

**Rosh Hashanah 5781**  
**Temple Sinai - Dresher, PA**  
**Rabbi Sam Hollander**  
**“Tashlich: The Act of Naming Uncertainty”**

The summer after graduating from college, I packed my bags and flew across the world to spend a year studying in Israel. Although I would spend most of my time learning Jewish texts in Jerusalem, I started my first month in Israel studying Hebrew in an Ulpan, an intensive course in Hebrew language at the University of Haifa.

I had never been to Haifa before, let alone lived abroad for an extended period of time. But what could be bad? It was summer, and living in Haifa meant the beautiful beaches of the Mediterranean Sea were right there. Little did I know that the University of Haifa was on the very top of a mountain, and it was an hour long bus ride on public transportation between the beach and the university. So I spent the summer on the top of the mountain, hardly ever leaving the campus, looking out on the water from a distance.

I was excited to be in Israel, yet I felt as though my whole world had turned upside down. Haifa was not the familiar sights of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. So much felt new and uncertain as I immersed myself in studying a language, living with roommates from different countries and cultures, there were concerns that the US military would strike Syria and my Israeli SIM card was not working properly with my phone which made it difficult to talk with family in the States.

Everything felt uncertain, and I felt trapped. One night, I remember asking a friend to walk with me to the front gate of the University, so that I could walk through the gate, take a deep breath, and then immediately re-enter.

But what really helped, was my mom suggested that I create a list of the things that were making me feel uncertain, as well as the things I was looking forward to experiencing in the year ahead. Writing down my thoughts helped, and I still have this list saved in my phone today.

This year, in March 2020, I felt a similar feeling. Confusion that my entire world had just changed. When would the synagogue be able to reopen? When will I next see family and friends? Sheltering in place with Amanda who had left New York City for what we thought would be two or four weeks, I remember telling Amanda, “I have not felt this much uncertainty since Haifa.”

In the early weeks of the Pandemic, whenever I felt overwhelmed, Amanda would ask me to name out loud what was bothering me. So if I ever felt anxious, I did not keep it inside, I shared what I was feeling with Amanda. And in return, if there was something making her feel anxious, she told me. Instead of ignoring our feelings, we shared them with one another, and for that moment as we named our feelings we regained a sense of control in a world full of uncertainty.

Many things are different on this Rosh Hashanah from a year ago. So much is uncertain, but Judaism provides us some certainty. Shabbat comes every Friday evening regardless of whether there is a pandemic, and that is comforting. For me, the weekly separation of Shabbat from the rest of the days, and the anticipation of upcoming Jewish holidays have provided me with a feeling of grounding, of certainty. In most of Jewish practice, prayers and rituals have a set order... and that is reassuring because we know what to expect. But Tashlich, the custom of “casting away” our sins, by throwing breadcrumbs into a body of water on Rosh Hashanah does not have a specific prayer or set liturgy.

Tashlich dates back to at least the 14th Century and different communities have adapted the custom in different ways and have included different readings, but in all cases, tashlich is the symbolic enactment of the words of the prophet Micah, who said,

“Who is a God like You, Forgiving iniquity  
And remitting transgression;  
Who has not maintained His wrath forever  
Against the remnant of His own people,  
Because He loves graciousness!

God will take us back in love,  
God will cover up our iniquities,  
God will cast ‘*v’tashlich*’... God will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

What the prophet Micah teaches us is that when we cast our sins, throwing breadcrumbs into the water, we are in a sense mimicking God. My mentor and friend, Shalom Orzach, shared with me that us mimicking God is perhaps a way of us answering the opening question stated by the prophet Micah, “Who is like you?” Shalom explains that this is another example of the reflective nature of our relationship with God, because when we stand at the edge of the water to cast our sins during Tashlich, the water enables us to see our own reflection.

For those who have participated in Tashlich in the creek beside Temple Sinai, or plan to come to the creek this afternoon or later this week... it is not easy to see one’s reflection in the water nor does our creek conjure up the image from the prophet Micah, of casting our sins into the “depths of the sea.”

Standing at the edge of the water can be frightening. At camp, if given a choice, I always preferred to go swimming in the pool rather than the lake, because within the crystal clear waters of the pool I could see the bottom, but in the murky waters of the lake you could not see into the depths of the water and that gave me a sense of uncertainty.

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the birthday of the world, *Ha-Yom Harat Olam* “Today is the day of the world's creation.” On the third day of creation God gathered the water and made dry land appear. It is this dry land that we as humans call home. We are much more comfortable on the dry land than the deep sea.

When we stand at the edge of the water, we experience a sense of uncertainty. After leaving Egypt as slaves, the Israelites reach the Sea of Reeds. With the Egyptian army chasing

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 7:18-19

after them, and the depths of the sea before them, the Israelites are trapped in a moment of uncertainty. During Tashlich, on the Days of Awe as we await God to inscribe us in the Book of Life, we too stand at the edge, and as we gaze out on the water, we too recall that sense of uncertainty.

Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe of the 16th century in his work, *Levush Malkhut*, explains for Tashlich it is customary to go to a river where there are fish, because we are compared to fish suddenly caught in a net. So too are we caught in the severe net of divine judgement, and gazing at the river contemplating Teshuva.

For me, the experience of gazing at the water contemplating Teshuva is an important act. Growing up, we always walked over to the nearby creek on Rosh Hashanah afternoon. My dad would bring his mahzor, but I don't know why he ever brought it because he would always say there really is no specific prayer for this moment and that we should use this time to think about our relationships with others. He then would distribute a piece of bread, most likely the end slices of the sandwich bread I used every day to make my peanut butter sandwiches for school. As I stared at this piece of bread in my hands, I would think about a friend or family member. And right before I tossed that piece of bread into the water, I thought of something specific that I had done wrong to that person. Some were easier to think of than others, but for me, it had to be something concrete. And when I saw the pieces of bread floating in the water, I would reflect on all the wrongful acts I had just named to myself. Some of those things I had never paid attention to, or really was aware of until it came to mind during Tashlich.

Reflecting on my childhood memory, I have come to realize that Tashlich is a powerful moment of self-care. As we stand at the water's edge, looking into the depths of the sea, instead of feeling trapped or frozen in this moment as if we are uncertain of what we can do to repair our relationships with others, we use breadcrumbs to help us physically name that which we have done wrong. And this year, when we have experienced so much uncertainty, I invite you to also take a moment to name that which has caused you anxiety and after naming it, throw it into the

water. And by doing so, no longer will the deep waters remind us of an uncertain world, but instead these waters can represent a feeling of renewal.

In 1859, the traveler Israel ben Joseph Benjamin reported that the Jews of Kurdistan instead of throwing bread into the water like the Jews of Europe, they would recite prayers for Tashlich and then would jump into the water and physically immerse themselves in the water. When Israel ben Joseph Benjamin asked them why they did this custom, they explained that the river would wash away their sins. This Tashlich custom reminds me of the practice of immersing oneself in a mikveh, as the waters of the mikveh can mark a transition and have the ability to purify and renew.

This year, we long for physically immersive experiences, like jumping into the river to feel our sins being washed away. From Graduations, to Funerals, to B'nai Mitzvah we have experienced so much virtually, but rituals that we can do on our own, can create an important tangible connection. I have always thought of Tashlich as a way to cast away my wrongdoings, but let's be honest. Throwing bread crumbs into water will not heal our relationships with others, that takes real work. This is not a shortcut.

On Yom Kippur, we recall the ritual of the scapegoat which like our breadcrumbs represents our sins being cast away. The High Priest confessed the sins of the people onto a goat that was sent off to Azazel, an uncertain place far off in the wilderness. Jewish thinkers, like Maimonides, have always been skeptical of rituals such as the scapegoat. Maimonides refers to these kinds of rituals as symbolic. These rituals alone do not cause a change, but they can make an impression upon the participants and induce them to change their ways.

This year, I encourage you to participate in Tashlich- whether it is your annual custom or your first time. For some it has drizzled, and for others it has poured, but we all have experienced challenges this past year. The Pandemic is far from over, and there is much uncertainty that lies ahead. But as we stand at the edge of the water, gazing out into the depths of the sea, we can feel

a sense of control in this moment as we name what is in our power to change with each piece of bread that we cast off into the water. No longer will these waters represent uncertainty, but instead the water can be like the waters of a mikveh, providing us a feeling of renewal.

Self-care is important. When was the last time you did something for yourself? Only when we take the time to take care of ourselves, to feel renewed, can we be fully present to take care of others. Teshuva is not only about our relationship with others. Before we can work on our relationship with others, we must first turn back to find ourselves.

For me, no longer is Tashlich the act of casting away, of putting something out of mind. Instead it is the complete opposite. Tashlich is a way to name the issues within our control, to list the things we can work towards. We place in our minds the next steps that we can take. And when we do this, no longer are we standing at the edge of the water looking into uncertainty, instead we are immersed in the water, feeling renewed and ready to take on tomorrow's challenges.

Shana Tova!