

## Planting Seeds for Eternity

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She made an appointment because she “had some things she needed to discuss.” She arrived on time, dressed impeccably. Her heart broken after the death of her husband, her soul vibrant, her mind clear. 90 something years old she had no time to waste and got right to her agenda.

“Debbie, I’m scared,” she said. “I’m afraid of dying because I don’t know what will happen to me.” She paused to take a breath before she continued. “I know my kids and grandkids will remember me. I know I lived a good life. But I’m scared. What happens after we die?”

I said the obvious, which she already knew, “We don’t know...”

She, ever the teacher, pressed on. “Debbie, you’re a rabbi, tell me what Judaism believes.”

I, ever the rabbi, answered her question with more questions. “What do you think? Do you think there is nothing? Do you think you’ll see your parents? Your sister? Your husband?”

“Well of course,” she said. “I know they are waiting for me, but is it true? Do we believe that as Jews?”

“Yes,” I said. “We believe that and so much more.”

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“Well then,” she said, “How come I’ve been coming to this Temple all my life and I don’t know that?”

She was right. There are some things we need to discuss. As the new year begins with the book of life wide open we need to discuss not only that we will live and we will die, but what our lasting legacy could be, how we can encounter eternity in life, and, the destiny of our immortal souls. Our conversation begins on this dawn of the New Year with its seeds of potential. It continues on Yom Kippur when we consider our mortality. It extends through Sukkot when we celebrate gathering together. We too have no time to waste. So let’s begin.

**Many of you may be thinking, Christianity believes in a world to come, we focus on fixing the world, here and now.** This is true, AND, we have a rich literary and spiritual tradition of a world to come. AND in classic Jewish style, there are multiple perspectives. There is *Olam Haba*, the world-to-come, once peace arrives in the world.<sup>1</sup> There is *Gan Eden*, a Garden of Eden-like setting where souls gather with God.<sup>2</sup> There is *Tehiyat Ha-matim*, resurrected bodies reunited with souls, in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> There is *Gilgul*, reincarnation.<sup>4</sup>

**You may be asking yourself--does this mean we believe in Heaven?** Only 40% of American Jews say they believe in heaven,<sup>5</sup> and their belief is well grounded. The more staid rabbis of the Talmud taught, “in heaven, there is no eating, drinking or propagation. No business, jealousy, hatred, or competition. The righteous sit with their crowns on their heads [studying Torah] and feasting on the brightness of God.”<sup>6</sup> But the more, shall we say fun, less staid, rabbis anticipate heaven as a place of ultimate pleasure and speculate: “Three experiences in life are microcosms of the World to Come--shabbat, sexual intercourse and a sunny day.”<sup>7</sup>

**Next, I’m guessing you’re wondering, ok, so what about Hell?** 70% of American Jews *don’t* believe in Hell but, like it’s counterpart Heaven, it’s a well formulated Jewish belief.<sup>8</sup> *Gehennah*

is a fire-filled permanent purgatory.<sup>9</sup> *Sheol* is a murky netherworld, a temporary dwelling for souls after death.<sup>10</sup> And, just so you know, resistance to repentance sends people there-- not the verbal curse of another human being.

**By now you may be “dying” to lean over to the person sitting next to you and whisper, “How come no one told me this before????”** In large part it is because the early Reformers were strict rationalists. They expunged from our prayer books, and thereby our language and theology, all references to resurrection, and ideas about where immortal souls would abide.<sup>11</sup> Today, we Reform Jews are hungry for authentic Jewish spirituality, and our movement’s 21st century prayer books, are multi-vocal to address this need. Reflective of our members the books now embrace diverse Jewish theologies, philosophies, and perspectives on the human soul, a world to come, and our immortality.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. On this day of new beginnings, we remember the very beginning. God planted seeds for trees and bushes and flowers. From the very same soil, God formed the first human, animated with Divine breath. All life born the same way, created from the earth. And then God said, “for dust you are to dust you will return.”<sup>12</sup> All life returning, in death, to that same earth.

I remember visiting the rain forest in Olympic National Park. Trees lay stretched across the forest floor. Wrapped in moss, embraced by decomposing leaves, seeds found their way into the bark and put down roots, cradling themselves, growing out of the log. Nurse-logs, nurture life after their own lives have seemingly ended. Thousands of species in every forest, depend on dead wood to live.<sup>13</sup> It is true for the trees and for us. We depend on “dead wood” to plant the seeds of our lives. On Rosh Hashanah we consider the nourishment we receive from those who came before us, AND how our lives will provide the nourishment for future gardens.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “A person’s kind deeds are used by God as seeds for the planting of trees in the Garden of Eden...”<sup>14</sup> The same mythic-perfect place described in Genesis is also the destiny for our souls at the end of time. In the Torah, God created the trees and grasses, on a single day, with words. In life, for us, planting takes more than words, it takes action, and it takes a long time.

An example of success, after many years of seed planting, is the expanded Jill Stone Community Garden on the north side of our campus. The new greenhouse, shed and expanded beds provide space for our members to garden alongside participants in the IRC New Roots Program. Moriam and Shafeka, Muslim Rohingya refugees from Burma, living legally in Vickery Meadow, without yards for gardening, plant their seeds here at Temple Emanu-El. Organic vegetables are growing and healthy friendships too. Moriam and Shafika bring their produce home. We bring our produce (1400 pounds since last Rosh Hashanah) to the Vickery Meadow Food Pantry and Clothes Closet. These seeds, are mitzvot, our holy obligations. As the Mishna teaches, we enjoy the fruit in this world, and the harvest will come in the world to come.<sup>15</sup> You’ll recognize them: Welcoming the stranger. (2 so far and more to come). Feeding the hungry. (87.5 pounds last week). Caring for the earth. (Organic farming techniques and composting). Making peace where there is strife. (Muslims and Jews working together). Thanking God for Divine blessings. (The gardeners begin with a prayer).

Together we are planting a Garden of Eden, a paradise, at the corner of Northwest Highway and Hillcrest. Rabbi Heschel continues, “The seed of life eternal is planted with us here and now. But a seed is wasted when placed on stone, into souls that die while the body is still alive.”<sup>16</sup> The challenge of Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, is to enliven our souls. In this new year we ask ourselves:

What kind of seeds are my deeds?

How will I be a nurse-log to the seeds of eternity planted in my heart?

While Rosh Hashanah celebrates birth, Yom Kippur’s tone and rituals evoke death. We fast, to afflict ourselves and mimic the dead, who no longer need food and water. This is to help us better do *teshuvah*, to achieve a sort of life after death, immortality while we are still alive. Dr. Erica Brown, who was our guest this past year, writes, “*Teshuvah* is the elixir of life--when people commit to change, they give themselves a new life and find possibilities that they formerly believed were closed to them.”<sup>17</sup>

It might be

- confronting an addiction
- making healthy choices about exercise or food
- looking for more rewarding work or rekindling a friendship
- redoubling efforts to repair our broken world
- returning to or embracing anew a practice of prayer or Jewish learning
- committing to be kinder and more generous, less judgmental of others, more forgiving of ourselves.

If *teshuvah* is the elixir of life, when we make these kinds of changes, we extend our lives, maybe not in duration, but surely in meaning and value. *Teshuvah* allows us to live, not in an unseen unknowable realm but to encounter eternity, right here in life. Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizensk teaches, “All of us are created twice: first when we are born; second when we repent our past and find new courage to live in ways more acceptable to God.”<sup>18</sup> We are reborn when we find new courage. Listen to how Mary Daly says it: “Courage is a habit, a virtue, you get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.”<sup>19</sup> Now is the perfect time to develop a habit, to learn couraging. Courage is essential to do *teshuvah*, to bravely begin to live in ways that are more holy, more healthy, more spiritually and emotionally satisfying. Ways of life, as Rabbi Elimelekh says, that are not only more acceptable to our parents, our children, our friends, ourselves, but to God.

We celebrate on Rosh Hashanah by planting seeds. We find courage and are renewed on Yom Kippur. On Sukkot we gather the bounty of our harvests and we conclude the sacred season, with a final encounter with our own mortality. At *Yizkor* services on Simchat Torah morning we pray, “*El Malei Rachamim...God Full of Compassion, embrace the soul of my loved one...B’gan Eden t’hay menuchatam, May he rest in the Garden of Eden... V’yitzror b’itzror hahayim, May her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life...*” We have an opportunity to remember, in life and in death, we can be in the presence of God and our loved ones, for eternity. Think of it this way: When a block of pure steel is pressed against a block of pure gold the two metals exchange molecules. Each one carries microscopic transformative elements of the other, forever.<sup>20</sup> My guess is the same is true for humans. When we draw close to another we exchange molecules on

some microscopic spiritual level. We carry the other with us even after they are no longer living in this world.

At the heart of Psalm 27, our companion throughout this season, the Psalmist speaks of death and life and immortality. “My father and mother have abandoned me, *v’Adonai ya’aspheni* yet Adonai gathers me up.”<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew word, *ya’aspheni* is used often in the Bible as a euphemism for death, a soul is gathered with the souls of their ancestors. The psalmist boldly suggests we can be gathered with our deceased, in the embrace of God, while we are still alive--like steel and gold eternally bound up together in God’s presence.

Here’s how I imagine it in *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*.

My parents abandoned me, they died too young.  
They left me long before I was done needing them,  
which is probably forever.  
But they were not the first to be gathered by Adonai to their people.  
They were gathered to their people by Adonai,  
like so many before them.

Abraham was gathered to his people.  
In death, he abandons the souls he had made,  
and somehow they complete the journey without him.

Jacob was gathered to his people.  
After death, his abandoned children mourn his life,  
and somehow they continue without him.

Moses was gathered to his people  
with bright eyes and energy unabated,  
with a kiss from God.  
His people are not abandoned,  
and somehow they, we, gather in God’s presence,  
generation after generation after generation.

The souls of the dead, freed from their bodies,  
are gathered with the other souls in God’s wide inclusive embrace.

I wonder:  
If God gathers the souls of the dead  
and the living are not abandoned by God,  
can my soul, safe within my body, be gathered along with them,  
for even a fleeting moment?  
Maybe at official times of gathering, Kaddish, yahrzeit, yizkor?  
Rosh Hashanah?

Abandoned, we pray:  
Gather us up God--  
only You have the power, the capacity,  
in your presence we don't feel alone--  
with You, we are also with them.  
bind our souls together in death and in life.<sup>22</sup>

I believe the woman who came to see me is here today, even though she recently passed away. She is here in the almost indescribable sense we have that as full as this space is with people, there are even more souls gathered here with us to celebrate the possibilities of life in the New Year. She is here not only in the memories of family members and the minds students (myself included) but in seeds she planted for all of us, by having that honest conversation. She was right, there were things we needed to discuss. On this Rosh Hashanah 5780, this birthday of the world: We too can talk about living, in this life and for eternity. We can plant seeds with our deeds, do *teshuvah* with courage, gather with others and with God, in ways expected and unexpected, that lead to the blessings of immortality in this New Year.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon.* So May it be God's Will. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, page 284 note 1.

<sup>2</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, beginning on page 117

<sup>3</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, beginning on page 55

<sup>4</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, beginning on page 224

<sup>5</sup> Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/>

<sup>6</sup> Berachot 17a

<sup>7</sup> Berachot 57b

<sup>8</sup> Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/>

<sup>9</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, beginning on page 111

<sup>10</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, beginning on page 41

<sup>11</sup> Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, pages 196-204

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 3:19

<sup>13</sup> I was reminded of this experience by the writing and photographs of Peter Wohllenben in, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, pages 78-81

<sup>14</sup> "Death as Homecoming" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p.375

<sup>15</sup> Mishna Peah 1:1

<sup>16</sup> "Death as Homecoming" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p.378

<sup>17</sup> Erica Brown, *Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe*, page 146.

<sup>18</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh for Rosh Hashanah* page 269.

<sup>19</sup> *Philosophy Now Magazine* September/October 2001.

<sup>20</sup> As cited by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso in "A Soul-ar Eclipse" in *May God Remember: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism* edited by Lawrence Hoffman, page 207.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 27:10

<sup>22</sup> *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*, adapted from pages 118-119.