The services of Yom Kippur are designed deliberately to keep us occupied the entire day. From very early on our Sages described Yom Kippur as a day spent entirely in prayer. As we move deep into our afternoon worship we begin to turn. While our prayers may feel more urgent we also begin to mix the solemnity of the day with the elation of completion. I offer you these words as we begin our descent into that moment:

King David’s ancient city was one of the sites that the Women’s Israel trip visited in May. While there, we sat in a circle and studied the story of David and Bathsheva. Our tour guide Kayla, offered a drash or interpretation of the story incorporating Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*. While sitting in what is left of the ancient David city, I thought about our biblical ancestors who used to recite psalms in the Temple as both praise and petition. Cohen’s modern *Hallelujah* psalm reminded me that in some ways we behave no differently from our ancient ancestors. We too, as complex beings, come before the divine, come before something greater than ourselves, with our sin, our atonement, our gratitude, and our praise. We do not sacrifice an animal, rather we sacrifice our defenses. We must become vulnerable. And out of our vulnerability we can praise, we can ask, we can give thanks. We can bring our own psalms and our own *Hallelujahs* before God.

This is the story of David and Bathsheva:

While war was being waged in the distance, it was a beautiful night in Jerusalem. King David couldn’t sleep. He tossed and he turned, but he could not calm himself into slumber. A man of war, David had just sent many troops out to battle. Anxiety and fear was keeping him up. Would they be able to continue their siege of Rabbah? The night air was crisp and clean. The kind that when you breath in, you feel as if you are nourishing your lungs with goodness. King David went up to his roof to get some air. Maybe taking some deep breaths with some clean fresh air would calm his many anxious thoughts. He looked over his city and felt proud of all that he had accomplished so far. As he was scanning the rooftops of his city, he saw a woman. A woman so intriguing. She was bathing on top of her roof. David was taken. So taken that he quickly rushed down from the roof to find one of his advisors. He inquired about the woman and found out her name was Bathsheva, the wife of the Hittite Uriah. Completely ignoring the detail that she was someone’s wife. He sent for her. Bathsheva, flattered that the King found her of interest also ignored that she was someone’s wife. And she went over to the King’s house. They spent the night together. And a child was conceived. She sent the news to David. And David devised a plan. He sent for Uriah thinking that he would come home from battle and want to sleep with his wife. Then Uriah will never know that the child was really David’s. Uriah came home, but was too distracted by the war. How could he eat, drink, and lay with his wife when his comrades were in battle? The plan flopped. But, David persisted. He fed Uriah himself, poured him countless glasses of wine, and then sent him to his wife, but Uriah passed out with David’s guards and never went home. David was baffled. He came up with a new plan. He told the captain of his army Joab to put Uriah in
If Uriah died in battle, he would never know that David had slept with Bathsheba. And it came to pass, Uriah died in battle. Bathsheba mourned her husband and when the period of mourning was over King David proposed. They were married and their son was born. David thought, “all’s well that ends well.” David was wrong. He had committed both adultery and murder. God was displeased. And a messenger from God came and told David that he had sinned. For fear of God, his life, his wife’s lives, and we hope because of his remorse, David repents for his sins. And while God forgave, God did not cease punishment. God declared David and Bathsheva’s child would not live. Their hearts brake. They do not think they could possibly survive this loss.

They try to comfort one another, but it takes time. These are the types of wounds that don’t really heal. They are broken. And out of their brokenness another child is conceived. Solomon is born. The next King of Israel.

King David is a complex biblical figure. In this story, it’s hard not to feel disgust for him. Yet, he is also known as a great leader and is celebrated for his military triumphs. And even more significantly King David is known for his music, for his talents as a harp and lyre player and for his poetry…our moving Psalms.

David’s complexities are canonized in Leonard Cohen’s epic lyrics:

CANTOR REUBEN:
I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
It goes like this
The fourth, the fifth
The minor fall, the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

At the beginning of this first verse of the song Cohen is referring to the first book of Samuel, chapter 16, verse 23, “And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.”

David’s “secret chord” as Cohen describes it, is magical. His music has the supernatural power to cast evil out. But then Cohen writes a jarring line, “But, you don’t really care for music, do you?” This is a jab at King David, who essentially abused his powers when he sinned by committing adultery and murder. In just three lines, Cohen captures King David. A man both capable of soothing the soul with his tremendous musical talents and committing heinous crimes that can cause death and devastation to those around him. Perhaps, this is why Cohen then concludes, “the baffled King composing Hallelujah.” Or as the Reverend Dr. R. M. A. "Sandy" Scott puts it, "even after the drama, the grasping, conniving, sinful King David is still Israel's greatest poet, warrior and hope. There is so much brokenness in David's life, only God can redeem and reconcile this complicated
personality. That is why the baffled and wounded David lifts up to God a painful hallelujah."

CANTOR REUBEN:
Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

(music lingers a little bit)

The story of David and Bathsheva is tragedy and sin of the worst kind. We can place it in another time and another place, but the truth is that kind of brokenness is very real in our lives. We have all felt loss that feels like we will never get over. We have all felt hopeless in a way that feels impossible to climb out of. We all know the feeling of a painful Hallelujah.

I can imagine that this is how Bathsheva and David felt when faced with the news that their son will die. And then when he actually does pass away. The anger, the dark sadness, the regret, the pain…I can imagine that the word Hallelujah was the farthest thing from either one of their lips, but if they did try to utter it…I can imagine the pain…

In the second verse of “Hallelujah,” Cohen meshes the story of David and Bathsheva with the story of Samson and Delilah:

CANTOR REUBEN
Your faith was strong but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you
She tied you to a kitchen chair
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair
And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

In short, Samson is one of the last judges of the ancient Israelites. He is known for supernatural strength given to him by God to combat enemies and perform heroic acts. Samson’s weakness is women and his hair. He falls for a girl named Delilah who is paid by Samson’s enemies to seduce him. She does just this and cuts his hair, which ultimately destroys his great strength.

I imagine Samson was not in the mood to sing the word, “Hallelujah.”

CANTOR REUBEN
Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

(music linger a little bit)
Analysts of Cohen’s lyrics believe that he blends these two stories to demonstrate that even heroes can lose their strength, even heroes can transgress and atone. In the third verse of “Hallelujah,” author and historian of this song Alan Light claims, the song’s central message is revealed:

There is a value, even a necessity to sing a song of praise in the face of confusion, doubt, or dread.

CANTOR REUBEN
You say I took the name in vain
I don’t even know the name
But if I did, well, really, what’s it to you?
There’s a blaze of light in every word;
it doesn’t matter which you heard,
the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!

“A blaze of light in every word.” What a beautiful line?! Alan Light writes, “Every word, holy or broken – this is the fulcrum of the song as Cohen first wrote it. Like our forefathers, and the Bible heroes who formed the foundation of Western ethics and principles, we will be hurt, tested, and challenged. Love will break our hearts, music will offer solace that we may or may not hear, we will be faced with joy and with pain. But Cohen is telling us, without resorting to sentimentality, not to surrender to despair or nihilism. Critics may have fixated on the gloom and doom of his lyrics, but this is his offering of hope and perseverance in the face of a cruel world. Holy or broken, there is still hallelujah.”

The amazing thing is, is our Rabbis taught the very same thing. The Talmud states that one must recite psalms of praise, “at every important epoch and at every misfortune.”
Or in other words when we are holy and when we are broken. Our psalms have words for most times in our life: times of gratitude and self-pity, times of anger, and times of joy. Psalms of praise are a specific group of psalms, known as the “hallelujah psalms.”

“Praise,” reflects an insight into what is going on in most psalms that we sing or recite. The psalmists tell us that humanity’s ultimate calling is to use the resources of human language to celebrate God’s greatness and to express gratitude for God’s beneficent acts. When we are broken or hurt or when we are sad or mad, it’s hard to express gratitude and praise. However, both our Rabbis and Cohen’s modern Hallelujah psalm presses us to do so.

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2 Pesachim 117a
Praise forces us to acknowledge the other, to acknowledge that we are apart of something larger. Praise helps bring us up from the depths. The *Hallelujah* psalms that David might have uttered or even written provided a way to acknowledge that we are a part of something immense and wonderful. It’s as if *Hallelujah* is a synonym for “wow.”

The writer Anne Lamott describes “wow” as meaning, “we are not dulled to wonder.”³ “Wow,” brings us into the present, opening our minds to be mesmerized by something incredible. The word *Hallelujah* has that same power. That’s why it is often associated with the action of shouting. Consider the famous lyric made popular by the magnificent Judy Garland, “Shout Hallelujah, c’mon get happy!” Like a shofar blast, *Hallelujah* wakes us up to the present.

This is not to say that we shouldn’t feel what we need to feel. Often we need to mourn, we need to be angry, we need to feel sad, before we can get to a *Hallelujah* moment. And sometimes it is the *Hallelujah* moment that picks us up. It gets us out of the confines of our inner sadness. Yom Kippur and particularly Yom Kippur afternoon is a solemn time: a time of reflection and contemplation, a time of memory, a time of hunger. We are stretching our human limits for the sake of piety and deference for our tradition and the divine. We feel judged and are judged. We wonder about our fate and the fate of our loved ones. We miss those who are not with us. *Hallelujah* is far from our lips. It just feels a little too joyous for the occasion.

Yet, the Talmud tells us, “Atonement and joy go well together,” because both ask us to be present to the moment. If we don’t acknowledge where we are at we can’t atone. If we are not attuned to our every day, joy can’t come in. Both joy and atonement play a significant role in making us feel more alive, more awake. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov has said, "Finding true joy is the hardest of all spiritual tasks."

*Hallelujah* can lead us there. *Hallelujah* on Yom Kippur afternoon is an affirmation of our desire to live. Only the living can praise God. Only the living can sing:

**CANTOR REUBEN LEADS CONGREGATION IN**
**Leonard Cohen’s chorus of Hallelujah**

*Hallelujah, Hallelujah....*

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³ Lamott, p.71