

**What Are You Doing Here?**  
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Green Bank, West Virginia, with a population of 288, is a small, nondescript town like many other small towns in America- it boasts a mini-market and a Dollar Store, a library, post office, a school, and two churches. And yet, it is unlike any other town in the entire country in one crucial way. Green Bank, West Virginia is, by design, the quietest town in America. Home to the world's largest and most sensitive radio telescope, the town is located among 13,000 square miles of mountainous terrain known as the National Radio Quiet Zone. Given the telescope's high sensitivity to any electronic interference, radio transmissions in the area are heavily restricted by law. Residents and visitors to Green Bank must adhere to the nation's strictest ban on technology; all wireless devices are forbidden including cell phones, ipads and radios. And because they generate an electromagnetic field, also forbidden are microwaves, garage door openers, cordless telephones, and remote control toys and devices. And lest you think one can circumvent these laws and sneak a peak at Netflix or Facebook every now and then, a radio police person strictly enforces the policy with specialized equipment that can detect signals from all unauthorized electronics. This is necessary because, as one local resident explained, "The telescopes are powerful enough to detect the death throes of a star, but also terribly vulnerable to our loud world. Even a short-circuiting electric toothbrush could blot out the whisper of the Big Bang."

Mr. McNally, a retiree and local resident of Green Bank, thinks that the rest of the country, "out there beyond the mountains," as he says, "is losing its mind." And I think he may be right. Just before Rosh Hashanah, I asked a friend and colleague, "what are you bringing with you to the High Holy Days? What's disturbing you? What is weighing on your soul?" She thought for moment then replied, "I'm working on patience this year because I've realized I'm just not as patient as I thought I was or would like to be." Frankly, I was stunned by her answer and admit to you that I was truly taken aback. I'd fully expected her to tell me how disturbed she is by the rampant inhumanity in our nation and the suffering it inflicts on so many. I expected her to tell me how enraged she is by the erosion of our democracy and of our planet's future. I thought she'd tell me how demoralized she is by the preponderance of spiteful vitriol, and how

impossible it is to escape its blaring noise and hear her own thoughts. I expected her to answer this way because honestly, that's how I would have answered, and I imagine some of you would have as well. It simply didn't occur to me that we are allowed to focus on anything else.

You and I don't live in Green Bank, West Virginia. We can't readily block out the events of the world nor escape from the onslaught of information and misinformation. We can't turn away from the lack of civility, integrity, and compassion in our world. We can't block out the cries of children confined in cages, separated from their parents. We can't mute the plague of gun violence in our streets and in our children's schools. We can't look away from the fires, the floods, the rising tides and temperatures that imperil our precious planet and our future. And we certainly cannot look away from today's insidious threat to our democracy, to the soul of our nation, and to our own souls as well. And today, this constant cycle of disturbing news has so heavily afflicted our souls, that so many of us are exhausted before we even wake up. I speak with first hand knowledge, because you see, in our household, Frank wakes up earlier than I. He exercises while watching the morning news, flipping from station to station. When he completes his workout, my dear husband then gently wakes me up, sometimes even bringing me a cup of green tea brewed at just the right temperature, and with alarm his voice cries out, "You have no idea what's going on out there today! It's getting worse by the minute!"

I heard a story, originally about an Israeli but it could be about anybody, of a man who asks his neighbor, "with everything going on today in our nation and in our world, are you an optimist or a pessimist? And his neighbor replies, "me, I'm an optimist." So the man asks, "then why do you look so miserable?" And his neighbor replies, "You think it's easy being an optimist?" And it's not. We try, but today's countless crises and unremitting bad news take a toll on our health- our physical health, our mental health, and our spiritual wellbeing as well. In fact, a recent study found that today, so many of us are experiencing increased levels of stress, elevated blood pressure, chronic neck pain, overeating, insomnia, and grinding of the teeth. I feel it too, and sometimes, I just want to go to Green Bank, West Virginia, sit on a chair overlooking those 13,000 miles of lush mountains, and listen for the whisper of the wind and the echo of the world's creation.

I am speaking about this tonight because I, like many of you, have grappled with this barrage of troubling news over the past year. And I find myself regularly vacillating between two poles, hearing two calls- the blast of the shofar, and the still, quiet voice deep within my soul.

Sometimes, I am hyper-alert, agitated, reacting to every headline, every cruel deed, every rupture in our moral framework. Other days, I just want to push it all aside, and hide behind a game of on-line checkers and a good novel. And the truth is, that I have been quieter over the past year. I now see that I've been incubating- incubating my passion, my moral voice, and my resolve. As a result, I feel I have let you down at times when I have hesitated from sharing my full voice with you.

Our community is diverse. We are comprised of many ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and yes, political beliefs. And some of us want to engage in issues of the day on Shabbat and holidays, and others do not, just as some people like to conclude services with Adon Olam and others with Ein Keloheinu. But in this New Year, I feel called more strongly than ever to uphold our prophetic tradition, which has, for thousands of years, included protests against corrupt kings and wicked advisors. Entire chapters and portions of the Torah are devoted to societal structures and rules of governance, ethical conduct, and leadership. How can I in good faith look away from our sacred imperative to hold our leaders accountable to the highest values we know? I know that I will not always please you, and I know you will tell me when I don't, and I certainly welcome the conversation. But I do promise you that we, your clergy, will never abuse the privileged position of this pulpit. And of course, we will continue to offer comfort and hope to one another amidst the chaos of our time as well.

In fact, that is the very voice to which we awaken tonight. As we know, the stirring Unetaneh Tokef prayer is central to both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, asking "who shall live and who shall die?" In it we say, "U'veshofar gadol yitakah, Ve'kol d'ma'ma daka yishama," A great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard. Rosh Hashanah is the day for the great shofar, the tekiah of the world's birth. But the still small voice, that is the voice of Yom Kippur, that is the voice of this day. These powerful words, "kol d'ma'ma daka," come directly from First Kings. In chapter 19, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had just destroyed all of God's prophets except one, Elijah, and now they were coming after him. So he fled from them and hid in a cave.

The next morning God calls out to him, “Ma l’kha po, Eliyahu? What are you doing here, Elijah? Why are you here?” “I am defending your covenant, your goodness, your covenant,” he responds, “and I am the only one left.” Then God commands him, “Come out of the cave and go stand on the mountaintop.” He complies. And at that moment we read, “the Eternal One passed by and a great and mighty wind split the mountain and shattered the rocks, but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake struck, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, Elijah heard a still small voice, kol d’ma’ma daka,” the very voice we listen for today. We often stop reading the biblical text there, but that is not the end of the story. Later in the same verse, we learn that Elijah leaves the mountain and flees to the very cave where God first found him. And so for a second time, so that Elijah cannot ignore this inescapable question, God asks him again, “Ma l’kha po? Why are you here? What are you doing here?”

I’ve been thinking about this question a lot, particularly over the past five months when my dear friend and friend to so many, Jacquie, died suddenly from a massive brain aneurism. I still have the text messages she sent me the day before she died when she and Bruce were visiting Washington D.C. She wished me a happy birthday and asked if I thought Adam might be free the next day for a visit. There is no way she could have known what was to befall her that day. But Jacquie lived each day answering the question of this day, “ma l’kha po, why are you here,” and lived her life with utter joy, an effervescent smile, and abundant love and laughter. And I must tell you that it wasn’t easy for her. She faced considerable challenges, both in her family and in her soul. With Bruce’s permission I share with you that she also battled depression and some days overwhelmed her with darkness. But, as Bruce explains, knowing that people relied on her, propelled Jacquie out of bed each day. She knew exactly why she was here and was singularly focused- she lived to help others- her family, this community, and the many families and children she supported and nurtured through her work in the San Rafael city schools. And every day she and Bruce were together, she’d look straight into his eyes, stop everything, and say, “I just love you so much.” You see, she left nothing unsaid, nothing undone- she just gave generously and loved freely because her life depended on it.

The true question of this day is not who shall live and who shall die, but rather, how we live and by extension, how we die. And this year, there is so much at stake, in our society, our world and in our own lives. At times it feels so overwhelming we don't even know where to begin. Where can we make a real difference given the gravity of the crises we face? How do we even begin to fix our broken planet? Violence? Poverty? How do we avoid inertia or that very real desire to just run away, to curl up and hide in a cave? And how can we retain optimism and hope despite the relentless upheaval in our nation? How can we remain clear and steady, moral and upright, when the ground beneath us is shifting with every step? Today, our tradition offers us three lessons for navigating our lives in these difficult times.

The first comes from our beloved teacher and friend, Rabbi Michael Barenbaum, of blessed memory, who on Yom Kippur used to admonish us, "Don't bring the sins and faults of others into this sanctuary and leave our own outside on the curb." We know how easy it is to focus on the moral failings of others; it has become a national pastime and current obsession. But tonight, we begin and we end with our own transparency and with the truth of our own misdeeds and moral failings; we examine how we, ourselves, have wronged others and where we have missed the mark. The great 19th century rabbi, Israel Salanter taught, that this self-reflection is the very seed from which we begin to heal the ills of the world. He explains, "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But now as an old man, I realize that the only thing I can change is myself. But," he adds wisely, "I've also come to recognize that if long ago I started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that in turn, could have changed the whole country, and we could all indeed have changed the world." We change ourselves when we truly encounter and embrace the truth of our souls and our lives in the quiet of this holy time.

The second lesson I share with you tonight comes from this very room. Each year we gather together in this sacred place. We pray side-by-side, we lift our voices in unison, and collectively confess our transgressions, and then we go home. But even when we disperse and return to our own lives, we still remain in community with one another. As we know, our prayers and our Torah portion are all in the plural- Atem nitzavim, our Torah cries out. You all stand here this day; we all bring divine goodness and generosity into this world. For over 26 years I have

watched this community perform selfless and righteous acts in our world. And today, I stand in awe before you. Truly, this community and all we are capable of, is breathtaking. As we know, almost 2,000 years ago Rabbi Tarfon said, lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, it's not up to us to complete all of the work, but neither can we desist from it. We need one another to complete the transformational task of repairing our fractured world, and often, it starts with one act, deeds we can each perform which combined, make a powerful impact- register voters, listen respectfully to someone whose views differ from our own, join a protest, make a contribution to support human rights. Later this year I'll be taking our 11th/12th on a Civil Rights trip to the south, and next year, we will take a synagogue-wide trip. And so many of you here tonight are already on the frontlines pursuing peace, and for those who are, we pray you feel strengthened and buoyed by this holy community.

The final lesson tonight is a reminder that we are rooted in our sacred texts which have propelled us and inspired us for thousands of years to bring justice and righteousness into the world. We are aware that today, when reality is being distorted and discredited, it can feel like the ground beneath our feet is shifting, crumbling even. But this holy day calls us to stand firmly in our ideals, in our notion of what is ethical and kind. Elie Weisel tells the story of a righteous man of Sodom who crosses the city protesting the injustices he encountered. The people criticized and dismissed him. A young person asks him, "Why do you continue to protest?" And the man response is profound. "I don't know if I can change others or not," he says, "Yet if I continue my protest, at least I will prevent others from changing me." Today, we stand firm against the insidious moral failings, which threaten our society and our souls as well.

Tomorrow morning Isaiah's voice calls out to us from our haftarah reading, commanding us, inspiring us to break the bonds of injustice and to let the oppressed go free. He cries out, share your bread with the hungry, protect those with no home; remove the heavy burden of all of those in pain. This is how we reclaim and sustain our moral grounding and our sense of wellbeing today; this is how we will maintain our souls and our society this year, by allowing Isaiah's words to whisper in our ears and by heeding his call for righteousness and justice. "Ma l'cha po," Why are we here? One year from now, when we recite the Unetane Tokef and Kol Nidre prayers, we will ask ourselves, what did I do to bring dignity into this world? What did I do to heal our

fractured world? What did I do to bring more love and joy, generosity and compassion to humankind, and what did I do to ease the burdens of my own soul?

At the end of tomorrow's reading, Isaiah makes one final plea to us;

“If you offer your compassion and  
remove the chains of oppression,  
then your light shall shine through the darkness and  
your night will become bright as day.

Adonai will guide you always,  
give you strength, and  
will lift up your journey to the highest places.”

This is my prayer for you,  
For our nation and for our world,  
And for all who dwell upon this earth,  
in this New Year, 5780.