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Shadow, Struggle, Blessing
Kol Nidre 5786
Temple Micah, Washington, D.C.

These days, any time we rent a car, or stay at a hotel; anytime we call an Uber or eat out, we're asked to hand out stars.

The whole thing can feel a little absurd, and for me, nothing captures the absurdity better than a satirical piece in the *New Yorker* titled, "One-Star Yelp Reviews of Heaven." The writer imagines one reviewer writing: "Not a fan of the pearly-white color scheme."

And another: "Let me preface this by saying, I love God. I mean, God's perfect. And IMHO that's what makes Heaven so disappointing. Because you think, like, God—what could be better than that? Nothing. Of course. So, yeah, big letdown."

One more. "I dunno. I heard a lot about this place, and everyone seems to love it, but the clouds are too soft—you could break an ankle if you had bones—and, granted, the peach cobbler (which everyone raves about) is perfect, but how much peach cobbler can you eat, really?"

Strangely, even Temple Micah has online ratings. We are 4.9 stars on Google—not bad—but only 4.4 on Yelp, dragged down by one angry reviewer who came but couldn't find parking.

It's funny—and yet living in the constant glare of ratings and reviews lures us into a habit of judgment.

Our eyes are drawn to the light of the world's bright stage, where it's easy to look out and spot the flaws of others, the failures of the world, the cracks in everything.

And so, we pass judgment.

With eyes fixed on others, we form opinions about our neighbors—their politics, their parenting, their vacations and vocations, their schools and sometimes their souls. We critique and congratulate our friends, scrolling through pictures, commenting and comparing. We form opinions about strangers we'll never meet—celebrities, journalists, athletes. We judge elected leaders, nations at war, the fate of democracy...

And let's be real, this being Yom Kippur and all—the question you'll ask your friend on the way out will be something like, “so, how'd you like the rabbis' sermon?”

To be human is to look out on the world and—praise and condemn, lift up and tear down. We sort the world into the worthy and the unworthy.

And I know—this impulse to critique isn't necessarily destructive. It is *only* with eyes fixed on others that we can truly participate in the world. *It is only* with eyes trained outward that we can heed our prophet Micah's call to “do justice, and to love mercy...” (Micah 6:8). This much is clear.

Indifference is not our inheritance. **לֹא תִכְלֵל לְהִתְעַלֵּם**” the Torah says, Do not hide! (Deut. 22:3). We are children of prophets! To respond and critique the world is to be part of the Jewish conversation. Similar to what Elie Wiesel famously said, “To be in the window and watch people being sent to concentration camps or being attacked in the street and do nothing, *that's being dead.*”

But Jews choose life. (Deut. 30:19) We get out there.

Examples abound.

From Jews who marched with labor unions,
To settlement houses built for immigrants.

From Jews who walked in Selma for civil rights,
To voices that cried out to free Soviet Jews.

From communities that rallied for the refugees of Darfur,
To Israeli aid workers rushing to the frontlines of disaster all around the world.

Again and again, we chose life.
Our story has always been an outward cry for life.

And right now, in this mess we're living through, we can't stay quiet. We have an obligation to speak up—and to speak out. There are urgent conversations that require our voice.

And you know the conversations.

Well first of all, *internal* conversations about the future of our congregation. And then...

Conversations about *our country*—how do we respond when our enlightenment ideals of justice and human worth are eclipsed by cruelty and a disregard for decency? How do we love our neighbor when contempt tears us apart?

Conversations about *Israel*—how do we hold fast to Israel's promise of peace when externally its neighbors try to destroy it and internally religious zealots daily undermine the founding ideals of Zionism? How do we engage a range of viewpoints on Israel from deep shame to profound pride?

Conversations about *antisemitism, Jew hatred*—will we let fear define us as Jews are gunned down in our city and hunted in the streets of Europe, or will we answer with dignity and defiance? How can we rely on those who have fallen silent in our time of need?

Conversations about *American Judaism*—What is the Judaism we are creating here, in this moment? How do we tell our own story alongside the American story and make it not only one of survival, but of purpose. What Torah will we write in this place, for this time?

These are not *side* conversations, they are *the questions of our time*. They rise in the bright light of the public square. To turn away would be to break faith with our obligation to engage in the world.

And if not *here*, at Micah, then where? A synagogue community is the place for these conversations, the place where we learn together, share our doubts and pain together, where we grapple with the fault lines in our world. As I see it, no other institution is so deeply called, or so uniquely equipped, to be that place. And our society is starving for it—for a home where hard truths can be spoken, and where we can model respectful disagreement.

But certain moments in the Jewish calendar pull us *away* from the noise and *into* the shadows, to face what hides within.

Kol Nidre is such a moment—when we stand still, and enter into conversation with the truth of our own lives.

If on the world's stage we "do justice and love mercy," it is in the conversation we have with ourselves that we reach for the third part of Micah's call: "to walk *humbly* with our God." For judgment without humility becomes arrogance, and the path of moral courage begins in the mirror, before it turns outward to the world.

So tonight, we face the haunting "I" within us.

Tonight, we follow the words of Leviticus, "אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם אֶת־עַנְוֹתֵיכֶם"—"afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:29).

Tonight, we return to the origin of the Hebrew word for prayer לְהִתְפַּלֵּל which is, "to judge oneself," to place one's life under review, not by ratings or stars, but by questions that endure: Am I living a life of integrity, or just moving through the days? What masks do I wear, and what self hides behind them? When I am gone, what will people remember?

These are *unsettling* questions. We're being asked to imagine our own eulogies. We're being asked to reckon with the shadows within.

The rabbis knew a thing or two about the shadows within. They knew that darkness could *break* us, but they also knew it could *shape* us. They taught: "without the dark within, no one would build a house, take a spouse, or bring children into the world" (Bereshit Rabbah 9:7). See our task is not to *banish* the shadows, but to *wrestle* them.

Consider our ancestor Jacob. On the night before he faced his estranged brother Esau, וַיַּתָּר, וַיֵּקֶבֶב לְבַדּוֹ he stood *alone* by a riverbank (Gen. 32:25). No family. No possessions. Only himself. And there, in the dark of night, he wrestled his own shadow.

Or consider King David. After he had cunningly taken Bathsheba and sent her husband, Uriah, to his death, the prophet Nathan came to him in condemnation (2 Sam. 12:7). At that moment, David stood exposed. No crown. No soldiers. Only himself. And there he wrestled with the truth of his actions.

You must know times like this—I'm sure—dark nights of the soul, when our grounding slips away.

And still—Jacob by dawn, and David in the subsequent days—both stood wounded, yet somehow made new. Only then could Jacob meet his brother. Only then could David rise to lead again. Each found blessing not by *escaping* their shadow or fleeing guilt, but by facing what was theirs, and being remade through it.

And this is the pattern: shadow, struggle, blessing.

Kol Nidre is this kind of night. A night of shadows that unsettles what we think we know. The harsh *brightness* of the world's stage is replaced by a quiet, *dark* space. We step into the shadows of our own inner struggles. The questions turn inward. In Jewish fashion, we learn to answer a question with a question. We don't ask "Is the world good?" we ask, "are we good?" Not "what is broken *in the world*?" but "what is broken *in me*?"! Not "what do I *deserve*?" but "what do I *owe*?" Not "does life have meaning?" but "how do I bring meaning to life?"

Kol Nidre is this kind of night. A night that gathers us into that hidden place, each of us, to remind ourselves that our days are fleeting.

Kol Nidre is this kind of night. We strip life down to its essence. We fast, we set aside comfort, traditionally we dress in our own burial shrouds. During the chanting of Kol Nidre, we look inside the empty ark, and it becomes a mirror of our own mortality.

Our ancestors, too, wrestled in their nights—Kol Nidre whispered in cellars during the Inquisition, carried across the Atlantic on immigrant ships; chanted in DP camps after the Shoah. Always in the shadows of history, Jews have gathered for this night, facing what seemed unbearable, yet still seeking blessing.

Shadow, struggle, blessing.

This confrontation with the darkest of places is not meant to *paralyze* us—it's meant to *awaken* us.

While Plato famously saw shadows as deception, a trick of the cave, Judaism turns the image inside out: shadows are not *illusion*, they are where *truth begins*.

Tradition teaches that each soul is actually *created* in the shadow of God. We are created *b'tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God, or read differently, *b'tzel elohim*, in the *shadow* of God. And to live as humans is to live in constant conversation with that shadow. These dark places—the rabbis imagined—are not the places God *has left*. They are the places where God *abides*.

“בְּצֵל כַּנְּפֵיךָ יְיָ יְהוָה” it says in Psalms, “We rest in the shadow of Your wings.” (Psalm 36:8)

God's presence in these depths shows us we are not helpless! *Even* as we are mortal, *even* as our days pass like shadows “כִּצִּיל יְמֵינוּ עַל-הָאָרֶץ”–we have agency (1 Chronicles 29:15). The shadows are not *limiting*, they are charged with choice, and ultimately we're meant to harness them for life.

Shadow, struggle, blessing.

The word we give to this practice of struggle is *teshuvah*. An idea not about *guilt*, but *honesty*. Not about *despair*, but *possibility*. Not *self flagellation*, but a process of *return*—of finding our way home, even in a dark and fractured world.

And importantly, *return* is never a solitary endeavor. The self we address tonight is not the *transactional* self or the *curated* self of Instagram. It is, rather, a *covenantal* self—woven with others, responsible to family, community, country, and God.

And the covenantal self finds that the moment we reach out for others, we find them reaching back for us. Which is to say: *none of us carry the years alone*.

This is the promise of tonight: that by showing up, by turning inward, and by doing so together... we elevate our lives, and we sketch the selves we long to become. And as in any great work of art, *it is the shadows that give us depth*.

The writer Rebecca Solnit reminds us that history is staged like a theater. The powerful stand in the limelight, and command our attention.

But hope, she says, is not born under these bright lights. Hope lives in the shadows—where no one is watching, where quiet courage takes root, where ordinary people ask big questions and make unseen choices that, over time, bend the world toward mercy.

Kol Nidre is not the stage, but Jacob's dark riverbank. Not the headlines, but the hidden wrestling of the heart. We stare into the abyss and it shows us the abyss in ourselves. This is where renewal begins.

And what rises from the abyss?

All of us, together.

And at the final breaths of this holy day—with the gates still open, with our hearts laid bare, having wrestled with ourselves— we will stand before the ark.

And there, in the hush where truth can be spoken—we will voice the prayers that matter most:

to be held in love,
to meet our purpose.

And we will ask for the only review that matters:
that our names be remembered,
that they be written in the Book of Life.

And then—hungry, yet nourished— we will cry out the final words of Ne'ilah.
The shofar will sound. Havdalah will carry us back into the world.
And we will step into the light—
our souls steadied, renewed by the work we have done.

Shadow. Struggle. Blessing.

This is our inheritance.

May we go forward in courage, in humility, in life.