

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5784 – Rabbi Linda Joseph

THE DAYS OF AWE

Can you imagine it?

The King spent a whole month in the field.ⁱ He spent a month traveling on the highways and byways.

He put on his jeans and t-shirt, even donned a suit when it was appropriate. The King was sensible. Comfortable shoes. He slathered himself in suntan lotion, with a hat to protect His head, from the heat of the sun. He had a jacket in case it got cold at night.

The King spent a whole month in the field. He visited your home and your office. He went shopping with you in the supermarket. Hung out by the pool. Met you while you got your nails done. Played a round of golf with you. He joined your Mah Jongg game. And then He had a barbeque with your family.

The King joined you when you fed the homeless. He did some clean-up with the volunteers in Hawaii. And wandered the war fields of Ukraine.

He went dancing with your grandkids at Burning Man ... and was a little inconvenienced by the traffic-jam.

The King spent a whole month in the field. Through the month of Elul, the King got to know the intimacies of your life, your thoughts, your intentions. He saw your struggles and your successes. He greeted you with a warm and welcoming faceⁱⁱ, a smile, a caress. He listened to your requests and your dreams. He reconnected with each of us, His subjects, intimately. Intimately.

How unusual it is, to have a King take the time, to spend a whole month in the field with His subjects!

As Reb Shnuer Zalman of Liadi teaches:

During the month of Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, the King is not to be found in His Palace, but rather He journeys with each one of us, connecting with us.ⁱⁱⁱ

Can you imagine it?

Yesterday, Erev Rosh Hashanah, you received an invitation to accompany the King back to the Palace! You! Who would have thought? The King has invited you, you

who lives an ordinary, regular life. To join Him there. You ready yourself for this experience of a lifetime.

The sun set. The daylight is nearly over. The King stood outside the Palace walls, robed in Glory, radiant with colors, reflecting the settling sun. The King stood there. At the edge of the field that borders the Palace.

He greeted you. Welcomed you with a gesture of hospitality into His home. You, willingly, eagerly... filed through the Palace Gates and follow His Majesty. He led you through more Gates, Halls, Antechambers, Rooms. You are surrounded by magnificent Vessels and Treasures. Your eyes are awed by beauty.^{iv} The floor of the Palace, is like a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.^v

You are in awe, in wonder. This is the home of the King. These are the vessels of the King. You are here to spend time with the King.^{vi}

Can you imagine it?

You find yourself in the throne room and the King ascends the throne. A shofar sound proclaims the King's arrival. *Malchuyot*. One blast, for one King, who is present. *Tekiah!* You hear the Shofar call proclaim the King's splendor. And your soul -- it cracks.

Who are you, that the King is mindful of you? What are you, that the King has taken note of you?^{vii} The blast penetrates your heart. You understand in this instant, in this Rosh Hashanah moment: That the King you spent time with, joked with, was intimate with, whilst He was in the field; is also the King that is more than you, greater than you, more powerful than you. As if on cue, you bow our head in reverence, rendering praise and offering submission.

ℳ *Vanachnu Koraim Umishtachavim Umo'adim.*

Can you imagine it?

You hear the Shofar once again. *Shevarim!* The servants bring before the King three books. With the first blast of the *Shevarim* appears the Book of Life, containing the names of the righteous. With the second blast of *Shevarim* appears the Book of Death containing the names of the wicked. With the third blast of *Shevarim* appears the Book of Uncertain Destiny, for those who are in-between.

You are conscious that the King is a Judge. You are aware of the concentration on His face as He studies the books before Him. He is remembering all He has heard

about you through the year, and all that he has learned about you in the field. Remembrances. *Zichronot*.

If your name is read from the Book of Life, you will say to the Judge: "As You have written!" If your name is read from the Book of Death, you know you will beg the Judge: "Erase me please!"^{viii} If your name is read from the Book of Uncertain Destiny, you resolve to plea: "Consider me worthy to be written in the Book of Life."

The King on the throne responds to your thoughts:

"I don't ask you to change your whole life. I ask only that you open for me the eye of a needle. Dedicate to me one moment, one space, one corner of your life. But this moment, this space, this corner, should only be for Me. If you open your heart to me like this, just a little bit, I will grant you Mercy as expansive as the Corridors of the Great Hall of my Palace."^{ix}

Can you imagine it?

The Shofar sounds again. Nine blasts this time. *Teruah!* You are crying. The sound of the Shofar is your heaving, the sobbing, your heart cracking into pieces. *Shofarot*. You are called to repent.

Your mind turns to the song you sang in the field. A melody that spoke of yearning to be worthy of the Judge's mercy:

"One thing I ask of You - May I dwell in the house of the King all the days of my life. May I behold the pleasantness of the King and visit His Palace."^x

You so want forgiveness.

Can you imagine it?

The morning adjourns. You wander the Palace. Your time with the King was intense. Wonder filled and Fear filled. Awe abides in your heart and mind and soul.

You find yourself at the grand Mote that surrounds the Walls of the Palace. You empty your pockets of the tissue and paper and lint that remains from times past. Were it so easy to rid yourself of guilt and trespass, transgression, and iniquity! Were it be so easy to return to your best self. There is work for the days ahead.

Can you imagine it?

You return to the Palace. You spend the next ten days wandering, meandering, roaming around the Gates, the Halls, the Antechambers, the Rooms. Your mind is unfocused. You do not see the magnificent Vessels and Treasures, the floor of sapphire, and the awe of the beauty that surrounds you.

You are contemplative. You feel fragile. As you reminisce everything you have done, the words you have said, the acts of compassion you did, or did not do. You ponder every intention you had, and the ripple effect of every action and consequence. You realize, that life is sometimes in your control, and sometimes it has not been in your control.^{xi} You cry because you grasp that you were being judged at every moment.^{xii}

Just when you think that you can no longer bear the intensity of such self-reflection, the King calls you back to the Throne Room, on the eve of the tenth day.

Can you imagine it?

Surrounding the King on the throne is a full Court. Attornies. Witnesses. Lawyers. Juries. Judge. They all bear a striking similarity in appearance to the King Himself. Or are they the King Himself? Before them your soul feels like it is about to die. Worldly pleasures hold no allure. You step forward shaking, trembling, in this awesome moment.

You just manage to say:

“Pardon me, forgive me, grant me atonement.

For I am Your servant, and You are my King,

I am your child, and You are my Parent,

I am Your Follower, and You are my Inspiration,

I am Your beloved and You are my beloved.”

The King says:

“My child, your intentions over the last few days, speak to your desire for the past to be forgiven. I have already pardoned your past – but how will you atone for the present? Direct your thoughts and words towards this endeavor.”^{xiii}

So, you, for the next 24 hours, will rehearse your life, you will contend with your death. You wear the white of a shroud. You do not drink. You do not eat. You do

not fornicate.^{xiv} You grow pale and translucent, as you become more and more angelic in your appearance and demeanor. Your heart hardly beats. Your breath slows. Your body weakens.

Can you imagine it?

A messenger has come forth and tells you: The Gates of the Palace are readying to close. You must finish up all that you need to do in the Palace. Awe is intense. Fear is real.

Your eyes turn, filled with the angelic purity that these twenty four hours have brought you too. And you see the King smile. You see the King's countenance turn softly to you. You are reminded of those intimate moments, when the King was with you in the field, your friend.

Awe is intense. Wonder is real. And you hear the King proclaim: "*Salachti Kidvarecha*. I forgive you as you have asked".

The gates are closing, and the moment turns to relief. It turns to joy and awe. The room begins to sing and sway. Your voice is filled with praise amidst other angelic voices. Your feet begin to dance. Your body whirls.

The King begins to dance, his crown glitters, his robes swirl around Him. He accompanies you back through the Rooms, the Antechambers, the Halls, the Gate. The tears you have sown have turned to joy.^{xv}

Your eyes focus on the field before you. Life awaits. You proclaim the greatness of the King. As the gates shut behind you.

A Shofar sounds. *Tekiah Gedolah!* One long blast.

Can you imagine it?

These are the Days of Awe.

ⁱ Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Likkutei Torah*, Parashat Re'eh 32b

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Rabbi Aryeh Hendler "The King's Palace" in <https://www.yeshiva.co/midrash/7454>

^v Exodus 24:10

^{vi} Rabbi Aryeh Hendler, *alt cit*

^{vii} After Psalms 8:4

^{viii} Rosh Hashanah 16b

^{ix} Midrash Shir HaShiraim Rabbah, 5:2

^x Based on Psalm 27

^{xi} Inspired by Rabbi Alan Lew *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* New York, Boston, London: Backbay Books, 2003 pp.3-5

^{xii} The Ari *Pri Etz Chaim*, Shaar Shofar, Chapter 5

^{xiii} Inspired by Rabbi Alan Lew, op cit

^{xiv} Ibid

^{xv} Psalm 126:5