

Lit

*Poems to Ignite Your  
Jewish Holidays*

*Chaya Lester*



Copyright © 2019 Chaya Lester  
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-62393-021-9

Published by  
SHALEV PRESS  
[www.shalevcenter.org](http://www.shalevcenter.org)  
Tel: 972-54-691-8226  
Jerusalem, Israel



# *In Memory*

*L'alui Nishmat of*

*Reb Shalom Ben Yosef Yekutiel Zusha (Brodt)*

A master of Jewish Celebration  
Reb Sholom lit our neshamas  
And gifted us with the taste of Shabbas

He taught us well  
How to live like a Hassidic tale  
How to care about each other relentlessly  
How to pursue righteousness  
And bring Godliness into all things

We were not ready for him to leave...

# *Table of Contents*

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	8
<b>Opening Prayers</b> .....	10
<b>Introduction</b> .....	11
<b>Instructions</b> .....	14
<b>Rosh Hashanah (New Years)</b> .....	16
A Prayer for All.....	17
Inscribed in the Book of Life.....	18
Submission.....	19
Selichot – I’m Sorry.....	21
The 4 Sons of Rosh Hashanah.....	24
The Siege.....	28
Av Harachaman.....	29
Books of Life & Death.....	30
<b>Yom Kippur (Day of At-one-ment)</b> .....	31
White Inside.....	33
At-One-Ment.....	35
At-One-Ment #2.....	36
Crime-in-All.....	37
Ashamnu.....	38
Under Done.....	39
Incensed.....	40
Last Minute Penitent.....	41
<b>Sukkot (Tabernacles)</b> .....	42
Lifestyles of the Spiritually Rich & Famous.....	43
Jewel Tones.....	45
Ushbizin - The Invitation.....	47
See & Be Seen.....	48
When the Equinox.....	49

Hoshana Raba.....	50
Save Us.....	51
<b>Simchat Torah.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Swing.....	54
In the Leaves of the Tree.....	55
<b>Rachel's Yahrzeit (Jewish Mother's Day).....</b>	<b>57</b>
How to Birth a New Land.....	58
Rachel's Prayer.....	60
Mother's Day Poem.....	61
<b>Hannukah.....</b>	<b>63</b>
8 Meditations for the 8 Nights of Hannukah.....	64
The Brightness.....	72
25 Sure Signs You're a Souldier for Light.....	73
Humans of Hannukah.....	75
<b>Tu B'shvat (New Year of the Trees).....</b>	<b>78</b>
Poetree.....	80
Redwood in Tea Pot.....	82
Happy Knew Year.....	82
The Yearn.....	83
The Tree of Life & Limb.....	83
Karma Forest.....	84
<b>Purim.....</b>	<b>85</b>
Esther's Paradox.....	86
The Hidden Queens.....	87
A Purim Rant on Modern Haman.....	89
<b>Pesach (Passover).....</b>	<b>91</b>
Pe-Sach – The Mouth That Speaks.....	92
Passover Cleaning.....	93

Free To Serve.....	95
Hear the Call.....	97
These are the Faces.....	98
Feel Free.....	99
Elijah's Cup.....	100
Miriam's Well.....	102
Exodus: An Instruction Manual for Escaping Abuse.....	103
My Pharaoh.....	104
Another Slave Set Free.....	107
In the Merit of the Women.....	109
Puah.....	111
<b>Shvi Shel Pesach (7<sup>th</sup> Day of Passover).....</b>	<b>114</b>
Circle Dance.....	115
Raise Your Voices.....	117
Moshiach Seudah.....	120
This Side of Gulus.....	121
More Yearning for Redemption.....	122
<b>Pesach Sheni (2<sup>nd</sup> Chance Passover).....</b>	<b>123</b>
Again.....	124
<b>The Month of Iyar.....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance).....</b>	<b>128</b>
Pittance of Admittance.....	129
Shoah.....	131
The Old Trees are Falling.....	133
<b>Yom Hazikaron (Remembrance Day for the Fallen).....</b>	<b>135</b>
These Cemeteries.....	135
Sleepless in Jerusalem.....	136
The Jerusalem Symphony.....	137
Prayers for Victims.....	139
The 3 Boys.....	140
For Yemima.....	142
For Hallel.....	145
Who by Fire?.....	146

<b>Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day)</b> .....	<b>148</b>
Happy Birthday, Dream State.....	148
Re-Start-Up Nation.....	150
Destiny We Have Danced.....	155
Hey Olah.....	159
The Bad News Too.....	161
Israeli Interdependence Day.....	164
<b>Lag B'omer (33<sup>rd</sup> Day of the Omer Count)</b> .....	<b>168</b>
Bow and Arrow.....	168
<b>Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day)</b> .....	<b>169</b>
The Burning Bush.....	170
The Jerusalem Day Parade.....	171
<b>Shavuot</b> .....	<b>173</b>
Sinai in the Womb.....	175
Love Poems for the Sinai Desert.....	177
First Fruits.....	180
Synesthesia.....	183
<b>Tisha B'Av (Fast Day of Mourning)</b> .....	<b>185</b>
Collision.....	187
As Tensions Mount on Temple Mount.....	190
The Account of the Spies.....	192
Weep.....	194
The Day When.....	195
Open My Eyes.....	197
All I Want for Tisha B'Av.....	198
<b>Tu B'Av (Holiday Celebrating the Feminine)</b> .....	<b>199</b>
In Vineyards.....	202
A Visualization.....	203
<b>Rosh Hodesh (New Moon)</b> .....	<b>204</b>
What Cycles of the Moon.....	204
The Diminishment of the Moon.....	206
Are You Done Being Diminished.....	207

<b>Shabbat</b> .....	<b>211</b>
Shabbat as the World to Come.....	212
A Prayer for Patience.....	213
The Braid.....	216
Tadaa – Candle Lighting.....	217
I'm Embarrassed to Write This.....	218
The Secret to Shabbas Hosting.....	222
A Prayer for Havdalah.....	228
<b>Month of Elul</b> .....	<b>230</b>
The Spiral Staircase.....	230
This is Your Brain on Elul.....	232
Dear Departing Year.....	236
<b>Post-Script</b>	
Writual ~ Writing as Ritual.....	237
A Personal Story & Request.....	239
<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>242</b>



Låt

# *Acknowledgements*



It takes a village to raise a book. My village is thankfully full of like-minded creatives.

One of my writing mottos is ‘Don’t be afraid to mess of a page...every mess is messianic.’ To those who helped me clean up the mess of these pages: To Leah Hartman, for the sharpest and kindest editing. To my brilliant graphic designer Lanny Shubitz. To Rivka Hellendall, Alden Solovy, Jenna Romano and R’Dave & Chana Mason for your book-writing expertise.

To the mainstays of my village – my beloved parents Gary & Cheryl Kaplan, for gifting me with my core connection to Judaism and for tirelessly nourishing my self-expression.

Finally, with infinite beyond-expression-gratitude to my husband, R’Hillel, for masterfully ‘holding it together’ while I wrote poems. Your loving partnership is the greatest gift of my life.

And to my 4 most cherished lights

Yeshaya

Beriah

Maayan

& Levi Yitzchak.

You light up my life

like nothing else.

Thank you for making  
every day a holiday.

# *Opening Prayer*



## *The Seed*

May each page be a point of light  
To illuminate the mind  
Or if not the light  
Then at least the wick  
That holds the fire in line  
And if not wick then may it be  
The oil to anoint the eye  
But if not oil then at least the branch  
That brought the olive to life  
And if not a branch then single seed  
To plant the point of light.

Yes, let there be a single seed  
within each page I write.

# Introduction

Welcome to this  
convocation of punctuation  
amid some 250 sheets.

I pray they inspire your own  
inner genius of creativity.

May they further fuel  
your very best spiritual strivings  
Making your rituals richer  
and your holidays holier.



**A Call to Celebration:** It is no mistake that we begin each of our holidays with the ritual ignition of lights. For our holy days seed a sense of enlightenment like no other. They are treasured spiritual technologies, built to sanctify and brighten our mundane. Seed meaning, our holidays illuminate our path through time, and feed those of us who most hunger for light.

R'Joshua Heschel wrote poignantly:

*People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state--it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or a spectacle....Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions.*

- The Wisdom of Heschel

The confrontation with transcending meaning is encoded in our holidays. Each spills with rich themes, symbols, profound teachings. Each offers a manual of instruction for how to truly Celebrate and illuminate our lives.

â

## *Why 'Lit'?*

From sacred to slang, the title 'Lit' expresses the many layers of what is contained in this book. In addition to the lit candles that herald in each holiday, 'Lit' in its classic connotation refers to the 'Lit' of poetry - the literature - that fills these pages. Equally relevant, 'Lit' in its modern connotation has come to mean intoxicated; like that post-kiddush sweet spot of loose yet still lucid. Finally, 'Lit' in pure slang is an apt adjective for that which is alive, exceptional, amazing, hot.

This book braids each of those layers together to make a unique poetic commentary on the Jewish holiday cycle.

~ Guaranteed to illuminate your year.

## *On the Imperative of Getting 'Jewishly Lit'*

T.S. Eliot said the world ends “not with a bang but a whimper”. So too by the Jews. Jewish discontinuity in our era isn't happening through the nightmarish bang of a Holocaust, but rather through the whimpering 'meh' of irrelevance & assimilation. (Cue the shrugging shoulders of an entire generation.)

How many disinterested millennials are simply wandering off into something more exciting? The Pew Report spelled it out most clearly: In the United States, a shocking 72% of non-Orthodox Jews are intermarried. That's 58% of America's 6.8 million Jews. Of those 3.9 million, almost half of them are not even bothering to raise their children Jewish. That's nearly 1.8 million 'Jewish' children being raised in utter Jewish apathy. 1.8 million unlit candles.

Statistics show it - the Jewish world is quite simply being bored to death. For in the vacuum of wildly engaging Jewish experience, indifference sets in and assimilation wins.

But there is an antidote, my concerned friends....It's called celebration. Jewish partying; plain and simple. I'm not talking about Purim carnivals for your kids. Yes, I loved them too. Loved my 7-year-old rhinestone rendition of Vashti the Proto-Feminist. Loved each plastic trinket and each Hannukah gift. But those saccharin memories are precisely the problem. Force-feeding Jewish masses a preschool-sized Judaism of plastic trinkets is not going to preserve Jewish continuity.

What the Jewish world needs is to be intoxicated with religious experience. It needs Heschel's "transcendent meaning of our actions" kind of celebrations. Soul-stirred, hard-core, irrevocable experiences of 'Jewish relevance'.

In short, what the Jewish world needs is to get lit...Jewishly lit.

Our holidays are just the place to start. Each holiday is a magnificent rave of meaning just waiting to happen.

The writings in this book strive to give access to that expansive sense of transformative Jewish celebration. Using the lit of literature, these poems will help ignite your holy days and hopefully leave the world a good bit more Jewishly Lit.

## *Instructions:*

Please. Read. Aloud.

These poems are written to be Spoken. The full fire of these pages comes from their song & cadence. It is no mistake that the Hebrew words for 'poem' and 'song' are one and the same - *shir*. It is admittedly painful to relay these poems without the full acoustic justice of their music.

So I recommend that as you are reading you make them into the proper Oral Torahs they are meant to be. Read them aloud to yourself – or better yet, share them. Speak them, sing them, around your holiday tables, with friends & family, lit up l'chaims.



## *Sing, please*

If I were to place a poem upon this table  
would you stare until she turned away  
embarrassed for being put on display?

Or would you take her in your arms  
and dance her round the elm trees  
to the barn and up the rafters  
to the roof, where she could rise  
~ a butterfly of proof  
that there is a God  
that rests between the teeth  
A God who awaits our prayerful speech.

How together we could speak  
a better being into things.

If I were to place a prayer  
upon the table...  
Would you stare  
or would you start to sing?

*Quotes:*

God purposely left one aspect of creation unfinished in order to involve man in a creative gesture and to give him the opportunity to become both co-creator and king. The individual who is not engaged in the creative gesture can never be king; only a creator may lay claim to kingship and sovereignty....

- Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

“He who wants to interpret the Torah has to begin by drawing unto himself words as hot as burning coals. Speech comes out of the upper heart, which Scripture calls “the rock of my heart”. The interpreter first must pour out his words to God in prayer, seeking to arouse His mercies, so that his heart will open. Speech then flows from the heart, and the interpretation of Torah comes from that speech...As the Heart’s compassion is opened, it gives forth blazing words, as it is written: “My heart blazes within me; the fire of my words burns on my tongue.”

- Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav

“There is one who sings the song (shir/poem) of his own life and in himself he finds everything, his full spiritual satisfaction... There is another who sings the song of his people. He attaches himself with a gentle love to the whole community of Israel and together with her, he sings his songs... And there is one who can sing the song of all humanity - aspiring to the perfection of all... Then there is one who links himself with all existence and he sings the song of all God's creatures... And finally, there is one who can sing all the songs as "one" song. This is the Divine song, the song of Yisrael, for the name of Yisrael stands for "shir E-l" - God's song/poem.”

- Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

“Two strides across, the rest is dark...Life is a fleeting question mark...”

- Hannah Senesh



Låt

CHAYA LESTER

# *Rosh Hashanah:* *The Head of the Year*

Rosh Hashana celebrates the birthday of the world. It is also the day when we as a people are tasked with praying for the world's welfare for the fledgling year. It is a holiday that is at once very Jewish, as well as supremely Universal. Our focus and mission: to evoke compassion – both Divine & human - and to raise a raucous of pray for the immediate betterment of the entire globe.

## *A Prayer for All*

This year may we be focused  
& bound by one purpose:  
the love of kindness  
the work of healing  
the care for innocence & children  
and all that is decent.

May our 'call to arms' not be a call to harm  
but a call to these holding limbs of hope  
that our children might live in a home  
a little more whole, a little more holy  
with a lot less hating  
and a lot more embracing

Where we see no more  
terror over territories  
shed not blood  
but rather tears  
of rejoicing  
at the warped glory  
known as humanity.

For the Messianic era  
may or may not be at hand,  
but it might just be in our hands  
– that we may outstretch them  
to hold each other  
and usher in another  
year, one-breath-closer  
to utter  
peace.

## *Inscribed in the Book of Life*

The highly symbolic metaphor of *writing* punctuates (pun intended) our High Holiday experience. God, after all, is not just a creator or an orator. God is a writer, scribbling notes about our lives in cosmic journals. And then once a year – with utmost seriousness - God inscribes our names, hopefully, in the Book of Life.

We too are writers. The authors of our actions. Indeed, if this season of Repentance is to teach us anything, it is that we are all struggling artists; scrawling out our books of life – hoping they will be found acceptable (publishable) in the eyes of the divine. Just as writers sweat and struggle to but write a good piece, we are all striving to live eloquently.

### **Teshuva/Repentance/Return**

To carry this metaphor forward, the image of editing is expressive of the ‘*teshuva*’ process, where we make amends for our actions. Both editing & teshuva represent processes of going over what we have done and fixing the mistakes. Yes, the essence of the piece of work/of the year, will remain the same, but our glaring mistakes, the problems in our “text”, can be smoothed out by a good editing job. *Teshuva* is that conscientious review; an act of spiritual re-writing.

The title of the poem below – Submission - captures the dual meaning of both submitting ourselves to a higher power and submitting our work to a publisher/critical eye. Either way, we are under scrutiny of some overseer.

At Rosh Hashana we submit our work, our lives, our creativity, to be reviewed by God, the master publisher, the mentor, the teacher, the King.

## *Submission*

Days of  
Inscription,  
of Submission.  
Before  
God bent  
Back curved  
as a comma,  
or an end  
quotation  
mark...”

Having spoken,  
having scrawled,  
the letters of our lives  
on *claf*, on cow  
hide.

All have bent  
ink black nights  
over their works  
- Writing with deadlines.  
To submit  
rough draft in  
trembling claws.

Having carved out of stone  
Cumbersome Tablets  
Of a twelve-month tale  
~ Days of Awetobiographic awe.

Lapping up a page  
of whiteness  
with a pen's thirsty tip.  
Sent to press  
the Book of Life  
encyclopedic

voluminous.

Each name  
a manuscript  
of events  
sins scribbled  
like a stowaway  
writing wishes from the bowels  
of a bottom-born ship  
- or praises poured like  
honey to mask  
the poison of the dish.

All of us in need of  
a good editor  
to make structural  
emendations  
spelling  
corrections, verb  
replacements.

For a life lived  
in stream of conscious  
must be crafted  
by master's fingers,  
opposing thumbs,  
into something well  
worth reading  
when at last  
the year is done.

So, pray, let us write a  
Masterpiece.  
Let us be published  
in the World  
to Come.

## *Selichot*

*Selichot* is Hebrew for “forgiveness” and stands as a ritual of gathering to recite penitential prayers from midnight to dawn. These prayers are recited leading up to Rosh Hashanah as well as during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

While this is a time of making amends between us and God, we are also called upon to have an air of penitence within our relationships. Just as our synagogues ritualize *selichot* to the Divine, may we likewise ritualize *selichot* in our most intimate lives.

ø

## *I'm Sorry*

This is the kind of *Selichot* I yearn to see.

A husband steps up  
close to his wife's ear and  
with baritone sincerity  
hoists up an “I'm sorry”  
from his rattled depths  
through his chest  
throat to lips.

And it sings  
with such humility  
A *shir* of sheer generosity  
of spirit, selfless as dust  
done for the sake of the other,  
for the sake of the ‘us’.

A *selichot* strong enough  
to rebuild the very gilding  
of the sanctuary that shifts  
and splinters between their feet.

The *selichot* I want to see

is the wife  
who lies down  
her prodigious pride  
by the bedside  
and recites a prayer-book worth  
of an apology.

Who takes responsibility  
for her own part  
in the cycle  
of coldness, inertia, absence.  
Done with the plagues of  
resentment.  
Done playing victim.

“Forgive me, my beloved, for my distance.  
My face turned  
away from you  
is my greatest sin.”

Would that our synagogues  
would teach us this kind of hymn.

Would that we would wake  
in the drawn shade of night  
for the sake  
of begging this type  
of forgiveness.

Give us a midnight straightening  
of our most intimate  
relations  
and the world would  
be washed anew by dawn.

Walk not another step out the door  
until you have implored  
your spouse, your parent,  
your child, your friend,



for forgiveness for each offense.

Before you raise your voice  
to Hashem  
bend your self  
into amends.

Let your *Selichot* be sung  
in your bedroom  
at 4 a.m.

## *The Four Sons - and Daughters - of Rosh Hashanah*

A core theme of Rosh Hashanah is CHANGE. The Hebrew word for year - *shana* - shares its root with the word *shinui* - meaning 'change'. We could thus (with some poetic license) reread Rosh Hashanah - the Head of the Year - as the Head that Changes.

Rosh Hashanah is about accessing the mind that changes - the head that turns - its lessons learned. The yearly celebration of a mind, a life, a world, re-born.

It is our chance to review who we have been this past year. This is our time to think of how we might want to try on new & improved ways of being, thinking, speaking, as we take off into a new year.

The spoken-word poem below is a chance to try on new characters. It is to be read in four voices - like the four Sons of the Passover Seder. Best shared around your Rosh Hashanah table - invite four participants to play each character.

The characters are:

- The Traditionalist - The Revolutionary
- The Spiritualist - The Simpleton.

Get into character. Embellishments and dramatizations are welcome. For instance, the Simpleton can be read innocently, like a child, perhaps curious, perhaps clueless. The Spiritualist could be read meditatively. The Traditionalist could add props of religious garb, a tallis, a prayer book. The Revolutionary, read with fervor!

Feel free to add accents, add costumes. But most importantly, add YOU. Notice if there are aspects of these archetypal characters that you lean towards, or others that you shy away from. For instance, perhaps you're usually a sophisticated thinker. Use this reading to try on being the Simpleton. What does it feel like to look at the world through simple, childlike, eyes? Or if you are far from rebellious, perhaps try on the Revolutionary and see what it brings up for you.

After you have finished the reading, discuss what it was like to try on a different character – a different ‘head’. Go around the table and have each participant speak about what changes they want to welcome in to their new year, what new traits they want to embody, what new lines & parts they hope to play this year.  
- Experiment. Explore. Enjoy!

ð

## *Rosh Hashanah Is*

**The Simpleton:** Rosh Hashanah is apples and honey.  
Is new shoes & hair combed-through.  
Is candle-light & time with cousins. Is something NEW.

**The Traditionalist:** Rosh Hashanah is apples dipped in *holy*,  
not just honey...  
Is as OLD as the universe. Is the Book of Life.  
Is a stack of prayers - Read verse by sublime verse.

**The Spiritualist:** Rosh Hashanah is the FIRST of all firsts.  
The first inceptive in-breathe of the Divine  
*beyond* words, *beyond* appearances,  
where we touch *beyond* time - just in time... to realign...

**The Revolutionary:** Because God knows it's about time  
that we realigned!  
And realized our immense and overwhelming need for CHANGE!  
Rosh Hashanah is a nuclear reactor  
of getting our proverbial act together.  
Righting our wrongs.  
Making the world better... and better... and better.

**The Simpleton:** And so, we change our clothes... our calendars...  
our lines.

**The Revolutionary:** Forget the facades, just so long as you change  
your MIND! Take your old bottled-up self & learn to Recycle,

Reform, Refine!

**The Spiritual:** And speaking of refined...  
Let us not forget to pause, to pursue our insides  
so much more than our very many *outs*...  
Let us pray, chant & meditate...  
That we may have no need to shout.

**The Traditionalist:** For the only thing shouting  
will be the ram's horn  
as our prayers form  
a tidal wave that hits the very shore  
of what we can only call heaven...  
- else what's a heaven for?!

**The Revolutionary:** Though perhaps heaven also needs a few  
reforms? Especially this year...haven't we counted far too many days  
of war? Perhaps heaven has given us a bit *too much* to mourn?

**The Simpleton:** I've seen the loss of children, of soldiers, of parent,  
of friends.

**The Spiritualist:** The shocking slaughter of justice, of safety, of  
innocence.

**The Traditionalist:** We stand here humbled & gawking at the state  
of the world.  
We've seen her horrors and sorrows - haunting and absurd.  
When, dear God, will the shofar of *real redemption* be heard?

**The Revolutionary:** Sometimes longing for something better is the  
best that we've got...

**The Spiritualist:** And sometimes, she who is rich is she who is  
happy with her lot.

**The Simpleton:** So, we know that we have lost - a lot...but what  
have we gained?

**The Spiritualist:** A deepened connection...

**The Traditionalist:** A higher direction...

**The Revolutionary:** A heightened push for change!

**The Spiritual:** So, let us breath and stretch,  
& strain our necks  
into this next horizon of a year  
keeping our eyes on the prize of ideals we hold dear.

**Revolutionary:** Lofty ideals of peace in the face of violence;  
justice in the face of crime.

**Traditionalist:** Turn our eyes from greed to giving.  
Open our hands, our hearts, our minds.

**Spiritualist:** And this day will be our haven

**Revolutionary:** --- and our engine

**Simpleton:** --- our sense of connection

**Traditionalist:** --- to Tradition

**Spirituality:** --- And inspiration

**Revolutionary:** Vive la revolution!

**Spiritualist:** -- A celebration

**Simpleton:** -- of apples

**Traditionalist:** -- dipped in *holy*

**Revolutionary:** --- with grit & determination

**Traditionalist:** -- with prayers and prostrations

**Simpleton:** -- with family, with friends

**Spiritualist:** --with spiritual elation

**ALL TOGETHER:**

As we raise a *L'Chaim* to our differences

and the Oneness that made us!

Bless each other with a year of

sweet,

holy,

& inspiring

CHANGES!

## *The Siege*

What channel is your soul turned to  
- there where reception to the world is lost  
and true reception best received?

Why do I spend my words on worldly things  
when all I want to speak  
is the language of the King  
of Kings?

Why are the endless antennas within-us  
tuned mainly to channels  
of war and grief?

If we were starved of our media  
might reality succumb to peace?  
Like a well-intended siege?

For what happens to a sage in-a-siege  
She stops and listens to the quiet.  
Quietly - Becomes the Silence.  
Becomes the siege.

And so with me...  
I want to mouth soundless  
like Hannah taught us.  
I want to seek what mystics seek  
I want my harms to strive for harmony  
I want to cease.

This holiday is my siege  
My straightening - like a new cloak  
Sown with fire and thistle & ram fleece  
Honey streaked & stained  
Pockets stuffed with apple  
rinds and grace.

## *Av Harachaman*

*Av Harachaman* is a common term used in the High Holiday liturgy. It means “Our merciful father”. Wonderfully, *rachaman* – the merciful – has at its root the word *rechem*, meaning womb. Thus we can read *Av Harachaman* as the ‘womb-full father’, or the father of wombs.

♫

“Father of wombs”  
 We wail at the waxing moon  
 ...And a merciful Mother He be.

Like the open casket  
 of the *Aron Hakodesh*  
 That delivers our scroll in her  
 soft swaddling.

We call it our teacher  
 And yet carry it like a babe.

Born from our heavenly Father  
 And yet handmade by handmaids.

Someone once said a gentleman  
 was a contradiction in terms.  
 But a “wombing father”  
 ... Now that’s progressive  
 for a couple of ancient  
 Hebrew words.

*The Books of Life & Death*

God is in the gorgeous  
And the gorging at the feast  
God is in the gauging  
And the crouching of the beast

God grows in the famine  
Flourishing and thin  
Furniture of the homeless  
The health of ailing men

God paces in the palace  
As it's put to flame  
God who writes the Books of  
Life and Death  
Signs His very name



# Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; the holiest day of the Jewish year. On this day, God seals our fate for the upcoming year: whether we will live or die, be in good health or ill.

Yom Kippur is called the Day of Atonement, but really it is a day of “At-One-ment”, where we are able to access our deepest inner connection to the Divine, the One and only One. And so, we spend the day like angels, dressed in white, leatherless, no food or drink, nourished by thin air and singing our way through the fast.



## *The Inside of the Inside*

Yom Kippur is the singular day when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. Another name for the Holy of Holies is *‘Iphnai u’Iphnim’*; the inside of the inside. Because the ultimate truth is an internal thing.

Take an apple, for example. The world would tell us that apples are red. But, 98 percent of any given apple is not red at all. The bulk of the apple is white – within. The world all too often defines reality according to its external coating. The deeper truths are beneath the surface; beyond what the eyes can behold.

The English word ‘face’ connotes externality – the face of a building,

the ‘sur-face’ of things. But in Hebrew the word for ‘face’ is the opposite of externality. The word for face is *panim* – as in *b’phnim* – the insides. According to Jewish wisdom, the face is expressive of our deepest insides. Our externals should express our insides.

The Hebrew word for ‘world’ – *olam* - shares its root with *neelam* – hidden. God is hidden in the world. The Jewish God is specifically an invisible God; a God who downright refuses visibility. Even when Moses asked to see God, He would only reveal His back. That is because there are some things – the very best of things – which can only be seen with your eyes shut.

This is why the *Shema* sits at the cornerstone of Judaism. When it comes to talking about the oneness of God, we must cover our eyes. That oneness can only be ascertained when we bar external sight. With our eyes open, everything appears to be separate – there’s you and you over there and you are not each other and neither of you are me and we are as disparate and different as can be. But when we close our eyes and use our insight instead, we are able to feel in to that FACT that all is one. That, yes, an apple really is white.

This Yom Kippur may the hidden truth of things be made obvious as skin. Our faces, our *panim*, should shine with what is *b’phnim* – our deepest and holiest insides.

## *White Inside*

Sitting by my teacher  
peeling the apple  
which I'd retrieved her.

She said, "Thank you, dear, for this Macintosh red"  
"No, ma'am, its white"  
"White what?" She said.  
"White apple, there inside your hand."

"Well apples aren't white, my dear, now understand...  
Yellow, gold – or red to be precise  
All sorts of shade  
But never white..."

"Yes white", said I,  
sans batting eye.

"Will you insist on such silliness?!"  
She roared,  
"To the corner with your insolence!"

And in she called the Principal, Rabbi and President

And they passed judgment once again.  
"The apple's red.  
Not white!  
... We win!"

And father was called in  
Quick to see  
What insolence, what nonsense,  
does his daughter breed.

Psychologists and farmers too  
Said "In truth,  
- the fruit is more a rouge!"

A great debate  
within the room.  
What virus had my sight consumed?!

And when finally  
they came  
to ask *me* why  
I simply cited,  
“It’s white  
...inside.”

## *At-One-Ment*

One of the best paths to atonement is to access a taste of deep connection to the Divine; a state of At-One-Ment.

ð

This day, I am learning to be a corner  
- the place where two walls MEet  
- No ME beyond the MErging  
of these two tangible things.

I am intangible, no texture  
No text - only breath.

Like the present moMEnt that rests  
between Future and Past  
(Those two persistent walls  
that plaster on...)

I am simply striving to  
shimMEr into existence  
through the simple insistence  
That yes, I am  
nothing  
but a MEeting point between.

Surrendering  
To the Tent of MEeting  
Set up daily in my den

And there we will listen  
to what eMERges in the MErger  
the in-between  
the corner where  
the voice of God  
speaks

*At One Ment #2*

'Distance' - isn't.  
'Don't' - can't be.  
Fear is but a metaphor  
- Love is everything.

And when the words get confusing  
just trust the feeling  
and when the phone isn't working  
and communication ain't happening  
- Just sing.

## *Prime In All*

Read crime-in-all  
Not criminal.  
Ours to contain  
ours to dissolve.

Sentence self  
til spoken right  
lest one hand stab  
the other in spite.

In spite of self  
and body same  
your cripple  
crafts the others maim.

The convict with conviction calls  
“We are a chain  
En-chained to all”

“And I myself will not be free  
Til jury sees its injury”

“And I’ll not give a guilty plea  
Til Judge confess  
His Culpability”

## *Ashamnu - We have Sinned*

The High Holiday liturgy most often uses the collective language of 'we' when confessing our *vidui*. One Hassidic interpretation of that 'we' is that it includes the Divine in its plurality. As if God is a part of me, as well as a companion come to comfort me.



For the sins *we* have committed

For the ways I drag my feet  
when You beckon  
or turn deaf and blind  
before the begging.

The way I ravage my time  
or rip my words with my teeth  
the way I step on my own feet  
the way I work myself into a wormhole  
and dig deep.

For all the ways  
I have misdome my deeds  
Sliced through my very own sleeves.  
For all the ways I have hurt me & hurt Thee

Count them, not against me  
but come,  
and simply count them  
- with me.



## *Under Done*

For all things done wrong  
Done under  
Under done  
For all things un-done  
“Nothing new under sun”.

Remember these words  
And the one who said them  
Had 1000 wives and was wise  
And yet sinned  
when he wed them...

So why do you punish us our trespasses  
Why the reprimand?  
Why the ban?  
Why the shame and the lashes?

Just forgive us – like the sunrise  
With your automatic control.

Just change our channels  
so we're better.  
Just reprogram our shows.

And we'll be New  
Like the year  
Over the sun and beyond  
Where the stars read our fortunes  
Where all our under-  
Done  
Is gone.

## *Incensed*

The crowning ritual of the ancient Yom Kippur Temple service was the incense offering; the one time in the year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make an offering. That singular crowning offering is specifically one of incense. Incense is the fragrance of repentance.



Let me at your incense stick  
to fill the hall with smoke.

Til we no longer see each other  
Not our blunders, not our cloaks.

And run around, unencumbered,  
in the fragrance, in the clouds  
Til overcome by vapors  
Aromas as our shrouds.

This is the cloud we followed  
Through the stunning heat of day.  
This is the cloud  
We borrowed  
From the angels  
For the way.

They lent it with small interest  
If we promised to give it back.  
We repay it with our incense  
with our smoking  
like a pack.

## *Last Minute Penitent*

Forgive me please  
 For any time I said, "Yes! Let's  
 Get together."  
 And then totally didn't get it together  
 to follow through  
 on that enthused sentiment.

For any time I didn't call back  
 or text back or reach out or check in  
 especially when  
 I said I would but didn't...  
 Especially when I wanted to  
 And, even more so,  
 when I – secretly - didn't.

Forgive me for not living up  
 to the response you deserve  
 or not opening my door  
 or my heart or my mouth  
 and for those times I was too loud  
 and too little too late  
 Like this message  
 that slips through the Gate  
 of Repentance  
 ...last minute

Next year I'll strive  
 to be early  
 and live my word fully  
 like it were pure gold and utmost.

So forgive this last minute  
 penitent for all the good intents  
 I just didn't ...

# *Sukkot*

Sukkot is the Feast of Tabernacles; when we build booths with a ritual vengeance. During Sukkot, our neighborhood in the heart of Jerusalem is well-stocked with sukkahs of all shapes and sizes, colors, tunes and fragrances. Each its own unique jewelry-box of beauty. Streams of awe-struck tourists amble about, wide-eyed at the vision of sukkah upon sukkah lining these quaint boulevards.

Here we can hear the languages of the world waft through the thin sukkah walls all around us. A mix of accents of Greece, Morocco, France, England, America. We snack dreamily on the taste of the good old days, the ancient days...when the Pilgrimage Festival witnessed devotees of all stripes pouring into Jerusalem's streets to "see and be seen" in this God-drenched capital.

Here the ingathering of the exiles is on full display. It is a teeming testimony to the fact that the prophetic promises of the return of the Children of Israel are being fulfilled...one sukkah at a time. Here we are sitting pretty with the winning numbers to the largest spiritual lottery known to man.

Sitting in the sukkah amid all this opulence, we get a taste of the immense wealth that lays hidden just under the surface of this all-too-often challenging life as an 'ingathered' immigrant in Israel.

## *Lifestyles of the Spiritually Rich & Famous*

We're all living homeless and on  
the streets around here.  
And yet we strut about like millionaires,  
partying like rock stars...  
spiritual rock stars, that is.

It's Sukkot after all, *zman simchataynu*,  
time of our bliss.

Sukkot is the grand EXIT  
from all of life's fixed sureties.  
We abandon sturdy shelter  
and opt instead  
for flimsy shacks.

We are busy  
studying how to release  
our clutches on wealth  
to take firm  
hold on the riches  
of Spirit instead.

This is our work right now  
in the shade of the sukkah  
— to learn faith.

And yet, we don't rely on faith.  
Because here, in the sukkah shade,  
we actually get a taste.

Here we finally grok the fact  
that we are the very heirs to a vast  
TRUST fund.

A bank account accruing interest

CHAYA LESTER

for some 3000 years.  
Daily deposits made for millennia  
by our diligent ancestors.


We have cashed in on this  
long awaited inheritance.  
Sitting in rickety shacks  
we are moguls of fortune.  
We are Royalty  
Homeless and living  
on the streets.

## *Jewel Tones*

I am sukkah  
I am home.  
And mom.  
My colors are warm  
Like a Beaujolais bouquet.

This room's maroon,  
But never marooned  
and even if I were to be,  
I want to be marooned with you.

This year is gonna bring in gold,  
silver, glitter.  
No litter.  
More thriving, less surviving,  
No strife. Just l'chaims.

A year where  jewel tones jam our homes  
With flushed rust & chestnut  
star-lit with scarlet vermillion  
and a million other shades  
of garnet gilded dreams.

God give me a pashmina of meaning  
From floor to ceiling.  
Sukkah-Me burgundy  
Velvet and cream.

Let's house some Shechinah  
Between us  
And make poetry between  
these walls of sheets.

Write me in fuchsia-infused pen  
and O'Pen the door

CHAYA LESTER

to let something strange in  
Something for'eign  
I'm talkin getting Reborn-in  
To a whole new matrix  
of Human.

Let's annex the next  
palace of genetic potential  
here in this leafy-green hovel  
of Possibility



## *Ushpizin - The Invitation*

Please be my guest  
 Ushpizin-so-pleazin  
 Let's host each other  
 And usher in  
 the best year yet

A year made like a mansion  
 And did I mention  
 YOU are the reason  
 I've settled in this otherwise-uninviting region  
 Of the Middle East?

It is because of you  
 and me and the we-ness  
 that weaves between us  
 like baubles in these dreamy leaves.

We are each other's surrogate family  
 In a date-tree palace of orphans  
 Richly embellished  
 with the bling of being siBlings  
 the pampered kinder of the  
 Queen of Queens!

So come in, in your crimson  
 And riots of rubies  
 Be my guest,  
 well-dressed-well-blessed  
 In this jewelry box of leaves  
 And promise to never leave...

## *To See & Be Seen*

Sukkot is a week-long pilgrimage. A veritable carnival. A party worth being born for. The Gemara tells us that people went on the pilgrimage to the Temple “to see and be seen”. Seen, deeply, by God – by others – by self...and how these three can be one and the same.



This is the *chag* ‘to see and be seen’...  
And here we all are  
Swimming in a sea of extended family  
Beholding these faces graced  
to be here in this place  
Like winners of this marathon  
called the human race.

Thick in these prayer tents  
Where a million minyanim  
sing niggunim.  
All of us  
members of the same band,  
belting songs of the Leviim.

Shuckling and swooning  
lulav-shaking  
- challah-baking - bracha-making.

Let us never forget the music of this  
unforgettable syllable  
of God's own soliloquy  
known as Sukkos  
in the Jerusalem streets.

God's very own best poem  
better known as ‘WE’.  
Seeing other and being Seen.

## *When the Equiknocks...*

There are 2 poles to our ritual year: the Pilgrimage Festivals of Passover and Sukkot. R'Aryeh Kaplan says that Passover is all about fixing our 'Inner Space'. We ingest the mitzvah into our being when we eat the matzah. In contrast, on Sukkot we fix our 'Outer Space'. We enter the mitzvah with our entirety by entering the structure of the sukkah.

Indeed, we are taught to make our sukkah's roof in such a way that we can see the stars -- which is at its core a call for us to grok the magnificence of outer space. Given that it falls at the full moon of the month of Tishrei, Sukkot also often occurs at the same time as the fall equinox; a time of supreme celestial alignment. Surrounded by sky, we are able to marvel at the wonders of the space that engulfs us.

⚡

It's nothing  
but a shack that sits  
in the drench of this  
particular slant  
of earth & sunshine  
called the equinox.

And we are the astronauts  
with sukkahs as our spaceships  
powered by mere palm fronds  
and the words of our lips.

So when the equi'knocks  
on your sukkah  
-- open wide  
Let it in.

Be harmonized with the heavens  
And gain entrance to the heavens  
within.

# *Hoshana Raba*

Hoshana Raba is the seventh and final day of Sukkot as well as the final day of the season of Judgement begun on Rosh Hashanah. The primary ritual of the day is the beating of willow branches on the ground while circling seven times around the bimah (Torah reading table). We call out Hoshanot prayers begging for Divine protection. Hoshana means 'Save us'. The striking of the willows symbolizes a tempering of Divine harshness here on the last day of the long season of Judgment.

The poem below was written the Sukkot of 2015, which marked the beginning of a fresh series of terrorist attacks in Israel. During Sukkot alone four innocent Israelis were killed, leaving behind 14 orphans. That year's prayers of Hoshana – Save Us! - were all the more poignant because of the anguish felt throughout the Jewish world.

ø

## *Save Us*

When blood runs like a commentary  
 through our prayer books  
 and skirts around our  
 brimming dishes  
 our feasts  
 our guests  
 our visits  
 like a red henna  
 on our raised hands  
 as we tilt  
 another glass  
 to bless the good Lord who gave us life  
 and joy even amidst the most  
 unsettling blasts.

We sit together surrounded – shrouded –  
 by sheets of light  
 – like a lit booth on a dark street.  
 Like a plain truth set  
 between falsities.

We are emptied and full.  
 We are teetering between.  
 We are sore  
 & soaring.  
 We are soiled  
 and washed clean.

When we close our eyes  
we see only those children  
in the place where sleep should be.

Hoshea'na. Save us.  
Save us from the monsters.  
Save our humanity.

Let us not be undone by our anger  
but let it pick open the lock  
of our darkest closet-worth  
of prayers.

For the sake of the martyred  
and the orphans  
– Dance another circle.  
Beat the darkness with your willows  
with your woeful, with your willful  
with your feet.

For the sake of the parents  
and their orphans.  
Be the brightness.  
Be the lit sukkah  
on the dark street.

# Simchat Torah

Simchat Torah is celebrated on the last day of Sukkot. On it we celebrate the end of the yearly reading of the Torah and the restart of the next cyclical round. We relish in the joy of embracing the Torah and all it represents. It is a day of embodied celebration; of dancing in circles around the Torah like a Jewish Sweat Lodge or a Sacred Rave. It is a day of a committed sweating of our prayers; swirling in spirals around these circular scrolls we hold so dear.

*“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it....”*

~ Deuteronomy 30:12

## *The Torah of Our Lives*

The Torah is called a Tree of Life because it is a living thing. Not an inert crowd of words, but a vital, breathing, portal to encounter with the Divine. It lives through how it is lived; inviting us to traverse the bridge between text and self.

May we feast on the fruit of the Tree of OUR Life; no longer simply gleaning from the Tree of Knowledge - of Someone-Else's-Knowledge. Rather return to the 'sources' by experiencing the wisdom sourced within; not confusing the map and all of her beauty with the vivid glory of exploring our soul's terrain.

We have returned to the Land of Israel, to the very soil that sprouts immediate access to Divinity, to vision, to prophecy. It is our task to also learn the Torah of the Insides.



## *Swing*

“The Torah is a tree of life.”  
- a tree of YOUR life.  
Just hold tight  
and swing.

Carve your initials into her trunk  
and pick the fruit from between  
the good book's leaves.  
Yours are the lungs  
to let it breathe.



This poem captures the feeling I had when I arrived in Israel and had my first joyous spins with learning and embracing a Torah lifestyle.

ø

### *In the Leaves of the Tree*

So this is what it means to be a Jew – Who knew?!  
Who knew that Judaism was ancient and yet progressive  
mystical, intellectual and impressive  
grounded yet elevating paradoxical and penetrating.

Suddenly I am plumbing depths  
and thumbing through texts  
that have been thumbed and plumbed  
for generations past and more to come.

Living the return of Judah's long-lost children  
– so far gone, so far hidden.  
Now come home to the old books of  
OUR OWN venerable tradition!

Ready and willing to kiss these white stones  
– and make a home  
in Yerushalayim's now-revived dry bones.

Clamoring with higher calling  
cleaving to deeper meaning  
shining with persistence  
and a 3000-year-old commitment.

Commitment to the Torah, to something more  
than the mores & norms of the Western world  
with her hordes of the immoral and the impure.

CHAYA LESTER

Committed to something more than a Manhattan latte  
and a pumped-up paycheck to “provide for the family”  
that may smile wide for the cameras  
but weeps inside for their bankrupt neshamas.

Famished for a richer truth  
than the loose change of material gain.  
Famished for the fresh fruit of the living tree  
of Jerusalem with leaves of flames!

And so I pace myself with the stealth  
of a leopard on the chase of the truth  
which darts like a gazelle  
through these hills of Yehuda  
and tomes of Gemara  
I will come to know so well.

With a fire hotter than a thousand degrees  
from the cool Ivy League.  
My ivy climbs the Western Wall  
– a beanstalk tall to which I cleave.

We have returned to these streets  
to breathe these books  
to dream these dreams.

If Torah is a tree of life  
then I will gladly change my life,  
that I may sit amongst her leaves and read...

So come and sit and read  
Amongst Jerusalem’s leaves  
And dream...

# *Rachel's Fahrzeit* *(Jewish Mother's Day)*

In 2208 (1553 BCE – approximately 3500 years ago) on the 11<sup>th</sup> of Cheshvan, the family of Jacob was returning back to the land of Israel. On the way, Rachel gave birth to her second son, Benjamin, and died in labor. Jacob buried her on the spot, on the road to Bethlehem (Efrat). Her grave has been a cherished site of prayer ever since.

Rachel is called 'Rachel Emaynu' – our mother Rachel – for she stands as a Jewish archetypal figure of motherhood. From the first day of the year, the 1st day of Tishrei, to the 11th day of Cheshvan is 41 days. 41 is the numerical value of the Hebrew word "*eim*," which means "mother," thus the 11th of Cheshvan is truly the Jewish Mother's Day.

## *Birthing a New Nation*

Rachel Emaynu, your sandals  
Were made of leather and dreams  
Your prayers, a macramé of tears  
Your grave engraved  
your name  
upon our historic Return.

All because you yearned  
With the rushing push of a mother in labor  
Willing to die  
Just as long as she birthed  
new life.

For you, birth was no less than the kiss of death,  
and yet, you have lent us your lesson plan  
A lamaze in how to breathe our way  
through the labor pain.

We read your instructions like braille  
- for we are blind to the light.  
Help us feel the formula in our fingers  
as we write.

Teach us well, for we are laboring still  
for this city and this vision.  
Still convincing the world of our address  
Still convincing our very own flesh  
that this newborn land  
is ours to labor, birth and nurse.

Let there be no more deaths in this process.  
Rachel, that was your last act  
- to die that your descendants may live  
But let that not be the recipe  
On this side of history.

Why through war  
was the Western Wall won?  
And why can't the next be done  
with gentler delivery?  
With reconciled wing-span  
Not hate of man?

Rachel, weep through us  
A new recipe  
for birth in our world  
A birth made with Words  
Not wars  
Perhaps a path paved by women and girls  
Not metal birds.

Rachel, be reborn in us  
In our mothering  
and our mumblings  
and our coming all the way home  
to these ancient domes.

Dance us in your sandals  
Over smooth stone  
All the way home  
– And may there be room  
enough for everyone.

## *Rachel's Prayer*

*"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."*

~ Jeremiah 31:15

Promise me  
to plant your stones  
on that baneful road  
where house my bones

And let memorial stand,  
a somber marker  
in a severed land

To mark the promise  
of a prophecy  
of transcendence  
of time and of distance  
with a mother's mad insistence  
that the exile of her children  
must end

And I will be weeping  
loud with pleading  
at that corner-side  
- where Jerusalem  
meets Gush Etzion  
with her border guards  
and building zones

And with the force of my weeping  
and the form of your rocks  
will our children return  
to the road to Efrat...  
will our children return  
to the road to Efrat...

## *Mother's Day Poem - Word to the Mothers*

This motherhood is the mission of a lifetime.  
This being present & a'parent  
a teacher  
a tender  
a vessel in the Temple.  
The curator of an entire digital  
museum worth of photos & uploads  
– the motherload.

Just gazing with amazement  
at the beauty created  
in these small bones  
and soft skin.  
The impossible impeccable ten toes  
that mock all the world's miseries  
with a loud resounding:  
“Yes, life is glorious  
and worth being born for!”

Which is all to say, I want to be like you when I grow up one day!

You are fallen from the infinite skies  
like a ripe fruit  
and I am the crisp basket  
and the rich reaper.

The one who gets to feast on this sweet  
nectar of being your mother.

I am swimming in the 4 rivers  
that flow out of Eden  
– all for the love of children!

You, child, birthed me!  
And bathe me daily  
in the salt waters

of wonder and worry  
in all its infinite variety.

Sleeplessness has never been so effortless!

You, dear bliss, make me into a goddess  
a “God-Is”!  
For you have made me more godly.

I might have birthed you – but you have created me  
into someone so much better.  
Someone who cares about another  
more than myself.

And Lord knows I can be selfish  
to the point of astonishment  
but you – you make me selfless.

You are my endless  
prayer book.  
I read you and weep you.

I am drunk on this love of you.  
You keep me honest  
and grounded and astounded.

You are my prayer shawl  
and I am wrapped deep  
in this ritual of motherhood

So thank you, child,  
for birthing me.



# *Hannukah*

Hannukah honors the house. It is the Maccabees' renowned rededication of the House, the House of Holiness, the Beit Hamikdash. It is the lighting of the fire in the heart, the hearth, the home of a people.

In a similar vein, a Hannukaht Habayit is the celebration of settling into a new home, a sacred housewarming party. It's as if with every move to a new house we celebrate a miniature Hannukah. For each home is the symbolic manifestation of our own Holy Temple. Thus our four walls call for a Hannukah — a dedication — the lighting of the fire that warms and sanctifies our space.

Hannukah's lighting of house is no less than the illumination of the inner Self. For the Self, with her secret stairways, her observing windows, her half-closed doors, is a many-storied home, the abode of the soul. Our task on these eight nights is to rededicate the Temple, in our own times, in our own lives. Each night illumines a different aspect of the self, lighting a new alcove in our inner House of Holies.



## Eight Meditations for the Eight Nights of Hannukah

The following is an opening meditation to recite before the blessings for candle lighting, plus a series of 8 *kavanot* (meditations) to be read after candle lighting, one for each of the eight nights of Hannukah.

### **HINNENI MUCHAN UM'ZUMAN / I AM READY (to be recited before lighting the candles)**

I am ready to light the first (second, etc.) candle of Hannukah and here I stand ready to rededicate myself to achieve higher levels of personal holiness and illumination in a world of shadows. Tonight's candle is dedicated to \_\_\_\_\_.

(Enter your own value for the whole family or ask each person to dedicate it to their own personal value).



### *1<sup>st</sup> Night - Dedicated to Darkness: The Cellar*

Before you light your first candle, stand quietly for a moment in complete darkness, and let the darkness indeed be complete, with no want for anything, no need for the distractions of sight. Simply sense the quiet self that sits there patiently waiting for you to take notice, to turn off the television, to turn off all vision, to be quiet and sense the sanctuary that is the self.

Standing in the cellar of my inner self, with an unlit candle in my hand, in the darkness I discover a deeper self than light lets in.

This night I dedicate to inner darkness, to the unknown, unspeakable seclusions of the soul. It is the darkness that keeps me searching...a worthy opponent, provoking my path to further reaches, my

thoughts to further depths. It is the as-of-yet unilluminated, unanswered aspects of an unraveling self, the landscape of dreams and nightmares, tragic truths and fears.

I dedicate this night to every question I have quested after,  
to every confusion that has humbled me,  
to every challenge I have mastered,  
to the thrill of secrecy.

As this candle casts a shadow, my self in dark outline,  
I integrate and dedicate the darkness with the light.  
The first night is for the dark cellar of winter,  
that which illumines a deeper insight.

ø

## *2<sup>nd</sup> Night - Dedicated to Ascension: The Stairway*

Standing at the stairs, sights set on ascension.

As you light your candle, envision a stairway rising before you, each step a soul ascension made with a worthy act, each good word you have spoken, each good work done by your hands. See how each step leads to the next. Dedicate yourself to singular steps in an upward direction. Go out of your way to do one new kindness every one of these eight days, for each is a link in the ever-increasing chain of compassion that stretches out before you.

This night I dedicate to increase, to the second step of every path. This is the move towards abundance, to building in increments, an ordered process. The treasures of the house of Hillel tell of holiness that it should only increase, ever-rising. Thus it was decreed that we light an additional candle to mark each night of Hannukah. For holiness, like light and all luminescent goodness, should always advance, like an ascending staircase, ever more inclined, increased, enhanced.

Just as each good act gives forth another, one spark springs forth to a

second wick, while a string of candles await. I stand at the stairway from my depths, ready to rise, to explore. Having found my foundation in the darkness, I move with upward momentum, the second night, the second step, the strength to increase...



### *3<sup>rd</sup> Night - Dedicated to Decisions: The Hallway*

Imagine yourself in a hallway, an endless corridor stretches before you. This hallway offers options. Each dark wood door opens to a different opportunity, each offers an unknowable path, letting you choose, demanding you move, challenging you to act. Which door do you lunge for?

The hallway is where I will my way through the world. It is the narrowness that leads to expansion, where one knock determines entire destinies. This hallway calls for precision, decision, the analysis of options, the care and the courage to choose true, exact, correct. This corridor is the tension before any great act — when the moment calls for a deeper determination to raise it from the vast heap of mundane happenings, to let it become a great occurrence in the course of life.

This night is dedicated to direction, to making decisions in the dark, to taking the leap of faith that leads to miracles. From the narrowness of the Greek domination, the Maccabees chose no less than the doorway to vastest freedom. They did not remain confined, nor walk through assimilation's passive portal, but rather lunged for the doorway of self-dominion and independence, fearless of the fight on the other side.

Standing in a hollow hallway, doorways blind my eyes, I contemplate the path to my future, light three candles as my guides.



### *4th Night - Dedicated to the Senses: The Dining-Room*

See yourself seated at a silvered table, set stately for some feast.  
 You are guest and host and caterer, called to task, to eat.  
 How full is your plate, how great is your need? Is your spirit  
 nourished as your body feeds?

The fourth night is dedicated to the dining room and her sister space, the kitchen. This is the seat of appetite, brimming with all things delightful to the senses. At the center of the table is a fine serving bowl of shemen, olive oil, for it is a sign of the paradox of the sensual, where the sublime and the material meet and dine together. Shemen is used for the anointing oil of Kings, the markings of the Messiah, the dripping robe of Redemption itself. It is the nourishment for the candle, that upon which the holy flame feeds. It is the utmost of sublime, but it is also the basest of the mundane. Meaning also "fat" (*shuman*), it signifies all that is thick and physical, the ultimate image of the material world, where spirit resides.

This night is dedicated to delicate balances  
 where our desires come to dine  
 offering pleasure in each embellishment  
 fuel for the fire of life  
 though oil anoints and nourishes,  
 overpour and it will put out the light.

ð

### *5th Night - Dedicated to Defiance: The Outer Courtyard and the Inner Will*

See yourself standing in a courtyard stained with suffering.  
 Stationed before you are Hannah and her seven sons.  
 They stare down Antiochus and a torturous task —  
 denying their identity or facing their death.  
 They are a family forced to the edge of existence, given ultimatums  
 they refuse to fulfill. You are an observer in the outer courtyard, what

says your inner will?

The fifth night finds my strength tested. This night is dedicated to standing strong against external forces, refusing to fold to the host of voices that beckon me away from my core. This is the night of Hannah and her seven sons, caught in an outer courtyard, called upon to convert, to conform to an alien world.

This is a night dedicated to persistence, a night not afraid to sacrifice. It is a night of knowing one's identity, of being grounded in an inner courtyard of calm and courage, regardless of the chaos of the world outside.

In the cold of the outer courtyard,  
crowded with calls to comply,  
I call upon the powers of my own inner will,  
to courageously defy.



### *6th Night - Dedicated to Rebirth: The Bedroom*

Your eyes are clouded beneath a canopy,  
your limbs lie in linen, in your mouth one last breath.  
Recall the colors of your days, are you satisfied with the path you  
have tread? Make peace with yourself, and, resigned to dying, find  
yourself re-birthed instead.

The sixth night leads us to the bedroom, painted with scenes of the self in her several stages. For one lifetime witnesses many lives, many bodies worn and shed, personalities developed and discarded, many births and many deaths. Just as Jerusalem's Temple was lost and won and lost again, so too are we forever falling and redefining, losing and re-finding, a new beginning born with every end.

Nightly I lay my soul to rest here, my breath slows, the world recedes. I experience the end of all, only to dream, and be reborn, burdenless to the morning. The bed a soft cocoon, a womb, a tomb, a room of rejuvenation. These are the four walls of rebirthing — where the bed

of birth becomes the bed of death — the drive to end, and to begin again.

The six flames lift from the ash like a phoenix, reviving life in her circular stride. Though history be a looping spiral, Redemption lies at the end of the line.

ø

*7th Night - Dedicated to "Advertising the Miracle":  
The Light in the Window*

As you stand lighting at the window, raise your eyes to look outside. Imagine you behold a face before you, some curious passerby. Then realize it is your own reflection, in the window glass your own eyes. What have you seen in the window's mirror? What miracle do you advertise?

The seventh night is dedicated to the window to the world. This is where the strength and purpose that I have nurtured within are celebrated in the sight of others. This is the show of lights that sparkles forth from self. It is the commandment of Hannukah to *pirsum hanes* — "to advertise the miracle," the miracle that was wrought in history, and that is wrought within me.

May my eyes behold the miracles  
shining forth from each passing soul.  
As I gaze into their windows may my own miracle  
be beheld as I behold.

ø

*8th Night - Dedicated to the Soul's Transcendence - The  
Rooftop*

Imagine yourself standing upon a rooftop, engaged in that ancient and timeless human act of watching the night fall. As the blue

deepens into black you witness a star shutter forth, and another, and another. The night invites each new star to step onto her stage. The darkness kindles stars upon the sky as surely as you will light the candles upon your menorah.

By the time the eighth star appears the entire sky releases her storehouse of sparks. Dazzled by stars beyond count, you are confronted by the infinity of space. Beholding this vast drape of stars from your rooftop perch, you touch the infinite depth of your own soul.

The eighth and final light. *Zot Hannukah*. The menorah stands luminous before us. Entirely ignited and complete. These 8 lights are the grand finale of the entire Hannukah journey. And finales, with all their pageantry, essentially mean finality.

And yet, eight can simultaneously represent the infinite. We know that God created the physical world in 7 days. The step to the eighth is thus a step into the transcendent. A step beyond the mere physical. Although this eighth night is the exuberant end of this holiday, it also hints at the limitlessness. Yes, there were eight nights of miraculous oil, but beyond that every day, every moment, is its own miracle.

The rooftop is the upper limit of the house. And yet, standing upon it, we are inspired to even greater heights. We look out upon the expanse of stars and are reminded of the limitless cosmos that encompasses us.

The eighth and final night is dedicated to transcendence. Just as the seven days of the week represent linear time, the number eight represents the transcendence of the linear.

### *Dedication: The Open Door to Redemption*

The *shamash* stands silent at the open door, silhouetted before an inner light. She ushers in a new guest, a new age, as the Messiah steps to her side. Having journeyed through self to but arrive at the selfless, the *shamash* has the final goal of discovery held solid in her outstretched hand.



On the eighth night we also acknowledge the *shamash*, the candle that lights all other lights. The *shamash* is the mystical servant, the symbol of service in the world. I dedicate this night to the self who serves, to the self who has striven for perfection for the sake of the greater whole.

She is the radiant Self of the selfless servant, open and extending, sharing light and life, like a flame never diminished with its spreading, giving forth freely of the source that lights us all.

The eighth night is dedicated to dedication, the dedication of the *shamash* to the service of humankind. She is an open invitation, the current which connects door to neighbor's door, house to neighbor's house, self to community, to nation, world and the utmost of the universe. The *shamash*, the supreme usher, welcomes us into our own House of Holies, and Redemption follows in its wake.

## *Hannukah Lights*

Another theme of Hannukah is the celebration of light. The holiday starts on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month of Kislev. Remarkably, the 25<sup>th</sup> word of the Torah is 'Ohr', meaning light.



## *The Brightness*

Celebrating  
the lights  
that don't stop  
no matter the  
drop off  
the cliff  
the tattered  
the ripped  
they're just the trough  
of the crest.  
NO worries  
the rest  
is blessed  
The Brightness got us  
held tight  
to her treasure  
chest

## *25 Sure Signs You're a Soldier for Light*

1. You enthusiastically enlist yourself in epic battles against the darkness.
2. Your wisest weapon: When you are confronted by evil you search for its root in yourself.
3. You respond to tragedies by creating more light.
4. You try not to hate. Not even the haters. Unless they actually do something hateful and then you hate what they did...and you really hate it when that happens.
5. You identify not as a body with a soul, but as a soul with a body.
6. You believe in Belief.
7. You used to play truth or dare – and now you just dare to be true.
8. You don't really need to 'go out' much, but you really do need to 'go in'.
9. You used to rebel by breaking the rules. Now you rebel by keeping the rules – universal rules, golden rules.
10. You tend to tend to things, particularly tender things.
11. You can't help but help the helpless.
12. You don't care how others look. You just care how others look at the world.
13. You hold paradoxes & dig dialectics. Example: You practice radical acceptance while being committed to change.
14. You have dreams and visions and they hold more sway on you than hard facts and newsfeeds.
15. You find yourself talking about said dreams at cocktail parties, in grocery store lines and other socially inappropriate places.
16. You like to listen. Especially to children. Yes, you savor listening to the world according to children...
17. Perhaps you are a professional listener. Probably you go to a professional listener.
18. You take your listening, your silence – and your jokes – very seriously.

19. You know that this is the best lifetime you've ever had – and live it up as such. #bestgilgulyet
20. You like to breathe consciously. Being aware of your autonomic nervous system functioning is your idea of fun.
21. You particularly like to breathe consciously before responding to inflammatory remarks.
22. You smile on purpose. You smile with purpose. Even at inflammatory remarks.
23. You don't care what you are called because you know you are being 'called'.
24. You look for spiritual SOULutions to worldly problems, and sincerely encourage others to as well.
25. Your battleground begins within. You fight with love.

## *The Humans of Hannukah*

Hannukah is a celebration of miracles. For me, I zip-line along the continuum of the miraculous and the mundane. Some moments I am the utterly confident embodiment of the fact that God is running the show. The One who pays my bills and rough drafts my scripts. The One who master-minds all of this magnificence. And then there are the equally convincing moments of smashing into a material world gone so very wrong; an authorless narrative where all that's certain is death and taxes.

And then there's Hannukah. In Yerushalayim. Nachlaot, to be precise. There's the dramatic amble down my alleyway lit up by flames. There's the nightly spiritual block-party out my door and I am once again so utterly floored by the miracles that house my days.

I mean, we have been brought home. And it wasn't a given either. It was a highly unlikely couldn't-have-dreamed-of-how-good-it-could-be kind of a thing. And it happened to me. And a whole unlikely slew of us too. Brought home from the farthest reaches of Gullus and Clueless. To take root. To take old family trees and f-i-n-a-l-l-y replant them in the soil of our souls. Every inch and inkling of my Israel reality is a miracle – pure and simple – and yet so hard to articulate with its deserved grace.

But at least I can try with a few snapshots of Hannukah here in my hood. I pray a glimmer can shimmer forth that gives word to this miraculous reality. So here we go. Step out the door and onto the street. Welcome to Nachlaot, the beaming forever-scheming-for-meaning heart of Jerusalem.

### **Take it to the streets:**

Mine is a thin-limbed alleyway sculpted with 150 year old Jerusalem stone. It's dark. Except for these little metal and glass houses of candles. Every twelve paces or so. Around here you don't just light candles in windows and leave it at that. You go well out of your way to bring the flames into the streets.

The most devoted houses are built with outdoor display cases just for these 8 days of the year.

**Oils well that ends well:**

I grew up impeccably assimilated in Memphis, Tn. My favorite Hannukah ritual was driving around looking at Christmas lights with a sugar-high on Hannukah gelt. I still get nostalgic for Christmas bling. And yet, these little humble flames put all that electricity to shame. As far as the soul is concerned, a thousand reams of electrical lights can't beat the soft timbre of these oil-based flickers. Now I do like to wax nostalgic, but it ain't wax that anoints the Messianic moments...it's oil yall. And we got it flowing with abundance down the Nachlaot streets.

**Make sure to make music:**

A half-block away marks the arrival at the Be'er Sheva Street Light Show featuring the Hullman Family Band. Rabbi Barak yearly pulls out his life-size Hannukiah with enough oil to last 'til morning. For hours he strums his guitar and lights up tune after tune. With all his 7 seven children to boot. There is a basket of instruments at his feet for all who pass by to join in the jubilee.

**The Golden Rule – Meet the neighbors:**

So by this point it's a party already. There's the families, the couples, the singles, but the golden rule on Hannukah – everybody mingles. When we moved in, we didn't even meet our next-door neighbors...UNTIL Hannukah hit and there we all are out lighting our candles together on the street. We bonded over a roaring round of Ma'oh Tzur and drank a few L'chaims. Boom, lifelong friends. Communing with community is just an undeniably holy thing.



## **Remember, We are the Miracles**

On Hannukah we aren't just witnessing miracles. We are the miracles. The humans of Hannukah. We are all zip-lining between the celestial and the mundane. The two opposites meet and mix in US. Just like the darkness and the light. The hidden and the revealed. All in all, it's all IN HERE. So Happy Lights from the Hub of the Holy.

## Tu B'Shvat

Tu B'Shvat – the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Shvat - is the Jewish New Year's for the trees.

There is a story told in kindergarten classes all over Israel at Tu B'Shvat. It is called the Birthday of the Almond Tree. It goes like this...

*It was the wet of winter. The forest was a flutter...for tomorrow was the birthday of the trees. The birds went from limb to limb singing, "Tomorrow is your birthday, we will all come to visit." The birds told this to the squirrels and worms and winds, and all the creatures of the forest agreed, "Yes, tomorrow we will all go to celebrate the birthday of the trees!"*

*The forest hummed with a great fuss of excitement. But as the sun set, the darkness fell upon the trees, and they started to tremble. For they knew that the next morning, all the creatures of the forest would gather around to see them, and – lo and behold – all would see that they were totally bare, totally naked, on their birthday. Dressed in no fine flower feather leaves. Only bare bark and embarrassment. They shivered with trepidation of the morning light that would reveal this.*

*The almond tree in particular was so upset by the prospect of the morning that she started to weep and wept terribly all night long, begging for help. Finally who should appear but the Angel of the Trees herself. She came*



*and comforted the almond tree and kissed her, all up and down her limbs. Come the morning light, as the forest came to gather to celebrate the birthday of the trees...they looked and saw that the almond stood there brilliantly bedecked in white blossoms. For every place that the angel had kissed, had become a white blossom. The whole forest rejoiced in the sight and a mighty celebration of the birthday of the trees was had.*

Sweet story, right? And yet, there's a jarring question here...What about the rest of the trees? The lucky almond tree got to wear a gorgeous Ralph Lauren white flower gown, but what about the other trees, did they just sulk there in the shadows, ashamed of their bareness?

We could just call this a simplistic kindergarten story, but I think there's something more to it...for it reflects an essential element of Tu B'Shvat.

In psychology, there is a stage of a child's development where the child – still unable to stand up on his/her own – supports herself against a mirror and pulls up on it to stand on her feet. In the mirror, she sees herself as a full standing individual. Wow! She realizes that she, too, can stand up like those two towers – mommy and daddy.

Of course, the very next minute she falls back down to the floor and continues crawling around. But for those brief moments, she saw herself as a standing being. Psychologically, it is precisely those fleeting seconds of vision that push the child on to that next stage of development: when the child sees for herself that standing up is possible, it actually becomes possible.

And so it is with the trees of the forest: when they see the almond tree all abloom, they realize that it is possible for them to bloom, too. They are also filled with the desire to become like the almond tree and burst into color. This is the glimpsing of possibility that is done on Tu B'shvat: an early glimpse of what's to come.

Here at the edge of winter the world is given small tastes of what is to come *in order that it may come*. This taste inspires us, teases us,

moves us forward. Thus, even as winter is still lingering, we are celebrating the spring.

This state of yearning mirrors the Jewish idea of the Moshiach. Moshiach is the ultimate human expression of holiness in the world. He stands as a towering example of the best of humanity – what we are all striving to be. Like the almond tree, Moshiach is the vision of what is possible for each of us. This poem plays off of the idea of this Messianic ideal that raises us up and pushes us forward in our own development.



## *Poetree*

A forest home in green ravine  
and in the sunset a mountain seen.  
The trees in root would upward grow  
towards mountain top and sunset glow.

And youngest leaves on fresh branch top,  
who taste the sky and first rain drop,  
did notice that the sun was blocked  
as it set behind the mountain rock.

Now these trees loved the sunset's hues  
and raged when mountain stole their view  
for tip- top leaves did see the blight  
of solid stone eclipsing light.

And yelled: "You wall, you color thief.  
You block our door and give us grief.  
Move out the way we've sights to see  
and as it is we just see thee!"

So years went on of bicker bad  
until one spring a vision was had  
by Lookout Leaf on tallest elm

in constant watch at highest helm.

"On Stoney Pass, oh desolate place  
of mountain top, I see a face.  
As if some sapling sprouts been born  
on that bear rock so weather worn.  
Quick call the birds to take make a search  
if truly there a tree could perch!"

And sure enough the birds did rise  
to circle mountain top surprise,  
for verily a tree had sprung,  
a tree no mountain could block from sun.

"Awake Old forest," Lookout Leaf said,  
"for life has sprung from mountain dead,  
a tree that shines in sunset red!"

"Be like the birds that will to fly,  
be like the winds that fill the skies  
and we will bring mountain's demise!"

So leaf and limb did tremble flutter  
in hopes to join their highest brother.

In one great surge stretch show of strength  
the trees did double in height and length  
and yearned down to earth's deepest core  
to raise to sky the forest floor.

From dark unknown a rumble came  
and quick as light  
all levels were the same.

And so it was a new land founded  
flat and grounded  
and the sun set all around it.

*Redwood in Tea Pot*

Ever felt like a redwood caught  
in a tea pot?  
Not quite what you ought  
to be?

Then write poetry  
and let your roots  
breathe  
- at the root of things

Crack the bottom of the pottery  
And dig deep

8

*Happy New Year*

May we know what we need to seed  
May we know how best to speak  
May we know how to hold  
the fragile balance  
May we know how to bend  
how to bow  
how to bough  
like a tree knows.

## *The Pearn*

I feel like a tree in an English garden  
Potted in a Grecian Urn.  
I sit polite with but one plight,  
“What if my roots begin to yearn?”



## **The Tree of Life & Limb**

Today I will read the papers published by the trees  
I will take slow small steps & stretch my limbs  
I will search my heart for her hidden terrorists  
and listen to the rant of the sun's rays on the rooftop

Today I will take a short break  
from numbers, news and miseries  
I will swing from the branches of the tree  
of life and limb  
and breathe in whirled peace

## *Karma Forest*

Tu B'shvat is the central Jewish holiday for environmental awareness. When it comes to the abuse of the environment, we are creating our own punishment. Or, as they say in the forest, "Karma's a birch".

A Power-saw  
You coming  
Across polluted stream.

A Power – saw  
You cunning  
To cut the cautious green.

A Power – saw  
With daggers  
Raised roaring  
'gainst the sky.

A Power-saw  
And punished you  
Your trees should  
split and die.

# Purim

Purim revolves around the idea of the revelation of the hidden. After all, the core text we read during Purim is the Megillat Esther. Megillah means ‘book’ but it also shares its root with *gilui*, meaning revelation. The word Esther is the heroine’s name, as well as a word that shares its root with *hester* meaning hidden. As such, the Megillat Esther can also be read as the holiday of the ‘Revelation of the Hidden’. It is a day of unprecedented celebration and joy for there is an ecstasy that comes with the dramatic disclosure of Truth.

It is also a day that celebrates paradox and over-turnings of all types. These two poems attempt to give word to the play of paradox and hiddenness that is embedded in Purim.

*Esther's Paradox*

Esther asked  
no rouge, nor oils  
no wax nor whiten cream

Nor asked she pride  
nor prude  
from God  
Nor withhold  
From the King

She asked no  
Answer from the Hidden  
But let the riddle ride  
She'd step up strong  
til she be bidden  
She'd show how  
she could hide.



## *The Hidden Queens*

We do not fear hot water.  
Like tea bags  
we just grow stronger  
the longer  
We are steeped.

We are like  
burning bushes  
- unafraid of torches.  
For the sake of spurring on some  
unsuspecting prophet  
in the right direction.  
Regardless of reason  
– for the sake of our children –  
we will gladly burst to flame.

No matter the singe of the centuries.  
No matter the rebukes and disparities...  
our leaves remain downright literary  
shameless, changeless, fearless  
& green.

Blind to bribes of pride...  
We do not fear being unseen.

It is our right to be moon-like  
dimmed or strengthened  
silver-slivered, full or crescent...  
The sun might be the one  
considered constant  
but we remain  
unchanged

CHAYA LESTER

Regardless of how he slants his  
light upon us  
we are flawless.  
Unphased by phases.  
Complete.  
We are burning bushes  
- unafraid of torches.  
Like tea bags,  
We grow stronger the longer  
We are steeped.

## *A Purim Rant on Modern Haman*

Haman is alive and well in the modern era. Assimilation is his modern-day gallows. This gallow is trendy, after all. It is sexy and adulated and how can you argue with the noble allure of universal love & acceptance of all peoples. Assimilation is quite simply the world's stealthiest PC Jewish genocide machine.

Whole genetic lines have already been wiped out before our sleepy eyes. These lines, mind you, marched straight from Sinai through the shtetls – survived pogroms and expulsions and Holocausts to persevere Jewishly for millennia. Until, that is, they strutted onto the American shores and simply blended away into oblivion. Millions of ancestral lines just quietly came to America to die.

With every disinterested millennial wandering off into something more exciting – Haman wins. We need a party. Badly. And not just any party. But a meaning-rich psycho-spiritually expansive party.

This whole Jewish trip is going to apathy itself into oblivion if people don't wake up and start to dress up. That's right. Dress up already. Get ridiculous. Get serious about getting ridiculous.

Party – hard. Get Lit!

To all you Jewish hand-wringing adults: be wild and rambunctious. Be fascinated. Be turned on and tripped out by Torah. A thousand Federation meetings strategizing Jewish continuity won't amount to beans if YOU don't get drunk this Purim. And not just decorously tipsy on the sidelines. I mean "sloppy-messy-out-of-your-mind" drunk. Have some frickin' Jewish fun already.

And so too to the tight-laced Orthodox crew. Start taking your frivolity seriously! Have some religiously ordained fun. Break out of the OrthoBox this Purim. Bring down a vaster consciousness into the *dalet amot* of Jewish law.

Because without depth Jewish fun, apathy sets in and Haman grins. I

mean, what's the point of Jewish continuity anyway if it's just a monotonous burden schlepped out over generations? That kind of Jewish experience is simply an insult to our magnificent tradition.

And if you don't know what I'm talking about then dear God please book a ticket and come visit us in Israel for Purim. There will be a thousand freakishly-costumed mythological creatures on my street. It will be a Burning Man meets Judean city street rave. It will be deep and mind-altering and worth being born for.

Our children will watch us dress up and get crazy and they will yearn for a time when their adult Jewish expression will be so wild and funky and free. They will grow into their Judaism and will never dream of leaving it. Not for Christmas trees and Easter eggs. Not for even the loveliest of universal dreams. They will cherish it and uphold it because it has thrilled them and gifted them with wonder and joy. - Why would anyone want to discontinue that kind of thing?

And here is where we meet the truth of truths, my friends. Because actually, you can not not have Jewish continuity. Because Judaism is its own mystical force beyond measure. It is God's very own poetry. It is God's own bated breath that rests in our mouths and enlivens our limbs.

It will prevail, whether through you or some other avenue. As Mordechai tweeted to Esther, "Who knows. perhaps it was for this that you were made Queen".

So, please, take your partying seriously this Purim.  
The Jewish people is yours to save.  
— Let's feast.

## *Pesach (Passover)*

Passover is the full moon Pilgrimage Festival of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan. It is a spring holiday that celebrates freedom.

The Hebrew name for Passover is *Pe-Sach*, which is symbolically read as *Peh Sach* – the mouth that speaks. Indeed, on Seder night the retelling of the story of our people’s enslavement is nothing short of a national therapeutic ritual. Psychology has shown us the necessity of using speech and expression to best process through the pains and traumas of our lives. Our yearly processing through re-telling has been an essential path of healing and empowerment for our people over millennia.

At the same time, Seder night also offers us a ritual space for processing through our personal enslavements. Speech is the ideal vehicle for generating our personal freedom in tandem with the national freedom tale.

*Re-Sach - The Mouth that Speaks*

We need to Speak  
to be a Spoke  
of the wheel  
that makes the world go.

So come to circle  
to talk about  
your torn and tattered.  
And through this speech  
you will sew  
your sinews back together.

Through thread and needle  
of circles & syllables...  
craft the cloth  
to garb your soul.

Be a spoke  
of the wheel  
that makes the world Go.

Speak for yourself.  
Be Spoke  
& Sew.

## *Passover Cleaning*

One of the classic cultural rituals of Passover is the massive house cleaning that precedes it. It offer a paradoxical path of restriction that grants an uncommon taste of freedom.



Love it or hate it you can't escape it.  
Might as well make it somethin' sacred,  
Celebrated.  
– It's all about how you frame it.

And I'll tell you how...  
'Cause I've donned the gloves and gown  
and crown me with a tin crown.

Because I'm like Moses goin' down to Egypt.  
This kitchen is my Pharaoh  
and I'm gonna defeat it.  
Gonna clean it 'til it shines like Venus.  
I mean it – I'm a Passover genius.

Got my squirt bottle in high throttle  
- better believe it.  
Gonna cook a brisket  
'cuz I got masses on the guest list.

I'm sleepless and shameless  
& this hametz is heinous.

Don't blame us.  
We're the world's most famous  
obsessive compulsives  
on the A-list.

But matza medicates us and uplifts this

downtrodden nation of misfits.

Did I mention  
I got a tinfoil kitchen?  
We give new meaning to anal-retention.

But you gotta appreciate the vision.  
Stop your kvetchin' over cleaning.  
This is your mansion  
your temple, your mission!  
Scrub it with a passion  
– for God's in the details.  
We're living like a fairy tale.  
Following bread crumbs like a trail.

So, yeah, Freud might say were outrageous  
And diagnose us with a neurosis  
but he never knew the sweetness of Shabbas  
in the land that God promised.  
Never knew how real freedom  
is born out of bondage.

So start up your sweepin'  
and I'll see you smiling wide  
on the other side  
of freedom.



## *Free...to Serve*

Let's face it,  
we are histories latest greatest liberals liberated.  
We are a people of endless means  
to do and be  
whatever the F (and F stands for freedom)  
that we want to be.

We are free to craft our wildest  
self-styled-est set of dreams.  
As we walk amid twin pillars of miracles  
that burst through material's endless *seems*.

With our AC cloud by day  
and our TV blaze by night  
we hear DVDs of symphonies  
atop chariots of SUVs...  
But did we get the message right?

We are whatever we want to be.  
But who do you choose to be?  
For the purpose of all this  
unprecedented & historic  
freedom...  
The singular purpose,  
is Service.

Our task is to have impact....

God won't ask if we stood with the great  
but if we sat  
with the broken at the back.

Did we align our greatest wants  
with the world's direst needs?  
Did we use our undeserved freedom to serve humanity?

Nobles oblige...

Let us desire service  
like a smoker smolders for a cigarette,  
like a drunkard hunkers for a drink.  
Let us become addicts of attentiveness  
to the world's grittiest Needs.

For "Let my people go!"  
is not the rally call  
the movies told you so.  
-Not for our man Moses.  
His divinely-given vision ends  
not just with freedom  
but freedom with a mission.

So go ahead and finish his sentence...  
"Let my people go  
...that they may **serve** Me."

Read your Bible & your Eric Fromm.  
For the point of true freedom  
is freedom **To**  
not just freedom **From**.

Freedom to be holy  
To obey Highest Decree.  
Freedom to be servants  
not of Pharaohs but of the Cosmos  
and the hoboes, the hungry, the mean.

So don't replace your past master  
with another king in a castle...  
Rather be a vassal to the sky.  
Take the stuff of this new-found freedom  
and be of service  
if you truly want to Fly.

## *Hear the Call*

They say that the bush burned  
not only for Moses  
but for anyone  
who would simply  
NOTICE.

Simply step aside  
from their daily grind  
and notice  
the quiet light that  
burns inside.

And know this:  
We need not be consumed  
by life's smoky plumes.  
We can endure most anything  
we set our souls to.

For we are the sacred brush  
of paradox and calling.

Sit with the things that sear  
your leaves  
and when you hear the call  
- be prepared  
to leave.

*These are the Faces*

*Dedicated to all the children born first-generation on Israeli soil*

These are the faces  
of the children  
born on the other side of the Story.

The ones passed over;  
to where the past is over.

The ones who know in their bones  
that next year will be in Jerusalem,  
just like the last one  
and how, for them, it's been all along...

These are the ones who inherit full freedom.  
The ones with Hebrew tongues and new songs.  
Where bitterness is a story about ancestors.

These are the ones  
the prophets promised would come.

## *Feel Free*

Here's to freedom of every flavor.

Free-2b-dumb...as a doorknob - that opens wide.

Free to fall flat...as a matzah - sanctified.

Free to be broken...as an Afikomen.

Free to be bitter...as maror - and let the bitter be.

Free to be so haroset sweet that we're sappy, sticky, messy with accepting.

Free to be split like the Reed Sea... like atoms with nuclear energy.

Free to sit and tell stories all night

of how we got here and

wow, we got here.

Free to leave

Free to believe.

## *Elijah's Cup*

She kept a corner of her cupboard bare  
to remind her of what wasn't there  
singing "The Righteous will have their share"  
as she dusted the spot with her long brown hair.

The spot was for the missing kiddush cup  
which was painted upon the board where she supped  
and many an eye claimed it stood straight up  
though its golden facade still alluded their touch.

And though her bare cabinets held no books  
it was plain to those with eyes to look  
that the holy hung from the flower pot hooks  
around the kitchen where she nimbly cooked.

How her Sabbath soup could feed a dozen troops  
they'd tread on the heels of the trill of her flute  
and stream from the hills in their rest-a-day suits  
to cover her porch with a patchwork of boots.

For it was said you could reach heaven through her backyard gate  
though the front door opened to a much better fate  
for they'd sing and tell stories till the hour grew late  
recounting the deeds of Elijah the Great.

She'd wink and point out her Seder plate  
-just a scrap of cloth 'neath a paper weight-  
which she claimed no common hand could create  
for it was given in a visit from Elijah the Great.

As one night she had seen in a crystal clear way  
that the Prophet was passing her humble gateway.  
So she ran through her garden to ask him to stay  
and linger he did till the soft break of day.

But before his visit was finally through  
the cup and plate he magically drew

and promised with expression true  
that he'd soon return to fill the two.

So with these tools of flawless faith,  
Elijah's kiddush cup and Seder plate,  
she lived a happy-ever-after fate  
of a life of song sung in sacred wait.

## *Miriam's Well*

There is a modern tradition to have a Cup of Miriam set on the Seder table next to the Cup of Elijah. It is filled with water to remind us of the Well of Miriam that followed the Jewish people as they wandered in the desert. Miriam's Well was the gift of staying spiritually hydrated even in our wanderings. The Midrash says that this well relocated to the Sea of Galilee when the Jews entered the Land of Israel and is still there today.



When we weren't looking  
our drinks were spiked  
with waters from the Well of Miriam.

So surreptitious  
and sneaky was the hand  
that held the flask  
that we dare not ask how  
that mystic cocktail  
ended up in our glass.

But God don't we know how  
we are blessed.  
Watered by the mythic  
Mother of miracles  
Fearless of the desert weather.  
Wet forever.

Thank you, sister Miriam,  
For your fabled faucet  
that keeps us hydrated and free  
even in our driest & direst of wanderings.



## *Exodus: An Instruction Manual for Escaping Abuse*

The Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt is perhaps the world's most famous metaphor – and guide – for how to move out of a toxic relationship. It is particularly potent medicine for anyone caged in an abusive relationship. The Biblical phrase the 'House of Bondage' (*beit avadim*) is a striking image because the truth is that any home where there is abuse becomes a house of bondage.

The term 'bondage' is also illuminating because in any abusive home there is an essential BOND at work. That is the unyielding bond between the abuser and the abused. That bond is a shackle to which they are both imprisoned. That essential bond must be identified and broken. One way it is shattered is in the very telling of one's story of enslavement.

In the entire text of the Exodus, it never once says that the Hebrews protested their enslavement. For over 100 years they don't so much as make a whimper of complaint, much less a lunge at rebellion. Noticeably absent from the story is any hint of the slaves' selfhood or expression.

The slave is notoriously speechless, helpless. That identity is encrusted and reinforced with each new put-down, smack-down, or silencing. And yet it is up to the slave to break the bond...for the Pharaoh never will. The first way to do that is by telling your story.

For those who are enslaved: Tell your story. Seek a Moses, an Aaron, a Miriam, a therapist, a friend. You deserve an entire tribe of support. The biblical formula of freedom is real...and there is a Promised Land on the other side.

## *My Pharaoh*

*"The truth will set you free...but first it will piss you off." Gloria Steinem*

I share this next poem in the spirit of the Pesach theme of the power of speech; particularly the giving of expression to that which has pained us. It is about my own enslavement to the Pharaoh of an abusive relationship. It is vulnerable, and yet empowering. I share it with a prayer that all such enslavements will cease.<sup>1</sup>



Let me tell you my story  
My Egypt-fleeing  
My finding-freedom  
My facing-demons  
My truth.

It is a story of deception & seduction  
A narrative swollen  
with abuse.

I sit in stunned recollection  
Of the Egypt from which I have  
wrested my soul.

See my shrunk purple hands  
That served him  
Will you hold them?

---

<sup>1</sup> Statistics show that 95% of reported domestic violence cases are men abusing women, while 5% are women abusing men. As such, I use the model where the abuser is male and the abused is female. But of course abuse is not gender-specific. Women also abuse men, or even other women. There are other variations. But given the statistics, in these personal poems, I address the dynamic of abusive men/abused women.

And this tongue rotten  
From silencing his secrets...  
Will you hear them?

Can you hear this story?  
Will you dare to dream with me a better ending  
An ending of not just my slavery  
But an end of slavery itself.

An end of women enslaved to men  
An end of men enslaved to addictions  
An end of the vicious cyclics  
of abuse.

Perhaps you have wrangled a Pharaoh  
Or two  
Of your very own.

Witnessed his web of manipulations  
Seen his vast deceptions  
Perhaps you heard rumors  
Dismissed hearsay  
With an air of compassion.

But Pharaohs play off of our righteousness.  
Our goodness  
Is a knife in their hands  
By which they daily carve  
Their sick designs  
into our very skin.

And I bleed still  
From his blade  
Even though I had the will to leave  
The memory of slavery  
Will be forever engrained.

And at the very least

CHAYA LESTER

I must speak it here  
at this milestone of memory...  
That the cycle of slavery may  
end with me.

Or at least evoke a plague or two  
Upon some unsuspecting Pharaoh  
And set free  
another slave.

May my telling help another woman  
To step out of her grave.

## *Another Slave Set Free*

One good thing that was born from my own enslavement to an abusive relationship was my ability to empathize with, help and heal others who found themselves in similar straits.

As a psychotherapist I have worked with many women struggling their way out of houses of bondage. I wrote this poem after receiving the kind of email every therapist working with abuse-victims hopes to receive.<sup>2</sup>

§

*"Oh my God, I finally did it.  
Finally went to the police  
Finally filed that thick report  
about my husband's abuse  
because yes-it-was-abuse  
a-decade-of-abuse  
felt-like-a-lifetime-of-abuse  
thought-it-would-never-end-abuse  
I can finally call it abuse.*

*Got my Dad to pick up the kids  
my brother to pack up his clothes  
my lawyer to file for divorce.  
Picked up my own pride  
from the floor  
to wounded knees  
to wobbly legs  
to lengthening spine  
to long breathe  
to leave that corral where  
it had covered in fear  
for so many years.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Details have been altered to protect the identity of the victim.

*I am free."*

I read this email and literally collapsed into tears.  
Shocked myself with sudden sobbing.  
Shoulders heaving and forehead heavy as a stone  
on the table sobbing.  
Sobbing  
for her 6 children  
and another on the way  
sobbing  
in sheer amazement  
of the sheen of her wings  
set free from that cage

Sobbing for every time  
she held it in  
when he pushed her, punished her  
badgered her, stole sleep from her  
siphoned strength from her  
sucked pride from her.

Sobbing for that step when she sang a solo in the concert  
- though he told her she had no voice.

Sobbing for that step when she took a bus to the job interview  
- though he had hidden the car keys .

Sobbing with release and with gratitude.  
Sobbing for all that was lost  
and for all that she will gain  
from this courageous mother-bear  
thrash of strength.

Sobbing in thanks  
For the freeing of another slave

*Here's to all the women who set themselves free....and all the ones who will.*

## *In the Merit of the Women*

The Sages tell us that it was in the merit of the women that the Hebrews were redeemed from Egypt. So let's look at the first women who appear in the Exodus story - Shifra and Puah. These were the plucky midwives who refused to follow Pharaoh's decree of slaughtering newborn babies. These women are also understood to be Miriam and Tzipora, the mother and sister who nurtured histories' great social agitator, Moses himself.

These midwives employ a crafty tactic for the defiance of Pharaoh. He demands that they kill every male child. The text tells us they fear God, blatantly defy the command and kill no children. What is so strategic about their approach is that they don't simply refuse Pharaoh to his face. They knew that that path, honorable as it may be, would have only led to their own death and Pharaoh's choosing someone else to enact his murderous plans. So they pretend to follow orders; pacifying Pharaoh, protecting themselves and saving the children in the process.

When Pharaoh calls them back to ask why they have disobeyed him they plead powerless, saying that the Hebrew women are lively and deliver the children before their arrival. Pharaoh apparently believes them and retains their services. It seems that these plucky midwives have simply talked their way out of trouble.

It is no wonder then that in reward for their defiance, the text tells us that God rewards the midwives with houses. These gift houses, as enigmatic as they may be, make perfect symbolic sense. For midwives are essentially symbols for not just the technical birthing of a child, but the entire sphere of actions and intentions that usher in and house new life.

Midrash Hagadol illustrates this idea beautifully in its weaving of a story of Pharaoh sending guards to capture the delinquent midwives. It says that God saves the women by turning them into the beams of a home. The guards search the house to no avail, for Shifra and Puah have become embedded in the house itself. They are the beams, the

fortifying forces that uphold the entire structure. The midwives thus embody the home and all that it symbolizes: family, inter-relatedness, communication, and internality. For our homes are the internal spheres from which we impact the outer world.

Indeed, in this episode, these internally-oriented women are called upon by Pharaoh himself to become players in the external arena of power and politics. They rise to the task and become social activists on the national scene. Their act of defiance impacts the entire people and allows for the very birthing of Moses and Aaron. They are the abolitionists that enable the redemption of an entire people and the righting of a massive social wrong.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out so eloquently, their story is “the first recorded instance of civil disobedience... [setting a precedent] that would eventually become the basis for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Shifra and Puah, by refusing to obey an immoral order, redefined the moral imagination of the world”. History's proud line of social activists and conscientious objectors can trace their source back to these righteous midwives stand against the powers that be.

In the poem below, Puah herself calls for a redefinition of what it means to be a freedom fighter. She reframes agitating for social justice in more internal terms. She is an activist who does not so much take to the streets, as she takes to the kitchen sink, maintaining that all great battles for justice have their locus in the living room.



## *Quah*

Like freedom fighters  
who pray with their feet  
I protest for inner-peace.

Though paraplegic in comparison  
to prodigious heels of powerful men,  
my prayerful wheels  
spin tales of inner-freedom  
and mindful treatment  
of children and kin.

I commit to calm the din of crying infants  
with the easy clicking of my teeth.  
I speak for those who do not yet know how to speak.

My freedom fighting is not political,  
That task is for a hardier class  
of Jewish girl.

For me - the Egyptian fiend  
is personal  
for the Pharaohs I dethrone  
rule the halls of each of our homes.

In the inner-alcoves of a private despair  
that petrifies the children  
and paralyzes the parents  
that imprisons our finest hours  
of family commitment and contentment.

I prefer to peddle wares  
of wars-well-avoided  
where everyone wins  
through carefully worded  
apologies and the timely  
airing of grievances

between friends.

For cowering beneath the pyramids  
of needs – my fiends  
are the menacing insecurities of adolescents  
and the lethal bickerings of parents,  
the noisome whines of needy toddlers,  
and the all-too-common-household-hollers  
that oppress our most precious commodities  
of family.

My enemies crouch quietly beneath  
the crumbs on the living room carpet.  
A beast between the sheets  
of a cold-shouldered bedroom  
where partners sleep  
unconscious  
and deeply out of tune  
with the exquisite call  
of their common dreams.

I come to loosen the shackled lips  
of fathers and mothers  
that they may better utter  
their astounded praise  
at the miracle of a house full  
of filthy shoes, spilled soup  
and their childrens' most innocent mistakes.

My task is to counter the  
armor-clad offensive  
against love and friendship  
- to incite a protest against  
the enslavement of a trillion  
inner prophets of tranquility  
whose gentle-tongued souls  
are daily buried beneath  
straw burdens of poor communication  
and tossed out with the trashed

afternoons of a mother's impatience.

I come to play the Moses of relational redemption  
in the face of a sink-full of grimy resentments.

And so I call forth all fellow  
freedom fighters for inner-transformation -  
midwives with wise hands  
toting Torahs, toting infants, toting pens.  
All prayer-footed-protesters  
come & herald in  
emotional freedom from the Pharaonic foe  
and let us birth our children  
into peaceable homes.

For when our houses enshrine tranquility  
then outer-world will follow inner-lead  
and rock-hard hearts  
will soften grips  
and all that's enslaved  
will lithely slip  
into the soft of freedom found  
and take your shoes off  
to walk around  
for our houses are the  
hallowed ground  
from which God speaks.

So call me Puah,  
who quiets the cries  
of children, slaves  
and the Pharaohs  
inside.

# *Shvi Shel Pesach*

## *(7<sup>th</sup> Day of Passover)*

The seventh day of Passover is its own mini-holiday within Passover. It marks the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea. *Shirat Hayam* – the Song at the Sea – is sung in exultation after the miraculous parting.

In truth, though, there are two songs sung. One by Moses and the other by Miriam. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Hassidic writer, the Meor V'Shemesh, shares a powerful paradigm shifting commentary that contrasts these two songs.

He bases his writings on the Kabbalistic principle of linear verses circular consciousness. According to Kabbalah, line consciousness is essentially masculine. It is hierarchical, progress-oriented, future-directed, competitive; the epitome of the world's current state of affairs. Line consciousness correlates with Moses' song, rendered in the future tense of the opening lines to the song, “Az Yashir – I *will* sing”.

Circle consciousness, on the other hand, is egalitarian, rooted in the present, supportive, non-hierarchical. It is a feminine paradigm. And more than that, it epitomizes Messianic consciousness, the glowing state of affairs towards which our world evolves. Miriam's song is sung in the present tense with women dancing in circular form. Each woman stands equidistant from the center, all with equal access to God.

In a circle, everyone is holy and wholly rooted in their own source of wisdom. These circle-enacting women, according to the Meor V'shemesh, were able to access a higher revelation than Moses, history's greatest prophet.

Why? Because something immense happens when we circle. We know of the importance of the circle from teachings in the Kabbalah...but more importantly, we know it in our own bones. Circle-consciousness is humanities next frontier and most pressing endeavor. It is feminine. It is Messianic. It is essential to our globe and our mission on it.

I bless us all that we may each in our own way taste the fruits of circle consciousness flooding into and rounding out the angles of our all-too-linear world.

ò

## *Circle Dance*

Here at the sea  
we offer limb to reach beyond  
the limitations  
of a linear world gone wrong.

Here we are egalitarian and elegant  
Responsive and penetrant.

For the secret encoded  
in our circular chorus  
will speak for generations  
of a new paradigm of being

Of how to be connected and conscious  
even amidst conflict  
with a promise of resolution  
through attunement

to the circle of life  
to which we are all enchained.

And our dance will  
evoke an approaching era  
when the ailments born  
of institution & competition  
will dissolve into  
equality.

When common dignity  
for all will incorporate  
regardless of position  
on the no-longer-existent ladder  
of hierarchy.

Our circle will model  
what it is to be fully embodied in the present  
- a servant to the womb of the Moment.

With no future tense  
impending & impeding  
the flowing rhythm of our spin.

Here we are free  
from the hamperings of  
will-be's or has-been's.

Temporality is our temple  
in this circle  
where all is ample  
and transparent.

Ours, a choreography  
of equality  
inclusivity  
& bringing all-of-me  
into this welcome  
crucible of community.

## *Raise Your Voices*

In a related vein to the teaching on circle consciousness, Passover offers a strong vision of what happens when people (and in this case, women) gather together in creative expression. The women brought their drums out of Egypt with them because they had faith that they would have cause to celebrate. Note that omanut/art has the same root as emunah/faith. The women danced, played drums, sang, channeled. They modeled for us being creative, expressive, bold.

*“How did the women of this generation know to take tambourines out of Egypt, when there was barely enough time to take food? The righteous women of the generation were certain that God would perform miracles in the desert, so they brought the tambourines out of Egypt.” ~ Rashi – Exodus 15:20*

⚡

Women raise your voices  
in rightful raucous.

Beat drum, sing song  
and stun anyone  
whoever called  
you too timid  
to sing.

For the Spirit alone  
instructs your lips and  
limbs as to the allowance  
of their bend  
and propriety is defined by  
the prophetess  
who abides within.

For she will be the one to pull the covers  
of your tresses  
to dress her modest  
as she launches

into her loudest  
campaign - for you to stand and  
dance majestic on histories'  
well-sanded stage.

Sisters, this is why we wear our drums  
ready on our shoulder blades...  
to seize this moment at the sea  
that it may become a fable famous  
and decree.  
For as long as history  
needs a precedent  
to utter unabashed  
riffs of praise.

Here we are held  
responsible to sing  
of the God-drenched things that  
we have seen.

And we will whirl castles out of sand  
with our dance  
unhampered  
unashamed  
entranced.

For we handmaids  
have a mandate to hand-make  
our own music,  
to move muscles  
and meet quotas  
of creative output  
through inspiration  
and through struggle.

To sway on sand-dunes  
undone by a tune.

To be emboldened



in our God-given right  
to self-expression.

Embodying ideas  
and idealizing emotion  
invoking insight  
at the lips of the ocean.

Holding up mirrors  
like the windows of waves  
-reflecting each other  
face to effervescent face.

And so it was, is and will be  
in one graceful gesture  
at the parting sea  
that the women set out  
with clapping feet  
to circle in a consciousness  
of creativity.

Let us ignite each other's  
dormant scorch of  
dreams.

## *Moshiach Seudah*

An additional theme of Shvi Shel Pesach is connected to the idea of Geulah – the final Redemption. In Hasidic circles there is a tradition to mark the last hours of Passover with a Moshiach Seudah – a meal celebrating the idea of Moshiach and the ushering in of the Geula.

Geula is an ideal that is held in contrast to that of Gulus (or in Sephardi pronunciation Galut). Gulus means Exile and refers to both the physical/geographical exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel as well as the spiritual/inner exile of our consciousness from a godly consciousness. Geula, on the other hand, means Redemption and represents an arrival at both the Land of Israel as well as the redeemed ‘godly’ consciousness of Israel and all it symbolizes.

Shvi Shel Pesach focuses us on our deepest yearnings for Geula, as well as invites us to notice the ways in which we are already on this side of the Gulus. The recognition of our return to the land of Israel is an ever-present gift we now have access to. This is a poem about the yearning for Geula, as well as the yearning to be able to give expression to the Geula that is already here.

## *This Side of Gulus*

I am agitated  
For just the slightest slice  
of expression of this new-found reality.

I want to pen the lines of my  
people in poetry  
Instead of pining in lines  
at the grocery.

Instead of all this thick mundane  
and money-to-make  
I want to agitate  
To narrate  
this long-awaited state...

To write like Maya Angelou would do...  
Wistful with a whiskey  
and spilling a masterpiece  
In long hand  
With a deck of cards  
In a hotel room I have rented  
for that very purpose

I want to narrate all this brightness  
on this side of Gulus.

... *More Yearning for Redemption*

All I want is to fix this old broken junk-shop of a world.  
I just want to fix the heck out of it.  
And quick.

Before the sunken flowers fan  
out their familiar reek in the kitchen sink.

Before the many monsters dance  
on the lawn - drunk on blood  
and claim the moonshine  
as their own.

I've had enough  
with the ponderous pace  
of Redemption  
that comes dawdling  
round the mountain  
with tortoise shells and unring bells.

Though it may lounge long  
with the hound dogs on the porch  
I know this Saving-Grace is a Porsche.  
With many roads to torch.  
Many roads to torch.

So come quicker, sweet Redeemer  
and til then - let us tinker  
well with the knobs and whistles  
in this junk shop  
made for fixers.

Or else, what are all these slivers  
of silver<sup>3</sup> yearning for?

---

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word Kesef - silver – has the same root as kisuf – yearning.

## *Pesach Sheni*

Pesach Sheni comes exactly one month after Pesach, on the 15th of Iyar. It is a quiet, often overlooked holiday. And yet, it is a ritual that offers a lot of strength to those who need it.

I, for one, always seem to need it...

Passover is sometimes hard on me. Hard on my faith, my body, my nerves. Hard on my marriage, too. I can't seem to make it to Seder night without a resounding chorus of my own low moans of protest. Protest against the toil of it all. The cleaning. The cooking. The taking care of everyone and everything...again. Another round of exhausting rites and ritual, long nights and a few too many fights. I inevitably seem to miss out on God along the way.

So I am particularly appreciative of Pesach Sheni. The Second Passover. The Holiday of Second Chances. This is the replay holiday, reserved for those who were unable to partake in the Pascal lamb on time. Exactly one month later, thankfully, we get another chance to re-tackle this whole freedom march, this time from a place of a little less stress and a lot more perspective.

Just get out a piece of matza and sit down with whoever you lost along the way. Ask for a second chance; from God, your spouse, your self, your friend. After all, second-chances have their own particular flavor of freedom. It's richer, more subtle and complex than the first taste could ever have been.

*Again*

Let's try this again.  
To connect the *daats*  
– to know each other  
Biblically, mythically, thoroughly  
with all of our incompletes.

Let's bring back the mystic,  
because I missed-it  
a month ago  
in all the madness  
of the Exodus.  
I just flat-out missed it.

I was too bloody tired  
and you  
were strained  
and the table was painted  
with the sweat and toil of slavery  
though we played like we were free  
for the sake of the children,  
didn't we?  
– Masterfully.

We were as distant as  
planets spinning  
in their usual orbits  
– light years between us.

'Do not worry, we will loop  
back around  
to eclipse each other again'  
– I said.

We are like the moon and the sun  
that don't ever really touch  
except every once

in a while  
 on a starry night  
 one sphere to another  
 still so distant  
 but stacked with precision  
 in a line of connection  
 and perfect symmetry.

It is all about our perspective,  
 isn't it?  
 When the M of me stops  
 gazing down and  
 turns heavenward instead  
 to become 'We'.  
 Just lift your head.  
 Come cast your shadow over me  
 with nothing but forgiveness  
 between us.  
 The close flat facts of our connection  
 plain as any page  
 of matza reads.

You can bring the charoset  
 for sweetness between us  
 and I will bring the maror  
 to memorialize the distance.  
 We will sandwich them  
 just like the sages.

Forgive me.  
 I was lost in my own loss,  
 my own trauma.  
 I carried the old bones  
 of Joseph, you know.  
 Like a mother who buries  
 her priestly sons  
 in silence.  
 I lost my chance  
 to celebrate you.

But I won't lose my chance  
to beg forgiveness  
and to press with compassion  
that eternal reset button  
on our friendship.

So let's try this again.  
With no pomp and circumstance.  
No children, no guests, no friends.  
Just a page of matza  
and four open palms  
between us.

“And with a strong hand  
we were brought out of Egypt.”

You are my Exodus.  
My strong hand.  
Your forgiveness  
is my freedom.  
Our love is my holy land.  
Let's leave Egypt  
Again.



# *The Month of Iyar*

The next chapter of Jewish holidays are a complete package unto themselves. For over the next seven weeks – from Passover to Shavuot – we experience a chain of holidays that are particularly poignant and vibrant, especially to those abiding in the Land of Israel. They include the holidays of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom Hazikaron (Remembrance Day), Yom Haatzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), Pesach Sheni, Lag B'Omer, and Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day). All of these holidays fall during the month of Iyar (except for Holocaust Remembrance Day which is the 28th day of Nissan, a few short days before Iyar).

For those living in the Land (particularly in Jerusalem) each of these holidays are punctuated with a slew of activity... including kids getting out of school – again and yet again. Just as the fall season (spanning the entire month of Tishrei) witnesses a month's worth of holidays from Rosh Hashanah to Simchat Torah, the span of time between Passover to Shavuot has its own marathon of celebration and commemoration. Much of it is focused on the new historical miracle of the return to the Land of Israel.

I pray these poems can capture the magnificence of this Israeli journey through time for it is an unprecedented experience that is utterly unique to our times.

# *From Ha Shoah: Holocaust Remembrance*

There's a saying in the world of professional Jewish educators, "When it comes to Jewish identity, there's no business like Shoah business." I.e. - there is nothing like the Holocaust to engender a sense of Jewish identity.

Stinging and tragic though that statement may be, I myself am a walking testimony to its truth. A mildly-affiliated, wildly-assimilated American teen, I had zero interest in the banal goings-on of my local synagogue. The only thing about Judaism that was even remotely interesting to me was the Holocaust.

Now I wish I could say that I got turned-on to Judaism because of some joyful Shabbat song or a bite of a really finely done potato-kugel; but it wasn't. The thing that first pulled me in was the near-genocide of my people and this sudden vast sense of history, gravitas, and responsibility towards them. My doorway in came through shared mourning, shared grief. Because something happens when we mourn together. When we weep together, we are woven into family.

When we share mourning, we share housing. When we mourn together we become mishpacha.

## *The Pittance of Admission*

This House of Israel is in mourning.  
 We sit upon the floor and weep  
 the mirrors are black,  
 our robes are slashed,  
 and leather-less our feet.

Our clan is clad in ash and sack  
 a dirge between our bones  
 a wail of anguish unabated  
 rises from this home.

The pittance of admission here  
 is expression of lament  
 —authentic, rasp and risen  
 mangled and intense.

Here the graves are multiple  
 and flanked with stacking stones  
 which could, perhaps, be launched at enemies  
 but sit instead in memory of what is gone.

Our weaponry is our weeping;  
 our protection is our prayer  
 our strength is born when we gather to mourn  
 made siblings by shared despair.

And in lamentation lies our comfort  
 and in this meeting, our home is built  
 founded firm on the raw resilience  
 of the families of the killed.

But hear this, our love is  
 mightier than our anger!  
 For we are a nation of mothers  
 and fathers and priests.

CHAYA LESTER

We build houses out of war-stones  
and change cemeteries into sanctuaries  
with our songs of hope.

A knock upon the lintel lets in the shiva guests.  
God shuffles in amongst them  
and bends to offer His condolences.

And in the madness of the mourning  
and the anguish so immense  
a dwelling is suddenly erected  
– regal & resplendent.

And a sacred space is made  
amidst the family who endures  
such loss and grief.

And our household stands strong  
amidst the weeping throng  
and God's Presence refuses to leave.

Our household stands strong amidst the weeping throng  
and God's Presence refuses to leave.

## *Shoah*

It's this fathomless  
 deep crease  
 that will not be decreased  
 even by time  
 and a hundred-thousand ceaseless therapies.

It is a part of us now – this haunting –  
 and we can only hope to make the most  
 of the least...  
 to make the best of the worst  
 thing that could possibly be.

At the very least  
 I see how we walk sturdy with knowing  
 we were the ones willing  
 to give up everything  
 to lose life, limb & children  
 just because we're *yidden*.

And even if we weren't Consciously willing  
 to be the world's archetypal victims  
 deep down in our souls  
 it seems we signed an agreement  
 intoned in bones  
 at the dawn of time  
 to be a human sacrifice  
 for a globe-full of guilt.

And perhaps it isn't just a Christian  
 metaphor after all  
 that he 'died for our sins'  
 that thin-as-bone Jewish man  
 hanging there...hammered in.

That crucifixion is no fiction.  
 It is the black and white facts of

Jewish history.  
It is our mission - hidden  
in plain sight.

We did it then and would again  
– as the world demands –  
offer ourselves up  
death-defying and doin' just fine,  
thank you very much.

So bring on your hatred, cruel world.  
Your very best BDS BS  
your slyest Hamas  
your vilest lies and ISIS  
don't surprise us...

Hit us with your best shot  
and we will hit it out the stadium.  
Just like then...  
the only difference  
is we the home-team now.  
Our dry bones  
dance on home ground,  
holy ground  
sewn with ashes  
upon our countenance.

We are the risen ones  
Resurrected - into Israel and her settlements,  
(yes, even into the world's most-protested settlements...)

A little acknowledgment  
wouldn't hurt us...

But then again  
the world's silence  
is just extra credit  
on the test we aced  
at Auschwitz.

## *The Old Trees are Falling*

Harry sat like a noble giant  
– a sturdy oak  
Suddenly planted in our Jerusalem living room.

It was Holocaust Memorial Week  
And I rushed my children home from school  
“We have royalty in the house....”

A deep knowing in me  
insisted “Seat your children at his feet”  
Now may be their only chance  
to meet a walking marvel, an open vault of history.

And sit they did – magnetized -  
they listened  
filled up with his words and his silence too  
and they asked him questions  
the kind only children would dare ask  
“Did you know Dr. Mengela?”

I was shocked that they even knew that curse word  
At the innocent ages of 6 and 8  
But unlike me, they are Sabras  
And their public-school education that week had  
Spared few details of the horrors  
“Horror can build you, not just break you”  
Harry had said...

And build it did – when it came to him.  
This survivor who was so much more than a survivor  
He was a tower  
A stately oak that had burst through cement  
And overtaken the sidewalk entirely

The 13 year old who tried to save his father’s life  
By taking his place at their local Polish

CHAYA LESTER

Slaughterhouse of a concentration camp  
and another and another and another  
until 18 camps had known his number  
and yet none had conquered  
his spirit and the sheer force of God-given-grace  
that was his Survival to this day...

My friends, the old esteemed trees  
carved with our memories  
are soon falling...

Let us pay homage to their service, their spirit  
Their inconceivable resilience.  
They are so much more than survivors.  
They are redwoods.  
- Rush to seat your children at their feet...

\*

*In honor of Harry Weinroth, of very blessed memory.*



# *Yom HaZikaron* *Remembrance Day for the Fallen*

## *These Cemeteries*

I'm used to graveyards  
where the stones are cold  
rows of cabinets, filing away  
forgotten generations.

Sprawling silent  
secluded plots -- of stories  
muted by resignation & time.

But the cemeteries of this land are  
fabled, hot and peopled  
havens for tears  
teeming with siblings, parents, children  
whole communities  
Flocking around fresh  
unfaded memories.

These stones have steam.  
Steeped in fresh mournings  
Hot stones of young souls  
stole early.

*Sleepless in Jerusalem*

It is 3am in Jerusalem.  
My first night fully shaken  
awake by the notion  
that there is a war down the street.

Sleep seems like a luxury  
I am too poor to keep...

Listening for those silent sirens that don't stop ringing  
those explosions that don't stop exploding  
known in bone and 6th sense of sleeplessness...

Listening like you listen when there is a robber in the house.  
Listening like you listen when the world is a furnace  
And you are a forest  
and fire is a trauma  
of ungodly proportions...

Listening in a way I never learned to listen  
in Memphis Tennessee, in Berkeley, in the Ivy Leagues.  
Listening like an Israeli...

I have new ears now  
and old wisdom  
and wet eyes  
...and children.

Yes, that is how I listen now.  
Dleepless as a woman  
– in Israel  
– with children...

## *The Jerusalem Symphony*

Jerusalem is a symphony  
 of sirens.  
 Where overtures  
 of war soar  
 through the atmosphere  
 like an air-born opera  
 of under-cover opera'tions  
 leaving loud impressions.

Here we are all ears  
 all audience  
 in awe.  
 We are the living  
 Shema.  
 Every morning  
 we cock our ears over coffee cups.

We are all dreaming Jacobs.  
 With helicopters hovering  
 above us  
 like angels  
 ascending & descending  
 with tidings  
 of Intifada operettas.

And how we will never forget  
 each soaring roaring aria  
 of each neshama lost  
 at each attack, each bus stop  
 how they went up  
 - like smoke - smooth and fast  
 and we are left  
 furious and helpless except  
 for our higher purpose  
 our purse full of Psalms  
 our pamphlets

CHAYA LESTER

our glasses  
gasping, clapping  
cathartic  
helpless  
but not hopeless.

Listening for the righteous  
ringtones of a higher calling  
like it was a world-class masterpiece.

We are at the Opera  
known as Jerusalem  
listening breathless  
from box seats.

*Poems Honoring the Victims*

I often liken the threat of terror in Israel to a vaccine. With a vaccine you take a small homeopathic dose of the very thing you want to avoid. That diminished amount of the disease protects your system from the full-blown illness. So it is with my experience of the conflict here in Israel. There is a certain strengthening of the system that occurs in the face of threat. One feels life deeper; one loves stronger. In the face of conflict, I more consciously treasure peace. I take less for granted the blessings in my day to day mundane.

I feel it most those mornings when I send my kids to school with an extra outpour of prayer born from fear. I savor every moment with the ones I love. I feel strengthened in my connection with my neighbors who are marching through the same battle ground on the way to work and school. I feel more intimately connected with the Divine hand that orchestrates it all.

## *A Prayer for the Three Boys*

I remember the day after the three boys were kidnapped in 2014. I sat there shocked that the sun rose. Going about my automatic daily tasks... all the while, framed with a backdrop of uneasy angry grief over the kidnapping. I fluctuated between prayer & anguish... disturbed and stirred. With little left to do but give word...



Days like today  
I am weary of preaching peace  
Cannot talk about forgiveness  
I only want vengeance  
for these innocent stolen treasures.

I am deeply triggered for my people...  
post-traumatic stress disorder-ed  
from Hitler to Hamas  
– will there be no end to the horrors?

We are the haunted, the hunted  
sons and daughters of prophets  
the parents of soldiers and students abducted  
— for no fault of their own...

Dear Lord, bring them home...  
Unscathed unstoned  
– bring them home...

Guard them, guide them  
Let their captors stumble like blind men  
that we might find them  
lift them safely gently seamlessly  
as the streams of prayers flow endlessly  
from our mouths as we learn your Torah  
as we walk your streets and weep with every eye we meet.

Reminded that we are bound together  
in this endeavor of care and prayer...  
wasted and weathered with despair

What else can we do?  
I don't know...  
Write a poem? Rip your clothes?  
Go to the Kotel? Pray it's gonna end well...  
Let your voices swell...

For we are the disturbed  
the greatly stirred.  
Let us – at the very least – give word....

Let's be forces of friendship,  
of godliness, of justice  
with a breathless wish  
for the end to this horror flick.

Return our sons  
they're only kids...  
they're only kids...

## *For Yemima*

At age 16, Yemima, a young Ecuadorian woman, contacted a Rabbi via the internet with a desire to convert. While she was not considered Jewish, her mother lit Friday night candles, following a family tradition that her grandmother & great-grandmother had also done. Her family name is one known to be used by those who were forced to convert but still retained vestiges of Jewish practice.

One of the moments she knew that Judaism was her path was when she was praying the Silent Amidah Prayer and an earthquake hit in Ecuador. Her entire family rushed to hide under the tables. But she was so engrossed in her prayer that she did not notice the earthquake.

She moved to Israel to study daily – relentlessly – for conversion and after 2 years she finally received her conversion certification, only a few short months before she was killed.



She was the second  
one murdered  
“succumbed to her wounds”  
four days after  
the terrorist hit her at the train-  
stop  
early Wednesday evening.

Probably when you were serving dinner  
and this was already four  
days later  
– so maybe you didn’t hear  
about her...

Though you heard about the three  
month old infant Chaya Zissel  
miracle-child come straight from the Kotel  
immediately expired



from the impact of tires  
and the moorings of every mother's world  
shattered from the car blow  
and our sanity swayed  
like a high-rise  
in an earthquake.  
The glass picture frames  
shattered  
– but the building stayed.

And I'm not blaming you  
if you didn't weep yet  
over this 'second death'.  
I too know  
about the drawer  
in the far cabinet  
where you stuff your mental notes  
of pieces of news that prove  
that the world  
is truly awful  
senseless and brutal.

I have my own discreet  
file of facts that I keep stacked  
just out of sight  
when I am stirring the soup  
for the children to eat  
so that I do not poison the broth  
with my intensity.

And yet, it is good to break  
open  
to break  
over – these things  
to sift through  
the notes in the drawer  
to study the truths of the world  
carefully stored  
away.

And let it be known  
– if you don't already know –  
that on one of those notes  
God Himself wrote:

“Yemima Mosquera  
the daughter of Avraham.  
The convert from Ecuador.  
Another soul left the world.  
Another sheet in the dirt.  
Another note in the drawer.  
May her memory be a blessing.  
May her name be well-mourned.”

## *In Memory of Hallel*

Hallel Yaffa Ariel was a 13-year-old girl who was stabbed to death in her home in Kiryat Arba, June 2016 by a 17-year-old terrorist.

ø

School had just ended.  
The only thing that should end  
in the summertime  
is school.  
Not this. not life.  
not yours – age 13.5  
in your sleep...by a knife.

Your name means praise, means  
beauty, means lion  
of God  
means terror.  
No, stop.  
Stop.  
I will not let it mean terror...  
it will mean dance  
it will mean mother's prayer  
it will mean children educated  
relentless to honor life.  
it will mean endless  
commitment to righteousness  
not to the atrocious.  
not to the murderous.

Your name will mean goodness  
in the face of darkness  
at the foot of the Tomb of the Matriarchs  
watching over us.

Your name will roar beauty and praise  
and rally us to love life and hate hate.

*Who by fire? - A Brush with Flames*

Our dear and admired friend Yoram Raanan is a painter who had his treasure-house of a studio destroyed by terror through arson. Forty years' worth of masterpieces - a fortune - lost to flames.



Is it permissible to weep for things?  
Because I want to sit shiva  
for this house that just  
went up in flames.

Mourning a most tender  
box of paint.  
Mourning the way  
life devastates.

You would tear your shirt too  
if you had  
ever stepped foot  
into that great forum  
of form and color  
now torn asunder by  
flame and fume  
and utter hate.

You would've dazzled at  
the way it was scattered  
with a thousand  
masterpieces  
the way a king  
scatters diamonds  
like a child's  
game.

A place where honest  
art was made.

It was a structure  
ever-lit-up and  
upward-faced.  
Like an altar.

And forgive me if I  
exaggerate  
but a eulogy is in order  
today.  
For a great and epic  
loss of paint.

Honored and exalted  
be Thy Name,  
O Master Creator  
who gives and takes.

Restore the spirit of creativity  
to this painter  
that his expression be but  
deeper and wiser  
and all the greater  
because of his tragic  
brush with flames.

*From Haatzmaut  
Israeli Independence Day*

*Happy Birthday, Dream State*

Do you know that You stopped  
me dead in my tracks?  
My hitherto-life-path  
didn't just turn  
It lifted off the track  
entirely  
when I set the soul  
of my foot upon the soil  
of your streets.

Levitating in an aliyah of amazement  
with a longing I didn't even know I had...  
Suddenly fulfilled  
In your epic shpiel of arrival  
after 2000 years of every sacrifice possible.

You are a daily treasure, an absolute delicacy.  
I do not exaggerate.  
This is an understatement.  
The mad excitement of being alive for this instant  
Of celebration.  
I want to make a bumper sticker screaming  
BEST GILGUL YET!!

And just getting better

I would give up every inch  
of what I used to see as rich  
To be poor as dirt  
As long as it's your dirt.

Oh distant ancestors,  
you could not have known this nectar  
Sipped by us Ingathered.  
Your astounded children are flat-out-feasting  
On this Leviathan with blue and white flag fins  
The finish line  
The winning ticket  
The grand finale  
Sitting pretty  
in this ancient-modern hybrid  
sleekest invention of history.

Shore to shore, door to door  
*dor l'dor*  
Happy Birthday, little dream state  
we are yours.

## *Re-Start-Up Nation*

I'm a big believer in the power of positive thinking. Or Herzl's Zionist version: "*Eem Tirzu Ein Zo Agada.*" If you will it, it is no dream.

There's an endless winding book-shelf full of documentation that all reads essentially: 'YES, it is true that we can positive-think, pray and hypnotize our way into the highest of realities.'

As for me, I just start by looking out my window. Because I happen to live on a street that was fabricated from the recesses of Moshe Montefiore's mind...in a country that is nothing short of the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy and a billion of my people's prayers. Modern Israel is the result of positive thinking taken to the Nth spiritual degree.

When I get doubtful of the power of positivity, I just pull out my Israeli passport and anchor into this 2000-year-in-the-making Dream Come True of a country.



Breaking News:  
You cannot fail.  
Embrace this truth.  
And proceed  
*...without caution, please.*

Imagine  
That your fears & insecurities  
Are but beasts  
That scour the Serengeti  
of your wildest dreams.

They are the hard-hoofed herbivores  
By the hundred-thousands  
Who have trampled  
Your inner-gardens.



They are free-roaming  
free-floating agents of grief.  
Now imagine that they have all  
Suddenly, stunningly  
Become EXTINCT.

Whole herds  
Never heard  
from again.

And now know that this is not just in  
your imagination  
but it is in fact,  
not fiction  
and did I mention it is written  
on every thought you think  
in inevitable & indelible ink.

From here on out  
your hard-drive is *only* programmed for  
Yeses and pluses.  
Download this divinely inspired Anti-virus  
And light the fire  
Under your britches  
To become the richest flyest  
highest shooting tireless  
version of your very blessed self.

Take the A out of BeAst  
Simply Be your Best.  
And you WILL Manifest  
An embarrassment of dreams.

F.E.A.R. is but  
False Evidence that Appears Real.

Now here's the deal...  
You WILL  
trade in your ill-conceived worries for the

Pure gold confidence of royalty.  
For you are the sons and daughters of the King.  
Harness your passion and  
You WILL manifest  
A manna feast.

Need proof?  
Just look at this valley  
of dry bones  
that we call home.  
Ours is a Re-Start up Nation  
Of bootstrappers  
Who didn't give a cr\*p  
what Reality said.

And excuse my language  
But, dear God, how we have battled the ages.  
Weathered every flavor of haters  
We're the original species Endangered.

Downtrodden forgotten  
and rooted out  
but all along we just keep on bein' all about  
coming back home  
and Messianic hope.

We never stopped keepin' these laws  
like a lifeboat – like a bad joke.  
Like a devoted daughter  
who would never give up on her Father.  
You know why?  
~ Because her soul told her so.

Because it was written in the glittering  
literature of her DNA  
to believe that her people would make their way  
back to their homestead  
back to their Bais.

Breathless, breadless, hatless, tactless.  
 History has kicked our atlas  
 But we're here at last  
 just the way we've asked  
 with bated breath  
 for countless millions worth of prayers  
 over 2000 years.  
 We're here.

Because we believed we would be.  
 Because our prophets had visions  
 and we were willing  
 to bet our very children  
 on 'em.

Willing to give every stitch of cloth from our backs  
 to just make it back  
 and look – just like that  
 ~ we're back.

If that isn't positive thinking proven productive  
 I don't know what is.

So go graft some greatness  
 From your fore-mothers and fathers.  
 And your inner-fearless-farmer-seamstress  
 Will weave her seeds  
 Into this New Fertile Crescent of Positivity  
 Growin' strong in the Middle East.

All because you have agreed  
 to drop that old drag of self-defeat.  
 All because that is what is meant to be.

And the ultimate Redemption  
 will be one syllable closer.  
 It will shimmer inevitable  
 And invincible  
 From up your sleeve.

You are the magi of imagination  
Yours is the divine vision  
It's a given.  
Defeat is not an option  
– *now* DREAM.

Proceed,  
without caution,  
Proceed!

## *Destiny We Have Danced*

In his famous death-bed scene, Jacob calls forth his sons to relay to them what will happen “b'aharit hayamim”, in *the final days*. This is the first time in the Torah that we see any reference to the type of messianic visions that will eventually become such a major theme in the prophets and later Jewish thought.

Jacob, though – unlike the prophets, never does give over the details of a messianic vision. His sons gather expectantly to hear the prophecy. But it doesn't come. After his teasing preamble, he turns instead to the topic of blessings for each son. We are left on the edge of our eschatological seats. Just as in our present reality, the future remains a dark continent of invisible inevitability.

And yet what is visible in the text that might be revelatory to us? One thing which stands out in Jacob's words is the stress he puts on his sons coming together. “He’asfu,” he says, “*Gather together* and I will tell you what will be”. And again in the next verse, he bids them, “Hi’kavtzu v'yishmau”. Make of yourselves a group – a “kevutzah” - and hear your father!

For Jacob, it seems that there is something intimately linked about the gathering and the telling, the grouping and the hearing. Indeed, messianic visions by their very nature gather us together, binding our hitherto splintered individual selves into one common narrative, one massive shared drama. Messianism at its best is about unifications, in-gatherings, national and eventually international oneness.

What's more, I would add that it is in our people's very gathering together that the prophecies of the end of time are themselves brought closer to their fulfillment. It is as if we have an inbuilt propensity for gathering, for grouping...some genetically predisposed sense of nationhood, tribe and shared destiny. The messianic promise in Jacob's words is that when we as individuals make the move from separateness to togetherness, when each of us is able to access the depth and beauty of that sense of being gathered together, bonded in family and fraternity, then the prophetic vision is one person closer

to being fulfilled.

I am daily moved by those who have gathered here in Jerusalem; individuals who are called with an imperative to the fulfillment of our national destiny. Individuals who have chosen to leave behind the comforts and allure of the West, compelled to disentangle from the familiarities of exile, to forge a shared destiny in this complex land. We who chose to dwell here, to gather here, are – in essence - living on a prophecy. None of us know the details of the end of days, and yet we are drawn together with a sense of its immanence.

The poem below is about that promising immanence of redemption. It is about the cultivation of a sense of shared destiny. Let us gather together, let us celebrate our familial bond, our commonalities. May we gaze in amazement at the ongoing ingathering of the exiles that is occurring before our very eyes and within our very limbs.



Destiny we have danced  
and with the wind of our will  
we have wiped away the tears  
that our history did spill.

And with our hands upon the wheel  
that holds our wheels upon the road  
we have driven our desire  
to our destiny's abode.

And though the road stretches far  
from creation's first flung light  
to the far dark destination  
of the future in the night,  
we will stop – and take a walk  
beneath the sea of stars  
catching constellations  
in our net of dreams thrown far.

For destiny is glimpsed in

and guided by our dreams  
while in waking hours  
our prayers mix with the reality it brings.

So let me recall a vision to you  
of a prayer thrown to an open sky  
how our people have watched up after it  
with long-enduring yearning eyes.

And suddenly it has come back down  
and hit the ground before our feet  
for fate has come to fulfill the wish  
that our dreams had dared to seek.

And we are thankful now not only  
for the grant of God's permission  
but for the gift of witnessing  
the long path of prayers procession.

And thus I come to you  
offering this view  
of an in-gathering in an instant  
of a people living on a prophecy  
of community & commitment.

And we gather here to witness  
the long path of God's own dreams.  
We fulfill God's very prayers  
with the reality we bring.  
So let us wander  
Yerushalayim together  
and raise our thankful eyes  
like dreamers our mouths are full of laughter  
for the sight which fills the sky.

Above our heads there blows a vision  
we had but beheld in dreams  
framed by flickering constellations  
a singular blue star beams.

CHAYA LESTER

It is a prayer shawl upon the wind  
for the spirit also prays  
It is a sign that day begins  
after we've dreamt the night away.

It is our flag ~  
as fixed as fate and raised on high  
it dances with the willful wind  
with prayers and dreams  
and you  
and I.



## *Hey Olah*

Hey olah, yeah you!  
You recently – or not so recently - made the big move?  
Stepped off a one of those chartered game-changer jumbo jets  
and you're struggling, I bet...

With your bad accent - and your high taxes  
- and your 50 shekel job  
- and you can't help your kids with their homework  
- and blah blah blah

Yeah, I know...  
how all your shiny degrees  
are just gathering dust as you bust your butt for  
some nonprofit or another  
and yes, I know, you miss your mother...

But listen to me - stop it - stop it right there  
and remember - you are a frickin' rock star  
rockin' this rocky terrain...  
Sweating the stage of history-made.

You are so not your salary my dear.  
This aliyah IS your high-powered dream career.

You're a prophecy come true,  
You are the little white picket palace  
that God was just dyin' to live in  
– for millennia...

And yes, you will get shoved around and despised the world over -  
...you will be misunderstood and highly demonized.

But God as my witness, it is worth the fight.  
Worth every bit of fanatic and static  
and bureaucratic bullshift of this paradigm shift.

CHAYA LESTER

You on the front page of heaven's every newsstand.  
You are the superhero who just landed  
her very own Home Land!

So go on with your bad self  
- and your bad accent too  
and accept that you are one imperfect & historic  
& absolutely gorgeous  
little God-Send of an immigrant.

That bad accent is your  
badge of completion  
Wear it with distinction.  
Your Aliyah is a lifetime  
Achievement.

## *The Bad News Too*

I come home to Israel because of all the good news.

I come because it is the fulfillment of the prophetic vision.

I come with a Herzilian sense of mission.

I come because of its leave-me-breathless people & beaches & vistas.

I come because I am commanded.

I come because Jewish history almost wrecked us, but the party has just begun.

And it consists of Friday night Kotel mosh-pits (mosh-iach pits!) – clutching sisters, soldiers, strangers, sweaty & gleaming like long lost friends.

I come because of untold miracles & synchronicities – so intricate and exquisite that I couldn't explain them if I had an ocean's worth of ink.

I come home to Israel because it is the culmination of two-thousand years' worth of daily prayers blared loud and relentless by my long-ago long-bearded ancestors and my one-day descendants.

All of this good news is ample and vibrant and viable enough to float my boat across any sea.

But it doesn't end with the good news only.

I come home to Israel because of the not-so-good news too.

I come home to Israel because we Jews are the miner's canary.

The miner's canary is that fateful feathered companion who is brought along for the miners' descent. It is brought along to test the waters, to test the air and her unseen menace of gases.

For the canary is gifted with an extra sensitivity to methane. A creature naturally prone to that invisible poison beyond the grasp of the common nose. That which others cannot yet sense, the canary knows in its bones.

And so the canary in its cage dies a death by gas and its demise becomes a mournful message, a signal, to any miner smart enough to receive.

And so it is, we Jews warn the world of its hidden noxious gases and all things ghastly and in need of battling.

It is why the Jews were the signature carnage of the Nazi regime.  
Sending forth a world-wide message that this evil is thick and ruthless  
and headed for your shores.

It is why the destruction of ancient Judea preceded Roman world-  
domination in 70 CE. It is why Jewish persecution in Spain signaled  
an era of murderous fundamentalism. It is why the pogroms of the  
late 1800's foreshadowed the slaughter-house that Russia would  
become.

We Jews seem to be inescapably suited to that canary's cage.  
Not a cheery metaphor by any means. But here's the secret. And why  
I chose to brave the storm to make this place my home.  
The secret is to know why the canary sings.

Maya Angelou knew why the caged bird sings. Well, I know why the  
miner's canary sings and its reason is the guide of my days.  
The miner's canary sings because it has agreed to be the one to bear  
the darkness where the treasures are housed. Has agreed to lead the  
forge into the treasure mine. Agreed to be the one to lift the prayers  
– to intone the bells.

I know why the miner's canary sings.  
She sings because the world is worth it.  
I come home to Israel because it is willing to risk everything  
for the sake of protecting goodness.  
I come home to Israel because I want to be a part of that  
incomparable chorus that sings for the sake of everyone and  
everything.  
This is a song composed in the throes of commitment, for the  
betterment of the entire globe.  
I will sit here resolved and resilient to record each note of that heart-  
wrenching melody – because the world is worth it.

With ISIS at our doorstep, we will sing.  
With Iran pushing fast against us, we will sing.  
With the warble of a world-blackened name, we will sing.  
With the injustices of UN Resolutions, we will sing.  
With the scorners and the haters and their endless harangues,  
we will sing.

With immeasurable compassion for the innocent, we will sing.  
With a care for all humanity, we will sing.  
We will be the bird that blasts its anthem to the ends of the earth that  
it might be heard and headed...because the world is worth it.

We might have gone down with the gases of Birkenau like a bird  
caught in a cage....but now we have the State of Israel.  
This time our bird has no bars to bind it. It has just its song if the  
world would but heed it. It has just its prayer, if God will but hear it.  
And it has just its wings, if we will but lift them together with the  
investment of our committed energies.

I come home to Israel because, if the Jews are the miner's canary,  
then Israel is its wings.

*Israeli Interdependence Day*  
(The Peace Accords of the Hospital Ward)

Do you remember me my Arab sister  
6 a.m. frantic panicked  
at the hospital in the heart of Jerusalem?

We brushed arms as we rushed our girls along  
that sickening maze of hallways

for twin bronchoscopies  
for our 2-year-old princesses

yours had swallowed a bottle cap  
and mine had such coughing fits  
she could hardly breathe.

Both of them fussy &  
fasting from the night before  
yet they played together seamlessly, dreamily  
on that sterile floor

with their small armies of figurines  
enacting scenes  
of war and wonder  
in the hospital ward  
and I wondered  
what you thought of their 'imaginary' games

as I handed out crackers and raisins  
like peace offerings  
to you, my distant cousin  
both of so sullen, so estranged.

And yet we wept in unison  
when the nurses came to escort  
our angels away... down that endless hallway

put them to sleep one after the other  
with tiny matching gas masks  
saw them lay limp & unconscious  
on that cold steel slab.

Remember how you and I sat  
outside the locked metal door  
on the blue plastic chairs  
- broken, sunken, scared.

Perfect strangers  
... strong as sisters  
... thick as thieves

praying to our respective Gods  
the same exact pleas -  
for holding healing relief.

And that hallway was morphed into  
a makeshift mosque  
a sudden synagogue  
and we were the choir wailing  
in a harmony  
of mother's agony

weeping up something holy  
right there in the *beit holim*

out of our minds  
with the pining  
only known by parents  
in cold plastic hospital seats.

And I want you to know  
that You were my family that day.

Your presence was my haven  
I took refuge in your gaze  
Soothed by the fact that there in the hospital

we could never be enemies

because we were too busy  
battling shared adversaries  
of weary, worry  
waste and weakness

all we had between us  
was our sameness  
our sadness  
our senseless  
vulnerability.  
Both of us bowed deep - bent knee  
to that same divine  
Mender of disease.

And remember  
that luminous moment when  
our prayers were answers  
with the eloquence  
of the slowly opening eyelids of our children

and we were elated  
& related in shared relief

and you know what  
I want to share that ecstatic sentiment with you again  
- my cousin, my sister, my friend...

I want to see a day  
when both of our families  
will be massively relieved  
at the end of this surgery  
- this treacherous surgery -  
known as the conflict in the Middle East.

For make no mistake  
this conflict is our common enemy  
both of us suffer from this noxious & contagious



communicable disease  
So sweet sister, please  
May we see no more  
terror over territory  
and shed not blood but joyous tears  
over our shared recovery  
from this rank disease.

And here in this hospital  
we will broker a lasting peace.

Not by politicians in parliaments  
but by parents in blue plastic hospital seats.

Sharing crackers and raisins  
and Messianic visions.

And this will be the Peace Accords  
of the Hospital Ward;  
a place so ironically, iconically  
more hospitable to peace.

So may it be...

# Lag B'Omer

Lag B'Omer (the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer) is the birthday of Jewish mysticism; the yahrzeit of R'Shimon Bar Yochai, author of the Zohar and keeper of the ancient Kabbalistic tradition. One of the archetypal symbols of Lag B'Omer is the bow and arrow. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the bow-and-arrow symbolizes the power of inwardness – the power unleashed by the mystic wisdom of Torah. We pull the arrow in, towards our hearts. The more we pull it in, the farther we are able to send it out. The deeper we ground within in inner depths, the farther we will go in meeting our goals. We must begin by going within.

## *Bow & Arrow*

Accumulating kindling  
pullin' back bowstrings  
broad-smiling soul-shining  
mystics blowin' smoke rings.

Open wide your eyes  
meet your Maker, meet your Guide  
Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai  
lightin' up the mountain side!

Downloadin' Zohar  
You know you're gonna go far...  
God ain't on your Facebook  
go INSIDE & take a look.

You'll be richer than a queen  
with this Kabbalistic bling.

# *Yom Yerushalayim* *(Jerusalem Day)*

## *The Burning Bush*

Yerushalayim means “Ir Shalom” - City of Peace. And yet, it has been destroyed twice, attacked 52 times, besieged 23 times, and captured and recaptured 44 times. How can this city, so beleaguered by conflict, be named for peace? Is it irony or paradox, or perhaps something more?

It reminds me of another Biblical paradox – the burning bush. A symbol of the undoing of the natural order, where fire does not bring destruction...on the contrary, it brings revelation. The voice of God calls out from the impossible endurance of a shrub amidst flames. That which should logically be destroyed, endures. And not just endures, but initiates and ushers in what is to become history's greatest symbol of liberation, the Exodus from Egypt. The fiery shrub is the holy ground from which God speaks.

This paradox of endurance amidst destruction is quite possibly one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people. The State of Israel has been described as a phoenix, risen from the flames of the Holocaust. But not only is it a country that has risen from the flames, it is a country that thrives amidst the flames of continuing fires of attack from her neighbors. It is a country ensconced in conflict, yet somehow, at its best and highest, remains untouched.

And so too with Jerusalem. Never before has a metropolis weathered such unending quarrels. And yet, amidst the conflagration, she endures as a city of peace, issuing a message of godliness and the

promise of salvation.

It is said that the burning bush was nothing extraordinary to most who looked upon it. A dozen others walked right past it. What proved Moses' greatness is that he saw the miracle within it. He turned aside and wondered at it. He heard God's voice in it. He removed his shoes.

Sometimes that is how I experience Jerusalem. Usually it is just the mundane domain where I shop and schlep my bags and pay my bills. But sometimes, at the best of times, I turn aside from the mundane drone of my day and see the astounding miracle that is being worked beneath my very feet.



## *The Burning Bush*

Jerusalem, my burning bush.  
A city so inflamed,  
and yet, endurance is your name.

Here roam my heart & mind  
Where, walk me soft,  
and put my shoes aside

Let me admire more this site which burns  
with no less bark and no less branch  
Eternal spark within its stance.

And blaze my days with hers  
And let no less than all of her endure

And may she brighter burn  
that I may longer gaze and learn –  
this mystery of Yours.

## *The Jerusalem Day Parade*

I'm not really Left or Right wing. I'm more of the in-between wing. The In-betweening, if you will. After all, it takes two wings to fly.

There are few days when I feel the tensions of living in the political 'inbetwing' more than Jerusalem Day. It is a day when there will be thousands of blue-and-white banner carriers making their way through Jerusalem's thoroughfares. There will be epic endless dance-circles of white-shirts and spinning skirts. The dancing will shift and stream into a song-lit march through Damascus Gate and spill out into a packed Western Wall Plaza.

This, my friends, is the kind of day I made aliyah for. The kind of day that fills in the details of a long-recurring national dream. It is a day that celebrates the time the miraculous bled through the mundane. The way it did in 1967 when a military miracle swooped through this country and allowed us to reclaim our most treasured city. The day, mind you, that Temple Mount was gifted straight back into our awe-struck hands. It is the day we gifted it back to our Muslim cousins, as well.

I have rich storehouses of memories built on this day; of pushing my twin babies in a double stroller through Damascus Gate and being literally carried along a waterway of tears of gratitude that let out into the sacred spinning pool of the Kotel. This has been my day of celebrating with my feet the fulfillment of the Biblical promise of Return to the Land of Israel and her shimmering capital.

But now it is also a day when I am conflicted. For I am reluctant to make this march through Damascus Gate. Not because I am scared of Arabs. But because I am unsettled by my own people's darker side. Ashamed of the small Jewish faction which has marred this march with their hateful words and actions. My left-wing side can not partake in such hate.

But I have a right-wing to me as well. Not a gloating right-wing, but a rightfully deserved, finally-arrived-home kind of right-wing. The

side of me that says, “Yes, it is our RIGHT to march through all quarters and corners of this city, be it Arab or Christian or whatever religion.” The side of me that says it is our right to not shirk away in guilt or shame or fear from any Jerusalem thoroughfare. But to claim our rightful historical place here.

This year, I want to be both sides. Not hateful, and also not fearful. So I turn to the way laid out by Rav Menachem Frumin, of blessed memory, who redefined peace-activism with a real spirit of ‘the in-betweening’. It is told that he once went to the dedication ceremony of a new building in the West Bank. When he arrived he refused to enter said building, for above the entrance was a sign that read, “The Land of Israel belongs to the Jews”. He demanded that the sign be taken down, insisting instead, “It is not that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jews, it is that the Jews belong to the Land of Israel”.

This sentiment expresses my ideal; a truly holy orientation to living in the Holy Land. Our goal today is to belong to the Land; to belong to Jerusalem. To honor that it does not belong to us. We belong to it and are called to behave in a way that befits that belonging.

If God wanted the Old City to be peopled by Jews only, then God would’ve done just that. But God didn’t. This is the reality we have been gifted, in all of its God given complexity. On Yom Yerushalayim I celebrate the gifts of that reality in all its forms and colors.

So I will be making that march through Damascus Gate. Not scared off by the Arab shopkeepers and even their most menacing gazes. Not scared off by the misguided Jewish youth slinging hate. But courageously carrying my own flag of the In-betweening. A banner that reads, “Salaam – Shalom. I am marching in peace.”

Yerushalayim means ‘City of Peace’. If we want to live up to the honor of inhabiting this glorious metropolis of peace, then we must behave accordingly – peacefully. To belong to Jerusalem is to strive for, pray for, march for, and raise banners for peace. Salaam Alekum, Shalom Alechem, may we BE the peace we seek.

# Shavuot

Shavuot celebrates the day we received the Torah upon Mount Sinai. Thus one core theme of the holiday is Torah and Revelation.

In a poignant image of revelation, the Talmud (Niddah 30b) teaches that each of us learns the entirety of Torah while in the womb. There is a candle lit above our in-vitro-souls and in the drench of that lamp-light an angel teaches us Torah. At our destined hour of birth that self-same angel touches us above our lips, creating the gentle slope indentation, known in anatomical parlance as the philtrum.

With that touch we forget all that we have learned in our 9-month tutorial. Life sprawls out before us as an on-going uncovering of all we have forgotten. Each piece of Torah learned is thus imbued with a striking sense of déjà-vu, of resonance with a truth we have seemingly always known. Torah learning, according to the Talmud's model, is thus seen as more of a recovery, or discovery, than a revelation.

The Talmud makes an implicit link between the external revelation at Mount Sinai and the more internal revelations of the womb. This link can be seen hinted at in a charming play on words – for the word for pregnancy, “b’herion”, is reminiscent of “b’har”, the phrase meaning ‘on the mountain’. Mother's mountainous belly and Mount Sinai are thus parallel locals of highest revelation.

And yet the Talmud's image of womb revelation evokes questions. Why do we forget the vast knowing locked away in our souls? Why is life predicated on forgetfulness? And, more importantly, how can we

access the store-housed knowledge of our souls?

I am reminded of the story of the 'tainted grain' by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. He tells of a king who is informed by his most trusted minister that all of the wheat in the kingdom has been infected by a certain type of growth that will induce madness in all who eat it. The king's quandary – to have his people die of starvation or to have them go mad with this tainted grain. The choice is obvious: insanity over death.

But the next quandary is more complex – do the king and his minister also eat of the grain and join the people in their dementia or do they refrain from partaking and remain sane in the midst of an insane world? Their decision is to consume the grain and join their countrymen in madness on one condition: that they will both make a mark upon their foreheads. A mark to remind them of their insanity. Each time they see this marking on the other's face they will remember that they have forgotten.

The indentation below each of our noses can thus be seen in the same light. When we behold our fellow's face we can be reminded of the Sinai of the womb, of the Torah knowledge that each of us has carefully tucked away. The philtrum reminds us of our own insane amnesia of the truth that rests within. It spurs us to seek out that wisdom and sanity again through our quest of Torah learning.

The following poem is a prayer of an embryo in the womb. It is a prayer that she will be able to recall the Sinai lamp-light teachings of the womb. And more than to just remember, but also to find the ways to relay that inherent knowing out into an insane world so out of touch with forgotten truth.



## *Sinai in the Womb*

Touch me lightly 'neath the nose  
 That my lips may part in prose  
 Let me not forget  
 You though  
 I fall into the world.

Let luminescence last me still  
 and still my heart  
 With seraph quill  
 If I fall too far to hear  
 & memorize your notes.

Send a script  
 A scrap of timber  
 A stub of finger  
 'quipped with pencil  
 May my newborn  
 have utensils  
 to inherit as she grows.

And I will write what I have learned here  
 In this hollow, warm and light-filled.

So touch me slight  
 That I may  
 Recite all that  
 the angel quill  
 inscribed upon my soul.

And from this amniotic Sinai  
 I will find the voice to cry  
 the truth  
 though all the world  
 would call it lies.

And though I fall

insane, forgetful  
slap my lips and  
snuff my candle  
yet I will remember well  
the angel  
that taught me all I know

and marked thus with  
indentation  
I will recall  
the revelation  
of this loom  
where God wove with love  
my soul.

For Sinai stands  
indelible  
above our lips  
to tell of all  
that we forget  
as sure as  
we are born.

So let us thus pursue  
Your truths  
in déjà-vu  
wrap us well in  
what we knew  
there in the womb.

And Sinai  
will be as a mother  
enfolding us to rediscover  
the radiance lost in the rubble  
of the shattered tablets  
of Your  
Truth.

## *Love Poems to the Sinai*

Torah is received in the Sinai desert. That is no logistical coincidence. The desert is revelation's classical terrain. The word for desert in Hebrew is *midbar* – which shares its root with the word *midaber* – to speak. The silence of the desert is where Divine speech is best heard. When one truly meets the desert, they meet divinity. The following are Rumi'esque love poems written to the Sinai Desert.

### I

If I cannot come to your desert  
and you will not come to my town  
let us, with our letters, speak a language  
that builds bridges  
... and let the rest fall down.

You will guard all things dangerous  
for their safe keep.  
Both the precipices, precious  
And their soft sands far beneath.

There is no path into the desert  
but that of silence  
learning from the neighboring minerals  
how to petrify my speech.

And there is no way out of the desert  
but to drink that silence  
- an oasis  
in the middle  
of your speech.

### II

I travel long to get here  
and when I do  
feasting all night

on nothing but the stars.

No matter we are in the middle of winter  
and the jackals are my neighbors  
I am free  
and can feed on chocolates another time.

For now, forget my chores  
and resumes  
and let me resume  
living for at least this day.

III

My hands have let my nails grow long  
- would not deign to bite such dirty things  
and so finally look more stately  
not the child hands I once had  
when I was urban and clean.

Yes, I have let everything grow  
grow dirty, grow deep  
become woman and  
wilderness, wild and fierce  
whispered and freed

become thin as birch branch  
fed by small dripping tubes  
bare as a rock  
as a burden dropped  
- smooth as a dune.

IV

In the dunes at dusk  
I make chai on simple fires  
And subsist on this thought  
throughout the night  
“The desert speaks!”

I dream in sign language  
fruit in the morning  
and fist-fulls of sunshine  
plus herbs rolled in paper  
with head in the sand  
and soles in the sky.

And the eye between my eyes  
opens and closes  
Like palms  
like leathery tent flaps  
in the wind  
Like the pace of padded hoofs  
as if walking on my  
hands.

All of this silence  
but a camel ride away.

## *First Fruits*

Shavuot is called *Hag HaBikkurim* – the holiday of offering the first fruits. The Talmud [Bava Kama 92a] comments regarding this ceremony, "the poor get poorer".

Why? One answer is that when the wealthy brought their first fruits on silver and golden trays, the Priests would return the trays to the owners. However, when the poor brought their fruit in simple reed baskets the Kohanim would not return the baskets to them. This appears to be one of life's typical inequities -- the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. But is there a deeper intent behind this statement?

For me, deeper reasons usually arise from consulting my own experience. - I think of my own first fruits. I have been living in the land of Israel for a number years now... And what do I have to show for it? What have I produced? What can I really offer up?

Surely, I have nothing akin to fruits on silver trays. I left behind all hopes of silver when I left America. If anything, I have worked laboriously to but build a basket. Life here often feels like an intensive exercise in building my vessel to hold greater light, weaving my metaphorical basket.

Yet the laborious time spent constructing the basket is precious. The Hassidic master, the Mevo Shearim writes, "The holiness of the vessel is greater than that of the light which it holds". Usually, one thinks of the vessel as being secondary to the light (as the glass is secondary to the wine). But the Mevo Shearim turns that notion inside-out, stating that it is the vessel (the basket) which is even more precious than the light (the fruits inside).

This answers our question why the Priests would keep the baskets of the poor. For their baskets, their strivings to simply create a vessel in the world, were such an integral and sacred part of their offerings. All of our work to build foundations is sacred work. All the more so when the poorest amongst us have sweated and struggled to weave

our basket while the rich tote silver trays.

The Priests keeping of the baskets shows that those thankless hours of labor and sweat are also received on high, as vaulted and valued as the fruits inside. More precious than silver, the effort-soaked baskets are received as integral to the gift.

So the next time you feel like you have little to offer, nothing to share, be reminded that the basket itself is essential to the offering. Build yourself well, accept your emptiness, and the fruits will follow.

ô

I have spent my days  
slicing reeds  
making baskets  
out of sand.  
I have woven my handwork  
On the warp of this holy land.

Like matted nest of bird  
built of stick & string  
I have gathered  
goods together  
fit for first fruit offerings.

Sewn foundations  
of straw, stalk, sinew and hay  
awkward armfuls  
are my hours  
empty archways are my days.

I've worked  
cleaning open windows.  
For only emptiness receives  
And for the sake of offering  
I weave.

I weave a basket - a braided *teiva*

with bitumen blackened brow  
having drawn myself from river  
having planted self with plow.

I have toiled to build this vessel  
a basket firm for future fruits.  
I've wed a fertile womb  
I've cleared a field  
but set no root.

And every newborn morning  
I've borne the burden of one more stitch  
To beautify this basket  
- To offer it.

And I proclaim  
With my pain-upraised  
& paltry hands  
I have offered all that I could reap  
From this steep God-given land.

I have brought my first of fruits...  
An empty basket in my hands.

I am empty as an echo  
Resounding cavernous and clear  
I am an open basket  
May my offering draw me near.

To but build a basket  
a vassal vessel to the King  
to labor long to weave it  
and all along - to sing.

That the holiness of the vessel  
Far exceeds that which rests inside  
This Land has made me build myself  
The fruits, I trust,  
will grow in time.



## *Synesthesia*

One of the many remarkable things about the revelation at Sinai was that, “All the people *saw* the thunder/voices”, rather than *heard* the thunder/voices of revelation. (Exodus, 20:15) Essentially, revelation was an overwhelming experience of synesthesia; where all of one’s senses become unified and interchangeable. Seeing with ears and hearing with eyes; this is the heightened state of awareness whereby one can apprehend the voice of the Divine.

ø

Lord let us  
 - like at Sinai -  
 speak more  
 brightly  
 sip your  
 incense

step more  
 soundly  
 drip your  
 entrance

see more  
 loudly  
 taste your  
 statements

feel your  
 vision  
 think your  
 fragrance

let us learn  
 with senses  
 sacred

CHAYA LESTER

what You  
murmur in each  
language

teach us  
taste us  
grant us  
grace us

greet us  
gratis  
soothe us  
sate us

melt a mountain  
move and mage us

with scent  
and sentence  
Inundate us

# Tisha B'Av

Tisha B'Av is our holiday of communal mourning. It is the day we commemorate a multitude of calamities that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history. The central focus of our mourning is weeping over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

ð

## *The Collision Site of the Temple*

Temple Mount is a collision site. It is a paradox. It is at once the holiest site we have. And the most explosive. A place where prayers are lifted. And rocks are launched. Where firearms scatter pilgrims feet. Where calls to prayer and calls to war collide mid-air.

In the archetypal tale of Jacob's ladder, the narrative opens with a powerful verb that demands our attention. It reads, "*Vayifga* - Jacob arrived/encountered the place." That place was Mount Moriah, Temple Mount.

This verb *yifga* carries with it a punch, quite literally. For much more than mere arrival or encounter, *yifga* connotes a sense of collision – of two objects striking each other. It is no mistake that this verb shares its root with the modern Hebrew term for terrorist attack, *pegua*, and for injured– *nifga*.

This essential verb *yifga* colors our entire understanding of Jacob's narrative and thus our own narrative. It defines our making sense of this day, of the nature of Jewish history and of the conflict that riddles this Land.

For this is one of the Torah's defining stories of the Jewish people's relationship with the Land of Israel. First, "the place" that strikes Jacob is no less than Mt. Moriah, the historic site of the binding of Isaac and of the Temple itself. And what's more, the core content of God's message to Jacob is the promise that this land is given to his seed. This vision is at once a mystic glimpse of the corridor connecting heaven and earth, as well as the highly political promise of Jewish possession of the Land of Israel.

As such, it is really no wonder that our current-day experience of "the place" is one so terribly fraught with violence, with awe and intensity. Just as Jacob collided with this spot, so too we do collide with this Land. Just as this was for Jacob the site of his father's fearful binding, and also a place of holiness and prayer, so too for so many of us, to be in Israel is to be struck, to be flooded, by both a sense of prayerfulness and fear.

Jacob wakes up after his astounding dream and exclaims, "God is in this place and I did not know it." He is filled with fear and adds, "*Mah nora hamakom hazeh* - how awesome is this place, the house of God."

All too often we do not "know" that God is truly housed here. Certainly the evening news and trends of world-opinion would say the opposite. Even the utmost holy Jacob didn't get it. He admits he did not apprehend God here. That is, not until he was hit by it. Not until that *pegua* of Mt. Moriah had thoroughly struck him into a state of knowing. And so perhaps it is with us, too. That with each hit, with each *pegua*, we can access some otherwise inaccessible revelation of the God.

I admit that it is arguably absurd to ask or expect that anyone could, or should, behold God in these horrific attacks.

And yet, I must speak for myself and say that I find solace in this teaching. I find solace in the fact that we have a long religious tradition of mixing prayer and Jerusalem and fear. The violence that accompanies Israel, as unfortunate as it may be, is but a testimony to the fact that this place is full of God, fearsomely full of God.

Yes, on Tisha B'Av we could easily see ourselves as victims of history. Or we can stretch for significance in the face of all the violence & absurdity. We can close our eyes and dream God into this place. We can envision the ladder connecting all this dross of worldliness to something so much higher.

Yes, this place is awesome. Yes, like Jacob, our voices crack with fear. And yes, like Jacob, we can utter an affirmation that God is here. Even with each fresh pegua, "God is here."

Ø

## *Pollision*

Count us as those who have  
collided  
with this mountain,  
with this gravelly amalgam  
of prayer and fear.

A place so revered  
for 3-thousand years  
that we have no choice  
but to stop in our tracks  
and pay homage  
to the *impact*  
of Moriah.

And though the truth  
be hidden  
in the conflict

and her spinning dust  
yet we have glimpsed enough  
to know that  
this is none other than  
the House of God.

And yes,  
she is replete with  
sonic booms  
and safe rooms  
where huddled children  
howl as sirens sound  
and war looms.

But still  
this is our sacred ground.  
Rattled and riddled  
with bullets and shrapnel  
with blood-let  
and battle.

And yet it is  
ironically and eternally  
unruffled  
by the prattle of our enemies.

This place is our very own concoction  
of awful and awesome.  
Of blessing and foreboding  
All folded up beneath us  
As we sleep upon  
our rocky beds  
and dream.

You, God, have granted us  
the vision of prophets  
at this collision spot  
of pain & promise.

You have opened our eyes  
to behold the ladder  
lapping sky  
that we might exclaim,  
“God was here all along  
And I, I did not know.”

And so we find refuge  
in this sacrament  
of dirge and dirt.

And pray  
at this monument  
of faith  
known as  
“The Place”  
where heaven  
collides with earth.

## *As Tensions Mount on Temple Mount*

This poem was written in July 2017, after two Israeli police-men were murdered by 3 Arab-Israeli terrorists. The terrorists fled to hide in the Al-Aqsa Mosque on Temple Mount. In response to the attack, the Israeli government closed the compound for the first time in decades. They also installed metal detectors and cameras. In response, Arabs in Israel held violent protests as the Palestinian Authority called for a Day of Rage. This incident coincided with the month of Av, leading up to Tisha B'Av.

\*

Dear God, please let there be no rage today.  
Just rags of light. Just rays.  
Just metaphors for Grace  
at that contested meeting place...

Or if there need be rage  
then doesn't it seem  
the proper rage  
that should be raised today  
Is ours?  
Over terror and murder and a status quo  
That defies what is sacred?

Where is our fury  
That our most holy place is  
Forbidden  
from the pilgrimage of our own  
rightful prayers?

And tell me where  
is the world's rage  
that the very spot designated  
a #HouseofPrayerforAllNations  
is restricted to one nation alone  
and the rest sent home?



What rage should be raised today?  
If tempers mount  
on the Temple Mount  
then at the very least let  
our rage rise inside  
to make a riot of our hearts  
and stir a prayer for what is right

## *The Account of the Spies*

The very first calamity that is said to have fallen out on the 9th of Av was the negative account of the spies in the book of Numbers. As the Hebrews wandered closer to the Land of Israel they grew fearful of the idea of entering the Land and so sent out a troop of spies to scout out the land first. Those spies brought back a notoriously bad report. The people broke into wailing upon hearing it. The Midrash tells us that God replied to their tears with, "In the future I will give you something to really cry over on this day." That day was the Ninth of Av.



Yes, I have written near a thousand  
Foul accounts of despair  
At the terror  
And the taxes  
At the tenants upstairs  
and their crassness  
And the tremors  
Of coming war  
That nightly rock  
my children to sleep.

These reports  
-Compositions of consumption-  
On how the Land has eaten us whole.

But these black pages  
scattered on my pavement  
are not sent.

The newspapers are already filled with such lines.  
Why add mine?  
When what I really want  
Is to create the reality of this soil  
with poetry  
not soiled

report.

With accounts of buoyancy.  
Not drowning at the very port  
Of our longed-for dreams.

My occupation lately  
Is thus to see  
This Land  
- not for the ways it pains me  
But for how I dream it could be

My mission,  
To be a Scout of dreams.

## Weep

Our holidays are clearly not just about joyous celebration. They are rich with commemoration. And with mourning. There are gifts that come when we make space for the darker tones of pensiveness & mourning in our lives. These are gifts of humility, thoughtfulness and a certain type of grace.



Go gracefully, graciously  
about your day  
giving  
as often and as freely  
as you humanly can

smile gently  
...at everyone

spin your own scarves  
tend your own garden

listen pensively  
listen actively  
...also do this gently

be genuine  
be forgiving  
be committed to something  
higher and deeper than  
what can commonly be seen  
...also do this gently

accept reality  
and yet  
yearn for its embetterment  
work for its enrichment

you are allowed to be loud

when it serves the good  
...but also do this gently

grow things  
grow friends  
grow deep  
& when it's called for  
-- weep

*The Day When...*

Today is the day I reserve  
For seeing the dark side of things.

When the roads that lead lush to the sea  
Remind me of those that have promised  
to there drown me.

When the groves of olive trees  
Remind me of that which would  
steal my light from me.

When the rich maze of streets  
Remind me of how  
lost I have been.

## *Open My Eyes*

One of the explanations given for why the Second Temple was destroyed was that of *Sinat Hinam* – Senseless Hatred. Thus, one remedy we focus on at this time of mourning is that of having Senseless Love for each other.

Ø

Open my eyes to prize Your  
infinite palette  
of people...

Each *neshama* another color  
mixed together  
to complement  
each-other.

Verse-by-verse  
Diverse  
but single-Source'd

SistersBrothers  
all watercolored  
masterpiece by piece  
peaced together  
from one Mother.

*All I Want for Tisha B'Av*

This Tisha B'Av  
I'm mostly noticing what a jerk I can be.  
Like on a daily basis  
To my husband, for instance.  
(Poor guy)  
And I'm sure he's not the only one.

I want to go give someone a massage and a wad of money.  
And to not respond to my kids kvetches with a kvetch of my own.

I want to tame this frantic ego  
And all my overblown  
everything  
And just clean up my own kitchen  
Like it's not work that's beneath me.

And fess up to the whole persona thing...  
The one where I swish around like I'm holy  
Because I live in Jerusalem and cover my elbows  
And talk about God pretty much incessantly.

It's fine and all  
But not today...  
Today I just don't want to be a jerk anymore  
To anyone  
That's all.



# Tu B'Av

*"There were no Holy Days for the Jewish people like the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur." (Maseket Taanit, 26b)*

TuB'Av – the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av - is one seriously long lost holiday. Tu B'Av is like the Bermuda Triangle'd holiday that just up and disappeared. And mind you, it used to really be something spectacular. Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur are called the two happiest days of the entire year. Clearly, Yom Kippur stuck around, but where did his poor forgotten happy-day sister run off to? How did we lose touch with one of the two most essential pieces of Jewish spiritual technology for happiness-making?

And how do we reconnect to it already? Because it really is worthy of celebration. Tu B'Av could very well be the stealthiest secret weapon of Geuladik-Redemption yet. It's an uber fixer-upper of a holy day.

Now, you may note that a quick Google will show that it is – in theory at least – already being fixed up. It's been recycled as the Jewish Valentine's Day; a yiddishe Sadie Hawkins Day.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not going to argue with schlepping in a little celebration of romance into our unarguably less-than-sexy tradition. Sexiness is great for Jewish continuity and all...but, I think we're missing out on the full Tu B'Av turbo power when we boil it all down to romance.

I much prefer to view this mystery holiday as the ultimate celebration

of the Rise of the Feminine & the ushering in of Circle Consciousness.

What is Circle Consciousness? It is a Kabbalistic model for an enlightened state of mind that is based on principles of equality, supportiveness, presence, embodiment. It is understood to be the Messianic goal of humanity's spiritual evolution. Tu B'Av just drips with circle consciousness.

It is taught that on this day women would share their finest white dresses with each other. Utterly without competition. The wealthy would lend to the poor and vice versa and they would all go out to the vineyards and dance in circles.

Circle dancing is the Torah mega-symbol for circle consciousness and the ushering in of the Messianic era. First off, in a circle there is no hierarchy. Everyone is equidistant from the center and that center is God. Everyone has equal God access. Equal stature. Equal depth of wisdom. In a circle, everyone's an expert. Everyone is Professor Doctor Rabbi this or that. Everyone wears the pants, the badges, the glasses, the expert's hat.

The uniform of the World to Come is actually the white dress borrowed from someone either richer or poorer than yourself. This is the World to Come business suit.

The sharing of dresses takes the old school hegemony of hierarchies and flattens the heck out of them. Because our clothes reflect our status, our socio-economic standing. It's a symbolic act of defiance against the entire corrosive world order of have's and have-not's.

The rich girls give up their edge because they know that in the end the real EDGE – the place where we all benefit – is when we all have equal benefits!

And what's more, we have this gorgeous teaching in the Gemara

about the Messianic Era.<sup>4</sup> At the End of Days the tzadikim, the righteous ones, will dance in a circle and in the center will be God. Each tzadik will extend their hand, point to the middle and pronounce, “This is the God I’ve been waiting for!”

Now tell me friends, what happens when you dance in a circle and point at the center? What do you point at?

Lo and behold – it’s the person across from you! Each finger points straight as an arrow across to another lit up face in the circle. And then you call out, “THIS is the God I’ve been waiting for!”

What a crowning moment of circle consciousness...to see the divine countenance in the person in front of you. And for them to see yours. Even the hierarchy of the Divine is leveled. This is the invitation of Tu B’Av. This final push of empowerment of the feminine is a pathway of equality and embodiment for all people...and animals and plankton and angels and even God!

⊘

It is imperative to our evolution as a people and a planet for folks to just get it together and GET TOGETHER. Shatter the heck out of lines of inequality and rather instate circles of witnessing, acceptance and flowing self-expression.

This Tu B’Av get together and support each other. Get together and witness the wisdom, the godliness, of the people around you...and the person within you.

Dance in a vineyard if you’ve got one! Swap some clothes. Wear something white and shiny and shimmy around. Or just tell someone else how beautiful they are...and then tell yourself that too!

---

<sup>4</sup> Found in Maseket Taanit 31A, in close proximity to the discussion of Tu B’Av.

## *In Vineyards*

When the month of the father  
meets the moon of the mothers  
and their merger  
makes for circles  
in vineyards  
of lovers.

When ancient consciousness  
is called back in  
to its rightful bliss  
as the most joyous  
of all days.

Then we will begin  
to wake from our graves  
to inter-marry the tribes  
to forgive the unforgivable  
and share our most enviable.<sup>5</sup>

To dance unembarrassed  
and share our abundance  
and point incredulous  
at the Divine Presence  
that dances among us.

---

<sup>5</sup> The events which the Fifteenth of Av celebrates are similar in that they all brought about a sense of unity. For example: (a) this was a day designated for making shiduchim, (b) the tribes became permitted to marry into one another, (c) the tribe of Binyamin was again included back into the nation, (d) this is the day when "anyone who does not know his tribe" brings the wood for the mizbayach/altar.

## *A Visualization*

In honor of Tu B'Av I often invite women to come together to circle, to dance and celebrate the amazing history and ideal vision of the future that are woven into this day. Here is the text of a visualization on that theme:

*Imagine that we are a group of women 2500 years ago at the time when this holiday was celebrated in its fullness. Imagine we are all there, dancing together under the stars, wearing each other's white dresses. Now imagine that we all suddenly have a common vision of ourselves from generations before, when we were all together - dancing with Miriam at the Sea of Reeds.*

*Imagine ourselves remembering this lifetime from 1000 years before, when we celebrated together with song and dance at the Sea. Here we are with Miriam and miracles and a crystalline revelation of God. And in the midst of our dancing we have a common vision of ourselves some 3000 plus years later - as a group of women in Jerusalem who have gathered to commune and communicate with each other.*

*Imagine how they imagine WE will be. Soak in that revelation. And then imagine that we are part of the group of women who gather to celebrate the actual coming of the Moshiach. Imagine how we are dancing together in wonder at the realization of the world-wide redemption and perfection of history.*

*Allow yourself to believe for a moment that you are included in each of those circles. You are one of the women in the field, one of Miriam's women at the Sea, one of the women who will dance in Moshiach in the Days to Come. And one of us. We encompass and include all of that from the past to the present to the future. In the circle there is no past and future – all is included – all is One.*

# *Rosh Hodesh* *(New Moon Celebration)*

Rosh Hodesh (Hebrew: ראש חודש *Head of the Month*) is the name for the first day of every month of the Hebrew calendar, marked by the birth of a new moon.

It is considered a minor holiday, yet its themes of the rise of the feminine are majorly important. Similar to Tu B'Av, it is celebrated as a woman's holiday and as a holiday that celebrates the archetype of the Feminine.



## *Cycles of the Moon*

Do not call her waxed  
nor waned.  
tis all his doing.  
She is not made of change  
but is bold and bare and dark  
barring the sun his clever art.

So to speak of fullness is to speak  
An imperfect code  
She is constancy  
full of form.

Full of her own silt and  
stone and starry eyes  
It is only our shifting perspective  
That shrouds her with  
more or less cloth of light.

It is only the distance and the tilt  
that turn our heads spinning  
To keep up with her changes.  
She does not wilt, nor well  
She is full, she is still.

Full - no matter the date  
No matter the clouds that stand in her way  
No matter the blindfold of day  
She, amidst her cycles, rests unchanged.

And we, whispering of gravity  
Obey the laws which none dare disobey  
We fall and rise  
We birth and die  
And we too, in the rounding out of our cycling lives,  
Realize that perspective, space and distance  
Are the varied rays  
cast upon our skin.

Waxing and waning – twin illusions.  
We remain, lunar and unilluminated.  
We too remain unchanged.

## *The Diminishment of the Moon*

This story from the Gemara is one of the key texts that instruct us in gender disparities and how to respond to them:

*“Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi explains: Indeed, initially the sun and the moon were equal in greatness and luminance. But then the moon said to God: “Master of the Universe! Can two kings wear the same crown?” Said God to her, “Go diminish yourself.” Said she to Him, “Master of the Universe! Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself?” Said He to her, “You may rule both in the day and at night.” Said she to Him, “What advantage is there in that? What does a lamp accomplish at high noon?” Said He to her, “The people of Israel shall calculate their dates and years by you.” Said she to Him, “But the sun, too, shall have a part in that, for they shall have to calculate the seasons by it.” ....Still God saw that she was not appeased. So God said: “Offer an atonement for My sake, for having diminished the moon.”*

~ Talmud, Chulin 60b

In Isaiah 30:27, the Torah describes the era of *Moshiach* as a time when “the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun.”

So it was that the moon was diminished....and with it the diminishment of the feminine and of women. And yet, this diminishment is no mere metaphor. It is written in the whirling verses of our very DNA...Each strand and stanza demands an answer to this riddle of history. We are finally starting to discover just what it means that the Messiah will usher in a day of full equality between men & women, sun & moon. And together let us ponder this wonder - what will be when two luminaries will shine with equal spark and matching brilliance, men and women in equality and harmony?



## *Are You Done Being Diminished?*

It all started back on the 4th day of creation  
when God was first layin'  
down those early tracks of earth-craft.

Set two chandeliers  
swinging sweet  
from the ceiling of heaven.  
Both beaming like crazy.  
One to rule the day and one to rule the night.

And isn't that nice?  
Equal dominions – equally sliced.

Until the very next verse asserts  
a slight  
so slight  
it's almost imperceptible...

“God made the two great luminaries:  
the Great to rule the day,  
and the SMALL to rule the night.”

And how quickly sweet equilibrium melts away  
into a 4-course debate.  
The Talmud sits up straight  
and gesticulates:  
‘Why the sudden disparity?  
At first it was 2 greats  
...and now suddenly one is small?’  
– A subtle shift in linguistics and the whole world falls.  
What was once sameness now avalanches into difference.  
And the Talmud spells it out all tragic & explicit.

The moon is the princess  
the sun is the prince.  
One destined for greatness

the other for diminishment.

And this metaphor of the ages  
has been replayed in women's most basic  
inequalities.

For yes, there IS a glass ceiling  
where only the unhamperings of heaven should be.  
And history bears ample witness  
to the hundred million tales of women  
being battered and shattered dreams.

Of unequal compensation,  
of rape and ransom  
by the not so handsome  
hand of mismanaged masculinity.

These are the culture currents we all wade in  
but now we are called to weigh in  
to confront its contortions  
and put an end  
to the distorted proportions  
of the feminine.

And lo and behold  
that's exactly where the Gemara goes!

The moon protests her smallness  
and God listens....  
argues a bit in defense  
but in the end  
apologizes  
with honest grit  
and earthly means  
brings a monthly offering  
to atone the divine misdeed.

So feminist naysayers follow God's lead.  
And tell me — will you be in the camp

that shades their eyes and looks away  
when the moon takes her stand  
in all of her God-given strength?

Will you shush her, shun her, ignore her, abhor her?  
Or will you bless that glorious day...  
and assist in its establishment with speed and with praise?

Will you see it as a *siman tov*, a *mazal tov*,  
a good sign that shines forth on a new sky line.  
Will you copy your Creator?  
Celebrate her  
and apologize?

And to my sisters I say:  
Let us soak in the good news  
that's been brewing  
in our very own millennium.

A fortune long foretold  
that we women  
are destined to shape-shift  
a new end to this story.

Our duty – to rise to full stature and station and glory.  
The path begins with our own inner sense.  
So tell me this -  
When's the last time you felt small  
weak or worthless?  
Was it last week, last night?  
But, tell me, aren't you worth it?

Aren't you worth a new paradigm?  
Aren't you worth your loud-voice  
let loose, well-juiced, just-in-timed?

Lift your chin to the heavens child  
you are interstellar  
and styled

bright as Venus  
and the Shechina  
you're the Luna  
the Diva  
the shimmering Kallah  
the Shabbas Bride.

Drink in this sweet nectar.  
We have arrived.  
Be every bit your brothers equal  
not his rival.

After all, even God apologized.

Be done being diminished.  
Forgive yourself for your own smallness.  
Harness your Her-ness  
your moon'ness.

Embrace your stately greatness  
and Shine on

Offer up forgiveness  
To the fuming alter of history.  
Have compassion on your brothers  
And with that bigness, you will lead.

# *Shabbat*

Shabbat is our weekly holiday. Considered to be the holiest day of the entire year, and yet it occurs weekly. Aptly named “A palace in time” by R’Heschel, Shabbat sits at the center of our ritual life. Called the Queen, the Bride, this day is the Jewish people’s ultimate spiritual technology.

\*

Getting ready  
to greet the great  
bride and ride  
the Shabbas tide of  
good tidings  
l'chaims  
and shine!

## *Shabbat as 'the World to Come'*

To best understand Shabbat we can look to where mention of Shabbat occurs in the Torah. Strikingly, the Torah's core injunction to keep the Sabbath is followed directly by the idolatrous debacle of the Golden Calf. It begs the question, why is the theme of Shabbat found *here*, brushing up so closely to the Golden Calf?

The nineteenth century commentator, the Mei Hashiloach highlights the essential link between the two. He shares a vision of God and Moses atop Sinai engaged in the study of Shabbat. God reveals to Moses the nature of Shabbat as a replica of '*Olam Habab*', the World to Come, when all existence will be harmonious and completely good. Shabbat is the weekly taste of the ultimate redemption reserved for the future.

Simultaneous to the scene of God and Moses learning together, the people at the mountain's base unconsciously feel the incoming vibrations of this Sabbatical promise of redemption. This intuition stirs in them an irrepressible eagerness for redemption's arrival – now! Their impatience was holy-rooted-yet-poorly-executed, manifesting itself in a mad plunge into idolatry. It's no wonder then that what emerged from the molten gold was a calf. The calf is, after all, an undeveloped cow, a keen representative of prematurity, of the not-yet-ness that defines so much our present reality. Thus, the greatest of Biblical sins is here portrayed as the deafening pulse of Impatience; a need to be or have something more than what is *right now*.

And that is where Shabbat comes in. Perhaps the greatest spiritual-technology of the Bible, Shabbat encodes an antidote to impatience. For when the time for candle-lighting arrives, wherever we are, however many dishes still need to be washed, however much is left undone, Shabbat compels us to stop and simply accept what is, whatever it is. We light our candles and we sanctify the moment. We accept the present, no matter how imperfect it may be, and in that act our lives are made holy.

For we are all works in progress; more human's becoming than human beings. Popeye misquoted when he said, "I yam what I yam." Rather, the God of the Bible is named "I will be what I will be." Our God is not a half-baked calf of gold-laden impatience. Our God is a long-suffering, patient process of becoming...an ineffable zephyr of growth, yearning and unfolding.

On Shabbat we are invited, compelled, to pause our busy goal-goaded lives. When we do that we taste the arrival of the mythic end of days, even amidst its delay.

This week, may we cease paying homage to our impatience. Let's stop being run ragged by our unmet goals and nagging inadequacies. Let's taste the sweetness of arrival and acceptance that God bequeathed to us at Sinai.



## *A Prayer for Patience*

Please God  
Let me light  
More than flame tonight.

More than wax and wick  
and sliver stick of wood.  
More than shallow stream of words  
recited from a pocket book.

But rather with this touch of torch  
and spell of prayer  
let me light a way towards You  
let me dare  
to radiate  
a rapt request  
that with this lamp  
the world will rest  
a stilling hand on pounding heart

and take a breath  
- a pause  
- to start  
to appreciate  
the state of things  
...just as they are.

And spill this light  
to stain the sheets  
so feverishly inscribed  
with what the future will bring.

Washed away in what's today  
- present, patient, allowing space.

The ache for arrival laid to rest  
our wreck un-rectified...as of yet.

Yet rest us well  
in the humbling fact  
that we are made replete with lacks

The future's but an ornament  
on the bounding limbs of present tense.

All force and foist  
of fists and fights  
flooded out by candle-light.

Incandescent with acceptance  
- allowance made for imperfections.

We offer up our Sabbath rest  
Forbearance on our table set.

A chance for us to savor food  
to honor all  
to prize, to prove  
that there's matter higher



than a week of labor  
than lofty goals and courting favor.

For a match-box and a bit of wax  
can top and tumble all of that.

So as sun sets  
we raise a blaze.  
Resplendently  
We offer praise.

As light leans in  
and grips go lax  
our ache for future  
slips into the past.

Arrival, a candle.  
Impatience, in vain.  
The World to Come  
has come and come undone  
by flame.

## *The Braid*

“And God braided Eve’s hair” (Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 18a)

When Eve saw the day getting darker on the sixth day of creation, she said: “This is all my fault. The world is returning to a state of unformed chaos because of me!” Then God came and braided Eve’s hair and taught her how to kindle light to usher in the Shabbat Bride. And ever since then Eve’s daughters have brought light where there is darkness by lighting Shabbat candles at the end of the sixth day of each week. And we eat Challah on Shabbat; special braided bread - to remember God’s kindness, how God *comforted Eve by braiding her hair*. (A Modern Midrash by Rabbi Moshe Silberschein)

\*

Reading these things I cry  
to think of your hands, mama,  
braiding my hair  
or there,  
on my cheeks

and wondered if everyone who ever felt  
your hands on their cheek would agree  
that they are the two most dove-like  
cashmere caring things God’s love ever  
carved out of this coarse world  
... or does it just feel that way for me?

Reading these things I cried  
to think of your hands, Hashem,  
in my hair  
on a hundred honey-colored Friday afternoons  
your fingers ringed with cloves and raisins  
braiding all of my frustrations  
into life-sustaining  
bread.

## *"Tadaa!" - Candle-lighting*

I look out from behind  
 a veil of light before my eyes  
 and see - surprised  
 the whole world cloaked in sacred time.

"Tadaa"  
 as if a child,  
 told to put her impatient paws  
 over her eyes  
 to twirl around twice  
 and open them  
 suddenly to see  
 - Tadaa! -  
 it's Shabbas!

The day the world  
 wears a big crimson ribbon  
 or amethyst wrap  
 a white shtreimel  
 or just a smile.

Chaos has settled into a set table  
 the week has washed  
 and wears, like manna,  
 whatever you desire.

Tadaa!  
 you twirl your tongue in wonder  
 & praise the transformation.  
 But a blink ago, another world.

Tadaa no less than Todah - "Thank You"  
 in the holy tongue.  
 Tadaa, today, it's a whole new world.

## *I'm Embarrassed to Write This, But...*

I have a secret. I deliberately keep it hidden and have so for years, except for those rare moments when I drop my guard, and have usually regretted it afterwards. It is quite possibly a distasteful secret. A secret that could distance me from people I care about. A secret that might label me in ways I definitively do not want.

So, why share this formidable secret now? - Well, this morning I sent my kids to school with a prayer that they make it there alive. And, quite frankly, I'm just desperate enough right now to bear the sting of shame that comes with saying my truth out loud. So here it is...

You want to see peace in the Middle East?

— “Keep Shabbas.”

Yup, I said it. “Keep Shabbas.”

Or wrap tefillin.

Or eat something kosher.

I don't care what it is. Just so long as it's something God instructed.

Oy, I can feel the horror-clinch tightening in my chest as I write this. Horror as I imagine the 1000 glazing eyes of my beloved friends & family who simply dismiss me right here and now as a narrow-minded religious fanatic. And I hate glazed eyes. I hate being dismissed. And I hate religious fanaticism.

Believe me, I'm a therapist, I know about the dangers of 'magical thinking'. I know about the limitations of reward and punishment theology. I get how simple-minded childish and inane this might sound...

But wait, here it comes again. Like a wave, like a labor pain...born from a two-thousand year old gestation. Birthed between my teeth and onto this screen:

“Light candles this Shabbas.”

“For Israel's sake. For the sake of our beloved children and heritage and all that is fragile and precious. Light candles.”

My face is literally turning red. My jaw hurts with the knowledge that I can't unsay this and you may just think I'm a spiritual crazy. I want to whip out my many diplomas and desperately assure everyone I am intelligent. I am educated and sane.

But, the truth is, I've never felt saner or more intelligent in my life as I do now, living here in Israel in these rare and defining times. And it has taken an un-educating for me to get here. A re-educating to what truly matters most.

So please – if you are still reading this – don't glaze over quite yet. Just indulge me. Just apply your well-honed post-modern skepticism to the idea that maybe, just maybe, the tangible, visible world is not all that there is. Maybe, just maybe...

Believe me, I do not want to encroach upon your lifestyle choices, your decisions, your intelligence.

...But oh Lord here it comes again.

“Get connected.”

“Do a new mitzvah.”

“Cry out to Hashem.”

I can't hold it back anymore.

Not when I watch my 3 kids walk out the door like it's the front-lines of a spiritual battle and we are short six-hundred-thousand soldiers and the ammunition is running thin because all we're doing is talking politics and checking our news feed when we should be talking to God and checking our good deeds instead.

This is life and death my friends and my family sleeps restless in these shimmering trenches.

For the non-religious and religious alike, I beg of us to take our spirituality more seriously. It is not just a side bar, a bi-line, a luxury, a thing of fantasy for hippies and freaks. It is the next crucial and exquisite dance step of our evolution.

Because you know why we haven't found political solutions to the conflict in Israel? – Because there ARE NO political solutions. Politics alone cannot solve this inscrutable mess.

We are talking about Israel here. A miraculously destined dream-state crafted out of improbability, prophecies and prayers. Even Israel's secular founder David Ben Gurion said, "To be a realist in Israel you must believe in miracles."

There are no this-worldly strategies big enough to encompass this other-worldly battleground.

I'm not saying we aren't obligated to pursue political avenues. Of course, work for peace and strategize for war. Do all you can in this world. But do not let this world limit you or do you in.

The Shema itself lays it out with utter lucidity. Do these things you have been commanded "in order that your days be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land that God vowed to your fathers to give to them for as long as the heavens are above the earth."

Yes, I really do believe this stuff.

Or let me put it this way.

We need a shift in consciousness, agreed?

This current paradigm is clearly not working out for a-n-y-b-o-d-y. What keeping mitzvot does is shifts us into a consciousness that says that there is something bigger going on here than the sum of its earthly parts. When you do an act that you have been commanded to do you are plugging in to the consciousness of a higher truth, a diviner order.

We are willing to invest millions of dollars in warfare and defense. We are willing to hand our youth over to the hard arms of armies. But keep Shabbas, follow the Oral-law? Ugh, unseemly, illogical, antiquated, irrelevant.

Maybe so...but maybe, just maybe, it's real.

Maybe, just maybe, there is a more peaceful path through these land-minded fields.

Maybe we can do this thing called teshuva. And maybe, just maybe, it will save our children's lives.

And maybe, just maybe, the entire world will be better off for it too. So forgive me for my simple-minded reward-and-punishment Jewish-mama-guilt-trip. But if just one more mitzvah is kept because of this

post then dayenu, it was worth the sting of a thousand eyes of disdain and disbelief.

I believe this to be true and I'm willing to risk life, limb and a good dose of embarrassment to live by it my friends.

## *The Secret to Shabbat Hosting*

We host meals. Big meals. Glorious meals. I get goosebumped just thinking about the shining faces, the tears shed, the sacred space held at these holy feasts. People think I'm this amazing hostess. Oh, I am. But not the way you think.

In fact, I'm a fretful wreck in the kitchen. But it doesn't matter. Because I have THIS 6-step formula for how to host the ideal Shabbas/holiday meal. Here's my secret:

### **First of all, DON'T.**

Yeah, you heard me. Don't do it. If there is even a remote chance that you will end up a driveling mess of mother-nerves and householder-resentment, just skip it.

The first step in fabulous hosting is to know thine own self...and thine LIMITATIONS. If you are going to end up a monster of overwhelm, don't let slip that robotic Yes. Cancel it. Built up your reserves. You'll get another chance in about 7 days.

### **Stop Lying & Start Honoring Your Insides**

Let's say you do decide to take the plunge...When your guest asks, 'Can I bring something?' – NEVER lie and reply, "Oh, just bring yourself." That's usually just a load of bunk you are sweating to uphold in the hopes of looking flawless. Now maybe that smiling got-it-all-covered visage is your deepest truth. Mazal tov. I admire you. A blessing on your head...But if there is any, and I mean any, residue of bluff there, just practice letting it drop. Far too many of us have a gag-order on our authenticity when it comes to hosting. We repress the heck out of our genuine overwhelm and pay for it later when we explode at our kids & our partners.

I consider it my contribution to conscious community to not play in to this quiet game of martyrdom any more. For the sake of all that is healthy & mentally sound, let's stop suppressing our inner needs and speak some truth to our guests already.

### **Potluck Is The New Paradigm**



Some people get crafty in the kitchen, I just get anxious. So what started happening to me was that I would get so stressed out before a meal that I started hosting less and less. It was an all-or-nothing game. Either I had to be perfect or I would shut down shop altogether. So in my quest for balance I discovered potluck. And I feel lucky indeed.

Here's my favored potlucky formula: We provide essentials of drink/wine/challah/dips and let's say a brisket and salad. Totally doable on a Friday. Everyone else brings a dish. A significant dish, mind you – A fish, a quiche, a curry. Walla. It's a royal feast.

And what's more – it's Egalitarian. Everyone's a king, no one's a slave. No more heavy top-down hierarchy to get in the way. Gone is the model of burnt-out families where the wife is the korban on the altar of a lavish table. We MUST morph the expectations and the definitions of 'holiness' into healthy holiness, shared responsibility and cooperation.

Don't go nuts, go potluck.

### **Educate The Youth**

How I wish that someone had educated me when I was young & single. I saw Friday as my fun day. My get out and go hiking day. My coffee with friends til 3pm day. My paint my nails day. You got the message.... Now that I'm a mother of four it's my day of one thousand and one tasks to be done at light speed and still not all accomplished. God, I wish someone had told me the truth about family realities back then. So, I'm going to do it now...

WORD to the single people – If you are going to a family for a meal, know this. These people are tired. They are zombie-tired. They are To-Do-list-to-the-moon tired. And they are conflicted. They want to host you and all your friends. And they are limited. Just like they are stretching their vessels to have you, you stretch yours to be had. Lend hands!

To all you hosters – Let your single guests in on the Reality Tv show that is your mad-hectic life. Invite them in – to play with your kids, chop the veggies, schlep out the garbage. I don't care. Just be real.

Allow them to get dirty with the enormous mess that exists behind every perfectly-set table. You can talk Torah with them as they wash your dishes. Or talk life. Show them what being the CEO of a home is really like. Teach them some new-paradigm Shabbas-etiquette where everyone contributes to the cause and all come out feeling more empowered for it.

**For Parents – Don't Host At The Expense Of Your Kids.**

Please parent-people, don't let your ideal Shabbas meal be at the expense of your darling mess-makers. If you're like us then this is one of the few windows in the week to actually connect with the kids. And this is an ideal ritual for doing so.

Here's how we do it:

Bribery. Yes, I am willing to air the dirty truth of my parenting. Generally my kids take off to play upstairs after the challah and dips course. I call them down before dessert and make a deal. I put aside choice healthy food for them and then leverage the heck out of dessert. "Whoever wants cake, first eat at least 10 big big bites of this green stuff..."

Once you have fulfilled your Mother Jones regulated version of being a respectable parent...pull out the chocolate chips. Pose questions about the parsha. Age-appropriate questions for each kiddo. If they answer it right, throw them a chocolate chip. It's a joy-fest memory-maker you will cherish forever. I am so not above bribery when it comes to Torah learning. The Torah should be sweet. And those precious kids are the chocolate chip treats that sweeten the meal for the whole table.

**Finally And Most Importantly — Don't Be Fooled By The Food:**

You heard of Susie Fishbein? She's the Jewish Martha Stewart of kosher cookbooks. I (affectionately) call her Susie Fish-bane-of-my-existence. I get all indignant just thinking about those cookbook-standards that no middle class multi-child'ed woman can sanely reach. What's worse is that all those pretty settings entirely miss the point of a Shabbas or holiday meal.

Because it's not just a meal. It's a ritual.

The food is the just the excuse. Don't let it trip you up or hold you back. The goal of the meal is to create a sacred space for people to connect- to each other, yes – but more essentially – to their very own souls. You see, our souls are like scared animals crouching under the table. The gift of a great ritual meal is that it coaxes our souls out and invites them to sit firm and flourishing in our seats. When we realize it's so not about the food, what do we care if the fish is overcooked? As long as the singing is strong and the conversation is a communion. Get rid of the prep stress and put the stress on the soul instead.

### **Here's how to dish out the real soul food:**

Prepare content beforehand, just the way you would prepare the food. Zone in on a theme for the meal. Base it on a teaching from the parsha or the nearest holiday. Share a little Torah on it and pose a question to the table. Make it personal. Not just intellectual. Not just informational. Preferably something with a psychological twist so that everyone can apply the teaching directly to their most intimate real-time lives.

The obvious example – Let's say it's almost Passover. What are you currently enslaved to and what would it take to get free of it already? Go around the table and share. Process it. Give & get feedback. Granted, my husband and I are die-hard therapists, so we tend to invite everyone to share their neurosis freely at the table. (Guests beware.) By us, it's like a gourmet group therapy ritual. We have been known to lead a meditation, do impromptu spoken word free-styling, dramatic renderings, on-stage dream interpretations. - Find your own style. Just remember to keep it creative. Keep it moving with l'chaims. Keep it focused, go deep and make sure everyone gets the chance (and feels comfortable) to freely speak and to let their souls speak.

A great Shabbas/holiday table is a crucible for witnessing each other. It is a playground for God expression. A feast of creativity & togetherness. Let this goal be your hosting North Star. Don't be fooled by the food. That tasty spread is just the bait to get your soul into the seat.

The learning, the personal transformation, the connections – those are the real feast!



QUIZ: Here's a quick final quiz for you to review and find out which of the 4 Hosting Archetypes fits you best:  
The Martyr – The Masker-of-Truths – The Healthy-is-Holy Host – The Soul-Food Chef (AKA Shefa Chef)

You get a call Thursday morning from a single person who wants to know if they can come for Shabbas. And maybe bring a friend or 3. And a bottle of wine of course. Your response:

1. "Great. What do you like to eat and what time works for you guys to start the meal?"
2. Out of your mouth: "Don't worry about the wine. Just bring yourselves." Inside your head: "Oh my Lard, my stress level just went from mild to extra-sauna."
3. "Great. I'm a big believer in the power of group contribution. Can you come by on Friday for a few hours to help?"
4. "Yes and bring some Torah to share along with that bottle of wine!"

Friday morning usually finds you:

1. Biting your nails and pounding your coffee as you rush around in a frenzy to prepare a meal Susie Fishbein would be proud of.
2. Kvetching to your partner or to yourself about how much work you have to do.
3. Chatting to the many helpers you have gathered around you while you all group-chop vegetables.
4. While you prepare for Shabbas you are listening to a YouTube class on the parsha, pondering a Torah to share and a question to ask your guests that will best foster introspection and growth.

Saturday night usually finds you:

1. Trashed
2. Resentful
3. Glowing from a gorgeous Shabbas. Cleaning up only a little, because your guests amply helped you clean after the meal.

4. Feeling thankful, soulful & significantly more evolved after everything you learned over Shabbas.

Which one(s) are you?

Mostly 1's = The Martyr

Mostly 2's = The Masker-of-Truths

Mostly 3's = The Healthy-is-Holy Host

Mostly 4's = The Soul Food Chef (AKA Shefa Chef)

The real question is not "Who are you?", but rather, "Who are you going to be next week?!"

Keep it real friends.

# Havdalah

Havdalah is the ceremony performed at the end of Shabbat. Havdalah literally means ‘separation’, for the ritual makes a separation between the holiness of Shabbat and the mundane of the week. The ritual includes turning off the lights, saying a blessing over a candle with two or more wicks, the smelling of spices, the tasting of wine. This candle-lit ritual has a special poignant beauty as we say farewell to the beloved Sabbath bride.



## *A Prayer for Havdalah*

May we be a many-wicked-candle of a family.  
Giving out light like it was a vocation,  
a given, a naturally occurring mission.

Give us spiciness.  
Give us goodness.  
Give us *reyach*  
scent and shine  
and goblets worth of fullness.

Let us house Eliyahu  
on a regular basis.  
And help us be gracious.  
With our hosting.

Give to us that we may give to others.

May we move flowingly  
between *kodesh v'hol*.<sup>6</sup>  
Between endless bowls  
Of rice puffs in the morning  
And cleanups in the evening  
Of raised cups on Shabbas  
& praised lips as we kiss  
our children hello and goodbye  
Through the turnstile of this doorway  
Every morning and night.

This Havdalah, help us to distinguish  
between wrong & right  
And may we be distinguished  
Never extinguished  
in the world  
And in Your eyes.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sacred & profane

# Elul

## *Preparing to End & to Being Again*

### *Elul ~ the month of the Spiral Staircase.*

Elul is this intense time of soul searching that propels us into the new year. Within the word Elul is Lul.

Lul is specifically mentioned in reference to the structure of the First Temple (1 Kings 6:8). It says that King Solomon built a lul, a spiral staircase, at the back of the Temple. - And Solomon was the wise of the wise, so why?

Have you ever studied what happens when you climb a spiral stair? It propels you upward; the spiral shape builds momentum. The whole month of Elul we're laboriously climbing up this spiral staircase...Gaining momentum, building strength until the month of Tishri when we are propelled out onto the roof of a whole new year. Just look at the hieroglyphic Hebrew letters of Elul – the double LL lamed root actually looks like two spirals!

Every day of Elul, we recite Psalm 27. The crowning verse of this psalm begins, "Lulai he'emanti..." - *If I had not believed...* Turn the word Lulai around and you get – Elul. Lulai is Elul spelled backwards. And it's no coincidence, for what does lulai mean? It means 'if it weren't for...' It's an expression of reflection. It captures this motion of turning to look back at the past in order to understand its significance for the present and the future.



In Elul we spiral up with 360 degrees of perspective. We turn and say, "Lulai, if x had not have happened then y could not have happened."

This is the motion of the spiral; we turn the curve and look back at where we came from, but this time we are on a higher level on the spiral, with a broader perspective.

Rosh Hashanah can be read as 'the head that turns around' - the head that turns and sees where it has been in the past year. What sins and what successes are seen in this vista? We look back at the past and say 'lulai' - had this that and the other thing not occurred then I would not be where I am today.

May we dance in spirals of growth & joy - and the joy of growth. May all our years circle around us, so that we may relish in the whole spiraling spiritual sipur<sup>7</sup> of our lives.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sipur means 'story'.

## *This is Your Brain on Elul*

Elul is the season for teshuva; our own temporal epicenter for Change. In Elul we are invited in to becoming Change Agents in our most personal lives. How do we, in fact, cultivate the ability for transformation? Change occurs at the cross-roads of spirituality, psychology, and physiology.

### **The Physiology:**

Change happens in a box in our brains. It is a magical little cubicle called the pre-frontal cortex. We'll call it 'PC' for our purposes – because it really is like a PC; an adroit little inner-computer that handles life tasks masterfully.

The PC is a wiz at focusing, impulse control, problem solving, will power. It is the artist of our life's best progress. Want to lose weight? Root out laziness? Step right in to the PC. Here anything is possible and you are queen. Like a crown at our forehead, like an inner-tefillin. It's a wildly productive place from which to function.

Elul is the time to get trained in how to optimize our PCs. Because Elul is to our year like the pre-frontal cortex is to our brain. Here in the PC, teshuva is a piece of cake...mehadrin, zero-calorie, dream-cake.

But there is a glitch. Of course.

The problem is that we don't always work from our masterful PC.

*Why in the world not?*

Well, because it's taxing....and because change hurts.

### **Change Hurts**

I've always loved that oft-quoted Jewish aphorism for growth. "There is an angel that stands over every blade of grass and whispers 'grow'." That's the pastel Hallmark version. The actual quote in the Midrash says that the angel is there HITTING that poor striving blade. A real clobber call for growth.

Of course, when we look at our own lives that makes sense. There is an inevitable aspect of pain inherent to change. In fact, that badgering angel has actually been illustrated wonderfully by modern technology. Advancements in brain analysis technology has shown us how different areas of the brain light up in response to our thoughts. And lo and behold these brain pictures reveal that the human response to change is consistently and universally a preference to avoid it.

Indulge me in a rudely rudimentary layman's description of what happens:

Brain imaging shows that when we think about Change our pre-frontal cortex lights up like a Hannukah bush. Which is good news, but also bad news.

Apparently, our magical PC can only handle a handful of concepts at once – and then it hits its limits. Once it bumps up against its limit there's a marked sense of discomfort, fatigue and even anger that seems to occur.

This is because the PC is real tight with its overly-emotional and unstable neighbor, Amygdala. Ah, amygdala. You're soooo primitive. The amygdala is our emotional center. It's part of our dinosaur brain and it's all about fight or flight. When the PC crashes our not-so-helpful friend amygdala steps in and that's not good for productive growth.

The PC crashes because it needs a lot of blood sugar to fuel it. That glucose is unfortunately metabolically expensive for the body to produce. Note that the brain makes up 1/50th of our body mass but consumes 1/5th of the calories we need for energy. That makes brain activity expensive. And the most expensive of all brain activity is that which is done in the PC.

And so the brain usually opts to not turn on the gas-guzzling PC at any great length. Instead it runs off of an operating system that needs much less fuel – the slower, gentler basal ganglia. Basal ganglia

is all about what's habitual, automatic – the hardwired habits and memories that make up the bulk of our daily lives. It is simply less effort intensive to fly on automatic pilot than to rev up your inner super-computer. And so we tend to stick with Old Faithful, the geyser of our habits.

So how are we going to get anywhere given that brain propensity for familiarity...and, I dare say, mediocrity? Here's where spirituality & religion comes back in.

### **Elul to the Rescue: The Power of Epiphany**

What do we do during Elul? We're in hard-core training for the metaphysical marathon that is the upcoming High Holidays. And so we sweat our spirit. We learn Torah. We wake up in the middle of the night to beg forgiveness. We introspect the heck out of ourselves. We pray and plead and weep and work out our wounding.

All of these activities can be fabulously pleasurable for the brain. Because one of the brain's favorite delicacies is Epiphany. Sweet epiphany and her compatriot Insight. The super-foods of brain treats.

Brain scans show tremendous activity during moments of insight. New and complex connections are crafted in the brain. Even solving a math problem can create positive brain activity. So imagine what having a major life epiphany can do to all that grey matter. The pleasurable toil of insight-production keeps our PC amply charged for productive growth.

Thus, the ritualized push of Elul, when done right, gifts us with the brain-enriching path of epiphany.

Epiphanies are not a luxury. They are essential to our evolution. Without them, all of our growth work will feel like a pain in the brain. If your prayer life is dull then it will just create a brain ache. If your Torah learning doesn't rejoice in personal insights/*biddushim* and all the new synapses they create, then it's just going to drag you down. Invest in Insights. Get insight'ed.

Elul is a field of introspection fresh for the picking. Good Lord, let's pursue insights as our most practical core endeavor if we want to change our lives and habits with lasting impact. Start the year on the right foot...and brain hemisphere too.

Here's to an Elul full of Insight & Epiphany!

*Dear Departing Year*

Dear straying friend, on your final spin  
Here's to 12 months of grit, struggle  
& accomplishment.

Remember the way we were worn out  
Reborn and burned out  
The way the world smoked  
And the globe rolled  
The way the heat rose  
now grown cold.

From the live-stream of global tragedies  
We turn our attention to the small victories  
To the treasury of our most deliberate days.  
To the way we raised and were raised.  
Our children, our work, our face  
To Your Face.

Here's to how the survival of the kindest  
still holds sway.  
And the gentle triumphs  
persistently accumulate.

Go in peace, old teacher,  
For we are wiser  
From your curriculum.  
Rest in peace, blessed year  
A year in requiem.

# Post-script

## 🕯 *Ritual - Writing as Ritual*

*Ritual: An act which connects one with the Divine.*

*Writual: Using the written word to connect with the Divine.*

There are many pathways up the proverbial mountain; myriad ways to connect with the Divine. The written word, though, is a proven fast-lane to God; well-traversed within our tradition since the very beginning.

Just look at the Ten Commandments, that archetypal divine communication that stands at the foundation of world culture. The first word of that divine divulgence is God saying “I” - Anochi.

Poignantly, the Talmud (Shabbat 105a) reveals that Anochi is an acronym standing for: *Ana Nafshi Ketovit Yebovit*.

Literally meaning ‘Please My Soul Wrote Gave’. This poetic acronym – like all good poetry - could be read in many ways:

“I wrote down my soul and gave it to you.”

“Please, my soul, I am writing, I am giving.”

“My soul is inscribed in these words I give you.”

The common thread in any of these renderings is that God gives God’s soul over in writing and that writing itself has an uncanny power to relay the otherwise ineffable soul. What’s more, the written word is a choice path of connection between human & divine.

And so too with us. The written word connects us in the most profound ways. To God, to self, to others. As much as silence is a sure path of spirituality, we Jews are not so much a people of silence as we are a people of books.

CHAYA LESTER

My hope in this book is to create connection and to relay soul. My hope is that using creative writing as a form of commentary on the Jewish holidays will help us to better access the power of these yearly rituals we hold so dear. I hope it has been that for you.



I want writings  
to make vast watersheds of change

I want language to move mountains  
Purge pollution, pacify pain

I want a photosynthesis of speaking  
That leans towards the sun...

I want a poem  
To page the powerful  
And watch them stand and run

I want prayer  
To speak explosives  
to silence every gun

May these prayers  
speak explosives  
to silence every gun



## *A Personal Story & Request:*

I will never forget the first time I decided to experience a Shabbat service at the local Orthodox Synagogue. I was raised mildly affiliated in Memphis, Tennessee. I was typical modern American somewhat Jew'ish. It just so happened that down the street from my home was the grand Baron Hirsh Synagogue of Memphis. A somewhat austere Orthodox establishment I never would have electively chosen to spend my time on any given weekend. But in my late teens I became 'Jewish curious' and had started feeling around for my roots. So one Shabbat I decided to take a very tentative first step to enter that imposing building.

I timidly inched my way in. Knowing no one, I felt awkward and uncomfortable and was decidedly underdressed for the occasion. I opened up a prayer book that was perfectly foreign to me and tried to divine where in the world they were in the service. Amid the ocean of over-sized hats in the ladies section, I strained my neck to spy out other people's books, knowing that even if I had been able to decipher a page number, I'd still be lost as to what the page itself read. So I sheepishly sunk into my seat, desperately hoping no one noticed this strange underdressed uneducated outsider, interloping into their sacred space.

And then, to make matters worse, everyone somehow got the memo that it was time to stand up, get quiet and enact this set of very peculiar moves. They shuffled backwards and forwards. They bent and bowed and silently mouthed a whole mess of mysterious words. I was flat-out bewildered by it all and in my typical teenage manner, I burst out into tears and dramatically rushed out of the sanctuary, indecorously shoving several elderly women with oversized hats along the way.

All the while my mind was screaming, "I don't belong here." I spilled out into the grand foyer with the plush green carpeting and I was a mess. It all felt so foreign and unattainable. As I tried to compose myself, I looked up through the wash of my tears. I saw this long imposing stretch of portraits of men on the wall before me. Again I

was an outsider, a clueless girl gazing up at this host of powerful Jewish patriarchs. And yet, something drew me in...

I stepped closer to the first portrait, noticing that the man in the picture looks strangely, uncannily, like my father. Except my father in the 1800's. It was a black and white grainy photo of a debonair gentleman, in a tuxedo with a black bow tie. He was Clark Gable'esque with dark hair and a mustache, with a daring glimmer in his eyes and an irrepressible smile, just like my darling dad's.

I inched closer to decipher the name underneath the photo and was astounded to read – "Solomon Kaplan, 1884". Wait, Solomon Kaplan was my father's father's name. What's more, it just happened to be 1994 as I was standing there in amazement. This photo from exactly 100 years earlier could only have been my grandfather's grandfather – whom he was named after.

Apparently, this distinguished smiling eyed gentleman was indeed one of my own – and he was also, apparently, the first President of the esteemed Baron Hirsh Synagogue. His was the very first portrait on this formidable wall that held 100 years worth of pictures of distinguished gentlemen in this community...in *my* community.

That whole refrain of 'I don't belong here' just got dissolved in his smiling eyes. And I said to myself, "You know what, maybe I DO belong here."

And even more, there was this faint voice inside of me that spoke up with surprising backbone and said, 'I may not (yet) know the Hebrew and the bends and the bows. But I do know my soul. And I do know how to talk to God.' It was something that I had done ever since I was a little girl. I talked to God, like a beloved companion. The rest might be foreign to me, but when it came to talking to God, in this I was fluent. I may not have *the words* – of the traditional lingo of the books. But, Lord knows, I had *my* words.

There in front of my great-great-grandfather's portrait I touched this faint glimmer of belonging. And it wasn't just that I belonged; that this select club would tolerate my presence. But more than that, there

was a feeling of responsibility. Maybe, just maybe, I am needed here. Maybe, just maybe, I have something unique to offer in these imposing hallways.

*I may not have 'the words' but I have 'my words'.*

ø

Did you ever think that?

Maybe you are needed? Maybe the Jewish people – the world - needs you and your words? Needs your input, your unique soul's vision?

Did you ever think that maybe your face was a much needed portrait in the endless halls of contributors to the Jewish story?

My prayer for this book is to give what word I have to give...and to inspire the same in you if you should be so inclined. Ours is an era where everyone can – and should - contribute. The old norms of hierarchies and exclusivities are over. We have shifted into a more egalitarian era where there is equal opportunity – and responsibility – for each of us to share and to shine....each in our own way.

If you do have your own writings on the holidays please do send them my way. I'd love to drink them in; to be illuminated by them. Perhaps we will Jewish wordsmiths can create a compilation together...a whole chorus of lights.

My email: [chaya@shalevcenter.org](mailto:chaya@shalevcenter.org)

With blessings,  
Chaya

Jerusalem, Israel  
December, 2019  
Kislev, 5780

## *About the Author:*

Chaya Lester is a Jerusalem-based psychotherapist, Jewish educator, & spiritual guide. She is a wordsmith and an unapologetic mystic; passionate about bringing Torah to life. Synthesizing ancient Jewish wisdom, cutting-edge psychology & the arts, Chaya's writings, classes & private therapy are all designed to help people THRIVE.

Chaya holds an Ivy League BA in Religious Studies and MA in Clinical Psychology. She also did extensive doctoral work at Oxford University on the theme of 'Experiential Torah Learning'.

As co-director of Jerusalem's Shalev Center for Jewish Personal Growth, Chaya offers individual and couple's therapy as well as classes for locals and visitors alike.

As a performance artist, her one-woman show (and book) about her Jewish journey, 'Babel's Daughter', has been hailed as a masterpiece by audiences from around the world. [www.babelsdaughter.com](http://www.babelsdaughter.com)

As a spiritual guide, Chaya has had the honor of inspiring thousands of visitors to Israel; among them are VIPs such as pop-star Alicia Keys & Demi Lovato, Chinese billionaires, US Senators and others. She also works with families to create boutique Bar and Bat-Mitzvah ceremonies in Israel.

Throughout all of her work, Chaya masterfully facilitates experiences of deep connection & transformative celebration.

Chaya lives with her husband, Rabbi Hillel Lester, and their 4 energetic children in the vibrant heart of Jerusalem.

For more information on therapy, spiritual guidance,  
classes or tours with Chaya please visit:

[WWW.CHAYALESTER.COM](http://WWW.CHAYALESTER.COM)

[WWW.SHALEVCENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SHALEVCENTER.ORG)



SHALEV PRESS

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

If you have received this book on Shabbat and would like to make a  
donation to the Shalev Center you can do so at:

[www.shalevcenter.org/donations/](http://www.shalevcenter.org/donations/)