Rabbi Samantha Frank
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‘Family Friendly’ Service
Temple Micah, Washington, DC

The Letter “Hey” ה

Dear Little One,

Right now you are inside my body, but in a few months, we are due to meet you.

You are due to arrive into a world that feels increasingly chaotic. We live in a country that is chasing “greatness,” and there is deep disagreement about what that greatness means, looks like, and how much freedom of the press and freedom of media can be allowed to exist. I pray that when you arrive, the war between Gaza and Israel will be over. You’ll arrive in a world where antisemitism is used to justify the murder of Christian children, and where fighting against antisemitism is used by corrupt politicians as an excuse to defund critical scientific research that supports education, equity, and health.

On top of all of that, you’ll have to navigate “typical” questions of growing up, like peer pressure, making friends, and generally finding your way in the world.

“How can I live a life of which I am proud?” you’ll ask.

“How can I live up to my values, and commitments, despite the pressures around me?”

Luckily, your Jewish community has been asking these questions for thousands of years. We have a treasure trove, in volumes and volumes of text and rituals to turn to.

Maybe, little one, we don’t need big words or big concepts to help us. Maybe we can focus on one Hebrew letter, the letter *hey.* **ה**

A few years ago, in a class on poetry and prayer, my professor Dr. Wendy Zierler talked about the rhythm and the sounds created in Hebrew poetry. 500 years before that, the Kabbalists also explored what the shapes and sounds of the letters have to teach us about meaning and our world, and the Rabbis of the Talmud saw holiness in letters too, 1300 years before that.

[What is the impact of the repetition of the sound *mem* ? Mmm, mmm, mmm. Delicious in English. Or *ima,* or *mama.* Satisfaction. Mothering. Closeness.

Mem, with your mouth closed, is the opposite of *hay,* which asks us to be open.]

Hay is both the sound of the breath, and it’s the source of being. Hey appears not once but twice in God’s holy name, Yud Hay Vav Hey. Hey is the key word when, standing at the burning bush, Moses says: “who will I

explain to the Israelites has sent me?" God responds: "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh,* I will be who I will be. *Hay,* then, is the sound of being itself. Can we all make the sound of the letter *hey* together?

In other words, perhaps we can use the letter *hay* like a tool we can keep in our pocket, a way to answer the question: "how can I be my best self?"

The letter *hay* comes at the end of the three things we can reliably do, no matter how hard the world gets.

*T'fila**h*** - prayer. We cannot honestly reflect on who we are without breathing through it. When we look in the mirror, proverbial or otherwise, and don't like what we see, we can remind ourselves to just breathe through it. Sometimes, when we ask God for something big - to help us or to help people we love, it can be gut-wrenching. But when we breathe through it, we make it to the other side. Sometimes asking for help is the hardest thing.

*Tzedaka**h*** - The world desperately needs our righteous action, right now. We need to take action for justice and goodness in our world, and we need to do this over and over and over again, no matter how much courage it takes. Today, many people in our community came to services with a filled bag of socks and underwear for our neighbors. This is one act of *tzedek.* But *tzedak**ah*** is a sustained practice. How can we build it into our lives: Is it in giving *tzedakah* each week at Shabbat? Is it something else? Even young people, reliant on your parents for so much, you can still make a difference with *tzedakah*. Have you ever been worried about what you can

do, and then when you finally take action, you breathe a sigh of relief? Maybe this is the *hay* of tzedakah.

Teshuvah - the work of repair can combine *tfilah* and *tzedakah,* or it can be its own spiritual (emotional) (physical) work. *Teshuvah* requires looking at the patterns of our lives and asking if they are working for us, if they are helping us be the best we can be. The Rambam taught that true *teshuvah* only exists when we make a heartfelt desire to change. If we simply apologize with no intention of figuring out how to avoid doing the same thing in the future, then true *teshuvah* has not happened. In other words, when we do true teshuvah, it means we commit to being our best selves so that we can build a better world. This is going to take a lot of hard work, and we are going to have to continue to breathe out.

The Rabbis of the Talmud taught that the letter *hay,* which appears twice in God's holy name (YUD HAY VAV HAY) is extra special. They taught that some scribes would add an extra upward swoosh to the top of the *hay* to symbolize both God's holiness and the idea that we should always be seeking that holiness. [*Hey,* then, is not just an integral part of teshuvah, tfilah, and tzedakah, but it is also a reminder of the holiness of being.]

They add that the bottom of the letter is open to symbolize that we are free to make choices: good choices and bad choices. We are not boxed in. Perhaps the second leg of *hay* is broken to symbolize that it's natural to choose wrongdoing, and yet there is still always a path back toward holiness.

So my dear little one, the world in which you will enter is a hard one. But there is much holiness to be found, and to be created.

Shanah tovah.