

**All Our Hopes**  
**Kol Nidrei 5781**  
**by Rabbi Scott Shafrin**

After Rosh Hashanah, I sat down to reread the words I had prepared to share with all of you tonight. As I looked over the pages, I got more and more frustrated by each word. I thought, “What good are these words, these stories, these texts?! Is this truly what our community needs to hear?” The words felt shallow, hollow, like an artistic cover on a book filled with empty pages.

And so I stressed. And I fretted. And I got angry with myself. What was the one thing I wanted my sacred community to hear from as we start what we hope will be a better year ahead. A day or so later, as I was walking home to grab lunch, lost in my own spiraling negative thoughts, I noticed a butterfly on the ground right next to my foot and I stopped, suddenly. I had nearly stepped on it. I don’t know why, but I was struck by it, not only by the stunning patterns of blacks and blues and oranges that dotted its wings, but by the fact that I was so very near to it and instead of fluttering away, it just sat there.

I leaned in slowly to get a closer look, and it jumped up and landed on my work bag. I froze, not wanting to scare it off, not daring to move. And then, being that it’s 2020, I slowly moved to grab my phone from my

pocket, and take a picture. I thought to myself, “No one would ever believe this if I don’t get this shot.” I’m not sure what possessed me, but the butterfly was so still, so small and beautiful, and so I reached out my hand and carefully lifted it off of my bag.

And there I stood, a butterfly sitting quietly in my hand, and I started to cry. I don’t know why but the peace of that tiny creature just released so much tension I have been holding for weeks, months, God only knows how long. So we stood, the two of us. The moment passed the butterfly flew on, and I went home.

When I told my boys the story over dinner, my five-year-old, Amitai, got quiet and then asked, “What did it feel like, having the butterfly in your hand?” I thought for a moment, and then replied honestly, “It felt like nothing, like I was holding onto something vibrantly alive and precious, but unable to be grasped. I could feel its legs move, feel its wings slowly flutter, and yet if I hadn’t been looking at my hand, it would have felt no different than holding the air.”

I have been pouring over these moments all week, and something came to me that I have slowly been realizing but couldn’t quite put words to until now. This past year has taught me that some of the most important things in life are also some of the least solid. Big ideas like love or justice or

compassion or meaning are difficult to define, but just as in that moment of holding a tiny butterfly in my hand, we can feel them when they are present in our life and they make all the difference.

Throughout this last year I have poured out my heart and soul, searching, questioning, praying to God for some direction of where to go. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the world is off course, out of balance, heading in dangerous and terrifying directions. I want to know what to do. I want to tell you, "Here's how we fix things. Just do this, and we will all be safe and healthy, justice will be fairly handed down and equitable to all, science will be believed, hate will be rooted out, and we can, as it says in Leviticus, all lie down with no one to terrify us." (Lev 26:6)

But the fact is that we come here today, on this Day of Atonement, not only seeking to make amends for the wrongs we as individuals have done by word or by deed, with malicious intent or with casual negligence, but also to atone for the state of our world and seek to rectify it.

Tonight, we begin that journey by voicing aloud all of our vows, *Kol Nidrei*, and the ways in which we have not lived up to them. What is a vow? What is its essence, its force, its purpose? In trying to find a framework for this idea, I looked back to see the first time in Torah that this word for vow, נדר (*neder*), is used. It appears about halfway through the Book of Genesis,

chapter 28:20-21, right after Jacob has his famous dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels going up and down to do God's holy work. When he awakes, here is what he says:

יֵרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּנֹדֶר לֵאמֹר אִם־יְהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וְשָׁמְרֵנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן־לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבִגְד לְלַבֵּשׁ: וְשָׁבְתִי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה יי לִי לֵאלֹהִים: וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי מִצְבָּה יְהִי בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן־לִי עֹשֶׂר אָעֱשִׂרְנוּ לָךְ:

*Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if Adonai protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safely to my father's house - Adonai shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You."*

On its face, this seems like an utterly sensible and practical bargain: God helps Jacob through his current trial and takes care of him, and Jacob honors God with praise and thanks and sacred offerings, turning the place he had slumbered into an altar for worshiping The Holy One.

But look at who Jacob is at this moment in his life. His past is a disgrace. Jacob cheated his brother, lied to his father, and left home under threat of harm and possibly even death from his twin, the person to whom he was most closely linked in the entire world. His present is bleak, wandering through the unknown dangers of the wilderness alone, on his way to relatives he has never met and an uncertain future.

His condition brings up frightening parallels with the condition we find our world in today. We are living in a world that is suffering on an almost unthinkable scale. Can anyone remember a time when our nation was at

once being ravaged by wildfires and scourged by floods and hurricanes? When a plague forced people out of work while leaders were simultaneously working to take away their access to healthcare, landlords trying to kick them out of their homes? Have we ever been more socially, emotionally, politically, and rhetorically distant from one another than today? Siblings ARE at each other's throats; children of God are tarnishing that sacred image by abusing, hating, and treading on their brothers and sisters.

And yet, we must have hope. Jacob has no reason to expect good things in his future. He has done little to merit help from anyone, let alone the Master of the Universe. How does he have the gall to ask God to ensure that he will have a better future?

Because he has just seen a glimpse of something bigger than himself. In encountering the heavenly hosts in his dream, Jacob, possibly for the first time in his life, is able to see a world that is bigger than his individual concerns, a universe that is more grandiose and powerful than fights over blessings and birthrights, more meaningful and impactful than his own needs or comfort. He sees a world full of light and promise and thinks, "If I can be a part of that world, then I might be ok."

If there is hope for one so far gone as Yaakov Avinu, our ancestor and teacher who bound us each together as B'nai Yisrael, descendants who commit to wrestling with difficulties in heaven and earth, there must be hope for each of us and for our world as well. It may seem hard to carry the hope with us when times seem dark, but that is precisely the moment that it is most needed and most helpful.

Last year ended on one of the darkest possible notes when the world lost a luminary defender of justice moments before the start of this new year. And while we mourn the loss of the beacon of courage and truth that was Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, she would not want us to lose faith or hope for a better future. In fact, she told us so. When addressing the necessity of clear, forceful opinions, especially dissenting opinions, Justice Ginsberg said:

*Dissents speak to a future age. It's not simply to say, 'My colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way.' But the greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that's the dissenter's hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow.*

What is a vow but a promise for a better future? Why have we all gathered here today, on this Kol Nidrei if not to look toward the vows we have left unfulfilled and to promise, with renewed strength and vigor, to commit ourselves and everything we are to the pursuit of a better world?

What is today other than a day for absolute honesty, to look around and assess our world and to realize that we all live in a world of our own making?

This society is the cumulative result of the actions of all the people who live in it and the consequences of those actions. It is why, throughout these High Holy Days, we all collectively say *Al chet shechatanu...*, for the sins WE have committed, realizing that we all bear responsibility for the state of our world. If today you look to the past year and see a world that is not how it should be, what are you vowing to act on TODAY to change it? If you look ahead with fear or anger or sadness or grief, what can you promise TODAY to alter in your own everyday to help?

Tomorrow, we will read the words of Jonah (2:9-10), who proclaims “They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform.”

Tomorrow, we will read the words of Isaiah (58:5-7), castigating us, harshly calling us to account, wondering,

*“Is this the fast I desire? A day for human beings to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the LORD is favorable?”*

*No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. 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 him, And not to ignore your own kin.*

It is the act of making sacred promises to improve the world AND THEN CARRYING THEM OUT that will create the world that God intended for us, a world of justice and peace. It is not enough to beat our collective chests and own up to our errors and the wrongs of our fellow human beings. We need to move beyond words or personal apologies and start taking actions designed to push our entire world toward *teshuvah*, toward returning to the promise and the potential with which The Holy Blessed One created it.

It is not enough to be horrified about injustice; fight for justice.

It is not enough to feel sad for those in need; give aid.

It is not enough to be outraged when our LGBTQ+ siblings are persecuted and when their legal protections are denied; reach out and be an ally.

It is not enough to wonder how another unarmed black person could be killed by police; stand up and demand not only accountability but sustainable change to how the rules of justice are applied.

It is not enough to mourn; Say their names- Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, Treyvon Martin, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, Oluwatoyin Salau,



Riah Milton, Michael Brown. May their names be a blessing and a call to action.

It is not enough to be offended when elected leaders lie, deny facts, spew hate speech, or fail to live up to their sworn duty; VOTE for leaders who represent you and can faithfully execute their oaths of office.

It is not enough to cry over families separated for months and years, living in abhorrent conditions, and denied their basic human rights; demand freedom and change.

It is not enough to feel that the systems are rigged to help those with money and power accumulate more and more while opportunities for the majority become fewer and fewer; lobby to change laws and fight bad corporate actors.

It is not enough to look at the storms and fires engulfing our nation and be saddened by the loss of life and destruction of the natural world; take action to force those in power to address climate change.

It is not enough to be upset when you see someone in trouble or in need; as Isaiah says, share your bread, feed and clothe them, do not ignore your sacred siblings, each made in the Image of the Divine.

We all have too much to do to keep our own lives balanced these days. I know that shaking ourselves out of the myopia of our daily lives and

tasks and confronting the ills of the world is some of the hardest work any of us could do.

But that is what is being demanded of us today. Of all of the days in the year, all of our sacred occasions, our celebrations, our gatherings, this is the one where we are asked to drop all pretense, all self-importance, and simply and honestly say, “*Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, anachnu LO tzadikkim, v'chatanu*. Adonai Our God and the God of all of our ancestors we have NOT lived up to our righteousness, and we have missed the mark.”

On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Arnow asked each of us to look ahead to next year, when we end 5781 and move into the year 5782, and to envision those things we wouldn't want to say we have left incomplete. Think of that right now. Think of those things that this year are still left sadly and painfully undone in this world.

Then fast-forward 24 hours. Look at the person you are one day from now. And after all the chanting has been silenced, after all the chest beating has stopped and the *sifrei Torah* have been rolled, after the great shofar sounds one final time and the Gates of Repentance and Prayer have closed, what will you do next? Will you fill your belly with bread and slide into tomorrow's routine, or will you act to make a change? What do

you vow to do in the year ahead? What sacred promise can you swear before your family, your community, and your Creator in order to make the world a better place in the year 5781?

The future is promised to no one. It is ephemeral, dimly perceived, and always outside of our grasp. It is as fragile and illusive as a butterfly, drifting on the currents of time. But if we reach out our hands, if we take steps to make real the future we desire, a future of equity and justice, fairness and compassion, courage and peace, we just may be able to one day soon hold that beautiful reality within our grasp.

G'mar chatima tova.