

## JEWISH JOURNEY

NOTES FOR Kol Nidre 5778 (2017)

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1. This talk will not be a biography, but the journey of the development of my Jewish faith, of an ethical awakening.

2. Instead of a road or a journey, I will suggest we use a **different metaphor**. The weavers of western Africa create cloths of rigorous geometric beauty, but there are inevitable errors in the weaves. They call these **spiritholes**— As I understand it, **2 functions**—the first is to remind us that **human life is imperfect**, and the second is to suggest **that on the other side of the hole lies a realm of idealized perfection**. We are all like those weavers, facing the ethical irregularities in the weave of the world about us and in the tapestries of our own lives –but we can look through these so-called imperfections and see our own visions of the ideal universe , the one pictured by our prophet Isaiah as he teaches us in a Yom Kippur Haftorah:

**58:6**

*this is the fast I desire:*

*To unlock the fetters of wickedness,*

*And untie the cords of the yoke*

*To let the oppressed go free;*

*To break off every yoke.*

**58:7.**

*It is to share your bread with the hungry,*

*And to take the wretched poor into your home;*

*When you see the naked, to clothe him,*

*And not to ignore your own kin.*

3. Alexander Pope remarked in awe , “God moves in mysterious ways/His wonders to perform” and I will relate some of the extra-ordinary events that make up the warp and weft of my own weaving.

4. I want to start my cloth by paying tribute to **my father**, reading to me from a **kiddie Bible** when I was about 7--the story of the prophet standing up to the

king saying “you should not do that”. When I asked my father in amazement how he got away with such audacity, my dad replied that you had to be sure you were talking about **the truth**. What our Quaker friends call “speaking truth to power.” Indeed, allowing the “**abuse of power**’ [B’chozek yod] is one of the collective failings noted our High Holidays mazchor for which we should repent. From this beginning I have always understood **Judaism as a faith of social and political action**.

Developing a questioning mind, I followed the description my dad’s mother, Clara, gave of when my grandfather Philip courted her and came to dinner, in the Lower East Side: “We talked about the affairs of the day” she said in her memoir. **Here's a spirit hole for all of us!**

5. When I was about 10 there was a **fire** in our apartment, as my brother and I slept. Mother coming home from a hospital visit smelled smoke. We were rescued. The drama queen in little me says “I am going to be a rabbi when I grow up because God saved us”—and a **rabbi**, a teacher, I have indeed been.

And later we joined Riverdale Temple. After Shabbat services the rabbi’s daughter invited me up to the bimah to see the Ark up close. Out of Debbie’s childhood crush on me came the important loving mentorships I had with Rabbi Charles and Avis **Shulman**. This rebbitzin was head of the speaking bureau for Bonds for Israel and had been a gun-runner for Ben Gurion (she taught me more about the former than the latter!) Avis was asked to become the first female rabbi but didn't think society was ready for it. **But look through that spirit hole and see all the women rabbis we have now!**

6. Also at that age, my Grandfather took me with him on a grand adventure--driving to Florida in the era before freeways. Rte 301 “The Old Tobacco Road” **Signs at motels in southern NJ** “no Negroes allowed”; stopping in Williamsburg Va, home of fake colonial patriotism —4 bathrooms labeled by race and gender, separate and labeled water fountains; Many—if not most—of you have never actually seen such abominations.

A few days later, we had lunch at the **Oasis Café in Florence So Carolina** When we went to pay, the owner was on the phone and motioned to us to wait a minute; “I’ll send the boy right over,” he said, hanging up. Then he turned to a Black man

sitting nearby—“Henry, go to Mr Jones and pick up a parcel he’ll give you.” Once we were outside the cafe I asked my grandfather “Why did he call that man a ‘boy’?” As a European immigrant, he had no answer really—but we all eventually found out, and are still finding out-- **an important lesson for us even today. Weave Charlottesville into your fabric, my friends.**

**7. My professional field, assessing the social forces that produce new technologies and also assessing their impacts. A lot of utilitarianism (“greatest good for the greatest number”) in the calculation of costs and benefits (not paying heed to the common situation that those who bear the costs and the risks are usually different from those who reap the benefits), leading to disturbing notions of “collateral damage” (eg dead bodies in using military technologies).**

I always tried to balance this terrible vision with the insight from the **Pirke Avot**, The Ethics of Our Forebearers, that “If you save a single life it is as if you saved the universe entire.” What a different calculus that is! This **non-utilitarian** thread needs to be important in every one of our weaves.

**8. There is an ancient Jewish legend** that despite all the wickedness in the world, God forebears from destroying it because of the existence of 36 righteous people, called “**lamed-vavniks**” after the Hebrew for 36—most of the lamed-vavniks don’t know of their status --See Andre Schwartz-Bart, in his noteworthy book of the 1960s, the “**Last of the Just**”. Thus, I was taught that **each of us** needs to live as if the fate of the whole world depends upon us—because **it actually may**, who knows?

**9. I am proud to be a “Child of the 60s”**

“Jewish Renewal Movement”—working on Tikkun magazine with Rabbi Michael Lerner (one of the Seattle Seven indicted for anti-war activities here), Art Waskow—ecological insights greened the Judaism I learned in my youth---eg, “If you take your enemy’s city, do not cut down his fruit trees” at a time of the massive defoliation in VietNam by Agent Orange which disfigured so many Vietnamese babies. Jews for Urban Justice in D.C. in the early ‘70s. Working politics into liturgy (the Kadima seder here in Seattle, hand scribed on rice paper), Art’s Liberation seder; later liturgical work for our KHN shul including Yizkor with Michael Latz developing the

“ceremony of the stones”—participants creating a Buddhist use of noise as prayer. **Many beautiful holes here** which have carried into today’s visions.

And I attended an early '70’s weekend workshop on a Pennsylvania farm **“Jews and Our Bodies”**— where yoga segued into a niggun and the gentle beginning of Shabbat services --something called “bio-feedback”, other physicality. This was all sort of heady for a 30-something young man coming out in the midst of the '70s sexual revolution. **What a great spirit hole that one is!**

10. But doing serious politics in opposition to murderous regimes entails risks. Through one spirit hole I see the recently departed Daniel Berrigan— of the Catonsville Nine who spilled their own blood on draft records. Dan was Catholic Chaplain at Cornell—As told by Art Waskow in one of his books, a huge Passover seder was held at the Cornell field house in the early 1970s where the questions of violence and war in Vietnam and domestically would be highlighted against the themes of the liberation of all peoples. My former wife, Nancy, planned the seder with Art, and Dan was Josh’s babysitter during the planning meetings. Then Dan was indicted and went underground, but we had no doubt he would appear at this **Seder of 5,000** and set a place at the head table for him—our own version of Elijah. —and he did, under one of the masks of Vermont’s Bread and Puppet theater. The FBI could do nothing with the swarms of supportive students and townpeoples. He escaped by motorcycle. **The Spirit Hole of Resistance.**

11. Unlike Dan, I haven’t been able to compile an arrest record. Where are prison stripes in my fabric? Volunteering in a movement print shop in the early ‘70s, opposing the Trident subs at Bangor, such activities failed to get me busted. But in Paris in 1989, —as a member of **ACT/UP Paris**—I wove a great thread into my tapestry. We were putting *pochoirs* (stencils) on the sidewalks, I was nabbed with the others. As planned, I claimed to be only a tourist attracted by the commotion, but *les flics* enjoyed toying with me all night, as they moved us in *manottes* (handcuffs) to several jails, sleeping on the floor. In the morning they tossed me onto the sidewalk—still no real arrest record. A month later, after a

workshop, *atelier*, on World AIDS Day, we hung a giant banner between the towers of Notre Dame “OUI AUX CAPOTES ” “Yes to Condoms” that made the nightly news throughout the country.

12. Growing up in NYC—the theater was a part of our lives. My first show, for my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday, was the “King and I” with Yul Brenner and Gertrude Lawrence who sang—‘If you become a teacher/by your students you’ll be taught”. And so I have. I need to mention the great fabric irregularity that was my student **Ben Linder** who used his engineering education to bring electricity to peasants in the hills of Nicaragua, instead of earning a hefty US salary,. For this defiance of the imperium, he was murdered by the contra forces funded by Ronald Regan, Ben’s life has continued to be a great view for me of Isaiah’s vision

13. Like the tallis that we will be wrapped in at death, this ethical fabric we each weave will envelop the story of our life. My friends, make it beautiful, a “coat of many colors” But make sure that one of the spirit holes leads to the insight that **Mohammad Ali** opened for us: “Float like a Butterfly/Sting like a bee.” this sage advised. Yes, but we must pray to HaShem to give us the wisdom to lead a life knowing when is the right time to do which.

14. I wish you all an easy fast, and as you contemplate your own spirit holes on this Day of Awe, may you look forward to a New Year of great joy and adventure.