

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
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

Acknowledgments.....	8
Opening Prayers.....	10
Introduction.....	11
Instructions.....	14
Rosh Hashanah (New Years).....	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
Yom Kippur (Day of At-one-ment).....	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
Sukkot (Tabernacles).....	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
Simchat Torah.....	53
Swing.....	54
In the Leaves of the Tree.....	55
Rachel's Yahrzeit (Jewish Mother's Day).....	57
How to Birth a New Land.....	58
Rachel's Prayer.....	60
Mother's Day Poem.....	61
Hannukah.....	63
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
Tu B'shvat (New Year of the Trees).....	78
Poetree.....	80
Redwood in Tea Pot.....	82
Happy Knew Year.....	82
The Yearn.....	83
The Tree of Life & Limb.....	83
Karma Forest.....	84
Purim.....	85
Esther's Paradox.....	86
The Hidden Queens.....	87
A Purim Rant on Modern Haman.....	89
Pesach (Passover).....	91
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
Shvi Shel Pesach (7th Day of Passover).....	114
Circle Dance.....	115
Raise Your Voices.....	117
Moshiach Seudah.....	120
This Side of Gulus.....	121
More Yearning for Redemption.....	122
Pesach Sheni (2nd Chance Passover).....	123
Again.....	124
The Month of Iyar.....	127
Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance).....	128
Pittance of Admittance.....	129
Shoah.....	131
The Old Trees are Falling.....	133
Yom Hazikaron (Remembrance Day for the Fallen).....	135
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

Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day)	148
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
Lag B'omer (33rd Day of the Omer Count)	168
Bow and Arrow.....	168
Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day)	169
The Burning Bush.....	170
The Jerusalem Day Parade.....	171
Shavuot	173
Sinai in the Womb.....	175
Love Poems for the Sinai Desert.....	177
First Fruits.....	180
Synesthesia.....	183
Tisha B'Av (Fast Day of Mourning)	185
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
Tu B'Av (Holiday Celebrating the Feminine)	199
In Vineyards.....	202
A Visualization.....	203
Rosh Hodesh (New Moon)	204
What Cycles of the Moon.....	204
The Diminishment of the Moon.....	206
Are You Done Being Diminished.....	207

Shabbat.....	211
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
Month of Elul.....	230
The Spiral Staircase.....	230
This is Your Brain on Elul.....	232
Dear Departing Year.....	236
Post-Script	
Writual ~ Writing as Ritual.....	237
A Personal Story & Request.....	239
About the Author.....	242

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.

Ø

“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 misdones 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 thumbbed 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 11th 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).



1st 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

2nd 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...



3rd 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-birthered 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 25th of the month of Kislev. Remarkably, the 25th 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 15th 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 15th 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.¹



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?

¹ 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.²

§

*"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.*

² 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

(7th 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 18th 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.

ð

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 silver³ yearning for?

³ 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
door 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 33rd 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 15th 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.⁴ 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!

⁴ 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.⁵

To dance unembarrassed
and share our abundance
and point incredulous
at the Divine Presence
that dances among us.

⁵ 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*.⁶
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.

⁶ 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 sipur⁷ of our lives.

⁷ 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

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

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

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/