

Chai Society Shabbat 5782 - May 13 2022 - *Shabbat Emor*
Rabbi Jonathan Blake - Westchester Reform Temple
To Dance Beneath the Diamond Sky

First, let me convey how sorry I am not to be able to join you in person for this meaningful and joyful Shabbat. I guess I was wrong, after all this time, about a “rabbinical forcefield” that protects one from getting Covid. So, I’m at home recovering with symptoms that are unpleasant but not more than that. Thank you for your understanding.

I want to emphasize, having tested Covid positive yesterday, on the same day that our country memorialized the one million Americans claimed by Covid, that I regard myself as one of the lucky ones.

I therefore ask that you direct your concern and caring not to your rabbi but to your fellow countrymen to a hurting global community. Not everyone has been so fortunate as I, to accept vaccines and boosters, and to thereby avoid and mitigate the worst that this disease has inflicted on us. So if you must reach out with concern, find others who have suffered loss and direct your love and compassion toward them. On this Chai Society Shabbat, let’s remember that *Chai*--life--is a precious blessing from the Creator that we must safeguard with our lives.

And now, please join me on a trip down memory lane:

My first day of Hebrew school was an exercise in bewilderment. I was a fourth grader at Congregation Keneseth Israel, KI, in Allentown Pennsylvania, and had been enrolled in Sunday morning religious school since kindergarten (having graduated with honors from the nursery school of the JCC of the Lehigh Valley).

But now it was every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, 4 to 6. It was early September and it was hot and there was no A/C at KI. Our teacher, P'nina Avitzur, brusquely marched into class, as only an Israeli Hebrew School teacher could, and proceeded to take chalk and fill the entire blackboard with a single Hebrew letter: א.

Aleph.

"It has no sound," Mrs. Avitzur explained.

Aleph.

What kind of a deranged letter was this? It was, literally, unsound.

"That's stupid," replied Chad Obenski, who, among other 4th Grade Hebrew school shenanigans, managed to dislocate my finger in a case of what happens when you combine too much sugar after school with those old-school sliding wood wall panels that separated classrooms.

"It takes the sound of whatever vowel you put under it or next to it," said Mrs. Avitzur.

This did nothing to clarify matters. Wait, vowels aren't letters? No, the vowels are little lines and dots that we use to pronounce the words. "But we Israelis don't need them," she bragged.

None of this made any sense.

So, back to *Aleph*. A letter that makes no sound but which is the first and therefore most important letter of the *Aleph-Bet*. It is the *Aleph* of "Adonai," the name of God, and of "Anochi," the Divine first-person

pronoun “I” that begins the ten commandments: “I am Adonai your God,” “*Anochi Adonai Elohecha*,” three words that begin with *Aleph*.

Even in glory, *Aleph* stays silent.

Generations of Jewish kids who learned *Aleph* on day one of Hebrew school may be surprised to learn that the current methodology is different. Most modern curricula start with *Shin*, and proceed out of order, teaching *Shin*, *Bet*, and *Tav*, the last letter of the *Aleph-Bet*--letters that will be more familiar to children who already know words like *Shabbat* (*Shin-Bet-Tav*) or *Shalom*: *Shin-Lamed-Mem*. Kids pick up these letters quickly and you don’t have to get them to wrap their heads around a letter that makes no sound. An unsound letter. A letter that hides in plain sight.

Aleph.

There is a silent *Aleph* hiding not at the beginning, but at the end, of an important word that pops up in this week’s Torah reading from *Parashat Kedoshim* and, especially, throughout the Book we read at this time of year, Leviticus.

That word is *chet* (spelled חטא) which is usually translated “sin” and which actually comes from archery where it means “to miss the target.” *Chet*, spelled *Chet-Tet-Aleph*. Chapter 22 of Leviticus explains the roles and responsibilities of the *Kohanim*, the Biblical Priests. “The priests,” verse 9 comments, “should perform My service,” meaning service of or for God, “in such a way that they do not incur *Chet*,” so that they do not “sin,” miss the mark.

When it comes to how we serve God, it seems to say, it’s important to pay attention to all the details, it’s important not to “miss the mark,” *chet*,

with an *Aleph* hiding in plain sight at the end of the word, but with no vowel attached to it at all, keeping the *Aleph* silent, which is, of course, its natural state.

During my sabbatical studies, I was introduced to the writing of Rabbi Moshe Chayim Efrayim who hailed from Sudilkov, one of the most important Jewish communities of Western Ukraine, exactly halfway between Kyiv and Lviv. Rabbi Moshe Chayim Efrayim of Sudlikov was born in 1737 into the home of his maternal grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and lived with him until the age of twelve. His magnum opus, called the *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*, is a rich source for the Baal Shem Tov's teachings, the vast majority of which were transmitted orally, from grandfather to grandson. As such, the *Degel* remains an essential gateway into the mystical thought of the early Hasidim.

Looking at the word *chet* in this verse, and seeking to penetrate the mystery of the silent *aleph*, he writes:

“There is a very deep pathway here.... I heard from my master and grandfather that [God], the Master of the Universe, [whom we call the *Alupho shel Olam*, or the “*Aleph* of the World”] is hiding inside of sin (the word *chet*).

What [my grandfather, the Ba'al Shem] means is that the *Aleph* is not revealed or discernable in speech; it is [swallowed up] at the very end of the word.

And to comprehend this, [we must understand] that when we commit a transgression (God forbid), the awareness [of God] abandons us.... And in that moment, we certainly imagine that God has left the world and is not paying attention.

...But this is a total falsehood, because God's attention is always present, [even in sin, even when we 'miss the mark'].

The Holy Blessed One is in fact right there, [in front of us, *in* our transgression]; but God remains in a state of great concealment and hiddenness.”

Here's the basic idea. God, the Omnipresent One, is just that: all-present, always present, even when concealed or silent like the *Aleph*. God is present not only in the synagogue, in the soaring *Kedusha* of the morning prayers, in the mountaintop vista and the Pacific sunset, in the birth of a healthy baby and in the final breath of a great-grandparent taking gentle leave of the world--the moments that inspire awe, connection, what we call the *numinous*: that pull back the curtain of mundane experience to reveal something of the divine mystery animating existence.

This must be what Blake meant--not the rabbi but the poet--when he wrote:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

Or maybe even what Dylan was alluding to in the phantasmagorical imagery of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” where the invitation “play a song for me” opens up a doorway to cosmic revelation:

*And take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time
Far past the frozen leaves*

*The haunted frightened trees
Out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
With one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea
Circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
Driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow*

Yes, says Blake; yes, says Dylan: the Omnipresent One is always present.

And also, the Degel teaches, for God to be truly Omnipresent means, present in the moments that do not strike us as inspiring or uplifting or even particularly mysterious: in the drycleaning and the haircuts, the dishwashing and the diaper changes, the watercooler conversations and Zoom meetings, the argument with your spouse or parent or child, when the internet goes down and the basement floods, and, oy, I could go on but I won't.

And, perhaps strangest but truest of all--even when we miss the mark. When we transgress, when we sin. There, too, hides the *Aleph*: silent, perhaps; swallowed up at the end of the word, the littlest portion of the deed, perhaps; but there, all along, nonetheless.

How so?

When we miss the mark, the *Degel* teaches, we do so because we failed to acknowledge God's presence in the world and within us. We transgress precisely because we fail to see how our deeds, our choices (both good

and bad), are not isolated events, but have cosmic ripple effects, like a stone thrown into a pond, radiating outward toward eternity.

And, therefore, every deed, including every *misdeed*, presents an opportunity to self-reflect and cultivate mindful awareness of our connection to the Omnipresent One, *Alupho shel Olam*, the *Aleph* of the World.

As a coda to these musings, I observe here, on this special *Chai Society* Shabbat, where we finally gather in person again to honor members of WRT who have affiliated for 18 years and more, and to welcome members of the *Chai Society* class of 2021, that tonight is also the night when Kelly and I are officially inducted, having arrived in the summer of 2003 to be embraced so warmly by this holy community. (Our official welcome to the club, as with so many of you, has been deferred until now on account of Covid.) Kelly joins me in sharing our love and gratitude. She's performing tonight as Irene Molloy in the opening of *Hello, Dolly!* at the prestigious Pioneer Theatre in Salt Lake City, grateful to be back onstage after a more than 2-year hiatus.

Throughout these now nearly nineteen years of our participation in the life of WRT, and especially in hindsight, looking back over them, the Omnipresent One has, true to the *Degel's* word, revealed something of the Divine to me, to us, time and time again:

- Under the *chuppah* and at at the grave;
- In *simcha* and in sorrow,
- On the *bimah* and the bagel brunch,
- Naming babies and saying deathbed prayers,
- On Shabbat and Holidays,
- Or just a regular Wednesday night, learning with our teens,
- Bringing refugees from peril to safety;

- And charting a course to reach one another in lockdown,
- And find holiness even over broadband

And,

It should be added:

- When I haven't been my best:
- When I've been stressed out or pressed for time;
- When I've forgotten to make the call or failed to schedule the visit,
- Lost my patience,
- Said something I wish I hadn't said,
- Or didn't say the thing I could have,
- And you told me that I had missed the mark--
 - In these moments, too, you helped me become more aware of the Omnipresent One,
 - Who conceals something of Divinity in every encounter and every deed, good and bad and in between,
 - Even in every letter
 - Even in the *Aleph*, which always comes first, and makes no sound.

Shabbat Shalom