



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2021/5782

“Telling Our Stories”

Yom Kippur Kol Nidre Sermon, September 15th, 2021

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We have choices. Our lives are a series of choices that have brought us all individually and collectively to this moment. *Bruchim Habaim*-Welcome to this moment! In our foundational origin story, when Adam and Chava eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the world of conscious choice is set in motion. The story of human agency upon the earth begins. Torah opens with this image of choice and closes five books later with this refrain from Moses: *I put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your children may live.* (Deut. 30:19)

Most of the time we walk around in a rather unconscious state, habitually moving through life until we collide with something or someone that awakens us for a moment. It might be a car-accident, a painful loss, a sudden illness or an argument with someone we love that brings into focus the precious blessings in our lives. For many of us, the profound disruption of this past year has caused an expansion of awareness and an inner stirring that demands attention.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote, as if from the perspective of the soul itself:
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Tonight, we come together as one community but each with one's own stories of challenge and of loss, of blessings and even miracles. Together, we will enter into a sacred drama of ritual and prayer, of confession, release and forgiveness. Turning inward, we shine a light on our own stories, on our relationships in need of healing. Turning outward we lean upon the strength of community to carry us through this journey.

There is a beautiful midrash- a Rabbinic legend, told of the biblical figure Joseph, who while travelling back to Egypt after the funeral of his father Jacob in Canaan, stopped at the site of the pit into which his brothers had thrown him many years earlier. One might imagine that revisiting the site wherein a family betrayal took place, a moment in one's history that led to years of suffering, that one would likely feel anger and pain. But the midrash tells us that upon seeing the pit, Joseph spontaneously offers a blessing of thanksgiving to God for performing a miracle for him at that site. Rather than reliving the trauma of betrayal and a near-death experience, he is awakened to the miracle of survival, of Divine providence. Filled with gratitude, he understands that the '*Pit*' experience was a step toward the fulfillment of his eventual destiny. Joseph rewrites his own story. And by doing so, he not only changes the past, he changes the future as well. For though he is able to exact retribution from his brothers, he

does not do so. Instead, he arranges not only for their survival during the famine but for their future well-being and flourishing in a foreign land. Joseph transforms the family story. He stops the cycle of bitter sibling rivalry that proceeds through the generations of Abraham and achieves peace in the family.

We do indeed have choices.

Each of us has a story and how we tell our stories is always a choice.

What will be the story of this past year? And how will we shape the story of 5782?

The Torah teaches us a beautiful Jewish land practice called *sh'mitah*. It is referred to as a Shabbat for the earth and requires that every seven years the land be given a year's rest from cultivation. Just as we are to pause from all creative activity 1x/week on Shabbat, the land is given a sacred pause from agricultural production, once every seven years.

These agricultural laws were intended for the Land of Israel only and so they were not observed during the 2000 years of exile. However, upon return to the Land of Israel in the late 19th cent., the *sh'mitah* practices were reinstated. Observant Jewish farmers in Israel have been counting these agricultural cycles of seven years and observing the laws of *sh'mitah* ever since. On our Jewish calendar this new year 5782 is a *sh'mitah* year.

Let's take a deeper look at the wisdom embedded in this practice. The word *sh'mitah* means 'release', for the land is being released from the work of production imposed upon it by human beings. Have you ever stopped to think about how we treat the land as a slave, requiring endless production and higher yields each year? Torah reminds us that we live in relationship with the land which, as a living organism, requires rest and rejuvenation. The *sh'mitah* year requires as well that all creditors release debtors from their loan obligations. This practice creates a safeguard against families falling into transgenerational poverty and re-balances the distribution of wealth.

So, what relevance might this have for us, in this time and in this place? The practice of *sh'mitah* calls for an extended period of **release** from the patterns and habits of the past that have held us back from making important and lasting changes. *Sh'mitah* is a time for re-evaluation, encouraging us to cultivate inwardly while allowing the external world to rest.

I offer to you that this entire pandemic experience can be likened to an imposed *sh'mitah* for the whole world in which humanity has had to pause from business as usual, pull inwards and retreat from imposing our will upon the natural world. In 5781 we have all been compelled to release our attachments to the ways we had been living. And while this *sh'mitah* experience continues into 5782, what is different today is the sense that rather than simply being acted upon, we have choices to make.

As mother nature continues to send us clear messages of a world out of balance, we understand that we cannot return to our usual patterns of life.

This *sh'mitah* year of 5782 asks us, these questions:

What do you need to release?

What can you release that no longer serves you?

What can you release that no longer serves those you love, your community, and the earth itself?

And as the practice of *sh'mitah* calls on us to forgive debts, I ask you tonight, are there emotional debts you may be holding against others or even yourself?

Our sacred inheritance, our Torah gives permission to forgive, to release these debts. All it takes is a small movement, a small shift from grasping to letting go.

Let us enter this Yom Kippur with an intention to begin the necessary work of release, to create a fresh space to write a new story in the book of life, for the coming year.

Let us transform that 'pit' in which we found ourselves this past year, into a place of miracles and blessings.

Friends, how shall we tell our story?

How shall we tell the story of 5781 so that we can co-create 5782 as a year of blessings?

Let us pray for the strength to release our attachments to all that stands in the way of healing and may we strengthen our relationships with one another and with our one precious planet earth.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be our will and may it be God's will.