



LETTING GO: PERMISSION TO GRIEVE, AND LIVE AGAIN

Kol Nidre

Shortly after I moved to Los Angeles, I got a call about a soon to be announced rabbinical position at VBS and an invitation to come in for an unofficial meeting with Rabbi Harold Schulweis. I knew about Rabbi Schulweis of course – it would have been impossible to go through six years of rabbinical school and not hear about his fearless and prophetic voice, his intolerance for injustice and his love for Torah and humanity. I read his sermons – marveled at his eloquence and elegance, his courage and creativity. And of course I knew all about his brilliant student, co-conspirator and closest friend, Rabbi Ed Feinstein.

I felt, driving up 405, like a seeker trekking through the Himalayas, hungry to sit at the feet of a holy person, for even a few moments. Never before had the exit for Ventura Boulevard beckoned with such sacred promise. I was led, alone, into his office to wait for him. I took the opportunity to marvel at his bookshelf, noticing that every binding had been cracked. We all own books. Rabbi Schulweis actually read them. (Or wrote them.)

I don't remember exactly how the conversation started, but as soon as he sat down we dove into a fierce debate about moral authority, the mandate of conscience and the boundaries of communal responsibility. About half an hour passed and I was so enlivened that I began to plot, in my mind, how I would announce to David that we were moving to the Valley.

But then, without warning, Schulweis stood up and pounded his fist on his giant desk. "Leave my office!" he shouted, pointing to the door. "What? Excuse me?" "Go to the city! The young people need you – go build something for them!"

I was terrified. I really didn't want to leave – I wanted to stay forever in that room overflowing with books and brainpower. All I wanted was to talk about ideas, think about morality and polarities, contemplate shattering impossibilities. I stumbled out of the office – no hug, no stay in touch and let me know how it's going. Just "GO!" I got into the car, tears streaming down my face. Even though I sensed from his voice that this was more prophetic charge than insult, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of rejection. I have no idea who I would have been had I stayed, but that afternoon I sat in the car listing for myself all that I would now never learn from these great teachers.

That was January, 2004. I sat in Melissa and Adam's living room four months later – in a story most of you have heard, planting the seeds for the launch of IKAR that spring. Even still, it took

me years to realize that being sent away by Rabbi Harold Schulweis was a rejection that cleared the way for the rest of my life.

Rabbi Schulweis died this past December. I give this sermon tonight to honor his memory. It is about Holding On and Letting Go, something he spoke and wrote quite a bit about.

First, holding on:

Lo l'hityaesh! said Rabbi Nahman. Do not despair! Never, ever give up. Just because things are, does not mean that they must be. Just because it has never before been, does not mean that it can never be. You are alone today –tomorrow you might find the person who makes your heart sing. Just because the story of your life has been set in prose does not mean in an instant it can't turn into poetry. Every moment could be the moment your dreams are realized. *Lo l'hityaesh* – do not give up! Let your life become a testament to what is possible in the world.

Remember how Moses climbed back up the mountain after smashing the first set of tablets, begging God for another chance. Together they inscribed a new set of Tablets. The day that Moses came back down the mountain holding the second set of Tablets was the 10th of Tishrei, also known as Yom Kippur, the Day of Second Chances. So too, we are called to give a second chance. To learn from our mistakes. To be humbled. To recognize how we behaved impulsively. Acted from anger. How we broke what was holy. Is that not the point of Yom Kippur – to stare at death's inevitability and then walk back into life with a renewed commitment to give our partners, our parents, our children, our friends, *ourselves* a second chance? *Lo l'hityaesh* – try just one more time!

All of that is true. It's just that it's not the whole truth.

Last May, we went to the graduation ceremony of a dear friend. Of the thousands of graduates, nearly all were first generation Americans. Many, including our friend, were the first in their families to get a college degree. For none of these graduates was college graduation inevitable. It was truly an extraordinary moment.

Then the graduation speaker stands up to address the crowd. This guy's story is really impressive. He went from living on the streets to becoming CEO of his own stockbrokerage firm. He revs up the crowd and then charges the students:

I've got one message for you: Plan B Sucks! A couple of hoots from the graduates, some nervous giggles from the more traditional parents.

That's right, Plan B Sucks! If you have a backup plan you'll NEVER achieve your dreams. If you know there's a cushion, you'll let yourself fall. If you know there's just pavement beneath you, you'll make sure you stay on your feet!

Then he gets the whole crowd to join him in a raucous chant: *Plan B Sucks! Plan B Sucks!*

And David and I look to one another and I sheepishly whisper, “Except when Plan B saves your life.”

Because we should dream great dreams. Big, audacious dreams. We should believe in the power of change, we should fight for love. But sometimes, when we’re so laser focused on Plan A, we ignore evidence that this plan has no reasonable chance of succeeding. We work so hard to make this dream work that we risk losing ourselves. We distance ourselves from friends and family who love us enough to try to help us see that this plan doesn’t stand a chance. At some point, determination turns into delusion.

There is a time for eternal optimism and, I’m sorry to say, a time for a good back-up plan. A time for holding on and a time for letting go. A time for the valiant *lo l’hityaesh - never despair!* and a time for what’s called in our tradition *ye-ush* – despair. Here I want to thank our friend Rabbi Adam Greenwald for offering what I think is the perfect framework for holding this tension: *ye-ush* is the permission to relinquish hope, to give up on one dream to make room for another.

Ye-ush is the spiritual equivalent of Plan B. In economic terms, *ye-ush* is sunk cost. Once you've paid for something, the money is gone. Sunk. And yet you feel the pressure to fully realize your investment, even if you’re miserable, because you’re convinced that if you don’t, you’ll be wasting your money.

We all know that the world is made up of two types of people: those who walk out of movies and those who wish they could walk out of movies. Why do those who stay, stay? It’s not because we’re idiots. It’s not because we don’t value our time. Economists would say it’s because we have an innate aversion to loss. We don’t want to admit that we made a poor investment. I would say it’s because we, for all of our cynicism, are fundamentally optimistic people. Our core narrative is a redemption narrative. We hope against hope that the thing will get better. It usually doesn’t. When’s the last time a bad movie surprised you by getting really good at the end? We know this – yet we want it that so badly we’re willing to give over precious hours to truly bad movies – and jobs and relationships - in the hopes that there will be some redemption in the end.

The principle of sunk cost – and *ye-ush* – gives us permission to let go.

The concept of *ye-ush* originates in the Talmudic discussion of *hashavat aveidah*, lost objects. The Torah is explicit that if a person comes across a lost object, she is obligated to return it to the owner (Deuteronomy 22: 1-3). The Rabbis make it clear that she has to go to great lengths to return it - posting around the neighborhood, knocking on doors, announcing it at the Grove (LA’s equivalent of a public square).

But there are certain exceptions – times when you’re allowed to keep what you’ve found. The Mishnah lists a few examples: scattered fruit, scattered money, sheaves of wheat left in the public domain (Bava Metzia 2:1). These are all things that, once lost, would leave the owner

despairing they'd ever be recovered. If you drop a \$20 bill on the street, for example, you don't ever expect to see it again. Sometimes even for things that are more personal and identifiable, like baggage with a luggage tag, the owner would experience *ye-ush* – despair that it will ever be returned – if it was lost in the ocean or a flowing river, for example (Bava Metzia 24a-b). At a certain point, you acknowledge the loss and give up hope that you'll get it back.

This is a powerful idea, and it applies not only to lost object, but also to lost people. In order to establish death according to Jewish law, one needs either to recover a body or hear testimony by witnesses who saw the person die. But when there is no body and there are no witnesses, like after a plane crash, terrorist attack or shipwreck, what are the loved ones to do? Are they allowed to grieve? When does shiva begin? At what point is a spouse allowed to remarry? In the Shulchan Arukh (*Yoreh Deah* 375:7), in such a case there is only one determinant as to when the process of mourning begins: once the family despairs of their loved one returning - once they call off the search. *Ye-ush*. Sadly, we've had to apply this principle more than once already in our community's short life.

Once, in New York, I was walking down the street in the Village. A woman, sitting on the stoop ran up to me: "Did you see my husband? Dark hair. This tall. Did you see him? He's late coming home!" This was probably 20 years ago and I still remember her anguished voice. "I'm so sorry," I said, "I haven't seen him." I walked a bit further and another neighbor said: "That lady's been out on that stoop for ten years waiting for her man to return."

Ye-ush may seem cruel because it means, on some level, that you have given up hope. But it is also an act of liberation from the permanent and torturous state of uncertainty.

Look, we are a *lo l'hityaesh* people – never give up! We are stubborn and strong. We know that, as Rav Kook taught, great dreams are the foundation of the world. The dream of returning to Zion as a free people is one that our people stubbornly clung to through 2000 years of exile, persecution and unimaginable suffering. *Od lo avda tikvateinu!* For thousands of years our identity was built around perpetually unfulfilled yearning. The Jewish hope of return gave us strength, purpose. Something to fight for, to live for.

But sometimes, holding fast to a dream can consume you and prevent you from living fully. It can leave you feeling unsatisfied, unseen, unfulfilled – and all the while there may be a different, perfectly decent dream right beside you, if you only give it a chance.

The thing about *ye-ush* is that it is a legal principle that is dependent entirely on a spiritual and mental state: your recognition that hope is truly lost. This is completely personal. Nobody else can tell you when you're done... not your folks, your best friend, your partner, your therapist or even your rabbi. Only you will know when you reach the point of *ye-ush*.

Here's what that *ye-ush* looks like in our lives: it is the tremendous, inconsolable heartache so many of us have over a relationship with a family member with whom you just can't reconcile.

You have tried. You have apologized. Attempted to see things from their perspective. Written letters. Pleaded. But they are irrational. Cruel. Uninterested.

Rabbi David Hartman once said: “It took me 20 years of therapy to realize I can’t change my mother.” The gift of *ye-ush* is the recognition that we can’t change our mothers. Or our sisters or brothers. Or even our children. And sometimes the perpetual desire to do so sucks the life out of us, leaving us frustrated and exhausted. Permission to disengage from that narrative is what gives us life again.

Some of the people I love most have struggled in such relationships, and have gone to heroic lengths to fight, to the bitter end, to be the daughter or son your parent did not deserve. I know that for you, this has been both deeply painful and among the great triumphs of your life. But not everyone can stay and fight. One of my dear friends realized that he had to separate from his parents after a lifetime of abuse and degradation. Every interaction was so toxic, so demeaning, that he felt he had shrunk into half a man. Walking away from his parents was awful, but it was also an act of self-love. A year later, he met a woman who filled his heart with light, who helped him heal, and together they have built a family on a different script – one of compassion, patience, and trust.

Sometimes we need to move on not only from hopes and expectations for others, but also from our own dreams. It’s so hard to contemplate walking away when you’ve given so much of yourself, and yet that’s precisely what we must sometimes do. Declare *ye-ush*, so that we can grieve and begin to rebuild.

Many of you have shared with me and written in our Elul books, over the years, about having made such difficult decisions. Declaring *ye-ush* on your career after ten years because you realized you didn’t want to be yelled at every day at work anymore. Declaring *ye-ush* on a business venture that consumed four years of your life and will never see the light of day. One of you came to see me after your big project was cancelled by the studio. “But this is the only story I really have tell,” you told me. “This is the story of my life.” “You are so much more than this story,” I told you. “This loss will make space for something else - something you haven’t had time to see because this project has smoked everything else out of the room.” Several years have passed since that conversation. You found another story. It’s not the same, but that story was not all that you had.

How many women have wept and wondered – just as Rachel and Hannah did so many years ago – who they were, fundamentally, if they were not able to have children? For someone struggling to get pregnant, the world can feel like a very cruel place. *Why am I here if not to have children?* you asked. *What is my purpose in this world?*

Last month, Jeremy spoke so beautifully about his family’s fertility struggle, saying that at a certain point it occurred to them that maybe they ought to give up and use the money they’d save from IVF to buy a small island. For some, radical interventions work and the whole journey

becomes a chapter heading. For others, nothing works and at some point the conversation shifts to “What now?” One of you came back to me three years after our first teary conversation. No child, but now many children. You decided to share your gifts with the world through teaching theater to little ones, and they – and you – are all blessed by that choice. Another couple speaks now, years later, about how you built the family of your dreams by sheer force of will – through adoption. It is different from what you imagined, and in every way as beautiful. Despairing of one path to make room for its fulfillment another way.

Ye-ush is operative too on the threshold of the end of life. A few years ago Rabbi Ed Feinstein ruminated on the fight to extend life:

...But there comes a time to change direction... There comes a time when we must... give up the fight... stop worrying about what’s coming later, and provide the fullest possible life now... offering the patient what is valued beyond longer days – to be at home and not in the hospital; to be free of pain and discomfort; to be mentally aware and alert and not sedated into delirium; to be with loved ones and friends and not surrounded by strangers; to be able to share final words and wisdom and say goodbye.¹

That is *ye-ush*. An acceptance of the limitations of medicine and miracle in order to make space for holy moments of meaning and connection before death.

And after death? Rav Soloveitchik writes that the process of letting go is essential to the grieving process. There is a moment at the graveside, he taught, at which “despair [is transformed] into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation.”² Even in death, *ye-ush*, is not the end, it is the beginning. It is what allows us to bury one dream so that we can birth another.

I know several of you in this room tonight who are right now bumping up against the realization after years of struggle that however big hearted you are, you cannot love enough for two. You need more, you deserve more in a partner than you are getting. You’ve tried. You’ve invested and doubled down. My friend, Vanessa Hidary, is a Latina Jew and spoken word artist – she calls herself the Hebrew Mamita. My favorite piece of hers is called PhD in Him, which I am guessing has probably never before been quoted in a Kol Nidre sermon. Here’s a small (PG) taste:

If I counted up all the hours I’ve studied,
Read,
Focused on,
Cried over...
Gotten up and been resilient about...
Ignored my friends advice about,
Talked about...

¹ Rabbi Ed Feinstein, “It’s Time We Talk: On Life and Death,” Yom Kippur, 2013

² Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, “The Halakhah of the First Day,” Jewish Reflections on Death

I'd have a PHD in him.
 By now, I could have had a PHD in Philosophy
 Internal Medicine
 Middle Eastern Studies
 Stem cell research
 BUT NO...
 I have a PHD in him.
 Funny how he brings me no income,
 No pension
 No future...
 Funny how he brings me no Roth IRA funds
 No medical plan including dental
 No sense of security...
 And so don't ask me what I did this year...
 I didn't write any plays or any books.
 I didn't do some[thing] responsible... like pursue a "back up career,"
 I was fully employed in the fury of him...
 Clocking in 80-hour weeks,
 Graduated Valedictorian at the tippy top of my class
 Magna cum... laude and a waste of... time!

The path of retreat – even once you know you have no other choice - is full of pain. There seems to be no escape from the shame and guilt and the loneliness. But listen to the way Marcia Falk translates Kol Nidre:

All vows -

All promises and pledges -

That we have made to ourselves

And that no longer serve

For the good -

May their grip be loosened

That we be present of mind and heart

To the urgency of the hour.³

Kol Nidre, the one night the most cynical, disconnected, disaffected Jews walk through the door, gives us permission to declare *ye-ush* – to imagine your life free of the paralyzing hope of the redemption narrative. Kol Nidre gives us the permission to birth a new dream. Contemplate starting a new chapter. Letting go may be the hardest thing you'll have to do in your life, and

³ Marcia Falk, *The Days Between*.

yet at some point you may have to – in order to make room for something new. *Ye-ush* brings a profound sense of loss, but it also redirects us away from the absences toward what is present.

I prevail upon us tonight, on this eve of Yom Kippur, that as seriously as we take the command *not to despair*, we also take the permission to *despair*. To think of *ye-ush* as a rabbinic dispensation to move on from a dream that's not going to be realized. Not because I want us to wander in the bleak, black landscape of despair. I have known and loved too many people who have gotten lost in that place to romanticize it. Not to indulge in loss.

But because *ye-ush* – the permission to let go – can be an act of grace. Of love. *Ye-ush* is an invitation back into life. A gift given to us not so we'll lay down and die, but so we can begin to heal. Plan B doesn't suck, Plan B can save your life.

Ye-ush is a last resort, once you've given everything you've got and you realize you've hit a wall. It's then that you decide that rather than bang your head against the same wall again and again, sometimes if you take a step back you might discover that you have wings.

Rabbi Schulweis was one of three great men who sent me away when all I wanted to was to sit at their feet, study in their halls and learn their Torah. One day I'll tell you all the stories. For now know that I have learned (in addition to the fact that there need to be more female mentors out there) that sometimes being rejected, being prevented from realizing your dreams is the greatest gift someone can give you. Because in the absence of one dream, another is born.

"Hold on and let go," Rabbi Schulweis wrote:

"On the surface, contradictory counsel, but upon reflection this bonding and loosening provides a profound key to our healing. To hold on means to cherish every gesture, kindness, embrace... At the same time, we are urged to let go... [engage in] loosening rituals which signify closure... Letting go in order to hold on."⁴

Ye-ush is not failure. It's freedom. It is an affirmation that you are alive and awake and as much as you have lost, you still hold the agency to choose a new path. Your core does not recede with *ye-ush* – the circumstances of your life may change, dramatically, but the essence of you stays the same. *Ye-ush* is a quiet act of self-affirmation, a coming to terms with the reality that:

...Your father might never hug you. But that doesn't mean you can't hug your kids.

...Your heart is broken. Shattered. But you'll have life after the darkness. You'll be able to live again.

...Your folks will probably never understand the choices you've made. But you are worthy of love anyway.

⁴ Rabbi Harold Schulweis, "Letting Go/ Holding On," [In God's Mirror](#).

...Your child will not be just like you. But he'll be something else, and that thing will be magnificent.

...You may not, in the end, be the next Gehry or VanGogh or Bader Ginsburg. But you're still pretty damn great, and you bake a mean apple strudel.

This year, let us let go – of our anger, our fear, our judgment and self-loathing. Loosen our grip on the dreams that cannot be realized to make room for those that can. Let go – because life is fluid and full of possibility and surprises, and something brand new just might be waiting to be born.