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One week ago about 350 of us who were still here for the very end of the Rosh Hashanah service witnessed a truly shocking, jarring sight. As the Torah lay on the floor, a gasp went up from the room. Everyone here felt moved. Unsure of what to do. Uncertain as to the meaning of this event. Do we believe in omens? (Surely this couldn't be a good one.) Do we have to fast for 40 days? How exactly would that work? How did this happen? In short- oy vey!

I can tell you I felt all the same things. I felt a feeling in the pit of my stomach that is probably best described as a knot that punches from the inside out. I wanted us to conclude the service, take a deep breath and work on our responses later. One thing both Leah and I felt for sure. We talked afterward and agreed our thoughts were the same. "Man! After all that work the only thing people will say about services this year is, 'Wow! That was the Rosh Hashanah that the torah fell!'

I am very happy to report tonight that the case of the falling torah has been solved on a few fronts.

First: we had a wonderful outpouring of interest and concern from so many quarters in the congregation. Yes- we reached 40 members of our community who fasted on Sunday, Tzom Gedalia, as a reaction to this shaking event. My father in law said we should call the Guinness Book of World Records people to claim the highest number of Conservative Jews ever to have fasted on this day in one synagogue. (I actually find the fast meaningful every year- but he is probably right.) But these members of our kehila, from the very young (3 pre bar/t mitzvah kids) to the pretty 'up there in years,' from Shabbat regulars to not so regulars, from those who witnessed the event to those

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who did not- they all responded to a profound emotional and physical feeling they had in response. And they form a kind of community of 'first responders.' Yashar koach to all of you.

Second: we have received hundreds of dollars of tzedakah. These monies have come in for our torah repair fund and to my discretionary fund will go to support the Masorti movement, Mazon, and our own synagogue.

Third: we have learned. I studied personally about the laws surrounding this circumstance and have shared some of these details with the congregation. Also, I have been teaching Maimonides' Laws of Repentance all week long after morning minyan and will conclude the study of this text on Yom Kippur afternoon before Mincha.

And finally: we now have one less scroll in our beautiful and crowded ark. For safety reasons, so that this never occurs again, we are talking about ways to reengineer the ark, maybe even part of the bima. I think that a number of interesting ideas have already emerged. Thanks to those who have shared their suggestions and to others, we will be starting a process to bring these ideas forward soon.

But most broadly, the response of our congregation was one of Tikkun- repair. It was focused on how we can take the disruptive, the unwelcome, the upsetting and the negative twists and turns of life's journey, and make them into a source of community, blessing, holiness and goodness. In truth, this event, which I genuinely hope never to observe again, was a classic example of the kabbalistic notion of how apparent evil can really be for a holy, good purpose- yerida leshem aliyah, descent in order to ascend .

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzato, one of the fathers of the kabbalah, holds that God created

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evil in order that we might overcome it through goodness. So in that spirit, we are grateful for the goodness which flowed from this event. And I am grateful for the window it provided me on this remarkable community.

So now I have a question for you. A real, honest to God question. I want to ask you to think for a moment- why? Why did you react the way you did? What caused you gasp? To feel so disoriented? To go white for a moment as you read about the events after Rosh Hashana? To feel so upset? What was it about that moment that caused you to fast? To write a check? To think or learn or pray or pause and connect? Why did it strike you so profoundly to see a Torah scroll, a thing, lying face down on the floor? How would you feel if you looked up and saw that the eternal light had gone out? How/why/what would you feel when you discover that our holy vessels, our sacred tools of connecting to God- our tashmishei kedushah- they are only things? Parchment and wood and ink; light bulb filament and silver and fixtures and wires.

I remember as a young child in Portsmouth, VA I could not wait for services to end on Shabbat morning. Not for the obvious reason most of us do. But as a 7, 8 9 year old earnest little boy, I would wait for everyone to leave the sanctuary, go to the social hall for Kiddush and leave me alone to stand before the ark in my own personal, private prayer. I wanted to do my own thing. Say my own tefillot. I would have my time in that holy space to find God.

As I have grown I have looked back at that sweet boy and thought, 'how I have grown since then.' But in my first pulpit in West Hartford, I discovered that boy still inhabited my adult persona. My predecessor Rabbi Bodenheimer had the rabbi's office placed so

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that it abutted the rear of the ark in the small chapel. There was even a little door behind the desk which allowed direct access to the interior of the ark itself. He did this because he was a sofer, a scribe, and he would work on scrolls in his office. When I discovered that the back of my desk chair in the office bumped into the back of the ark, I have to tell you- I was really unnerved. It felt somehow wrong for me be able to lean back in my office and basically find my head leaning against the aron hakodesh. I still felt 'it.' Residing there.

Maybe you and I, maybe we still believe, we still feel this kind of energy in places and things and matter. Maybe we still experience, even in this modern community, that rooms can be sacred sanctuaries, parchment can be made into God's gift to the Jewish people, and days can be made into holy occasions. After all, what is today? Why are you here? It is just another 24 hour period. Another spin of our 3rd rock from the sun on its axis. Just another day, another weekend. Another occasion to choose among various activities and options: services or the movies; errands, catching up on reading, taking the kids to soccer practice, or - oh yeah, shabbat.

We found that sense of the enchanted on Friday morning as a Torah scroll lay on the ground. We all know in our rational, deductive minds, that there is no magic. Lighting and carpeting and paint (thanks to the Shermans) are necessary to beautify this space. And donations, and labor and design teams are necessary to purchase and craft animal hides and ink and turn them into parchment and torah scrolls and arks. And the precariousness of torah holders and curtain pulleys and sliding doors- these are all the things of mechanics and textile work and art. There is even a kind of danger in seeing too much mystical otherworldliness in the things of this world. That kind of so called

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“over inflation” of holiness is exactly what our Torah has tried to wean us from- the idolatry of things made into gods; the idolatry even of the Torah made into a relic. We feel more in control, more familiar with the opposite of this “overinflation of holiness.” But such a demystifying of all we know seems wrong as well. Draining all ritual, all the sacred and holy encounters we have in our lives to cultural norms and practices, is draining our very lives of their meaning. We cannot really explain our life’s experience without invoking the etherial, the imprecise and the holy. We love. We grieve. We tremble in the face of etenity. In our very bones, we know a truth that whispers, “there is more.”

We know that some things are more than things. That some days are more than days. That some pathways to the holy must intrude into the world of the real, observable and measurable.

That something calls us to the holy immanence all around us.

Today is no ordinary day. Today you are called. The voice of God, the kol demama daka, the still small voice, that is usually shut out by the cacophony of life’s noise, today that voice shouts out to us. Stop! Pay attention! Notice the hidden holiness as its leaps out at you from every direction. Pay attention to the passage of time. To the guilt and errors you know in your heart that have accumulated in the past year. Strive with all your heart for a new beginning. And it can be yours.

Today is Shabbat. It is a day that is filled with the same wonder, the same spiritual possibility each week. I know that we will not have a synagogue filled like we do tonight in a month’s time. Shabbat week in and week out is hard to sustain as a day of

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immanence, as a day of transformation. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the High Holidays, the Days of Awe- well its right there in the name. I get it. These days are special because they are rare. But I implore you- seek out the magical holiness of Shabbat throughout the year. Don't wait for the rare day, or the dropped holy object to jar you into an awareness of what is real and possible all the time. What you can find in your home, around your Shabbat dinner table, what you can find here all the time. Holiness is your inheritance, your birthright. You just have to claim it.

Rav Nachman of Bratslav told a story:

There was once a poor, G-d fearing Jew who lived in the city of Prague. One night he dreamt that he should journey to Vienna. There, at the base of a bridge leading to the King's palace, he would find a buried treasure.

Night after night the dream recurred until, leaving his family behind, he traveled to Vienna to claim his fortune. The bridge, however, was heavily guarded. The watchful eyes of the King's soldiers afforded little opportunity to retrieve the treasure. Every day the poor Jew spent hours pacing back and forth across the bridge waiting for his chance.

After two weeks' time one of the guards grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and demanded gruffly, "Jew! What are you plotting? Why do you keep returning to this place day after, day?" Frustrated and anxious, he blurted out the story of his dream. When he finished, the soldier, who had been containing his mirth, broke into uncontrollable laughter.

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The poor Jew looked on in astonishment, not knowing what to make of the man's attitude. Finally, the King's guard caught his breath. He stopped laughing long enough to say, "What a foolish Jew you are believing in dreams. Why, if I let my life be guided by visions, I would be well on my way to the city of Prague. For just last night I dreamt that a poor Jew in that city has, buried in his cellar, a treasure which awaits discovery."

The poor Jew returned home. He dug in his cellar and found the fortune. Upon reflection he thought, the treasure was always in my possession. Yet, I had to travel to Vienna to know of its existence.

We Conservative Jews tend to be the type that can be found in Vienna. We are not known for doing 'magic' well. We are not the community of ecstatic prayer or meditation. We are the Jews of *Wissenschaft der Judentums*, the scientific study of Judaism. We are the Jews who, in the formulation of Dr. Saul Lieberman, know the difference between *naarishkeit*- foolishness- and science. Mysticism and spirituality are *naarishkeit*. But the study of *naarishkeit*- the study of spirituality- ahh, that is science, said Dr. Lieberman.

I believe in the value and truth of science. I am interested in the study of this observance or that ritual, this text or that prayer from a scientific and historical perspective. But if we only live Judaism at arms' length, always with caveats and distance and questions and doubt, we deny the presence we all feel from time to time. Today, this Shabbat, this yom kippur, I ask you to leave all of that aside and remember why we are here today at all. We are here because we feel called to that which is greater than our lives. That which is more enduring than our meager worries. We are

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called to eternity. And eternity is too big for science. It is too big even for Dr. Lieberman.

In 5 days time Sukkot will start, as you probably noticed in the parking lot this evening. Sukkot, coming fast on the heels of Yom Kippur, is not disconnected from today's high drama and holiness. Sukkot is the reminder that it is not just on the days of greatest awe and grandeur; it is not only on those times when we are shaken by the holiness around us, that we can find this magic. On sukkot we take a simple hut, the most basic expression of our human frailty and vulnerability, and we elevate that space, that leaky roof and those shaky walls, and we find God's presence there. When you know things can fall down, that is just when we can be lifted up. When you know the precariousness of our being, that is just when you most crave the taste of the infinite. When you have seen a torah fall, that is the time to raise up the Torah inside of you.

This year, this Shabbat, this sukkot- lift yourself up to new Jewish heights. This year, next Shabbat and the Shabbat after that, raise your vision, your expectations, open your eyes and feel the holiness of a world enchanted by God's presence. Discover the treasure that is buried right at home, right here at Beth El, right at your feet.

And raise it up.

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