

Standing at the precipice between here and there
Kol Nidre Drash
Nehar Shalom Community Shtibl
Yom Kippur 2014
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This Yom Kippur my mind is immersed in both the reality and the spiritual metaphor of moving. Throughout the month of Elul Jeff and I have been attending to the details involved in selling and packing up our house as we prepare for a move cross-country.

Moving. You pack up our life. The physical reminders of what you've done and who you've been up until this point consolidated into that which can be packed into boxes, bags, and crates. You look and there it is, arrayed before you on the floor of the living room, piles of sweaters and books, old shampoos, binders of notes from graduate school, worn towels, too many pairs of jeans, the stuff of your life.

Moving means everything must go, one way or another. It demands that you go through and examine closely everything you have accumulated. This is not just the cursory glance given once or twice a year during spring-cleaning or when relatives come to stay. You have to go through every desk drawer and nightstand, no nook or cranny left unturned. There is only so much that the boxes can hold and so you must evaluate everything you have. There are all those things that at one time seemed helpful, but turns out you never really used. And you have to get rid of many things you love but don't need because, well, there isn't room for everything. You make piles of keep, throw away, donate. It takes days to whittle down the mountain of "keep" to travel size.

You dig through the boxes under the bed or high up on shelves that have remained out of sight and mind until the move compelled you to look through them. Sifting their contents you relive memories, going through old pictures and letters stashed away in drawers that you haven't read in ages. Postcards from a college friend's trip through Europe, notes from long-ago lovers, cards of comfort, holiday greetings, ticket stubs from first dates, random photos faded in the corners that never made it into an album but somehow you never could get rid of. Each one capturing a moment in time, like brush strokes of paint in the mind's image of years gone by.

Sorting through the basement you find suitcases of clothing you've kept with you in your moves from house to house over the years, even though you never did wear the clothes. Deep down you knew you wouldn't; yet you weren't prepared to part with the memories and fantasies that they had come to represent. Down in the cool dampness of the basement you try them on one last time, letting your skin feel the texture of the fabric. You stretch out your arms to find the material hangs heavy on our frame and feel the sadness of knowing what you've come to outgrow.

It doesn't happen all at once. Rather slowly, in stages. Pieces of furniture sold, eating down the food in the cupboard. Returning items to friends who have lent you things over

the years—loaf pans, Tupperware, a scarf—each gets handed back to its owner in the process of untangling our lives.

Artwork and decorations you dread un-mounting from their place on the wall because, once they are down, the house just feels so stark, so raw. The walls, bare now, can be seen in all their imperfections. Cracks from age and weather spread like sprawling fingers from corners of the room. Nails and hangers remain in their places, dotting the surface of the walls with hints of the family photos and watercolors that used to hang on their hooks.

It's freeing and nostalgic and exhausting. When you move it can feel like the world is falling apart because, in many ways, it is. Life carries on around you, other people go about their work and relationships, as you sit on the floor in too dark or too bright rooms, surrounded by dust bunnies and paint chips and the refuse of all you have come to call your own.

The memories of what has been open into a grief at what you are leaving behind, which is never separate from the glimmer of anticipation for what the future holds. But for now you sit in the discomfort of being in between. Everything turned from the inside out, all adornments gone, on the beautiful precipice between here and there.

This precipice is where we dwell right now on erev Yom Kippur. No longer the self we once were, but not yet the new person we are becoming. B'rosh hashanah yikateivun, u'v'yom tzom kippur yichateimun -- On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. During the month of Elul we, each of us, prepared for our spiritual move. As the heat of summer peaked and turned towards fall we felt the High Holidays creeping towards us and began to evaluate our year. The days cooled and shortened as Rosh Hashanah neared. We began to pack our bags, choosing what of who we are would come with us and what we would leave behind. When we stand in front of the open ark at the end of Neilah tomorrow evening, the final box will be sealed. Who will we be when that final cry of the shofar sounds?

These precious 25 hours of Yom Kippur are our chance to survey the person we are, to see the stuff our of life arrayed before us in all its nakedness: the choices we've made, the mother, father, sister, brother, partner, child, we've been. Noticing the accumulated affect of our habits of mind over time as we trace the grooves of action and thought we've formed.

Boxes open and close like the doors of the ark as we ask ourselves what stays and what goes? What of who we've been do we want to take with us? Thinking back on all we have done this past year we build our "keep" pile within our heart: our capacity for love, patience, humor, honesty, generosity, courage, healing. In this liminal place between here and there we can consciously choose to cultivate these aspects of ourselves.

Earlier this evening, as the sun sank below the horizon and the haunting melody of Kol Nidre echoed in the air, the bonds of all the spoken and unspoken vows of who we are

and how we act were shattered. Unfettered by what has been we have the freedom to leave aspects of ourselves behind. As Rabbi Alan Lew describes, the “ideas we no longer believe in or haven’t challenged in far too long, old feelings we really don’t feel anymore but cling to desperately, afraid of what might happen if we admit we don’t feel them. Without our realizing it, these things have suffocated us, crowding the life out of our soul.”¹ We look with clear eyes and a compassionate heart at these qualities of self we’ve carried with us from place to place. We give ourselves the chance to notice what no longer fits, and perhaps never did.

In this way, we are all preparing for moving day, removing the clutter so we have room to grow. We sort through what we’ve collected, discern what we can give away, and figure out what is worthy of being carried forward. We release anything that stands in the way of our returning to that house we are always seeking, that house which is our home no matter where we move. In the words of the 27th Psalm, which we recite during these Holy Days, “Achat Sha'alti me'eit Adonai, otah avakeish; shivti b'veit Adonai kol y'mei chayai – One thing I ask, the one thing I seek, God, is to dwell in your house all the days of my life.”² The prayers and melodies, poetry and meditations of these sacred 25 hours invite us on a journey; we must move with courage, unencumbered and uncluttered in our process of coming home.

It used to be that we conceived of God’s house as a mighty physical structure that we would visit for doses of the Divine. During the time when the Temple stood, Yom Kippur was the one day of the year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the empty space in the heart of the Temple and receive a new name for God. It was, as Rabbi Lew describes, “the day we experience the charged emptiness at the Sacred Center.”³ It was in that place of the holy void that infinity and possibility mixed and new ways of seeing and being emerged.

The Temple no longer stands and there is no longer a High Priest to act as our proxy. Today, we move through the stuff of our lives on our journey to the Sacred Center within. We remove the adornments and lay our hearts bare. Each of us our own High Priest, braving the personal sanctum of our soul. We enter the now empty rooms of our inner landscape. Walls echo, cracks along the surface show, imprints of what has been recede into the possibility of what will be. We tremble in the exhilarating terror of the emptiness, and from the depths we cry out in joy knowing we’ve made our way home.

¹ Alan Lew This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared, p. 173

² Ps 27:4

³ Lew, 55