

Firstly, I want to say what an honor it is to be called to the bima to deliver a D'var for Rosh Hashannah. Thank you Evelyn for asking me to write a poem, and for making space for me to share my heart with you here. Thank you to Rabbi Ruhi for sitting down with me to discuss some of the concepts and meanings of Rosh Hashannah, and in that way helping me sift through the multiple possibilities to arrive at the poems I will share with you today.

Writing a poem is a perpetually daunting and vulnerable endeavor. And because many of us here are gardeners, or have moved the tender soil with our own hands, and because the metaphor of Kings in the fields is so prescient during these holy days, I will discuss poetry in relationship to gardening.

I love to garden. For years, I tended to medicinal gardens with plants like rosemary, and feverfew. Like oregano and rue, german chamomile, lavender, and turks cap. Every garden I have tended has basil, parsley and lemon balm. My cabinet is stocked with lemongrass and ginger gathered from plants I have grown. With these herbs, I have learned to prepare tinctures, balms for wounds and sores, teas for aching hearts and chests, baths to bring down a fever.

Similarly, I have found that writing a poem is like tending a garden of herbs. See, herbs are finicky, and tender. If your heart is not connected to their essence, they will dry out, withering away. This, I learned from my aunts. A poem is equally requiring of attention. If your heart is not in the poem, then arranging the words in broken lines is merely a verbal exercise in which the meaning of those words will be lost on everyone but you. This, I learned from other poets.

You cannot simply set an herb starter on top of the soil or throw it carelessly into an emptied hole. You must first feel the temperature of the earth with your fingertips, its texture and song. You must close your eyes and test the moisture in the air, to know when the last rains came, and when the next rains are coming. You must, above all, breathe and feel the weight of your own heart.

Similarly, writing a poem requires using your senses, closing your eyes, and breathing. With each gesture, you become aware of the breath required by each word, and you notice whether bringing that word to life requires an inhale or an exhale. Like spacing out tender shoots, you must be aware of how breath breaks the meter and the line, the impact caused by the line reaching its ending, curving into another line and another possibility that may or may not require a break in breath, an attention to the natural rise and fall of our own sacred rhythms.

And like a garden, a poem also has a time of day (or night) in which to become. I lived in Texas for years, where gardening required waking up at 5am to water. In a place with temperatures up to 115 degrees, this meant watering every day, before the sun rose over the hills. Once cresting over the mountains, its light would refract off the droplets, burning the leaves. Like bronze fennel, a poem requires daily tending. And like rosemary, there are poems it takes years to grow.

So, I took the chance to write a poem for Rosh Hashannah the same way I would approach harvesting purple coneflower at the end of summer: as a deeply sacred act. An act in which my heart and my hands were engaged in awaiting the appearance of the divine in each letter formed, each line written:

I was
a poet behind her pen
squinting through
the darkness of night,
a white page, its lines,
blue, awaiting
the tender trill of ink,

Each mark made where before none existed became a manifestation of the divine force I so eagerly awaited as Elul opened to the awaiting fields, rising before me in the star-studded dark nights when I sat down with the quiet and my pen. With the waxing and waning of the moon, I have been plowing memory, sowing and pulling up words and dreams and images, knowing that with the blowing of the shofar, I would pick the first roots, leaves and flowers of my harvest, and soon thereafter, these words and all of the deeds preceding it would stand before the infinite greatness of creation, a sum of all the rows plowed and planted, of all the pages written and re-arranged.

It is an act of faith to plant a seed. It is equally an act of faith to write a poem.

And then, to write a poem for Rosh Hashannah, Holy Days so impregnated with metaphor and meaning that any poetry about it is almost quite literal. It is a cornucopia of poetic possibility: the story of Sara and Hagar, the binding of Isaac, and Abraham oh Abraham, and then there is the King, the Memory, the coming together as one, the Shofar, repentance, forgiveness and not to mention the Books: the Torah, the Talmud, the Book of Life, the Book of Death, the Book of the In-Between, the Book of the World, the Book of the Body, the Book of the Heart! A poem, a poem is but one tiny stanza in this library of meaning. And then the most celebrated Jewish poets do wonders, astonishing us with their choices in imagery, syntax and questions.

Take, for example, an excerpt from Adrienne Rich's poem about Rosh Hashannah, "At the Jewish New Year":

For more than five thousand years
This calm September day
With yellow in the leaf
Has lain in the kernel of Time...

Or this choice morsel from Marge Piercy's "The Birthday of the World":

On the birthday of the world
I begin to contemplate
what I have done and left
undone, but this year
not so much rebuilding
of my perennially damaged
psyche, shoring up eroding
friendships, digging out
stumps of old resentments
that refuse to rot on their own.
No, this year I want to call
myself to task for what
I have done and not done
for peace. How much have
I dared in opposition?

And the exquisite work of John Hollander whose poem "At the New Year" that starts with:

Every single instant begins another new year;
 Sunlight flashing on water, or plunging into a clearing
In quiet woods announces; the hovering gull proclaims
 Even in wide midsummer a point of turning: and fading

Not to mention the plethora of gorgeous psalms already filling the books so sacred. And so it is indeed a humbling and joyful task to attempt the discovery of meaning and breath and sound and line and break and meter and words of Rosh Hoshannah through poetry. To reach for my heart to reach yours.

This Rosh Hoshannah I have been feeling and thinking about heart break; about collective breath in the wake of heartbreak, and about the transformations that emerge with each breath. Heartbreak is often a moment when we become aware of our own breath and the breath of others and that awareness is usually brought on by the song of profound sorrow. Unexpectedly, I lost my young cousin during the month leading up to the New Year. My heart was broken – not so much for him, but because accepting his loss requires heart break, it requires accepting a new reality where he is now gone. I became aware of my family's collective breath and loss of breath, of my aunt's echoing wails, my uncle's stifled sobs. Each prayer sung out in his hometown congregation was a practice in collective breathing, meant to buoy the mourning who must continue living. Each moment of remembering also required remembering to breathe.

What to do when faced with heartbreak?

In the dawn, I face the
rising sun and my ten fingers
kiss my palm the dew
washing against the crevices
found there.

In this moment as the earth turns
beneath the sun's gaze
I hold all of nothingness
within my cupped hands.

What to do when faced with heartbreak?

My fist rests against my chest
My open palm greets yours
I dare to need you, deeply
to fill the break between us
with the stream of our song
whether of joy or of sorrow
“for those who came before,
for all those yet to come,
for all of us joined together”
our harmony forms a mighty river,
carving a path through canyons and rocks,
crashing against the sudden ledge.

What to do when faced with heartbreak?

The reeds along the banks
ask for nothing. They
shake in the heat of the sun
and tremble with the water's current
opening their hollow hearts
to whistle a melody, asking for nothing
knowing: it is enough. Fragile,
a thin edge against the wind, it is enough.

And so our hearts are broken open – perhaps not so dramatically as with loss. After all, that line between absolute devastation and absolute ecstasy is reed thin. We can experience heart break with the change of

seasons, when our spirits are awakened to the change around us, and our anguish and shame and disappointment melt away before the sounds of angels

kadosh kadosh kadosh
let regret be transformed
let the most deliberate harm
thrum with holiness
and in its core
be transformed

With each heart break and each collective breath taken, we hold a space for each other in our most vulnerable, imperfect, ugly and sad places. And when we allow this for each other, when we welcome it with our gaze, and our hands, our hugs and our song, we welcome true transformation. And this transformation, in my mind, is a reflection of the divine as it manifests in all of our hearts and in the world around us:

Back on the East Coast
the new year is a flamed
crown gold red orange leaves
dancing on the heads of angels
I draw that memory into now
startled at the bright sunlight
the berry stained paths
and evergreens majestic

Here, in Eugene, it is
but yet another growing season
as the light begins its
dance into darkness,
I await the descent of fog
the sprouting seeds of winter crops
pushing up against the rain-soaked clouds

This time, this moment when we come together, despite all obstacles and barriers, despite our own resistances and reckonings with our beliefs, our families, our histories, we come together

like twelve rivers
flowing across earth's flesh
azure arteries reflected
against the bronze of daylight.
The sun, sure of itself,

does not race forward,
does not run nor seek
to go backwards.
It stands in its place
like all of Creation
gathering at the seams
of dawn and dusk
just like us
gathering the edges
of our tallis
preparing to seek
our faces

“we intone their names from the valley in between – that sliver of eternity on which we stand and that we call the present moment” (Lew 67)

we pass the aromatic herbs,
the sweet fruit between our
bosoms a song descends
wrapped in light in love in sorrow:
forgiveness crowds the edges
of our wrinkled brows

in the breath between us
the universe unfolds as though
from the crevices of snail shells,
a milky way of stars
an echo of a one-foot journey

This collective gathering, this coming together, the ways we catch each other’s eyes, recording each other’s truths and faults, and circumstance, noting each other’s journey to forgiveness: this is holy.

there is no truth save for what I remember
there is no truth save for what you remember
there is no truth save for what we remember
so let us remember
and in our memories recall the tightness of our frowns
and in our memories recall the weight of our faults
and in our memories recall the heat of a smarting wound
and in our memories recall the bruising of our stumbles
the searing pain of our words

the catch of breath at our sorrow
the face we seek
when I remember
when you remember
when we remember

First, we are asked to recognize, then to remember and to reflect. And finally, we are asked to awaken. The three calls of the shofar: the ancestral sounds that blow desert dust across oceans and continents. The bridge between the past and the future, between the time before birth and the time after death, that sliver of sound in the void that is this moment, the sound the rings forever along the valleys and mountains of time.

This moment, this moment right here right now is eternal, infinite, vast. Time, though passing, has asked nothing of me but to be submerged in its present. I allow my senses to be engaged, and then, as I remember, reflect and awaken from a nothingness beyond time I allow my senses to transform meaning in the world. Only then do I look at the clock.

Poetry, when the poet wants, tells hard truths in pretty language. The poet Patricia Smith is a master of telling ugly pretty. Yehuda Amichai, too. His poem, "The waters cannot return in repentance" goes:

The waters cannot return in repentance
To where would they return?
To the faucet, the sources, the ground, the roots,
the cloud, the sea, into my mouth?
The waters cannot return in repentance,
every place is their days of old, their waters of old,
every place a beginning and an end, and a beginning.

Like the narrator in this poem, this New Year, I also reckoned with past words spoken and un-returnable moments. It is not just the truth that is at stake, nor simply the weight of words, images, memories, but also the worlds created and destroyed.

I have stood at the precipice of the infinite,
my feet caught between jagged rocks as I
stared out at the unending horizon. The sun
burned my cheeks; I squinted, unable to
comprehend the vast expanse before me.

"So? It's an ocean." I said to my awe struck
friends. They gawked back in disbelief, what
little breath remained in their ecstatic chests

was released in a double gasp.
“How could you not find this amazing?”
they asked, their hands pointing
in each direction where
the only thing to be seen
was jeweled turquoise water and
the dancing light along its surface.

“Don’t you see how special this is?” they guffawed
running their fingertips over the stalks
of grass cradling our hips,
the grass that hid the earth and snakes
beneath its lushness. A gentle wind bent
the spikelets.

Disappointed with myself, I touched my chest,
searching for my heart’s beat. I gazed up
at the cloudless cerulean sky. My hand
passed over my left breast, then moved
down to my sternum. My stomach
released a howl as my middle finger
came to rest over a spot of tender pulsing flesh.

Blinded, I lowered my chin over the arch
of my ribcage. Under my skin, my pulse:
between each beat I held my breath,
awaiting the arrival of another beat.
In the split second between thumps
I felt the ocean’s song.

My friends they shook their heads
and wandered to the path down the
cliff’s edge, and once again, I was alone.
I stood and stared out at the ocean
all around me, teeming with life I
could not see, reaching into
crevices of the earth I would never
know, rising and receding with
the changing moon. I stared out

at the infinite, knowing then I would
never grasp the count of breaths
between eternities.

And so Rosh Hashannah – comes and goes, not unnoticed, but rather deeply marked by rituals and the waxing and then waning moon, which once again embarks into fullness as the shofar sounds; when the books of life and of death and of the in-between are opened and we stand in an uncomprehending awe before all that is great and unknowable.

And this:
the awakening of the seed with water
the burst of sour in the depths of sweet
the prayer whispered on the edges of leaves
the birds plucking at time

And this:
the dance of breath
and song and sound
the welcoming of love and life
and everything eternal
the step into the infinite

L'Shana Tova.