



“Returning to the Sea”

Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

A poem by E. E. Cummings:

*maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach (to play one day)
and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and
milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;
and molly was chased
by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and
may came home
with a smooth round stone
as small as a world
and as large as alone.
For whatever we lose
(like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves
we find in the sea*

In a childhood trip to Cape Cod, I remember hearing the echo of my laughter as I crouched in the long, turquoise tunnel of a wave, before it crashed down around me. We go to the ocean to experience how small we are, to feel the pull of the tide — back toward the ineffable sea, scraping pebbles against our feet, to feel the wind in our hair, to know that, against the rush of the waves, we too could be washed away.

And we come to Kol Nidre as we come to the ocean-- to acknowledge the finitude of our lives. Grains of sand we are. The fullness we feel now after a big dinner will have vanished by tomorrow mid-day. Without life’s temporary pleasures, without adornment or excess, who are we, really? At its essence, Yom Kippur pushes us toward simplicity, limitation. Whatever our achievements, next year—the waves and the wind will have washed our footprints and our sandcastles (however grand) ... away.

We come to Kol Nidre to hear the kol- the voice of the wind, of our prayers, ancient stories. Only these remain the same, rock hard against our fragility, the vicissitudes of time, and of our own changes. We come to Kol Nidre to meet our Maker, emptying the ark before the congregation and our souls before God, pouring our prayers into the vastness of the beyond. We come to Kol Nidre to face the certainty that each of us will die. That’s why we are fasting-- in order to release our hold on the physical. For in the end, nothing is ours to keep.

Indeed, this past year, 5770, has been a year of coming to terms with our limits. Even as our toys: iPhones, global positioning systems, Droids and iPads have become more sleek, more enticing. We have had to face the blunt reality that we cannot **have** everything, **be** everything, **do** everything. This year, we have been caught in our personal repeating struggles and stunned



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

by unexpected loss. Trapped in investments that have failed us and wars we cannot win. Battles over health care and immigration that reap no grand solutions and mired in oil that source of luxury, freedom and profit ... except, of course, when it seeps out into the wrong places.

This year we have realized how weak we are when caught in the pull of the undertow. Like grains of sand carried back out to sea, with no claim on the shore. But perhaps there **is** some comfort in knowing how small we are. Gazing out at the ocean, we can lose ourselves, wash away the weariness, all of our questions swallowed up by the waves. We go to the ocean as we come to Kol Kidrei- seeking to be released from the burden of all that is imperfect, of all that has been left undone.

True story:

Last September 27th, a year ago according to the Jewish calendar, erev Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre, Private James Prosser, a 21-year-old British soldier, was killed in Afghanistan when the armored vehicle he was driving was hit by a roadside bomb. Three months later, his mother, Sarah Adams, traveled to Barbados. (James had won her a trip there once from a radio talk show.) Returning to the island after his death, Sarah wrote a letter to her son, rolled it up tightly, pushed it inside a Sambuca bottle – James' favorite drink, and then hired a boat to take her as far off the island's coast as possible. After drinking a toast to James, Sarah dropped that sealed bottle into ocean. It was a gesture of release, no expectations. Similar, perhaps to the way in which we cast bread upon the water in the ritual of tashlikh, a ritual of letting go.

Yet, somewhere inside, we sense that whatever we have cast away, whatever has been consumed by the endless, arching waves – all of it, will someday, somehow be returned to us.

And so it is tonight with our prayers. We set them free, as did that British soldier's mother, each prayer, a message in a bottle. We cast them off into the beyond, hoping that each one will somehow find a home, that our prayers will be read counted, fulfilled.

*For whatever we lose
Like a you or a me
It is always ourselves
Who are found in the sea*

We come to Kol Nidre to inspect what the tide has carried back in. Because you never know what might have washed up in the storm: A perfect shell, a discarded plastic shovel, tide pools and candy wrappers, evidence of our play and our folly. So what **do** we find? The pristine sands of childhood are pure white no more. The shore line is stained by refuse, proof of our misdeeds.

Was it 30, 40 or 50,000 barrels of uncontained oil a day? The number seemed to grow with each news report, the consequences of our mistakes bleeding out from the bedrock of our lives, from



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

the unseen depths, far below the surface. We visit the sea to play, wishing to be washed pure, but cleansing is not so easy. That’s not the nature of sin —

*Unetana tokef Kedushat haYom
Let us declare the sacred power of this day
It is awesome and full of dread.
For on this day ...
You write and You seal
You record and recount
You remember deeds long forgotten
You open the book of our days
And what is written there
Proclaims itself
For it bears the signature of every human being.*

A pelican desperately tries to spread her oil encased wings and stumbles forward. A pod of dolphins passes by, each spouting oil through its blow hole. As we examine the year that has passed, we ask, “Did we make the most of our power, our wealth? What portion of our resources did we use for the collective good? What went awry?”

April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig erupts in fire, killing 11 platform workers.

Our misdeeds have explosive power, fatalities, and what’s done is done. Whether we are talking oil spill or the other accidents of our lives – how do we even begin to make it right? For many of us, the impulse may be simply to move on. Life itself pushes us forward, and the evidence sinks away from view. BP offers a perfect analogy. The wellhead was capped on July 15, and only two weeks later, much of the oil seemed to have disappeared, more rapidly than had been expected – dispersed by storm winds, consumed by bacteria, and evaporating from the ocean surface.

It’s easy to convince ourselves that it’s all fine, that our sins, especially the quiet ones, the ones hidden from the public eye, will disappear, will be absorbed into the fabric of the universe, that it will all be taken care of ... somehow, as though nothing ever happened. But five million barrels of oil don’t disappear so easily. Scientists observing hundreds of miles of coastline, up and down the Gulf, claim that an unknown amount remains under the surface.

*For whatever we seek to hide
Like a you or a me
It is always ourselves
That we find
In the sea*

Minute traces of oil have been found under the shells of newly spawned crabs. Whether we admit it or not, each act leaves its imprint on the universe, and the next generation will bear the



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

consequences of our misdeeds. We come here tonight to face ourselves, to own our choices. Tonight, we acknowledge what lies in the depths, what can be seen only by the eyes of God.

Normally, we keep our lives neatly divided into compartments: love and anger, energy inertia, public private, positive negative. But, tonight, we acknowledge the overarching unity of existence. For there are no dividing lines in the oceans of the lives we inhabit. Everything spreads quickly in the sea, every pollutant altering (ever so slightly) the chemistry of the water. Each deed affects the design of the whole, our lives suspended in a complex interwoven chain of cause and effect. Ultimately, there are no secrets in our lives, or in the sea. Eventually it all washes up on the sand.

So, stop take a moment now to become still, as when you hold a shell to your ear, and listen. What is *your* truth, this Kol Nidre? What act, what habit calls **you** to attention? What has washed up, this year, upon your shore?

*For whatever we lose
Like a you or a me
It’s always ourselves
We find in the sea...*

When it comes to cleanup of any sort, of the kind we seek to do now, on Yom Kippur, our first impulse is often to look outward. Yes, yes, I shouldn’t have said what I did. I shouldn’t have acted without more carefully weighing the consequences ... But if it wasn’t for so and so’s sheer idiocy, I wouldn’t have lashed out in the first place! We blame our reactions, our reality, the mess in which we have found ourselves, on the others. But, this evening, this next 24 hours, is about putting blame and excuses aside. It’s about looking inward, instead, as when one takes a long solitary walk on the beach.

In a recent article Thomas Friedman addresses the paralyzing role of blame. Whatever your opinion of Friedman, put it aside for a moment. Here, he offers us guidance, not only on how to respond to the oil spill, but on how to return to our best selves, on how to make teshuvah. “We cannot fix what ails America unless we look honestly at our own roles in creating our own problems... We sent BP out in the Gulf to get us as much oil as possible at the cheapest price. (Of course, we expected them to take care, but when you’re drilling for oil beneath 5,000 feet of water, stuff happens.) As Pogo would say, ‘We have met the enemy and he is us.’” (“This Time is Different,” *NewYork Times*, June 12, 2010)

Are we ready to accept Friedman’s insight? I’m not sure. In the global world of today, we are bound together by satellite images. Yet, by and large, we do not have a palpable sense of cause and effect, of mutual responsibility. The world is too immense, foreign shores too distant, and the proportions of human misery too staggering for us to implicate ourselves. Think of it—Pakistan, some four million people rendered homeless by torrential rains and flooding, making this latest humanitarian disaster more devastating than the South Asian tsunami, plus recent



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

earthquakes in Kashmir and Haiti, all of them combined. Devastating mudslides in China, a prolonged heat wave in Russia, which filled Moscow’s morgues to overflowing and ravaged hundreds of thousands of acres, more bombings in Enough! I am numb, empathy exhausted. And, the suffering in those far off places, thank God, bears little relationship to my life of relative comfort. Except for a few split-second images on CNN or my internet screen, I can’t really touch that suffering, hear it, smell it. I can turn away.

Yet the ocean, which laps at my toes, contains the same water that travels to distant shores and then back again to me.

Some posit a direct connection between our own actions and the suffering of those on the other side of the ocean-- the waters of which both divide and unite us. We’ve all heard it, too many times, perhaps: Climate change, a steadily warming planet, drought, flood and famine... I just read, without surprise, that the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world. Marc Rothwell, the captain of the *Louis Saint Laurent*, an icebreaker stationed in the Arctic reports, “Now, there’s so much open water up here, we have to account for heavy swells that undulate through the sea ice. It’s almost like a dream. The swells move in slow motion, like nothing I’ve ever seen.” (Thomas Homer-Dixon, “Disaster at the Top of the World,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2010)

When I stop to think about it, sitting here in Great Neck, I realize that we too may be on the verge of changes unlike anything we have ever seen.

But of course, this is all conjecture. None of this has happened yet. Indeed, how could the empty horizon of the Arctic Ocean, this marginal wilderness spot, bear any relationship to global affairs, to the stock market, to my backyard? How could this swath of uninhabited water play a central role in . . . say . . . the course of human civilization?

*But it is always ourselves
That we find in the sea*

The oceans connect the significant places to those that are unseen, the past to the future, carrying signs and portends of things to come. But, only if we listen, comprehend, take action . . . Or not. In the world’s capitals, movement on climate policy has nearly stopped; the global economic crisis, energy security and other near-term concerns pushing climate issues to the back burner. What has the power to break through this political and spiritual paralysis? Only a gut-level, emotional understanding of the pain that our choices inflict. That’s a lot to ask. I mean, listen. I understand **intellectually** that, as an American, I consume an inordinate percentage of the world’s resources, and I understand **theoretically** that my habits of consumption lead to evergrowing amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and therefore, (at least according to many) extreme weather changes, flooding, refugees. But can I really link my next vehicle purchase, my penchant for turning the heat up just a few degrees in the winter,



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

my next plane flight or the blue-eyed, plastic, imported Barbie that I buy for my daughter – can I link these choices to pain in the eyes of Pakistani refugee child?

Judaism’s answer is undeniably: Yes.
There is no other moral or spiritual option.

Ever hear of the Butterfly Theory? It posits that an act as small as the flap of a butterfly's wing could eventually cause a typhoon halfway around the world. Judaism, too, with its obsessive focus on the minutia of every human choice be it ethical or ritual communal or individual, teaches that it **all** matters; that each act has transcendent significance; that it all gets stirred into the cosmic melting pot.

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu
Adonai Echad*

A single reality binds every aspect of the created world together as one. It’s a leap, and I, personally, am not quite there yet. But, just for the sake of argument, let’s suppose that we have arrived at that point of awareness, that visceral understanding of the incalculable power of each word, each glance, each choice. This is exactly how the Jewish mind imagines the universe, particularly in these Yamim Noara’im, these Days of Awe. Here’s the image: A scale held in the balance, each side piled high, one with deeds of goodness, the other with evil. Both sides weigh the same, such that each choice could tip the scales, one way or the other. Each act can either inflict or relieve suffering, can condemn or redeem the entire world. Tonight, when we examine ourselves with unflinching honesty, let us be aware: your next thought could be that butterfly’s wing.

OK, if our thoughts and actions are so powerful, so important, how **do** we begin the process of self-improvement? Well, first of all, we shouldn’t expect the work to be easy clean or tidy and we shouldn’t expect to feel hopeful about finishing.

For weeks now, crews have been working to protect hundreds of miles of beaches, wetlands and estuaries along the northern Gulf coast. They use skimmer ships, floating containment booms, anchored barriers and sand-filled barricades. They employ chemical dispersants. They filter the oil and burn it. It took almost three months even to stop the flow. In a first attempt, BP employed remote control underwater vehicles to close the valves on the wellhead; that failed. Then they tried to place a containment dome on the wellhead; that didn’t work either. Next, they pumped heavy drilling fluids into the blowout preventer; that failed too. So then a second containment system became operational carrying oil from the well head to a service vessel where it was ... Are you bored yet? That’s my point. The clean up from our acts of wrongdoing is laborious, backbreaking, time consuming and, in BPs case, expensive. We may even have to don rubber boots and carry garbage bags, scrub brushes and soap.



“Returning to the Sea”

**Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
Rabbi Tara Feldman’s Sermon
on Yom Kippur 2010/5771**

After Reading, click on your browser “back” button to return to the Message Page

Teshuvah, reversing the damage that our choices have wrought, is dirty unglamorous and sacred work, God’s work.

In past advertising campaigns, before the spill, BP re-imagined its initials to stand, not for the company’s well-known name, but rather for two other words: *Beyond Petroleum*. Now, such a politically correct acronym sounds preposterous. But, it expresses this essential truth: In every fall from grace, in every disaster, there is also the opportunity to redeem ourselves, to move beyond the boundaries of the past. Imbedded in every sin, and in every painstaking clean up, is the opportunity for transformation. And, once we begin to take responsibility for our own mess, we never know what will happen. Thus every moment of despair carries with it the opportunity to hope.

Seven months after Sarah, Mother of Private James Prosser Traveled to Barbados, an oil spill clean up team from Progressive Pipeline management was hard at work on Horn Island, just off the coast of Mississippi. There was so much to collect: sticky sand, chunks of black hardened oil, brown encrusted seaweed, trash, a bottle... a bottle of Sambuca. Currents had carried it for 1,300 miles. Carefully, workers removed the letter they saw rolled up inside. They read it aloud and then got busy on the internet, looking for the bereaved mother who had written this note. After discovering the Sarah’s identity and that of her son James, they sent back to her their own letters (by conventional mail this time) expressing their gratitude for her son’s sacrifice and their prayers for her peace.

A Mississippi oil spill clean up crew, a British soldier in Afghanistan – joined by two separate disasters, by two attempts to rise above those accidents, those tragedies, and by a message in a bottle

*For whatever we lose,
like a you or a...*

Can you pray to the ocean? The water simply – is like God, covering the earth, reflecting light and darkness, absorbing each action and prayer.

Will the ocean answer? Not in words but in wind and waves. So return.

It’s never too late to find ourselves in the sea.