

Rosh Hashanah 5787 Tribute in Light

If you are in New York City on the night of September 11 and you look into the sky, you will see two massive beams of light rising to the sky. They are so tall and bright you can even see them from Brooklyn. Those beams of light have a name and purpose: The Tribute in Light, to honor the victims of September 11, 2001.

If you were able to get closer to those lights, you would see what look like dust particles swimming in the beams. Those particles are birds. And they are trapped within the two beams of light.

This passage is the beginning of a powerful story, and I'd like to share it with you this morning.

This story comes from a recent book entitled, Turning to the Birds: The Power and Beauty of Noticing, by actress Lili Taylor. Taylor is probably best known for her acting roles in the films "Mystic Pizza" and "Say Anything." I came across the book one afternoon while perusing the stacks at the Fairfield University Book Store. In the book, Taylor offers a series of stories and essays about - lessons we can learn from birds.

A novice birder, Taylor writes, for example, of learning about the virtue of patience from observing quail in New Mexico and about the simple act of paying attention by watching a nest of hatchlings in her own backyard.

The essay, however, that really stuck with me was her recollection of volunteering on the evening of September 11, 2001 on a rooftop in New York City. To save the lives of birds.

To give a little background, Taylor explains that most birds migrate twice a year. In the spring they fly north to breed, and in the fall they fly south, mostly to the Southern Hemisphere, where they spend the majority of their lives.

The birds know they are going somewhere in South America, but many of them do not know how to avoid the two light beams shining brightly over New York City every year on September 11th. Hundreds, if not thousands of birds get trapped in those beams. Birds are drawn to city lights, for reasons scientists still don't completely understand.

We humans are quite like the birds, I thought to myself as I read Taylor's account of volunteering on that New York City rooftop on the eve of September 11th to help save these trapped, migrating birds.

We too are drawn to the bright, glowing beams of light. Except our beams are more metaphorical. Jobs. School. iPhones. Laptops. Practices. Family dynamics. Anxiety. Worries. Fear. All the things that seemingly entrap us and weigh on us, like the birds caught in the beams of light.

I wonder if God looks down on us and also doesn't completely understand why we do what we do. "Those humans, they keep getting trapped in the light," I imagine God saying. Staring at little screens instead of into their children's eyes. Poring over laptops answering emails early in the morning and late into the evening instead of looking out at the stars. Trapped within the beams of light. The beams of life.

Taylor notes that artificial city lights kill three hundred million to one billion birds a year and are a leading cause of staggering decline in bird populations. This is because the birds are attracted to the light, especially at night, and tend to run into buildings near the light more frequently. Scientists have begun to rely on the public, everyday citizens to monitor birds and help them understand exactly when birds will migrate through a city.

Some communities have even begun programs like Lights Out, a national effort by a network of cities to provide safe passage for migrating birds by turning off excessive lighting.

That sounds a lot like Shabbat, I again thought to myself. Lights Out. Day of rest. Lower the beams. Safe passage from week to week. God tells us in the Torah that if we do not rest, we will work ourselves to death. Like the migrating birds. For twenty-four hours, two Sabbath candles replace the artificial light.

Taylor arrived at the New York City rooftop at 7:45 p.m. on the eve September 11th. The plan was to monitor the birds caught up in the two beams of light. As soon as the number of birds would peak to over one thousand, the plan was that the volunteers would shut off the lights for exactly twenty minutes to allow the birds to continue on safely to South America.

"I keep looking up at a rectangular beam of light that stretches up and beyond what I can see with my naked eye," she writes. "The light seems infinite... I settle into a world of night sky and light beams."

As Taylor continues her story, my mind turns to my own experience of the morning of September 11, 2001, twenty-five years ago yesterday. I had just graduated Brandeis University a couple of months earlier and was living in Boston doing engagement work for MIT Hillel. As I was leaving for work this morning, my roommate motioned for me to come look at the television set.

Planes hijacked. Smoke coming from the towers. America under attack.

This was the early days of cell phones, as all of us tried furiously to call friends who we believed worked in the twin towers. Busy signal. Busy signal. My boss at Hillel calls me. "Can you come to the Hillel building as quickly as you can? Many students are shaken and upset."

It was probably the first time I ever offered pastoral care to someone, six years before I would even apply to rabbinical school and learn how to do it. I sat with students and we cried. Some were worried about a relative or friend who they believed might be in one of the towers. Others were just overwhelmed by whatever it was we were witnessing, barely able to speak.

I was twenty-one years old, what did I know from anything about comforting another human being? But sometimes our instincts just guide us where to go in those moments. When to speak. When not to speak. When simply to sit side by side and cry. I chose the latter.

Twenty-five years later and it feels as though much of the world has changed in some way or another, and yet in many it hasn't changed at all. There are days that B'nai Israel congregants come into my office to try and make sense of whatever it is we collectively are witnessing and living through at this moment in history.

And despite my years of training in pastoral care, most of the time I hearken back to my twenty-one year old self and still sit side by side with you and cry.

Rosh Hashanah is, for us, like that brief twenty minutes when the beams of light are shut off. Like the migrating birds, we generally know where we are headed, but we don't necessarily know exactly where we are going to land.

Questions about the future feel overwhelmingly abundant at this moment. The future of our country. The future of Israel. The future of the Jewish people. With the invention of AI, the future of what it even means to be human.

All the while we fly around and around, many days feeling in some way trapped in the metaphorical beams of light. There's so much that envelops us. Boxes us in. Decisions are made for us. About us. Like a bird in a beam of light.

"I record my first data entry," writes Taylor at 10:30 p.m. "Seventeen birds." By midnight there are now 759 birds caught in the beam. "There are so many birds," she writes.

"More and more birds are dropping lower, a sign that their efforts at getting out of the light are failing." When the number hits one thousand, they will turn off the beams.

My parents told me that, for them, September 11 felt akin to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Junior. Not in the scope of the tragedy, but rather that you'll never, ever, forget where you were that day. 2,977 innocent people killed as a nation sat in shock.

We no doubt still feel the impact, twenty-five years later. Our nation miraculously came together in the days and weeks that followed, and then it felt like it split like a dry piece of wood struck by lightning and continues to split ever since. A lot of people said "I love you" more, not knowing what tomorrow would bring. The simple act of leaving for work now felt uncertain. We realized nothing is invulnerable.

“Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?” We will pray tomorrow morning. I imagine even God doesn’t know.

As I enter 5787, I think about my own beams of light. I am forty-six years old, turning forty-seven just a few weeks from now. If I am lucky, I am about halfway through life. I am in what I’d call the middle phases of pretty much everything. I am blessed with a high schooler, a middle schooler, an elementary schooler, and also now a very cute puppy. On a good night I still can help my youngest with his math homework, although he is already much smarter than I am.

My parents are getting older, no longer able to navigate the world the way they used to. I am starting to attend the funerals of friends’ parents. My kids scroll too much.

I have a job that I love, and it also feels so complicated to be a rabbi at this moment. Israel. Jewish infighting. Security. American Politics. Antisemitism. Too much of it keeps me up at night. These are the important lights in our lives, which also bring us to exhaustion, making it even harder to complete the journey.

I ask myself what it means to be a Jewish leader at this moment. How best do I use my voice with the limited time that I have? All while trying to help hold a Jewish community together and not to miss my kids growing up right before my eyes. I imagine, like you, doing my best to fully live as my wings slowly begin to tire.

“The numbers have reached a critical mass,” writes Taylor. “We all stand fixated on the beams of light. There is nowhere for the birds to go but down, their precious fuel burning out in the cages of light. They descend slowly, inexorably, gravity taking its toll.

“And then an explosion of dark. The beams are gone. There is a soft chorus of cheers. The lights will stay off for twenty minutes,” she writes. “the amount of time it will take the birds to orient themselves and continue their migration.”

Today is Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world. The beams are switched off. There is a soft chorus of prayer. The lights will stay quiet for twenty-four hours, or forty-eight if you observe two days of the holiday. According to God, this is the amount of time it will take us humans to orient ourselves and continue on our journey.

The lights are off, but our senses are incredibly alive today. The shofar awakens our ears and our souls. The apples and honey sweeten our parched tongues. The two festival candles burn brightly, delighting our weary eyes. We breathe in. We breathe out. Our wings feel lighter and freer, even if just for a little while.

The beams have been temporarily turned off. How will we use this day? This year? The wings that the divine has gifted to each of us? I am taking today to remember September 11th. I am taking today to breathe. To close my eyes and listen to the melodies of the day. I am taking today to soar, to look up, to escape the artificial light. I am using today to hope, to renew, to dream about what I can create in 5787.

"It's nearing 2:00 a.m.," writes Taylor. "My shift relief is here... I roll up my mat, leave my tally sheet, and say my goodbyes quietly... I exit and walk as if I know where I'm going, but I don't. I feel like I've come from another world - because I have.

"I've been in the world of light and dark, birds, hope, and suffering. And I keep walking," she writes.

We too have been in the world of light and dark, birds, hope, and suffering. Although there is so much that traps us, we keep walking. We continue flying. Rosh Hashanah reminds us creativity is possible. God created the world amidst chaos and violence. And despite all its flaws and seemingly insurmountable problems, so shall we. God also gave us the ability to create. To finish the work of creation.

Today, on the birthday of the world, the beams have been shut off. Just for a little while. We rest. We hear. We pray. We dream. And tomorrow, we will surely keep on walking.

Today is dedicated to the memories of the lives lost on September 11, 2001. Shanah Tovah, and wishing you a sweet and blessed New Year.