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L'shanah tovah, may this year be filled with blessing for you and your families.

I was in my second year of school when the countless experiences and influences, conscious and subconscious, over the 24 years of my life came together into the idea that I wanted to study to becoming a rabbi.

I sat down in our tiny apartment that was literally built upon the Appalachian trail in New Hampshire and wrote page after page, a letter to my family announcing and describing my new direction. I took a kind of trickle-down approach to sharing the letter, starting with Sarah, parents and siblings, then closest friends. They were all supportive and generous and I was feeling confident and reassured, but I knew I also had one big conversation left.

My father's mother. I told you about her last year, as she stood by her window looking out at her brother, saying goodnight when he turned out the lights.

I had a feeling this would be a bit of a tricky conversation. She was really proud I would be entering into a distinguished career as a lawyer and soon after, of course, a judge and then a justice for the United States Supreme Court. And if for no other reason, she loved speaking about her three grandsons, my older brother Ari in medical school, me in law school, my younger brother Ben traveling the world through South Asia and Africa. Quoting the old nursery rhyme and 1940's song, she told everyone she knew that she had herself a doctor, a lawyer and an Indian chief.

I sat down at her home with her, during dinner.

“I am excited to tell you something,” I said.

Her interest immediately piqued. I wonder in hindsight what she must have thought. She knew Sarah and I were already engaged. I’m doubtful she thought we were going to have a child already.

“What is it? You can tell me.”

“I think I am going to study to be a Rabbi.”

“You think?”

“Well I am pretty sure.”

She looked confused more than anything. For the next 5 seconds, which felt like 50 years, we sat in silence.

“This is not going to go well,” I thought to myself.

She finally spoke.

“Well I don’t see how you’re anywhere ready to become a rabbi.”

Suddenly all my doubts and concerns, all the fears that dwelled beneath the surface of my apparent confidence that leaving law behind to study for the rabbinate was the right thing to do came flooding forth.

“Why not?” I asked.

“How can you go to study to be a rabbi,” she asked me, “when you have so little experience slaughtering chickens.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I in fact had *no* chicken slaughtering experience.

I told her that rabbis do less of that than she remembered growing up. I would study about shechita, ritual slaughter, I was sure, but I didn’t need to be the one actually killing the chickens anymore. She seemed relieved to know that they don’t just admit anyone to rabbinical school.

“So, what do you think,” I asked.

“What do Mom and Pop think?” she returned the question.

They always support me, I said.

“Sarah?”

She loves me.

She sat quietly for a while.

“God?”

“What?”

“Have you talked with God?”

It was a shocking question.

I came to learn she spoke to God quite a bit during those many years after her husband, my grandfather, had died, almost always ending with a single question: why did you leave me here all alone for so long?

My grandmother didn't believe God would hold a conversation with you the way you talk with a person. Her relationship with God and her question to me was far more complex and interesting.

Is God real in my life? Do I pray? Do I have a relationship with God that guides me?

I didn't know how to answer her question with any semblance of clarity. But I've spent the last 20 trying.

I thought about this conversation recently, when this question, *have you talked with God*, came up again.

This past year I participated in a series of conversations for rabbis, ministers, pastors and imams of synagogues, churches and mosques. The purpose was to learn about the texts and traditions in each of our faiths that we felt expressed our understanding of the joys, challenges and purpose of spiritual leadership. One of the topics we discussed was community processes for change. After everyone in the group had briefly shared a bit about his or her community, a senior pastor of a local church added, humbly, that her community has a very different initial approach.

She brings a question or issue to their membership, and they sit quietly. After a few minutes, one of the members of the community begins to pray for God's wisdom and support, for compassion and gentleness. Everyone joins the prayer when they're ready.

She described a process of *discernment*, that is, prayer, reflection, meditation, song and silence that helps her community members feel more open, generous, and compassionate towards one another and themselves. They then begin a conversation, guided by the direction of their spiritual process. Ideas flow, the pastor told us. People build each other up, never knock each other down. There are always different opinions and suggested approaches and they have thoughtful conversations and even debate. Their discernment process doesn't predetermine an outcome; rather, they feel guided by seeking God's Presence at that moment.

I was so moved by her description and I've been thinking a lot about this process of discernment as part of my reflections for these High Holy Days.

You remember our question: what does it mean to say that we can bring God's Presence into our lives in a way that makes a difference? What does that look like?

From a classic Jewish standpoint, the theology that God is here, present, with us, is clear. *Kadosh Kadosh Adonai Tzivaot milo khol ha'aretz kvodo*, we say three times a day. Holy, Sacred, Divine is the One who fills the entire earth with God's Presence. God is imminent, dwelling deeply within the reality of our lives.

But the process of discernment doesn't rest merely on a belief of the presence of God - it requires another dimension of *faith*.

This is a faith that wherever we are, we will still attain a deeper level of insight, understanding and wisdom; that this world, and our lives, are unformed and unfinished; that there is always more to be revealed and discovered; and most shockingly, that even humanity is not the finished product of universal processes that will be unveiled. It turns out the Jewish religious language for this insight is none other the name of God.

When Moses asks God to reveal God's name, God responds, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. If you look in English editions of Torah, you'll find this Name untranslated. But the name suggests something like: *I am what I shall become*.

The most common personal name for God in Torah is indicated by the letters Y-H-W-H, containing the same Hebrew letters that God revealed to Moses. A name so sacred it couldn't be spoken by anyone other than High Priest on Yom Kippur, we have lost any knowledge of how it's pronounced. We instead vocalize these letters as Adonai. While mysterious, Y-H-W-H seems to mean "Being," that is, all of past, present and future existence - or "Is-Was-Will Be." Our most ancient sacred texts describe God as in constant motion; God is the process of "becoming."

The aspect of discernment is a relentless commitment to *not* knowing, to staying, always, in a mindset of *possibility* of what has yet to become.

We experience this process of becoming in at least three stages of being: in the *universal* that is creation and evolution, in the *communal* that offers hope for a better future, and in the *personal*, that allows and empowers us to see ourselves as unfinished, full of possibility, no matter the age or stage in our lives.

The ***universal*** is where we come *face to face* with our greatest mysteries. The unveiling of potential is the constant movement and transition of all life. The force of existence that came to constitute life journeyed from the simplest forms to the great complexity of the human mind.

The ***communal*** is *where we need to be the most resolute*, as it requires an unrelenting faith in human potential for good.

The truth is religion and ethnicity have historically been powerful sources of conflict, aggression and violence, rising at times to the greatest human crisis. In part, this is because ancient religion was built upon binary forces – oppositions between knowledge and revelation, atheism and belief, secularism and faith, evil and good, observance of the covenant and abandonment of the covenant. If the religious imagination is necessarily structured on polarity, then religion will inevitably be a source of conflict, contempt, and violence: my religion is true, yours is idolatry. [see :James Carroll, “Warring with God,” 10/21/2003 Boston Globe].

This philosophy of binaries is potent. It exists not only among different religions right now, but also has become more and more present among Jewish communities in Israel and the U.S., which are now consistently alienating one another. You're religious or your secular. You're right or your left. You're pro or your anti. That's not where God dwells.

God dwells in the breaking down of these oppositional and entrenched forces, pushing us towards acceptance, understanding and growth.

I witnessed this first-hand this summer. My daughter Elie attended a very special camp called Seeds of Peace. The Camp sits on a small lake in rural Otisfield, Maine. Seeds of Peace brings teenagers together from the U.S., the U.K, Israel, Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, Egypt and Jordan, Pakistan and India. Elie was a member of the Middle East dialogue group. The content of the sessions was driven by the kids, and phenomenally skilled facilitators supported them as they navigated their very painful conversations.

The goal of the camp is not reconciliation, but rather, engagement of conflict; an opportunity to to tell your story, and a requirement that you let others tell theirs.

For much of the month it was excruciating for the teens, particularly the Palestinian and Israeli participants, to hear one another. They were angry and overwhelmed by conflict and grief.

But they were there. That's the essential aspect of this camp that makes it so redemptive. The grief of growing up in conflict will continue when they return to their homes. They knew this. They didn't come on false or overly optimistic hope. But every one of the participants of the camp had to come with some measure of faith in a new, yet unimagined reality.

When I went to pick Elie up from the last day of camp, I walked into what the camp director accurately shared as the saddest morning on earth. Real relationships were formed. Kids had opened their hearts a little more to one another, and they continue to be in touch.

Seeds of Peace is faith come-to-life, human beings breaking through the polarities of conflict and revealing the potential of a life of wellness and peace.

It's incredibly hard to do this. Miraculous even. The Camp is in its 26th year. Many of the first campers have their own children, who are now growing up amidst conflict. The movement of potential is slow, but the process profoundly changes the course. This is where the popular teaching from Pirkei Avot, the ancient rabbinic collection of principles comes most to life: *lo alecha ha'mlacha ligmor*. It may not be upon us - or these children - to finish the work. *V'lo atah ben-chorin l'hivatel mimenah*, but we must not desist from it. The process our ancient rabbis are describing in Pirkei Avot is faith in the always-present reality of potential.

The universal and the communal are always part of our spiritual growth. But it's in our individual, personal lives where believing in potential makes the most impact.

At some point, a point that is different for each of us, we tend to see ourselves as static beings. We like what we like; we dislike what we dislike. We know what we do well, and what we do not do well. This is natural and in many ways helpful; it protects us from having to struggle or fail more than we can endure, and it helps us be accepting of ourselves. This is no small matter.

But there is a shadow side to acceptance, when it begins to bleed into resignation.

Having faith in potential means we believe we have yet to become full and genuine, no matter what our age or stage of life. I was with a woman a year ago who was coming to the very end of her life, and she made a short video for her husband asking for forgiveness. As she took her last breaths, she

was still becoming, forgiving more generously than she had, loving more deeply than she had, offering comfort and solace to the person she knew would miss her more than anything in the world.

Victor Frankel was a Jewish Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist. He was a survivor of the Shoah and wrote a number of books, including one entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. The heart of Frankel's work is that the primary human drive is not a pursuit for pleasure or power, but rather for meaning. He writes about love: "Through love one is able to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person and even more, he sees the potential in him . . . By his love he enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be, he makes these potentialities come true."

Frankel is describing what it looks like to stand in the presence of God; to not only believe that we are always in a state of becoming, but also to love deeply enough to make others aware that they, too, have so much to give the world that they have not yet even begun to imagine.

This is why we're here.

As we come to the end of Rosh Hashanah tonight and continue these days of teshuvah towards Yom Kippur, try to reimagine your life. That is what discernment means. That is what it looks like to be guided by God: opening your mind and your heart to the revelation of new forms of Being in the world. That process of formation is where God dwells, awaiting our partnership, to unveil new realities.

Once we recognize this, we can begin our conversation that my grandmother asked me about all those years ago.

Rifa'eynu Adonai, v'ni'rafeh. God, heal me. It's still possible to heal.

Avinu Malkeynu, chaneynu v'aneynu. God, be compassionate. We can become more compassionate and generous even when it feels like we have nothing more to give in a relationship.

And perhaps most poignantly, most courageously, Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu ya'ashev shalom alyenu v'al kol Yisrael v'al kol ha'alom, v'monar Amen.

Take these coming days of teshuvah as we approach Yom Kippur to dwell in possibility.

It's a Sacred field. Let's meet each other there.

L'shanah tovah.