

*“What Can You Imagine?”*

*L’shanah tovah.* It’s so nice, as always, to be here with you to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. I hope you are able to take time to breathe and feel present with family and friends amidst the cooking and cleaning and that your time here in prayer feels restorative, uplifting and comforting.

Over seven years here at Reyim, I have focused much of my teaching on Judaism as a pathway for developing an inner spiritual life. I believe in this Judaism. It is not an easy pathway but it can offer great strength and comfort and help us cultivate generosity and compassion.

In my talk yesterday, I focused on developing a greater consciousness. We are being called on now to not only think about Judaism as a religious and spiritual tradition but also *what it means to be a Jew* in this moment in time. That’s a different question.

Our responsibility is greater than our inner spiritual life, or sharpening our sense of personal meaning, or increasing our learning. Our responsibility extends outward now as much as inward, towards the greater Jewish and multi-faith community and to *anyone suffering*, with whom we need to stand together in solidarity.

The essential Jewish teaching suddenly seems countercultural: it’s not by entrenching ourselves more deeply in our positions and personal truths that we can make a positive impact, but by learning to ask new kinds of questions that can elicit new kinds of answers:

How can I live genuinely, truthfully? How can I take care of others? What - and whom - am I responsible for?

We need to understand the full impact of our actions, and to *act as Jews*, leading with the sacred quality of compassion.

Today, however, I want to come back a bit to the inner spiritual life; after all, that the spiritual life is what fills us with the strength, courage and hopefulness we need to reach as far and high as we are being called on to reach.

I will begin with what I think is an amazing story.

Two summers ago, my entire family traveled to Israel to celebrate my parents' 50th anniversary. After my siblings returned home, my parents, Sarah, Elie, Mica I stayed to spend time off the beaten paths. Together with dear friends from Jerusalem, we drove to a northern region of Israel called the Galil for a *tiyul*. This word, *tiyul*, generally translates to "hike," but evokes a much fuller kind of experience, a sense of connection to the land, appreciation of its history and gratitude for being there.

Like most areas in Israel, the Galilee, and its central city of Tiveria, holds strong religious significance for multiple faiths. The Jerusalem Talmud was composed and compiled there. It was also the home of the Masorettes, Jewish scribes who, between the 6th and 10th centuries, standardized the pronunciation and musical cantillation of the Hebrew Bible. It is where you find the great freshwater Sea of Galilee, also called the Kinneret, where Jesus is said to have walked on

water and where his ministry and many of his miracles took place, according to the Christian Bible. The greater Galilee is now home to Israeli Jews, Arabs, and Bedouins.

It is also where, just recently, an ancient world was found.

Exactly fifteen years ago, the Reverend Juan M. Solana, who directed a religious institute in Jerusalem, decided to develop a spirituality center, a serene gathering place for prayer and contemplation for Christian pilgrims.

Father Solana purchased four privately owned plots on the shore of the Sea of Galilee near the small Israeli town of Migdal and the Israeli Arab village of Al-Majdal - both named after the ancient town of Magdala, which was known to be somewhere in this general area.

At the site that Father Solanas wanted to develop, there was an old, somewhat tattered Hawaiian Beach resort that was built in the 1960s. So he hired architects and construction crews and spent five years just securing building permits to knock down the resort and build his new development.

He was almost there, but for one final piece.

There is a law in Israel that prior to any new construction in Israel, developers must carry out an archaeological dig on site.

The archaeologists of the Israel Antiquities Authority didn't imagine they'd find much. They performed these kinds of routine digs all the time, which didn't typically lead to earth-shattering discoveries. That's the thing about archaeology - you don't come across new worlds very much.

Typically, under layers of earth, you find more earth. To train to *become* an archaeologist is difficult;

it takes many years of training and skill building. But to *remain* an archaeologist after so many attempts to discover realities that may not exist is radical in a world so focused on results. It is an act of faith.

They began to dig. Nine inches below the surface, ten inches, eleven inches, they almost completed the routine check. Then one foot below the surface, the spade of one the archaeologists hit a remnant of what they would discover was an ancient stone bench. Within months they discovered the remains of a synagogue from the first century, one of only seven known to exist from that time period, and the first to be found in Galilee. A local coin found in a side room of the synagogue was dated from the year twenty-nine. Soon it was clear that this *was not somewhere near* Magdala, this *was* Magdala, an ancient Jewish town.

Near the synagogue were many mikvaot, Jewish ritual baths, and inside the shul was as an ornately engraved stone that archaeologists say was probably used as a table for reading Torah. It is carved with columns and arches, a seven-branched menorah with vessels for wine and oil to each side, a 12-leaf rosette and chariots of fire. The stone appears to be a miniature replica of the Temple in Jerusalem. In an interview, the chief Israeli archaeologist commented, “We do not fully understand the power of this stone yet [but] whoever [engraved] this saw the Temple with his own eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

We spent the morning at this archaeological site, walking along the walls of the ancient shul and mikvaot, trying to take in their historical and religious significance. It’s a bit shocking at first to

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<sup>1</sup> NyTimes, *A Resort in the Galilee Rises*, May 13, 2014

imagine that this is where Jews in the year twenty nine called out the words, *shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai echad*.

We then went up to the spirituality center, which was built to the east of the site. It is beautiful and enchanting, its altar shaped like a boat, overlooking the Sea. We spent the afternoon there, where we met a guide who showed us around the center. The acoustics were like symphony hall, so during a break in our tour, we began to sing. As soon as the guide overheard us, she ran to grab her guitar. Just above and to the right of an unveiled ancient Jewish town, with a shul, a mikvah, and a stone carved with the design of the Second Temple, we stood in a spirituality center singing the words of King David's 150th psalm, reimagined and arranged by Leonard Cohen.

At Magdalah, where a Hawaiian beach resort stood, the remnant of an ancient world was one foot below the surface. I like to imagine that city waiting patiently for two millennia to be discovered, as if alive, calling out to those who walked above: "if you just look a little more closely, I'm here, just below."

That imagined call is at the heart of the innovative spirit in every creative field. If you are in science, technology, medicine, or engineering, if you are an artist, writer, or teacher, making a positive and lasting impact requires you to believe that *there are layers of meaning all around us that we have not yet discovered, or even imagined*. Jewishly, our most treasured wisdom is that wherever we are, we can still attain a deeper level of understanding and wisdom; that this world, and our lives, are unformed and unfinished; that there is always more to be revealed.

This insight is one of the central themes of the book entitled *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, published five years ago by Yuval Noah Harari. Harari is an Israeli historian and a professor in the

Department of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The book is primarily about what he describes as the "cognitive revolution" occurring roughly 50,000 years ago, when *homo sapiens* became the only surviving species of the genus homo by developing primarily shared language skills. They could communicate with one another.

Harari' *chidush*, his contribution, is that language was not the *only* critical factor: rather, sapiens separated themselves and survived because they used language to express another unique talent: *imagination*.

They could talk about things that were *not yet real, that did not yet exist*. Only Sapiens could communicate about worlds that they had never sensed, seen or touched. Legends and myths appeared for the first time. Other species of the homo genus could say, in some manner, "That's a lion!" Only *sapiens* were able to add, "The lion is the guardian spirit of our tribe.'

Stories about the creation of the world and humanity led people to think differently about how they made use of the earth. Legends about dreams led people to place nets above their heads so they could catch their dreams as they floated from their minds at night. The collective imagination allowed people, *including complete strangers*, to feel a sense of connectivity, shared identity, shared joy, shared grief, that is so much a part of the human experience. Religion was born.

There was a time, not that long ago, when people couldn't grasp a life without religion. To be without religious thought, stories, or ritual was like being without water. You understood your life only in relationship to mythology and the spiritual and ethical practices they inspired. Without religion, you'd be totally dislocated.

We've been very well trained as rationalists, but in the most important moments of our lives, religion is our lifebreath, and faith is a *unique* human ability to imagine a different reality, one that we cannot touch and we cannot see. When it came to the survival of the species, this was an enormous advantage. For us, it is a spiritual gift.

It allows us to live meaningfully in the most important, poignant and even painful moments in our lives. When you lose someone you love, particularly someone you didn't think you'd outlive, a spouse or a child, religious imagination may be the only way we can breathe. In ancient Judaism, you continued to breathe because you imagined - you believed - that you will reunite, that you hadn't said a final goodbye. The need to imagine, to believe, that we will be near the people we have lost remains as true now as then.

That's where the content of these days - the prayers, songs and story- come in. They are meant to inspire that imagination - that belief - to help us let go of what we hold as rigid truths and instead consider the possibility that other truths exist.

This kind of openness begins with an almost childlike sense of wonder. In one of his better known personal and theological reflections, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement . . . get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

I always find a bit discomfoting when I'm asked to return to my childhood, but there is something magical about that time that is worth tapping into. I remember that when I was six years old, we moved from the big city Portland Maine, to a small town on the water. At the time, there was quite a bit of undeveloped land around us, and new homes constantly under construction.

I would get very excited every time a construction crew began breaking new ground.

I have a feeling this is not going to shock you, but I was kind of a rule-follower. I never met a good rule I didn't like. But I had one weakness: the "no trespassing" sign. It just didn't speak to me.

I loved walking through the construction site, stepping into the house-in-process, guessing which room was which, or where the staircase will go. I loved seeing the way the joists intersected with the walls and ceilings: raw, exposed, unlive in. It also smelled amazing, like freshly cut wood and I'd rub some of the sawdust on my hands and clothes so it lasted.

Every time a home was finished, another construction would soon be underway. Most kids my age started getting together for parties when their parents were away; I would walk the neighborhood looking for new construction.

Walking through those homes-to-be, I remember being in awe that someone, or some group of people, had the technical genius to design and actually build a house. I always find it inspiring that things *come from somewhere*. Someone had to imagine roads, cars, houses, medicine, writing, technology, Sanctuaries - at some point, they didn't exist and no one in the world had yet imagined their first stage of development.



I think about this a lot, and number of years ago I began a kind of thought experiment that goes like this: if I were the only person on earth, and nothing had been invented yet, what would I come up with? What can I imagine?

Unfortunately, my first thought is almost always: absolutely nothing. But there's probably something. I wouldn't come up with advanced mathematical equations or principles of physics. That's someone else's job to do. But I might be able to come up with the concept of song by experimenting with the different tones of the human voice. I might figure out how to draw to help me remember my experiences. I think I'd recognize I was growing older, and I might begin to imagine that there's something, or someone, who transcends my limited years and is much bigger than me.

But honestly, I think I would mostly live quietly, trying my best to take care of the earth.

The purpose of the experiment is to activate your imagination, to prime and train it to lead you to new ways of being alive. What would you imagine? What would you invent?

As we come tonight to the end of our celebration of the new year, and begin the work of living in it, know that you have enormous potential that you haven't yet discovered, imagined, invented. This is our time to visualize that potential, meditate on it, pray for it, and begin to bring it alive.

Potential to be fully present when you are with people you love.

Potential to imagine, create, and generate new ideas that feel revitalizing and exciting.

Potential to be more gentle on others, and ourselves, more accepting of their - and our - limitations.

Potential to have a meaningful spiritual life, a terribly difficult task in this time in history, in this part of the world, in this culture, with a Western secular - or traditional religious - education.

Potential to forgive, and believe that you will be forgiven.

The challenge of a human life is that, like archaeologists, much of the time we find very little that is new or that changes our perspective. Maybe we find an old coin - but many like it have already been found. Or the pile of earth we are sifting leaves only sand, rocks, dirt and residue, but no ancient treasures. Day after day, year after year, everything can look and feel the same. As troubling as this may be, I think we can take solace in knowing we're not there yet.

Because occasionally an entirely new world - a shul, a mikvah, a stone with the imprint of an ancient holy Temple - dwells just a few inches deeper below the surface than we have looked. And if we can visualize it, believe in it, we will discover it. And just above, to the right, together, we can build a gathering place for prayer and song that overlooks the Sea.

May you be blessed this year with a creative, imaginative and bold spirit to become who you want to be.

*L'shanah tovah.*