

A long time ago, in a garden far, far away, there were vines and flowers and bushes and trees.

There was one particularly beautiful tree in the center of the garden with ripe, luscious fruit on its branches. And a man walked through the garden, and came upon the tree.

You've probably heard this story before.

The man's name was Isaac Newton, the year was 16 hundred and something, and when he sat at the base of that tree, the apocryphal tale goes, one of those luscious pieces of fruit fell down, bonked him on the head, and inspired him to immediately discover the Law of Gravitation.

Now, I don't usually like talking about gravity— it really brings me down.

...and yeah, I just made a pun about gravity, and you fell for it.

But no, truly, Gravity is pretty neat. It's a word we use to describe the fact that things in our universe, all things, are drawn to each other. Ok. Got it. That tendency of things to be drawn together is described by something called the theory of general relativity, suggested by Albert Einstein, which proposes that gravity is actually a curving of spacetime, giving each object relative weight and drawing them together— for example, helping hold us down on the chairs where we are sitting, or on this floor where I am standing, or in a grocery store or a golf course, or even on a runway.

This is science. It's also pretty much the limit of my own brain's ability to understand anything scientific, because honestly, if I were to try to describe to any

of you what “Spacetime” or “relativity” is, the only thing I would accomplish is reassuring all of us that we should be grateful that I went to rabbinical school, and didn’t become a physicist.

And yet. If I trust in Dr. Google, PhD, there are so many more fancy big confusing words that I could bandy around about gravity!

For example: We approximate gravity’s force using something called Newton’s law of universal gravitation, which is an equation using constants and letters and divisions and multiplications that honestly, when I try to make any sense of it, I can’t. But. Let’s suffice to say that the mass of the Earth is a LOT, and it’s definitely strong enough to pull the center of a Cessna prop plane down and keep it securely sitting on the grass at the head of that

runway where we are theoretically standing, held down by gravity.

Now, if you or I were to try and pick up that airplane, our measly arms could not lift its almost two-ton weight because, again, SCIENCE.

But something kinda cool happens when we humans climb into that plane and turn its engine on.

Some very smart people whose brains work very differently from mine figured out that with enough forward momentum, and enough buildup of air pressure below the wings supported by thrust from a propeller, that that same two-ton Cessna, with five fully grown humans inside of it, could fly off into the air, and climb to a height of over 10,000 feet in the air.

Wow. Science! So cool.

Ten thousand feet is almost two miles, or the distance from the steps of the Capitol to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

That's a loooooong way back down to the ground. And depending on air conditions, any object or person exiting that aircraft at 10,000 feet would take about 11-12 seconds of accelerating free fall before reaching terminal velocity, after which point they would be plummeting back towards the ground at 120 mph.

Luckily, if a person who exits the plane at 10,000 feet is wearing a special backpack with carefully folded and incredibly strong, tightly woven nylon inside, which they open at just the right moment, it

will slow the person's fall to a safe speed, for a safe landing.

And I have just shared lots of numbers and letters and measurements with you, and I understand that these numbers and words mean something to a lot of people, maybe even some of you in this room, but I am a rabbi, not a scientist.

And that is why, when I slid out of the open door on the side of that Cessna prop plane at 10,000 feet, strapped to a stranger I had met only a few minutes before, so far up that any buildings I could glimpse through the clouds looked like tiny doll toys,

It was one of the strongest, and most memorable moments of *faith*

That I have ever experienced in my life.

Faith. Faith, that science really does work the way that Newton and Einstein say it does— even though my brain can't really comprehend it. Faith, that everyone who was in charge of making that plane fly, packing that parachute, and a million other tiny things that made that moment reality, had done their part well and safely. I couldn't control all of those things: I had to surrender to them.

Because I am 100% not a scientist. And to be honest, whenever I am in a plane—any plane, not just that Cessna—as it takes off, I hold my own hand and say the Shema, just in case it's my last few seconds on this Earth. I can google science-y things to write a sermon, as I clearly just did, but the fact is that when I was sitting in that tiny prop plane that was climbing up, up, up, I was terrified. I was keenly

aware that I am a human, and that humans are not birds, or bats, or anything that was designed to fly.

So why in the world— or why, 10,000 feet above the world— would a person ever decide to jump out of a perfectly good airplane? Why would we do something that goes against that core part of ourselves, that part of us that loves to be bipedal, not aviary? Why would we put ourselves through such a stressful physical and mental experience?

Well, if we return briefly to science for a second, we learn that when we intentionally do something that part of our brain understands goes against our nature, or terrifies us in a basic, animal, core way, there is a rush of a neurochemical called adrenaline, one of the most powerful substances in the human body, which can be thrilling, exciting, and also brings the entire world into pin-point, crystal-clear focus.



These are the famous fight-or-flight encounters of life, where facing our own mortality and fighting for survival are paramount.

Now, intentionally bringing ourselves into such a moment might seem counterintuitive at first, but in reality, surviving such a moment fills us with happy chemicals, with relief and pleasure, and for some, this can be downright addictive.

You've probably heard of "adrenaline junkies."

Extreme sports of all kinds— whether skydiving, bungee jumping, cave diving, or delivering a high holy day sermon— rely on a lot of factual buildup, research, and preparation in order to go off without a hitch. But in the heat of the moment— that moment where the door on the side of the airplane opens, or your foot steps off of the ledge, or you walk up to the

bimah and open your mouth— in that moment, there aren't bigger questions or details on your mind. You have made your choice, made your peace, and are surrendering yourself to the experience.

When I stepped off of the wing of that plane, I plunged. I felt that gut-punch pull of the Earth's gravity yanking towards it, unlike anything I had ever felt before, and the most violently pressing rush of air from all sides.

I was not asking myself, "What is the meaning of life?"

I was not wondering, "Is there a God?"

I was not agonizing over justice, or charity, or repentance.

I was just falling, and screaming, and when that parachute opened— spoiler, alert, I didn't die that

day— I laughed one of the purest and most joyful laughs of my life, because again, beyond any preparation I could have done for that moment, the experience of *actually going through with it*, surrendering to forces I honestly didn't understand, was so lovely, so humbling, and so beyond any words I could say to you today.

Zoom ahead a good ten to fifteen years. A few weeks ago, I was leading a study session with some congregants about the weekday Amidah. We were going through each bracha, and we got to the one that says “Slach lanu avinu ci chatanu.” “Forgive us, our father, for we have sinned.” Traditionally, we put our fists to our chests as we say these words, each day, and tap twice, mirroring what we do many more times during the High Holidays, when we say Ashamnu, Bagadnu.

One of the people in the study session noticed this parallel between our daily Slach Lanu and our annual Ashamnu, and asked, wait– if we ask for forgiveness every day during the Amidah, why do we need Yom Kippur at all? Why do we need one big day each year to come together and apologize and repent, if we're actually supposed to be doing it every single day on an ongoing basis?

I've been thinking about this question in the ensuing weeks, because as much as there are many accurate responses to this question, about the value of coming together in community to pray, about zooming out and repenting on a larger scale as opposed to for daily mistakes, about how we are commanded to observe Yom Kippur by our tradition and Torah, there's also something else.

And that something else has to do with what it felt like jumping out of that airplane.

Showing up to Yom Kippur is one thing. Getting through the doors is a start. But truly surrendering to the holiday, giving ourselves over to what is happening, and trusting in established tradition parallels in many ways how I felt when I climbed out of that open plane door 10,000 feet up, and trusted in that stranger and his parachute, and science I don't understand, to get me down to Earth safely.

It can be downright scary to enter into Yom Kippur, knowing we have sinned, knowing we have hurt others, and knowing that our actions have consequences. It can be scary to face our own mortality and the limited span of our time on Earth.

That is to say that we are all at the open door of the plane, right now. We are looking down, not at the very tiny ground so far away, but rather across the

next 24 hours of prayer, fasting, repentance, and surrender.

And instead of letting go of all of the big questions as we plummet, we're about to do the opposite, here, together.

We're about to do a very, very deep spiritual dive into who we are, why we are, what drives us, what haunts us, and why it matters that we are alive and in this world today.

If we commit to this experience, if we commit to making ourselves truly vulnerable to each other and God in this spiritual space, there will probably be moments of discomfort and guilt— maybe even fear.

But that's OK. We have the spiritual parachute of our tradition strapped to us, that parachute that tells

us that God loves us, that we are in this together, and that making mistakes and atoning for them is part of the human experience. Our spiritual parachute is woven of sacred, ancient words and melodies. It has caught generations of Jews before us. And we have to have faith that it will open and catch us, too.

Our Maariv service includes the phrase *Emet v'Emunah kol zot v'kayam aleinu*, literally, Truth and Faith are all of these things, and they are established upon us. *Emet v'emunah*, truth and faith.

How beautiful, to know that these two things do not need to be opposites, or in competition with one another; like religion and science, there is often a false dichotomy presented between the two, but

both truth and faith are unavoidable, core aspects of this beautiful world that God has created.

Jumping out of that airplane sure required me to believe in the factual truths that got that Cessna into the air, but also to have faith in the aspects of the experience which were truly beyond my control.

And being human— being Jewish— also requires an embrace of both truth and faith, *Emet v'emunah*, especially as we head into Yom Kippur. Truth, that we know we are imperfectly human, and that our actions and mistakes have consequences. We know we have sinned. And faith, that we can be forgiven, that we can do better, and that if we make ourselves vulnerable to the experience of the next 24 hours, the spiritual parachute of our tradition is ready and waiting to catch us at Ne'ilah.



That's the beauty of it. This is why we need Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is NOT just like any other day. Yom Kippur presents us with an opportunity for true spiritual openness, atonement, and surrender on a scale which is incomparable to any other day on our calendar.

The rest of the year, we can take metaphorical spiritual flights, sit in our seats, pray, look out the window, and marvel at the wonder around us.

But here, tonight, we step out the door.

Here, tonight, we fall— together.

Don't forget your parachute.