Like a Tree Planted by the Water[1]
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New Synagogue Project
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I went out to the garden in early Spring to clean up one of the beds and a tree had taken root along a fence. I gave it a strong tug and fell on my tush. So I took out my spade and started to dig about 8 inches all around. Pulled as hard as I could, NOTHING. I had at least learned one lesson at this point and spared myself some discomfort. So I get out a round point shovel and worked at it for a good 15 minutes. NOTHING. I'm covered in dirt and sweat but I'm not giving up so I borrow from my neighbor a carbon steel spade shovel [show how big with hands], like this long. I get as deep as I can, stand on it with all my weight, and jump up and down. NOTHING. I can't uproot this tree. If you come to my yard you'll see it's still there.

We are living through authoritarian fascism. One of the ways Trump and company assert control is by overwhelming us with attacks on multiple fronts, confusing us with lies, scapegoating us and our loved ones, stoking fear and dividing us from one another. This flooding of the zone is meant to make us so disoriented that we lose our grounding and are G!d forbid knocked over, preventing us from effectively organizing to oppose their rule.

The Prophet Jeremiah lived in similar times, with his eyes and heart wide open to the evil and suffering of his time. Rabbi Heschel wrote[2], "To Jeremiah his time was an emergency, one instant away from a cataclysmic event." In the midst of this great emergency, Jeremiah offered a metaphor to his people of how to stay grounded and rooted amidst the storm.

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[1] Immense gratitude to my sermon coach Jon Argaman for thought partnership, insights, encouragement, and editing and to chevrutahs Rabbi Dev Noily & Hazzan Shulamit Wise Fairman, Rabbi Alana Alpart, Rabbi Berel Wolvovsky, Eli Kasargod-Staub, Rabbi Daniel Klein, conversation with Rabbi Liora Abelson about emuna & davening partner Batya Levine for learning, teaching me, your thought partnership, and support and to brilliant editors and commenters Rabbi Gray Myrseth and Frances Kreimer.
[2] *The Prophets Volume I*, pg. 106.

Here are Jeremiah's words[3]:

בָּרוּךְ הַגֶּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בַּה'...

Blessed is the person who trusts in Hashem…

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ ׀ שָׁתוּל עַל־מַיִם…

They shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream:
It does not sense the coming of heat,
Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no worry in a year of drought,
It does not cease to yield fruit.

My friends, the spiritual work in this time is to be like a tree with roots deep enough to reach the water, connected to a source so it is possible to weather any storm, heat wave, or drought.

I want to be very clear that I see how severe and shattering this storm really is. Since Trump began occupying DC, hundreds of people have been kidnapped by masked thugs, children left without one and sometimes both parents, people afraid to leave their homes to go to work, the grocery store, or even get a breath of fresh air. And this is just one city, where people's lives are being destroyed. It seems like in any direction you turn there is racism, hate, and harm. It is a mighty challenge to stay centered.

As Batya said to me when we spoke about this, it takes incredible strength and courage to pay attention to more than the inundation of war and destruction and hate and **seek to maintain grounding**. BUT When so much

[3] Jeremiah 17:7-8, a text I learned out as part of the Dismantling Racism from the Inside Out curriculum from Kirva by Yehuda Webster and Rabbi David Jaffe for the focus on Bitachon (trust) which pulls on this text from Bachya ibn Pekudah's Duties of the Heart/Chovot HaLivavot in the introduction to Sha'ar HaBitachon/The Gate of Trust.

is out of our control, when we are so powerless, the inner life, what happens in here, is the **one thing that can't be controlled or taken away; the one place,[4] where we can always continue to cultivate our power and connection to the Source**.

We all make our own attempts at rooting. My attempts at rooting go something like this:

1) First, I dedicate time to make my plans for my and family's safety, and then i put them aside so I'm not anxious about the future.

2) Second, I work to find my particular *avodah*, work, service, what is mine to do and what is not. Not easy, but essential.[5]

3) Last, I prioritize the things that provide nourishment. For me that includes my hands in the DIRT, gardening, and being in the woods. Connecting to EARTH TIME. **What is it for you? What provides nourishment in your life**… is it singing or hiking, maybe cooking or art, exercise, poetry, shnugling with your kids, or time with friends or in community? [Big Pause] **To build and nourish those deep roots we have to invest in the things that will sustain you.**

That's a bit about my path, AND each of us needs to figure out our own attempts at rooting.

BUT there is something less tangible, which lives somewhere deeper. How does Jeremiah begin his metaphor? "Blessed is the person who *trusts in Hashem*." Jeremiah's claim is a radical one, hard to fathom, that by trusting in G!d you can get through, you can be ok.

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[4]Many have made this point, what drove it home for me recently was in Episode 68 of Homesick for Lubavitch with Bentzi Avtzon, "Looking for What I'm Looking For" with Tzvi Kilov. Kilov: "Everyone in the modern world feels so powerless over everything in the modern world.That is where we are sovereign, the inner world…" Avtzon: "that is where you are going to make your first and last stand, you have to go there, it is the one place that you have dominion over."

[5] As it says in Yoma 80a תפסת מרובה לא תפסת - you grasp a lot, you haven't grasped anything.

Until recently I didn't believe it or at least, I didn't understand it. I grew up hearing stories from my Grandma Bronia who survived five camps and a death march. She talked about how she survived because strangers - both Jews and non-Jews - risked their lives to save her.[6] **AND** she also attributed her survival to G!d. She said that she survived because G!d was with her the entire time.

For a long time I couldn't understand how that was possible. At the time, I only had access to the idea of G!d as Sky Daddy, who looked down on human beings and either acted or did not. I couldn't imagine how G!d could possibly save some people and let others die. Was Grandma Bronia saying that G!d wasn't with the people who died?

Later in life I was exposed to the idea of G!d as the Source of Life, pulsing through the universe.[7] The conception of YHVH as Being Itself or translated as Is/Was/Will be,[8] cracked open a deeper understanding of my grandmother's *emunah*. The Source of Life is *not* a divine king who picks and chooses - on these High Holy Days we say "Ein Lanu Malech - we have no king - Eleh Atah - Only You![9]" and Being Itself can be - and in fact IS - with us every day, evening, morning, and afternoon.[10] This is just as true in moments of safety and joy as it is in times of suffering and distress.

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[6] See Sifra Kedoshim, 4:12, Rabbi Akiva says, רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה – "ואהבת לרעך כמוך". -"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" Lev. 19:18 R. Akiva says: This is an all-embracing principle in the Torah.

[7] My entry point was Rabbi Arthur Green's book, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*, a theological work that translating chasidus while simultaneously still writing from within that tradition.

[8] Art Green in *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas*: "The mystical tradition within Judaism insists on translating God's name as "Being." Really it's not a name at all, not even fully a noun. Y-H-W-H is an impossible conflation of all the tenses of the verb "to be" in Hebrew. HYH means "was" in Hebrew; HWH indicates the present "is;" YHYH would mean "will be." Put them all together and you get the implausible, and therefore mysterious verb form Y-H-W-H. Probably it should best be translated as "Was-Is-Will Be." But since that's a little awkward to say each time, "Being" will have to do, a "Being" that embraces all of time and space as one, then reaching beyond them into impenetrable mystery."

[9] This is Eitan Katz's vort for the chabad melody of Aveinu Malkeinu, as told on his album Live In Jerusalem 2. Story & teaching at the 5 minute mark here.

[10] From מודים in the amidah: "וְעַל נִסֶּיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל יוֹם עִמָּנוּ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְטוֹבוֹתֶיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל עֵת עֶרֶב וָבֹקֶר וְצָהֳרָיִם" - "For Your daily miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and goodness at all times— evening, morning and noon."

The challenge is to be aware of Their Presence. To notice the shimmer on the leaves, the magic in genuine connection with another human, and also that even amidst deep sorrow and fear, I am not alone.
And as I'm talking, play madlibs! Tyr Source or Source of Life, The Holy, Nearness, Spirit, The Infinite, or Midwife. Go with what resonates and let the others names slide by knowing they are helpful to others sitting near you.

Whatever the names we give to the unknowable, I am talking about EMUNAH. Oftentimes emunah is translated as faith. But that word comes with A LOT of baggage from Christian hegemony, which makes it about BELIEVING. BUT the question, "do you believe in G!d?" is the WRONG QUESTION. Believe is not the most relevant nor the most interesting verb in my relationship with the Divine.[11] The relevant question *is*, how and when do you experience the Divine?

I asked over the community listserve for people to share an experience with Divinity. Thank you for your trust in me and your vulnerability in sharing! Here are a few snapshots of the experiences of those sitting next to you:

-One of you wrote about a Klezmer retreat on a mountain where a mixed multitude reached the Promised land. Through song, dance, cooking, eating, studying, talking, creating, performing, praying, and celebrating Judaism beyond nationalism - for about 72hrs, you were living in the world you wanted.[12]

-One of you wrote about visiting a Buddhist holy site, where during meditation your breath became both shallower and deeper than it had ever been. It felt like being soaked in - emotionally not visually - the prayers,

[11] Thank you to Jon Argaman for this brilliant phrasing. Alan Morinis in *Everyday Holiness* writes that the way to get to emunah is through "registering and trusting the glimpses, intuitions, and flashes" of the Divine in both the extraordinary and the everyday moments. Pg. 228
[12] Thank you Abe Plaut

wishes, hopes, spiritual imprint of hundreds of people visiting at the moment - and then the same imprint of thousands or millions of people for centuries back.

-One of you wrote from the ER of a hospital, where a community member was reading to you as you lay in pain on the floor: "The act of being together, of her accompanying me with her favorite passages, sparked a whole small community of people, in pain and suffering, coming together to connect and see each other…to laugh, and be holy together in the ER at midnight. The time was full of awe. Infinite."

And you shared about the struggle and miracle of childbirth, and about gentle guidance and a calming presence. You shared about faith and perseverance against all odds, about genuine solidarity, about human connection, empathy, and love, about the mountains and the ocean, and Rock Creek Park.

My underlying assumption is that everyone has these experiences,[13] that they are likely at least a little bit different for each of us and that we use different languages to describe our experience. **The trick, as Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes[14], is to use one's "own lived experience" as the "guide…" to trust it, and then to cultivate it.**

THE FIRST STEP IS TO IDENTIFY when do you experience those moments of awe or times when you've ascended higher or tapped into something deeper or felt woven into the cloth of Being or when you've held in the

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[13] Asserted in multiple ways by the Ba'al HaTanya, see Likutei Amarim 18 that every Jew inherently has a love of Hashem within them, which is an inheritance from our our ancestors - "אַהֲבָה מְסוּתֶּרֶת" שֶׁבְּלֵב כְּלָלוּת יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁהִיא יְרוּשָׁה לָנוּ מֵאֲבוֹתֵינוּ

[14] Surprised by God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion, pg. 52. Full quote: "There was no need for a dramatic leap of faith, for a blind trek into darkened woods. My own lived experience was the guide here, and all I needed was a willingness to meet it, to allow myself to ask certain kinds of questions and be willing to hear the answers that might follow, no matter how disconcerting those answers might be. This, then, was the real test of faith—not whether I was willing to change my beliefs but, rather, whether I was willing to give language to that which I had already begun to experience as truth."

waters of life. Maybe it's nature, human connection, music or something else altogether.

The next step in cultivating *emunah* is to figure out how to take the same feelings and experiences of awe and wonder, of tuning into the Divine aspect of reality that we experience in extraordinary moments, and bring them into the every day. At any moment we have access to this AWE, because the Divine is always present. In every moment? It is said about the chasidic master Reb Zusya that whenever the Torah was read and it came to the words "וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה" And God spoke to Moses - Reb Zusya would start yelling "GOD SPOKE?! TO A HUMAN?!? And was so disruptive they took him out of the room![15] We could do that same with a blade of grass, the fly on the wall, or the smile of a stranger. All are generally experienced as mundane, but if we focus and contemplate, they are miraculous works of creation.

It is these moments of awe when we are able to drop into a different aspect of reality. We turn off the rational brain and move into what we might call, the world of the spirit. Rav Shagar says that in order to understand what is happening here, we have to call on the mystical tradition of multiple worlds living together alongside one another.[16] None of these worlds is more or less real than any other, the rational brain world is also real, they are simply different aspects of reality and we exist in all of them at the same time. To be present in the Realm of the Spirit is to enter a world that can nourish our souls and we can plant our roots with the Divine.

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[15] Idea for sharing this parable came from Morinis's chapter on emunah cited above (pg. 229) but this a paraphrase of the version in Buber's Tales of the Hasidim where it says that Zusya didn't transmit the teachings of his teacher, the Maggid because anytime the Maggid would quote from Torah and say the words "and G!d said" he would get ecstatic and start yelling and they would have to remove him. And then he would bang on the wall or the shed and cry out "AND GOD SAID!" In *Tales* Pg. 326, "the word"

[16] From "My Faith: Faith in a Postmodern World," Compiled from notes recorded in Sivan 5764 (May/June 2004) and printed in *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, translated by Elie Leshem and edited by Dr. Zohar Maor. pg. 29. The multiple worlds/aspects of reality he refers to are most likely the worlds of atzilut, briya, yetzirah, and asiyah which originated with the Ari (Lurianic Kabbalah) and pulls through Jewish mysticisms that follow.

Ok, so lets say we get there, and I've learned to cultivate emunah, to live in that aspect of reality, so what? FIRST, It is what makes it impossible for anyone to uproot us because the emunah is the groundwater. Authoritarian fascism wants to divide us, take away our humanity, and make us think we are powerless and alone. But if we are grounded, we can continue to live in the world with integrity and with alignment and keep LIVING into the world we want to live in. If we are grounded, we can be vulnerable[17] with one another, connect with each other and our neighbors, bear more together than we can alone.

We can't be in the world of emunah all the time, it is not possible. There is a concept about this experience called Ratzo V'shov.[18] Running and returning or going to and fro. Jumping from one world to the next. Going from a rational mind to the world of the spirit.

The Divine is manifest in our world but is also simultaneously hidden. This is how the Jewish mystics understand the struggles of life, the suffering and the injustice. Hashem is present but hidden, in that hiddenness we feel separation.[19]

From our perspective, the Divine pulses in and out of the Universe, like the heartbeat[20] or a flickering flame, the art is learning how to ride that wave of expansion and contraction.[21] We can do this in two ways:

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[17] Gratitude to R' Gray Myrseth for bringing this idea that emunah can allow us to have vulnerability, which they get from Butler's insight that fascism is a denial of vulnerability (humanness) and therefore our vulnerability with one another is essential to intentionally cultivate and maintain with one another, citing "The Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence."

[18] The phrase itself is from Ezekiel's vision 1:14

[19] This is the simplistic version of the direction that chassidus took the Ari's idea of tzimtzum, or Divine contraction. For a short historical overview see "Immanent Transcendence Chassidim, mitnagdim, and the debate about tzimtzum," By Eli Rubin, further elucidated in his recently published book, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity An Existential History of Chabad Hasidism*

[20] This image of the heartbeat is from the Middle Rebbe in שער הייחוד/Gate of Unity 37:19-21

[21] Thank you to Jon Argaman for this insight and phrasing!

A) First, by creating intentional times where we GO IN - Ratzo - by taking walks in the woods, meditating, davening, holding hands while walking with a friend, or observing shabes in a serious way.[22]

B) And second, cultivating what the Piaseczno rebbe refers to as **an entirely different sense**. In addition to sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell there is an additional sense חוּשׁ קָדוֹשׁ - the sense of holiness.[23] And at all times we can work on this! The Ramchal[24] says that "it is possible to see contradictory images! A person may see one thing, but when they look at it again in order to understand it, it changes into something else" At first I see a bird - but then I look back and see a gorgeous creature flying through the sky! The difference between "God Spoke to Moshe" and GOD SPOKE! TO MOSHE!!!!

Of course, in either case - the intentional periods or the practice in the moment, there is SHOV, we go back OUT and return to the other aspects of reality and experience separation. But, when we return, we are changed, sturdier and able to live with more alignment and integrity. I think about when I'm in a power struggle with my kid, if i can close my eyes, take a deep breath and then re-open them to look at my child differently, like there is light emanating from their bodies, and I see their Divinity and find mine as well, I can reenter with a different mindset, and change the interaction.

But what about when we are feeling beat down and overwhelmed, powerless and exhausted? How do we access awe and connection, how do we GO IN then? Because that is when it is most needed! I wish I could ask my Grandma Bronia about this, how did she do it amidst impossible horror and suffering? I've been experimenting with some of this ratzo 'vshov When I'm in the car and feeling the heaviness of this time I practice seeing

[22] See Sefat Emet, Genesis, Bereshit 9:3
[23] This is a central theme of Benai Machsehva Tova, exact phrasing in Principles and Advice Chapter 13.
[24] קל"ח פתחי חכמה 8:9

the glow of the trees, in the challenging times with my kids I envision the light of the Divine emanating from their bodies, when I sit with someone who is suffering, I hold tight to the connection. We go in and out, in and out. Ratzo V'shov, reaching down for the groundwater to deepen our roots.

During the time between now and Yom Kippur I have an assignment for you. Every day, take 5 minutes to pause and stop and cultivate the sense of holiness. Take some time in the woods, singing a song, or looking at a child or friend differently. . And then, if you can, reflect on it for another five minutes before bed by journaling or talking. Set aside intentional time to cultivate awe and wonder.

A blessing, a bracha:

In the year to come may we be like trees planted by the water!

May we do the work of cultivating awe and connection, may we take time to activate our Sense of Holiness and live in the world of the spirit

May this help plant our roots deep so we stand firm, together as a forest, to weather any storm that comes our way.