

Today is a day of entry.  
Entering into the *kodesh kodashim*  
the holy of holies,  
the inner sanctum of the temple  
where the ark of the covenant stands,  
and securing atonement from sin  
for all of Israel.

Today is the day of entry  
into the *kodesh kodashim*  
into the heart of hearts,  
looking at the truth inside  
at our deepest center.

who gets to come in?  
and how is access gained?

In the ancient ritual which we read in the Torah  
and which we will listen to in the poetic rendition of the Avodah  
entry is an intricately ritualized event.  
It is the kohen gadol alone who comes in.  
The high priest.  
The descendant of Aaron.

Three times  
he pronounces out the verse :  
ki vayom hazeh. . .  
“For on this day God will absolve you from all your sins  
to purify you from all your sins,  
you will be made pure before YHVH”  
*lifnei HaShem titharu*  
And in the declaration of this verse  
the Cohen Gadol pronounces the Holy Name,  
the ineffable name of G-d  
the yod heh and vav heh  
the sound of breath  
the name of pure being  
which we guard ourselves  
never to utter.

The ritual entering begins at the outermost ring of a cluster/array of concentric circles.  
*beit yisrael*  
*beit aharon*  
inside the courtyard  
inside the *heichal*  
inside the *kodesh kodashim*  
it is a dance of penetration  
a lifting of the veils  
one by one.

The Cohen Gadol starts by preparing himself  
“Forgive me for my sins and allow me to enter.”  
Then,  
“Forgive all the House of Aaron, the Cohanim, for their sins”  
and finally  
“Forgive all of Israel for their sins.”  
Each step requires its own initiation act  
a confession and a sacrifice on behalf of everyone in the circle.  
Then, finally, the cohen gadol can step into the innermost ring.

He enters alone and yet he enters on behalf of everyone;  
no one is physically with him,  
in fact he has a rope tied around his waist  
(just in case he drops dead inside the inner sanctum  
upon pronouncing the name,  
and no one would be permitted to enter  
to retrieve his body)  
and yet he is *not* alone at all  
he brings everyone along with him.  
that’s *how* he gets in.  
knowing that he does it for and with his people  
knowing that he belongs to and in his people.

Today as we listened to the Torah reading  
and later as we will listen to the poetry of the Avoda service  
I’ll go out on a limb here and guess  
that this is not a part of the service  
where people feel particularly connected.  
It’s archaic, it’s purely symbolic. . .

Yes, It is archaic.  
And now, with no temple, yes, it is purely symbolic.  
But it is still very much about us.  
It explains, in some way, what we are doing here today.  
It teaches us about reverent ENTRY  
and it teaches us about the power of BELONGING  
and both of these challenges—  
entering and belonging—  
are crucial tasks of the day.

Entering: how might *we* use this day to go inside?  
and Belonging: how might *we* find ourselves  
completely connected today?

The issue of going in  
is a deeply personal one, and at the same time  
it is a communal one.  
the *Kodesh Kodashim* is the center of the collective  
the heart of Jerusalem

and it is also the personal heart.

As we sit here in shul  
our seats are mostly oriented in the forward position  
there is no center to enter into physically.  
And I imagine that some of you  
are feeling involved and at the center of things  
and that things are hitting you in your center;  
and that also  
some of you are sitting sort of on the side, on the edge,  
following along but *not* too invested,  
and things are *not* hitting you at your core.  
If you identify with the latter description,  
you are probably in the majority.  
For many American Jews,  
being in synagogue, being in the liturgical framework  
is not a comfortable experience.

Alienation from Jewish practice  
has actually become part of the American Jewish experience.  
It is, in some way, our bequeathed heritage.  
As safe as we have been in America,  
one of the first things the immigrant generation or their children learned was to not look too  
Jewish, to not sound too Jewish,  
and,  
even if, like on my mother's side of the family,  
you were going to remain strictly observant,  
you would still dress and speak and carry yourself  
like a modern American.  
Because of the anti-semitism that many of us were escaping  
,or even living with,  
deep in our Jewish identities  
is also a shame, or a hiding, of our Jewish identity.  
Speaking of the Jewish connection  
of some of my own cousins and extended family,  
religion is looked upon by many  
with some nostalgia, some indifference, and some scorn—  
but usually not as a central component of daily, or even weekly life.  
It is no wonder that many Jews feel themselves alienated from Judaism.

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE**

**THAT THIS ALIENATION**

**IS PART OF THE SUCCESS OF OUR ASSIMILATION .**

It's what we wanted to achieve.

But now

many of us find

that we are on the outermost ring of a very wide circle.

With no real means of access to the center.

This feeling of being on the outside  
is very similar to the alienation that many of us experience  
from our own hearts, our own deep centers.

What I describe as happening to the Jewish People  
is a familiar psychological process  
of protecting the human heart from being wounded.  
As healthy people we have all learned  
that we do not go too often  
into that tender place of deep love and deep pain.  
We all know how to keep things on the outside  
smiling on the outside  
keeping conversations intellectual and interesting  
avoiding the heart  
protecting the place of fears  
of true dreams that might be ridiculed  
knowing that it is often not safe to bare our souls.

Just like every little boy learns to hide his tears and his shame  
from his classmates,  
so too have the Jewish People  
learned to hide our heart.  
We are all in cahoots:  
the Israeli ideology denies that image of Jewish vulnerability;  
Jewish intellectuals, even Torah scholars, will no longer invite allegations of superstitious or  
magical thinking  
The liberal religious communities are redefining and reshaping piety.  
We are safe from the accusing eye.

But we are also reinforcing our own exile.

Ironically, paradoxically, We are at *home* in *alienation*.,  
we are safe keeping ourselves off to the edge.  
Like a shy kid, we are comfortable being far from the center.

Today is a day to reconsider our position.  
Where do you see yourself in relation to the center?  
Do you yearn for more learning, more practice, more community?  
Are you satisfied with not knowing what's going on  
and letting yourself follow others who do?  
can you imagine yourself closer in?  
do you wish you were further out?

many of you here have spoken to me over the years  
about the difficulty of understanding the structure of the services  
of how impenetrable the Hebrew is  
the dissonant G-d imagery in the Torah and the liturgy.

Not everyone who has spoken to me, though,  
has opted to go forward to study and explore.  
Many simply needed to voice their discomfort rather than  
alter their connection with prayer, study or practice or Hebrew.  
Those people find the barriers and obstacles forbidding.  
One of our members told me recently of a conversation she had with Reb Zalman Schachter-  
Shalomi  
who is a sage in the Jewish Renewal movement:  
She is someone who has felt herself on the outside,  
longing to know more  
longing to be closer to the center,  
and she told Reb Zalman  
that it was the Hebrew language that was blocking her.  
She loved the spiritual wisdom of Judaism  
but she couldn't feel herself an insider  
as long as she didn't have Hebrew;  
and, as someone already past 50,  
she felt that acquiring a new language would just be impossible.

Reb Zalman didn't hold her hand or cajole her or tell her how to get past the obstacle—  
instead,  
he very plainly said,  
“Well then, you'd better figure out a way in.”

This is really the first step:  
Deciding whether we want to stand on the outside and peer in  
half wishing we could get in  
half satisfied to be on the outside  
or  
are we going to figure out a way to enter?

I've been talking about coming into the center of Judaism,  
but the same is true regarding coming into the center of your own heart.  
How many of us profess that we want more intimacy  
more meaning  
more access to the depth of pain and joy that is possible  
but then we find that there are obstacles to that center  
that we are not ready to meet.  
Maybe we *are* satisfied  
with the distance between ourselves and our hearts.  
But if we are not—  
we'd better figure out a way in.  
Getting 'in there' is not something you do all at once,  
as the rituals of this day inform us.  
It is gentle step by step dance.  
You don't just jump in and start telling the truth.  
that would be an I Love Lucy comedy routine..  
No, you go in with reverence.

with love and longing  
with humility.  
With trust  
and vulnerability.

I talked eight weeks ago about Tisha B'av and Yom Kippur  
both of these commemorations are days of full fast  
both of these days mark the entry into the holy of holies  
but the *tisha b'av* entry was a break-in  
it was violent  
on Yom Kippur it is a dance of intimacy.

The verse that the Kohen Gadol repeats is  
*ki vayom hazeh*  
it is ON this day that you are atoned.

But our sages also translate the “vet” of *ki vyom hazeh*  
to mean “with”, saying:  
With this day G-d will atone you.  
The rabbis teach : *etzem hayom m'khaper*  
it is the day itself which atones.

The day itself IS the way in.  
Fasting is a way in.  
Pretending to be an angel is a way in.  
Being generous is a way in.  
Confessing our sins is a way in.  
Traveling back in time and remembering ancient ritual is a way in.  
Asking for forgiveness from others is a way in.  
Remembering our beloved departed  
and crying tears is a way in.  
Looking around and loving the dear people in this room is a way in.  
Singing in full voice  
bowing down to the ground is a way in.  
Feeling our bodies hungry  
and feeling our spirits high  
humbled in shame and raised up in love  
these are all different ways to gain access to the guarded heart.

We are all invited.  
We are all frightened,  
that's why we do this together.  
Like the chazzan who says, “hineni”  
let us also say, “here I am”  
at the center of this room.  
Let us each envision ourselves as the Cohen Gadol,  
emissary of my people Israel  
stepping in to the holiest of holy places

on behalf of those who came before me  
on behalf of those who follow me  
for the sake of truth  
for the sake of G-d  
fully invited into the softness of the waiting heart.