I stand here, today, and I miss you.

I want to take a moment, as we welcome the year in this unprecedented way to embrace the sadness of this moment.

I am here with Noah, Aviva and Yoni, in a space empty of people. This is a sanctuary filled with cameras and lights but you are not here.

This is a sanctuary with a screen to show me your beautiful faces. This sanctuary may be physically empty but it is spiritually full. You are far away, but I can feel your presence.

You are close and you are far. I am close and I am far. I long for your presence. I feel the blessing of what exists and I feel the grief for what is absent.

I feel this way about each of you, who are joining us from different places in the Boston area and beyond.

I feel this way about God lately, too.

At moments, I can feel the presence of God. At moments, I feel close to God and at other moments far away. At moments, I drift away from God and at other moments I long for God’s presence.

The verse that will be guiding us this Holiday is from Deuteronomy 30:14:

Ki Karov Elecha- Opening to Closeness in Times of Distancing
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781
And I wonder, what is close to us?

How do we experience closeness in times where we must be physically distant from each other to be safe?
What does closeness and intimacy mean during a time of physical separation?
How do we embrace this moment and create new possibilities for closeness?

In my junior year in high school, I traveled with my classmates to the Atacama Desert in the North of Chile, a 41,000 square mile area of stony terrain, salt lakes (salares), and sand. We would drive on our bus for hours and still be in the desert. One day in the middle of one such long drive, the bus broke down. We were in the middle of nowhere. A new bus would take several hours to arrive and our teachers let us wander about while we waited. As I walked farther from the bus, people became so small, and when I couldn't see the bus anymore, I realized the great desert’s vastness and the feeling of being unable to see what is beyond.

I love the desert. I love it because of its vastness. It also evokes in me a sense of fear. A lack of control of what is beyond, something, that I must admit is not easy for me to embrace.

Our tradition tells us that Torah was given in the wilderness and the question is why? The Midrash explains: “Anyone who does not make oneself as open as the wilderness, is not able to acquire wisdom and Torah”
The word used to describe the wilderness is *Hefker*, which means ownerless. In another words: “Anyone who does not make oneself ownerless is not ready to receive Torah”

What does it mean to make ourselves as open or ownerless as the wilderness?

Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld, president of Hebrew College, (dear friend and TBZ member) shared with me her understanding of *hefker*, saying:

“Making yourself *hefker*, ownerless, is the capacity to be in a state of open-heartedness to that which we can’t control. To be ownerless, is to hold uncertainty and be open to what comes to us with surprise, and no judgment.”

Six months into this pandemic, we continue to walk in this long, exhausting journey, where there is no clear view of an end. It feels like the vastness of the wilderness. And I know that for me it definitely evokes fear at times.

During forty years of wandering in the desert, the people of Israel could not know the end of their story -- their wanderings to come. They must have been filled with questions and fears.

For us, in the middle of our own wanderings and unexpected journey, we too are filled with questions. Simple and profound ones:

When will my kids go back to school as they used to?
How long until I can hug my grandchildren?
Will my business survive?
Is my paycheck secure?
When can we return to our Sanctuary?
How will our government and our country hold together?

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1 Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7

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Will November bring to us new leadership, one with moral values and a new hope for some better future for all us?
When will we sing together again?

The American Tibetan Buddhist, Pema Chodron in her book, “When Things Fall Apart” writes:

“Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.²

I find these words to be real for this moment.
Yes, I would prefer a message that says, things are not falling apart, but I want to invite you to open this new year with the intention of letting there be room for all that is to happen, the grief, the relief, the misery and the joy.

Perhaps making ourselves ownerless - hefker - means to allow ourselves to be in this uncertainty with an open heart for what it can bring to us. When we allow ourselves to be open to what is, we also remember to be open to each other. We are not alone on this journey. We are not isolated in our wandering.

We stand with each other. We stand with you, we stand together.

How do we walk in a time where the vastness, the intensity is so big, that we cannot see the bus that will take us back home?
By reminding ourselves that even when it feels far, and scary, we are close and not alone.

Because the matter is very close to you  
In your mouth and your heart to do it

Our tradition, our community, the values that we stand for, they are in us and close to us, they are in our mouth and hearts.
We have this community, we have each other and we are part of something bigger than us, God is in all of us and we are in God. And even though at times it is hard for us to see and find and feel the blessings of God’s presence, God is ready to embrace us. God is able to hold our tears, our sorrow, our longing.

Earlier today we sang a piyut - a liturgical poem - that had the words:

Let the year and its curses conclude! Let the year and its blessings begin!

We don’t know what this year will bring, we really don’t, and that can be scary, but I also know that if each of us open our hearts and lean into closeness, new blessings might flow for us this year.

Ken Yehi Ratzon,

May it be your will.

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