

**“Come Away with Me”
by Rabbi Jill Gold Wright, Ph.D.
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Once again, it is my honor to welcome you to Temple Menorah at the beginning of a wonderful High Holy Day season. The Jewish New Year invites us to focus on our journeys, both through the lens of hindsight and through the process of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* – the searching of our souls. As many of you know, Temple Menorah has been on its own journey through difficult terrain and an uncertain future. I, too, have travelled a tumultuous road – quite literally through fire – but one that led me to be here with you now. Tonight, we enter the year 5787 as travel companions. We have all landed at the same crossroads on the map.

For this reason, the theme of travel is especially resonant for me in these High Holy Days. Each of my sermons over the Yamim Noraim will carry us to a different location on the globe. We’ll adventure together, exploring the stories that are embedded in the landscape and culture, learning together what the world has to share.

Join me aboard Flight 5787. Our journey is about to begin.

Different from a vacation, a getaway, or even a trip, a journey implies a transformation. The experience of leaving home in one condition and coming back significantly changed. I don’t mean blistered heels from walking miles every day or a few extra inches on one’s waistline. I refer to the kind of change that results in a fuller understanding of ourselves and our place in the

world. Jewish thinker Martin Buber describes this profundity when he writes, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”

Some of you know that this past summer, my family and I traveled to Greenland. My son, a college junior who had begun his study abroad year in Copenhagen, spent his second semester at Danish Technical University’s satellite campus in Sisimiut, Greenland -- 22 miles north of the Arctic Circle. At the end of his Arctic Semester, we felt compelled to meet him in Greenland – hoping to get a small taste of all he had seen, all he had learned.

I anticipated that our visit to Greenland would encompass some majestic scenery, great hikes, and wonderful family time. What I didn’t expect was that I would return home having learned a profound lesson about **Humility**. And on this first evening of the High Holy Days – the season when we stand before God - and each other - yearning for understanding, our sense of **Humility** is one of the most important lessons we need to take us into the new year.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes, “Humility – true humility – is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtues. It does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals an openness to life’s grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it.”

The Greenlandic Inuit people have lived on the land for millennia, surviving in the most extreme conditions where there are no trees, freezing temperatures, months of almost complete darkness,

followed by six months of constant light. Everyday life has a different rhythm there – the climate and landscape necessitate a lifestyle that seem foreign and strange to us. Being exposed to life above the Arctic Circle was a profound reminder of how my way of life is *one* way, but not the only way.

In Greenland, even eating can be an adventure. Sure, Sisimiut has grocery stores stocked with the same chicken nuggets, bagged pasta, and canned goods you would expect. But the freezer sections of even the smallest stores stock large boxes of locally caught crab legs and prawns. These sit next to massive boxes of 28 frozen dinners in one box – enough to get a family through weeks of wintry darkness without running to the store every day or so.

We entered the Sisimiut butcher shop to find displays of local meats: fresh whale, dolphin tails, reindeer meat, narwal blubber, and musk-ox steaks. In the clothing shops, alongside the imported synthetic parkas and boots, you will find ox wool socks, sealskin slippers, and coats in every size lined with the fur of Arctic rabbits and foxes.

Perhaps to some of our sensibilities, this sounds outdated and even cruel.

But when the native Greenlandic people eat whale or wear sealskin, it's not to be ostentatious. It's not political. It's not provocative. They're not making some kind of a statement. As they have for generations, they use the resources that the land provides. When they shoot a polar bear that gets too close to a town, it's not for sport. It's for safety. It's for survival. It takes some **Humility** to realize that survival above the Arctic Circle means something different than what it means in Southern California. We “survive” taking exams in school. We “survive” rounds of

corporate layoffs. We “survive” heatwaves. In Greenland, survival means teaching the next generation to live on the land and sea as proud guardians of their traditions.

Look around this sanctuary tonight. What are we doing if not preserving the traditions that have been handed to us, lovingly passing them down to our own generations?

In our second week in Greenland, we took a short flight to Kangerlussuaq, the tiny airport town that is the portal to the Greenland Ice Sheet, the second largest ice sheet in the world after Antarctica. My family of four drove quad-cycle ATVs to the massive glacier, passing reindeer on both sides of the road. We four were the only humans there – and besides the sounds of our voices and footsteps crunching in the snow, it was utterly silent. It was a raw, utterly untouched landscape. I am lucky enough to have seen Half Dome at Yosemite. I have hiked the Narrows and the Hoodoos at Zion and Bryce National Parks. I’ve walked through the Black Forest of Germany and been to Himeji Castle in Japan. But the Greenland Ice Sheet was unlike any place I have ever been. There were no cars or busses. No parking lot. No entrance tickets or legal waivers. No signage, restrooms, or rangers. No postcards, no gift shop.

We were quite literally on the top of the globe, taking steps through a wintry landscape, in the middle of summer. There were no birds, no trees, no clouds. It was cold, dry, crisp – The sky was a bright cerulean blue. We mostly didn’t speak – each wrapped in our own thoughts as we slowly walked through this bright white world of glimmering snow. Silent as we soaked in the shimmering, diamond-studded splendor of hills and valleys of snow and ice, past running streams of melting glacial water, each bank edged by glittering snowflakes.

I stopped and stood alone near one of those nearly frozen rivulets. Taking off my glove, I stuck in my hand and picked up a rock. It's a small rock – deep green with little orange veins running through it. I stared at it, and my mind drew down from the vast landscape around me to the little clump of earth in my hand.

I was acutely aware of the scope of my unfamiliarity with my surroundings, and equally struck by my own sense of curiosity, my connection to the place where I stood. I had so many questions. From where had that rock traveled? How many winters and summers did it take to reach its spot in that water? How many brilliant displays of northern lights had illuminated the skies above it as it rested in its utterly silent landscape?

What is this easily-passed-over rock's purpose? Come to think of it, what is mine? What lesson am I to understand by standing here on the literal top of the world? Every moment exposed even more questions, further indications of my own ignorance, my own insignificance, my own shortcomings. How small we are. How little we know about the infinite stories of the world around us. How much there is to learn. How far we still need to travel.

Gustave Flaubert writes, "Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world."

This lesson about **Humility** is so fundamental to Judaism that our Torah embeds it into the very first chapter of Genesis. In the story of God creating the entire world, we learn immediately and

explicitly that creatures were created last of the whole universe, and that human beings were created last among all creatures. Our Talmud teaches that:

Adam the first man **was created on Shabbat eve** at the close of the six days of Creation. **And for what** reason was this so? ... [So] **that if** people **become haughty**, God can **say to them: The mosquito preceded you in the acts of Creation**, as you were created last... (Sanhedrin 38a:13).

Don't misunderstand this teaching. Humility does not mean what people often mistake it to be: a low estimation of oneself. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains:

“Humility is not self-abasement. It is not self- *anything*. It is the ability to stand in silent awe in the presence of otherness – the Thou of God, the otherness of other people, the majesty of creation, the beauty of the world, the power of great ideas, the call of great ideals. Humility is the silence of the self in the presence of that which is greater than the self.”

Greenland's climate, landscape, and lifestyle compelled me to consider how much our world is in need of a greater sense of **Humility**. We have the tendency to perceive the world in an overly simplistic, binary way. Too often, we frame our thinking in terms of two oppositional sides: Dodgers or Angels? PC or Mac? This, or that?

The problem of a binary framework is that black-and-white thinking forces us to be Absolutist. We are staunchly on one side or the other. But innocent questions like “Dogs or cats?” reveal

that by presenting and controlling only two options is limiting. Absolutist. And Absolutism moves from being restrictive to downright dangerous when we try to force ourselves and each other into binary boxes: Male or female? Legal or undocumented? Jewish or Gentile? Friend or foe?

If we base our opinions and decisions only within binary thinking, that leaves no room for alternative ideas. No space for nuance, no opportunity for complexity. And without consideration of many perspectives or alternative ideas – indeed, without **Humility** - we put limits on knowledge and boundaries around truth. The world is far too intricate, far too wondrous, and far too colorful to be understood in any lesser way.

Humility teaches us that human experience is nuanced. It's true in Greenland, and it is true here. And it's time that we get honest about how my way of life is one way but not the only way. Even among friends or acquaintances that we might disagree with, we must acknowledge that there are probably truths in their perspectives, too. It can be true that we might criticize a nation and still love its people. It can be true that we might vote differently from family members and still cherish them. And it is true that we might feel confused, exhausted, or unclear at the very same time that we know what we know and feel what we feel.

Even our Talmud is a book of contradictions, and this teaches us that Judaism holds a Multiplicity of Truths. Think of Hillel and Shammai – the rabbis who created the two opposing schools of thought in our Commentary. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai argue nearly every single point there is to argue about in our tradition. Sometimes Shammai wins, and much more often,

Hillel wins. But in most instances, a non-absolutist, non-black-and-white compromise wins the day. A compromise that arises out of an abundance of **Humility**.

Rabbi Abba recalls that, “For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: “The halacha is in accordance with our opinion,” and these said: “The halacha is in accordance with our opinion.” Ultimately a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: “Elu v’elu divrei Elohim Chayyim -- Both these and these are the words of the living God.”

Both these and these are the words of the living God.

The divine response to Hillel and Shammai’s ceaseless disagreements models something very important for us. “Elu v’elu” means that these AND these are valuable opinions, even when they seem like polar opposites. Our practice of Humility – of non-judgment, of thinking critically and generously is the lesson. The way to hold space for the Multiplicity of Truth is not only to love the neighbors who live like we do, but to recognize that we have so much to learn from embracing the unfamiliar.

“Humility – true humility – is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtues,” writes Rabbi Sacks. “It is a form of perception ... the unspoken call beneath human speech, the Divine whisper within all that moves, the voice of otherness that calls [us] to redeem its loneliness with the touch of love. Humility is what opens us to the world.”

My family's travels in Greenland were filled with adventure, awe, and a lot of fun, but if we don't carry back what we learned, it becomes nothing more than a past diversion. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us, or we find it not."

You may be familiar with the teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunam, who said that each person must have two pockets, each one containing a written note. The first note should say:

בְּשִׁבְלִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם

(Mishnah Sandedrin 4:5), "The world was created for me."

The second note should say:

אֲנִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר

(Gen. 18:27), "I am dust and ashes."

And as we walk our way, each of these sentiments must be right within our reach. If we find ourselves leaning too far to one side or the other – either arrogant and self-aggrandizing, or stymied by fear or depression, we can read the note we need in that moment.

With one note in each pocket, we strive for balance. Even as we stand in insignificance, reminded of our shortcomings, we aspire to become our best selves. We try; we fail. Sometimes we need help; sometimes we are able to help each other. We run; we fall down. And then we get up and keep hiking.

These High Holy Days, let us reach out to each other in **Humility**, remembering that we all travel together. Come away with me.

We will find each other between a little green rock and a glittering world of light.

Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom