

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Kol Nidre 5776

Weeks ago, Rabbi Nathan and Rabbi Buck-Yael and I were reviewing the machzor in preparation for the holidays, and we came to the end of Unetaneh Tokef. Most famous for its refrain, *בראש השנה יכתבון, וביום צום כיפור יחתמון*, On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall pass, and who shall be born, who shall live, and who shall die. It concludes, *ותשובה, ותפילה, וצדקה מעבירן את רוע הגזרה*—repentance, prayer and charity can avert the severity of the decree.

To me, this prayer contains the most intense words in our entire liturgy—and because we say them only during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we never get used to saying them—they pack an emotional punch each time.

Following those powerful words, it can be easy to miss what comes next: “Each person’s origin is dust, and end is dust. We spend our life seeking our daily bread. We are compared to broken pottery, withered grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a dream that flies away.”

Our liturgy seems to be telling us: our existence is so temporary, so insignificant, so minuscule...we barely leave a ripple.

And not only that. One way to read this prayer is that our best days are behind us: the flower was beautiful—now it is shriveled...the pottery was whole, now it is broken.

And obviously this resonates. I feel sometimes so wistful looking into the past, that I’ll never be as fit, or as carefree, or, obviously, as young as I once was. Many in this community—those here tonight and those who couldn’t make it here this year—are frustrated that their bodies don’t work like they used to, that their minds don’t remember what they used to. There are regrets that life now is so much more complicated than it used to be. We feel voids left by those we have lost over the years.

As my great-grandmother, who lived to be 106 years old, used to say, “It’s not like it used to be.”

Sometimes we feel this only in retrospect— “you don’t know what you got til it’s gone.” It reminds me of when people often say to college students, or new parents: “Enjoy this time! These are the best years of your life!” It’s not easy to enjoy it all. My wife Tammy will tell you the story: while in Target, all 3 kids of our kids kvetching simultaneously, two women smile knowingly at her and say, “Enjoy it all! It’s gone in an instant.” We often only realize we were in our prime, after that time has passed.

We are withered grass, broken pottery, a shriveled flower. But the question in a comparison is always: compared to what? In the machzor, those comparisons conclude with the phrase, “And You—are the Sovereign living God, ever-present.” Compared to God, we are indeed, like a passing shadow.

But it really depends on what level of detail you’re looking at it — like those pictures where it looks different as you focus your eyes differently. Zoomed out, compared to God, we’re nothing, and we need reminders of this from time to time.

But if you zoom in more closely, you see: Here I Am! Here We Are! The grass may have withered, and maybe it used to be greener, but it is still there. So many of us have had great-

grandparents, grand-parents, parents who have been well past their prime. But their impact was still powerful on you, and on the world, oftentimes, even though they weren't at their prettiest or strongest, richest or busiest. We are both tiny and insignificant and breathtakingly significant—we are humility, and chutzpah, at the same time, here to make our mark with as much time as we are blessed to receive.

And as a community, in the life of the universe, we are nothing. But zoomed in, in our lives, in the lives of our children, and our children's children, what a privilege, what a momentous opportunity we have here at Kol Rinah. At Rosh Hashanah, everyone was invited into this sanctuary to hear the shofar together. What a perfect start to this year of building community together—our theme this year—as we all heard together our collective wakeup call. This year we will be challenging each other to build stronger, more inclusive community, to know each other and care about each other. To love your neighbor as you love yourself, you must first know and love yourself. This year is for *our* community, to share sacred experiences and sacred conversations together.

This year is only 10 days old — but I want to offer hopes, not concrete plans, for our next several years together. Next year we'll start looking *beyond* ourselves, to see how we can make St. Louis a more just and peaceful place to live, work and raise a family. We will be working on identifying and building ways to be deeply engaged in the communities which surround us and in which we are embedded. And I want some of what we do to be part of creating an ongoing relationship—not drop off help, not one-time help, but ongoing relationships with people and other communities.

The following year, let's focus on prayer, tefillah, worship, davening—whatever you call it, and I'll call it tefillah for now, tefillah is one of the core experiences and purposes for Jewish community, for Kol Rinah. Let's spend a year immersed in prayer, thinking about new and old ways to reinspire, invigorate and reinvent the prayer experience here in ways that speak to us today in the 21st century, yet are consonant and consistent with the best of traditional Jewish prayer.

The next year, we will up our game when it comes to engagement with Torah and the study of Torah. What kinds of new ways are there to study Torah? How can we do that intensely and communally so that the Torah we study changes us, and so that we become a congregation of learners, so that we can be inspired by Torah and let Torah inspire our action in the world?

The next year, Israel. A year devoted to deep engagement with Israel—learning, celebrating, challenging, discussing, visiting Israel, and we could throw Hebrew in there too.

Public Service Announcement: Speaking of Israel... This year, we're going to Israel too, February 22-March 6. 12 days. You want to be on this trip. We're going to eat well, and drink well, and see Israel like you've never seen it before, if you've already been there. We're going to the highlights, but also we're going off the beaten track a little too. And there's no better way to build community than to travel together. If you feel like you don't know enough people, or you want to make some new friends, please talk to me or Karen Rader, who's been an incredible partner in planning this trip. I've been on a lot of trips to Israel, and I've never heard anyone say, "I wish I hadn't gone." Come to Israel with Kol Rinah this winter. You won't regret it. If not now, when?

Back to your regularly scheduled sermon. Including this year, I sketched out just now five years of plans. And they are subject to change! Some of you are itching to start the Israel conversation this minute. Others want to start the prayer stuff tonight. Others of us wonder why we're here at all now, and would we not be better off feeding the hungry tonight instead of feeling so stuffed ourselves right now.

Every year we should be davening and feeding and loving Israel and building community and studying Torah. And we will. But each year we'll focus, to really develop how we do that thing here at Kol Rinah in ways that work for us and speak to us, creating and transforming our culture year by year. I also know that sustainable change happens gradually. Let's see ourselves not as a passing shadow, but as a house, a home, that takes years to become its best self, and that is always being improved, redecorated, reorganized, revitalized, to meet the changing needs of a family over time.

As many of you know, Kol Rinah has been on a quest for a new home since even before its inception. We are getting closer to completing that quest. We have a contract to trade spaces with a church in Clayton. The holy work of building and planning for a bright future is ahead of us. What an exciting possibility, to have a new home for our new community, one that can meet our needs and embody our values and position us for growth and success. This will be an exciting and complex process—envisioning how we would design a new building, making sure it could meet all of our needs, and making sure that it is indeed the best move for our congregation.

We will be a stronger community for having gone through this process. It will take thousands of our collective hours as we come together to envision and dream and imagine and design, with the help of some really smart architects, a new home for Kol Rinah. Our tagline at Kol Rinah is “share your voice,” and we want to hear your voice. There will be numerous opportunities to do that, and that's what it means to be part of a community—to engage in the dreams and decisions of the community, and to share your own voice and your dreams.

The last line of Untaneh Tokef, the dream that flies away, always gets me the most. What's more hopeless and depressing than vanishing dreams? However, dreams we dream together do not fade away so easily. No. Dreams we dream together bind us together to create and labor in the service of ourselves and others, to create something that will outlast all of us, that will be here for our children and our children's children.

I know some of you are here only for tonight, or only for Yom Kippur, or only for a year or two. Welcome, and I'm so glad you're here. Maybe you'll be back, or be here longer than you expect—I've met so many people in St. Louis who came 35 years ago for two years. But even if your time here at Kol Rinah is for whatever reason only brief, I hope you will take the spirit and energy of this community with you wherever your life's journey and your Jewish journey take you.

We all have a gift right now of about 24 hours. While Rosh Hashanah is focused much more on the communal and universal, Yom Kippur is a day for personal introspection and evaluation. This day is a gift of time, to focus on whatever it is we each need to do to become the person we can and want to be.

A passing shadow...a shard of glass... These are the metaphors that remind us of our frailty, that we are tiny...that we, so small and here for so little time, have been given the great, improbable gift of our lives. And yet. And yet! If I think I'm but a shard of pottery and don't

matter at all, I have absolutely no incentive to change and improve. The act of teshuvah, of repentance, itself is an act of hope and faith that I, myself, matter. That I am powerful enough to create positive change in myself, my small world, and the larger world. To be able to accomplish anything of value in our lives, in our community, or as a community, we must have the chutzpah to say, I may be a passing shadow. But I'm here now.

You, me, each of us, and together, as a community—let me tell you the way I see us.

We are a beautiful bowl, made of clay, that has many more portions of nourishing soup to serve.

We are like a beautiful green lawn that will host many more picnics and baseball games.

We are like a rose whose petals and perfume embody beauty.

We are like the shade that cools and relieves on a hot afternoon.

We are like the clouds that hold and release the raindrops that nurture our earth.

We are the gentle breeze that makes heat bearable, which refreshes us, bringing us the scent of baking bread and freshly cut grass.

Our dreams are forming, not fading, and they are the dreams that build better lives, better families, a better shul, a better tomorrow, a better world.

We are here now, and we can do so much together.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah.