

Every year, preparing for the Yamim Noraim, I can't help but feel like all this davenning, preparation and soul searching would be a lot more convenient if it fell at some other time of year, *any* other time of year. Whether we are working in the summer or on a break from school or a job, the summer is spacious. Time seems to expand with the long days yawning out in front of us. So much seems possible when evenings are accented by freesia and fireflies; days punctuated by blooming buds and bird song.

Yet, our holiest days don't fall during these months of expansiveness. It seems that just as Elul sets in, the calendar begins to fill and Rosh Hashannah is upon us before we even notice. For many of us, this is the busiest time of year. Grants are due, new hires come into the office, moves to new apartments are made, school starts up again. Fall is a time of increased responsibility, obligations and activities.

The weeks surrounding the Yamim Noraim require an incredible output of energy, even as our tradition asks us to go inward. It is at precisely this time of year when anxieties are being aroused and when our values and limits are being tested that we are meant to engage in the hard work of rectifying relationships, asking for and accepting forgiveness, emptying ourselves out and emerging renewed.

Ours is not a tradition that let's us remove ourselves from the world so that we may engage in self-reflection. Rather we are meant to both fully inhabit our lives and step back for reflection at the same time. In a paradox such as this, as Parker Palmer writes, "opposites do not negate each other – they cohere in mysterious unity at the heart of reality. They need each other for health." It is only when we are actively living this outward journey of life that we come face to face with our fears and failings and can see with honesty where our inward journey needs to go.

Just as much as this journey is about rebirth, new life, a fresh start, it is about loss, confusion, and letting go. It may be that if we were still surrounded by the abundance, light, and warmth of summer, we would avoid the darker tasks involved in this holy work. As Palmer writes, "When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless and, beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off."

So, then, the time of year becomes even more integral to the task at hand. It is *precisely* at this time of year, when summer's bounty ends and the plants begin to brown, that we are called upon to reflect the natural world around us and acknowledge our own period of decay. Rosh Hashannah marks the beginning of our process of letting the surety of who we know ourselves to be die away so that we can become who we truly are.

The time of year and the task at hand allow us to connect to the power of mythic time, as well. Known as Hayom Harat Olam – the day when the world was born – on Rosh Hashannah we tap into the primal nature of creation and our earliest origins. Rosh Hashannah falls as the days grow noticeably shorter. As Rabbi Jill Hammer explains, we are living out a recreation of the first human's long night. As our days shorten we are reminded of Adam and Eve's initial encounter with darkness in Gan Eden when the sun set for the first time.

In the Talmud we read, "When Adam, on the day of his creation, saw the setting of the sun he said, 'Alas, it is because I have sinned that the world around me is becoming dark; the universe will now become again void and without form — this then is the death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!' So he sat up all night fasting and weeping and Eve was weeping opposite him" (BT, Avodah Zara, 8a). Unsure of the future, afraid that the momentary state of turmoil would become the permanent reality, the first humans lamented, cursed themselves, and mourned the sun's disappearance.

It is this journey into the darkness, past the edges of the unknown, which we encountered in today's Torah reading. We begin with Abraham, our archetype for personal journeying. While Moses led us on our journey to becoming a people, Abraham is our first model of an individual journeying on his own path of spiritual development. It was Abraham who was told by God "lech l'cha l'ereetz arekha," to "journey to the land that I will show you." In the mystical tradition this statement is read not as a command to go seek out some external place, but rather "lech l'*chah*" "journey into the inner landscape of *yourself*." From the outset Abraham is asked to leave behind all that he knows – his land and his father's house – and to confront challenges to his identity and self-conception – in order to come to truly know himself.

Consider this interpretation. Our Torah portion today portrays Abraham's struggle with one stage of his journey ending and another beginning. The son that he and Sarah hoped and prayed for came into being and is now

reaching maturity. With his own son becoming an adult in his own right, Abraham will be freed to embark on the ultimate task set for him by God, to becoming “av hamon goyim” a father to many nations. The birth of a son through Sarah is something that Abraham never imagined possible. God’s promise is fulfilled—Sarah bears Isaac. At the point of his son reaching maturity, Abraham hears God’s voice instructing him to kill his son. Abraham’s misunderstanding of God’s will is a reflection of his own limitations.

In the case of Abraham we are talking about an external being, but Isaac can also represent an aspect within each of us. Isaac is our plan being fulfilled, one stage of a journey ending and another beginning. There is a tendency within each of us to short-circuit the final pieces of development, to not let a part of ourselves come to full maturity. We become afraid that all we’ve been working for won’t pan out, or, perhaps even scarier, that it will. What if all our dreams become fulfilled and we don’t know how to handle it? In Abraham’s case, I can imagine the trepidation in fulfilling God’s words by becoming the one by whom all nations on earth will bless themselves.

In the process of our evolution, when we reach our own limits we fall back on old systems. When we don’t trust the Divine, we think we have to *be* the Divine. In Abraham’s case, he reverted back to a system of child sacrifice from the culture of his youth and took the power of God, of deciding life and death, into his own hands. After hoping and praying for Isaac, when his son is finally about to reach the age of adulthood—signifying the transition that he himself now needs to make to becoming a “goy gadol,” the leader of a great nation, Abraham becomes so afraid that he believes he must destroy Isaac. Perhaps in not allowing his son to come into the fullness of adulthood, Abraham will be able to avoid the next stage of his own development.

It can be almost unbearable – both to think of part of a journey coming to an end and to tolerate the unknown of what this new stage of being will bring. Like Abraham, our trust wavers – will life organically unfold? Can we trust in the process? If Rosh HaShannah is Hayom Harat Olam, the day the world is born, then the Akedah a story of birthing pains of a self becoming fully realized.

The challenge of being human is that we are at once asked to yearn, struggle and accomplish, always striving to be the best we can be so that we and God can continually reflect back to one another more and more amazement. And,

at the same time, we are asked to continuously evolve, not holding onto any one version or definition of ourselves.

Each of us has a self we present to the world: our accomplishments, CVs, facebook pages, the stories we tell of who we are. To the outside these may seem shiny and impressive, but they become a limiting force in if we let these depictions of ourselves become calcified and static. When we allow who we've been to constrain the creative potential for who we might yet be.

It is a scary thing to embrace the force that compels us to take apart our well-constructed identities. Once we dismantle what is, no one knows exactly what will take its place. How can we take apart that which we have used to define ourselves and have come to rely on? Like Abraham, during these holy days we are asked to the very edge, the boundary between one identity and another and to discern the voice of fear from the voice of the Divine.

These Days of Awe demand a lot from us. Yet, as we each embark on our own personal journey, we can derive comfort from that of Abraham in knowing that we are not alone on this path. Though Abraham heard the voice of fear—the voice that told him to sacrifice Isaac—an angel of God was sent to him to help him see another path. After the angel calls out to Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram caught in the thicket.

It is said at twilight before the first Shabbat, in the final moments before God ceased from creating the world, 10 things were created. Among those things created there was Noah's rainbow, Miriam's well, the tablets for the Ten Commandments...and the ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac. The ram is always there, waiting to save us from our impulses of fear. In our own journey of teshuva, of discovering and returning to ourselves, we can find comfort as well. In the Talmud we read that even before creation, teshuva was created (TB Pesachim 54a). Embedded into the structure of the universe is everything we need on our journey.

We close by returning to Adam and Eve, crying and forlorn in Gan Eden during their first evening on Earth. The sun set for the first time and they mourned all night thinking the darkness would be forever. The next day, however, when dawn broke, Adam exclaimed, "Oh! This is the usual course of the world!"

Just as Adam and Eve had to enter into the darkness and endure the anxiety aroused by thoughts of a lightless future, so too must we journey downward and inward, moving through the fear in order to find the place of gratitude and awe. These holy days challenge us to enlarge our limits and increase our capacity for enduring mystery and living through transition. May we grasp this cycling from one state of being to another, is the natural state of the world, and that even the darkest of nights are followed by brilliant sunrises. In so doing, may we be able to dry our tears, take a deep breath, and look up at the night sky in wonder and amazement.