

# Becoming Good Jewish Ancestors

Kol Nidre, 5783 2022\*

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I'm feeling deep gratitude tonight for my ancestors and teachers and companions, given and chosen, whose love and path I walk in, so that I could find myself here with you on this Kol Nidre night.

And I especially want to thank Victoria Alcoset and Avi Brooks and Aurora Levins Morales for your teachings on Rosh Hashanah. As I listened to your words, I could feel something new opening up, something shifting in the direction of life. You all gave expression to ways of thinking and being that offered me spaciousness and possibility in this time that can feel so narrow and tangled.

With these High Holy Days, we move into a new Shmita cycle - a new 7-year cycle for the earth. So the Kehilla Spiritual Leadership team wanted to explore what it might mean to re-engage with the land after this time of resting and ceasing. And the concepts that emerged most strongly when we looked at Jewish teaching about our relationship to land are the concepts of *reciprocity* and *mutuality*.

The *shmita* cycle offers us a vision of the land as a living thing, to be respected and cared for, according to its own needs and rhythms. And the *shmita* cycle also points to a layer of Jewish teaching that isn't always brought to light—earth-based teaching that speaks to our deepest longing for connection and guidance, for a good path to follow when we can feel so lost in this time of melting ice and burning forests and flooded communities.

I hope to keep exploring this layer of our sacred teaching tonight, focusing on a few of the many Jewish sources that have deep resonances with Indigenous frameworks of reciprocity and mutuality.

I want to be careful and precise when I talk about the intersections of Jewish and Indigenous teachings. While there are layers of Jewish sacred teaching that are intimately of and about the particular Biblical land of Canaan, I don't think of myself, or of other Jews except for a relatively small number of Palestinian Jews, as being indigenous to that place. Our spiritual teaching may have begun there, but our ancestor Abraham was an immigrant from Ur, in modern day Iraq, and the centers of Jewish spiritual life moved from Jerusalem to Babylonia, and to Anadalu, to Cairo and Salonika to Vilna and to Uman, to Venice and to Piacenza, to Buenos Aires and to Brooklyn and to Boulder, and some might say, also here to Huchiun.

We are a diasporic, pollinator people, moving from place to place, from culture to culture, but bringing with us original and essential teachings that, like many human spiritual teachings, remind us that we are **of** the land, not on the land;

*\*Slightly revised from the live version on Kol Nidre. This offering is dedicated to Jesse Lev, my son and my teacher, whose company on the path of Torah is a wellspring of delight.*

that our aliveness is a temporary and fragile gift;  
that we are a living bridge between past and future, between ancestors and descendants;  
that we are sustained in this life by other living beings - the ones who care for us and the ones who give of their bodies to feed us;  
and we bind ourselves back to those beings through our gratitude, through our service, through our caretaking, through our humility, and through our awareness of this sacred interdependence.

Tyson Yunkaporta, an Aboriginal scholar offers some helpful language for describing indigeneity in his book *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. He says:

*An **Indigenous person** is a member of a community retaining memories of life lived sustainably on a land base, as part of that land base.*

***Indigenous Knowledge** is any application of those memories as living knowledge to improve present and future circumstances.<sup>1</sup> [emphasis added]*

This distinction, or clarification, about what it means to be an Indigenous person, and what it means to engage with Indigenous Knowledge is so helpful to me— because I know that I’m not an Indigenous person. But I see Torah, and certain veins of its expressions through Jewish time, as Indigenous Knowledge – as the application of memories as living knowledge to improve present and future circumstances.

And I believe that part of our sacred charge in this moment is to listen for, and to recover the Jewish *indigenous knowledge* that can guide us in this time - whatever this time might bring.

Because Jewish indigenous knowledge is our inheritance, carefully transmitted to us through countless generations. And because it’s our obligation to transmit Jewish indigineous knowledge to the generations that are coming - the generations that Aurora called “the menders.”

Over the next bit of time, I’ll share a glimpse of Jewish indigenous knowledge as it teaches us about our relationship to **time**, our relationship to **other beings**, and our relationship to **land**.

## Time

In *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta begins by noting that Indigenous ways of understanding the world defy description in European languages. In sharing how he sets out to describe Aboriginal knowledge in English, Yunkaporta says:

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<sup>1</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Harper One, New York, 2020, page 36.

*This will be a challenge because English inevitably places settler worldviews at the center of every concept, obscuring true understanding. For example, explaining Aboriginal notions of time is an exercise in futility as you can only describe it as “non-linear” in English, which immediately slams a big line right across your synapses. You don’t register the “non”-- only the “linear”: that is the way you process that word, the shape it takes in your mind. Worst of all, it’s only describing the concept by saying what it is not, rather than what it is. We don’t have a word for nonlinear in our languages because nobody would consider traveling, thinking or talking in a straight line in the first place. The winding path is just how a path is and therefore it needs no name.*

He continues:

*One man tried going in a straight line many thousands of years ago and was called wamba (crazy) and punished by being thrown up into the sky. This is a very old story, one of many stories that tell us how we must travel and think in free-ranging patterns, warning us against charging ahead in crazy ways.<sup>2</sup>*

I got so excited when I read this— because it seemed to be naming things I recognize in Jewish traditions, but that I could never name so clearly.

First, when I hear the phrase “we must travel and think in free-ranging patterns” my mind goes right to the moment of our liberation.

In the Book of Exodus, Torah says:

*When Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by the more direct way, but round-about, by way of the wilderness.*

And we know that *that* journey, the formative journey of our people, became a journey of wandering to and fro, up and down, here and there and back again over 40 years.

Second, the Biblical Hebrew language of our ancestors is also very difficult to translate into English. And I think this difficulty is partly because the very structures of Biblical Hebrew also embody a different, non-linear way of reckoning time.

For example, the Hebrew word “*olam*” means both “world” or “universe” and “forever” or “eternity”; it can mean “limitless time, past and future”. The Hebrew word *olam* doesn’t distinguish between time and space. In western thinking, we can move in any direction in space, but in only one direction in time. But if space and time are not separate, time can also unfold in many ways, in multiple directions.

Tyson Yunkaporta also points out that “time and place are usually the same word in Aboriginal languages - the two are indivisible.”<sup>3</sup> This is true for our Hebrew word *olam*.

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<sup>2</sup> Yunkaporta, p. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Yunkaporta, p. 57

To go even deeper, the three-letter verbal root of *olam* - *ayin-lamed-mem* means to conceal or to hide.<sup>4</sup> So there seems to be some hint that not only are all of space and time one and the same, but they are *also concealed* from us. So how we experience space and time is a partial revelation of a larger, concealed process that is beyond our awareness, but remembered and hinted at in our sacred language.

Our post-Biblical, rabbinic traditions which are transmitted through the Talmud and Midrash retain this non-linear conception and experience of time. There's a common rabbinic saying that *ain mukdam o-me'uchar ba-Torah* - there is no early or late, no before and after, no chronological order in the Torah.<sup>5</sup>

On its face, that seems absurd! The Torah is a story that unfolds in time! But in the rabbinic practice of interpretation, of mining sacred teaching from beneath the surface of Torah, conventional concepts of time are suspended.

In one famous story in the Talmud, Moses instantly travels 1000 years through time to visit the *beit midrash*, or classroom, of R' Akiva.<sup>6</sup> What may be most remarkable about this story is that the Talmud *doesn't* remark at all on the time-travel - it seems quite natural, at least as part of an interaction between G-d and the great prophet Moses. Moses simply turns around, as G-d tells him to, and finds himself in a different location in spacetime.

Another aspect of how time is reckoned in Biblical Hebrew has to do with verbs. Verbs in Biblical Hebrew don't have tenses like "past" and "present" and "future". Instead they have "aspects" which denote either actions that have been completed (which we translate using our past tense), and actions that are as-yet-incomplete or ongoing (which we translate using our future tense.)

And, as some of you know, we also have in Biblical Hebrew grammar this magical use of the letter *vav*, sometimes called *vav-conversive*, which, when placed in front a verb flips its tense or aspect in the opposite direction, converting its direction in time. What is yet-to-be is suddenly finished, and what is complete is instantly in a process of becoming.

These are hints - some blatant, some subtle, that our tradition operates in a fundamentally different conceptual frame when it comes to time and relationality. This is the "folding of time" that Avi Brooks talked about on Erev Rosh Hashanah - the Slipstream where "past, present and future overlap."

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<sup>4</sup> Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew & English Lexicon, page 761. Accessed online via the Hebrew Bible app.

<sup>5</sup> A search of Sefaria ([www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org)) for *מוקדם ומוחר בתורה* yielded 99 "source" results, including Rashi on Numbers 9:1 and Leviticus 8:2; Mekhilta d'R'Yishmael 15:9; Sifrei Bamidbar 64:1; Tosafot on Kiddushin 37b; Yerushalmi Megillah 1:5 and Rosh Hashanah 1:1; Raban on Leviticus 8:2 and Exodus 40:2, to name a few.

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b

This non-linearity of time binds us more intimately to both our ancestors and our descendants. We are not separate from them. They show up in our dreams, we show up in their hands, their words are our words, our breath is their breath.

## **Rights & Obligations**

From our relationship with time we move to our relationship with other beings.

Another fundamental framework in our tradition that mirrors many Indigenous systems is the framework of obligation. I got to learn a little this year from Rabbi and Professor Ariel Evan Mayse, who taught about the different legal frameworks of rights and obligations, as outlined by Robert Cover, a Jewish law professor.

To oversimplify his teaching, the western legal system we live in is based on “rights”. People who have standing in the system have certain rights, as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And our struggles for justice often center on expanding those rights to people who have been denied them, or enforcing those rights for people who have been granted them on paper, but have yet to experience them.

The Jewish legal system, and many other non-Western systems, are “obligation-based.” Robert Cover wrote, “When I am asked to reflect upon Judaism and human rights...the first thought that comes to mind is that the categories are wrong.... The principal word in Jewish law, which occupies a place equivalent in evocative force to the American legal system’s “rights”, is the word “mitzvah” which literally means commandment but has a general meaning closer to “incumbent obligation.”<sup>7</sup>

People in the system have certain obligations – to others, to the world we are part of, to our ancestors who prepared the way for us, to the future generations whose way we prepare, and to the Creator of life. We are commanded, held accountable. We are bound to Torah and to each other and to the earth through our obligations to them.

In the rights-based system, the individual is protected from others and from the collective, free to do and say as we please, within certain limits. The rights-based system regards the individual as primary, and sets us up to think of ourselves as fully separate beings, with a few strong connections to those closest to us.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Cover, *Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order*. Journal of Law and Religion, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1987), pp. 65-74 accessed online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1051017>.

In the obligation-based system, each individual is bound to others and to the collective, bound to the past and to the future. The obligation-based system regards the *Life system* as primary, and sets us up to think of ourselves as connected beings, who live in mutuality and reciprocity.

I grew up, and maybe you did too, saturated in the virtues of the rights-based system. So it's challenging for me to question it. And as a queer and trans person, my life and my family depend on those rights, and on their expansion. I also see how, in some systems that center obligation, without the promise of rights to fight for, marginalized people can be lost, rejected, or made to suffer terribly. But I can see, too, that my rights-based framework cuts me off from experiencing the truth of my connection to everyone and everything more fully.

So the obligation-based system of Judaism offers a portal into a sacred system of mutuality and reciprocity that can help me, and maybe help us, to reorient and re-calibrate the balance between the individual and the collective. Maybe, just as we learned that the earth isn't the center of creation, and that our solar system sits in an average spot on one of many arms of a typical spiral galaxy among many galaxies, we can learn, or re-learn that we don't need to be at the center in order to matter, and to live fully, as one among many miraculous manifestations of Being.

Consider *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws. All of the complicated requirements and regulations prohibiting the mixing of milk and meat are derived from a single verse in the Torah:

*Lo t'vashel g'dei b'chalav imo*<sup>8</sup>

Do not cook a kid, a young goat, in its mother's milk.

This goat, this source of food is a young creature. It has a mother. Its mother is alive, and she is still giving milk. It would be abhorrent to take the life-giving milk of the mother that is meant to nourish and sustain her child, and instead, use it for cooking, and eating the two together.

This isn't because the kid or its mother are regarded as having rights. I think it is because they are regarded as being alive, as being part of Creation. And we are obligated to respect and honor Creation; we are obligated to be mindful in our taking from Creation. We may take what we need to live, but we must honor the lives that are given up in order to sustain us. We must treat all life with respect. This is our obligation.

## **The Land is Mine**

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 23:19



The third and last relationship I'll touch on is our relationship to the land, to the earth. The verse on our beautiful art for this year, which was created by Lizzie Sivitz, comes from the end of the teaching about *shmita* in Leviticus. It reads:

*Ki li ha'aretz, ki gerim v'toshavim atem imadi.*<sup>9</sup>

YHVH says:

*Ki li ha'aretz* - For the land is Mine, the earth is Mine

*Ki gerim v'toshavim atem imadi* - And you all are strangers and temporary residents with Me.

I hear YHVH saying:

My beloveds, my treasures, understand this.

Your happiness, your flourishing, your children's children's children all depend on this -

Know who you are.

Know how you belong to creation.

Know what is yours, and what is *not* yours to do,

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<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 25:23b

what is yours to know and what is *not* yours to know,

Know what is Mine, YHVH says, what is beyond you;  
Know that you are guests here with Me, and that I am a generous host.  
Know that all of My guests are beloved to Me.

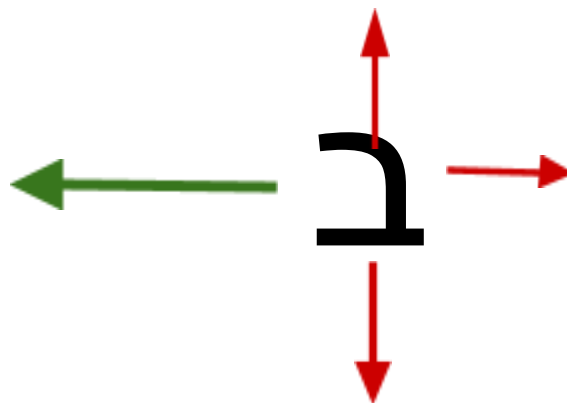
There's a *midrash* that asks, why did G-d create the world with the letter *bet*, the second letter of the *aleph-bet*? Why does the Torah begin with a *bet* and not an *aleph*? It says Rabbi Yonah taught in the name of Rabbi Levi: *The world was created with a bet because the letter bet is closed on all of its sides, and open only in the front.*



And the *midrash* goes on:

*And you don't have permission to say: what is below? And what is above? And what is before? And what is behind? Rather, [you can ask anything] from the day that G-d created the olam, the world, and about what is to come.*<sup>10</sup>

The core teaching here seems to be that What Is is vast, and we and our world are given access to part of it, but not all of it. There is much - really most of Reality - that is beyond us. And again here, space and time seem to overlap. The *midrash* says both *What is before?* and *what is behind?*" - when we look at the letter *bet*, we can see three spatial directions that are blocked off, and one that is open, but the *midrash* clearly names four directions that are blocked off, with one that remains open.



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<sup>10</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:10

## 2nd paragraph of the Shema & Vayikra on Shmita

On Rosh Hashana, we also learned with Avi Rose the Torah of the 2nd paragraph of the *Shema*, where the Torah reminds us that listening to the Sacred instruction we've been given will lead to rain in its season, healthy crops and well-being. And turning our backs on this Sacred teaching will lead us to misery and suffering.

Avi suggested, following the teaching of Judith Plaskow and others, that this paragraph isn't about a manipulative G-d offering us reward and threatening us with punishment. Instead, it is from a loving G-d, Who is offering a *description* of how things just *are*, and is desiring that through our understanding, we will be able to live in ways that bring joy and well-being.

In the Torah portion we'll read tomorrow with Rabbi Gray, it says that if we don't honor the land's need for rest and observe *shmita*, the land will become impossible for us to live on and we will become refugees in places that are hostile to us.

It says:

*Then the land will receive its shabbat -  
all the days that it is deserted and you are in the land of those who harm you;  
then the land will rest and receive its shabbat.  
All the days that it is deserted, it will receive the rest  
that it did not receive in your shmita years while you were  
living upon it.*<sup>11</sup>

Going back for a moment to Sand Talk, Tyson Yunkaporta says:

*"In Aboriginal Australia, our Elders tell us stories, ancient narratives to show us that if you don't move with the land, the land will move you."*<sup>12</sup>

This is just how it is. The land needs us just like we need the land. All the beings that contribute to our living need us to support *their* living. We are part of a life system, not separate from it. If we disrespect the life system, it can no longer sustain us.

It's a wonder to me that when this Torah was written down - maybe 2500 years ago, human societies didn't have the capacity to trigger changes in the climate that would bring rampant fires, superstorms, and floods.

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<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 26:34-35

<sup>12</sup> Yunkaporta, p. 2.

When this Torah was written down, humans didn't have the capacity to travel clear across the planet in a matter of hours, spreading a virus over the globe in a matter of days.

When this Torah was written down, humans didn't move hundreds of thousands of shipping containers across the seas, sometimes bearing tiny insects that could cause famine-inducing infestations on distant continents.

And I wonder, as time folds back on itself in a non-linear pattern where past and future emerge and interact in ways that my linear mind can't fathom—

Is it possible that this Torah of the Shema and of Shmita really is a message transmitted by our ancestors to the future that is us?

Is it possible that this Torah was meant just for this moment, just for our time and place?

Is it possible that generations of our ancestors passed it forward faithfully, not altering a word, honoring its sacredness even if its meaning lay beyond their understanding, so that they could deposit it whole and unaltered into our hands?

My prayer as we begin this new week of years, this new *shmita* cycle, is that we keep searching out and opening ourselves to the Indigenous knowledge in our own Jewish traditions -

And that as we immerse ourselves in the ways of thinking and the ways of **being**, we will connect more and more to our own place and purpose within the intricate patterns of life, and grow into good ancestors for the generations who will come.