Surviving the Wilderness[1]
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New Synagogue Project
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Last month my seven-year-old came home from art camp and announced "I read the newspaper today, Abah." Apparently the New York Times was being used for a papier-mâché project and she had read the headlines. She continued, "ICE is now at airports. What are they doing at airports?"

I could tell you the rest of the conversation, and my attempts to both understand and explain the callousness and cruelty of people and of systems. I could then recount the many other injustices, catastrophes, and sufferings of our time. But I won't.

We are living in a poop show, you know it, I know it, we all know it. I spoke about this last year. I spoke about this the year before, and the year before. Our first High Holy Days together as a community happened in 2018, about two years into Trump I, which was two years before the start of the pandemic. And on and on. What was an acute crisis has become chronic.[2]

In this same time, I have tried to go deeper and deeper into the teachings of our ancestors. The deeper I go the more convinced I am that there is a path for us, all of us, through this time. Isaiah tells us:

הִנְנִי עֹשֶׂה חֲדָשָׁה …אָשִׂים בַּמִּדְבָּר דֶּרֶךְ[3]

"I am about to do something new," said Isaiah, "I will make a path through the wilderness."

There are two dimensions to the path through the wilderness. One is "path" as that which leads to a destination, somewhere *out* of the wilderness into a new and better reality. Not a utopia. I am not convinced we are meant to reach *the* Promised Land in

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[2]Thank you to Jon Argaman for this insight and the language to express it!
[3]Isaiah 43:19

this life. We read through the Torah every year, beginning with the beginning, then Exodus, before setting off to journey through the wilderness and get to the edge of the Promised Land. Moshe dies, the Torah ends, and we start reading again from the beginning, we do not enter. We may never reach *the Promised Land* in this life, but In my heart of hearts I yearn for and *can* envision a worldly future where we are closer to a state of shalom, of wholeness, something worth passing on to future generations.

A second dimension of the "path through the wilderness" is not about the destination but the path itself. In many ways, how to BE while in the wilderness feels much trickier, because THIS wilderness we are in, be it personal or political or a compounding of the two, can be unsettling, disorienting, even horrifying. BUT, I put before you today, while we *cannot* predict the future AND while there is very real suffering in the here and now, *we can still choose how to be while we are here in the wilderness* G!dwilling in a way that helps us survive and, who knows, maybe, maybe even better than that! **AND** this can start *today*, on Rosh Hashanah.

But first we must understand, what actually is the purpose of this day, the essence of Rosh Hashanah?

Shacharit, the morning service, happens every morning of the year. But *only* during the Days of Awe does this part of the service begin with the words "Ha-Melech" *The* Sovereign. [sing it] This is the day we make it the clearest of clear that the Source of Life is Sovereign. In the Talmud,[4] G!d is recorded as saying "On Rosh Hashanah you" that is all of us gathered together here, "you" says G!d, "will crown Me Sovereign over yourselves!"

What *does* it mean to crown G!d Sovereign? We'll get there! But for now, suffice to say it does one important thing: it un-crowns everyone else (including, for instance, whoever ordered those ICE agents to terrorize anyone who looks like an immigrant at the airport).

Of course, throughout Jewish history and the diaspora we have put a lot of effort into crowning earthly authorities, instead of the Divine. Often our people have cozied up to earthly power in exchange for protection, sometimes at the expense of our most sacred teachings and values. Historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and others have characterized this as the vertical alliance: Jewish communities have entered into a

[4] Rosh Hashanah 16a

direct relationship with monarchs to secure safety and limited autonomy.[5] In the United States, this approach to Jewish safety has shifted, but continued, with a strategy we might characterize as seeking "proximity to power."[6]

Before moving to the DMV I had the incredible privilege to be the rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel, in Revere, Massachusetts — a community of warmth and lovingkindness, where our sifrei Torah come from. I got in trouble there once politically. One time. It was when I spoke out about the most contentious topic in synagogues today…casinos! Massachusetts opened a process for local municipalities to host new resort casinos. Revere city hall decided it was a good way to generate revenue and put in a bid. Clergy in Revere started organizing against the casino. The clergy approached me - the only rabbi in town - to join them. I studied the research on casinos and halacha on gambling and came to understand that casinos prey on the vulnerable and have devastating impacts on local communities. I decided to join my fellow clergy in speaking out. A group of congregants left and denounced me in the newspaper. What was their objection? What was the disagreement? It was NOT about gambling. It was because I opposed city hall, and staying in the good graces of city hall, they believed, was how the Jews of Revere stayed safe. I have compassion for those who pursue this path.

Today we're part of a Jewish ecosystem treading a different path — forming horizontal alliances with other communities toward safety and liberation for all. We're following the Ashkenazi Bund's idea of doikayt, "here-ness," and the multi-rootedness of Salonica's Sephardic labor movement.[7] There are pitfalls here too — *doikayt* didn't save most of its adherents during the Holocaust, and any idea becomes an idol if we mistake the partial for the Whole. But at its best, this kind of horizontal alliance is a theological commitment: affirming the kedusha of every person, and that in line with the teachings of the Prophets,[8] our journeys out of Mitzrayim include every person and every community working together towards the Promised Land.

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[5] See "A Multirooted Movement: Sephardic Activists and Horizontal Alliances in the Early 20th Century," by Professor Devin E. Naar, PhD, in *"Fragments III: Democracy, " a journal from T'ruah,* 2024.

[6] See "Safety Through Solidarity," Burley & Lorber, (Melville House, 2024). P. 304

[7] Naar, "A Multirooted Movement"

[8] See "The Power of Example" in *Covenant and Conversation*, published online here. The prophets' perspective is that G!d is the G!d of all peoples and desires freedom for all peoples. For example, Amos tells us that G!d did not only bring B'nai Yisrael out of Egypt, "but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir" (Amos 9:7). One of the prophecies of Isaiah about the messianic era is that we will all be free. Isaiah says explicitly that G!d will rescue even the Mitzrim from oppression! (Isaiah 19:20-21).

But of course we have not reached that Promised Land, so how - in addition to being in the struggle - are we going to be while we are in the wilderness?

I want to offer a path of spiritual survival in the wilderness that is potentially challenging and difficult, a way of thinking differently from how we are trained to be in the world as Americans. When I look at those who've led their people through the wilderness before — Miriam and Moses, Gandhi,[9] Fannie Lou Hamer[10] — they all grounded themselves in the Sovereignty of the Divine. *That* is what I want to offer you access to today.

The alliance of clergy in Revere was a horizontal alliance, leaders from communities across the city - Christian, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish - came together to oppose casinos. But what made it so powerful for me was a shared theological commitment, the understanding that City Hall is not sovereign; the Divine is! This is what got me through. When the attacks and the conflict created internal doubts and anxiety, the other clergy helped me gain clarity that, before I am in the role of rabbi, I belong to the Holy One.

In Shemot,[11] the book of Exodus, Pharaoh told the midwives to throw all of the baby boys in the Nile River, to kill them. Did they? Did they? Why not? The Torah tells us they had *yirat Hashem,* awe-fear of G!d. In the midst of chaos they acted in alignment with their calling to bring life into the world, and I like to imagine them as doing so with great clarity and calm, because they understood from their own experience that the Source of Life is *really* the one in charge.

My deepest loyalty and the One to whom I am most accountable is Hashem, Chai HaOlamim, the Life Animating All Worlds. There IS something to which I must surrender, but it is not any person, country, or even idea. AND THIS WAS FREEING FOR ME. Because it also means that ultimately, I am not in charge. I DO have free will, *bechira*/choice. I can and should put in all the effort that I can muster. My actions profoundly matter. I MUST figure out what is mine and do my best to do it. AND, at the end of the day, I am not G!d! I cannot control if I succeed or fail, I cannot control if

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[9] Gandhi believed that G!d is the ultimate authority governing reality. See, for example, his statement, “humble and mute acceptance of divine authority makes life’s journey easier” in Ghandi’s Collected Works, volume 43, pg. 96.

[10] Hamer was a deeply religious Christian and her faith was central to her identity and activism. She explicitly expressed this idea of G!d as Sovereign. See for example “Is It Too Late?” the 1971 Speech of Fannie Lou Hamer where she said: “God is on the throne today. He is keeping watch on this nation and marking time.”

[11] Exodus 1:15-21

our coalitions win, and I certainly cannot control when the chronic crisis ends and we make our way out of this wilderness. What I can do is *choose* to live as part of something much greater than myself**.** And make no mistake, this *is* a choice: to make Hashem Sovereign requires my choice and consent.

The metaphors throughout the liturgy are of a King in the sky who we crown through our prayers — patriarchal, distancing, hurtful even. How can we transform our relationship to this metaphor? Rabbi Linda Holtzman once explained[12] L'cha Dodi to kids — the Friday night prayer welcoming the shabbat bride — by telling them the "bride" was simply the most beautiful image its writers could imagine. Then she asked the children: what's the most beautiful image *they* could imagine? So I'll ask you the same, as a kind of Mad Libs: what's the biggest thing you can imagine being in relationship with? Mystery? Higher Power? The Unfolding of Life? The Great Web of Interdependence?

In "Earthworm Magic,[13]" poet Rebecca Villarreal takes sovereignty away from the human realm altogether:

Let the broken-hearted brokenness
sink into the earth

compost the
I am alone
I have to control it
I can handle it

Let the earthworms have it
Let it get dark, moist and messy
underground
There are seeds
waiting to grow

Can we surrender — not our agency, not our responsibility, but our illusion of control? Can we crown the Holy One? Can we accept a sovereign greater than any human, by choosing, freely, to trust the Source of Life within and among us? What might grow in that place?

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[12] I heard this story from Frances Miriam Kreimer, shared with the permission of Rabbi Holtzman.
[13] Full text of the poem is here.

I have been speaking about the collective wilderness, yet many, if not all of us, are navigating a wilderness in our own lives — places of loss, longing, uncertainty, and pain.

Modern secularism teaches that I am the sole agent of my future, that if I just try hard enough, I can make life come out right. But sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we can't.

If I can accept that I am a limited human being inside a reality infinitely greater than myself, it can be freeing. It does not take away the pain or make what is difficult any less excruciating, but it does free me to be present to reality. This allows me to awaken to the choices I still have about how to be amidst the wilderness.

OK, we've got the idea, but how do we move it from up here in the head, to down here into our hearts? We have to internalize it, so we can live it.

One way to do this is by connecting yourself to what is beyond you. You can practice this in a stressful moment. Let's try it now, together.

Begin by calming your breathing. In... and out.

Now notice a sound around you.

Now appreciate someone near you. OR bring to mind someone who isn't in this room.

Notice the stained glass. The sunlight streaming through.

Now imagine the street outside these doors. The sky above this building.

Now the whole city — look down on the trees, the rooftops and monuments.

Now something further still. The whole earth, turning.

And further.

Stay there for a moment.

Now picture the walls between yourself and everything else getting a little thinner, imagine little holes poking through…

Now let's come back. Back to this room. This seat. Your breath.

This is what's known as Bitul[14] - self-transcendence. I'm not losing myself; I'm letting go of the part of myself that wants to control everything and instead, I'm surrendering into what I actually want to be. When I succeed in poking holes in the partitions which create illusions of separateness to connect with what is beyond, I know inside me that I am not alone. I am part of something greater than myself. To ACT from that place, the place of connection with Chai HaOlamim, the Life Animating All Worlds, is to crown Hashem Sovereign.

This is all still very big, perhaps easier said than done, so what do you do? You do what you always do when you are walking a path: you take the next step. Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the New Year, is the time to take that next step.

One focus of this day is *malchut*, making Hashem sovereign in our lives and the world. But a second focus is that today is the birthday of the world, where we proclaim "HaYom Harat Olam." We have a tradition of calling out these words to bring them to reality after we blow shofar, but it's shabes today, so we won't blow shofar until tomorrow. So repeat after me HAYOM - HARAT - OLAM, TODAY - THE WORLD - IS BORN (AGAIN, LOUDER).

The Slonimer Rebbe says,[15] that really, actually, TODAY THE WORLD IS REBORN! How is this so? Creation was not a one-time action. As the Tanya teaches,[16] everything comes into existence over and over again in every single instant as the Divine life-force flowing through the world continuously recreates in every moment! TODAY THE WORLD IS BORN! And so, today, on Rosh Hashanah, there is even more so a complete renewal of all creation, where a new and new and renewed light descends and radiates within and among us.[17] This does not mean we magically become a different person. We are still responsible for our past actions. BUT just like our bodies are continuously replacing many if not most of our cells, our neshama, our soul is

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[14]This is the concept within Chabad Chassidus of Bitul Hayesh — the effacement of one's felt independent selfhood/ego before Hashem, while continuing to exist and act as a distinct being, although in the service of Hashem. This is distinct from Bitul B'Metzius, a dissolution in which one's very existence is experienced as fully negated within the Divine. The theology/metaphysical claim underlying both ideas/practices is that there is only Hashem, and that separation, while experienced as very real, is ultimately illusory. For an expanded basic definition see the Chabadpedia entry on Bitul, for an academic treatment see Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God* (Chapter 15 — "Entity and Manifestation—Nothingness and Being") and Elliot Wolfson's *Open Secret*, and for an in-depth insider scholarly treatment see Dubov & Pewzner, *The Basics of Chassidus*, specifically chapters 6 and 7, which are available online.

[15]See Netivot Shalom, Volume II on Shabes, Yamim Noraim, and Shalosh Regalim, First Ma'amar (discourse) on Rosh Hashanah, "HaYom Haras Olam" — "Today the World Is Conceived," pages 107–112 (קז–קיב). Full translation of ma'amar from Claude can be found here.

[16] Sha'ar HaYichud V'haemunah Chapter 1

[17]See Likutei Amarim 20-21 and Igeret HaKodesh 14

renewed as well. This means that there is potential, in this very moment, to tap into something deeper, to access what is *yours* to do, without trying to carry the weight of the world.

On Yom Kippur we will sing that Hashem is "*bochen levavo*t," searching in our hearts. What is She searching for? NOT searching our actions from the past year, were you good or bad?. Forget that. **She is asking, are you attuning yourself to carry out the intention and purpose for which *you* were created?**[18] **Are you becoming *not everything all at once* but a piece of The Greater Whole of which you are a part?** If so, together we can renew this New Year.

That's what Divine Sovereignty is: to proclaim that the Source of Life is Sovereign is to recognize that I am not solely the author of my own existence. I did not create myself. I cannot control the world. But I am part of something infinitely larger than myself, and I have a role to play in co-creating with Hashem. My work is to listen, to discern, and to move in attunement with the Divine within the life that has been given to me.

"I am about to do something new,": said Isaiah, "I will make a path through the wilderness"

Go into your heart; therein lies a yearning, a knowing, a direction, that is already present.

The work of Rosh Hashanah is to seek it out and begin to follow that path.

Because today the world is born. And so are we.

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[18]**Challenge:** Isn't this dangerous? Atrocities past and present are carried out by people certain of what G!d wants from them. You want us to try to discern what G!d wants from us?
Response: This is why we need *shiflus* — smallness — not as insignificance, but as the honest recognition that I am small against the infinite greatness of the universe and the Divine. That recognition should make me *less* certain, not more: I can never be fully sure what G!d or the universe wants from me. The danger in religious extremism is not the *attempt* to discern Hashem's will — the danger is certainty. But there's an equal and opposite risk: the arrogance of assuming I'm exempt from being addressed, needed, and given purpose at all.