

Rosh Hashanah 5781: Living with Longing

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom

Shaposhkelech (Rona Nadler sings in Yiddish, followed by translation)

I'll sell my boots and ride on wagons, just so I can be together with you.

Oh, I without you and you without me are like a doorknob without a door. My kitten, my little bird.

Oh, I'll go to railway stations and sell scarves to strangers, just so I can be together with you.

Oh, I'll eat without a table and sleep without a pillow, just so I can be together with you.

Oh, I'll sleep in railway stations and wash the floors of strangers, just so I can be together with you.ⁱ

I first heard this song at the Ashkenaz festival at Harbourfront in Toronto back in the 1990s, performed by the wonderfully-named Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band. It was the kind of gathering that is almost unimaginable today: a crowd of people, cheek by jowl, listening to music and sometimes even singing. I was a teenager then, towards the end of high school, wondering about the next chapter. And the song expressed something that seemed like the perfect soundtrack: a yearning, a deep yearning, for love and for life.

Usually we outgrow our soundtracks. But this one has stayed with me, reemerging at different moments in my life. And I am feeling it so strongly this year.

A rabbi in an empty sanctuary, like a doorknob without a door.

A grandparent unable to see their grandchildren, like a doorknob without a door.

An elder in a residence, separated from their caregivers, like a doorknob without a door.

You get the idea.

For each of us here tonight, the longings are different, sometimes even contradictory. A parent with school-aged children might simultaneously long for schools to stay open, in hopes of a precious moment of quiet and calm; and they might also long to keep their children home, safe in a smaller bubble. Empty nesters might long for a dinner out, but are unsure whether it's worth the risk. And the restaurant owner and the teacher and the medical professional and the

maintenance worker and the bus driver, each of us with our own conflicted longings, as we try to navigate the balance between surviving and thriving.

We long for what we have lost.

In an op-ed piece entitled, “Missing the comfort of ‘my’ seat in synagogue when the whole world is askew,” Tom Fields-Meyer writes:

After five months without in-person services at synagogue, I miss the singing. I miss the rabbis’ sermons. I miss seeing my friends. But mostly I miss being in my seat — that fixed place I could return to week in, week out.

I miss the routine. I miss knowing that whatever life has thrown my way — work stress, awful news in the headlines, tension or disappointment or celebration — I could return at week’s end to that same spot. I could watch the light stream through the window at the same angle. I could stare at the same ceiling. I could close my eyes and hear familiar voices from all sides singing the same prayers.

...the pandemic has made me realize that what I value... [is]: knowing that for a couple of hours... I’m in the right place — in the room, in the world, in my life. For that one brief stretch of time, I’m where I belong.

“That’s what I long for now,” he concludes, “more than the familiar tunes or the cookies afterward. When we’re feeling unmoored, it’s natural to yearn for the familiar.”ⁱⁱ

It’s true, I miss the Danish; but what I long for is being together. It’s true, we have opened our tent flaps in new ways; but I long for our in-person connections. So what do we do with our longing? I was speaking with a friend who was lamenting the state of the world. “I’m sad I won’t get to physically be in shul,” she said. “I miss people. I long for things to be back to normal. But really,” she continued, “I guess longing is a useless emotion.”

But is it?

“Many great civilizations,” one educator writes, “share this sense of human longing and give it various religious and poetic expressions.”

Longing is a powerful human drive – it drives people to change the world, to make it a better place... A suffocating man will long for air, a hungry man will long for food, a refugee will long for a safe haven and a home, and a person who "has it all" will long for self-fulfillment and love.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here's the good news: We Jews are experts at longing. It comes with exile, unfortunately. Whether the original expulsion from the Garden of Eden or the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem not once but twice, this is an area in which we have some experience. The reason that Reform synagogues calling themselves "Temples" was so radical at the beginning of our movement – and even, for some, still today – is that our Orthodox neighbours kept praying for the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. Secular Zionism reoriented that longing to the modern state of Israel. Theodore Herzl, whose passionate political activism was the foundation for that state, wrote: "Longing creates the Messiah." And Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, when asked by a twelve-year-old school girl when in his life he felt the greatest satisfaction, said this in reply: "What is satisfaction? What is the good of it? If a man is satisfied, he no longer yearns, no longer dreams, no longer makes demands. No. I have never known a single moment of satisfaction."

The creation of the modern Jewish state was always understood not as a new invention, but as a fundamental return. That's part of why the charge of colonialism, despite having historical context, rings emotionally and spiritually false. Zalman Shazar, born in Minsk, in 1911 at the tender age of 22 visited the Land of Israel for the first time. He wrote of his visit to the Western Wall like the culmination of an ancient dream, bringing together political and spiritual longings:

You will go down through the narrow alleys of ancient Jerusalem and arrive at the Wall and stand there. Then you will not only see with your eyes but you will also feel with your entire being the single eternity in our past ... And when your feet enter the courtyard of the Wall, here you feel and experience the re-weaving of your soul into the eternal fabric of 2,000 years ... Into the space at this remnant of the Wall the sighs from all the ends of the earth and all eras penetrate ... The tears have all flowed from the hearts of one people, they have all come from one source and they will all pray to One.^{iv}

In our High Holy Days at Home Kits, we included an original drawing by our congregant Jordanna Vamos, which is based on an ancient Jewish art form: the *mizrach*, which synagogues and homes would hang on the eastern wall. Ours evokes our Temple's ceiling, encircled by Leonard Cohen's words: *Ring the bells that still can*

ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in (you can find it on our website if you didn't get one at home).^v

Certainly, as much as many of us are connected to Israel, we are at home here in Montreal. But the art form of the *mizrach* itself points to yearning, for longing for something beyond where we are right now. Leonard Cohen can be seen as our modern psalmist, and there is no more beautiful poetry than the psalms, which express the soul's yearning for God. How the soul yearns, the Psalmist writes! Like a thirsty deer yearns for a stream; like a watchman yearns for the dawn. The soul envies the sparrow and swallow with their nests, yearning to be at home.^{vi}

And so yearning is not simply for the past. It is part of the human condition; and, like that Yiddish love song, there are times in our lives when that longing comes to the fore. This is one of those times – not just because of the pandemic, but because of Rosh Hashanah. We are *meant* to be longing right now; not just for normalcy, but for our best selves. In the timeless words of Rabbi Soloveitchik: “The whole essence of the precept of repentance is longing, yearning, pining to return again. Longing develops only when one has lost something precious.”^{vii}

The question this year is, how might our longing move us forward, and not just back? How might it propel us, not just to return to who we were, but to become who we ought to be? How do we make it more than nostalgia? Certainly, we want to ensure that the things we value are still around on the other side; in the words of Margaret Atwood, we should “Think of all the things you hope will still be there in [the] future when we get across. Then do what you can, now, to ensure the future existence of those things.”^{viii} Whether it is independent media or local bookstores, favourite restaurants and cafes, music and theatre, and yes, synagogues - if we want them to exist on the other side of this, we need to support them now. But this moment gives us the opportunity not just to recover, but to reimagine. As my Hartman teacher Rabbi Dani Segal says, “We always say change is possible. This year, we are experiencing it.”^{ix} In other years, the familiar can get us stuck; we see familiar faces and we sit in familiar places, and it's too easy to stay the same. I long for that familiarity; I can't wait to be back. But this year, and truly, every year, we also have the opportunity to change.

Zalman Shazar – who saw the Western Wall at the age of 22, who eventually became Israel's first minister of education and its third president, who spent his life surrounded by people – Zalman Shazar was also a poet, and here is what he wrote:

It is good for a person to be alone once,
No book, no companion,
No public, no private.
Just him and his heart
With his heart all alone.

It is good for a person to be alone once.
It is good that he be with none of his possessions –

No home, no field, no demand, no obligation.
He should only listen to his heart and remain totally silent.
It is good that he be with none of his possessions
That he listen to his heart
and understand his life
And know what exists
And feel what his life is...

Let me suggest tonight, at the beginning of the new year, that we take this time – which we never would have chosen, which has come with so much loss – and focus on our longing. Let me suggest that we use this time to discover what is truly worth longing for. Perhaps what we most miss is something we never actually had. Perhaps we are yearning for a soul more actualized, love more lived, a world more fair. Perhaps we take this time and realize that we have been living like a doorknob without a door, and not just for this past six months. And when we have *that* yearning, well; to go back to our Yiddish song, we will do anything. We will learn to smile with our eyes and hide our mouths behind masks; we will step more gently on our earth; we will reshape how we care for the most vulnerable among us; we will find new ways to connect to each other and become our best selves. We will choose to change our lives.

Shanah tovah.

ⁱ “Di Sapozhkelekh” (Little Boots), found in *Songs of Generations* published by Workmen’s Circle. With thanks to Joyce Rosenzweig, Jessica Kirzane and Michelle Heisler for helping me locate it, and Rona Nadler for knowing it and singing it. It has been recorded a number of times, but I first encountered the version from The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band’s 1990 self-titled album.

ⁱⁱ Tom Fields-Meyer, “Missing the comfort of ‘my’ seat in synagogue when the whole world is askew,” *LA Times*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-08-31/synagogue-coronavirus-pandemic-seat>.

ⁱⁱⁱ This quotation, along with the quotations below attributed to Theodor Herzl and David Ben Gurion, come from *Hak’hel - Conceptual Conversations: On the Longing for Zion*. Written for the North American Coalition for Israel

Engagement (NACIE) by Elisha Wolfin and the Oren-Shdemot, Staff, Oranim Academic College of Education, January, 2005. <https://makomisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Hakhel-LONGING-5.1-letter.pdf>.

^{iv} Ofer Aderet, "Prayers, Notes, and Controversy: How a Wall Became the Western Wall," *Ha'Aretz*, May 14, 2103. <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-how-just-a-wall-became-the-western-wall-1.5242783>.

^v Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, 1992.

^{vi} Psalms 42, 130, and 84. I am indebted to author and composer Kate Keefe, "Psalms of yearning, few but haunting," in her blog, *Music for Mass*, August 31, 2017: <https://www.musicformass.blog/2017/08/31/psalms-of-yearning-few-but-haunting/>. I was reminded of Psalm 84 while reading Jan Richardson, *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life* (Orlando, FL: 2020). My favourite translation and discussion of Psalms remains Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete Psalms* (New York, 2010), including her superb introduction in which she writes: "It is precisely the psalms' refusal to engage in theological piety – their overflowing into wild jubilation or anger or deeply wrenching despair – that allows them to resonate as perennial expressions of the human desire to stand simply and unabashedly before God" (xvii).

^{vii} Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *On Teshuvah*, cited by Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* (Boston, 2003), p.25.

^{viii} Margaret Atwood, "It's the Best of Times. It's the Worst of Times. Make the Most of It," *Time Magazine*, April 16, 2020. <https://time.com/collection/finding-hope-coronavirus-pandemic/5820595/margaret-atwood-coronavirus-uncertainty/>.

^{ix} This teaching, and the Zalman Shazar poem which follows, comes from Rabbi Dani Segal, "By Grace of God and Community: The Personal and Communal Journeys of Yom Kippur," *HartmanSummer@Home*, July 20 and 22, 2020. Rabbi Segal's session and sources can be found at <https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275614>.