*  
“and those who support it are happy.”

Of all the organisms in the universe to symbolize our holiest possession, our ancestors chose the tree. And this nursery rhyme incriminates it.

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There's a famous passage in Deuteronomy that says, "*Ki haadam eitz hasadeh*,"<sup>2</sup> which the 13th c. commentator Ibn Ezra translates: “the human being is just like the tree of the field.”

*The human being is just like the tree of the field.* We have roots—some as shallow as our Sequoias, and others as deep as Oaks. Our roots, our heritage, grounds us, tell us where we come from and who we are. And we have branches, which, if well nourished, can grow leaves and fruit.

The very first commandment God gives to the human being is *p'ru ur'vu*, “be fruitful and multiply.” To act like a tree. The fruit of a tree enable it to live beyond today, beyond its own mortality. Be fruitful, transcending time by creating generations to come.

Each fruit delicately grows from buds supported by branches, all the way to the treetop—and so vulnerably. When the wind blows the fragile fruit will rock until.... hmmm. Maybe there's something there, reading *with* the text.

*Ki haadam eitz hasadeh*, the human being is just like the tree of the field – vulnerable, delicate, but also resilient and generative.

The 10 Days of Awe are also like the tree of the field—vulnerable, delicate, but also resilient and generative. These 10 Days are designed to symbolize Life—or more specifically, the course of a lifetime. Rosh Hashanah is a birth. We call it *Hayom Harat Olam*, “the Day of the Conception of the World.” Yom Kippur is a death—we ritualize it as such: we deny ourselves food, water, and bathing; some wear a kittle, the Jewish burial shroud, and many refrain acts of “being fruitful and multiplying.”

In the sacred drama of Yom Kippur, we act like a tree in winter. Not dead, but, in the words of Billy Crystal in *The Princess Bride*, “only mostly dead ...still partly alive.” Now, we know that trees here need winter; they need things to change. That is how they grow. *The human being is just like a tree of the field*, and we too need change to grow. Our process of change we call "*Teshuva*," often translated "repentance," but literally, “*turning or returning.*”

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<sup>2</sup> Deut. 20:19

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We like to pretend that turning is easy.  
A simple "turn of the key" or "a flip of the switch."  
Technology tries to make turning easier by the day,  
with fewer and fewer buttons needed to make things happen.  
*Swipes and gestures, facial recognition and voice commands.*  
"Hey Siri, tell Alexa to call my Google Assistant to schedule my process of *Teshuva*."

No, life doesn't work that way. Turning, shifting, moving, changing is hard work. Especially if you're just a tree!

"If," as the Ibn Ezra's grammatically sound translation of the Torah says, "the human being is just like the tree of the field," how can we turn, shift, move?

In our tradition we read *with* text and *against* text. And we can read *against* the translation of Ibn Ezra. The great commentator Rashi translates "*ki haadam eitz hasadeh*," differently. He reads it as a rhetorical question: "Do you really think a human being is like a tree of the field?" The human being might have roots and branches and leaves and fruit, but what makes us special is that we can move—we can turn!

The Prophet Hosea says to the Israelites, *Shuva Yisrael*, "Turn Israel, move!" And what's the first step? The next verse, Hosea tells us: *k'chu imachem D'varim*, "Take with you words." "Do you really think a human being is like a tree of the field?" No, unlike the tree of the field, the human being has words and can turn. Take your words and turn.

This is the work of *Teshuva*, starting with words to address our mistakes. In our liturgy, we call this *Vidui*, Confession. But in our lives, we call this, "Apology." Real, authentic apology.

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Anyone who has received a genuine apology knows how powerful those words can be. Renowned Psychologist Aaron Lazare, the former Chancellor at UMass Medical School, in his book *On Apology* describes apology as

"one of the most profound interactions that can occur between people... [apology has the power] to heal humiliations, free the mind from deep-seated guilt, remove the desire for vengeance, and restore broken relationships."

*K'chu imachem d'varim*, "take words with you." Easier said than done.

It is easy to identify a bad apology, especially today with so much attention on public corruption and sins—accompanied by a prolific assortment of woefully scant apologies. Lazare uses the term "pseudo-apology" to refer to the prevalent use of the apologetic language that actually conveys the opposite.

Our culture, Lazare argues, doesn't exactly conduce unmitigated apology. Our dominant culture of competition and success, the vapid obsession with "winning," can thwart the humility needed to say the simple words "I am sorry."

So we say various pseudo-apologetic phrases like:

"I'm sorry if."

"I'm sorry but."

Or my new favorite: "The thing is." (*what thing?*)

Our tradition has a keen awareness of the lure of Pseudo-Apology. The Babylonian Talmud teaches:

"If one says: 'I'll just keep sinning and repenting,' then he won't really be given a chance to repent. If one says: 'I'll just sin because Yom Kippur will provide atonement for me,' then Yom Kippur will not provide atonement."<sup>3</sup>

With apology, there is no short-cut, especially with interpersonal sins. The Talmud continues:

"For sins between a person and God, Yom Kippur provides atonement, but for sins between two people, Yom Kippur does not offer atonement until the one has apologized to the other."

In other words, Yom Kippur only "works" if we apologize, person to person.

But let's be honest. Knowing we need to apologize to each other doesn't stop us from avoiding apology at all costs.

In *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson, the cartoon character Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

"Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes suggested.

Calvin ponders this for a moment and replies, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

We strain ourselves looking for less obvious solutions!

And this is nothing new to our story. In fact, you can read the whole book of Genesis and find not one literal, sincere apology!

- Adam: "She made me do it!"
- Eve: "It was the snake!"
- Cain kills Able, the first homicide, and says to God: "I don't know, am I my brother's keeper?"
- Abraham doesn't apologize to Isaac for the trauma of nearly killing him, nor to his mother.
- Rebecca doesn't apologize to Isaac for her deceit with Jacob and Esau's blessing.
- Laban never apologizes to Jacob for his years of fraud.
- Even Jacob when reconciling with Esau, he bows down 7 times, he offers him riches, they embrace with tears, he even tells him that seeing his face is like seeing God's face.... but he never says the words of apology.

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<sup>3</sup> Mishna Yoma 85

- Joseph's brothers don't apologize either. They try but Joseph says, "don't worry about it, it was God's plan all along." (*Argh- so close!*)

We have to wait until Exodus, when the Israelites become a Holy People, to first hear words of apology.

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Apology is the easiest thing to prescribe and the hardest thing to practice; so simple to talk about, and so nerve-wracking to do- and do *well*.

Apology takes work: the willingness to acknowledge weakness, or failure.

Apology takes vulnerability; humility; courage; and risk.

But the most amazing and sacred quality to this mitzvah, is that, somehow, it does not destroy us.

Virtually any other project that you might describe with these words—weakness, vulnerability, risk, failure—might sound like a self-destructive or corrosive endeavor. Not so with apology.

Somehow, breaking oneself down enough to say, "I am sorry," has the opposite effect. Apology is a strenuous exercise of the soul that makes us stronger and holier.

Listening to Hosea, using our spiritual muscle to *return*, with words of apology: this is how we grow. *Ki haadam eitz hasadeh* .... maybe "the human being *is* a like a tree of the field."

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Each year I prepare for the Days of Awe by doing some running outside, usually getting lost. In Boston, I would get lost running in the Arboretum and always end up on this one trail called the Conifer's Path. It was a dim trail; the ground had a bit more give to it; but what I loved most was the smell. The fresh scent of pine trees.

This year, I didn't have to leave that behind, since the pine is the State Tree of North Carolina. Nor did I have to part ways with my favorite type of tree on the Conifer's Path: the "pitch pine," one of the eight pine trees of this State.

The pitch pine is part of family called, "fire pines," given the name because when a fire sweeps through the forest, they are ready. Their pine cones are thick and literally glued shut with resin. When fires rage through the forest, and break down the trees, the heat melts away the resin and allows the cones, which are the fruit of pine trees, to open up and release their seeds. *When the wind blows*, the seeds spread out, they enter the ground, and they are ready to grow again.

What a gift: To have the ability within to grow in the harshest of times.

Our tradition urges us to see ourselves with that gift—with seeds implanted within us to grow.

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When Hosea, tells Israel to “return,” to apologize, he says that afterwards Israel will become, *kivrosh raanen*, “like a fresh pine tree.” And God will reply, *mimeinu pricha nimtza*, “I will give you your fruit.”

On this Day of Atonement,  
as we face all the elements of our lives:

May we be like a nursery of pine trees.

May the fires of our missteps avail our hearts to *turn* with honesty,  
and the winds of our merits open our lips to release words of apology.

And may our words, and all the seeds of righteousness we plant in the year 5780,  
grow and bear fruit, nurturing our children and children’s children, for generations to come.

Amen.