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Yom Kippur 5782/September 16, 2021
Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills

May Our Light Cleave Like the Dawn

אָז יִבְקַע כְּשֹׁחַר אוֹרָךְ וְאַרְכָּתֶךָ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח
Then your light will cleave like the dawn and your healing will spring up quickly.¹

I love these hopeful words from Isaiah; they are embroidered on my *tallit*. Before preparing for these High Holy Days, however, I hadn't explored the word for "healing" in this verse: *aruchah*. We are more accustomed to the word *refuah*, or the phrase *refuah shleimah*, "a complete healing." But *aruchah* is unusual. It appears only 6 times in the Bible. Metaphorically, *aruchah* refers to the new flesh that grows at the wounded spot. It is the tender skin revealed when a scab falls off. *Aruchah* also shares a root with the Hebrew word for long or lengthy.

This has been a long year of waiting for healing.
Scabbed.
Fragile.
Fractured.
Wounded, we have gathered together on this day, in-person and online.

II. אָז יִבְקַע כְּשֹׁחַר אוֹרָךְ וְאַרְכָּתֶךָ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח
These words are from this morning's haftarah: Isaiah's critique of the Yom Kippur practices of his time.

It includes this well-known admonishment:

Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?...
And for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast?..
No, this is the fast *I* desire:
To unlock the bonds of wickedness...
To set free those who have been crushed...
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own kin.

*Then like the dawn your light will cleave
And your healing will spring up quickly.*

¹ Isaiah 58:8.

Then,
when you call,
God will answer;
When you cry,
God will say:
הִנְנִי
Here I am.²

And here *we* are. It is so good to see you and to know that so many others who could not risk being here are with us online. Back on Friday night, July 2nd, which feels like a very distant memory, I thought we'd be seeing much more of each other. Perhaps you were here on that beautiful evening: For the first time since March 2020, we had re-opened our campus for Qabbalat Shabbat, and we began to reopen ourselves to one another. Believing we had emerged from the darkness of this pandemic, we recited *birkat hagomeil*: the blessing for having passed through danger. But now once again, it is risky to enter this sanctuary. To come together in our synagogue.

According to the Mishnah, 7 days before he entered *his* synagogue on Yom Kippur, the High Priest was placed in a type of quarantine.³ He was separated from his family and brought from his house to a room in the Temple designated specifically for him.⁴

The night before Yom Kippur—last night—the High Priest was kept occupied to prevent him from sleeping, or so the Mishnah states. If he was a scholar, he would teach Torah. If he was not a scholar, Torah scholars would teach Torah to him.⁵

During that long night of study, the High Priest was reminded that the Torah reveals its wisdom through binary pairings that communicate an encompassing totality.

Heaven and earth.

God and human.

Curse and blessing.

Usually, when you don't understand one concept in the Torah, you just need to read more, to read further, until you encounter the first idea's pair, it's clarifying complement: a second concept serving to define the first, while the first does the same for the second.

According to Genesis, the whole world was in disorder—*tohu v'vohu*—tumult, but then God came along and made separations. God made pairs:

water/land,

night/day,

separate but bound entities that together comprise a deep, coherent structure judged as “good” and “very good.”

² Isaiah 58: 5-9.

³ M. Yoma 1:1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ M. Yoma 1:7.

This is a Priestly worldview.

The priests had this thing about pairs:

Kosher/Treif.

Pure/Impure.

Sin/Atonement.

Throughout the week when he was separated from his family, the High Priest would have boned up on this expiation ritual for Yom Kippur: a pair of goats, one was consecrated to God, sacrificed on the altar, its *basar*, its flesh consumed by the priests. And one was made the scapegoat upon which the High Priest will lay the transgressions of the people and set it free to wander in the wilderness.

To see the worldview of the Priestly writers of the Torah is to see much—not all—but much of our world and so much of ourselves. It is to see too the coherence of the ten-day period that we are concluding today and our purpose in gathering here and online. For in this totality ritual is the binary pair of story, one the clarifying complement for the other. If we can better understand our stories, than we can better understand who and where we are, and what precisely we are doing together on this day.

Here's a one-verse story:

It says in the Book of Genesis,

וַיִּזְבֹּב אִישׁ אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אִמּוֹ וַיִּדְבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ

An individual leaves his parents and cleaves to another. One does not become one with another; one cleaves to another.

The verse continues:

וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

And they become—it's not one flesh (as it is often translated); *basar* doesn't mean flesh in this instance—here *basar* likely means “kin” or better, “relationship.”⁶

וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

The two become one relationship.

In this conception two separate entities—two individuals—cannot become one.

Instead, they can bind themselves together, cleave to one another, be the clarifying complement for the other.

In Judaism, relationships reveal wisdom through binary pairings that communicate an encompassing totality.

Without injustice, there's no justice.

No sanctity without mundanity.

No Shabbat without the other six days.

There's you and there's me, there's me and there's you, and we need each other in order to fully comprehend who each of us is.

⁶ Concise HALOT, p. 51

When the light of dawn cleaved the darkness on the morning of Yom Kippur, the High Priest knew it was going to be the most exhausting, most dangerous day of his year. It is a day for communal recalibrations and for new beginnings.

He will lead rituals and make offerings designed to ensure for another year, the continual outflow of *qedushah*, of holiness, from the epicenter of his community, the Temple.

And he will enter its core, the Holy of Holies: a room designated specifically for God; its entrance screened off and obscured by incense. It's a small space God's abode on earth, into which the High Priest, and only the High Priest, would enter just once a year, on Yom Kippur, to atone for his people and to pray for their welfare in the new year.

The Holy of Holies was a dangerous place to enter. To safeguard himself and to prevent impurities from contaminating the Temple's most sacred precinct, he will wear his Personal Protective Equipment: A layer of white linen and over that, the golden garments of the High Priest. He dresses in the garments and a rope is then attached to his ankle so that should he die in the Holy of Holies, he could be pulled out.⁷ After he sanctifies his hands and his feet,⁸ with hope and fear the High Priest delicately moves aside the curtain that screened off the Holy of Holies to see if God was there. And then, he carefully goes in to draw as close to God as humanly possible.

Ten days ago, we read a story about making offerings and drawing closer to God. In this way the *Aqedah* is a spoiler: the Binding of Isaac binds together Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, because what we read last week we enact ritualistically today.

After these things, the story begins, **וַיִּסְּאֵה אֱתֶּם אֱבְרָהָם**, God tested Abraham. Realize that the language of *nisah* is different from the language of *mitzvah*: testing is not commanding. Testing is testing. You can walk away from a test. Yes: this is a story of a father willingly offering up his beloved son for sacrifice, and yes, it does seem that they sacrificed children in ancient Israel. Child sacrifice: the *Aqedah* is partially about that. Mostly though the Binding of Isaac is a story about choice and risk, relationships and blessing.

For Abraham, the story presents a moment of choice and ultimate commitment. Commitment means to give something up; to say no as you are saying "yes." We all know that. We know too that commitment entails risk.

And I need to say a word now about sacrifice, so we can understand better what we are doing together on this day. To understand that, you need to know this:

In the sacrificial system, the offering—a ram, a goat—is a representation of the offerer. When the priests arranged the parts of an animal on an altar, they placed them in a pyramidal mound with the animal's procreative organs and its intestines at the summit.⁹ The Bible locates the emotions and intellect in the innermost parts of a body: thinking happened in the heart; compassion, according to the Bible, resides in the bowels. Now we know as moderns that we think with our brains. But like our biblical ancestors, we know too that we also make decisions in

⁷ See Zohar Vol. 16 *Emor* (102a), Section 34.

⁸ M Yoma 3:4

⁹ See Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 78–81.

our guts, so the animal's innards exposed at the top of the sacrificial mound, represent the innermost part of a person: their life force, their fears, thoughts and aspirations.

The *Aqedah* is a truly dramatic story, because commitment and risk are taken to an extreme when Abraham offers up, in biblical terms, the fruit of his loins: his child who, as with our children, represents his most closely held aspirations and fears. It is a truly dramatic story; but sometimes what we read is a *traumatic* story. And in our important sensitivity for the feelings of the characters, the outcome of the story becomes obscured: Abraham offers everything, yet he loses nothing. He loses nothing and gains so much. By choosing to not walk away from risking commitment, Abraham secures a blessing for him and for his progeny. Risk intertwined with reward: that's what covenant is.

The Binding of Isaac takes place in a particular location. After sacrificing a ram instead of his son, the story states, "Abraham named that place *Adonai-yireh*, from which comes the present saying, בְּתֵר יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה, "On the mount of God, where God is seen."¹⁰ Scholarship reveals that *Adona-yireh* is another name for *Yerushalayim*: Jerusalem. The story of the Binding of Isaac, therefore, is set in Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount: *Har Adonai*, God's mountain. Even more precisely, it takes place where the Holy of Holies would be built: *The place where God is seen*.

The *Aqedah* then is part back-story explaining, why Jerusalem? Why was the Temple built there? How did that place become the central location in Jewish history and myth?

There's a midrash that clarifies this scholarship. It reads:

The land of Israel is at the center of the world, and Jerusalem at the center of the land of Israel. The Temple, at the center of Jerusalem and the Holy of Holies at the center of the Temple. The ark is at the center of the Holy of Holies, and the foundation stone, from which emerged the entire world, is in front of the Holy of Holies.¹¹

The midrash suggests that the binding of Isaac occurred at the mythic epicenter of the world, the binding point of everything: where creation began, where God and humans meet. In the Holy of Holies: *That's* where Abraham made *his* offering. The midrash also elucidates further the Priestly view of the world. For them, the Temple and the world existed in an intimate and intrinsic relationship: the two projects could not be disengaged.¹² Professor Jon Levenson wrote that about ancient understandings of the Temple, but that's what I'd say about Beth Am and about our world, too. What happens here within our congregation is intrinsically linked to what happens beyond it. Our temple and our world: a binary pairing, one the clarifying complement for the other.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav used to say: Everywhere I go, I go to Jerusalem. Metaphorically, today we get to go to Jerusalem. Our synagogue, like all synagogues on this day, representative of the Temple that once stood in Jerusalem. And this outdoor chapel? Today it is the Holy of

¹⁰ Gen. 22:14

¹¹ Buber, Midrash Tanhumah: Qedoshim 10.

¹² Jon Levenson, "The Temple and the World," 288.

Holies: the binding point of hope and fear, our past and our future, of risk and reward, of who we are and who we want to be.

In our Jewish world everyone can enter the Holy of Holies, the place where God may be seen. Our power here equivalent, each of our voices, equivalent, on this day, in seeking blessing for ourselves and for our community. We all have equal access to the Divine.

And more than on any other Yom Kippur in our lifetimes, entering our Holy of Holies on this day entails risk. For those of us who are able to be here—and for those who are not here with us—our experience quietly reverberates with the trepidation, and the hope, conveyed by the stories of Abraham, and of the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies in *his* temple. For them, God was an external reality: the One who gives life and the One who takes it away. For me, and I imagine for many of us, divinity is discovered within; sanctity revealed through our human relationships, through being in each other's presence. Whereas the high priest donned his PPE to protect himself from God; on this day, to draw close to one another here in our Holy of Holies, we wear our PPE to protect ourselves from ourselves, and we don't need to look past our masked covered noses to see a potent symbol of our capacity to harm *and* to heal.

And here we are.

In-person and online, we are together.

Survivors of a year of *Tovu va 'vohu*, of tumult.

Wounded from this grinding pandemic.

Made fragile from an historic spike in antisemitism.

Still scabbed from an insurrection in our capital.

From twenty years of a failed war, we are scarred.

And we are here: gathered together in a synagogue inextricably linked to the world. Although we have done a very good job preventing Covid-19 from spreading in the midst of our community, other societal ills have penetrated to the core of this House of the People. Our relationships further attenuated by the polarization and misinformation that has cleaved America and, like incense in Jerusalem's Temple, obscure our vision of one another, making it difficult to comprehend who each of us is.

But today is for recalibrations and new beginnings, a sacred occasion to re-covenant with one another and with God. To cleave ourselves from the mistakes of the past year and to cleave to one another. And in a few moments, we will read a haftarah that critiques our power to harm and encourages us to harness our god-like capacity to heal, to bring order to the *tohu va 'vohu* in our world.

אִי בִקַּע כְּשֹׁחַר אֹרֶךְ וְאֶרְכָּתָּהּ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח

These hopeful words of Isaiah are the conclusion of a conditional, if-then statement.

This is Isaiah's "then" to these well-known "ifs":

If you unlock the bonds of wickedness

If you share your bread with the hungry...

If you house the homeless and clothe the naked...

But there is one more "if" leading to Isaiah's "then."

And it took the experience of a pandemic.

It took more than a year of not fully being able to see so many of you in your entirety, in your three dimensions, and for you to not to fully see me in mine.

It took a recognition of abrasions I may have caused to any of you during my first year as your Senior Rabbi. It took all of that, and the need to write this sermon, to clearly see for the first time the ultimate “if,” the three-word statement that immediately precedes the “then” embroidered on my *tallit*.

Three words:

מְבַשֵּׂרָךְ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם

Do not hide from your *basar*.

As in the one verse story from Genesis that I told to you at the beginning of this sermon, the word *basar* does not mean flesh here either. It means “kin,” or better, “relationship.”

Do not hide from or ignore our relationships: for we need each other in order to fully comprehend, and to discover, who we are as both individuals and as a community.

In our tradition, our sacred stories are the clarifying complements to our rituals. Ten days ago, we read a story of risk, sacrifice, and blessing.

The word for sacrifice in Hebrew is *korban* which doesn’t actually mean to give something up. *Korban* means to draw close, to make an offering that draws you closer to God and God closer to you. When Abraham stood where the Holy of Holies would be built, he drew closer to God by wordlessly offering up on an altar a representation of his greatest aspirations and his fears. After he offered up a goat on the altar in the Temple and sent off into the wilderness the scapegoat, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and risked drawing close to God in order to speak words seeking expiation and blessing for his people.

And as we have gathered together on-line and in person in our Holy of Holies, how may we as a community draw closer to God on this day of new beginnings? Isaiah tells us: we start with our kin, with our relationships, and risk drawing closer to one another through expressions of our vulnerability. We speak aloud to one another our fears, our transgressions. We draw closer to each other through our heartfelt offerings of words, and we risk on this day the articulation of our aspirations.

So these are my aspirations for us as we enter this new year. They are words that I first shared in writing to you as I began my tenure last summer; but after these many months of waiting for healing, of yearning for an end to this present darkness, they seem ever more vital.

May we, as a synagogue-community ever aspiring to sanctity, strive to do better, to do more. Let us channel our learning and our abundant resources into a stream of justice: a mighty river of compassion and righteous action that sweeps away dams of racism and bigotry, and engenders, in the Bay Area, a restorative floodplain of shared prosperity and of equal opportunity.

And when we do that,

Then our light will cleave like the dawn and our healing will spring up quickly.
Then, when we call,
God will answer;
God will say:

הִנְנִי

I am here.