[2]אור לנתיבתי / [1]A light for my Path
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"Yom Kippur atones for our sins" - יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, says the Mishnah,[3] and, NOT only that, Rabbi Akiva continues: on Yom Kippur G!d is our Mikveh and the Holy One purifies us. Like a mikveh we go into Yom Kippur and we will leave here tomorrow night with shiny new souls! Does Rabbi Akiva mean no conditions, no proof of work, just immersion?

That sounds ridiculous, how could this possibly be? That we go into Yom Kippur and *poof, all better.* That a sky daddy waved a magic wand and wiped away the past; you are forgiven for everything, no *teshuva* required.

The Slonimer Rebbe[4] says no way! That is *not* what Rabbi Akiva is talking about! When it comes to forgiveness - *selicha or mechila* - we have to put in the work. If we hurt other people - and we do and we will because we are human - Yom Kippur does not forgive for that, we have to go and fix it with that person (and on this the Mishna is very much in agreement)! AND when we make mistakes with ourselves or the Divine, Yom Kippur also does not forgive: here too we have to put in the work of self-assessment, hard work of changing our thought patterns and behaviors, make different choices and perhaps most of all, the work of self-forgiveness. All of this we have to do.

AND, our tradition has two different responses to two different problems. When we've harmed someone, or ourselves or have fallen short — that requires work. But there's another type of damage which the work of *teshuva* alone is never going to reach and that is כַּפָּרָה. When we make mistakes and create damage - with ourselves, with others, or simply by living in a world built on systems of oppression - something happens internally, at the level of the soul, our *neshama*.

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[2] Psalms 119:105

[3] Mishnah Yoma 8:9

[4] *Netivot Shalom* (R. Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe), Ma'amar Sheni: **"יום הטהרה בפנימיות הנפש"** ["The Day of Purification in the Inwardness of the Soul"], pp. 165–167, in the volume on the Yamim Nora'im

Think of your neshama like a miner's lamp, carried deep into the mine. After a while, coal dust settles on the glass from outside, and then a little more, and a little more. The flame itself never changes, it's as bright as it's always been, but after a while so little light gets through that I can't tell the flame is there and I lose my way.

Do you ever think: *I'm not a good person.* Or: *something is wrong with me.* Or: *I feel disconnected — from my spiritual life or from the people around me…*

[raise your own hand!]

Hands, if you know that feeling.

Imperfection, making mistakes, hurting and being hurt, all of these are baked into being human, and yet they act like the coal dust settling on the lantern, blocking our flame. They lead to us forgetting that at our core we are good, we are pure, that inside us is truly a piece of the Divine, חֵלֶק אֱלוֹהַּ מִמַּעַל מַמָּשׁ - מַמָּשׁ meaning *not a metaphor,* FOR REAL![5] This is how יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר "Yom Kippur atones." It does not erase the past or take away our responsibility for our actions. But on Yom Kippur we go deep; into grief, vulnerability, and radical honesty. And we go high, to a place of joy, release, and even ecstasy. For one day there isn't any coal dust blocking the light, and maybe there isn't even any glass around the flame either, there is only light![6] When the day is over, the glass necessarily comes back, but the dust is gone and we can re-enter the world shining bright. Not a new soul. The same one. But reachable again.

By the time we get to Ne'ilah and we're belting out "Open, Open up the Gates…," we're on top of the peak, as clear and bright as can be.

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[5] *Tanya*, Likkutei Amarim (R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi), ch. 2

[6] This is, in the language of Chabad Chasidus, Bitul B'Metzius, a dissolution in which one's very existence is experienced as fully negated within the Divine. Distinct from the concept of Bitul Hayesh, 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 (which I spoke about directly on Rosh Hashanah this year).The claim underlying both ideas/practices is that there is only Hashem, and that separation, while experienced as very real, is ultimately illusory. The Slonimer, in the first discourse on Yom Kippur characterizes Yom Kippur as:
סגולת היום שיהודי יכול להגיע בו לבטל את עצמו בביטול היישות המוחלט -
"The special power of the day is that a Jew is able to reach, on it, the nullification of himself — through the nullification of absolute selfhood." When read together, the goal of Rosh Hashanah is Bitul Yahesh, to efface one's independence but maintain a sense of distinct being in order to find one's particular avodah of Hashem in the world. On Yom Kippur, this purpose has been established, the goal then becomes to bitul b'mtezius in order to purify our neshama so we can then go back into the world as a vessel for Divine service.

But then there is a problem. On Tuesday morning I might wake up all nice and shiny but I also come back to being my every day self; the blessings, challenges, and constraints of my life are still there; and the world, well, like I said on Rosh Hashanah, it's a poop show!

So what do we do when we come down from the mountain? What about Tuesday and then the rest of the year?

The way to build the world we want and need is to re-enter on Tuesday and live with truth, with love, and with kindness — to have our hearts and minds open to injustice and suffering, to figure out what piece of the work is ours to carry. But then there is a conundrum: it's exhausting to keep going when the work grows and so little changes; there's so much loss to grieve without the time to move through it; and the weight of it all accumulates and takes a toll on us.

Many of us are also holding things in our so-called personal lives: staying up with a child at 3am before a full workday, figuring out where next month's rent is coming from, managing a parent's care from afar. The sheer volume of labor is overwhelming, and perhaps worse is the isolation.

Now that we've come back down from this peak experience, what can guide us, hold us, and ground us through?

Two of the elements of Judaism that are least familiar in progressive Jewish contexts: *halacha* and *chiyuv*.

Halacha, are you bonkers rabbi, classical Jewish law? That's for Orthodox Judaism! You want me to wake up and put on tefillin and pray the same words every day? And chiyuv, obligation, the yoke of heaven — that's going to sustain me? This is a spiritually vibrant, liberation-focused, inclusive community! These elements of our tradition are oppressive, stifling, archaic — a rulebook imposed by the patriarchy.

But here is the thing: it is very difficult to hold on to the benefits of a peak experience and integrate them into your life without structured spiritual practice alongside a community that has a felt sense of mutual obligation and shared practice. What I want to do here today is talk about the way Judaism offers these things, and begin a conversation about how to make that accessible, dynamic, and real for a congregation like our own.

Halacha. Halacha comes from the root ה-ל-כ (heh-lamed-chaf) which means to walk or to go and also holds the idea that there is something to travel on as well. So it means

something like "walking" or "going," on a dynamic path. Halacha is not just a code of rules — it's the name for the part of Torah that becomes lived, embodied action. If aggadah is the story and theology, halacha is what happens when that story starts moving through us.

Halacha can, has, and is still today used to police identity, oppress women, and yes, take the dynamism out of spiritual practice. All of this can be true. But it doesn't have to be. Halacha is part and parcel of Judaism — it's the structure of how to be in the world as a human and a Jew. It's already holding us this very week: it guided us to start Kol Nidre right before sunset, requires us to eat on Yom Kippur if fasting is unhealthy, and demands, in the plural language of the vidui, that we are responsible for one another. That is to say, we are all already keeping halacha. AND all of these are either directly or byproducts of *mitzvot,* which *are* obligations. If it is unhealthy for you to fast on this day, it is an obligation to eat! Does that make it coercive, something you are *forced* to do?

Not necessarily. We all have obligations — some we choose to enter, some we simply receive. But either way, once I have these obligations — to parents or children, a partner, my community — I need to freely take them on, again and again, and make them my own. When I do, they become the most meaningful things in my life: purpose, love, connection, belonging.[7] So too with halacha and *chiyuv*, obligation. They are the structures that allow us to cultivate holiness through the mundane.

The root of the word *Chiyuv* is generally understood to mean obligation, like in a creditor-debitor relationship.[8] But there is another meaning if we dig deeper into the etymology, and that is the connection to the noun חוֹב - bosom, חבב - cherished, and חביב - beloved![9] Obligation belongs to the same linguistic family as being drawn into someone's bosom and held as beloved! What is the connection behind these ideas? EMBRACE. When we embrace our obligations, they can become beloved.

Can you think of an obligation or responsibility in your life that you embrace, which in turn holds you, which brings you meaning, love, or connection? Which deepens your experience of living?

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[7] "... it's the unchosen obligations—or the obligations chosen but whose downstream responsibilities *cannot* be unchosen—that will give us the only real meaning in life. Family, children, our hometowns, our childhoods, our ethnic identity (if we have one), or the chosen-but-undoable commitments—marriage, joining the military, that company we start, religious faith—are the defining obligations where our selves really play out." -Antonio García Martínez, "Why Judaism? On abandoning secular modernity" Cited in Morris (See below).

[8] See Jastrow on חוּב

[9] See Klein on חובה and Wictionary for comparisons across semitic languages, thank you to Rabbi Joey Glick for sharing this discovery!

So too with Torah and *mitzvot*; they provide a path to travel through the world – halacha - in a way that can embrace and hold us through the challenges of day to day living. A relationship with halacha cannot magically wipe away our exhaustion, grief, or the residue of exposure to trauma. Nor will it magically make our work lighter, or make us feel less alone in the grind of daily life.

As individuals and families, an embrace of halacha can align us with the rhythms of creation, to live more in Jewish time and earth time. It can strengthen the spiritual muscles of expressing gratitude, making meaning, and experiencing awe and wonder. It can be the structure for spiritual practice, analogous to weekly therapy, a training program, or boundaries you set for your own mental health — practices that ask something disciplined and regular of us because we know we're not always able to give ourselves what we need without the discipline. But those practices can ultimately be only in service of *us*. Halacha asks something similar of us, in service of something bigger. "Music is played on musical instruments," writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "to the Jew the mitzvot are the instruments by which the holy is performed.[10]" In other words, the discipline itself isn't the point, any more than the instrument is the point of the music. The mitzvot are how the holy resounds — through us, not just for us.

At a communal level, halacha addresses for us - as a community, in this room - something we all struggle with: isolation. While nobody is going to do those 3am wake up calls or be able to take over paying your rent *every* month, a community in which we are obligated to one another means that more and more we will embrace one another by hosting one another, through meals, coming over to lend a hand. But perhaps even more importantly, through showing up in community together we build deeper relationships, windows into one another's lives, and while we may not be able to significantly lessen the loads that we each carry on our own, we can feel a lot less alone in carrying them. Halacha is the load-bearing structure upon which we can travel together.

This is true for the piece of halacha that creates mutual obligation to one another and it is true for the parts of halacha where we are in a relationship of obligation with the Source of Life. The two reinforce one another through a shared rhythm and a shared culture of embracing mitzvot. In the words of Leon Morris, when we live into *chiyuv and*

[10] "Toward an Understanding of Halacha," delivered as an address to the CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) at their 64th Annual Convention in Estes Park, Colorado, in 1953. In *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 141.

community, "we surrender the illusion of an isolated human individualism, allowing our relationships with others" and the Divine "to become more central" in our lives.[11] Here is a possible vision of our future together in the new space, the home we are building. Friday night the sun goes down —time to close the computer, perhaps turn off the phone, come to synagogue. Sing, pray, eat, hangout. Kids are running around, learning, and also being shul rats together. They'll want to go because their friends are there, and for the lollipops and cookies! Once we build the communal infrastructure - together - we can use 8 different rooms for chess and board games, a book club, meditation, and hanging out *all at the same time*. Then after formal programming is over, we can keep hanging out together, relaxing into shabbat with nowhere to be. This will also help us to be with one another in a deeper way, in times of sickness and grief as well as joy and celebration. Mutual obligation, support, and practice are core to Judaism.

Collective practice doesn't just benefit us — it strengthens our capacity for mitzvot and loving kindness with our neighbors and the larger world. This past week I sent an e-mail to the community asking every person to participate in the mitzvah of giving tzedakah to the Gaza Soup Kitchen and to families torn apart by ICE detentions in the DMV. So far, together we have given over $18,000, doing significantly more together than we could do on our own. Tzedakah is not charity. It is the obligation to share our resources. This is *halacha*..

Where do we start with halacha, as individuals and a community? The same way we always do on a path, by taking one step at a time. You don't really need a peak experience or religious awakening to begin. There is no all or nothing here, divest yourself of that notion! Let go of the 'I am observant or I'm not, I keep halacha or I don't.' That binary was never true! You embrace one mitzvah in your life, we embrace another mitzvah together as a community, each step is movement on a path that will keep us going. Some first mitzvot to embrace: saying or singing modeh ani — the one-line gratitude prayer — upon waking up, saying the Shema before bed (by yourself, with kids, or a loved one), or lighting candles Friday night before the sun goes down. If or when you've got those down, start on blessings before eating and drinking. That's the answer to where we start: not with everything, and not with nothing. With one thing.

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[11] Leon A. Morris, "In Defense of Surrender in Liberal Jewish Life," *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, Spring 2023 issue: *Jews and Law.* Gratitude to Rabbi Weisman for pointing me towards this article, which is also making similar and slightly different arguments than this drash.

Returning to Yom Kippur and the peak experience of these 25 hours, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. With כַּפָּרָה there is no magic wand, but there is the ability to clear the coal dust off the lantern so we can clearly recognize the shining light within ourselves. This year, we get to also recognize it in each other. The work of teshuva may remain - and there is halacha for that too! But with this shining light we have an opportunity to embrace, in the words of Heschel, "the seed of eternity that is planted in our souls.[12]" So when Tuesday comes — and it will come — may we still be moving. Not alone. Together, on the path, carrying one another's burdens.

A closing bracha/blessing:

Over the next 24 hours may we be blessed to go deep: into grief, vulnerability, and radical honesty.

May we be blessed to go high, to a place of joy, release, and even ecstasy.

And when we come down, may we be blessed with the structures to hold what we've touched — and the community to embrace it with.

[12] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 13.