

Going Beyond: Higher and Higher
Rosh Hashanah 2021/5782
B'nai Jeshurun Congregation
Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria

It was around this time of year that young Susie had just returned from summer camp. On the doorway of the kitchen, her family kept a record of her height. She had measured herself just before leaving for camp and then made a mark above that- the amount that she intended to grow in her time away. When she returned home, she ran straight to the kitchen and measured herself against the kitchen door and found she was a half inch below the mark she set for herself. Her father saw how disappointed she was. In fact, she told him she failed. She hadn't grown enough. At first her father didn't say anything looking at the mark on the door. Then, with his thumb- he smudged it out- erasing it- and then he took a pencil- asked Susie to stand again against the door and he marked her real growth. He said, "You've grown wonderfully well. Your only failure was that you made your mark a little too high." The story ends with Susie now an adult and a parent herself reflecting- Now every time I reach too high and fail, I just adjust the mark. Then from that place, I am able to reach even higher- or as we say in our prayers today- *l'eila u'leila*. (Mitchell Chafetz's story- Measure of success)

This has been a year like no other. Who could have expected us to be here virtually celebrating the new year together again? As we gather to celebrate the new year- I hope that we are all reflecting on the unexpected strengths that we discovered amidst the challenges of this past year- how we have each grown and what we are most grateful for. Rosh HaShana is the time to make resolutions- to reach higher- to reach out to each other and like the shofar's blasts, inspire ourselves and each other to dream big- to shoot for the stars- to push ourselves to be better and grow in this coming year.

Now perhaps like me, you had some big trips for the coming year and, you had to cancel many of those journeys- your passport didn't get stamped with the places where you intended to go. Our story is a story about journeys. Our spiritual ancestors, the first Jews Abraham and Sarah of whom we read on this holiday. Abraham and Sarah's first words they hear from G-d in our holy Torah are *Lekh Lekha*, Go Forth- Journey. There, the Torah is telling them to follow G-d to Eretz Yisrael, our spiritual homeland, the land of Israel. However, the rabbis say there is a second understanding of this command to journey, the first command to the Jewish people. It is not just to journey to a place but actually *Lekh Lekha* means to go inside- to find your true self- to go deeper. And that's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

This is a time when we make resolutions. Where we look deep inside ourselves to see where we want to and need to journey- not just to those places to get stamped on our passports but those places for ourselves and our families. This is a time we make resolutions and goals. I'd like to share my goal, my resolution for the new year.

I want to be the first rabbi in space- that's not too big a goal, is it? If Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos and soon Elon Musk can do it- then why can't all of us shoot for the stars and reach for new heights? My first pulpit as a student rabbi was in Huntsville, Alabama- the home to NASA's space camp- and on the morning of my first visit just hours before leading Rosh

HaShana services- my hosts took me to NASA's visitor center and museum- there, I put on a flight suit and buckled into the cockpit of an actual space shuttle- so on the birthday of the world, the anniversary of G-d's creation of the cosmos- shouldn't we all shoot for the stars? We are looking to book our next synagogue trip- after Israel next summer 2022- I'm thinking B'nai Jeshurun in space: An out of this world experience. This is the year we can all become astronauts- are you ready this year to rise to new heights? Do you have the Right Stuff? From Neil Armstrong's Apollo 11 Mission from 1969 declaring the immortal words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" taking the first steps on the moon. Like me, maybe you have dreamt of what it would be like to see the earth from outer space- to float weightless in zero gravity- to space walk- and see a sunrise from space- where it is all pitch black and then the sun begins to appear as if out of nothing. Jewish astronaut Dr. Jeffrey Hoffman who flew to space in 5 different space shuttle missions like so many describe it as a profound and life-changing experience- being separated from humanity by an empty vacuum- looking at the world from a different perspective changes you- your vision is longer and your mind gains clarity.

In these 18 months of pandemic- our vision has been shortened- it is so hard to see past the pandemic- to get a different perspective in the echo chambers of twitter in our divided country. In our Torah portion- Hagar is stuck in a difficult place- dying of thirst in the middle of the desert with her son- she can't see past all the impediments and difficulties in her life, she only sees imminent destruction when actually her help was right in front of her- the Torah says that G-d opens her eyes- and she sees an oasis of water right in front of her. She was unable to see it earlier. As our temple astronauts, this year we can gain new perspective, more clarity and longer vision in this narrow, broken and tenuous place we are in right now.

We can join the ranks of other Jewish astronauts including Akron's Judith Resnick who died in the Challenger explosion, 1960's Russian Cosmonaut Boris Valynov, recently Jessica Meir performed the first all female space walk and of course Israel's hero Ilan Ramon who died in the Columbia disaster. In the Torah, Abraham is a star-gazer- G-d tells Abraham- *Sa Na Einecha u'reih*- lift up your eyes and see- look towards the heavens- count the stars- and trust in me. G-d tells Abraham and Sarah- get perspective and think big, to live with wonder, awe and curiosity, to go outside your tent and see those stars- they represent all your children- for we are all one family.

Our prayerbook insists that we each are already Jewish astronauts- with the special repetition in every kaddish we say- *Leilah leilah*- our guide for this year- higher and higher= *l'eila u'l'eila*- higher and higher- for on these holy days we pray and act differently- we blow the shofar- the food is sweeter- the atmosphere is lighter (like space)- *Leila Leila*- higher and higher- inspires us to elevate, to lift up our eyes and hearts- to see the world as if through G-d's eyes- to gain a new perspective and recommit to living life the way we intend even higher.

On *l'eila Leila*- Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory writes that at the same time that G-d seems farther away from us in our broken world- that in reality G-d is closer than we think, even closer than we are to our true selves. If we practice what we preach- *l'eila l'eila*- if we go beyond our stubbornness, our short-sightedness, to repair our flaws, to look beyond the walls we've built up, and beyond the pre-determined limits that we place on ourselves. If we are honest

with our soul-searching *teshuvah*, our self-reflection of our own actions and words, then we can become closer to our true selves and G-d.

As Rabbi Sacks wisely advises- we need to train to get higher and go beyond ourselves. How can we reach for the stars when gravity and life? With covid and the brokenness in our country and world, with antisemitism and hate, with isolation and fear- all pull us down- they don't even keep us grounded- we feel like we are standing on unsteady ground.

Our guide to rising above and going beyond this year will be our Jewish space camp. Astronauts are chosen because they have "The Right Stuff!" What is "The Right Stuff" required for a good and sweet year, a better year to help us go beyond- Leila u'leila? For astronauts, the Right Stuff is physical endurance, courage, perseverance, survival skills, remaining calm under pressure, being able to react quickly, to work cooperatively, to accept risk and learn from experience. For us, is the Jewish Right stuff any different? On my first day of Rabbinical school- our dean Rabbi Bill Lebeau told our rookie rabbi class to be successful in this world- he taught us Pirkei Avot- the ethics of the sages- which in chapter 6 presents 48 qualities to be a Jewish astronaut- middot- characteristics necessary to have the Jewish right stuff- among them are generosity, humility, caring speech, flexibility, sharing the burden of others, an understanding heart and a listening ear. What is the Right Stuff you need to work on for this new year?

If you have followed the space race of the multi-billionaires between Branson, Bezos and Musk- their teams have worked years- more than 20 years for Bezos- 15 years for Branson- preparing for their first successful launches which lasted mere minutes in outer space after 20 years of work. Now perhaps- what lesson could we learn from that is that we have to try and try again. Failure is a part of a life that reaches for the stars. We have to pick up ourselves up each time and learn from mistakes and experiences to move forward.

One big question they each had to solve was the propulsion- how to actually get high enough- with a sustainable delivery system- the answer for some is boosters- we know about that word right now with vaccines- in space flight- the boosters give the initial push, the first ascent and elevation- nose up- for us- the 100 shofar calls are our booster rockets- they continually propel us- you can almost hear it in the notes- they are pushing us to aim higher- a shofar must be bent facing upwards to G-d in heaven- we follow that trajectory- pointing our way to good- helping us turn our lives around- as we engage in teshuvah with the propulsion of the shofar pushing us go deeper inside to raise ourselves to higher levels. Rabbi Simon Greenberg taught that on Rosh HaShana- we don't run from our duties, we face up to them and that is having the right stuff. When you are in space, you are weightless- just like my Bubbe's matza balls, floating in zero gravity of space, there is no greater feeling. It can definitely make it easier to turn, to do teshuvah- to turn our lives around for the better- to change direction- and center our lives on our highest ideals- the right stuff. This year marks the Shmita year in Israel- the sabbatical year for the land- when we do not harvest and leave the land fallow- perhaps this message of letting go- releasing- starting over- renewing and rejuvenating- is the closest we have to zero gravity- what do you need to let go of this year? Release? What has been dragging you down?

As Jews, we can never be fully weightless- without burden- for we believe in carrying the burden for our neighbor, sharing the mutual responsibility of our community and our world.

Astronauts are never alone, they have Mission Control ready any moment they hear- Houston, we have a problem- prepared to jump into action. We are never alone- whether we are still isolating or still feel isolated, Judaism reminds us that we are united and can never be separated- our prayers are recited in the plural even if we pray alone and apart- we have our mission control- each other- to support us, holding us up- like the tethered line of a space walk- we are always attached, connected to community and each other- with G-d by our side.

Ellison Onizuka was the first Asian American to fly in space and he died in the Challenger explosion. Now while you may not recognize his name, we all carry his words. Before his flight into space, he went back to his high school to deliver a commencement address. And some of his words are printed in our U.S. passport. "Every generation has the obligation to free people's minds for a look at new worlds... to look out from a higher plateau than the last generation. Your vision is not limited by what your eye can see, but what your mind can imagine. If you accept these past accomplishments as commonplace, then think of the new horizons that you can explore... Make your life count, and the world will be a better place because you tried."

The new Reform *Machzor Mishkan HaNefesh* translates *L'eila l'eila*- entirely beyond- to go entirely beyond ourselves this holiday- to reach higher in our own actions- to go above and beyond in order to make our presence a more significant force for good in this world. Now that is a powerful resolution for the year- to be a force for good.

May the words of Astronaut Ellison Onizuka printed in our passports be a guide for us to reach new heights to better each of our own lives and those around us. So this new year let us each strive to be Jewish astronauts- maybe even the first rabbi in space- so that we can reach even higher in our commitments- to reach out further to call those we haven't seen for a long time, those we know who are struggling without a tether, so that we can be their mission control- let us each aim higher and know like Susie from our opening story that we can smudge the line on the kitchen door- when we measure ourselves next year- so that we live up to the words of our prayer- Leila Leila- may we all go higher together.

L'shana Tova U'metukah- May it be a sweet, happy and healthy year for you and your families.