

Introduction

The Rhythm of the Calendar

IN 1905, Chayim Nachman Bialik published a long, powerful poem called “The Pool.” My favorite verse is “. . . when I was young and my days were sweet, and the wings of the Presence first rustled over me, my heart knew longing and amazement and I sought a secret place of prayer.”

I wish I could remember where I was when this verse found me. Long before I found the words, their meaning was already my companion. I remember the wooded walks of my youth—it seems I was born a seeker. I would linger long hours in the mystery, writing even then, with every word, every turn of the phrase serving that mystery. It still does.

My wondering is my prayer. Beauty is my prayer. My spiritual agitation is my prayer. My prayer is the quiet by the window, which frames my thinking room as the sun sheds an early hue. I have sought silent amazement all the days of my life. I linger.

And I invite you to linger with me. This volume is my attempt to synchronize our spiritual search for meaning with the heartbeat of a few weeks of the Jewish calendar. It is an ode to our mortality, a song to our sense of impermanence. The words are meant to scratch at our imperfections. If we are flawed, and we truly are, then what is our worth? How do we find our purpose within the cracks and fissures of our being? Where do we find meaning?

We live and tarry in these questions for just a few weeks, from Av to Elul to the beginning of Tishrei. This becomes an arch where we slowly become aware, touching our existential

longing to live deeply, intently, lovingly, and meaningfully. It is an invitation to a spiritual unfolding.

We begin with Tishah B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av—a time of mourning and remembering the many calamities that have befallen the Jewish people. The month of Av is a solemn period grounded in historical circumstances that encourages deep personal reflection. The Temple was destroyed on the ninth of Av in 70 CE because of human frailty; we chose hate over love, and all was lost for the nation. So too, with us—when we give in to negativity, we lose so much. Destruction, we learn, is caused by senseless hatred. Redemption will come with love.

We begin here, in the ashes, for we learn from our tradition that we are but dust. We are of the earth and will return to the earth. This is not a statement of self-deprecation—after all, we are also taught that we stand on holy ground—but rather a call for a humble perspective. It is the reality of human nature to rise and to fall, to love and to hate, to give and to withhold. The month of Av grounds us with a simple warning: Humanity has the unlimited desire and capacity to create and love, but at the same time, humanity has the will and the means to destroy itself. Av asks us to dwell in our desire to live an elevated life—an unfolding toward loving rather than fear.

Nestled between the lowliness of Av and the overwhelming spirituality of Tishrei is the ethereal month of Elul. Elul invites us to contemplate thoughts of forgiveness, love, and beauty. For the entire month, we sing songs of penitence, praying. Praying that we will be forgiven, for we are deeply flawed. Praying that we can forgive, for we are afraid to let go. Remembering that we are created for glorious things—if we can live a life of strength and resilience, depth and compassion.

Love is not a feeling but a spiritual state, not an emotion but a practice. We yearn for an expansive love that lifts us and connects us to our highest impulses. To be gentler with ourselves and find greater self-love. To embrace our relationships with open hearts and understanding. To find a faith grounded in the awareness that love abides and abounds if only we reach for it.

The mantra of the month of Elul is Psalm 27, recited daily: “There is only one thing I seek, to gaze upon beauty all the days of my life” (verse 4). We consider words and concepts such as God, holiness, love, and beauty. For me, they are synonymous and the dwelling place of the aspirational soul.

The calendar leads us further into the thicket of reflection, self-awareness, moral accountability, and spiritual elevation. The first ten days of the month of Tishrei are called the Ten Days of Repentance. For weeks now, we have readied ourselves for the intensity of these ten days. We have practiced sustaining a thoughtful and contemplative pose, thinking about where we have come from, who we are, and who we desire to become. We have tended to our wounds, nurtured our hearts, and immersed ourselves in matters of the spirit. It is healing to realize that these days begin with Rosh HaShanah, a celebration of Creation, when the world shines new and we know that the power to recreate ourselves lies within our attention and intention to do so. The shofar sounds, a clarion call to awaken what lies dormant within so that we may journey ever deeper into repentance and forgiveness, unfolding into a deeper sense of self.

And then Yom Kippur. We are tired, humbled, ecstatic with hope, crying out one last time. We deny ourselves food and drink. On this holiest of days, with nowhere to go, we go inward. We use metaphors that create a sense of urgency like “the gates begin to close” and “seal us in the Book of Life.” We

sing one more time of sin and repentance, rocking ourselves, hopeful that we can find the way, the path to a deeper life. A more thoughtful life. A forgiving life. And we bring our generations with us, immersing ourselves in loss and memory and the acute understanding that we are mortal. Morality is the demanding consciousness of Yom Kippur, bidding us to live better, deeper, and kinder. From dust. To dust.

This Book as Spiritual Grounding

You may want to follow the journey of the calendar and read this book in a linear manner, one page at a time, beginning at the beginning and progressing day by day. Or you may want to read it the way I wrote it, from the middle out, flipping through the book and allowing a passage to find you. And once it does, pause and let the words be your companion throughout the day. Think and feel its truth as your spirit perceives it. There is no beginning or end to the spiritual journey; instead, it is like a spiral, twirling and whirling, wondering and wandering through the complex landscape of our inner life.

This book is an invitation to pause, reflect, and unfold. We so rarely find time and space to linger and tarry by the window of contemplation, once again getting acquainted with the complexities of our inner lives.

This book invites you to find a quiet moment, just a moment, and enter the pages. Maybe as a bedside companion coaxing your sleep to journey with you as you examine the obstacles, paths, and byways that lead you deeper into self-awareness. Or maybe with a cup of tea in the early morning before the hustle and bustle, before the noise and distractions, before the day takes hold. A morning moment of reflection.

This book is a series of prompts for conversations with the Invisible or with friends, considering the many soulful aspirations such as a sense of purpose, hope, personal heroism, and meaning. And repentance and forgiveness. And love and kindness. And beauty—we so want to dwell in beauty.

This book is deeply personal; I have always said that we teach what we need to learn. I often write in the first person, with the belief that though our biographies are different and our stories are profoundly diverse, we share a yearning and striving to find meaning in our complex lives, to live with less conflict and greater connection, to self-actualize, to live a life of purpose, to love and be loved. We all share the pursuit of a deeper understanding of ourselves, our relationships, our faith, and our place in the world.

This book is an unfolding of the complex landscape of the inner life. It names the struggles we all have as we reach toward a meaningful life, the sometimes harshness of the journey, and the aspirational triumph of having walked the path.

When we weave together stillness, intention, and practice, then something shifts. When we are not afraid to say we are sorry, when we find a path to forgive, then something shifts. When we unfold into the pursuit of a deeper understanding of ourselves, our faith, and our place in the world—when we become seekers—something shifts. Every day has the potential to be a powerful day. Imagine embracing the themes and metaphors of this season, lingering in longing and amazement and the deepest questions of life. Imagine unfolding.

One page at a time.