

Sermons for the Days of Awe, 2008/5769

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

Congregation Shema Yisrael

Atlanta, Georgia

From Either-Or To Both-And

Rosh Ha Shanah Morning

Three rabbis were discussing their upbringings and what those upbringings had taught them about the rabbinate. One of them said: “My own father was a rabbi. He was a brilliant scholar in Bible, and he taught me everything he knew about scripture.” The second rabbi said: “My own father was also a rabbi. He was a brilliant scholar in medieval Jewish philosophy, and so he taught me everything he knew about the ideas of our people.”

But the third rabbi said: “My father was not a Biblical scholar, nor was he an expert in medieval Hebrew philosophy. I did not grow up with grand traditions like the two of you. My father was a humble tailor. But I did learn two very important things from him. I learned how to repair what is old, and I learned how to evaluate what is new. That’s how my father taught me to become a rabbi.”

My father was not a great rabbi, nor was he a humble tailor. My father was a professional photographer. His studio and his darkroom were in the basement of our house. I can still smell the chemicals. I will always remember coming home from school and finding him in the darkroom, and I would knock on the door, and he would say, “Come in, quickly!” There in the darkness, the only light coming from the glowing second hand on the clock, we would have conversations, all too often about my less-than-stellar academic career in high school.

My father believed that all the great photographers, whether Alfred Eisenstaedt or Walker Evans or Diane Arbus -- had one important thing in common: they all worked in black and white. That was my father’s preferred way of doing his work as well. My father believed that anyone could photograph a sunset in Hawaii or autumn leaves changing in New England and have it look great. That was no challenge, because nature supplied the colors. My father believed that too much color could beguile the eye. He believed that the true art emerged from the subtle interplay of black and white, of light and shadows.

It was there, at my father’s feet, that I learned – not photography, but Judaism. At my father’s feet I learned why the Jewish day begins with the evening, and the evening begins with the dusk, and the dusk is the hardest part of the day to discern. At my father’s feet, I learned the art of Judaism, which is simply this: Love the shadows, live in the grey areas, rejoice in ambiguity...and know that Judaism is not either/or. It is both/and.

Judaism 101, then.

Is Judaism this-world oriented, or is it focused on the World to Come? Certainly, it is fair to say that biblical Judaism focuses on this world, and yet the rabbis in the post-biblical period invented the idea of the *olam ha-ba*, the supernal world to come. This world, or the next world: it’s not either/or; it’s both/and.

Is Judaism mostly concerned with the Jewish people? Or is it more broadly universalistic? It's not either/or; it's both/and.

Does Judaism believe in nursing the wounds of the Jewish people, or is it more emotionally expansive? In the Haggadah, there is a famous passage in which we curse the nations who persecuted us. But the Haggadah also has a blessing for those nations who helped us as well. Once again, it's not either/or, it's both/and.

Is God *avinu* or *malcheinu*? Is God an intimate, loving parent... or is God a distant, demanding ruler? Both/and. Is God *dayan emet*, the true and perhaps harsh judge, or is God *ha-rachaman*, the compassionate and womblike one? Again, it's both/and.

Is Abraham the knight of faith who stands up to God and protests the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah...or is he a cowering servant of God who agrees – not once, but twice – not only today, but tomorrow – to an almost sacrifice of not one son, but two? It's not either/or; it's both/and.

Is Judaism in favor of capital punishment, or is it opposed to capital punishment? For some offenses, biblical Judaism certainly favors the death penalty...but the rabbinic tradition is largely opposed to capital punishment. And yet, even there, at least one rabbi believed that the death penalty could be a deterrent against murder. So, the answer is not either/or; it is both/and.

And what of Israel and the Palestinians? I am a committed Zionist and a lover of Israel. I travel to Israel whenever I can. I believe that there is no more urgent project in American Judaism today than to teach our young people and ourselves how to defend the state of Israel intellectually against her enemies.

And yet, even this fervent Zionist needs to remind himself that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a struggle between right and wrong. Rather, as the Israeli writer Amos Oz put it, it's a struggle between right and *right*. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a struggle between one very powerful, deep and convincing claim, and another very powerful, deep and convincing claim. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

But in my mind's eye, I can see a hand waving in the back of the room. "Rabbi, are you a closet relativist? Rabbi, are you saying that Judaism lacks any clear answers? Are you saying that Zionism and Palestinian nationalism are precisely the same thing? Are you possibly saying that Judaism can encompass everything and anything?" Here I must remind you that I have often counseled young people and not so young people alike: "Your mind should never be so open that everything falls out."

Let us pause to make a partial list of all of Judaism's verities. Judaism is absolutely certain: we need moral integrity; we must heed the call of conscience; we must utterly reject all forms of idolatry, which is not only worshipping false gods but worshipping money and status and the state and our selves. Judaism is absolutely clear: We have to affirm life and hope and purpose. Judaism is absolutely sure: there is a God in the world; there are *mitzvot* we must do; Jewish ritual gives texture and meaning to life; the Jewish people is our extended family and sacred community; there is a world we must

repair, and out of the chaos of existence, we can construct meaning. And that's just a short list of those things about which Judaism is certain.

But for all our certainties, we also relish our uncertainties.

Reb Naphtali of Ropschitz was the founder of a Hasidic dynasty in southeastern Poland. Reb Naphtali once had a dream in which he saw himself as a fetus still in his mother's womb. While he was in the womb, something bizarre happened. An angel came and revealed two sacred tablets to him.

On one tablet, Naphtali saw these words: "If a man wishes to make the Torah his own, he must be as cruel to his family as the raven is to its young."

And then, on the second tablet: "A man must care for his family beyond his strength."

On the first tablet, Naphtali saw these words: "A scholar should burn with the fires of righteous indignation."

And then, on the second: "A sage should always be meek and humble."

Then, on the first tablet: "Be cunning in God's service."

And then, on the second tablet: "Be simple hearted before God."

On the first tablet, Naphtali read these words: "Always be satisfied with a bare minimum."

On the second tablet, he read these words: "After you die, you will have to render an account for every legitimate pleasure that you denied yourself in this world."

As you can well imagine, Reb Naphtali was confused. He said to the angel: "I don't understand. You've shown me a pair of tablets in which one tablet blatantly contradicts the other. How can I possibly reconcile them? I'm about to be born. How am I supposed to live this way?"

At that precise moment, Naphtali was born. And these were the first words he heard: "Go," said the angel, "and try to figure it out for yourself."

That process of figuring it out is not pretty. It is quite often messy. A few years ago, I had the honor of taking our then-lieutenant governor, Mark Taylor, on a tour of Jerusalem. We went into a *yeshiva*. He looked on as the students argued with each other and pounded on their volumes of Talmud. As we left, he turned to me and said: "You know, Rabbi, I admit that I don't know terribly much about Judaism, but I gotta tell you: you got yourself a very noisy religion here!"

Mark Taylor was right. We got ourselves a very noisy religion here. The so-called Rabbinic Bible is a noisy book. In the center of the page? The biblical text in Hebrew. Around the edges? The words of commentators like RASHI and Ibn Ezra and Seforno and Ramban. They lived within hundreds of years of each other, from roughly 1000 to

roughly 1600. They lived nowhere near each other: in France and in Spain and in Germany and in Poland. Their opinions are all on the page. There are no heresy trials on those pages. No one burns at the stake; the only burning is the burning of the soul with the passion of study and engagement.

Do you know how you got to be a sage in early Judaism? It was like a rather unusual Ph.d defense. You had to show that you could find fifty reasons why something should be permitted... and another fifty reasons why that same thing should be forbidden. And when the rabbis could not figure it out, they resolved not to resolve. Let it sit until Elijah the prophet brings the Messiah and tells us what to do. Until then, let's live with the ambiguity.

In my personal experience, when I drive, the most dangerous sign is the one that reads – “One way: do not enter.” There are people in all of the three western faiths who have placed that sign upon the gates that lead to God's house. They love words like “all” and “only.” If you don't keep all the *mitzvot*, then you're not a good Jew. You can only have a full Jewish life in Israel. Jesus is the only way to salvation. There is *dar al-salaam*, the realm of Islam, or there is *dar al-harb*, the realm of the sword.

We crave absolute certainty. No weaseling allowed. Banish forever from your vocabulary words like “however,” or “but” or “on the other hand.” What's the worst thing we can say about a politician? That he or she waffles. That he or she changes her mind. That he or she blinks.

This is precisely what Judaism should be saying to America at this most difficult time in her history: We are living with very complex challenges in our nation. Complexity means that you are permitted to see the other side of an issue. You are allowed to blink and you are allowed to think and you are allowed to change your mind.

Moreover: Complexity means that you need your truth, but your truth needs another truth in order to become a richer and deeper truth.

Are you pro-life? Then you have something to teach us about the sanctity of even nascent life. Are you pro-choice? Then we need you to teach us about human autonomy. Are you in favor of same-sex marriage? Then we need you to teach us to pay attention to those on the fringes of society. Do you believe in the traditional view of marriage? Then teach us about what those historical definitions have meant. Do you remember the Hebrew word for truth? It is *emet* – *alef mem tav* – the first, middle and last letter of the *alef-beit* – the left, middle and right wing of the alphabet, so to speak.

We started with Judaism as a program to learn both/and. We moved to America as the place to teach both/and. And now we need to turn to ourselves as the arena in which to live both/and.

I am thinking of the wounded in our midst, those who are unemployed, or under-employed, or those who bear the indignities of the massive financial failures, this economic 9/11, of recent days. I remind you, prayerfully, that on Rosh Ha Shanah, God opens not only a *sefer chayim*, not only the book of life, but a *sefer parnasah*, a book of sustenance as well – and may God inscribe all of us in both of those heavenly volumes.

What do you do when you see your dreams disappear like a deleted computer file? In that long dark night of the soul, you ask yourself the following series of questions: Am I a good person? Am I a competent person? Or am I a loser?

Listen: there are at least seventy facets of Torah. There are at least seventy ways that people can interpret the Torah. Don't you think that there are at least as many ways for you to interpret yourself? Think, for a moment, about King David. King David was: a king, a warrior, a poet, a lecher – oh, and by the way, the forerunner of the Messiah. Should you be less complex than King David? Should you have fewer inner contradictions than King David?

That's why the ancient rabbis said: "Let no person think himself or herself as entirely righteous or entirely wicked." What does it mean to be a biblical hero? It doesn't mean you have no imperfections. It means that you transform those imperfections.

We cannot view ourselves as being entirely competent or entirely incompetent, or as being entirely successful or entirely unsuccessful. Even and especially when we cannot control the chaos of existence, even when we cannot be entirely professionally successful or financially successful – what we do have within our control is the ability to be humanly successful. The challenge is to work on those pieces of ourselves that are not subject to a market economy – to be better spouses and partners and parents and children and siblings and friends.

I have always loved this teaching of the Hasidic master Reb Nachman of Bratslav. One of his disciples came to him, totally depressed, because he was preparing for Yom Kippur and he realized that he had a great many sins to recite before God. There were sins that were listed in the prayer book and even a whole lot that weren't there at all. That knowledge was depressing to him. This disciple felt that he had plunged into the abyss.

So this is what Nachman said to his disciple who was in so much pain: "It's true. You do have to recite your sins on Yom Kippur."

"But, Rebbe, how can I possibly survive under the burden of my failings?"

"Because there's something else you have to do as well. Just as you have to recite your sins, you also must recite the good things you have done as well. You have to recite the *mitzvot* that you've done as well. Every *mitzvah* that you've done becomes a musical note in your soul, and each note becomes joined to another note and they become a chord and then a sacred melody and that becomes a symphony and that becomes the song of your life."

It is time for all of us to begin to listen to the symphonies of our lives. Be the conductor of your symphony. Hear the music in its entirety.

For life is not either/or; it's both/and.

To Be Born Again

Yom Kippur morning

My teacher is a man who died exactly twenty-five years to the day before I was born. Therefore, it is safe to say that I never met him. But his words have always inspired me. Today I want to introduce you to him, because it is possible that his words and his life contain the greatest story of contemporary Judaism.

His name was Franz Rosenzweig. He was the most influential Jewish thinker of the last century. It was not supposed to have been that way. Rosenzweig should have been lost to the Jewish people and to Jewish history. But something happened. Today I want to think out loud about what happened, and about what it might mean to us.

His life was simultaneously remarkable and tragic. He was born on Christmas Day, in 1886 in Cassel, Germany. He was the only child of assimilated German Jews. His home was a place of culture and cultivation; his Jewish education was painfully superficial. He celebrated his bar mitzvah. He attended High Holy Day services at his family's synagogue. But everything Jewish in his family's life was devoid of spiritual depth. His family's seder was raucous; his uncles scoffed at everything and made a mockery of everything. Ultimately his parents stopped having seder altogether.

Rosenzweig was not alone in his alienation. It seemed to have been the ironic birthright of so many German and central European Jews of that time. As a matter of fact, we might truly say that the German-Jewish renaissance that happened in the early decades of the twentieth century came about as a result of young people rebelling against their parents.

In a famous and blistering letter to his father, the great writer Franz Kafka castigated Hermann Kafka for his farcical Judaism: "What sort of Judaism was it that I got from you? As a young man, I could not understand how, with the insignificant scrap of Judaism you yourself possessed, you could reproach me for not making an effort to cling to a similar, insignificant scrap. It was indeed, so far as I could see, a mere nothing, a joke—not even a joke."

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, recorded in his memoirs that his father would light a cigar from the Shabbat candles and then recite a mock blessing over tobacco. His parents knew how much he admired Zionism, and so, in a classic case of good news/bad news, they gave him a gift of a portrait of Theodor Herzl. That was the good news. The bad news was that the gift was for Christmas. The younger Scholem would rebel against his parents' assimilation, and several years later his father would write to him and tell him that he was cutting him off without a cent.

But let us return to Rosenzweig. When his cousin Hans decided to convert to Christianity, Rosenzweig's parents were more than a little upset. In a letter to them, dated November 6, 1909, Franz said that he himself had counseled the move. "It doesn't rest with the children," he wrote, "but with the parents. Religious instruction is of no avail without a religion that is seen, heard, and tasted." His cousin was thirsty for the spirit, and

his parents had failed to give him a Judaism that would nourish him. "Because I am hungry," the young Rosenzweig wrote, "must I on principle go on being hungry? We already live fully Christian lives. There is absolutely no reason not to go the distance."

In 1912, Rosenzweig was twenty-six years old. He was studying at the University of Leipzig. There a prominent German-Jewish intellectual, Eugene Rosenstock-Husey, befriended him. Rosenstock-Husey had himself converted to Christianity; he would live to an old age and end his career teaching philosophy at Dartmouth.

The two men spend many long hours discussing religion -- sometimes straight through the night. Finally, on July 7, 1913, Rosenzweig decided that he, too, would convert to Christianity. But he decided that he would convert not as a pagan, but rather as did Saul of Tarsus, who would become the apostle Paul. He would act fully as a Jew until the moment of conversion released him from the yoke of Torah.

And so, it was 1913 – exactly ninety-five years ago, which is why I have been saving this story for precisely this moment.

It was Rosh Ha Shanah. Rosenzweig attended the lavish synagogue in Cassel with his parents. Some time during the service, Franz told his mother that he planned to convert to Christianity (I suppose that you might say that his timing was not exactly subtle). She didn't take it very well. She told her son: "When you come to the synagogue on Yom Kippur, I shall tell them to throw you out. In our synagogue, there is no room for a renegade."

And so, to avoid embarrassment, Rosenzweig decided that he would not spend Yom Kippur in Cassel. Instead, he decided to go to Berlin for Yom Kippur. It was today – ninety-five Yom Kippurs ago. There were all sorts of large and ornate synagogues in Berlin (all of them went up in flames on Kristallnacht – exactly seventy years ago this November). But Rosenzweig wanted something different. He decided that rather than go to a large and fancy synagogue, he would go to a small Orthodox synagogue.

Now, you can imagine the shul that Rosenzweig went to. You can see it. You can hear the chanting. You can even smell the musty prayer books.

And then, something happened.

Franz Rosenzweig spent the whole day in that small Orthodox synagogue. By the time *neilah* was over and the service was over, he emerged from that synagogue and he knew something. Christians might need the Son to lead them to the Father, but for the Jew, for Rosenzweig – there was no such need. He, as a Jew, already had a relationship with God – and for that reason, he resolved to remain a Jew. From that moment, he began living as a Jew.

A year later, World War One started. Rosenzweig fought in the German army as an anti-aircraft gunner on the Macedonian front. From the depths of the trenches, he recorded his thoughts on post cards, and he mailed them home to his mother. Adele Rosenzweig saved the cards, and after the war he compiled them, and they became his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*.

He then translated the poems of the Spanish poet Yehudah Ha-Levi into German.

Rosenzweig then created the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, where theologians and academics and scientists and artists and musicians and writers, and psychologists like Erich Fromm, would all learn together. He realized that Jewish learning could no longer start from the Torah and lead into life. It must now start from the realities of life and lead into Torah. In order to teach in the Lehrhaus, you didn't have to be an expert in Judaism. That wasn't the point. You had to commit yourself to growing as a Jew, and learning in the process of teaching others.

We don't need Jewish books, Rosenzweig proclaimed. We need Jewish people – Jewish human beings who express their humanity through Judaism. And how would that happen? Let's go back to the sources of Judaism, Rosenzweig proclaimed. Let's not simply rely on what earlier generations of scholars and teachers had pre-digested for us. Let's look at the texts and take them seriously. His Judaism was a big Judaism. "Not one sphere of life ought to be surrendered," he wrote. "Nothing Jewish is alien to me."

And then, in 1922, Rosenzweig was stricken with what we would now call Lou Gehrig's disease. He became increasingly paralyzed. Soon his condition would resemble that of Stephen Hawking. A scientist designed a special typewriter for him to use; soon, even that didn't work. When he wanted to create, his wife Edith would go through the alphabet, letter by letter, and he would blink when she came to the right letter, and she would write it down. Letters into words, words into sentences, sentences into ideas.

And yet, this is unbelievable. Sitting on my shelf is a beautiful volume that I actually found in a garage sale in New York many years ago. It is the German translation of the Bible that Rosenzweig created in partnership with Martin Buber. It is an utterly unique translation because it actually preserved the rhythms of the original Hebrew in the German.

What I had not known, or what I had forgotten, was that when Rosenzweig worked on this project, he was already totally paralyzed. From this we learn the sheer power of transcendence.

On December 10, 1929, Franz Rosenzweig died in Frankfurt. He was only 43 years old.

Let us re-visit the moment that Franz Rosenzweig decided to stay Jewish – the moment when services ended on Yom Kippur, exactly 95 years ago – in that synagogue in Berlin.

Franz Rosenzweig had fallen in love with Judaism, and as the great mystic Meister Eckhardt once said: "Love has no why." But still, we ask: Why? What happened on that Yom Kippur? What converted Rosenzweig back to Judaism?

Certainly there were more ornate synagogues in Berlin, so it couldn't have been the architecture.

It wasn't the rabbi's sermon. It wasn't the hazzan's chanting. It wasn't the majesty of the behavior that he witnessed on the pulpit.

It was the majesty of the behavior that he witnessed in the pews.

It was the community.

For the first time in his life, Franz Rosenzweig felt himself to be a part of a community that had purpose and meaning.

For the first time in his life, Rosenzweig felt that he was with Jews who were not strangers to what they were doing. He was with Jews who did not act as if they were at the opera, with polite and interested detachment. He was with Jews who did not act as if Judaism was a relic; or as if Judaism was a museum piece; or as if Judaism was passé.

Quite the opposite! Let us imagine that they had a sense of engagement; they had a sense of intensity; they had a sense of solemnity and of joy. They acted as if Judaism mattered – that it was their shelter against the storms of life.

I ask you now to imagine a spiritual descendant of the young Franz Rosenzweig.

A young Jew – or even a not-so-young Jew -- comes to services today.

Join me in imagining this person.

She (but it could be *he*) had a Jewish education – once. But “once” was a long time ago – thirty years ago, let us imagine. It has been a long time she has been to a service for the Days of Awe – or for any service, for that matter. No, that's not exactly true. A few years ago, her college roommate's daughter became bat mitzvah. She went to that service. But when she got there, she found that no one was praying. No one was singing. It was as if they were waiting for it all to be over so that the party could begin.

That was the last Jewish religious service she had attended, and it was a few years ago.

She (but again, it could be *he*) saw the ad for Congregation Shema Yisrael in the *Atlanta Jewish Times*. Or, more likely, a friend told her (but then again, it could be *him*) about the ad in the *Atlanta Jewish Times*. All right, she says to herself. I'm going to give Judaism one more try. It's not that if this service doesn't “work,” she will convert to Christianity or Islam or Buddhism – though let us admit that those are always options. But being “nothing” is also an option, or being a cultural Jew, whatever that means. It doesn't matter: she has already inwardly declared that this is going to be her one last chance to find meaning in Jewish life.

And here she is.

With all due humility, I will not be able to save this person for Judaism.

With all due respect, our hazzan will not be able to save this person for Judaism.

With all due encouragement, it will be you who will save this person for Judaism. Through your spiritual presence, through your attentiveness in prayer, through your participation, through your public witness to the meaning of Judaism – you, and perhaps only you, have the power of not only sending your prayers to the heavens, but also sending some searching Jew back into Jewish life.

This might be hard for some of you to hear. “What do you mean – that I have responsibility for other Jews? Sure, I may have responsibility for saving other Jews’ *lives*, if they are in danger. But that I have the responsibility to save Jewish *life*? Please, Rabbi. Don’t bother me with that. I just happen to be here. Someone told me about this service. Or I’ve come every year for the last few years because it’s convenient. I’m here, because, well, *because*. And you’re telling me that I have a job to do?”

Ah, but you do.

One of my colleagues tells me the following story. Some years ago, he had a congregant who was an old German Jewish man who had grown up in Berlin. Here comes one of the most outrageous examples of that popular game that we call “Jewish geography.” Lo and behold, it turns out that the man had been sitting two rows behind Rosenzweig in that synagogue in Berlin -- on that historic night of Kol Nidre, 1913!

My colleague said to the old man: “That service must have been amazing.”

“Well, not exactly,” the old man answered. “To tell you the truth, it really wasn’t that special.”

But that service saved Rosenzweig’s life. Even a not-so-special service can save a Jew’s life.

So, in this coming year, be your own Franz Rosenzweig. Learn more about Judaism. In this coming year, find new paths to God. Find paths that you may have forgotten, or that your parents had forgotten, or that your grandparents had refused to learn. Do what you can. If an actor blows a scene, he can go out and come back in again. We have flubbed our lines and we have blown our scenes, but Yom Kippur is the day when we go out, and come back in again. It is the day upon which we say to ourselves and to others: God loves you the way you are. But God loves you too much to let you stay the way you are.

And lest you think that it is too late; lest you think that you have been living your Jewish life this way and you must continue to live your Jewish life this way; lest you say to yourselves, “I’m forty, or fifty, or seventy, and this is the kind of Jew I am and will always be” -- consider this obituary that appeared just the other day in *The New York Times*. It is for a man named Boris Yefimov. He was Stalin’s favorite cartoonist, a personal friend of Trotsky, old enough to have seen the last czar riding by in a coach. At the time of his death, Boris Yefimov was 109 years old.

PS. Boris Yefimov was a Jew, and according to several Israeli newspapers, he was the oldest living Jew in the world.

PPS. Boris Yefimov didn't start practicing Judaism – until he was one hundred years old.

What is that verse in our liturgy? *Ad yom moto techacheh lo*: until the very day of our death, God waits for us.

This was supposed to have been the day of Franz Rosenzweig's Jewish death. By the end of the day, with the shofar blasts of *neilah*, he heard those shofar blasts not as the groans of death, as the cries of life. They were the cries of a new life. The new life was his.

Yes, Virginia (to coin a phrase): Judaism believes in being born again.

By the end of this day, may each of us be born again as well.

What Do You Have To Luz?

Yizkor

Shortly after leaving the chiropractor's office the other day, where I had just celebrated the post-Rosh Ha Shanah ritual grinding of my skeletal structure, I found myself reflecting on a fundamental Jewish insight into the human anatomy.

While on the chiropractor's table, I had whiled away the time by recalling the rabbinic legend that speaks of a bone at the tip of the spine that is called the *luz*. The *luz*, which some identify as the coccyx, is said to enfold the essence of a person's soul. The *luz* never deteriorates and it can never be destroyed. Even if the entire body were to be shattered, crushed or burned, the *luz* cannot perish. The *luz*, we are told, is the bone that stores a person's spark of uniqueness, the core of our selfhood. The *luz*, we are told, is the source of the individual's ultimate resurrection from the dead; it is the bone that regenerates first, and then the rest of the body, and then the body reunites with its soul. Most remarkably, this is a piece of rabbinic folklore that Jews and Muslims share; the sacred books of Islam refer to this bone as "*Ajbu al-Thanab*."

One of the amazing things about this legend is the context in which it first appears. Its source is *Vayikra Rabbah*, the major midrash on the book of Leviticus. The teaching emerges out of a question that the Roman Emperor Hadrian asked Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah: "When God begins the task of resurrecting human beings, which bone will He start from?" The sage answered that such resurrection would spring forth from the *luz*. The Emperor was skeptical, and so Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah brought a *luz* before him, and he proceeded to perform a series of science experiments. He put it in water, but it did not dissolve; he tried to smash it with millstones, but it could not be ground; he put it in fire, but it was not burnt; he tried to beat it with a hammer, but the hammer broke. Nothing had any effect whatsoever on the *luz*.

It is quite a delightful midrash – especially when you read it and you see that

when it refers to Hadrian, it interjects the phrase “may his bones be crushed,” which was surely the rabbinic equivalent of “he should go to hell,” or even worse. I thought of that midrash this past summer, when I happened to spend a few days in Rome on the way to Jerusalem. On my first day in Rome, I walked over to the Coliseum, which, my guide told me, had been built by Jewish slaves. The Coliseum! The great cultural center of ancient Rome, which drew its appeal from gladiator contests and lions eating Christians, the place where emperors had the power of life and death over hapless performers – that place is now merely a huge and fascinating ruin and tourist destination.

From there, it was just a few hundred yards to the Arch of Constantine, which commemorated the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity. And from there, it was but a few hundred yards to the famous, or infamous, Arch of Titus – with its depiction of the Roman soldiers looting ancient Jerusalem, carrying its seven branched menorah off as booty.

To me, the irony was as beautiful as the so-called Eternal City itself. I am in Rome, I said to myself, and I am on the way to Jerusalem. Today I am looking at the Arch of Titus, and I am looking at a monument to Jewish defeat. But tomorrow, I will be on my way to Jerusalem, to a Jerusalem re-born, which is a monument to Jewish victory.

And at that moment, I thought of Emperor Hadrian. When it came to the Jews, there were good Roman emperors (well, not exactly) and there were bad Roman emperors, but Hadrian was in some ways the worst of them all. He ruled from 117 to 138 of the Common Era. It was he who decided to erect a gentile city on the site of the destroyed Jerusalem, which he named Aelia Capitolina, in order to erase the very name of Jerusalem. He erected a statue of Jupiter and a statue of himself on horseback on the very site of the Temple.

Hadrian was the emperor during the ill-fated Bar Kochba revolt. When this afternoon we read the account of the ten martyrs who died for the crime of teaching Torah, let us remember: they died under the direct orders of Hadrian.

So, yes, there I was in Rome, and I was on my way to Jerusalem – which is the *luz*, the base of the backbone of the Jewish people. There are very few tourists who go to Rome and think of what Rome meant to the ancient Jewish people: how its very name was an epithet and the epitome of everything that we opposed, how the sages would simply call it “the wicked kingdom,” how the sages identified the murderous Rome with the murderous Esau, who was the renegade twin of Jacob, how a midrash said that on the very day that the Israelites built the Golden Calf in the wilderness, the twins Romulus and Remus were born and Rome, the ultimate punishment for our desert sin, was conceived.

But many are the pilgrims (notice that I didn’t say “tourists”) who go to Jerusalem and who remember that the rabbis said that this was the navel of the world, the spine of our people, the *luz* of our nation. Back in Rome, I had looked at the Arch of Titus and rather than feeling anger, I felt a certain sacred smugness within me: “You can have your monuments, Titus,” I said to myself, “but know that two thousand years after your troops

carried off the menorah, it's back. There is a replica of the menorah in front of the Knesset. We're back. We won."

Oh, and as for you, Hadrian, I had said to myself: if you're listening, I hate to inform you that your pagan religion is dead. But the words of the ten sages you killed – those words are alive. When you wrapped Hananiah ben Teradyon in a Torah scroll and you burnt him at the stake, in his dying moments he consoled his students by saying: "The scroll is burning, but the letters are returning to God Who gave them." Torah is the piece of us that neither water nor fire nor millstones nor hammers nor tyrants nor even assimilation and secularism can destroy. The Torah is yet another *luz* of the Jewish people.

Why would I even teach about the *luz*? Why even discuss this admittedly obscure piece of Jewish anatomical wisdom? I share it with you because it points to the fundamental questions that we ask ourselves during these moments of Yizkor. During these moments of Yizkor, we not only turn our thoughts to those whom we have lost, but also to ourselves – and to those things that we pray we will never lose and that will never be lost.

What is my *luz*? What is that which is within me that is the true root of my soul? What is the quality, the essence, and the final spark that will remain in me even after everything else is extinguished? What is the thing that has such great and concerted power that I could be spiritually resurrected and even re-created out of it?

In a recent essay, the Israeli writer David Grossman reflects on this question. Some writers, he says, will say that their *luz* is creativity. Religious people say it's the divine spark they feel inside. Some people say that it's the sense of being a parent. One woman, reports Grossman, said that her *luz* was her longing for the things and people she missed. A ninety-year-old woman told him that her *luz* was the man who had been the love of her life, a man who had taken his own life over sixty years before.

I think that Grossman had a particular sensitivity to this particular question because of his own personal experience – his son Uri had been killed in the war in Lebanon, exactly two summers ago. Uri died two weeks before his 21st birthday. Grossman wrote these words in memory of his son:

"For the last three days, almost every thought has had a 'won't' in it. He won't come home, we won't talk, we won't laugh. That boy with the ironic gaze and the awesome sense of humor won't be anymore. That young man with the wisdom so much more profound than his age won't be anymore. We won't have Uri's infinite gentleness, nor the calm that steadies every storm."

"Won't" is the word that we carry within our souls today. "She *won't* see her grandchildren graduate from college." "He *won't* be there for the wedding." "She *won't* be at break fast." "He *won't* be there to lead Seder this year." It's all *won't*. Yizkor is the *won't* moment of the Jewish year.

But the *luz* is the part of the person you love that won't – again, *won't* – be destroyed. Yizkor on Yom Kippur is nothing less than the day of remembering the *luz* of the loved ones you've lost.

Some of you who know me know that one of my worst traits is that I am an inveterate punner. So, let me prepare you for this: there is nothing quite as tragic as when you lose your *luz*. There is nothing quite as tragic as when you can no longer remember: What is the essential me that is me? And there is nothing quite as redemptive as the knowledge that you don't have to lose your *luz* – at least, not forever. You can misplace it, like a set of car keys – but like many lost objects, you can actually retrace your steps and go back to the place where you lost it, and you can find it again.

Yom Kippur is nothing less than the day of retracing your steps and finding the *luz* of your life. Where did I leave that *luz*? Did I last see it in graduate school? Was it at the job before the last job? Was it in the place where I was most deeply happy and yet I didn't know it at the time?

And there is one more thing about the *luz*. Some of you may know that one of the most beautiful and under-rated *mitzvot* is the *mitzvah* of returning lost objects. If someone has lost a book, it is a *mitzvah* to return it. If someone has lost a precious piece of jewelry, it is a *mitzvah* to return it. If someone has lost money, it is a *mitzvah* to return it.

And so, if you know someone who has lost his or her *luz*, then one of the most elegant things you can do for that person is – you can help him or her find it. You say to that person: “It doesn't matter that you think you lost your *luz*. Come with me. Let us find it together.”

So, don't worry about your *luz* too much. It may be lost – at least, at the moment – but you can find it. It is there. It is somewhere.

And water cannot dissolve it, and fire cannot burn it, and millstones cannot grind it, and if you try to smash it with a hammer, the hammer will break. The *luz* will not. It is indestructible.

God is waiting for you to find it.