In 1944, the poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote:
To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity

Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still
Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.
That may come also. But the accepting wish,
The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee
For every human freedom, suffering to be free,
Daring to live for the impossible.

1944 was arguably an odd time to call being Jewish a "gift." I wonder if my great grandmother, Eda Hersczkorn, might have come across that poem, and what she would have thought of it. When it was published, she was gratefully in America, but it might have been otherwise.

In the fall of 1935, Great-Grandma Eda traveled from Poland to the United States to attend her sister's wedding. The trip took 6 months. When she returned in early 1936,

she was shocked. The atmosphere of fear for Poland's Jews had thickened slowly enough that none of her family members noticed how much more difficult it had become for them to breathe. But she did. Eda's husband, my great-grandpa Joe, was the prominent physician in the town of Grojec (*Gruyitz*). One evening shortly after Eda returned from the US, she attended a society dance with him, and was mortified that no one would ask her to dance. They pretended not to see her. An old family friend finally invited her onto the dance floor. The next day, the local newspaper carried an article condemning this friend as a Jew-lover.

In 1930s Poland, an act like this looked like just a spike in the normal anti-Semitism that Jews faced, and no cause for great alarm. Certainly, no one would have thought that it heralded gas chambers. But six months in America had opened Eda's eyes to the possibility of life without fear, and she wanted out.

This was not an easy reality for anyone to face. Joe couldn't conceive of starting over in a country where he didn't speak the language. But Eda was not willing to keep opening their home in the middle of the night to clients who didn't want anyone to see them patronizing the "Jew doctor" during daylight. She was not willing to shake her head in dismay and keep enduring. She demanded that they apply for visas and sell their possessions. They got out.

The Jews of Grojec, who stayed behind, largely thought that the best way to deal with rising antisemitism was to bend their heads and ignore it. Waves of antisemitism had crested in the past, if we could stick it out, historical memory suggested that most would probably survive. Grandma Eda understood, unlike those around her, that this time it was necessary to flee. So in Nov. 1937, Eda, Joe, and their children, one of whom grew up to be my grandma Evie, came to the US on a second-class ticket, arriving in time

for the new immigrants to join their new country in the celebration of Thanksgiving. Everyone else in their family who stayed died in the Shoah.

My daughter Adar is named after her, for her foresight, and for her insistence on taking action.

Public anti-Semitism is clearly on the rise. Since we gathered together last year, the Jewish community experienced the most fatal anti-Semitic attack on US soil last October, at Tree Of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Passover saw the shooting at Chabad in Poway, CA. These events have fundamentally shifted our collective conception of safety and vulnerability. My family has asked, "what would Grandma Eda do now?" by which of course we mean, "What would someone looking back on this situation in 70 years say was the right thing to do now?"

I want to explore that question with you here tonight. I want to explore what we do in response, not primarily to antisemitism per se, but to the fear that it brings up in us.

My great grandmother had to leave Poland in order to appreciate the gravity of her reality.

If I were to leave the US today for several months, and then return, what would I find? Unlike my great-Grandma Eda's discovery on her return to Poland in 1936, if I were to leave and return I would have to reckon with the fact that even given our increased fear, this is still one of the best places in the world to be. This is still the place that people look to as a refuge.

The Jews of Europe in the 1940s who were starved and abused were the ones who didn't get out in time. There is a tendency in Jewish community to be offended by any comparison to the Shoah. But the asylum seekers at the border are facing similar

treatment in order to get *in*. A few weeks ago, at a Jewish Federation sponsored event about the asylum seekers at our border, Abby Gershenzon spoke particularly starkly about the situation that they face at the US border: people awaiting asylum hearings are being crowded into rooms that are air conditioned to the point of freezing, called "hieleras," literally "iceboxes," sometimes forced to stay there for weeks. They are fed starvation rations, and denied medical care. They know what they are facing – Abby Gershenzon described the FAQ sessions that experienced asylum seekers and allies hold for newcomers, to prepare them for the gauntlet they must run. And yet they choose to run it.

Even though our government is doing its very best to make the US as unwelcoming as possible, people around the world are fleeing situations that make the slim chance of finding asylum within our borders seem worth the cost of starving in an icebox, being brutalized and treated like a criminal.

So tempting as it might be, I don't think that in this moment, it is useful to think of our situation in 2019 in the US in terms of the choices that my great grandmother and the other Jews of Europe faced in the 1930s, namely: to endure quietly, hoping it would pass, or to flee. Fleeing was the most effective way for my Great-grandma Eda to show up to her reality.

How do we best respond to this reality? What do we do with our fear?

These Days of Awe are a time of fear, a time when we are supposed to contemplate our actions and face our fate. When we say, "unetane tokef," let us proclaim the awesome power of this day," tomorrow, the awesome power is the power of acknowledging the

inevitability of death. We do not know how it will come, - whether by fire, water, car accident, mass shooting or old age, but face the reality that it will come to us all.

We don't do this just for the sake of feeling uncomfortable, just as we don't educate ourselves about racial injustice, or the situation at the border, or any number of atrocities because there is any inherent virtue in feeling bad. The premise of this holiday season is that by facing our fear, by feeling our discomfort, we might be inspired to live better.

On this day, we remind ourselves that not only are we full of mistakes, but that each of us is a spark of the divine, full of infinite potential. Our mistakes do not let us off the hook from the powerful good we could do, or from our relationships to each other.

My grandma Evie, Eda's daughter, used to scold her six children during their radical anti-establishment phases in the 60s and 70s, saying, "Don't bash America – America saved my life." I am sure she did not mean that she found it offensive to criticize American policy; as I am sure she would be wholeheartedly criticizing our border policy today. What she meant was "don't be cynically anti-patriotic." Don't criticize the idea of America, don't give up on what America claims to be and could yet be. To be cynically anti-patriotic is to cede to the worst of current reality as the only possible vision of reality.

Of course, if we look around us most of the time, there is constant reinforcement towards cynicism and alienation. Right now in America we are inundated daily with horrifying news. For many it is all we can do to accomplish our professional

responsibilities and care for our families, while being burdened with dread. We will talk or post on social media about how horrible fill in whatever blank you choose, but we might not actually *do* anything.

Because fear and cynicism can only get us so far: The Babylonian Talmud, on page 86b of the volume dealing with Yom Kippur, quotes the sage named Reish Lakish speaking about teshuvah, repentance. Now this particular rabbi presumably had a lot to say about teshuvah, because his story is that he was a bandit who underwent a deep personal transformation to become a great teacher of Torah.

Talmud first quotes him saying: "Great is *teshuvah*, for it can cause transgressions to be considered in the Heavenly court as if they were accidents." But then the Talmud brings another teaching, also attributed to him: "Great is *teshuvah*, for it can cause transgressions to be considered in the Heavenly court as if they were actually merits." This is an even more radical statement. Properly done *teshuvah* can make our bad deeds look like good deeds! But how could Reish Lakish have said both things? The Talmud concludes that *teshuvah* motivated by fear of punishment accomplishes the first case – making our sins look like accidents; but only *teshuvah* motivated by *ahavah*, love, can accomplish the second – turning our sins into merits.

Reish Lakish understood, perhaps, the limitations of fear as a motivator. Fear alone will push us towards the familiar, centuries embedded responses of flight or burrowing.

So how to participate in collective *teshuvah*, not from fear, but from love? Today, just like in Poland 1939, it requires facing reality and showing up. But this time, the showing up that is required from us is not fleeing - it is, instead, bringing our whole selves *more*

present here, and embedding ourselves in communal structures that hold us accountable.

Teshuvah from love *demands* that we claim this place as our home, and take responsibility for the country that let in my grandmother's family, and that continues to be a symbol of hope to people all over the world. We cannot just wait or even just agitate for a better world to be created by the officials that we elect every few years. We are not just consumers of the public discourse, but empowered participants in it. There are many ways that we can act from love to manifest the world as it should be, daily, without waiting for our leaders to show the way. Any list I could make of potential actions would be incomplete and limiting; I challenge each of us to discern how we can stretch ourselves to act with love.

And since we're here tonight, using Jewish language to talk about the state of our world, I want to add that what is true for the individual and the national community is also true for our Jewish collective: fear will not do us as much good as relationship. I say this because the best attended service in this synagogue in the past year was not Rosh Hashanah or even Yom Kippur, but the service right after the Pittsburgh terrorist attack. In that moment of fear, we got that what we needed was community.

And that was powerful, that was good. But a Jewish community cannot be sustainable if we only feel motivated to seek each other in reaction to an acutely threatening situation. Pittsburgh and Poway made many of us in this room reckon with our Jewish

identities in new ways, but the fear remains, not just for ourselves but for our larger society - and this space is still a space where we are all welcome to face that fear together.

The American Jewish Committee recently sent out an email about #ShowUpForShabbat – you may remember the social media initiative to get Jews and allies to show up for Shabbat services the Shabbat after the Pittsburgh shooting. The subject of the AJC's email was "Save the date: #ShowupforShabbat returns Oct 25th-26th." The email invites Jews to attend shabbat services at a local synagogue the last weekend in October, and to "turn a global campaign of solidarity into a powerful force against hate."

I'm not sure what that means. I like the idea of a campaign of solidarity, and I will be delighted to see any of you who are moved to be at services the last weekend in October. And yet, reading that email, I felt uneasy. Shabbat actually happens every week, and its function is to give everyone, no matter their wealth or status, a chance to feel some rest and renewal. We have collective holidays that offer us the opportunity to face reality, be held in community, and accountable to our history: Yom HaShoah is Holocaust Remembrance Day, Tisha B'Av in the summer recollects all of the catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people, and the martyrology on Yom Kippur morning connects the ancient martyrs of our people to those who are persecuted today. And for our personal grief, we have Yizkor services and yarzheits, when we are encouraged to say Kaddish and receive support from our community on the anniversaries of the deaths of our loved ones.

To observe any of those already extant practices is to acknowledge that Judaism already contains beautiful and wise tools, invented by our ancestors and refined throughout the generations, for dealing with grief, nourishing ourselves and each other, inviting

solidarity and creating a more just world. In fact, that Judaism already offers the communal structures to hold us accountable, that we so need right now. So absolutely, if you are moved by it, #ShowUpforShabbat. But you might find it even more powerful to just show up for Shabbat.

None of you actually *had* to come tonight. It would arguably have been safer to stay home. Many Jews throughout the past thousands of years have decided to accept the safety that comes with breaking from this tradition and converting to something else. But this room is full. And since you are here, I hope this means that at least something in each of you senses that there is what to love in our tradition – something that continues to call to us, something that we want to treasure and steward for another generation.

In an even more frightening time, Muriel Rukeyser wrote that to be a Jew is to be offered a gift. The gift is still before us. The world is still before us. It is indeed a narrow bridge and we are afraid - but we have a choice about how we face it. Let's do this together.

Kol Haolam Kulo gesher tzar me'od.