

## Elul 7

## Journey to a Mountain Pond

Katy Z. Allen

The word *makom* in Hebrew means “place,” or “space,” but it has also come to be a name of G'd.

Some places take on more significance in our lives than others. They touch us more deeply or are associated with significant memories. For me, one of these is a place I have come close to, but have not yet seen with my own eyes. Yet, just through proximity, it has touched me deeply, shifting something in my soul.

The name of the place is Gamawakoosh, but you cannot find it on a map. Gamawakoosh is the name given to this place by my mother's family.

Beginning in the early 1920s and from a very young age, my mother, her older brother, their parents, friends of varied ages, their dogs, and their nanny goat hiked for three days, with the men and boys doubling back for a second load, up the side of a mountain in the Adirondacks to a hidden pond. There, with permission from the landowner (at that time it was not public land), they built a small log cabin. They carried in all their provisions, including tools and rolls of roofing—one year the collective weight of the packs was 512 pounds.

Several journals of trips to Gamawakoosh remain intact, providing clues to the travelers' route and insight into their experiences. Stored in my memory are the stories my mother told of Gamawakoosh, her most favorite place in all the world (and she travelled to many lands during her childhood and youth). For her, it was a magical place of sheer delight, of good fellowship and long conversations, and of the wonders and awe of the wilderness. It was a place of healing and joy. August and Gamawakoosh provided a refuge from the father who at home in “civilization” was the source of emotional and spiritual pain that my mother carried with her all her life; for in the wilderness, away from societal norms, he was a different person, one she could respect, appreciate, and enjoy. Even at age 90, her eyes still twinkled when she spoke of Gamawakoosh, and it remained a place of respite for her mind and soul when her body no longer permitted her to explore the woods and fields in the way her spirit needed.

One summer a few years after my mother passed on, together with one of my brothers, a cousin and her husband, one of my sons and his wife and their dog, two descendants of another youthful 1933 Gamawakoosh participant, and a gem of a hiker who had been that man's good friend for many years, we went in search of this hidden spot. Although we tried,

circumstances prevented us from reaching the actual site of the cabin, but in the process, we walked where our families and their friends had walked, as we waded streams they had forded. Although we never laid eyes on Gamawakoosh, we touched its essence. We found it in the woods and beside the river. We found it in the colorful mushrooms of the damp forest and in the fairyland nooks and crannies of mosses, ferns, and tiny pine saplings. We found it in the decaying 1939 Chevy we stumbled upon, mysterious and abandoned far from any current road. We found it in our shared breakfast lunches, and dinners, and in the preparation and clean up. We found it in the laughter and camaraderie that flowed among people who had never before met, and in the stories of family members long gone, whose spirits hovered among us. We found it in new definitions of family, in healing long-held sadness, and in new-found joy. And now we find it in our shared memories of a sacred place as yet unseen by our eyes.

*HaMakom*—The Place. The gift, the sacredness of Gamawakoosh is not inherent, but flows forth from what we do with it and what we make of it and in the Presence that fills all space. May we all find places that become for us Places that bring healing, laughter, and new depths of love and relationship with those we know and with those we don't know. As we journey through Elul, may our hearts and souls re-turn to The Place, *HaMakom*, and to the spaces It fills.

## The Known and the Unknown

Anne Heath

I celebrated my first Hanukkah amongst my siblings and their children celebrating yet another family Christmas. We had gathered for winter break in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at our brother's home, glad to be together after travel of varying distances and difficulties.

My lengthy, made-it-in-one-day drive from St. Louis culminated in a wondrous night sky display. My younger daughter and I approached Santa Fe well after midnight. The cold, crisply clear night made for perfect night-sky viewing, too good to be just an out-of-the-window-on-our-way-somewhere experience.

I stopped the car. We got out, glad to be standing. We stretched our road-weary limbs, all the while looking up in awe. We both agreed that it almost felt as if the sky were falling because the sky was so full of constellations and planets. The area's elevation made everything seem just that much closer.

growth and meaning-making that Judaism offers in such abundance—prayer, study, celebration and service—be the tools we use to tend the garden within. May we clear away the weeds that no longer serve, cultivate patience as the seeds within us germinate, and, in so doing, cause the garden of our soul to flourish.

## For Lifts

Nyanna Susan Tobin

Wherever I sit or stand, it is sacred ground. Sometimes it is hard to believe this wisdom. But, if I can re-remember my roots and my strong belief that we are all a part of the on-going cycles of creation and of unraveling, then I can wake up and realize the miracle of this moment.

One of my goals for this summer was to slow down and honor my desire for living closer to the land and water in my neighborhood. But in between watering and harvesting for a few backyards, I traveled all over New England. I went to a Slow Living Summit in Brattleboro, Vermont. I found and sold an antique (1740's) map in Hyannis, Massachusetts. I went to a Social Justice and Storytelling gathering in New Hampshire, and I experienced the strong Earth energy at The Round House in Colrain, Massachusetts. We also celebrated the crossing over of two special elders who live with me in Wayland Housing. And I participated in Ma'yan Tikvah's Shabbat in Nature retreat in mid-August. As Molly B. wrote, how does all this cook nutritious bread? This summer, I have experienced so many others working to make our world work for the present and for the future.

Maybe all religions foster a love and awe of the past, our roots. The exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the Boston Museum of Science was a journey into the past. Two thousand years ago, our ancestors made pots, and ink, and parchment. They lived in uncertain times, but they left us with their seeds, the work of their hands, and their written instructions for meeting the end. The end of existence is what the scroll scribes predicted. They were getting ready for their last breaths.

What will we be getting ready for this year? We have the science, the evidence of global warming and the rise of the waters. We have people living under tyranny and those trying to take back their humanity. Our people are recovering from nearly losing our footing on Earth. I imagine that while I continue to struggle with budgets and making real food, hopefully, I will be thankful for these daily struggles and the awareness that I am standing or sitting on Sacred Ground.

## Elul 9

### Invitation

Judith Felsen

My Lord, we saw Your waves  
and thought  
You were enticing us.  
We heard Your winds  
and talked of  
You reminding us.  
We felt Your rains  
and whispered  
You're inspiring us.  
We fled Your floods  
and dreaded  
You now chiding us.  
Yet all the while,  
with Love You were  
inviting us.

### Caring for the Planet

Laurie Gold

"When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are and how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.' (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13)

I read this midrashic story only recently, decades after I was a teenager sitting in the pews at Temple Beth El of Great Neck, listening to Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson deliver his sermon. He was speaking about how it is against Jewish values to litter and to pollute the air and seas. He was disheartened whenever he saw people dumping the contents of their ashtray onto the roads and sidewalks. Perhaps Rabbi Davidson was thinking about this Midrash when he said that Jewish ethics require that we do our part to take care of the Earth. Maybe he was thinking of another Jewish textual basis

of our obligation to care for the environment, for we find such bases in the Bible, Talmud, Midrash and Law Codes.

Jewish thinkers in every generation and in every part of the world have urged us to care for our planet. Why, then, don't we remember? Why don't we listen? There are many reasons. Some of us fall short of our obligation because we are forgetful, greedy or ignorant. Some of us miss the mark because we are lazy, oblivious or selfish.

Fortunately, at this time of year we are given the opportunity to ask ourselves tough questions, such as: How has my conduct caused damage to the planet? How can I change my behavior so that I stop hurting, and start healing, the Earth? Can I encourage other people to make these changes too?

Changing our behavior isn't always easy. It takes time to undo bad habits and replace them with new ways of doing things. All of us have been successful in modifying our behavior in the past. We can do it again. We can make the changes needed to help improve our world. May we start today.

## Growing *T'shuvah*

Maxine Lyons



I am often looking for ways to connect to *t'shuvah* even during the leisurely days of summer. *T'shuvah* for me means turning to those thoughts and actions that help me to become more of "my higher self," following those practices that nourish my growth to know *shalom* (peace) and to reach greater *sh'lemut* (wholeness). As I more mindfully pursue personal growth, I resonate to the Hebrew word, *hitpatchut*, growth through an openness and receptivity to change. In summertime, I focus on ways to practice with greater compassion in how I spend my time and focus my energy as I take on these goals.

I resonate deeply with a spiritual writing that described the personal journey of a young man who made meaningful contributions to help alleviate suffering, first locally and then he volunteered with a health organization performing basic life-saving measures for the most needy. He realized that he could not SAVE them all, that whatever he does is a small amount given the needs and intensity of the impoverishment and sickness of those in dire circumstances. And his conclusion is similar to mine—that one cannot effect major changes, but we can become more aware that individuals in pain require compassionate responses. He called it a "ministry of silence"—listening, being there, being present. I was motivated anew and started to participate in healing services for homeless people in my community in order to be a witness to their lives, to affirm their small steps to healing, to be

present as they were receiving some comfort and momentary relief during the service in which I participated. One homeless woman said to me, "It matters to me that you were here." With that comment, I committed myself to be there regularly.

My involvement with a Jewish inmate (writing him for 12 years during his incarceration) meant helping him in a variety of ways including his attempt but ultimate failure at re-entry into society after years of extreme deprivation. This included daily indignities, incivility and basic human concern. Consequently, he lacked the life skills that would enable him to succeed "on the outside." Listening to him and his travails and providing some financial assistance have given him support but insufficient for him to acclimate to life on the outside. He said, "I was physically out of prison but my mind was still shackled from the abuses."

Although there are few Albert Schweitzers and Paul Farmers capable of performing their amazingly impactful service to humanity, there are endless opportunities to alleviate the hopelessness and abject suffering of individuals in our midst. I am learning that we can offer heartfelt caring, express joy when good things happen to them, advice and empathy when the challenges cannot be faced alone and also, comforting words and deeds when they cannot succeed.

Participating in a weekly Buddhist meditation group adds to my sense of *t'shuvah*, as it prepares me to practice deep listening, offering new ways to respond with compassion and kindness and caring by being mindful in the present. My deep-seated Jewish values and traditions inform how I personally address the pressing societal ills and the all too elusive peace as I learn again and again to be present a little more each year.

## EARTH ETUDES FOR ELUL

The Talmud says, "Deeds of loving kindness are superior to charity" (*BT Sukkah 49b*). *Chesed* (loving kindness) is a virtue that contributes to *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). In Judaism, our *chesed* actions include sustaining children, the sick, strangers, mourners, and communities. But when we worship, we aren't required to do these things. No one stops me at the synagogue door and asks me to list my sacrifices. What selfless acts am I doing for humanity and other living things? If I am to be a spiritual person, my *t'shuvah* must be to worship with sacrifice by acting through my heart. More than giving money to charity, I must change myself, and in doing so, I change the world. What are you willing to do?

## Resistance

Lois Rosenthal

There is resistance to the waning of the year,  
These late summer days of afternoon warmth  
Sun's glare softened by a chill  
A bit of orange in the solar yellow.

Fall is almost upon us, Elul is here.  
Time to think about wrapping up this old year  
And stepping into the next.

There is resistance.

Remember last year's beginning?  
The intentions, the clarity of changes to make,  
The possibilities of bringing G-d into one's life  
The realizations of a path to follow.

Now we have questions to answer.  
What happened to those efforts?  
Some were fruitful, some forgotten  
Others too simplistic or too hard.  
Perhaps there were some moments of contact with the Divine  
And other moments so very human.

Resistance expects an inner voice  
To answer with a list of shortcomings.

## EARTH ETUDES FOR ELUL

Yet Elul is a tender month, and guides us  
To approach the new year with appreciation for the old,  
To consider every mindful effort  
Then build on what has been done,  
To repair the weak spots  
And keep building.

## Elul 12

## Detroit, Our Spiritual Journeys, and Coming Back to Life

Moshe Givental

Every year on Tisha B'Av, we begin a seven-week journey of preparation for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Like most significant experiences in life, for the Jewish Holy Days to have the potential for transformation, they require preparation. At Tisha B'Av, we reflect on brokenness of our physical, ethical, and spiritual worlds. From this, the darkest of places, we move towards hope, of a world filled with love, six days later at Tu B'Av. These are a miniature version of the journey through the next month. We spend the month of Elul in *heshbon hanefesh* (our soul accounting), reflecting on our past year, righting the wrongs we can, softening our hearts enough to apologize where needed, setting new goals, and beginning again the work of rebuilding relationships with family, friends, G-d, and ourselves.

In 2015, my journey of reflection and rebuilding started in Detroit, a city ravaged by decades via an exodus of jobs from the city after World War II, then white flight and abandoned property, then riots, crime and outrage, then political mismanagement and neglect, the recession of 2008, followed by Emergency Management's systematic undermining and deconstruction of many basic vital services such as education, city pensions, and access to water for the city's poor residents. It is a reality and history devastating to those of us who face it for the first time. However, amidst all of that, what was even more powerful for me in getting to know the city, was the way that her residents were sowing seeds of hope and life. Street Art such as the Heidelberg Project is giving residents a way to express their grief and dreams, while beautifying their neighborhoods. Residents surrounded by the blight of empty lots and decrepit buildings are getting their hands dirty and learning how to grow food. Places like The Georgia Street Community Center are putting Detroit at the top of urban agriculture in the United States, a part of the city's approximately 1,300 urban gardens and farms, while building community, the local economy, and resilience in the process.

Detroit is literally coming back to life, from the inside out, while its old top-down and government-controlled structures are still crumbling. Reflecting on this transformation, I think of our prayers for renewal and growth each day and on the High Holidays! It brings me to the *Amidah's* second prayer, referred to as *Gevurot* (God's Might). While some Reform and

Reconstructionist prayer books interpret resurrection literally, balk, and the excise it...our tradition long ago recognized the *Mekhayeh meitim* (the vivification of life) is also metaphor for something we all experience as we grow, stumble, fall, and try again. Our prayer repeats the phrase "*Mekhayeh meitim*" three times. Therefore, the sages ask, what are the three different ways in which we fall into despair, into darkness and destruction, and might be able to come back to life? Instead of giving you their answers, I challenge us all to meditate on this question in our own soul accountings. The residents of Detroit are clearly organizing, rebuilding, and bringing their city back to life. The questions for all of us are: What do we see in our life that is falling apart? What is decomposing? What kinds of seeds, creativity, and courage do we need to plant in order to come back to life?

## T'shuvah and Beauty

Lois Rosenthal

The weekly Haftarah readings follow the story of the Israelites after they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. The writing styles vary greatly from poetry to historical prose.

Of particular note are writings from the time of the divided kingdom: Conquests of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah were seen by the prophets as divine punishment for failure to follow the Torah. The writings from this time leading up to Tisha B'Av are full of harsh rebukes and biting metaphors.

Once Tisha B'Av is over and the High Holidays are approaching, the tone changes. Both Torah and Haftarah readings become infused with literary beauty—the lyrical prose of Deuteronomy accompanied by the lovely poetry of late Isaiah, filled with images of nature's grandeur as a reflection of the Divine, beckoning us to look around at the world and the heavens and there find G-d.

It is in this milieu of beauty that the month of Elul arrives, with its invitation to embark on a path of *t'shuvah*. This complex process of correcting our mistakes and learning from them can be painful and intense. The beautiful biblical backdrop for Elul and *t'shuvah* may serve to cushion a difficult process, giving hope for beauty and transcendence in resolution. It certainly honors the process.

We know that the perception of beauty affects us deeply. We crave beauty, we seek it out, we spend our precious moments dwelling on that which offers it. A Dutch still-life entices us with its intricacies and balance. Intense patterns on flowers are gorgeous beyond imagination. Birds' plumage



dazzles us with striking elaborations. The music of synagogue prayers draws us in; we sing and the notes hum inside us. We gaze at colors of a sunset sky; we rush outside to see a rainbow.

We perceive beauty and drink spiritual nectar—tasty, nourishing, filling. Every single human being is endowed with this faculty, through whatever sense functions within them.

On the evolutionary level, there seems to be no biological utility to this capacity we have for deep appreciation of certain “results” of our five senses. Call it a gift from G-d, a blessing.

But still, nothing in biology is maintained unless it endows the species with a way to strengthen and perpetuate itself. The biologic utility of the pleasures of food, sex, and so on, are obvious. But what about the pleasures of seeing or hearing beauty in nature or in the artistic creations of humankind?

This pleasure feels like an instinctual form of love, an immediate response on a tiny scale. Suppose you come across a wild iris in the woods. The iris is existing happily in its own environment; it doesn't need you for food or water. You find it beautiful, it pleases you. You have experienced a quantum of love for this little iris. Now you care about it. A connection has been made.

A piece of music stirs us—how beautiful! It was composed by a human being, played by other human beings. We don't know them; they may look nothing like us. And yet, some of that sense of beauty, that love we felt for the music spills out onto the humans who created it. A connection has been made.

Look out over a swath of treetops. The pattern of greens and rounded shapes is so pleasing. We can't help but love the trees, plus the whole web of nature that both sustains them and relies on them. A connection has been made.

Our ability to take pleasure from the natural world and from artistic creations of humankind creates threads of connections between each of us and the myriad elements of nature.

Beauty does have biological utility. It is an antidote to narcissism and loneliness. It connects us to the web of existence in the world, causes us to care about it, love it, and do everything we can to preserve it.

Genesis was right. We are stewards of the world. We are the only species that can preserve it or cause large scale destruction of it. Look for beauty in the world, and there you will find the passion to preserve it.

## Elul 13

### Movement Building and the Body

Janna Diamond

I invite you to notice where you are. Bring attention to your state of being. The way you are holding yourself up. Perhaps you choose to relax the muscles in your jaw ever so slightly right now.

Did you know that movement in the body never repeats itself? Even the most subtle motion can never be replicated. Each gesture is an expression of where you are in space and time. Movement is information. Sensation is knowledge. Every breath is change. You are here.

The body is our environment. The environment is our vaster, breathing body.

Let us become fluidly adaptable beings, softening to ourselves and those around us, generating authentic expression. Naming what we see and feel. Allowing sadness, fear, and possibility to stir and rise up within us.

In the face of incredible uncertainty, let us bring attention to how the physical body literally roots us in the precarious social and ecological conditions of our time.

How are we relating to the body? How do we care for our home?

Noticing subtleties of sensations draws us into a wider scope of awareness. We begin to practice (emphasis on practice) that which we are anxious to become.

When we go slowly, we can chip away at fragmentation and detachment. We can listen to and hear where we might be needed most in this time. We can reinhabit ourselves with greater clarity, purpose and power to disrupt the systems threatening our existence.

Elul readies us for turning, returning, and change. We are made to change. Change is possible and inevitable.

In the face of all that is here and all that is to come, let us turn toward and honor our body, this body of Earth. To thank it for holding us up. To allow it to express in real-time. For renewal and resiliency. For healing. For moving forward and towards wholeness.

## Elul 14

## Sweet and Sour Grapes

Robin Damsky

I am in my favorite place at my favorite time: in the garden, in the morning, before the cars have started up, before the noise of lawn mowers and leaf blowers. The crickets are singing, the birds responding. The rising sun's light filters through the leaves. A beginning.

It has been a tough year in the garden. An endless winter caused a late start and temperatures have been cooler than usual. A call from critter to critter that I cannot hear lets them know there is bounty on my corner. Maybe it's because the peach tree lost its flowers in a hard spring rain, but squirrels have eaten a fair amount of my produce this year, taking a bit of a turnip and leaving the rest (yeah, I'm not surprised). Mice, too, have traversed here. I have never seen one, but my garden helpers have. Let's not forget the birds.

At the same time, the blackberries went wild. Literally. I have cut them back and dug up new plants several times. Cucumbers abound. Arugula sings its symphony. The carrots are fat and rich. I could go on. But what hits me this year is the contrast between disappointment and satisfaction; the moments of wondering why I do this at all, pitched against the incredible feeling of gratitude when I bag up four bags of produce filled with veggies, fruits and herbs, for our local food pantry. When neighbors come by, they tell me they've been feasting on the blackberries. Who wouldn't?

This is the rhythm of the Elul and High Holy Day season, the time when we take stock. How many things did not turn out the way we wanted them to this year? How many grapes did we plant that turned sour? (Most of mine have been chomped on by critters.) What do we do? Do we become depressed or disheartened? Angry? Do we give up? Or do we plant more seeds?

Perhaps we do all of the above. Perhaps we need to feel the grief and disappointment of our losses and our failures. Perhaps we need to feel the frustration. But Elul and the High Holy Day season tell us this is only part of the process. For us to fulfill the essence of this time of year demands that we somehow find a way to get to the other side. Maybe that includes a change of project, or maybe it means finding a new way in the same project.

I sometimes think that it is all the difficulties involved in growing food that inspired our Jewish ancestry to move away from its agricultural roots. This was revived, however, with the kibbutz movement in Israel's pioneer

days, and is experiencing further revival all over the Jewish world today. As we demand more sustainable lifestyles and healthier, more affordable food, we are revitalizing our synagogue and neighborhood networks to feed ourselves and the hungry around us.

Even as I write this, I observe a critter that has found her way into the grapevines. I go over to see the culprit. A squirrel. She takes her time untangling herself from the vines, climbs up the adjacent telephone pole, and when far enough away from me to rest in safety, turns. I see the bulge in her mouth. She takes out her dessert—a nice, fat purple grape, and eats it in front of me.

Not all of our plans will fruit the way we hope or plan. But this is the season to harvest the best of our works this year, and to plan and plant again for a fuller, richer, more bountiful harvest in the year to come.

May your Elul and the year to come be rich with new ideas and renewed energy to plant and see them bear fruit.

## Elements

Judith Felsen

You gave us wind  
we hid from it  
You granted us rain  
we wasted it  
You made us soil  
we tainted it  
You gave us air  
we polluted it  
You showed us fire  
we abused it.

Our response  
has been destructive  
Your response  
has been corrective.  
You have given us directive  
let us use it.

## Wasting Food ✕

Scott Lewis

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.” (Deuteronomy 20:19)

The mitzvah of *bal taschit* (do not waste) helps frame Jewish environmental concerns. While most Jewish environmental activists recognize the importance of *bal taschit* for prohibiting wasting energy and polluting the Earth, we might easily overlook the commandment’s important connections to food waste.

Our sages understood this link. The Rambam, for example, pointed out that the Biblical passage was not limited to wartime actions:

“And not only trees, but whoever breaks vessels, tears clothing, wrecks that which is built up, stops fountains, or wastes food in a destructive manner, transgresses the commandment of *bal taschit*...” (Maimonides, Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Positive Commandment #6).

About 30-40 percent of food that is produced is thrown away, a shocking figure in the face of worldwide suffering due to malnutrition and starvation. The scale of food waste also has global environmental implications. Clearly, we are squandering the energy that goes into the production and transportation of food that is later thrown away. But did you know that when food waste is buried in landfills, it creates significant quantities of greenhouse gases that exacerbate climate change? The authors of the book *Drawdown* enumerate the top solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and list the reduction of food waste as its third most important solution, stating, “Ranked with countries, food would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases globally, right behind the United States and China.”<sup>1</sup>

Much of the food waste in developed countries occurs after the food has been delivered to retailers. Stores often throw away any “ugly fruit,” thinking that a bruise may make it unacceptable to consumers, and they toss food items based on the “freshness” date, even though many foods remain edible long past those dates.

Surprisingly, the amount of food that we consumers throw away may be greater than waste at the retail level. Some of us forget to use what we’ve purchased, bury it in the freezer, or simply purchase too much to use in the first place and it spoils.

I find myself guilty of being part of this problem. So this year, my *t’shuvah* will include reflecting on my food waste sins: the spaghetti sauce I left on the stove, the pickles languishing in the back of the fridge, and the beautiful Russian black bread that hardened into a brick before I could enjoy it. My *t’shuvah* will also include a vow to do a better job of following the *bal taschit* mitzvah, especially as it applies to food.

<sup>1</sup> Hawken, Paul, Editor. *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*. Penguin Books, 2018, p.42.



## Elul 15

## Elul Joy and Love

David Arfa

I'd like to speak about joy and love. I know that Elul is upon us; a time for relentless self-reflection, spurred on by the blasts of shofar. And yet, the rabbis in their complexity have added another dimension to Elul: love.

Remember the acronym for Elul? It's from the Song of Songs 6:3, *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*—I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. Reciprocal love is spiraling back and forth right here in Elul along with our lists of how we missed the mark. Isn't this worthy of attention? What might it mean?

Here's where it takes me. "Rabbi Akiva said that if all of Tanach (the five books plus all the prophets plus all the writings) is Holy, then the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies!" (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5) The Song of Songs is sensuous and loving, filled with tension, desire and yearning; lovers are seeking fulfillment in gardens and fields on every page. We all know that steamy passion can easily burn and destroy, and yet, Rabbi Akiva holds this up as the archetypal place of holiness. Blessed be.

The Song of Songs reminds us on every page that loving, sensual energy is paramount in all of our relationships—with each other, the natural world, and the Source of Life. Seeking love yearns for the reward of receiving love; and then I feel fully me, fully seen, feeling even fuller than me! I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. Is it possible that *t'shuvah* can inspire us to reclaim this loving joy in all of our life and remind us that this is our birthright?

I heard that the great psychoanalyst Milton Erickson tells a story of a mean nasty man who never smiled.<sup>1</sup> He became thunderstruck and lovesick with the new school teacher in town. He asked to see her formally, and she said, only if you clean up your ways and try to smile once in awhile. The goofiest grin came over his face, kindness filled his heart and he never looked back. They lived happily ever after, smiling and holding hands like young fools until the end of their days. Here, the power of love drives *t'shuvah*.

Of course, the allure of romanticism is just that fantasy of "happily ever after." Deep down, we all know the sequence: Beauty meets Beast, Beast turns into Prince through love, Beauty marries Prince, Prince turns back into

<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw, John. *Creating Love: A New Way of Understanding Our Most Important Relationships*. Random House Publishing Group, 2013, p. 178.

Beast. (In all fairness, Beauty has her transformations too!) Undoubtedly, the mean nasty man of Erickson's story slips and falls too. Perhaps this is why the linkage with Song of Songs and Elul is so very critical. Life is also Kafka, not just Disney. Here, *t'shuvah* can be our remedy, reminding us that we can actively participate in the work of turning our sense of "unlove" back into "love."

Rabbi Akiva is saying that this great love is our birthright, there nothing to earn. Contrary to Hallmark cards, this is very different than our relationships in this world, inside our families. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. Our very natural relationship with the world and God itself is to love and be loved in return merely because we are alive! This love, is much more holistic love that applies to our entire being. Forgetfulness of the birthright of joyful loving is the way of our world. Much happens every day that blurs our vision. From ordinary, imperfect attachment in childhood all the way through adulthood.

*T'shuvah* is like clearing our vision. *T'shuvah* helps me learn the ways that I actively block this joyous knowing; the many ways that I choose judgmentalness, pick myself in anxious worry and bewitch myself with my fears. *T'shuvah* shows me that by tending to my relationships with kindness and care, I can enter the apple orchard of love once again, to know love again, to be re-inspired to grow love and trust once again my passions, desires, and hopes for my partner, my life, my world and my God. After all, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

## Reflections on the Seasons of My Mourning

Leslie Rosenblatt

Almost a year ago, my husband Marty succumbed to the ravages of cancer, leaving us on a fall evening in October. Although this event was unexpected, we had been hopeful that he'd live longer with hospice in place. We had no idea how very sick he was and how soon the end would come.

He came home from the hospital for the last time on Yom Kippur. Just days before, we had sat for a festive meal at our dining room table. Marty was anxious to teach Nina and Gideon, our then four-and-a-half-year-old twin grandchildren, about those things that distinguished the Jewish Calendar from the more usual Gregorian calendar.

"The Jewish Calendar was determined in large measure by the phases of the moon," Marty said. "Many of our holidays come with the full or new moon."

Or is climate change more of a special case, a societal imbalance demanding intervention? The *Mishnah Brurah* (242:2) in the 19th century recounts a time when fish sellers were raising their prices before Shabbat to exorbitant amounts. He ruled that in such a case, the town should impose a decree and have no one purchase fish for several weeks until prices declined again.

Or is climate change a personal moral problem? Of a sort that even if we can't find a technical prohibition against emitting too much carbon, it might be *hayav be'dinei shamayim* (liable in the heavenly courts)?

I often feel tempted see climate change as something new and unprecedented. This can contribute to a sense of fear and desperation, a panic that can sometimes lead us to reckless choices in forming our long-term strategies. As a popular saying goes: "life is very short, so we must move very slowly."

Our *mesorah* (tradition) offers deep wisdom about encouraging individuals to behave certain ways to solve communal problems; we can use that wisdom to guide us in this new, old problem of climate change.

## Elul 16

### Returning to Diversity

Michael M. Cohen

The opening chapters of Genesis not only include the account of the creation of the Earth but over and over tell us of the importance of diversity. All of creation is called "good," reminding us of the value of the multiplicity of the world that we live in (Genesis 1:25). The text also teaches us, by describing everything that is created before humans as "good," that all things have intrinsic value in and of themselves beyond any value that we may place on them. Once humans are created, "very good" is the adjective applied by the text (Genesis 1:31). An anthropocentric reading of the text would say this is because the world was created for our needs, and once we are in place we can do what we want with the world. A biocentric reading of the text says that "very good" only means that creation as described in the text was complete, and that we humans were the last piece of the biological puzzle.

This reading is supported by the reality that if humans were to disappear from the face of the Earth all that had been created before us would go on quite well, actually better, without our presence. However, if a stratum of the diversity of life that had been created before humans were to disappear, we and all that had been created after it, would no longer exist. In a bit of Heavenly humor on survival of the fittest, it is actually the smallest and least physically strong species, like the butterflies, bees, and amoebas, which hold the survival of the world in place. Unlike the other species of the planet, we have the power to commit biocide if we do not protect and preserve those smaller forms of life.

The importance of diversity is emphasized a few chapters later, in the story of Noah, where Noah is told to bring pairs of each species onto the ark so that after the flood they can replenish the Earth (Genesis 6:19). After the flood, God places a rainbow in the sky as a reminder to never again destroy the world. It is both a symbol and a metaphor: a single ray of light refracted through water, the basic source of all life, produces a prism of diverse colors.

Immediately following the story of Noah we read about The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The whole account takes up only nine verses. The conventional reading is that its message is one against diversity; the babel of languages at the end of the story is understood as a punishment. The Israeli

philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz presents a different reading of the text.<sup>1</sup> For Leibowitz, Babel represents a fascist totalitarian state where the aims of the state are valued more than the individual. In such a society, diverse thought and expression is frowned upon. The text tells us that everyone “had the same language, and the same words.” (Genesis 11:1)

We read in the genealogies that link the Noah and stories that the “nations were divided by their lands, each one with its own language, according to their clans, by their nations.” (Genesis 10:5) Leibowitz sees the babel of languages not as a punishment but a corrective return to how things had been and were supposed to be.

That is still our challenge today. Diversity is not a liberal value; it is the way of the world. We know that the environment outside of our human lives is healthier with greater diversity, coral reefs and rainforests being prime examples. It is also true for humanity. We are better off because of the different religions, nations, cultures, and languages that comprise the human family.

But as that human family, we are shattering the web of diversity so essential to our environment and our lives. Moses, we are taught, had to respond to the shattered tablets that lay at his feet. At that point, it would have been easier for him to just walk away. But he did not. At the age of 80 he turned around, modelling *t'shuvah*, and climbed back up the mountain to get a new set of tablets. Like Moses we cannot afford to walk away from our task, no matter how difficult it may seem. We must return the diversity of the environment back to how it is supposed to be.

## Rainbows

Margaret Frisch Klein

There are many songs about rainbows. One I learned at Girl Scout camp said that I could even sing a rainbow!. Since that summer, rainbows have had a special place in my heart.

Learning the story of Noah in a *parshat hashavua* class in college was one of those moments. In order for a rainbow to appear, there has to be a perfect balance between sun and rain. Without that balance, no rainbow. Without G-d and a certain balance, no world. For me, in that instant, G-d was perfection. So what would be more appropriate than G-d choosing the

rainbow as the sign that G-d would never destroy the world again by flood. Rain is good. Too much rain leads to flooding and destruction.

Rainbows have appeared at my daughter's Bat Mitzvah, my daughter's high school graduation, my installation as rabbi. They are often a quiet, private reminder that the world is good and G-d is in charge. An almost private blessing, usually when I need that reassurance the most. What I have discovered is that you can't go chasing them. You need to be surprised by them.

One Rosh Hodesh Av, a day when we begin to feel the sadness of the impending Tisha B'Av, I was surprised by a rainbow. It was particularly surprising because the night before I had gone looking for one and didn't find it. Remember, it is about that perfect balance. This one was a beautiful, exquisite, full, double rainbow over Lake Charlevoix, in northern Michigan. You could actually see both ends reflecting in the water. Now the slogan for Charlevoix is, “Once in a blue moon there is a Charlevoix.” This was not a blue moon. This was even rarer. Cars stopped on both sides of the road to take pictures. Everyone said, “Wow.” It was a holy moment—regardless of religious tradition.


Sometimes you can capture such images on your camera. Other times you cannot. Sometimes you are surprised. On a hiking trip to Starved Rock State Park to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, the trail sign said, “Return.” Perfect for Rosh Hashanah, I thought, and its themes of *t'shuvah*, return. I snapped a picture. When I returned, I found that the sunlight had caused a rainbow in the picture just over the trail sign.

Each time rainbows appear, they are a reminder of G-d's covenant with us. Each time, they are an opportunity to recite the blessing, “*zocher habrit*,” that G-d also remembers the covenant with us, is faithful and keeps G-d's promise. Each time, I wonder how I keep my end of that covenant. How do I make good on the promise to be a partner in G-d's creation, to never destroy the world? How do I leave this world better for my children and my children's children? The rainbow, while offering that reassurance of G-d's love and promise, also demands an answer to that essential question.

*Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-heinu melech ha'olam zocher ha'brit v'ne'eman bivrito v'kayam b'ma'amaro.* Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, who remembers in faithfulness the covenant and the promise to keep the covenant forever.

<sup>1</sup> Leibowitz, Yeshayahu. *Notes and Remarks on the Weekly Parashah*; Israel: Chemed Books, 1990, pp. 17-20.

## Elul 17



## Sunrise, Sunset—Evening the Frayed Edges of Our Lives

Jeff Foust

Sunrise and sunset are special liminal times calling forth awe and mindful awakening to spiritual realities we otherwise might totally miss. It's no accident that the main traditional prayer times for Jews are sunrise and sunset.

This simple profound reality is especially moving me this year as I prepare for the *T'shuvah* (Realignment/Renewal) work of Elul before Rosh HaShanah. I've been reflecting on a powerful liturgical adaptation by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael<sup>1</sup> of the opening evening prayer *Ma'ariv Aravim*. She calls it "Evening the Evenings." It combines interpretive English with the traditional Hebrew. What especially moves me is the chorus: "Evening the evenings; evening the frayed edges of our lives; *Ma'ariv aravim*...; amen." The key for me is that "*Ma'ariv aravim*" refers both to "The One Who brings on the evening" and to the Creator of the heavenly vaults of light and darkness (*Arav* can be a heavenly vault or a containing boundary) which almost come together at the time of sunrise and sunset (in Hebrew called "*Bein HaArbayyim*," Between the Heavenly Vaults of Light and Darkness).

When I hear and experience "Evening the evenings," I experience the light of "*Bein HaArbayyim*" touching the shadows and ragged edges first between the heavenly vaults of day and night at sunset, and then touching all the shadowy, dark, constricted, frayed places of the world, including in my own self and my entire bodyheartmindspirit. I actually tremble and shake in the original sense of *havdim* (the tremblers), but it feels good because I know that the path to *t'shuvah* and renewal is in letting my frayed, shadowy dark place be evened out by G!D's light and love.

With G!D's help and our sincere efforts, may our Elul journeys be enlightening and renewing.

## Reconnecting with the Lands of My Birth

Lawrence Troster

On a vacation some time ago to my home town of Toronto, I drove around the countryside and saw the many places I knew so well from childhood. As I drove, I reflected on how the landscape in which I lived affected who I am and how I see the world. The Toronto area was covered by glaciers over 10,000 years ago, and the land still is shaped by that ancient event: spoon-shaped hills called drumlins, ridges called eskers, which are remains of the river beds that flowed from the retreating ice. And lakes. I spent many of my summers at camp in Northern Ontario beyond the glacial till where the major geological feature is the Canadian Shield. It has some of the oldest rock in the world—more than 3.96 billion years old—and covers some 5,000,000 square miles of Canada and the United States. The glaciers carved out more than 250,000 lakes from the Shield, and many of my summers were spent in the rock, water and forest of that landscape. In this world, I had some of my deepest and most important spiritual experiences in the Canadian Shield.

When I moved to New Jersey over 20 years ago, I became part of a different geological area: the Piedmont Province formed of volcanic basalt over 400 million years ago. And now I live in Pennsylvania, where I am in a different kind of geological formation: the rolling hills and valleys of metamorphic rock formed during the Precambrian period some one billion years ago.

What does all this mean for me? The food that I ate and which formed me was grown in the glacial soil of Southern Ontario and is still, so to speak, bred in my bones. How did this land also affect my mental perspective on the world? I thought of these things as I saw the familiar ridge of the Niagara Escarpment over where the mighty Niagara Falls is found. For the first time in my life, I took the boat that brought me close to the Falls. I felt the spray and saw the wonder of those thundering waters.

In this month of Elul when we are supposed to engage in *heshbon nefesh*, to take stock of our lives and actions from the past year, I believe that we should also think about the places where we were formed and where we now live. Forgetting these landscapes is a kind of sin. We must remember the rocks, the soils, the water, the flora and the fauna and what they imparted and continue to impart to our lives in real concrete ways. Each one is different, each one has special qualities that we are mostly not conscious of. So as part of our spiritual accounting we should try to bring these places out of our unconsciousness into our waking thoughts. Maybe this process will teach us to understand how we are of the Earth and not just the consumers of earth things. In a real way, as we live our lives, we are reborn from the places of the Earth on which we dwell.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.shechinah.com](http://www.shechinah.com) for more of Rabbi Raphael's work.