

Yoshevei V'tzalo
Dwelling in the Shade at the border of light.
Hosea 14:8

We begin our new year in the dark. Rosh Hashanah is our only holiday that falls on the new moon. It is the Jewish tradition's way of reminding us that in spite of the darkness (or because even because of it) we have the power to bring light to the world. It is magical — the year begins with a dark sky, and then as we approach YK, the sliver of the moon reappears. By the time we celebrate Sukkot we enjoy a full glowing harvest moon as we rejoice in the sukkah.

Our lunar calendar reminds us that to begin in the dark is possible. In fact, as secular calendars often get so wrong, each new day begins the night before. God creates night first, inspiring our celebrations and our worldview. To begin the dark is not only possible but is an essential part of celebrating in joy.

This Yom Kippur, we each enter this sanctuary with our own challenges: an uncertain diagnosis, aging parents or perhaps a strained relationship.

There are those who are entering 5780 with an empty nest. Or those facing a career challenge or transition. Perhaps our dark place comes from

guilt or shame; forgiveness not granted or forgiveness not received. In a world filled with uncertainty, there are times when it feels as though we are living in a dark age. The words of the prophet Hosea, in a portion read between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur resonates. “*Yashuvu yoshevei v’tzalo ychiyu.*”¹ The one who sits in the shade will be revived. As we sit as one community, with darkness both shared and personal, that hopeful vision frames this day.

For we are all *Yoshvei V’tzalo*. We are all shade dwellers.

The shade is not necessarily unpleasant. It can be restorative to relax in the quietude shielded from blinding light. The gardeners among us know that there are plants that thrive in the shade. They tend to be less flashy, more subtle, more nuanced, but not necessarily less beautiful. Or less nutritious. Peas and kale and even coffee thrive in low light. As the poet Mary Oliver² wrote “Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.”

¹ Hosea 14:8

² From “The Uses of Sorrow”

The same word in Hebrew for shade, *tzal*, is read in Psalm 23. “Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” These words are familiar to many in the context of loss and mourning. The valley of the shadow is long and many have walked its pensive lengths, this year and years past. Our own sage, Rabbi Gutterman, reminds us how the most important word of that verse is the verb--walk. The only way to navigate the darkness is forward, one step at a time. Our fear of the dark is as ancient as the darkness itself. The midrash³ tells this story: When the sun went down on the very first evening Adam, the first human was filled with fear. Adam saw a darkness come creeping upon him, and he began crying out “Oy Vey! Woe is me!” “Surely the darkness will bruise me”⁴ The Holy one, helped Adam find two stones, one of thick darkness and one of death’s shadows. Adam took up the stones and rubbing them one against the other until there was light.

Like Adam, the darkness may wound and bruise us. And like Adam we have the power to transform its depths into light. Our actions are paramount in this metamorphosis--each step through the dark valley, each

³ Midrash Tehilim 92:3

⁴ Psalms 139:11

time we find the courage to reach for the stones to leave the shade behind us. The rabbis⁵ remind us that, In our eyes there is a white part, through which we are not able to see, and a dark part in the middle of the eye, by means of which we do see. From darkness can come vision and even understanding.

Our prayer book, Mishkan Tefilah, offers, this wisdom⁶ each shabbat,

This is an hour of change.

Within it we stand uncertain on the border of light.

Shall we draw back or cross over?

What lies before us?

Shall we draw back or cross over?

All of us, no matter what kind of year we have had, no matter how bruised we are by the darkness, we are standing on the border of light. What lies before us? We may not know the answer. Crossing over into the light is a decision.

⁵ Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6:6

⁶ Mishkan Tefilah, p. 149

For we need not dwell in darkness. Rembrandt employed Chiaroscuro, the art of using light to define darkness. The old master's use of this technique does not erase the shadows, instead they use the darkness to accentuate the light. We can do the same. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber⁷ points out that the role of religion in our lives is to remind us that we each have the authority to “defy the darkness of living in a broken world” by pointing at the light. That is just what our ancients meant when writing, Ki Ner Mitzvah v'torah or⁸-- the commandment is a torch and the Torah is a light. The means to flipping the switch is before us. In this way, our tradition teaches us that: The wisdom of the past is the daylight, and it can become a torch we can carry into the night that is the future⁹.

The very Torah portion we just read reminds us that we do have a choice. And we are reminded that transforming the darkness is not insurmountable. It is not too baffling or beyond reach or in the heavens. It is actually very close to us--something already in our hearts and in our mouths. The key to crossing the border to light is something we each possess. We are not the

⁷ *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*

⁸ Proverbs 6:23

⁹ Inspired by Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

first to be faced with uncertainty and we won't be the last. We are reassured that we possess the tools to heal our relationships and the world.

It is through our strivings we walk the border with light. Through our teshuvah, our repentance, our reflection we navigate the darkness and even make our own light. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver writes, "if we are striving sunward, even though it be through pain and struggle. . . if we feel that we are growing, then we are alive ... and we are to be called blessed."

There are times when, with the gift of perspective, we realize that the darkness is merely an intermission between two points of light. The Talmud teaches, "On Yom Kippur we also say Havdalah (the farewell to this sabbath of sabbaths), because on this day the fire on the altar used to be extinguished and a new fire kindled." The rabbis touch on an important truth. The darkness need not be oppressive. It can be filled with possibility and opportunity for the next flame kindled. Darkness need only be the space between the lights. The Hebrew word for "darkness" is "shachor." The Hebrew word for "dawn" is "shachar." the distance between the darkness and the dawn is one small letter. As author Anne Lamott writes,

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.”¹⁰

Our tradition is filled with stories of upstanders who show up to do the right thing. In the Purim story, after Esther’s triumph over the evil Haman, we read these words: *LaY’hudim Haytah orah v’simcha v’sason v’yikar. Ken Tihyeh Lanu*¹¹ “The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor --- So may it be for us.” This same verse is also recited each week at havdalah as we usher out the sabbath. Our tradition reminds us to consider the Purim story not just once a year, but each and every week. Why? Because Hamans of the world continue to exist. The Jewish community has faced hatred and evil of the worst kind in the past year. Lives lost in Pittsburg and Poway, California. This heartache is not new to the Jewish people. It is an old and persistent darkness. After the synagogue shooting in California the rabbi explained that he was going to “be even more proud about walking down the street wearing my tzitzit and kippah, acknowledging God’s presence. And I’m going to use my voice until I am hoarse to urge my fellow Jews to do Jewish. To light candles before Shabbat. To put up

¹⁰ Anne Lamott on Twitter, April 28, 2013

¹¹ Esther 8:16

mezuzahs on their doorposts. To do acts of kindness. And to show up in synagogue.”¹² That is what it means to kindle a light in the darkness. The strongest response to anti-Semitism is with a Jewish faith built (as scholar Deborah Lipstadt calls it) on “joy not Oy”¹³ When our tradition brings us comfort and meaning, when we share this with the next generation, when we are inspired to help--that is the Joy of Judaism. Like Esther and Mordechai we must persist and resist and reflect light into the darkness and transform the world for the better. As we read in our prayer book today, “when evil darkens our world, let us be the bearers of light.”¹⁴ I will be ever touched by the small candle, left on our outside menorah by a thoughtful neighbor, when I returned to Temple the evening after the Pittsburgh tragedy.

I can think of no greater light than the hundreds of friends and neighbors who gathered together following the Pittsburgh shooting last fall to share love and solidarity. My friend and colleague Mufti Ikram ul Haq comforted us, “to my Jewish brothers and sisters: When someone expresses hate, bigotry and violence towards you, it is directed at all of us. When someone attacks

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/opinion/rabbi-chabad-poway-antisemitism.html>

¹³ Deborah Lipstadt, Anti-Semitism: Here and Now

¹⁴ Mishkah Hanefesh, p. 506

you, they attack all of us. We want you to know that we will always stand by you. And you will always find us by your side, in good times and in bad times--because we are one human family.” That is what it means to be a bearer of light. Deborah Lipstadt, at Brandeis commencement¹⁵, echoed his words when she charged graduates, “We cannot be against just one ‘-ism’ to the exclusion of all others. If we are going to fight prejudice, we must fight it across the board. We cannot be a fighter against anti-Semitism but be blind to racism, or even worse, engage with it ourselves.” She continued, “The Jew in the kippa, the Muslim in the hijab, the African American student walking across campus, the Latino kids gathered ... in a park must feel as safe as anyone else.” To step out of the shade we must banish xenophobia from our hearts. And to step into the light we must actively stand against “isms”--for an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us and together our light is stronger than that hatred that seeks to destroy our love and diversity. We cross the border to light when we stand up against injustice: misogyny, racism, homophobia.

Consider the movements that have started in the darkness and resiliently walked towards the light: the #MeToo movement, the March for our Lives

¹⁵ <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/may/commencement-main.html>

following the Parkland school shooting and Gay Pride. These movements have taken painful experiences and sculpted the anguish into a ray of hope. They are an inspiration, reminding us that darkness can be transformed when we turn on the light.

As we gather on this gray morning, it is still hard not to notice the light that fills our sanctuary. I have always loved the nuance of the changing light in this sacred space. The architect Percival Goodman conceived this space with that vision. But windows in a synagogue are not just for architectural beauty. We learn that while windows in a house function to let the most light in, windows in Solomon's temple functioned to let light out.¹⁶ This tradition continues to this day—our houses of worship must have windows so that our vision is not only inward. So that the love, community and holiness we kindle in this sacred space can shine outward.

There lived a young Greek man on the island of Crete when the it was invaded by the Nazi's early in WW2. That boy grew up to be philosopher Alexander Papaderos. He tells this story¹⁷, "When I was a small child,

¹⁶ Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6:6

¹⁷ Told by Robert Fulghum, It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It

during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror from a German motorcycle that had been wrecked in that place.

"I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine -- in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light - - truth, understanding, knowledge -- is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it." Papaderos believed that the hatred resulting from the war needed to be healed and so he went on to organize an institute where educators, philosophers and religious leaders could learn from one another and counter hatred.

As we find the strength to kindle the light in our hearts and in our homes— we must find the courage to reflect that light to our community and to the world. We learn from our tradition, from our calendar, that we may begin in the dark but we need not stay there. We dwell in the shade on the border of

light knowing that our choices enable us to cross over. We may not know what lies before us, but together we can cross into the light.

This is an hour of change.

Within it we stand uncertain on the border of light.

Shall we draw back or cross over?