

Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year. A Good Year. My name is Jane Eisenstark.

Three years ago, when I came to Kahal B'raira, this Humanistic Judaism congregation, it was the first time a Jewish service had real meaning for me. I could read the words. I could hear the words. They touched my heart. I was warmed by the presence of love I felt here. I was moved and inspired. I found support in my belief as I heard the song "Ayfo oree" – Where is my light? My light is in me. Where is my hope? My hope is in me. Where is my strength? My strength is in me. And, in you. And I thank you for that. And I thank my neighbor Judy Adler for bringing me to KB. the first time. Kahal B'raira means Community of Choice. And I have chosen it.

I chose to speak today because this congregation is important to me and also because I value these High Holidays, the time for reflection, a time for forgiveness and a time for making commitments.

On this Kol Nidre how will we remember our connection to all humanity? How will we remember those less fortunate this coming year, and how will we put our ideals into action?

We blew the shofar at the beginning of this service, and we said, I quote: "It pierces the armor of the heart.... "My heart and mind are open to what this night and the day following ask of me; I am prepared to speak the truth..."

We lit these candles to remember those who are no longer with us, those who came before us, those whose shoulders we stand on. And I remember my mother.

Twenty years ago she died, suddenly. My parents had retired to warm and sunny Southern California, after going west for six or seven years just for the winter. They had finally purchased their own place. Her death, was a shock. It pierced the armor of my heart.

My mother was familiar with Jewish customs and ways. We had moved in 1950 from (the ghetto as my father described it of) Brooklyn to Yorktown Heights, an hour north of New York City, where there were few Jews (but many cows up the road). My mother became active in her new community. It was her calling to inform and provide opportunity, and she was instrumental in founding a synagogue.

Her death was my first, very close brush with mortality. The loss was sharp; so much had been left undone. And death...was so final. Questions I never asked my mother came to me...Questions I never asked myself.

Did my mother believe in God? Did I?
 What, is the meaning of Life?
 What, is our purpose?

After she died, there were almost six months until the memorial service that took place in the synagogue she helped found. I, had volunteered to speak, and first I spoke with, and planned with the rabbi there. During the following months, hoping to unlock the mystery of life and death, I read, and read, and thought and thought, talked, listened and wrote.

I remember reading that as each Yom Kippur arrives, tradition would have us dress in white, the color we would be clothed in when we die. We are reminded to reflect, to look around, forgive

ourselves and others, and find peace within ourselves, the white clearly reminding us that any day could be our last chance.

Death can, give us perspective, prod us to make the most of life. Prod us to live, each day of our lives.

At Rosh Hashanah we were called to remember how we were in the past year. “We are called to examine our lives, our role in society, and our relations with our neighbors.” It is a time “to reflect on what is most important to us.”

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement. It is a time of forgiveness, and, a time of atonement, at-one-ment...a time to be at one with yourself. At-one-ment. What exactly is At-one-ment for me? And what part does forgiveness play?

Forgiving. I have questions about forgiving.

It started with my 80 year old neighbor and friend, Betsy. I have been speaking with her about Yom Kippur. She shared with me that she has not yet forgiven herself for being at home instead of at the hospital with her beloved husband Dante, when he died five years ago.

Forgiveness.

It sounds easier than it is. I find it hard to forgive myself when I don't live up to my own standard, when I feel I was not the person I want to be. I've missed the mark, MY mark.

Can I forgive myself? Can I forgive and move on?

What is it that YOU have done, or didn't do, that you want to forgive yourself for?...When have YOU missed the mark?

Can YOU forgive yourself?...

When I asked ME about forgiving myself, what occurred to me, as I prepared this speech, was not what I expected. For example:

I separated from my son's father 35 years ago. This was a good thing for me. It took some time, but I found my wings. However, I haven't forgiven myself for doing what seemed to me to be a less than adequate job of parenting alone. I was frightened and depressed. It took years to find myself, what was important to me, and I continue to build and find my friends and my communities.

Can I forgive myself for NOT being the parent I wished I was?

In myriad ways I have moved on, yet a seemingly encoded remnant remains. A remnant that reminds me of the time I was not able to be the person I wanted to be. I SHOULD have been better... I moved on.

Forgiveness.

Can I forgive myself for still being single? I see the value of a committed relationship with another. However, I have found much peace and contentment with my friends, family, my cohousing community, with Kahal B'raira, my peace and justice work, and even with my paid job. And I cannot even imagine re-ordering my life to fit in a committed relationship. Yes, there is a small part of me (is it a voice in my head?) that says - "What is wrong with you that you don't have a partner?" It was SUPPOSED to be..

Forgiveness.

Can I forgive myself for not giving more time to KB, to this congregation? There is help needed on the Executive Committee. I am not stepping forward. At this time I am not called in the same way my mother was to her congregation. However, I can promise you that I will do what I can to sustain this congregation, to grow it, and ensure that it is not just a watered down version of Judaism.

Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an essential part of life; we are all human. Yet ARE we always able to forgive ourselves? Must we?

I don't know the answer.

Or, if there is an answer.

At Yom Kippur we are called to consider how we wish to be in the year to come. We have come through the ten days of awe. We can look at ourselves differently. Who are we really? And where are we really, on this day of slowing down and reaching within. And are we at one with ourselves?

On this, the most revered day of the Jewish year we can celebrate our inner strength, the strength of others, offer forgiveness (AH!! OFFER forgiveness! OFFER forgiveness) to ourselves and to others.

It is also a time to reflect on the moral quality of our values and of our behavior. What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose here?

From Victor Frankl's search for meaning, a life can be worthwhile through "a thread of meaning and responsibility," "one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself," (and family commitments were included here).

I know that I want my life to have meaning and purpose.

Fasting continues to be a tradition for some on Yom Kippur. I recently read that the rationale can be viewed as a concrete expression of the gravity of the day, self-mastery over our bodily needs, and that fasting helps us identify more readily with the poor and the hungry.

This is a day to remember those less fortunate, a day to appreciate what we have, a day to commit ourselves, as we are able, to bring more purpose into our lives for the next year. This is the day we make a commitment to putting our ideals into action.

How can we do that?

One way that I will continue to do that is through social service, social action, social justice work. How have WE at Kahal B'raira, done that?

This past year at KB we (adults and children) had a number of opportunities to act on behalf of those less fortunate:

- We worked on behalf of the homeless, hungry, and elders living alone.
- We had a blood drive, a bone marrow registry.
- A couple of us, as the only Jews, represented KB at the Boston City Mission Society's Martin Luther King Day of Service.
- Many of us wrote postcards to members of Congress to urge their support of single payer health care.

And on this Kol Nidre how will YOU remember your connection to all humanity this coming year? How will YOU remember those less fortunate, and make a commitment to putting your ideals into action? Do YOU have a dedication to a cause larger than yourself?

Here is an opportunity for those of you who are not yet members of Kahal B'raira.

I invite you to join KB, live your Jewish ideals with us, and work with the KB Social Action and Social Service Committee!! (By the way, I happen to be the Chair.)

We blew the shofar at the beginning of this service, and we will blow the shofar at the closing of this service. I have opened my heart to you and spoken the truth as I know it. Together we will make a commitment as we embrace the New Year to Tikkun Olam, to healing the world, to a world of peace, and health, dignity and joy for all.

And this year,
 May I,
 May we,
 help this congregation to grow, prosper and continue to offer Humanistic Judaism as a warm, viable, rational and lucid choice.

We move next to Kol Nidre – I read recently that the “chanting melody of Kol Nidre is to stir the soul.” Let us be stirred...

“Ayfo oree” – Where is my light? My light is in me. Where is my hope? My hope is in me. Where is my strength? My strength is in me. And, in you.