"I Dwell in Possibility"

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When you book a seat on a plane do you choose an aisle or a window? And even if you do choose an aisle, do you peek out beyond the passenger next to you, to try to see something beyond . . .

As a kid I would always choose a window, and loved looking out on the mystery. Children appreciate windows. Perhaps that is why Erma Bombeck once advised, "It goes without saying that you should never have more children than you have car windows."

Windows are important to us adults as well. When we decorate a space for ourselves, we think carefully about windows. How much light do we want to let in or block out? What do we want to see outside--or not see?

A window is also a powerful image for being at the edge or at the limit of what we can know, while sensing a possibility of looking beyond. It is the border between what is visible and invisible—or *possibly* visible. John Dewey wrote that "[t]he visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped."[1] We live in the visible, tangible, observable world--what we often call the "real world." Yet we also have moments when we feel the greater reality of the intangible. This greater reality is what the image of the window points to. A window is a metaphor for possibility—the possibility to transcend our limited space and limited language. As Emily Dickenson writes:

I dwell in Possibility
A fairer House than Prose-
More numerous of Windows-
Superior –for Doors[2]

For Dickenson, poetry itself is such a window that can potentially transcend that border or limit. The window, is an image of our souls at the edge. Poetry can express these religious themes powerfully because it is, as Professor Michael D. Jackson (anthropologist and poet) says, "language at the limit." I was drawn to take a class last year with Professor Michael D. Jackson partly because I understood that poetry speaks to some of us (and through some of us) in ways that classical religious language and liturgy does not. That, of course, is what Dickenson's poem "I dwell in possibility" is about. She describes poetry as having windows and doors and an "everlasting roof". And the occupation of poetry as "the spreading wide my narrow hands/to gather paradise." The narrow hands refer to conventional prayer as she knew it. The window of poetry was for her-- prayer.

At their most sublime, the images of poetry and prayer, such as the windows of our lives, both take us to the border and invite us to look beyond. Poetry and prayer is the kind of language that we speak or read when we are at the border or limit of unbearable grief, joyous wonder, or chaotic mystery, when we want to express the inexpressible. No matter what your theology, what your religious observance or non-observance; no matter whether you are moved by the great cantors or the great operas, by meditation or philosophy, I think we have all experienced this call to look beyond. We have all experienced the limits of experience and the limits of language. We have all experienced the call to silence and (in whatever form) the call to prayer. Judaism seeks to open the possibility of these experiences, which enlarge our awareness and give us a sense of humility, vitality and hopefully compassion, as we seek to bring what is most meaningful into the center of our lives.

What are the windows in our Jewish tradition through which we can look out into the "veritable ocean" as Wallace Stevens calls it.[3] The Jewish morning liturgy praises God as the one who "bursts open the windows of the heavens' dome, bringing forth the sunlight from its seat of rest, providing light for the entire world . . ." Last week we celebrated Rosh Hashanah the anniversary of creation, and creation is seen in Jewish imagery as taking place every day by a divine act of bursting open the windows of the cosmos. So one window in Judaism is poetic language-- metaphor in prayer to express our wonder and gratitude.

Certainly another window in Jewish tradition is the window of forgiveness, the window we seek to open on this day. Archbishop Tutu in South Africa, who took so seriously the necessity for forgiveness in his Truth and Reconciliation Commission, talked about living without forgiveness as "like someone sitting in a dank room. It's musty. The windows are closed. The curtains are drawn. But outside the sun is shining. There is fresh air. Forgiveness is like opening the curtains, opening the window, letting the light and the air into the person's life that was like that dank room, and giving them the chance to make this new beginning."

Yet another window in Jewish tradition is that of prayer. Just as God opens windows, the traditional Jew asks God to "open my lips, that my mouth can sing your praise." The window is not only a metaphor for prayer, but it is understood literally as a requirement for prayer. In the biblical book of Daniel, the story is told of the Persian leaders who wanted to entrap Daniel and had the king issue an edict that would forbid petitions to any other god or man other than the king. Essentially, this edict made Jewish prayer illegal. When Daniel heard this, he went home as he always did, and courageously opened his windows on his upper story, which faced Jerusalem, and prayed, thus defying the king's edict. The story specified that Daniel prayed beside open windows (6:11). Because of this, the Talmud says that any space without windows is not an appropriate place for prayer (Berachot 34b).

The Zohar, the Jewish mystical text, sites the verse from Shir Hashirim, Song of Songs (2:9) which says that "I thought I would be forever alone, but behold! [My beloved] was standing behind our wall, observing through the windows, peering through the lattices." The lattices, the cracks of the windows, are where we find love and find the One beyond. We do not always have an open window another or to God. But we do have cracks, through which we can peer out at the beyond.

Like all windows, the window of prayer can be open or shut.
That is why the Talmudic sages themselves prayed to be able to pray. For them the difficulties were about focus, the burden of routine and the difficulty of expressing that which is most deeply within and most transcendent without. For some of us, the difficulty is with a kind of theology that posits a person-like God who grants requests, rewards good behavior, or punishes bad. It is to that difficulty that William James responded, offering the wisdom of his friend who said that "*Prayer* is the general name for that attitude of open and earnest expectancy. If we then ask to *whom* to pray, the answer (strangely enough) must be that *that* does not much matter."[4] For James rather, prayer *"is as if all doors were opened, and all paths freshly smoothed.* We meet a new world when we meet the old world in the spirit which this kind of prayer infuses" (*Varieties,* p. 425). The image of doors, like the image of windows, evoke the sense of border that prayer, as poetry seeks to transcend.

Another difficulty of prayer (and poetry as well) is the limits of language itself. In Dickenson's words:

To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the Spell demean--
There is a syllable-less Sea
Of which it is the sign--
My will endeavors for its word
And fails, but entertains
A Rapture as of Legacies—
Of introspective Mines—
(J1700)[5]

Her phrase, "syllable-less Sea" is a profound metaphor for the Infinite, for the divine. Syllable-less, of course, is silence. And the Jewish mystics know that silence is the most profound expression of reality. The paradigm of prayer in the Bible is Chana, whose prayer is so deep that it is unvocalized-- her lips move but her voice is silent.

Such silence stands in contrast with the loose flow of words that comes from intoxication. Perhaps that is why the Talmud says that "an intoxicated person is forbidden to pray." Why? Aviva Zornberg cites Beit Ya'akov who explains that "prayer is at root an acknowledgment of a void, a gap in one's being, that brings one to God; intoxication, on the other hand, is a state of completeness, euphoria. Riding high, the intoxicated person 'regards the whole world as a plain': that is, he feels sublimely masterful, lord of all he surveys. The window of prayer in such a condition is impossible."[6]

In other words, people get drunk to suppress or escape pain or the abyss. But it is precisely these painful experiences that generate "self-awareness, desire, and language" (p. 62). It is precisely these experiences that lend themselves to true prayer.

Yet deeply engaging prayer is not always easy to express for as Dickenson says, "By homely gifts and hindered words/The human heart is told" (F1611). So I want to look at another window in our tradition--the window of a broken heart. Judaism understands that true prayer arises from experiences of pain and loss. The Psalmist writes, "God is close to the brokenhearted, and those crushed in spirit He saves" (34:19). Similarly, the Talmud teaches that "one's prayer is not heeded unless God is approached with one's heart in one's hands" (BT Ta'anit 8a).

This idea is expressed metaphorically through the image of doors, gates, and locks. The Ba'al Shem Tov relates that the mystics had access to a complicated series of keys that could unlock the heart in prayer. We no longer have the keys; all we can do is smash the lock, and that is done by means of a broken heart. The final service of Yom Kippur, called the Neila service, literally means "gate" referring to the closing gate of the Temple. True prayer opens a gate, which is sometimes locked, but can be unlocked through a broken heart.

A gate can be locked, and a window can be shuttered. Paradoxically, it is darkness that helps us see through a window. Have you noticed that at night, when the room is lit from the inside, we cannot see through the window to the outside? Yet we can see through the window when our room is dark. When we are looking through darkness, the "dark night of the soul" so to speak, what was previously invisible becomes visible.

Sometimes our inclination is to light up the dark and chase it away, to fill the void. When we do that at night, however, windows don't serve as openings but as blocks. "When one looks from inside at a lighted window . . ." Marilynne Robinson's character reflects in her novel *Housekeeping*, "one sees the image of oneself in a lighted room . . . the deception is obvious, but flattering all the same. When one looks from darkness into light, however, one sees all the difference between here and there, this and that."[7]

It is darkness, paradoxically, that absence or void, that can bring the brighter vision. In the words of Emily Dickenson, writing no doubt out of grief and sadness:

> To fill a Gap
> Insert the Thing that caused it-
> Block it up
> With Other—and 'twill yawn the more-
> You cannot solder an Abyss
> With Air- (F647)

Rather, it is the darkness, the broken heart acknowledging the void, which makes the opening of the window possible.

We spend perhaps too much of our time closing windows. Sometimes it is in avoiding the void in our own lives. Sometimes it is avoiding seeing the pain and injustice around us. The most powerful story of the shutting of windows, in this case literally as well as metaphorically, was told by a dear friend of mine, Dan Golomb, who died this past June, may his memory be for a blessing. Dan was a survivor of the Shoah and the father of my closest friend, Anath, who is here tonight. When he was 15 years old he was deported to Auschwitz. He survived, moved to Israel where he became a scientist, and then to the United States. In the mid 1990's Dan had been sent on a scientific expedition to Algeria, where he shared a room with a German scientist. I will continue the story in Dan's own words:

"On one evening, sitting on the veranda, sipping beer and watching the spectacular desert sunset, our conversation inevitably turned to our past, telling each other's history. Of course, the subject of the holocaust came up . . . yet without giving details on where and how. Toeppl [as we will call him] became immediately reticent and defiant. 'Oh, you know we common folks had nothing to do with it . . . We didn't know anything about it . . . This was the work of Hitler and Himmler, and perhaps a few SS officers and the Gestapo.' I said, but you know there were an awful lot of participants in the beatings and murder, in the deprivation and torture."

And so Dan went on to tell Toeppl his story. How the SS would bring in workers from the concentration camp to a town where they did hard labor on a starvation diet. Most died after a month or two. Continuing in his own words, Dan related to Toepl how "every morning when we dragged the cart with the corpses through the village, I noticed that the shutters of the windows closed tight, and there was nobody on the street. Toeppl, who waxed increasingly pale while I was telling the story, with cold sweat pearls on his forehead, asked if I remembered the name of the town. I thought the name was Ampfing or something similar to it. Toeppl stood up, wiped his brow, and said that he lived with his mother in Ampfing during the war. Every morning, before we arrived with the cart, his mother told him to close the shutters."

Dan continued: "Toeppl staggered out of the veranda. I saw him walking on a path toward the desert. I thought he had to air himself out a bit. But it became dark, and Toeppl didn't return. I started to worry. I notified other colleagues and

the foreign legion. We all started to comb the surroundings, but couldn't find him. Eventually, I went to bed and slept fitfully, worrying about Toeppl. Did he do something foolish? He returned in the morning. He said he needed some time, alone in the desert. It was a good place for contemplation. . . . I haven't heard from Toeppl since."

The image of closing the shutters to make invisible the evil happening just outside our doorstep is a powerful one. The moral for Dan was clear. It is a moral that is still relevant, as we human beings still have elaborate ways of making invisible the needs and sufferings of others as well as the perpetration of evil on others. Yet I also want to remark on the irony of a boy who closed the shutters at his mother's bidding 50 years previous, and had them opened 50 years later by a chance encounter with the very person who had been right outside his door all along. I don't know where that open window led for Toeppl. At least it led to a pause and contemplation. We can only hope that for him and for all of humanity, we can find openings toward justice and change where we have known only thick walls and closed shutters. Listening to the cries and loosening the bonds of the oppressed, as we read in Isaiah tomorrow, is yet another window in Judaism.

We have looked at the windows of language, forgiveness, a broken heart, and commitment to justice. Let us look, for a moment at an image that is the complete opposite image of a room with windows and doors --a cave, a dwelling that has no windows at all. One story of a cave is in the Bible is a book of 1 Kings-- the story of Elijah the prophet. Elijah is isolated, alienated and zealous for the Lord. He kills by fire the 400 false prophets of Baal, and then flees to Horeb, another name for Sinai, and waits by himself in a cave for a revelation from God. "He arrived there at the cave and spent the night in it; then behold, the word of God came to him and said to him, 'Why are you here, Elijah? . . . Go out [of the cave] and stand on the mountain . . ." (1Kings 19:9-11).

Elijah steps out of the cave and waits for the thunder and lighting, shaking and quaking, but nothing happens. Rather, while Elijah is expecting the certainty of big sounds and blinding light, he experiences God through the "still small voice." In order to hear that faint voice or murmuring, he needs to step outside the cave, outside of the cave of his limited consciousness, so to speak. When we lead a life without windows, we need to step out, to step close to the border of what we can know, feel and perceive, to be open and look beyond what me may have mistakenly believed was all there was.

I understand, of course, that for some of us, synagogues, any synagogue, can feel like a cave. It is certainly our challenge during these days and in this place to open doors and windows of our spirits and our prayers. The experience of a cave could be anywhere in our lives—any place or every place. It could be a way of perceiving or a way of not perceiving. Coming out of the cave, having the awareness or faith to live on the shoreline looking out onto the "veritable ocean" or out windows that teach us about both our limits and our possibilities, is the goal of a religious life—of a Jewish life.

I would like to end with a poem by R.S. Thomas who was an Anglican priest and poet from Wales, and who spoke honestly about the difficulty deep prayer in the church. The poem is called "Threshold", an image that reminds us of windows and doors, borders and limits. It alludes to the story of Elijah I just recounted. In the poem, the poet is on the threshold of a cave, not quite knowing whether to step out into the open, which is not quite the "light" but "worse darkness" and the "abyss." Alone and unknowing, the poet still dares to write, to pray, to reach out his hand.

I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upwards toward
the light. To look forward? Ah,

what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.

I am alone on the surface
Of a turning planet. What

to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
Out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

While I do not believe we are alone, I do think that we are on the edge of both an abyss and a possibility. May this awesome day create for us the possibility of reaching out into unknown space, knowing we are supported and held by each other. May we have the courage to risk the safety of our dwellings, however we have constructed them, to look through the window to that "syllable-less sea."

L'Shana Tova Tikatevu v'Tehatemu

I wish you all an easy fast, a meaningful 24 hours, and a year of peace and blessing.

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[1] John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, volume 1:1925, Experience and Nature,* ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), p. 44. This quote was also referenced by Professor Michael Jackson in his course "Poetry and Religion" at the Harvard Divinity School.
[2] *The Poems of Emily Dickinson,* Edited by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), #466.
[3] "The Idea of Order at Key West".
[4] From *Varieties of Religious Experience,* in William James, *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 418.

[5] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson,* ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Back Bay Books, Little Brown and Company, 1976), #1700.
[6] Aviva Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), p. 62.
[7] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), pp. 157-58.