This Day is all about looking in a mirror,
but not to get lost in your own reflection...
   What’s the greatest illusion of our lives that YK lays bare?
   That we are in control of our destiny;
   Independent operators in charge of today’s agenda,
   And already scheduled for a successful tomorrow.
IF there’s a most popular, prevalent sin among us, I’d say its pride.
Take your pick; [It’s a virtual Baskin & Robbins assortment]
And there are plenty of flavors to choose from...
   The pride of power, where your aim is to gain enough stuff and stature
to make you feel unshakably secure...
Or the pride of intellect, as if your master-mind can arrange the world
Into a philosophy that explains life’s most vexing questions...
Maybe, for you, it’s moral pride, looking down on other’s actions
For not quite living up to your superior moral standards...
Religious pride is a snare for many of us,
Assuming the more mitzvot—the more praying & penitence,
The higher your score on the sacred scale...
Indeed, the popular metaphor through which this day is framed
in the Machzor doesn’t help:
The Heavenly Court on High is now in session,
And we are all on trial, hoping/praying for an acquittal...
And what’s the question you are attempting to answer before the Judge?
Will my religious resume measure up?
Based on this year’s sacred scale, will I earn a passing grade
in the Book of Life exam?
But the metaphor is misleading, because it sidesteps the real question...

After all, if there’s any day when holiness surrounds us,
And when the Holy One feels close, it is this one.
Which means that our atonement is measured
not in quantity of mitzvah points, but in quality of life-purpose...
The pressing question of this moment is not matter of fact—but rather,
a matter of faith. It is the very same question the Holy One addressed
to Adam & Eve, hiding among the trees of the Garden;
the single word that calls us out of hiding as well: AYEKHA—WHERE ARE YOU?
NOTE: Not WHO are you…
as if personal accolade or professional life-titles are the answer.
Not HOW are you...
Presuming happiness and personal satisfaction are what we’re really after.
But WHERE are you?
On this unpredictable journey we call life.
Are your steps taking you in the right direction?
Or, perhaps, do you actually feel you’ve arrived at that ideal life-destination?
   Let me assure you—at this spiritual GPS rerouting moment,
   the Holy One is holding up that [rear-view] mirror
   so that we can all see with inner life-perspective,
   No matter the path you’ve been pursuing
   “You’re not there yet!”

In David Brooks’ new book, The Second Mountain,
We are challenged to reconsider where life has taken us
In order to discover where it is, we need to be going.
Reflecting on the life-journey, Brooks’ premise is both spatial and spiritual.
We pursue our chosen life-path...
Maybe the one that made most sense years ago...
Perhaps a life-passion we always dreamed of...
And so, we aspire to succeed, climbing life’s ladder...
A degree or two… a job or two or three.
We build a career, perhaps find a life-partner, create a family,
And make our way up life’s mountain.
You may not exactly be at the pinnacle, but life seems pretty sweet,
THEN, invariably, inexplicably, something happens...
Could be an internal disquiet, or some moment of life-struggle,
The all-too-human suffering that brings us down from life’s peak
To wander through the valley… Maybe it’s a heartbreak, or a broken hope...
Could be a scare with sickness, or, God-forbid, the real-deal,
facing what may be a life altering reality...
Perhaps it’s a deep inner pain we can’t quite explain,
Yet, no matter, it throws our current life-direction into question...

As Brooks reflects, “These seasons of suffering have a way of exposing the
deepest parts of ourselves, reminding us we’re not the people we thought.
People in the valley have been broken open... only to discover, there is another layer they’ve been neglecting, a substrate where... the most powerful yearnings live.” [The Second Mountain, Intro, xii]

Shattering the illusion of our self-sufficiency,
Our life-attitude altered by that “season of suffering,”
Viewing life from the bottom-up [almost inside-out]
We make our way up a path we previously could not even conceive,
Climbing the Second Mountain....
Naturally, this ascent is antithetical to the first.
“If the first mountain is about building up the ego, the second mountain is about losing the self. If the first mountain is about acquisition, the second mountain is about contribution... You conquer the first mountain;
You are conquered by the second.” [Intro, xvi]

And so, finding yourself, in effect, by losing yourself
“through the daily act of serving others...”
Pledging to a promise far beyond the personal,
You make that second mountain climb. Blessed by the ability
to make the world better by serving some higher, even sacred purpose,
you come out of that valley “not healed, but with renewed hope.” [pg 37]

Jewish life-philosopher and Talmud scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in his classic work, The Thirteen-Petaled Rose, perceives how counterintuitive is this “second mountain” search.

“Here we have what is perhaps the great paradox of the search for “self,”
That only by ceasing to see oneself as a supremely independent essence can one say with all sincerity, HINENI—This is where I am....For only then does the immensity of existence take shape...And it becomes apparent that one is part of it. One becomes conscious of a vast arc, curving from the Divine Source of all Being to oneself, compelling the question: WHERE am I going?
And within this great circle each person can begin to discover the special lines of his own direction.” [The Thirteen-Petaled Rose, A. Steinsaltz, pgs 147-148]

It should not be lost on any of us:
THIS is WHY we’re really here.
We all want a life of deep meaning, infused with purpose,
What we could call a “2nd Mountain life.”
HOW we come to it is the question...
Urging us to surrender to the passion of our hearts & the yearning of our souls, Brooks contends that we are all summoned to a life of deeper commitment. “On the first mountain, a person makes individual choices and keeps their options open. The second mountain is a vale of promises and pledges. It is all about our making commitments... And when your life is defined by fervent commitments, promises made from love, you are on the Second Mountain.” [pgs. 53, 55,59]

Before WW II, famed psychoanalyst Victor Frankl saw his purpose as helping his patients find personal fulfillment... But deported to Auschwitz, Frankl came to soon realize the question: What do I want from life?” was not actually the one he, nor his patients, needed to answer. As he wrote [in Man’s Search for Meaning] “We discovered... It did not really matter what we expected from life, But rather, what life expected from us.” Brooks spends the bulk of his book in pursuit of a life vocation, Taking us on his search, encouraging us to follow his lead: Plumbing our innermost desires and asking ourselves: ‘What is it I’m most motivated to do and commit to?’ He sees the “Second Mountain life” attained as we pursue our greatest passions, and apply them to address some social problem, in the words of Frederic Beuchner, “to find the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” [pg. 122]

Such an existence brings it all together, as Brooks perceives the vision: “Our task in life is synthesis... to collect all the fragmented pieces of self and bring them to a state of unity, so that through serving your commitments, you move coherently toward a single [spiritual] vision...” [pg. 82]

... It’s a lovely model: idealistic, altruistic, even inspired... But it largely checks the totality of our reality at the door. Taken up with his own religious rebirth, a renewed professional sense of purpose, and new love in his life, advocating an ascent that marries our commitment to some great cause which in turn fills and fulfills us, enabling us to attain that Second Mountain life, Brooks misunderstands where we are. Because, for most everyone here, the “second mountain life” is meant for the first mountain.

We live really busy lives. [Many would say, pretty much Meshuganeh!] We already have loads of commitments:
To the kids—our families, to our jobs, our health, 
To our friends, some like family, to our community, even to this congregation, 
To helping—trying to make a difference—doing what we can, when we can. 
... And what we inherently understand is that life isn’t lived on a mountain. 
From fractured families to the pressures of our professions... 
From torn relationships to personal life-struggles & disappointments... 
From facing sickness—even loss, and trying to cope, 
Somehow, to find hope... 
What we discover is that life’s journey is one of tiny peaks and plains, 
And a good deal of time wandering in that valley. 

But here’s the reality-check [what our illustrious author fails to fathom]: 
The “climb” is not necessarily up...

When God calls Moses [Exodus Ch 24] to come up on Mt Sinai 
And receive Revelation—the tablets inscribed by the Holy One, 
The text’s wording is meant to make us wonder. 
“God said to Moses: Alei-Eylai Ha-Harah—come up to Me on the Mountain 
Veh’yeh Sham—and be there!” 

The Kotzker Rebbe asks: 
IF Moses came up the mountain, wouldn’t he already “be there?” 
Responding, the Rebbe explains: 
“From this apparent redundancy we understand that even one who ascends a 
high mountaintop, and is indeed able to reach the summit, might not “be there.” 
Even though he may be standing on the very peak itself, 
His head or heart may be somewhere else entirely.” 

Our teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner extends the text to our lives: 
“Being there is not merely geographical... Moses might be on the 
mountaintop, yet he may not be fully present. So why does God tell him to 
come up at all? Had God told Moses he did not have to go anywhere—If the 
Holy One said, “Just be there.” Moses may not have believed. 
Like most of us, Moses needed to feel he was physically going up 
to help him get to where he spiritually needed to go.” 
And now, Kushner’s kicker—meant for this “mountaintop moment.” 
“The ascent may well be just a metaphor. 
The call of the Divine is not somewhere else, providing you are open enough, 
Brave enough, to hear it. The search for a life of spiritual meaning is actually 
a spiral that results in the individual coming back to his/her true self.” 

[Sparks Beneath the Surface, pgs. 91-92]
SO, what we all must know is that you don’t have to go anywhere to encounter those “second mountain moments.” They happen right where you are, in the midst of the mundane, miraculous, maddening life you live...
And because we live on two mountains simultaneously, Like life itself, our journey is an inevitable, blessed blending of the bitter and the sweet—inseparably intertwined.
For it is in the midst of our brokenness, the fractures and fissures of life, That light and joy and love shine through.
We think we’re in the valley, and suddenly, We’re transported to a mountaintop view...

Since Labor Day, I’ve been anticipating his arrival, almost giddy just thinkin about it...
When this kid might come was the big question. Due October 7th, I was praying for an early appearance. Thankfully my daughter-in-law Chelsea has impeccable timing, And my first grandchild arrived on September 18th [What a Chai celebration!]
Sawyer Wolf Sirkman weighed in at 6lbs, 8oz. He is absolutely beautiful! [My unbiased opinion.]
But even all the ‘grandparent club’ advice Could not prepare me for the 8th day event, the baby’s Bris, During which he received the blessing of his Hebrew name. Talk about a precious, painfully joyous, peak-moment...
Carried in by a beaming Auntie Sophie, Passed from the Chair of Elijah to his amazing, waiting parents, Their words put it all in perspective. ...Calling herself out as a crier, Chelsea recalled their wedding day 5 years ago, marveling at the miracle, “a living, breathing product of our 13-year-relationship,” Affirming the awe all of us felt. “The gravity of this moment is powerful and humbling,” She explained... “From day one of my pregnancy, we started calling Sawyer “Baby S.” We didn't even know if he was a boy or a girl... but we did know with 100% certainty that we wanted to name him after his grandmother Susan, Who passed away nearly 5 years ago.”
Channeling his mother’s spirit, Gabe continued:
“My Mom would have loved this baby so much. She would have showered him with attention, love, and definitely gifts. She would have taught him lessons, cooked him delicious food, sang silly songs to him; and calmed every last one of his fears. So, in honor of my Mom, we all have to step in and split up these jobs, and fill in the blanks, to teach him all the beautiful lessons she would have taught him with ease and grace.”

Tears of longing and tears of timeless love; Our hearts broken and our hearts so very full, Atop the mountain and in the valley, All at the very same time.

In the only book on grief I read whose every word spoke to me, *Its OK that You’re Not OK*, Megan Devine reminds us of the ultimate takeaway. “There was love in this world before your loss, there is love surrounding you now, and love will remain beside you through all the life that is yet to come. The forms will change, but love itself will never leave. Its not enough. And its everything.” [pg. 229]

Tony-Award-winning actor Andre De Shields understands the secret of living a second mountain life without ever leaving the first mountain. As he shared in his recent acceptance speech at this year’s Tony’s for his role as Hermes in Hadestown, “I leave you with three cardinal rules for my stability in life that are also the secret to my longevity. First, surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming… Second, slowly is the right way you want to get to wherever it is you want to be… Three, the top of one mountain is the bottom of the next, so keep on climbing… The secret to our search for life-meaning is clear: You needn’t go anywhere. Our higher purpose is not found through self-elevation, and certainly not through self-denial, nor in the far-off seeking of other-worldly peak-perfect moments. The “Second Mountain” deep-meaning life is right here, just where you happen to be; in the middle of all the messiness, the stresses and the cracks—the beauty and the brokenness.
For what we come to know as we peer in that mirror, 
And see not alone ourselves, but life’s greater reflection, 
Is that the climb is not actually up at all, but rather out; 
Connecting us to who and what matters most; 
Helping us realize where we are, and where we truly belong. 
And that’s when we hear the Holy One whispering in our ear: 
“Just BE THERE.”

Rabbi Isaac lived in Cracow. A tiny little house with his wife and 3 kids. So, when he dreamed three nights in a row about a great treasure buried under the bridge of the King’s Castle in Prague, he set out on the journey to find it.

When he arrived, he saw the bridge as in his dream, but it was patrolled day and night by the King’s guards. After circling the spot for a bit, trying to find the courage, One of the guards noticed him and approached: 
“Why are you hanging around the King’s castle?”
So... Reb Isaac told him all about his dream.

“You mean to tell me you believe in such dreams!” the guard laughed.
“If I believed in them, I’d have to go all the way to Cracow and find some poor rabbi named Isaac, because I dreamed that a great treasure was buried under his bed!”

With that, Reb Isaac thanked the guard and hurried fast as he could back home, Discovering the treasure that had been there all along. [The Book of Miracles, L.Kushner, pg 77]

So, with light shining through the cracks... 
Blessing rising amidst the brokenness of the peaks and valleys of our lives, may we summon the strength of spirit, 
the awe-filled awareness, this new year, to “be there,”
And may each of us unearth the treasure that has been there all along... AMEN