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1.11.15: Beyond Resolutions and Hangovers  
(Genesis 2:1-7; Deuteronomy 20:1-7)

Happy New Year! I don't think we're too far into the year for us to still wish one another a Happy New Year, are we? Between racial injustice seething in our nation's cities, the Ebola virus in Africa, domestic violence among star athletes, and planes dropping bombs in Iraq and Syria to thwart the intentions of a new enemy, the Islamic State, many of us were not unhappy to see 2014 recede in our rear view mirror. Yet, despite our desire to begin anew, this week of the new year, too, was filled with brutality, suffering and violence.

As we absorb this most recent assault on freedom, on journalists, on Jews, I think of the words of Holocaust survivor and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel—no stranger to inhumanity, violence and evil—“I'm an optimist, against my better judgment.”

Even amidst pain and pessimism, there are still many pleasures to be had. I recently shared with friends the birth of a new baby and am anticipating with great excitement the birth of my first grand-niece or grand-nephew. Despite all the suffering in the world, the blessing of a new life can shine a light so bright, it renews hope in times of darkness. There is a famous midrash about how meritorious the women were in Egypt for making love with their enslaved husbands under the apple trees, for trusting in the future despite a dark present.

Consider the lines in Deuteronomy I just read delineating the rules of war, in which people on the cusp of the new are excused from battle. Someone who has built a new home, but not yet dedicated it. Someone newly engaged but not yet married. Someone who has planted a vineyard, but not yet harvested it... Each of these circumstances are bets on the future, beliefs that what is ahead will, and in the last case, even literally, bear fruit. The people in these circumstances—building a family, building a house, building a livelihood—all experience the blessing of anticipation, a conviction that tomorrow is synonymous with potential, with promise, with possibility.

For some of us in this sanctuary today, 2015 will bring a new house, a wedding, a freshly minted degree, a budding career, or a baby. All of us, underneath our cultural tropes of resolutions and hangovers, yearn for a fresh start, an embrace

of a clean slate, the potential to pause, to create a kind of Sabbath in which we pay attention, in which we renew what is pristine and promising in our lives.

In the Jewish calendar, ten days after Rosh Hashanah, the January 1st of Judaism, is Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of reflection, a kind of do-over in starting fresh, a reconsideration of our resolutions. Here we are, ten days after January 1st, on the second Sabbath of that new year. There are several ways we can read today's date. January 11, 2015. 1/11/2015. But I'd like us to read it in a less obvious, but suggestive way: 1. 1. 1. 1. 5.

It starts slowly.

1. We pay attention.

1.1. We linger at that place of inception, of hope.

1.1.1. We treasure the chance for reflection as we resolve to improve ourselves.

1.1.1.1. We begin our self improvement plan.

Then, suddenly, quickly, skipping steps, we're at 5. No 2-3-or-4. We forget to notice. We fall off the wagon. We revert to our bad habits. We're off to the races.

There is a tradition in Judaism of *Gematria*, where each letter has a numerical equivalent; 1 is the letter "*Aleph*" and 5 is the letter "*Hay*". Both Aleph and Hay are vowels, so if you were to try to speak the word that these numbers create, it would be "AHHHH", the sound of exhalation, breath, breath, a reminder of Genesis, "Then the Eternal God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

So on this 1.1.1.1.5 day, let's turn the numbers into letters. Let's turn the impulse to race back into our familiar lives on its head, and breathe, use the confluence of these numbers and letters on this Sabbath day to pause again.

As I welcomed in the Sabbath this past Friday night, and watched the Shabbat candles on my table flickering, I was transported back to my teen years. Then, I attended synagogue every Friday night, not because my parents went, but because my friends did. I remember none of the sermons and some of the music. But, literally, like a moth to a flame, I was present every week. I would always sit near the Shabbat candles and stare into those flickering flames. For that hour, those lights gave me comfort and solace from the angst of adolescence; they promised possibility and warmth; they telegraphed light and hope.

Staring into the glow of those candles was a time for reflection. Too many young people, indeed, too many people of every age are too busy to reflect.

Every year we begin our Fellowship for Religious Encounter with an afternoon retreat, which includes a walk on a labyrinth. My beloved colleague, Rev. Joanne Sanders explains the tradition of the labyrinth. She teaches how it can be a walking meditation, or a tool for reflection, or for resolving an insistent question. As they listen to her, more than once, I have caught one or two of our over-programmed students rolling their eyes. I can almost hear their internal dialogue, “Really, we’re going to walk around in circles for 20 minutes?” “With all I have to do at Stanford, I don’t have time for this!”

And then they enter the labyrinth. Their walking slows. Their breathing slows. Twenty minutes go by. Thirty. Sometimes forty. They don’t want to leave it. There are precious few moments in their day, their week, their college tenure for quiet, for calm, for contemplation.

Yet contemplation and reflection is essential to living well, living with purpose, living out our values. In his provocative book, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life, citing poet John Keats, William Deresiewicz writes, “The heart feels and the intelligence is educated by reflecting on that feeling...it is only through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self.”<sup>vi</sup>

That introspection, self-examination, communication, that development of soul not only helps us to discover who we are; it also helps to refine us. For many months, I have been knitting a sweater with an intricate cable pattern. Knitting helps me to slow down, to reflect, to remember what matters. My mother taught me to knit, and after she died I offered the “mourner’s kaddish” following a daily routine of knitting. When I concentrate, when I’m looking at what I’m doing, the knitting goes smoothly and the complexity has a comfort and satisfaction to it. When I’m not paying attention, when I’m distracted, the complexity is ripe for mistakes. So it is not uncommon that I have to rip out a few rows—and sometimes more than a few rows—and go back over it and return to the place I was before.

Like the formulation of new year's resolutions or finding ourselves the day after drinking too much, I find satisfaction in getting it right after having gotten it wrong. Isn't that what contemplation and reflection helps us to do? We weren't paying attention to the person we hurt. We were distracted and responsible for an accident. We were doing too many things at once. Rarely are our transgressions intentional. We get into a habit and without realizing it we get further along in a path of a mistake than we intended to. Sometimes the rows are too far back to fix and we live with the imperfections visible—perhaps only to ourselves—yet they serve as a reminder that we are still learning, still improving, still alive with possibility. There is a chance for a do-over.

On New Year's Day, just a few hours after his son was sworn in for a second term as New York's governor, Governor Mario Cuomo died. Ken Auletta, writing for *The New Yorker* remembered, "Mario Cuomo had a combination of skills rarely seen in public life. Unlike most pols, he had an active interior life. He spent hours reflecting on events and writing in his diary, not to tout his greatness but to formulate his own thinking.... The time he spent with his books and wrestling with his diary helped lead him to thoughtful, principled positions."<sup>ii</sup>

Here was a man of deeds, yet keeping a diary helped him to regularly reflect on the events of the day and prepare for the challenges and priorities of the future.

My friend, poet Merle Feld writes about an encounter she had with a French seatmate on a transcontinental flight. After discussing God, having daughters who were seniors in high school and the merits and shortcomings of some American universities, Merle excused herself to think about her life. "How often do you think about your life," she asked him. With a quiet earnestness that contradicted the stereotype of the high-powered corporate executive [he was], he replied, "Every day."

The poem this prompted Merle to write reveals how hard it is to have this conversation with ourselves as a daily practice.

Sometimes  
Out of the corner  
Of my eye  
I get a glimpse  
Of my life.

In a flash

In a moment—  
over there—  
I see it clearly.

Quickly then  
I make a shopping list  
Or rent a video.  
Quickly, I look away.<sup>iii</sup>

But on this auspicious day, this Sabbath of one, one, one, one, five, you have chosen to be in church, surrounded by music and beauty and community and sacredness, your familiar distractions distant. You have said yes to lingering, to looking for more than a moment, to commune with soul.

Using the Jewish tradition of praying in the morning, afternoon and evening, Merle Feld, who knows how easy it is to look away, offers some questions to help us to pay attention.

In the morning:

1. Try to catch a fragment of a dream from last night: are there images from the night that linger? images from yesterday? What might be their message?

1.1. Reflect on what you'll be doing today, one person you are likely to see: how can you soulfully prepare for this encounter?

In the afternoon:

1.1.1. Re-center: what are you grateful for this afternoon, right now?

Remember, describe, one small moment this morning that was a pleasure, that brought a smile, a moment that was meaningful, rich.

In the evening:

1.1.1.1. Did you challenge yourself today? take a risk? how? What happened?

5. What questions are you left with today for tomorrow to ponder?<sup>iv</sup>

These are but prompts to a life of attention. I invite you to take time, to share your reflections with those close to you, to enter this year with appreciation for the promise of beginning again, the embrace of anticipation of what may yet come.

Happy New Year. May 2015 be filled with attention and anticipation, with health, with love and with time to enjoy it. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Deresiewicz, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/remembering-mario-cuomo>

<sup>iii</sup> Merle Feld, A Spiritual Life: Exploring the Heart and Jewish Tradition

<sup>iv</sup> [www.merlefeld.com/disc.htm](http://www.merlefeld.com/disc.htm)