

Rosh haShanah Sermon – Evening 1, 2021/5782
Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz

One Thing We Ask

A recurring theme in the High Holiday liturgy is of imagining the Divine as '*bochen levavot*', the 'Searcher (or Examiner) of Hearts'.

This is an idea with a strong, intimate resonance – we gather here tonight, a few of us in-person and many of us on Zoom, and we find ourselves *searching* too. God searches for our hearts, inviting us to search our own.

In any given year, the High Holidays are our season of introspection, to be our own '*boch'nei levavot*', the searchers of our hearts. This year, we find ourselves searching in many different directions; steeped in many different emotions. Among our searching and questioning, there may be a '*J'Accuse*'; a raw anger, a buckling disbelief, a numbing grief that here we are still—now in the second year of the pandemic. We sing '*achat sha'alti*', 'one thing I ask of You', from Psalm 27, with many insistent questions brimming on our lips; some rhetorical, some existential. What may have been contemplative in previous years now feels urgent.

We are facing so many crises all at once that I am even hesitant to list them, not wanting to turn this sermon into a newsreel, but also not imagining that we can ignore the pressing needs of our world.

Each of us may search for a question in our own hearts; a worry, a fear, a need, a hope, a wish. Maybe it is of global significance; or of personal importance. The High Holidays are here to create space and sanctuary – a home – for all those questions. Whether it is the ongoing pandemic, the unrelenting climate crisis or the ever-present polarization of our age; here we are, our hands cupped with the fraught offerings of our hearts. Perhaps we feel lonely, or alienated; separated physically or emotionally from loved ones, set adrift and unmoored by what is. We may feel ourselves swimming for shore, grasping for stability, reaching for that one thing that grounds us. For the sense of, amidst all the chaos, of coming home.

The Psalmist in Psalm 27 speaks of his desire to dwell in God's House: '*Achat sha'alti me'et Adonai otah avakesh, shivti be'veit Adonai kol yemei chayai, lachazot b'noam Adonai ul'vaker be'heichalo*' – 'One thing I ask of the Eternal, only that do I seek: to dwell in the house of the Eternal all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Eternal, to frequent God's Temple' (Ps. 27:4).

If there is just one wish he could see fulfilled, like the old tale of the genie in an oil lamp, it would be to dwell in the Divine Presence. Out of context, this verse seems mystical, contemplative; perhaps a little too religious for many of us, orienting itself on a Divine encounter as experienced by other-worldly mystics, Kabbalists, prophets and seekers. However, there is a different way to see this verse. There is almost a Zen-like quality to this idea: we can strip away all the

excess; tune out the static, declutter our souls and focus on that one thing—drilling right down to the essence of our being.

Embedded in its context, however, this verse reads as a *reaching for sanctuary*. The Psalmist is assailed, attacked and abandoned in Psalm 27: '*when evil men assail... should an army besiege me... should war beset me...*' He fights off multiple difficulties at once; beleaguered and orphaned—spiritually or otherwise. Yet, amongst the wearying storms of his life, he just has one desire: to be in the Presence of what truly matters. To just... *come home*.

Can't we relate?

Like many rabbis, I have spent a great deal of time thinking what I would preach on this year; a particularly fraught undertaking. Part of me wanted to say nothing at all. What more could I possibly add? Has anything in our troubled times remained unsaid?

Still, rabbis choose to challenge; others intend to comfort. I would like to do a little of both. I want to offer both the '*kashya*' (the difficult question) and the '*nechemta*' (the consolation). The High Holidays operate with a centrifugal force: on the one hand, we feel the gravitational pull of our own immediate concerns: as individuals or our beloved Jewish community. We *need* to turn inwards, sometimes, and create space for us to be just who we need to be; to be introverted in a manner and feel, process and present Jewishly. On the other hand, I feel the other force too – the propelling force that projects us forward and outward; that pushes us to engage with the world, in all of its beauty and brokenness. Judaism as the vector for that holy and passionate engagement; where we are extraverted in how we walk and live and breathe that Torah, and how it brings light to ourselves and others.

We need both forces, of course.

We can find the resolution to that dialectic in Psalm 27, in the dwelling of God's House. A home is both a place of contemplation and mission; of inwardness and outward projection. A house has windows and doors; through our doors we welcome in; through our windows, we shine out. We return home to recharge so that we can go back into the world. Home is our sanctuary, our '*Mishkan Me'at*', the Small Tabernacle, as the Rabbis called it; the place of holy encounter in the stunning beauty and relevance of the mundane. (The Rabbinic shifting of holiness from the *Churban*, the destroyed Temple to the sanctified home in itself is a defiant act of moral courage, in the wake of their own trauma and loss).

The idea of God's Home is a template for ours. For all of its jarring and outmoded literalism, the *idea* – rather than the reality – of the Temple has resonance far beyond the politics of its destruction. Home is about *space* and *place* in our lives.

My sermon series for the High Holidays will focus on this idea of 'home' and how we can find healing, restoration, sanctification and welcome amidst the

brokenness of our world. It is about our inner homes; the '*chadrei beten*', the chambers of our innards, as Proverbs (20:27) calls it.

Our inner lives; the question of whether *all is well with our souls*.

It is about our *actual* homes; be they on Zoom or in-person, the pressures and blessings of the people we live with, stress-tested beyond measure during these pandemic times, or the sacred homes we create in our singlehood.

It is about our communal home; the state of our Jewish community, both immediate and writ large. About Agudas Achim—but also about the Jewish American experience, world Jewry and our relationship with the land of Israel and its people.

Lastly, it is about our planetary home and dare I say, cosmic home. As our planet convulses feverishly under both its scorching climate and the untrammelled plague that afflicts us, we are forced to think about the invisible lines of connection, across time, space and continents, that bind humanity to each other and to the Holy One.

A home has doors and windows. It engenders both the '*kashya*' and the '*nechemta*', the difficulty and its consolation. We will journey together this High Holiday season, ensconced in our homes, on Zoom yet again, to wrestle earnestly but safely in the confines of our beautiful Jewish tradition.

'*Achat sha'alti*' – one thing *we* ask. Give voice to the yearning; make way for the feeling. Do not seek permission but grant it to yourself in the embrace of our tradition that centers life and love and goodness, joy and future and hope—even and especially when these seem in short supply.

Ask our questions. Pray our prayers, even when we are not sure Who or What we are praying to. The paradox of *Achat Sha'alti* is that King David, the legendary Psalmist, *never* got to dwell in the actual, physical Temple—it was his son, King Solomon, who would fulfill the mission of building the *Bayit Rishon*, the First Temple. But David, in his naked, raw vulnerability found his place through spiritual truths far more powerful and enduring than a physical Temple.

May we be a little like King David this High Holiday season. In some ways broken; singing, in the words of a latter-day Psalmist, Leonard Cohen, '*a cold and broken Hallelujah*'. Our hearts full of yearning; our hands cupped with the fraught offerings of these difficult times. But more importantly, filled with song, '*standing before the Lord of Song*', brimming with love and courage; in our tenacious *minyan* across the ether; bouncing between satellites and the stratosphere.

We will gather here, beloved friends, and together, we will build our home.

Shanah tovah u'metukah—a good, sweet, healthy, healing New Year to us all.