

Yom Kippur 5779
Brooklyn Heights Synagogue
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A Wink From the Universe

On Rosh Hashanah, I delivered a sermon where I discussed many things, including a section about the comedian Louis CK and the teshuvah I thought he needed to do for his sexual misconduct. The following day was my birthday and Michelle and I went out to lunch with my parents to celebrate. You'll never believe this...but, guess who walked by as we were eating? Louis C.K.

In shock, I didn't go chase after him and tell him that I had some unsolicited advice for him. Although Michelle did think to go grab a photo so we had some evidence of the sighting. She has a lovely shot of the back of his head at the Japanese restaurant he was eating at next door. My parents, Michelle, and I started to process what it all meant...what were the chances that I would give a sermon and talk a little bit about Louis C. K. and the very next day see him. Michelle said, "This is clearly a wink from the universe...a nod...an affirmation."

Human beings and in particular Jews have been looking for a "wink from the universe" for centuries. Our rabbis taught in the Talmud, that a person who wants to know whether he or she will live throughout the next year should bring a candle into a room where the wind is not blowing during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. If the flame does not go out, then the person will know that they will live through the next year. If you want to know if your business dealings will be successful, you should feed a chicken. If the chicken becomes fat and beautiful, then you will know the deal will be successful. And finally if you are going on a journey and want to know if you will return home safely. You should go and stand in a partially darkened room, if you see a shadow in the shadow of your shadow then you will know that you will return home.

These are prescribed methods for getting the answers we want for our future. Sort of like asking a magic 8 ball a question or going to a fortune teller with a specific challenge you need help figuring out. Sometimes though we don't want to have to *do* anything. We just want a sign. We want to know what the universe or perhaps even what God thinks we should do.

This need for the universe to somehow tell us how we should proceed with our lives is a common yearning. Should we say yes to that opportunity? Should we fly on Monday or Tuesday? Should we go for a run or go to the gym? How will this decision impact me, my day, the course of my life? We are constantly wondering...is this meant to be? Is this the right way? Is this what the universe wants for me?

I grew accustomed to looking for signs this past spring on the Israel National Trail also known in Hebrew as *shvil yisrael*. A sign that you were going the right way was

actually seeing a three colored symbol, white, blue, and orange. If you are walking the shvil from south to north than the white is on top symbolizing that you are heading towards Mt. Hermon, which gets snow. And if you walk from North to South than the orange is on top symbolizing the sand on the beach of Eilat. During my time on the trail last spring, spotting a trail marker was always exhilarating. The trail symbols while in the Negev desert were often easy to spot, since they stuck out against the sandy yellow background. When we started to head into the center of the country where there was more civilization and colorful backgrounds it became a bit of a scavenger hunt to find the trail marker. So it was even more exciting when we would spot the marker. My friend Sonya, a fellow hiker on the trail, described seeing a shvil sign as an adrenaline rush.

We are all constantly looking for that metaphorical trail marker. Trying to figure out which way to go next. And when we get a, “wink from the universe” affirming we’ve chosen the right path...well, we feel excited or perhaps at peace no longer anxiously wondering if we have made the right choice.

Our world is laced with signs and wonders and sometimes we see them and sometimes we don’t. It is not always easy to find the signs right exactly when we need them. They don’t always come in a neat little trail marker with the words, “go this way” or “yes, take that job” or “no, don’t get on that train. Wait for the next one.” When we are not sure if we can trust our gut, we have to open our eyes and see what might appear.

When Abraham was faced with the command of *lech l’cha*, go forth, he might not have been totally sure where the shvil signs were. God doesn’t exactly provide Abraham with a well marked trail. Our biblical text is pretty silent on Abraham’s journey. How does he know where to go? When to stop? In Hebrew, *haaretz asher arecha...* to the land that I will show you. That’s what God says to Abraham. The biblical commentator Sforno remarks, that Abraham needed to just go until God said stop. He says God would reveal a heavenly vision when the time came. And that, “this is why he kept going without pitching his tent to settle down until he received an appropriate sign from God.” Seven verses later we see a repeat of the verb “to show” and in this particular context of the verse God appears...the verb connotes a vision, to make something visible...or a more loose translation “a sign is shown.” How does God or this sign appear to Abraham? Well, we know how God shows up in the book of Exodus...as a burning bush. Presenting us with an obvious sign of God’s presence. Abraham receives no such sign. Abraham, however has faith and along with that faith, he has a map, a spiritual map, consisting of his spiritual awareness. He stays open and aware and so when God reveals to him the spot for which he should settle, the message is received.

For us, such things might be harder to see and hear in 5779. Certainly we can experience a large gust of wind or an intense rain shower, even a rainbow...to make us go, “Huh, I think that’s a sign.” But, what about everyday living? Our famous

biblical commentator Rashi once remarked, “When you look closely and for a long time, you discover things that are invisible to others. Most people make the mistake of trying to ‘look deeper’ when all they need is to pay attention to the obvious.” Or as Rabbi Jamie Korngold suggests in her book, God in the Wilderness, “Heightened awareness is the first step toward engaging the spiritual possibility that continually surrounds us. It is accessible to use whether we live in Manhattan or Montana.” From one of our most ancient rabbis to a great rabbi of our day we are being told the key to seeing the “signs” is to cultivate awareness to what surrounds us.

Now, there were plenty of times on the shvil where we had no idea which way to go and couldn’t find the shvil sign. Luckily we had an app that pointed us in the right way. And while we have many apps on our phone that tell us many things we probably don’t have an app that taps into our soul and the universe...capable of telling us what we can’t always see. What if we didn’t need technology to help us though? What if we could tap into our soul and the universe on our own? When it comes to the soul, Rabbi Naomi Levy suggests, that we take a “Soulfie” ...no cameras, no phones needed for this.

Just ask yourself these four questions:

1. What has my soul been trying to say to me that I’ve been ignoring?
2. What activities and experiences nourish my soul that I don’t do enough of?
3. What does my soul want to repair that my ego is too stubborn or too fearful to repair?
4. What does my soul want me to reach for?

Just like selfies...we should take soulfies often. Checking into ourselves. Seeing if we are on the path our soul wants us to be on. Ecclesiastes warns us, “all the labor of humans is for our mouths, yet the soul is not filled.” (Ecclesiastes 6:7) Meaning we often try and fill our mouths with what our ego needs; money, material goods, status, and even when we have all these things we do not feel full. We need to focus on soul needs and longings. The trail marker might be inside of us and we need to go inward and spot it. Once we are aware we can then look out into the universe.

Now sometimes no matter how hard we look, we can’t find the signs. I remember one of the days on the trail where we decided for an easier hike we would follow blue trail markers instead of the shvil signs in order to get to the night camp. Well, the joke was on us as the blue trail markers ended up being few and far between and led us to do some serious rock climbing. We found ourselves looking out into the distance and seeing the general direction of where we thought our night camp was as we knew it was on top of a particular mountain. So instead of seeing signs every little bit we had to just keep looking out into the distance trying to make

sure we were heading in the right general direction. I remember cursing the fact that we decided to take an alternative route and only by the time we got to the night camp did I realize it was one of the most memorable days of the hike so far. As a result of getting a little lost, and not knowing exactly where I was going, I learned I was physically capable of climbing in a way I never had before, and during the route I came across gorgeous crystals sparkling around the rocks. So pretty in fact that I snapped several pictures and perhaps had to bring one home. (You are not really supposed to take home rocks from Israel...don't tell.) According to Estelle Frankel in her book, "The Wisdom of Not Knowing," she teaches that entering the unknown is where transformation happens. Can we be comfortable with knowing where we want to be in the distance even if we don't quite know exactly the line by line directions to get there?

In our everyday lives, the journey is important and the desired destination can be our motivation. The knowing of something being out there that we want to reach is the sign itself and it's ok if we take the long way or the short way to get there. Our "wink from the universe" in these moments is when we figure out how to relax into the unknown. Where we don't fight that feeling of not knowing. Our ego always wants to know, our soul is more willing to risk being in the unknown. Rabbi Leib of Ger comments on Abraham and Sarah's journey to Canaan and says, it is an allegory about the spiritual journey from an ego-centered life to a God or Spirit centered existence. Being in the unknown means going beyond our fears and doubts most likely created by our egos and move into a place of being open to meeting whatever the next moment will bring and trusting that your soul has its eyes on the horizon.

There were definitely times that even though I saw the shvil sign and I knew which way I needed to go, I literally could not move. I was exhausted. My feet did not want to take one more step. No matter how many times I tried to remind myself it was mind over body. I couldn't will myself to move. In these moments in our lives, when we feel so stuck, one thing to remember is that our ego and our body see time very differently than our soul does. Rabbi Levy teaches that, "The soul's understanding of time is quite different from the ego's. The eternal soul knows how brief its stay in the material world is." Getting stuck looks different for different people and of course also depends on time and place. For me, I was stuck on the trail physically exhausted. For you, you may feel stuck because you are in patterns of behavior you just can't break or moving forward feels so scary that you just can't move. Rabbi Levy shares that, "From the soul's perspective, every moment we spend repeating an old destructive pattern is a dire SOS. The soul sees grains of sand slipping through life's hourglass. The soul is saying to us everyday, "Can't you see how little time there is?...see how your Same Old Stuff is killing you."

How did I move myself forward on the trail? Well, I loved getting to hang out at the campsite at night. I would pitch my little tent, put my feet up on my big backpack, read, write in my journal, take pictures of amazing sunsets, and sit around

a campfire with a diverse and interesting group of people. The thought of getting to sit and relax and engage in things that filled my soul in addition to the hike itself kept me walking.

I imagine that Abraham from time to time on his journey felt stuck. Perhaps, Sarah asked him, “Why on earth are we doing this? Why did we leave everything that feels comfortable?” Perhaps Abraham said, “God, really? We have to go all this way? I’m tired.” This is where I think Abraham had to rely on his imagination. He and Sarah had to imagine what was not yet visible. Estelle Frankel writes, “With imagination we are not constrained by the limitations of our current known reality. Artists, scientists, social activists, and mystics alike use their imagination to unlock the gates of unknown mystery.” When we are stuck we need our imagination to give us that “wink” to help us move forward. I think of Albert Einstein in these moments who believed that, “the most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious.” Imagination allows us to think with no constraints and delve into possibility and help us move ourselves from narrow places of stuckness to the places we know our souls want us to go.

In some ways, the shvil was easy. I woke up every morning. I often walked with a group, I had the Israel Trail guidebook, we had googlemaps, and we had the shvil signs. Knowing which way to turn and go was usually pretty obvious. Life of course is not like that. And as someone who has suffered from Decision Deficit Disorder all her life, I know this intimately. The trail though opened me up to looking for signs..both inside and out. Checking in am I doing what my soul wants me to do or what my ego wants me to do? Am I enjoying the journey without focusing on the destination? Or is the journey unclear, but I can see where I want to go? Can I take some time to be mindful and attentive so I can know which way I want to go at the fork in the road? Many of us today, want to know are we making it into the *sefer hayim*, that book of life, will this year be a good year for us? And we are searching for a sign to let us know what will be and what we should do, will we get a wink from the universe to give us an extra oomf to let us know all will be ok and we are on the right track.

I invite you now in this late hour on Yom Kippur, to look around you, smile at those who you are sitting with, smile at those behind you and in front of you...take those smiles in and let those be your affirmation, your wink if you will, that right now all is ok, and this is where you are supposed to be, surrounded by community, who is willing to help you go forth...

G'mar chatimah tovah...may you be inscribed for a good life filled with signs, wonder, and winks from the universe.