Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783 Congregation Beth Evergreen

September 25, 2022 Rabbi Jamie Arnold

“Preparing for Difficult Conversations,

Practicing Letting Go, and Getting Some Peaceful Sleep”

*Achat Shaalti …*One request. One ask?

If a magic shofar could give you just one wish, what would it be. The sages tried to sum up the evening service in one prayer. They came up with *Hashkiveinu, haskiveinu l’shalom v’haamideinu l’chaim*. “Lay me down peacefully. Please Yah-God,” the prayer says, “allow me a wholesome night’s sleep, to rest through the night. And, your majesty, if you’d be so kind to raise me up again *V’Haamideinu* in the morning to renewed life.” A prayer to sum up all the ‘asks’ and ‘aspirations’ of a new year?

Need we ask for more? To retire tonight in peace, then to wake, to be raised up again in the morning to new life. But going to bed at night, wake up in the morning, why pray about something so ordinary, so mundane? Like breathing in and out, eating and excreting, our bodies, for the most part, make this coming in and out of consciousness, look so easy, so ordinary.

Then again, this body – this *nefesh*, embodied spirit, earth-made-into-earthling – its ability to breath in-and-out, to eat and excrete, to sink into the Zs of sleep and the come out of a coma, an AmaZing daily Awakenings, a resurrection, these are far from mundane. They are miraculous, daily reminders of a profound truth: **to make room for the new, we must release the old.** The goblet must be emptied before it can be refilled.

As with the body, so too with the heart and mind, soul and world. Want to renew life, or love or health, to restore justice or peace or prosperity? Something’s gotta give. Old ways. Old habits. Old assumptions. Old hopes. But letting go, letting go is not so as easy the body makes it look. Letting go can be downright painful, even terrifying. And doing it with grace requires practice. Listening to the news, looking the mirror, one thing seems clear to me: when it comes to letting go, we all could use some practice, not just reluctant former presidents and retiring athletes.

**Last year**, 13 months from today, I spoke to you about facing hard truths, **confronting pervasive prejudices** that we all carry – about **time**, and **love**, and **God**, and **America**. That work is on-going.

**This year**, I’d like to build on it and invite you into a series of conversations about, well, **how to have hard conversations**. How to broach so-called taboo topics! Working out together, what to say, and not to say, to someone who got a distressing health diagnosis? Or to someone who just got divorced? Or to one who adheres to a political view that you abhor?

Taking on hard conversations, I am slowly learning, requires us to practice letting go. In this new year to come, to help us let go with grace[[1]](#footnote-1), I join me in experimenting together with a variety of **rituals of release**. Because, when it comes to letting go, I suspect I’m not the only one who could use some help. So, let’s practice, together.

When you arrived tonight (and soon to be shared on Zoom), you received a grid, a map of the next 22 days, each of our high holy days paired with some “letting go” practices – some that we do every day (often unconsciously) and others we might do only once a year, or once in a lifetime, and again often unconsciously. We can think of this as a **22-Day Journey of Release: From *Slichah*** [regretting] **to *Simchah***[rejoicing].

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| HOLY-DAY | ROUTINE | COMMUNAL RITES OF RELEASE | PERSONAL PRACTICE |
| ***Slichot***  (9/17) | Inhale-**Exhale**  *Elohai neshamah* | ***Vidui*** - chant alphabetic confessions;  **shofar** - blow the ram’s horn | **Sunset**: **Reflect** on, learn from, & let go of **regrets** |
| ***Rosh Hashanah*** eve (9/25) | Rise up & Lie Down – **Retire** | ***Bless*** coming-going of the moon; **Retire**;  ***Hashkiveinu*** - lay-down to sleep | **Bedtime**: recite blessings, **rehearse dying** |
| ***Rosh Hashanah*** day 1 (9/26) | Sit Down - **Excrete** *Asher Yatzar* | ***Milah*** *-*circumcision, remove skin; **Wean;**  **Asher Yatzar** - bless openings-closings | **Morning**: **hand washing** as affirming clean slate |
| ***Rosh Hashanah*** day 2 (9/27) | Leave - **Exit**  *Lech* – Get up, **go**! | ***Tashlich*** - cast-away crumbs; separation  ***Shema*** - listen-love when coming-going | **Breakfast:** Name **hard conversation** to tame |

Here we have two complimentary approaches:

The first is to take a daily routine, and turn it into a ritual, a SpiRitual Practice: breathing, going to bed, getting out of bed, eating and going to the bathroom, leaving your house or workplace. These are things we do, often daily, that if invested with ***awareness*** can **transform the mundane into a miracle**. Each exhale, each morning when you go to the bathroom, each night when give yourself permission to go to sleep – each of these routine activities can become a spiRitual practice, an occasion to **practice LETTING GO**.

The second approach is to create simple rituals linked to the cycle of the day: addressing and releasing regrets as the sun sets; reciting blessings before you retire for the night; and in the morning at the breakfast table, naming a hard topic or conversation to tame that day.

But why? You Ask. Will practicing letting go protect me from the pain of heartbreak and loss, from fear in the face of uncertainty and change? Of course not. Change and pain is inevitable in this world we live in. My ‘letting go’ practices – mindful breath meditation, daily prayer, *vidui*-confessional, sitting shiva, morning blessings – these did not shield me from the pains of this past year, of going through a divorce with Marti, my wife, my life-partner for more than 30 years. It did not inoculate me from the grief I felt sitting with friend in his hospice bed, or with my mother-in-law when she died.

But such practices, I am confident, can help protect us from ourselves. They can curtail our tendency to self-inflict an unhelpful inflation of suffering. It can protect us from ourselves and it can protect others from us – from the times we as family members, friends, judges, or legislators expose others to the toxic repercussions of our inability to let go, when we reactively impose misguided, futile attempts to preserve an imagined certainty upon others.

There are many reasons to practice letting go, to confront those fears that make us hold our breath and keep us up at night. Perhaps none more so than the fear of dying. This brings us back to the prayer, ***Hashkiveynu***. Lay me down in peace. This prayer is coupled with *haamideynu*, the desire to be restored to life in the morning, to keep on living. It is coupled with a prayer for life, but not contingent upon it. I can’t help but wonder how the world might be different if the Putins and Trumps among us practiced letting go of their fear of death every night when they went to bed.

But tonight is not about them. Its about you. And me.

In a world permeated with examples of the avoidance of and the collapse of honest and productive dialogue, engaging such communal rituals seems even more relevant and precious. So let’s practice speaking about what keeps us up at night? And what helps you let go of all the woes in the world so you can close your eyes at night…and get up out of bed in the morning.

What a gift it has been to simply gather safely again! Let us grow this gift, layering onto the blessing of being together the gift of a **safe space to** **practice** **letting go**, and **having difficult conversations**. Without a respectful and effective civil discourse, how can we make progress on the collective challenges and the threats that we face

Entering into a new year with all the uncertainties that we face, it is not easy to narrow it down to but one request. For those of us here tonight, gathering with a heavy heart, simply seeking respite, relief. A decent night’s sleep. A bit of peace. ***Haskiveynu***. I applaud your courage to show up. And I say this to you: You are not alone. You are not alone. May you be granted a good night’s sleep. Peace. Rest. Renewal.

For those of you looking for a kick in the pants, a jump start, a new beginning, new life. *Haamideynu lchaim*. Thank you for being here. You inspire us. And may your 22-day journey from *slichah* [releasing regret] to *simcha* [reclaiming joy] be spurred on by a new practice or two and blessed with the best kind of growthful challenges.

Thank for being a part of this CBE family.

May we all, on Zoom and in the room, in Evergreen and everywhere, lie down tonight with newfound peace, letting go and laying to rest the unhelpful habits and regrets of the past. And may we rise in the morning empty, and open, and ready to receive and inscribe a new script sweetened by renewed life and love!

*L’Shanah Tovah Tikateivu*.

1. Borrowing here a phrase from dear friend and student Nancy Nowak z”l who passed away this year, She called her ethical will, “Aging with Grace.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)