Our Next Incarnation will be Interdependent
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783

At the beginning of her beautiful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer shares the creation story, "Skywoman Falling." Told among the original peoples of the Great Lakes, it begins with a woman falling through a hole in the Skyworld. There is nothing beneath her but water. Noticing her falling, the geese fly up to catch her, and gently lower her down upon their feathers. Then all the animals gather to help. A turtle offers his back for her to rest on. And since she needs land, those who can dive try to retrieve some mud from the bottom of the water. Loon, otter, beaver, sturgeon — but none of them can dive deep enough. Then muskrat volunteers. Even though he's little and not a very strong diver, he makes it all the way down to the bottom, but sacrifices his life doing so. As he returns to the surface, though, in his lifeless paw is a handful of mud. Skywoman spreads the mud across the turtle's shell. It grows and becomes the earth.

Now there was a Tree of Life in the Skyworld. And Skywoman was still carrying a few branches she had grabbed from it as she fell. From those branches she now scattered seeds onto the ground. She tended them and they became a home and nourishment for her and the animals who also came to live there. It all came to be, the story tells, "…from the alchemy of all the animals 'gifts coupled with [Skywoman's] deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home."

Skywoman Falling is a story of collective becoming. Of mutual creation and thriving. As I've returned to it over these days, I keep thinking of what Barbara Kingsolver wrote in response to a story about a toddler who was rescued by a she-bear: "a message from some gentler universe than this one." Except that that universe is this

one. The story of the bear and the toddler, a 16-month old Iranian boy, did happen. And Skywoman Falling, in a different sense, is also true. It portrays a world where life is interdependent. We live in that world.

Richard Powers, author of the Overstory, writes beautifully about the ways in which trees embody this interdependence. He was amazed to discover through his immersion in the world of trees how much they functioned in mutual benefit with each other. He shares this about what he learned: “Trees communicated with one another over the air. They shared resources through enormous underground networks of fungi, even across the species barrier. They domesticated insects, and prepared the soil for their young. They remembered, and sacrificed, and cooperated, and socialized…” Humans are not trees. But still, I feel in Powers’ words, and in the worlds he paints through his writing, the articulation of a deep wisdom that applies to us, not just other life. It is wisdom that has been known for many generations of indigenous people, only recently confirmed by Western science. And in unpacking this learning, Powers names something that upends one our core cultural mythologies: “Survival of the fittest,” he says, “meant those best adapted to their environment. But environment always and everywhere meant other living things. The fittest were not the greatest competitors. They were the best at exploiting this endless experiment in ever-more ingenious forms of collaboration.”

That is the universe we inhabit. We have largely been conditioned — throughout Western culture, certainly in the United States — to perceive ourselves much more as independent. A slippery term, as writer Eula Biss points out, that can mean “free” but often, in effect, means something closer to isolated. When I think about our theme for this year, Teshuvah — Returning, these images of a more mutual and interdependent

world have been front and center for me as I ponder what we need to return to. That this is our next adaptation. Because returning, in this sense, isn't about going back. It's about remembering capacities we'd forgotten we had; capacities that have been obscured for generations and more.

In a recent article entitled, "The Theft of the Commons," Biss explores the birth of private property in Great Britain. Prior to what became known as enclosure, formally written into law at the end of the 19th century, collective rights existed for people who didn't own or rent land to still subsist on it. As she writes, with enclosure "the traditional practice of living off the land was redefined as theft. Gleaning became trespassing, and fishing became poaching. Commoners who continued to common were now criminals." For those of us living in the world of private land ownership, this notion of a mutually beneficial commons — not just for recreation but for subsistence — might feel radical. But in the context of human history, this relationship to land is much more prevalent than many of us realize. Indigenous peoples across the globe throughout time have related to land through common stewardship and mutuality. Including this land we are on of course, before the original peoples were stripped of these rights. In writing about the Wampanoag people, who lived and thrived where the pilgrims landed, Biss describes how "rights to use the same plot of land could overlap, so that one family might hold the right to fish in a stream and another might hold the right to farm the banks of that stream. Usage rights could be passed down from mothers to daughters, but the land itself could not be possessed."

For some of you there will be resonance in that last phrase with a verse from Leviticus: "But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are

strangers and sojourners with Me." It's from the instructions for Shmitah, the sabbatical year. Which we've heard about over this past year, since it's been a Shmitah year. This verse represents its foundational worldview — that land is never ours to own. The word *li-tzmitut,* "beyond reclaim," comes from a root meaning, "put an end to" or "exterminate." That in owning land, or in perceiving that we own land and therefore can sell it, we are terminating something. Our foundational belonging to the Earth, maybe. And with that, I would say, our belonging to one another. Because with private ownership has often come the thirst for greater ownership — more land, more wealth. Which in turn has led to the exploitation and dispossession of other humans. People who become portrayed as less human in order to justify the dehumanizing methods through which they are stripped of rights and freedom for the benefit of those amassing wealth and power. As Nicole Hannah-Jones says: "To borrow from Ta-Nehisi Coates's phrasing, racism is the child of economic profiteering, not the father." Meaning it was on account of this drive for wealth and power that dehumanizing myths of racism were created.

Let's imagine for a moment — at the risk of feeling naive — living in a world in which we don't own land, but instead live upon it with one another in mutual benefit and collaboration. It is not a world free of conflict, not even free of violence. But it is a world in which the drive for personal gain doesn't become entrenched as a central orienting principle. And thus doesn't give birth to the dehumanizing mythologies from which racism and other oppressions emerge. Maybe I'm overstating it. In any case, we can't go back there. But the essence of that world, an understanding of mutual benefit and shared belonging, exists still, though greatly obscured, within and amidst us.

Our hyper-individualized culture conditions us to enclosure, not just materially but psychologically as well. On a moral level this plays out through shame and blame, where our actions or others' become defining statements on who we are, rather than harms that need to be addressed. As I'll get into on Yom Kippur, our ancestors were not stuck in this framework as we largely are, did not approach wrongdoing through such a heavy focus on the self. We have much spiritual work to do to unlearn these lessons of personal enclosure. To identify less with status, with how others view us, with a reified sense of the independent self, resulting in fixed notions of who we and others are.

Alok Menon, writer, artist, and performer offers that, "…the history of the individual is…a ghost story. How we came to see ourselves as separate from one another, from an ecology, from an interconnected sense of being and how shocked we are continually by that natural interconnectivity…I think what the story of the individual is, is a fantasy, a fable of fiction that we tell over and over again, that it's possible to have a self that's not in relation." ALOK is a gender non-conforming person of color, who embodies their own unique identities in bold and beautiful ways. So they are certainly not advocating for a world in which we all blend in as one. But what I hear in their statement is challenge to how we, in the West and in the U.S. for sure, perceive the self as enclosed. Rather than in mutual creation and becoming with others, we have developed over generations a walled-off notion of who we each are, separate from others.

In this light, I've been really fascinated lately by musical intervals. A single note, on its own, conveys no particular mood or style, is neither minor nor major, nor a part of any particular scale. Yet in relation to another note, its character starts to take shape. The space between them, the relationship between particular tones, is where expression

happens. And those two tones in relation with others, a community of tones, is where worlds are formed.

So it is with us. Our lives take shape in relationship. I know what I am saying may feel obvious. But we have been conditioned to see the particular tone — our particular self — as an independent entity. How limited an understanding that is. The metaphor is not perfect. Clearly, we're each much more than a note. But there is a truth here, which is that we always become in mutuality with one another. The more we recognize that, the more we can each take our place — and fight for each other's places — in this next stage of collective becoming.

It is essential to recognize that the consequences of this sense of separate self cuts differently for each of us, based on our particular identities. Each of us living in this culture have internalized these messages that over-inflate our sense of self. For people who hold the identities I do, though, the self I come to know as mine is often one positioned at the center, in leadership, with access and power. So there can be a kind of unexamined spiritual lens through which we want everything to be the same, which means everything to be like me. Whereas for people with less privileged identities, the reification of the separate self might manifest in ways that diminish, that are intentionally designed to exclude. So as we work to perceive ourselves in more of a shared sense of self and mutuality, it is vital that we do so with these dynamics in mind.

This is where it brings me: As I come to understand that larger sense of self and belonging to one another: What, then, is asked of me? To whom am I then obligated and how? What of my enclosed self do I need to leave behind for the benefit of another, for the benefit of us collectively?

Dr. Bettina Love shares a story that to her illustrates the difference between an ally and a co-conspirator. Speaking about the roots of abolitionism, she asserts that the Underground Railroad had to be based on trust and love for each other. And that manifested in a willingness to risk lives for one another. She shares a story about James Tyson, a white man, and Bree Newsome, a young back woman. Shortly after Dylan Roof murdered nine people in the AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, an action was planned there for Newsome to take down a confederate flag. When the day arrived and the moment came, she climbed up the pole. Police came and decided to tase the pole. And Tyson, standing ready right there next to it, put his hand on the pole. "That white man," says Dr. Love, "in that moment, understood why he was there…Put something on the line for somebody. Take a risk." Dr. Love names trust and love as the source of that willingness to risk. Clearly, the type of risks we each might take range widely. Regardless, tied to that love and trust, I believe, is the understanding of our lives as intertwined — that my safety is not separate from your safety.

The need to common may be thrust upon us. Climate change, massive migrations, unraveling of our political system — we all know that these things are happening or are real possibilities. We don't know exactly what will be asked of us, but we know that we will have to adapt. There will be some sacrifice. There will also be potential for profound liberation.

Returning is becoming. Is shedding layers that we have amassed which obstruct from who we aspire to be, who we can be, who we are. What is revealed is something that has yet to exist. It is a return and and an unfolding. *Ḥadeish yameinu k'kedem,* we

will chant on Yom Kippur — Renew our days as of old, or, Return us to who we can become.

I do believe, friends, that we have what we need. Not any of us individually. But collectively, we have it. Will we return to it and access it? I don't know. But I want to say clearly that it is here, within and amidst us. May this next incarnation be collective, be mutual, be interdependent. May we return in the ways we need to, become who might be together, and discover the world in which we belong to one another.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu — may we each be inscribed in the ways we truly need.