Last week we welcomed in Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world. The day when all creation is reborn and renewed. And now, just ten days later, we face the opposite end of life’s spectrum. Yom Kippur is often called a rehearsal for death. Those who can, do not eat nor drink. Many wear white—which is meant to evoke the image of burial shrouds. We chant, as we just did moments ago, the words of the Viddui—the confessional prayer—that is also traditionally said when a Jewish person is on their deathbed. These practices are not intended to bring us to a state of fear or panic. We only engage in them collectively, intentionally, gently. Not to be consumed or tormented with thoughts of grief—but to learn about life in the deepest, most expansive way possible.

As I said last week, in the move from Rosh Hashanah, to Yom Kippur and beyond, we move from collective birth, to collective death and then we
move forward, reborn into a new year. Birth, death, rebirth. Begin, end, begin again. As many of you know, and as I shared last week, my own life followed this pattern this year more overtly than usual. I returned from parental leave for one day before my father died, and I returned from bereavement just in time to pick up planning Rosh Hashana. All of which pushed me to grapple with what life and death—and the vast expanse between those states—mean in this tradition and in my life.

Of course, talking about grief and birth is complicated. In this community we work to make space for all the many emotions that attend these themes but in this drash I will just be reflecting on my own experience and the traditions that have guided me. To those of you with grief in your hearts tonight, HaMakom Yinachem—may the Holy One comfort you. For those of you who are not mourners or who may feel unsteady in approaching this topic, thank you for listening. May we all be each other’s witnesses in the year to come.

Time moved in similar ways when Shayna, my baby, was about to enter this world and when my father was leaving it. In both cases we knew life was about to change soon but could not control when. We were at the mercy of time and bodies and mysteries beyond us. Pregnancy and hospice both took so much energy—so much sacred focus and so much mundane
decision making and planning. In both cases, I had to learn to give myself over to what I could not control. To let pain in and then to let it go. In both cases, there was power in the wake of such letting go. And in both cases, there was a closeness to life itself, to the scores of unknown ancestors who had also brought life into this world, who had mourned loved ones, and who had left this world.

Above his bed my father had many pictures. One of them was of himself, his mother and father, his aunt and uncle, all sitting in a sukkah my father had built, sharing a meal. Only his aunt is still living. My grandparents both died in 2009. But this year, towards the end of his life, my father began to describe seeing his father coming and visiting him in hospice, sitting and playing chess. His uncle accompanied him to the beach. He saw his mother in his room. Are you going to visit Bubbie after you see me? He would ask.

For my father, his parents were both with him and also far away. In my friend Anna’s words—he had one foot in this world and one foot in Olam Ha Bah, the World to Come. Often when I left my father’s room, I felt that I was leaving him to the care of his ancestors, specifically to his grandmothers. I prayed for his ancestors and for the Source of Life to be with him, to bring him peace and witnessing and comfort when I left. And
when I did not feel that, when I did not feel anything at all, when I was barricaded with numbness and resistance—I prayed to be open. To just be open. Because I was not always open.

About two months before my father passed I found myself in a spiritual crisis. I was judging myself, discounting any belief or sense of spiritual insight that gave me real comfort. Over the years, I had experienced moments of sacred connection, like when I would feel G-d’s presence while meditating, while lighting Shabbat candles, while chanting with other people. Fleeting but cherished moments, when I felt bound to all other living beings and to all living beings who have come before me. Moments like when I felt my Bubbie’s presence in the months after her death. When I would talk to her years after her death. When I would talk to G-d, out loud, casually, like I would talk to a friend, even without any definitive understanding of what I was doing. Moments of sudden awareness of my consciousness expanding—the way I hear Michal Pollan describe acid tripping but without the drugs. (I say that without any shade and with genuine curiosity about his research.) These experiences brought me comfort and a complicated, but very real faith. I suddenly felt desperately far from all of that. Any belief that was a comfort suddenly seemed like a false balm, a distraction from some truer pain. I reached out
to one of my teachers, Rabbi Marjorie Berman, for support. I told her I was afraid of being irrational. She listened. She took a moment. And then she said, “Anything can be an idol. Even rationality.”

Anything can be an idol. Here I do not mean totems, statues, or images that hold a sense of deep spiritual vitality in other faiths. I mean a thing without vitality. I mean anything we cling to that is cold and unresponsive. Anything we worship that is not bringing us closer to holiness or peace or who we want to be. The things we are addcited to that hurt us and yet—we worship them or are controlled by them. A substance can be an idol. A relationship can be an idol. And more classicialy, obviously faith can be an idol, especially when it’s used as a weapon to control others. And now my fear of comforting faith, my desire to be rational was its own idol. Who was served by my sudden need to “tough it out” theologically?

Rabbi Marjorie also reminded me that Judaisim has long had a vibrant secular tradition along with the religious. “But,” she said, “we have perhaps never fully recovered from the aggressive pressures of modernity to prove that we are rational.” This gave broader meaning to my struggle. I thought of the enduring legacies of early modernity that may have animated my hesitation to embrace Jewish spiritual practices that aren’t rational per
Of the deeply ingrained, often bad-faith demands from a dominant European power structure that groups deemed not sufficiently “civilized” must prove their rationality in order to survive. The alternative was worse when this structure deemed groups—or entire races—incapable of rationality and deserving only of domination by military force, colonization, and genocide.

As a white American Jew, no one was demanding I prove my secular rationality. But in the midst of crisis, I wound up reverting to an old frame that wasn’t serving me: modern rationality or Jewish spiritual practices. Or put another way—I am a rabbi, the state doesn’t care what I believe anymore, but it’s still hard for me to talk about G-d sometimes. That is wild!

You can be an atheist and still be open to mystery and transcendence. You can be a person of faith who clings to empty idols. What matters is forging a path towards meaning and vitality and away from alienation and despair. It takes independent initiative and reflection, but it is also nearly impossible to do this alone.

This is the season of teshuva, the season of return. And, with the help of the Jewish thinkers and teachers my father had first introduced me to, I
let myself return to a faith that this world is pulsing with spirit, a faith that I
don’t have to understand what I believe in order to be buoyed by it.

Ironically, I felt my father’s spirit more closely, the more he began to
leave this world. When he passed and it was time to say Barukh Dayan Ha
Emet—I translated it not as the traditional, “Blessed is the judge of truth” or
“Blessed is the righteous judge” but as Kolot’s Rabbi Emerita Ellen
Lippmann does—“Barukh Dayan Haemet–We don’t understand anything.”

I don’t understand anything. And thank G-d for that. Thank G-d for a
life, a planet, a plane of being so vast and so beautiful that its mysteries
confound me. I want to live with gratitude for the blessings of science,
reason and critique. But, from now on, I will also be praying that I don’t
make an idol of my own mind, an idol of my own understanding.

What idols have you made for yourself? Stories and defenses that do
not serve you well. Convictions that you perhaps have clung to, that do not
serve to bring holiness, connection or meaning to your life. What are you
ready to set down this new year?

Part of Kolot’s mission statement says “Doubt can be an act of faith”.
And these powerful words call to so many of us. But I think the key to
making that phrase a real part of a thriving spiritual life are the words “can
be”. Doubt CAN be an act of faith. It is not always. Dynamic, questioning, flexible religious life is beautiful. Doubt can be beautiful. But it’s not inherently beautiful. Not if it becomes our next dogma. Our new idol.

We can come to worship our certainty because it gives us comfort. We can worship our doubt or our pessimism because it makes us feel sophisticated, intelligent. Instead of glorifying our certainties or our doubts, what happens when we follow what gives us vitality and connection. When we follow what connects us deeper to a sense of compassion and mystery and life itself—even in the face of death.

There is a long and sometimes playful thread of mystery woven through many of the ancient Jewish explorations of death and the afterlife. In a first century midrash, the rabbis describe the Jewish people coming to Moses and wanting to know more. The story goes:

And the children of Israel gathered before Moses. They asked him: Tell us, what will the Holy Blessed One have in store for us in the World to Come? Moses responded: “I don’t know what I can tell you! But happy are you for what is prepared for you.”

This story of Moshe’s hesitation is perhaps rooted in the rabbinic teaching that we cannot understand the World to Come. So it is better to
focus on this world and our lives in the here and now. Sometimes this way of talking about death can feel evasive—like, what are you hiding Moses! Just be direct! But I also think this long-standing tradition of mystery and sacred uncertainty can also provide the spaciousness for different Jewish people to feel confident in a wide range of beliefs.

Rabbi Richard Hirsch summarizes this in his book the Journey of Mourning, a Reconstructionist guide to loss and grief. As with many theological questions—I think the reconstructionist range of thinking actually captures a snapshot of beliefs in much of the broader Jewish community. Rabbi Hirsch writes, “Some reconstructionists believe that the soul survives, cared for by a God capable of calling life itself into being and capable of preserving it beyond its earthly journey. For other reconstructionists, immortality is conferred through memory, as the values we lived by and the contributions we made to family, friends and the world are honored by those who live on after us. Some understand each soul to be as a wave, drawn back into the ocean from which it is essentially never separate. A smaller number of reconstructionists no doubt find comfort and meaning in more traditional ideas of a world to come where injustices of this world are made right and the peace for which we long are finally bestowed...[There is] a remarkable humility in Judaism, which affirms that
in ways we can never quite know—and perhaps do not need to know—the sacredness of human life transcends and survives beyond death.”

I was moved by this spaciousness and fluidity. When my father was in his final weeks, I found I wanted to try and understand my own beliefs and intuitions, to follow what felt resonant and true. In some of the hardest moments in setting down my own idols, my own judgements and certainties that were not serving me—I turned to my father-in-law David who led me to the poet and writer Christian Wiman. When facing a life threatening illness Wiman wrote that atheists, religious folk and everyone in between all want “to believe that there is some way of dying into life rather than simply away from it.” In his book, My Bright Abyss, Wiman writes that dying into life, dying as an experience of connecting to life and not one of isolation and nihilism, is made possible by love. He suggests that love is the dynamic link between life and death. He writes, “My grandmother, who was in the world too utterly to be ‘conscious’ of it, whose spirit poured and pours over the cracked land of her family like a saving rain, exemplified this energy, and I feel that to be faithful to her, faithful to this person I loved as much as I have ever loved anyone, I must believe in the scope and momentum of her life, not the awful and anomalous instant of her death. In truth, it is not difficult at all. Nor is the other belief—or
instinct, really—that occurs simultaneously: that her every tear was wiped away, that God looked her out of pain, that in the blink of an eye the world opened its tenderest interiors, and let her in.”

He is saying that God, or perhaps life itself, can open to us. Can witness us and let us in, along with whatever grief or joy we carry. That the mysteries of love and life are bigger than the moment of death. Wiman’s words remind me of the move we are all making from Rosh Hashanah and collective birth to Yom Kippur and collective death, to the beginning of the Jewish year and the renewal of our spirits. Perhaps this is a kind of dying into life.

Perhaps this poet’s words stir something else in you or perhaps you are unmoved by him. Ultimately, someone else’s theology is only one tool for trying to understand what we ourselves might believe. And it’s worth searching, searching for new kinds of language to see what finally might resonate. And searching your own heart to see what finally feels honest and true. Because your own broken heart, your own joy, is usually the best siddur, or prayer book, to begin with.

In the words of the great Jewish teacher Reb Zalman Schacter Shlomi, “Theologians have devoted their lives to constructing answers and systems we can live with. But...theology is an afterthought of spiritual
experience, not the other way around. We are not trying to construct some top-down authoritative system but to nourish the seeds of our own personal spiritual experience. We start with wonder or with thankfulness or yearning or even rage.”

And so I start with my thanks—thanks for the bounty of this tradition. Thanks that my father lived to meet my child. I start with wonder—wonder that I felt my father’s spirit in my dreams before and after his passing. And of course it’s more complicated than that. I am also angry. Angry that he was sick for so many years and that he passed at 71. I also start with rage. Rage that in this country’s callus and convoluted healthcare system, my family had to fight tooth and nail for my father’s basic dignity, again and again. I start with grief, knowing that my parents took on tremendous debt to pay for my father’s care. Knowing that one of my father’s last cogent thoughts in this life was regret that he could not pay off his debt. My father’s friends and family helped in various ways to pay for his care. A network of supportive people like that is beautiful. But the ability to access care should not depend on how many people you know and what they have. The ability to access care ought to be inalienable, given, a basic right for every single person.
All of us were born and needed care. All of us will die and will need some form of care along the way. No human being is outside of that. Many of us in this room will be or have been caregivers. But we live in a country where so many people die without access to quality end of life care, or quality long term care, often exacerbated by systemic racism and classism. All the while dedicated and devoted care workers often live at the poverty line or just above it. My father’s death broke my heart—and in that wide open space I see the years we spent unable to get him enough care. I see the incredible care workers in his highly understaffed nursing home, struggling to meet their own needs and the needs of their patients.

This is why the work that many Kolotniks are doing through the NY Caring Majority is so close to my heart. I am grateful to all of you who are engaged in that organizing. Together we are fighting for universal healthcare, access to affordable, quality long-term care, and dignity and fair pay for all caregivers in our state. This means so much in terms of the material conditions of people’s lives. But it also means talking out loud about our broken care system which itself can be an antidote to the shame and isolation that surrounds conversations around care, disability and domestic labor.
There were times when it was a heavy weight to carry—advocating for my father and fighting for his care. This city, this room, is full of people who have done the same for themselves or for loved ones, or who will be in that same position one day. Right now care is structured in a way where we feel alone fighting for it and receiving it. But care is among the most universal and collective human needs we have. And gathering together to fight for it is powerful.

Gathering in all its forms is amongst the holiest things we do. Gathering to fight for justice and dignity. Gathering to mark holy time right now and to expand our sense of what is possible.

When Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moshe and Aaron died—each time Torah says “and he was gathered unto his people.” This is the basis for the Jewish belief that after death we are greeted by—and gathered up with—our people. That could mean so many things. And in a real and unreal way, I imagine my father at that table in his sukkah, gathered up with his people.

This teaching that we are gathered up with our people affirms the life we live here and now. And it affirms Wiman’s assertion that transcendence is made possible by love.
So on this night, when we face our lives—I want to ask you—who are your people? The people you want to gather with here and now, the people you want to be sure feel your love and care this year? In this moment where we honor the ones we’ve lost, where we face the cycle of birth, death and rebirth again—whose legacy are you carrying into the new year? And finally, who are the people you want to fight alongside? May the answer comfort you. May it surprise and challenge you.

On this night we face our vulnerability as human beings and we turn towards it. May you be blessed to gather with your people as you do so. Blessed to face what needs facing in your life. And may you be blessed to set down every idol that does not serve you, turning instead to mystery and vitality, here and now.

Gmar Chatimah Tova—may you be sealed in the Book of Life.