

CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL

425 Summit Drive
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Erev Rosh Hashanah
5770
Rabbi Julie Kozlow

To night as the sun begins to go down on the horizon of this new year, the universe goes into a comatose state.

A slumber descends on all existence and everything slows to a standstill in apprehension of it's contract being renewed.

For those who dare to scratch the banal surface of life's meaning an inner odyssey has begun.

This moment invites you to enter with eyes wide open for the stories we tell ourselves about what really matters in life are silenced and the universe and her mystery open before us like a book whose pages are grander than the galaxies and whose words are written in the stars.

We are asked to be still and listen to that quiet echo that whispers from beyond the shores of reason. Take heed, God is watching.....

The Talmud teaches us that the entire month of Tishrei is the nerve center of the year and that what we do with these days impacts the days that lie ahead.

It has been called "The main energy center of the Cosmic nervous system." These ten days set the tone for the year to follow. It is a vital and sacred time.

The process is difficult, and it is hindered by our stubborn inclination to deceive ourselves into believing that the only life that really matters is our own. And that the only true measure for a life is the goods that a life can amass.

Yet this excruciating and freeing ten day dance with TRUTH makes clear to even the untrained eye, that what matters to a life has nothing to do with goods acquired or schools attended, not cars purchased or youthful beauty bought....

The truth of life is measured by the soul and the way we offer our service to the world as a collective humanity.

During these days of Awe we will repeat over and over as if to scream to our collective soul...Avinu Malkeinu, Honaynu Va anay nu ...Avinu Malkeinu Honay nu Va anay-nu ki ayn banu Ma=asim...asay imanu, tzedaka v'hessed asawy imanu tedakah v'hessed v-ho-she-aynu. Avinu malkeinu.

These words ring out from the mouths of the world's Jews and collide together to create a symphony of our collective being. The Jewish People. Am Yisrael, Kehillah kodeshah. We take a stand as one people united in the work of return, the work of Teshuvah.



We are not instructed to say, AVI Melech....MY GOD, My God forgive me...we speak, rather, in the plural, for we are un-benounced to the unenlightened eye, one human family.

The illusion of separateness is just that...illusion. Yet we stand together and we carry the burden of all that makes our world ugly and vulgar and we acknowledge that we are responsible for the state of this world.

We may not have inflicted the blow ourselves, yet, we tolerate the suffering of others, we remain silent in the face of brutality we are stubbornly indifferent to the trials of the vulnerable. We close up the periphery of our vision so to block out those who we do not call our own.

And for this we ask forgiveness as a community, we carry together what is too burdensome to manage alone.

We know that life takes a village and until our circles of giving and care ripple out creating waves of goodness for the forgotten and the discarded, our spiritual discipline of collective prayer will continue to be mandated.

So tonight I bid you, listen to the resounding silence of a Universe waiting to be heard. We have been given eyes to see the majesty of Gods gift of life, but also to see those who have lost their way.... it is up to us to peer into the darkness and make sense of the myriad shadows.

We have been given ears to hear the beautiful sounds of creation, but also the sounds of tears....it is up to us to strain in order to detect the hidden notes and piece them together into a melody.

We have been given hearts to feel the power of love which, if truth be told, opens for every human being a clearly forged pathway to Gods soul. It is up to us to step firmly onto that highway.

It is simple yet incredibly difficult.....Love is the answer..... for it is without question, a glimpse of the Divine soul....for it is beyond the human animal to have created such an emotion.

Love is God potential in every split second of existence.

We hold the keys. You and I. Every choice we make can be tempered and ignited into beauty by the measure of love you pour into it.

These are the days to look squarely into the eyes of the one who stares back at you from the mirrors reflection.

The book has been opened and every deed, every choice, every action you have taken in the year gone by will be, for the next ten days, reviewed and judged by God.

Let us pray that the harshness with which we judge of our fellow human beings, not be the standard of Gods judgment for us.

Let us pray that the impatience and rush to condemnation that we show our fellow human beings, NOT be the approach that God takes in accessing our own misdeeds.

For those who dare, the next ten days will be spent pleading for Gods compassion, for Gods grace, and for Gods forgiveness.

Why not begin by offering these kindnesses to those closest to us. Why don't we look to the possibility of love as a measured ingredient which contains within it the power to change the course of our lives for the better and alter the trajectory of our world.

We ask God to forgive us yet we stand so strong and resolute in our disinterest in forgiving others.

Perhaps this is a choice that could be made as we stand on this threshold to a new year. Perhaps this is the first step towards true tikkun, true repair of the world.....

And so it is at this moment when the universe holds it breath....and in the stillness of the moment God's presence can be felt, bidding us to stand together.... As ONE people,

resolute in our commitment to being the designated light unto the nations, shining forth the depth and beauty of a life steeped in justice and goodness, a life that chooses to stand for a purpose higher than oneself.

How very important it is for us to honor that charge. For this IS the meaning of our peoples passionate journey through time. Do not avert your gaze.....

Do not step off of that train that is chugging through history carrying Gods message of light to the world.

For here we stand, singing to God in the plural,

Avinu Malkein, Honaynu Va anay nu ...Avinu Malkeinu Honay nu Va anay-nu ki ayn banu Ma=asim...asay imanu, tzedaka v'hessed asawy imanu tedakah v'hessed v-ho-she-aynu. Avinu malkeinu.

.....GOD, Be gracious to us as our flaws become evident to You. Be compassionate to us for we...WE are mere humans and our strength is limited. God, be merciful to us for our fragility is real.

God , be patient with us for we will try to show the same generosity to others. And perhaps together we will turn a world of darkness towards the light, towards you.

L'shanah tova, um-tukah...

Rabbi Julie Anne Kozlow

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770
Congregation Beth Israel
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From the time I was a little child, the most often question I asked was, WHY?

No it wasn't defiance that inspired my questioning, it was pure and utter curiosity. For, what ever reason, I naturally sensed the world from the view from above and that made the answers I was getting to my persistent, whys? Utterly unsatisfying.

Imagine for a moment the truth of our reality as humans beings here on planet earth.

We survive in this universe due to our being drawn to the surface of earth by the pull of gravity. We humans are newcomers to the Cosmos, having existed less than 1% of the earth's 4.6 billion year history, Which is in itself a brief instant in the 14 billion year history of the universe.

We are floating in one very small and obscure galaxy tucked away in the far reaches of a world too immense to capture in mere words.

We find ourselves in the midst of a lush planet teeming with color, drama, weather, design and unimaginable detail. From the delicate design of a flower to the breathtaking intricacies of a butterfly, the artistry of creation is quite beyond the imaginable.

There is for this rabbi, no denying that artwork of this caliber cannot come into being without an Artist at the helm of it's creation.

The very first question has got to be, why, why are we here.. Mind you this is not a new question. It is the very essence of all human profound thought, from religion to philosophy to theology to science....

All of the questions these disciplines attempt to answer are born on the first question...WHY?

There's a powerful Midrash that tells the story of Adam who was calling out to God from Gan Eden, what's going on here GOD? What's it all about, WHY am I here?

God responds, something like, That's not for you to know Adam!

And Adam just keeps on winning and asking, until God strikes a deal with him saying, ok ok, ok, look, I will give you one split second glance from one end of the universe to the other...this of course would allow Adam to see the details of the plan, yet God said, but after that split second, NO MORE QUESTIONS.

And so Adam, in one breathtaking moment, saw the mind of God.....

But from then on he had to find his way through life with the same human blind spots as the rest of us.

There are two important truths which emerge out of this Midrash, one is that there IS so much more to life than meets the eye. It is Platos theory of the cave that tells the story, According to Plato, we stand in the world as if in a cave, with our backs to the sun and we create the measure of existence from sensing the shadows that dance upon the wall.

Yet we never turn around to gaze directly at the Lightso all we see are mere shadows and it is these shadows that we call reality. Yet in truth they only hint to us the measure of Gods truth. They are after all, mere illusions on a wall.

The second truth to emerge form this Midrash is that God's intention for humankind is for us to be in the dark, as it were. In other words, what ever life is truly about, the human beings place within it is meant to be experienced in a state of "NOT KNOWING".

In such a case the actions of human beings can be genuinely measured by God, for the actions you take when you cannot know for sure if God is even watching, are your honest actions. For good or for bad, the choices we make completely belong to us and therefore it is utterly fair for us to be judged by them.

Sensitive to these powerful human realities, our Jewish tradition creates the High Holy Days.....ten days in which we are called to turn our gaze away from the shadows and directly towards the light.

For if Plato is correct, if we believe that the shadows are real, then our lives become mere shadows themselves.

Teshuvah means return, THE RETURN TO GOD. The turning of our souls towards the LIGHT.

Our job during these 10 sacred days is to turn our hearts and souls around and to look up. To access our lives form the view from above. Not to hide in caves and allow ourselves to be satiated by complacency or indifference.

For although the existence of God cannot be proven empirically, neither can the lack of Gods existence be proven empirically.

These days come to call to your soul to choose faith. It is not without reason.

The renowned rabbi, The RAMHAL said,

The one who walks through life blindly without contemplating whether his or her path is good or not, is like a blind person walking a tight rope over a raging sea.

Tonight the invitation into Rosh Hashanah is one of introspection. You are invited by God to look inward and to ask why..... WHY AM I HERE?

We are called To remember what we humans race to forget, that your life has meaning beyond your knowledge. That You are part of a great plan and your contributions are expected.

Yet what you can know, what you must know, is that everything you do, every choice you make will add or diminish color to Gods creation and you will be held accountable for your part.

You and I are part of a great mystery, God is calling to us at every moment. The experience we attempt to create during these ten days makes ignoring this truth more difficult.

I cannot tell you what LIFE IS, I can only tell you what life is not.

The search for what life truly is should be the impetus that brings us to synagogue. In this machzor, this prayer book, a journey has been set out that leads us to the answers. Here with your community, we search together, as one family on a mission of truth seeking.

Martin Buber wrote,

When God calls out, AYECKAH where are you? Adam hides to avoid rendering an account for his actions. Each of us hides, for each of us is Adam. To escape responsibility we turn life into a game of hide and seek. And the hiding is from the face of God. Yet, we cannot escape from the eye of God and so in the end we are only hiding from ourselves.

Tonight we are each written into the book of life and in ten days when the gates close at the end of Yom Kippur, our fates will be sealed.

Use these ten days wisely.

Open your heart and your soul to the bright light that shines outside of the walls of the cave. There is so much waiting beyond our vision. Ask God, WHY? And listen for the answer.....Shemah Yisrael, Israel, listen...listen for GOD , for God is listening for you.

L'shanah Tovah um-tukkah

Rabbi Julie Anne Kozlow

Shabbat shuvah 5770

GOD

Rabbi Julie Kozlow

Shabbat shalom,

Tonight is Shabbat shuvah, it is the Shabbat of return of teshuvah...

This is the Shabbat just before Yom Kippur and its intense focus is a last ditch effort to get us to see the true spiritual nature of these days of AWE and to compel us to act.

The return of which our liturgy speaks is plain and simple a return to God.

Now let me say for the record, a persons personal relationship with God or the lack there of is most certainly a private affair. There are very many Jews who define them selves as atheists and have the total right to do so. Judaism is defined by the blood that runs through your veins, not the dogmas you accept.

This gives us the passionate discourse that Jews so love to engage. So many opinions, so many ideas, and no one gets to claim ultimate authority despite the claims of the Orthodoxy, we are all a part of the story of our people.

Yet as a rabbi, I cant help but feel compelled to speak of God, to teach of God and to advocate for God. In fact it is my understanding that we Jews are only here to be a mouth piece for God. Without that mission, why be Jewish at all?

This is relevant on Shabbat shuvah because the essence of return is the return to GOD and a return to living a life that God has asked of us to live. Where do we return if not to GOD.

No I cannot tell you what God looks like or how GOD maneuvers through the universe. I cannot tell you how GOD thinks or acts in our personal lives. I can not tell you anything about what GOD is, I can only tell you that GOD IS.

Shabbat shuvah comes to shake us out of our complacency, we must, ourselves reach for this mysterious GOD because until we do, GOD cannot reach back. The very first step has got to be ours.

The rationalist movements of the 11th and 12th centuries created a dilemma for our Jewish world. The philosophic mind of man was challenging anything that reason could not explain and like all religions of the time, our rabbis and leaders tried to mold our theology and ideologies into systems of reason. And a thousand years later we are still struggling with the effects of that impulse.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

The search for reason ends at the shore of the known, on the immense expanse beyond it, only the sense if the ineffable can glide. It alone knows the route to that which is remote from experience and understanding. Neither of them is amphibious, reason cannot go beyond the shore and the sense of the ineffable is out of place where we measure, where we weigh.

God and the feelings that God inspires in our deepest souls are completely out of order in the world of reason.

I am reminded of a woman who sat in the pews of a synagogue where I once worked and her comment following my Shabbat shuvah sermon was that she never liked it when rabbis spoke about GOD.

Well. I'm not there anymore:

These holy days are powerful, no doubt about it, yet without an attempt to communicate with ones GOD, they can hardly reach the places for which they are intended to reach.

Our tradition DOESN'T HONOR BLIND FAITH AS OUR CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS DO, rather, IT TEACHES, THAT IF YOU CANNOT BELIEVE JUST PRETEND THAT YOU DO AND IN TIME THAT PRETENSE will carry to places where you will be able to find GOD. The point is not to give up trying.

There is no relationship in this life that can exist without constant tending. We are not allowed to expect others just to know how we feel, we need to speak words, we need to try to touch the soul, to feed and nourish those we love.

This is no different with GOD. Perhaps it is more challenging, but it is no different. If you never talk to God then God cannot talk to you.

This is the place to start..

These days of awe, ask us to bring a sacrifice to the temple to exhibit our gratitude and our loyalty. The word sacrifice in Hebrew is KORBAN and it doesn't mean to "give up" as the English word implies, it means rather to "draw close" and to what are we to draw close to? To GOD.

In other words the goodness you do in life brings you close to your creator. Now that's beautiful!

Yes it is true that the Jewish approach coming out of the rationalist era deemphasized a personal relationship with GOD. But the rationalist era has passed. We all know very well that life cannot solely be explained rationally. We are after all spinning on a planet in a small and obscure galaxy without any apparent reason. We know that there is more to the mystery of life than meets the eye.

Its time to reach once again for that undefined and invisible GOD. I cannot prove it to you, I can only say that when all is said and done, this rabbi believes with perfect faith what my heart and soul tell me and what they tell me is that GOD exists and is waiting, for you and for me to reach out.....to pick up the phone....and reach for home.

Talk to GOD for Yom Kippur is just around the corner. Give God a chance to act in your life and you will know what our ancestors knew, from Abraham to Jacob...this is Gods world and we have part to play in its majestic potentiality. But we are only the players, the stage has been set by GOD

Draw close to God and enter the fast of Yom Kippur ready to feel the dance of your soul as it sings to your heart the song of GOD.

These are powerful days indeed.

Shabbat shalom Shabbat shalom

Kol Nidrei 5770

“Open the book and write”

Rabbi Julie Kozlow

In 1896 a man named Alfred Noble died in Sonremo Italy. But this date wasn't the first obituary that had been written for him. For several years earlier, there had been an explosion in one of the factories that Alfred owned where he manufactured explosives and the explosion took the life of his brother. Yet it was believed at first that it was Alfred who was killed.

Consequently the following morning Alfred Noble awoke to read his own obituary. And in that obituary he was defined as a Chemist, an engineer, an innovator, an armaments manufacturer and the inventor of dynamite, a creation that would forever change the face of warfare and allow the armies of the world to reach new levels of mass destruction.

He was shaken to the core when he read the words that would forever define the very essence of his existence, he would be known to history and to human kind as the man who created dynamite.

Knowing that his name would ultimately forever be associated with death and destruction, he made the decision to re -create the man he would be known for and to rewrite the legacy of his life.

Alfred Noble took his great fortune and created the NOBEL PEACE PRIZE to honor those who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of peace.

Today you would be hard pressed to find anyone who could associate the name of NOBLE with anything but the highest ideal of peace and good will.

I share this with you because this kind of revelation, this kind of pro active work to design a life worthy of living is exactly what these high Holidays come to inspire us to do.

On the High Holidays we imagine a book, it is as large as the universe and God calls every human soul forward to stand to be judged.

We believe in an super natural way that on Rosh Hashanah God writes down for each of us the twists and turns that this new year will bring.

We also learn that in Gods compassion, we were given 10 days from the day of that judgment to acknowledge our true selves and to make amends for the mistakes of the year gone by, in this way allowing God the chance to alter our fate if we plead our case sincerely.

And then ten days later on Yom Kippur, as the gates to Gods hidden court room close and the sun descends at the end of a day of fasting and soul searching, our destiny's are sealed.

Tonight is the night to imagine the way in which God will see you.

To imagine the story you have been writing with your life. Will you be proud of the chapter that was written this past year?

Tonight is the time to stop pretending that we are the masters of our lives. We are only the masters of how we will face our lives. The mystery of which we are a part is not of our making. This domain belongs to GOD.

There is a story in the Talmud of Rabbi Halafta who was walking down the road one night and ran into the angel of death....

The rabbi remarked that the angel had a strange look on his face, why he asked? The angel of death responded...I am baffled he said, for human beings run through their lives making plans and dreaming dreams.

They store their ideas away for another time as if each of them has the promise of contract for a long life. Not one of them knows the day they will be called to leave this world.

Until we come to terms with death we will not be free in life.

These high Holidays come to bid you to take a moment and ponder the obituary that would be written about you today if in fact this were the day that God called you home.

Life is not about longevity, rather it is completely about the quality with which you imbue to every precious moment given you.

The book is opened and each of us stands before God, our deepest fears known, our vulnerabilities exposed, our stories revealed.

We Jews are uniquely called to parallel the journey of our people with the journey of our individual lives. What we stand for as a people serves as the same criteria for what we should stand for individually.

For each of us is considered to be a TORAH, each of us having our own circumstances and faced with our own set of challenges. Yet each of us is called to make a difference in our world.

There is not one of us who knows the length of our days or the moment of our death, yet most of us live our lives as if we will live forever and that no one is watching us as we do.

No doubt you are all aware of the very brilliant yet false advertising campaign that states,

What ever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.....

News flash for rabbi Kozlow...its not true.

There is no behavior no act, no look or word or deed that does not impact the character of our world as well as the character of the soul who made it.

Nothing is meaningless. Everything you do becomes you. You will either elevate the character of our world or you will diminish it...

God doesn't miss a beat.....

You cannot hide from GOD. Not in Vegas, not in a room where the shades are drawn, not in a cave or under a rock. You cannot hide from God.

One of the most powerful assignments I was ever given in rabbinic school was to write the details to my own funeral. It changed my life...and that is exactly what these days attempt to inspire in each of us.

Its too easy to forget that God has expectations on your life. If you are here, there is a reason, your job is to discover that reason and dedicate your life to actualizing it.

Don't you know that if you don't define your life, someone else or something else will, yet you are the one who will be held responsible for the legacy you leave.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that
To be means to stand for.....

What do you stand for? What legacy are you building to leave your children, your community, your world?

It is my prayer on this eve of Kol Nidrei that we not squander yet another year, another chance to re-create ourselves and to begin to become the pillar of humanity that God believes that each of us can be.

We Jews carry the light of God through the world yet to be effective we must allow that light to refract through our souls as a crystal captures the suns rays and emanates beauty and color.

Let today remind us, as we set food aside, and choose instead to nourish the soul that there is work to be done.

Let tonight stir you to open the book that defines your life and write a new script, or begin a new chapter. There is so much more to be and GOD is waiting for us to act.

Change yourself and the world will change with you. God expects nothing less.

Rabbi Julie Anne Kozlow

Yom Kippur 5770
“No easy answers”
Rabbi Julie Kozlow

There are two cycles which regulate Jewish life,

One is the cycle of the seasons and the holidays that decorate the Jewish years motion through time,

And the second is the cycle of life celebrations that spans the life of the Jew from birth to death.

We live at time when the second cycle is still, for most of us, an important fixture in the layering of our own identities as individuals and as Jews.

We want to be married under a Huppah, We want to see our children B'nei Mitzvah'd and called to the Torah and when its all over.... we still want to be buried among our people in Jewish cemeteries.

Yet the first cycle, that of the holidays has in modern times, faded in its centrality to our lives, having lost for the modern Jewish consumer, reason enough to hold on. And I would have to admit, that in many pragmatic and utilitarian ways, it is understandable. There is a disconnect.

We are in many ways alienated from the rhythms of expression of ancient Judaism. The world is just so different a place than it was 3000 years ago.

Not many of you will really be able to relate to the shaking of the lulav or the etrog during Sukkot, You probably won't be spending a lot of time arranging the sacrifice of your farm animal for Passover. I also doubt that you will be beating the willows on Hoshanah Rabbah. Come to think of it....I bet I can hear many of you thinking, Hoshanah who? Many of you probably don't even know that there is a holiday called Hoshanah Rabbah. It's off of the radar of modern life for most of us and understandably so.

What is so very interesting in the light of this reality, is that our synagogues fill up to the brim on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The cynics among us would say that the reason for the large turnout is that the Jews are just covering their bases, in case there is a GOD, best show up for the most important day of the year. But I rarely agree with the cynics, I believe it is something else all together that draws our people back into our synagogues on these high and holy days.

Somehow in the power of this day, these two cycles intersect and the holiday itself becomes much more than just another name on a calendar, it is rather, an integral part of who we are. This every year moment becomes us, like the very breath we breath, it is a part of who we are.

We don't even know exactly why our feet carry us to synagogues on these days, we only know that we must follow. Today we do not gather merely for a holiday, today we gather to BE.

It reminds me of the blessing from the Talmud in Masechet Brachot where Rabbi Haninah, upon departing from his students, bestows a blessing upon them, that their feet will always carry them to places where words of Torah are spoken.

On Yom Kippur, our feet know the way to go...they carry us home even if we ourselves have forgotten the reason why.

This gravitational pull that so powerfully draws us in, speaks in no uncertain terms, about the deeper and hidden truths about our religion and her traditions. And although I would agree that many of our holidays have lost their relevancy for us in a utilitarian sense, I would not agree that they have lost their relevancy in a spiritual sense and those who have cut themselves away completely, in no small way, are spiritually lost.

Judaism must be seen as a lifestyle of metaphor...for everything that Judaism demands, it does so in order to insure that we not only remember our purpose but that we actually become our purpose.

We are commanded to light Shabbat candles to remind us of the light of God that we are obligated to bring into the world.

We say Kiddush over the wine to remind us of our ability to elevate the very character of life to the level of the sacred.

We celebrate Passover to remind us of slavery and our obligation to fight for freedom.

We cover our heads to remind us that there is something above us...that we aren't the top of the hill...God IS.

Jewish ritual goes on and on and on, and each symbol represents yet another magnificent idea too breathtaking to have been devised from the human mind.

The idea of a utopian society did not come from a book written in 1516 by Sir Thomas More that lays out the ultimate model of a just and noble society, it was first articulated by the God of the Jews and spoken to Moses upon Mt Sinai 3300 years ago and then written down in the Torah.

More importantly, the actualization of this utopian society is the very purpose of our election as Gods chosen people and it is this standard of human dignity upon which our charge depends and our mission will be judged.

The question is, why don't we Jews understand that the two cycles of which I first spoke, converge upon this day of Yom Kippur precisely because of the spiritual variable of Judaism. The metaphor of this day is everything that is most unseen, yet most powerful in the life of a human being.

This is the day that the soul is acknowledged. This is the day when all masks come down. This is the day we deny ourselves the attention of the physical body so that we may ignite our senses to locate and bring focus to our souls and the mystery of existence. This is the day when we stand completely naked and seen before the ONE and invisible God of the universe.

They say that there are no atheists in fox holes, there are few atheists on Yom Kippur as well.

Yom Kippur is a highly ritualized day that not only reminds us of a dimension of life that is normally overlooked, but its depth and intensity draws us in and consumes our beings. It is about as real as it gets.

No amount of wealth, status or prestige can protect you. God cannot be bought. We all stand to be judged by God and it is by our actions and our deeds that will speak on our behalf.

I spent one Yom Kippur as the rabbi to lead services, in a maximum security prison in Los Angeles. There were three Jewish men who due to their labels as violent sexual predators, they were unable to attend services with the general prison population...seems that even in prison an ethical standard exists..... and the rape and abuse of children is deemed despicable by that standard....go figure.

I lead services in a prison pod, it was quite surreal. When I met with the men to counsel them before leaving, one of them said to me, Rabbi, I'm really a good person, I am not my crime.

Judaism wouldn't agree. Yes, we are all our actions. It is only TESHUVAH the genuine return to God and the rededication of ones life to the pursuit of righteousness that can save us. But we are our ACTIONS. The only help is TESHUVAH

We are drawn this day into the depths of Judaism which is one and the same as the depths of our very own Jewish souls.

For those of us who have dedicated our very lives to the perpetuation of this great heritage through time, we know, in no uncertain terms how complicated, layered, challenging and multi dimensional Judaism is. Yet we are asked to serve a Jewish world that no longer knows that itself.

In fact in the last few months, while discussing these very issues, I have received the request from for some sort of, "sound bites" for Jews to use when they are asked a complicated question that they don't know the answer to.

In other words, Rabbi, please give us some easy answers...Yet what they are overlooking is that they are seeking easy answers to some very complicated questions.

I have felt almost an intolerance as I scramble to explain the complexity of Judaism. It feels as if I am seen as being unable to reach the common Jew unless I can come up with some such "sound bites" or easy answers.

If Judaism were just another belief system, perhaps I could. But Judaism is so much more than that. In explaining Judaism we are attempting to express the experience of a people in love with the Divine.

We are believers who have the unpopular job of reminding a very dark world of the light that can change it all if only we as a human race could listen and learn to care.

We hold the attempted understanding of the ONE GOD, THE unimaginable, the boundless soul of the worlds creator.... and we attempt to explain this destiny of ours with our small and inadequate human words.....

Judaism is NOT simple...in fact one of the reasons we are in the state that we are in today, and by that I mean, 75% unaffiliated and major disconnection between Jew and Judaism....is precisely because many rabbis and synagogues of the past one hundred years, (for a million and one complicated reasons)have tried to convince the Jewish people that Judaism is simple.

They hoped to mainstream our religion into looking like other religions and making it palatable for the modern Jew. Yet in doing so they tore the heart and soul of our peoples identity right out of our collective gut.

We geared our religious teaching to the level of our Hebrew schools, we capped the thoughts and the ideas of our age old tradition at the level of a 13 year old mind. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah became the pinnacle Jewish experience, the first and the last and sadly, the end all...and it did end all... I cannot tell you how many Jews walk out of the synagogue the day of their Bar Mitzvah and NEVER ever walk back in...what is the message of a religious tradition that tells you that your learning, your participation, your loyalty has no value beyond your 13th birthday?

Trust me, if they thought they were leaving something magnificent behind, they wouldn't leave it. We human beings don't throw away that which we believe has value, we throw away that which we deem worthless and for a maturing mind, for a soul inspired by the enlightenment who yearns for higher answers to the meaning of life, who yearns for a higher vision of the God head....the capped intellectual stimuli of pediatric Judaism just wont do.

Of coarse the most deeply distressing aspect of this reality is that those who left our synagogues behind, left what they truly thought was JUDAISM.

But here is the truth, That was not Judaism.....

Judaism is neither pediatric nor simple. Rather it is responsible for the highest, most spiritually elevated conceptualized ideologies to spring from the human mind ...you don't have to take my word for it. Our legacy of ideas, which is the treasure hold of our history, has fed and nourished the human race since the time of Abraham.

And why is this so, it is so because Judaism is not merely a human creation, a human lifestyle, a human religion. It is rather, a dance of the Divine as it mingles with the human mind. ...we believe that God entered Human history and gave the human race its mandate. Nothing less than the most important communication ever exchanged between the Divine and the human.

There's nothing simple about it.

Judaism is a system of reminders attempting to help us never to forget what we have been commanded to relay to the world.

Yet, Here in lies the challenge for the modern Jew,

Today we are, a messenger people who has, for the most part, lost the message. There is something so terribly ironic about a people whose sole existence was to deliver to the world God's message but forgot along the way not only what the message was and who to say it to but that there even was a message at all.

So many Jews today define Judaism as presents at hanukka and childhood foods....matzah ball soup, and brisket, Potato latkes and Challa....comfort food and lots of it....

But being Jewish is so much more than out doing Christmas or food...it is deeper, so much more complex and involved. It transcends time and space and human history. It is not child's play, it's the real thing and it is powerful!

We are not attempting to sell Judaism as the best religion on the block, we are trying to bring God's light and obsession with goodness into a world that reeks of vulgarity.

Easy answers? There just aren't any.

Judaism penetrates the surface of human existence and it allows one to peer into the soul of God.

This is no place for a sound bite....there is just too much at stake, too much to loose.

There's a line in the megillah of Purim when Modrdechai says to Esther, you must step up on behalf of your people, we need your courage and your loyalty...But he says, if you refuse to help ... if you abandon your peoples cause, just know that help will come from some other quarter. God will not ever abandon the Jewish people and our purpose upon this stage of life....but for you Esther, this could be the very reason for your life, for your destiny. Do not turn from it.

This is what is at stake....There is not a Jew alive who fully owns the life he or she leads. Everything you do reflects upon our people. The good the bad, the decent the Madoffs, everything.

Everything we are, reflects or deflects God's light in this world.

Martin Buber wrote,

Don't you know that I God, need you? In the fullness of eternity, how would you exist if I did not need you? You need me in order to be and I need you, for this is the very meaning of your life.

This is what's at stake...the full dimension of your life....If you are living without a yearning to know the secrets of the universe, then you are barely alive. If you have lulled yourself into believing that life is a simple game of, what you see is what you get,...then you are barely breathing.

Heschel wrote,

We live on the fringe of reality and hardly know how to reach the core. What we take account of cannot be accounted for. We explore the ways of being but we do not know what it means to be. The deeper we search the nearer we arrive at knowing that we do not know.

If you are divorced from a personal and intense relationship with your heritage, You will not be able teach Judaism effectively, Judaism can only be caught..... Love and passion are contagious and there in lies your answers to the questions that ask....why be Jewish????? True love and commitment to the very complexity of our destiny speak what no sound bite can capture.

We live at a time when many of us realize that we have fallen away from the vibrancy of our heritage. Yet who knows, if Mordechai's words for Esther aren't meant for us as well.

Perhaps this is Gods way of asking you to stand up and face your destiny.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote Gods words saying,

For I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good, to give you a future and a hope. When you call me and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me with a whole heart, you will find me.

So I suggest to you today that instead of looking for easy answers and sound bites to offer, that we offer instead our time and our commitment to learning what the winds of change have denied us.

Knowledge is power. Refuse to be satiated by the easy answers.

It is never too late to show up and be present. This heritage is yours and it screams for your attention. No easy answers, I have none and any rabbi who claims to, well I'm sure they took that book off of the Hebrew school shelf, but that's not going to feed a mature soul hungry to learn.

If you were told that Judaism is just another religion, you have been told an untruth. If you have been told that there are easy answers to this ancient heritage that is wise beyond imagination, then you have been mis-led.

The only way to make Judaism contagious is to LIVE IT VIBRANTLY. To know the depth and majesty of your great privilege.

And if you love your identity as Jews so will those around you. Love it, live it, for who knows, perhaps the very choice whether to accept the simple answers or to dig deeper for the mystery, this could be the very reason you are here. Perhaps your destiny calls in this very decision.

Rav Kook wrote,

All existence whispers to me a secret: take it, I have life to offer. Take it take it. If you have a heart and in your heart red blood courses, a heart which despair will not decay. If you have not allowed your heart to dull then a holy Light will abound. Yet if beauty holds no spell for you, if existence whispers only pity. If beauty stirs you not to holy song, but to banal thoughts you are drawn, you will find that I, God, am out of reach.

And so the answer on this Yom Kippur must be simply to enter. Wherever you stand on this majestic ladder of Jewish history, there is always a rung above you that beckons your climb. I cannot promise you any easy answers, but I can promise you an enlightened spirit.

I can remind you of the metaphors that dance as triggers through our peoples collective psyche, metaphors that serve to remind us of the dream and of the ONE who dreamed it and our obligation to bring this dream to life.

We Jews are story tellers and it is Gods story we have been asked to tell. The soul of each Jew is required, for we are the family of carriers. We are the ones to carry Gods story through time. Each Jew matters even though our words are inadequate to relay the message of our charge. There are no easy explanations. We each must try to speak the depth of this mystery in our own way.

Rav Kook wrote while writing on a similar topic,

There is still a long road ahead of us in order to finish what we have begun to do. We begin to speak a great word among ourselves and in the ears of the entire world, but we have not completed it. We stand in the middle of our speech. All ears strain to us to finish; we cannot stop, nor do we want to stop it. The truth within us is so rich and overpowering that we cannot express it in clear and simple language. But we will say what we can, as much as our power of speaking and understanding will permit, even as generation before us have done. We know that in the course of time, others will say what we are unable to say. But we shall not stop until it has all been said, for our sake and for the sake of the world.

It is on this note that I bid each of you, on this Yom Kippur of 5770...when you face the person in the mirror tonight, see the yid stare back at you. Your destiny was decided, your job defined. If you are far away draw closer, if you have empty hands reach for a book of Jewish wisdom, if your mind hungers, reach for the learning that can challenge your deepest questions, if you feel lost step into the dance of your people, for that is where you belong. Life is not simple. But here, in this sacred House of God, you will find the perfect place to be welcomed and together with your community search for the answers.

No one said it would be easy, but nothing of value ever is.

L'shanah tovah

Rabbi Julie Anne Kozlow

