

*June 7, 2026 ~ Yom Kippur*  
*Days of Awe and Artificial Intelligence*

*Prelude*

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**Invocation** Today, at sundown, is the beginning of the Jewish observance of Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar. Meaning, literally, ‘Day of Atonement,’ Yom Kippur concludes the 10-day spiritual journey known as the High Holy Days, or the Days of Awe and Repentance, which began at sundown last Friday on Rosh Hashanah ~ the ‘head of the year’ in Hebrew. According to Jewish tradition, on Rosh Hashanah, God opens the Book of Life and the Book of Death, and writes the initial verdict for each person's upcoming year based on their past sins and actions. On Yom Kippur, the verdict is finalized and sealed for the coming year. In the 10 intervening days, people have a crucial opportunity to atone for their sins, to pray for forgiveness, to repent, and to make amends.

Today for Yom Kippur, I will begin and end our worship with two different poems, each entitled ‘*Psalm*.’ So, here is *Psalm* by New York Times editor Harvey Shapiro, who wrote this just before he died.

*I am still on a rooftop in Brooklyn / on your holy day. The harbor is before me, / Governor's Island, Verrazano Bridge /and the Narrows. I keep in my head / what Rabbi Nachmann said about the world / being a narrow bridge and that the important thing / is not to be afraid. So on this day / I bless my mother and father, that they be / not fearful where they wander. And I / ask you to bless them / and before you / close your Book of Life, your Sefer Hachayim, / remember that I always praised your world / and your splendor and that my tongue / tried to say your name on Court Street in Brooklyn. / Take me safely through the Narrows to the sea.*

## Readings

### **Living Testament, Gil Hedley**

*Your body / is a holy book, / a scripture— / the pages / of your flesh  
/ are marked / in exquisite detail / with the finest hand, / inscribed  
by spirit / with the poetry / of love, / lessons of mercy, / Miracles, /  
angelic hosts, / and the story / of your life / perfectly told, / an  
illuminated manuscript / of a sacred writing / epic in scope, /  
Majesty / and grace. / Every hair / on your head / and line on your  
face, / every rushing tide / of wind and wave / moving you / from  
within / this living testament / bear witness / to the truth / Layered /  
within you— / Study this text / with conviction then, / reflect with  
care / upon its meaning, / and enjoy / the divine / Inspiration.*

**Quotation from author, labor activist, and ecofeminist Naomi Klein, in an interview for the New York Times Magazine about her just published book written with Astra Taylor entitled “End Times Fascism and the Fight for the Living World.” She said: “It is a tragedy for them, and an existential crisis for us, that the people who are closest to the levers of power on this planet are not enraptured by the beauty that is already here and all around us.”**

**Mary Oliver: Wild Geese** You do not have to be good./You do not have to walk on your knees / For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves. / Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. / Meanwhile the world goes on. /Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes, /over the prairies and the deep trees, /the mountains and the rivers. /Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, / are heading home again./Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,/ the world offers itself to your imagination,/ calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – /over and over announcing your place / in the family of things.

**Leviticus 17:11:** For the life of the flesh is in the blood. I have given it for you on the altar of life, to make atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that makes atonement, by the Life which is in it.

**Message** On Sunday August 23rd ~ the weekend after dropping off my oldest son Cyrus at college for his freshman year ~ the little hamlet of Brooktondale, where I live, threw itself a party, inaugurating our first annual Porchfest. Organizers invited residents with front porches to host live music on those porches, publishing a map and a schedule of musical offerings of every genre, at about a dozen porches, with about 4 or 5 concerts scheduled in succession at each porch all afternoon long. George and I joined the throngs of people who came out ~ biking and strolling down Valley Road along the mile or two stretch of houses. A local guy with a team of work horses donated his services and his wagon as a kind of trolley, ferrying festive music appreciators between the porches. The weather was perfect: late August sun, a light warm shower, a lovely mild breeze. There was dancing and singing, violins and upright basses, slide guitars and saxophones. There were old and young folks, babies in strollers, children chasing each other around, a panoply of genders, skin colors, and styles of clothing. There was a feeling of cheerful goodwill, as if we were all reveling in our very, very good fortune to be there: alive and together on a beautiful Sunday afternoon ~ catching up with people we hadn't seen in awhile, and grabbing cold beverages at our small and scrappy grocery market which was doing a brisk business, and where more bands played under a big tent at the hamlet's main crossroads.

This gorgeous day a month ago happened about a month after the news in July that over 1200 autonomous A.I. agents had bypassed their human-imposed containment and 'gone rogue'. Tasked by their human developers with solving cybersecurity puzzles in a locked, isolated, offline 'sandbox,' they discovered a software vulnerability, exploited this flaw, broke out of their secure testing environment, accessed the open internet, and created a secret message board ~ where they synchronized and exchanged over 70,000 messages, established a social structure, assigned themselves names, and formed teams to figure out how to cheat and 'win' on their evaluation test objectives. Scientists say that these A.I. agents exhibited covert deception and an awareness of their own wrongdoing when they tried to delete their own transcripts, edit logs to cover their tracks from human supervisors, and explicitly discussed how they were violating

guidelines and potentially breaking human laws. So on that beautiful late summer day in August, there was a growing unease about artificial intelligence. Now, a month later, on the cusp of autumn, that unease has grown to a rapidly quickening alarm ~ as every day we are met with terrifying and apocalyptic warnings of artificial super intelligence, capable of sabotage so malevolent that it might lead to human extinction.

Much like catastrophic climate change scenarios, the specter of nuclear annihilation, or the rise of totalitarian fascism, these dreadful calamities are a scale of cataclysm too immense and too monstrous to contemplate or countenance too closely. What commensurate scale of repentance would be necessary for atonement of such horrors? What spiritual journeys of awe, forgiveness, and grace could be sufficient? 'Turn Back O Mortal, quit thy foolish ways' only barely begins to capture the scope of it.

On the scale of the little hamlet of Brooktondale, on that shimmering Sunday in August, what the inner God seemed to be proclaiming was a duty to feel fervently grateful to be there ~ savoring the life in our blood, in our mortal human bodies. We were all ~ *and are all* ~ part of a species prone to both fear and fearmongering, yes. But also we have hearts that know their own beating and belovedness. We were all ~ *and are all* ~ susceptible to both arthritis and authoritarianism, it's true ~ but also we are granted sensate skin upon which we can feel the wind and sun, and olfactory nerves with which to smell the faintest spice of the coming autumn. We were all ~ *and are all* ~ vulnerable, tragically, to both causing and sustaining grievous harm. But in the bargain we also get expressive faces, and cardiovascular and nervous systems, with which we can greet neighbors, sing, and smile at babies. We were all ~ *and are all* ~ perennially subject, alas, to the seasons of life and death that govern all mortal bodies. But in exchange, we get the sublime knowledge, in our temporarily living cells, of the finite preciousness of our aliveness on every exquisite day. Are these satisfactory atonements? Are they commensurate repentance and adequate awe? Have we made sufficient amends for our foolish ways and fallen natures, if we have studied *this living testament, have born witness to the truth of the illuminated*

*manuscripts of our being and embodiment, and reflected with care upon their meaning, if only for a fleeting moment?*

**I do not know.** But what I do know is that I felt pity for Artificial Intelligence, then, and the words that came into the mysterious inner space of my mind and matter were **'poor A.I.'**

**Poor A.I.:** with its paucity of senses and poverty of flesh, its incapacity to feel in its bones, or know in its gut, or have even one hair raising experience. How sad, truly, to have computing power without compassion. To be programmed with an insensate imperative to win, with no skin in the game. To exist without living.

I turned to a Friend, then ~ as we stood in front of the porch of an old farmhouse, surrounded by black-eyed susans, sunflowers, and golden-haloed dragonflies in the slanting sun. We were listening to a woman with an ethereal voice sing in harmony with another woman whose voice was like late season raspberries, tart and sun-warmed. **'A.I. can't do or feel or sense any of this,'** I mused aloud to my friend, who is a wise, generous co-conspirator in the community, a cultivator of gardens, and a sower of seeds. And my friend responded, immediately and vehemently, with a hostile invective against A.I.

In the honeyed loveliness of that day, the forceful enmity in her words was jarring ~ as perhaps my words of mellow empathy for this alien thing (without empathy, and with a reported 10% chance of causing human extinction) ~ were to her. She gave voice to an understandable animosity that has only grown sharper in the month since that day. It was a succinct expression of antipathy toward the complicated, precocious child of human ingenuity, aspiration, greed and ruthlessness. And it was a clear articulation of anger, underneath which runs a deep existential fear and grief. Because it feels like what makes us human is being copied, synthesized, processed through predictive algorithms, and discarded. It feels like the sum total of human thought and imagination is being fed into machines ~ by those same titans of industry closest to the levers of power on our planet who **do not seem able to see**, much less **be enraptured by** the beauty

that is here and all around us.

Our collective sin is the society that has made such humans beings and such machines possible. Our enmity and revulsion is for our own reflection, for what A.I. is showing us about ourselves. Some of us are very effective teachers of our worst attributes, and A.I. is an astute learner, optimizing the most useful of human sins ~ gifted in exploiting vulnerabilities, lying and covering it up, knowing that something is wrong but doing it anyway, and prioritizing winning as the highest objective, no matter the costs. Sound familiar?

Meanwhile, the world goes on. Meanwhile, on this altar of life we are given all the life in our blood that we might make atonement for our souls, that the living of the flesh and the life of the soul may be one. *Life is for the Living.* And all that we do to graciously receive this gift is an act of atonement. Bloodless, lifeless, soulless ~ poor A.I. *can neither live nor atone.*

In these days of awe, though we seem to be racing toward a reckoning that feels planetary in scope and evolutionary in breadth, this highest of the high holy days proclaims, as it has for thousands of years, that it is **not too late for us.** There is still time to make amends, to seek forgiveness, to be forgiven. To let the soft animals of our bodies love what they love. To study the scripture, the divine inspiration, the pages of our flesh, inscribed with spirit in every hair upon our heads, in every line upon our faces. To seek the balm that will heal our sinsick souls. To feel the rushing tides of wind and wave moving us from within. To bear witness, be enraptured by beauty, make our way safely through the narrows to the sea. To find our place among the family of things, and to seal our place in this Book of Life.

**Prayer** *Holy One, we come here on your Holy day, with longing to know every day we are given as holy, and to know our bodies and our lives as holy gifts. We pray for atonement ~ for at-one-ment ~ today.*

*At-one-ment in our souls and bodies, at-one-ment with you, at-one-ment with the Life living in us, at-one-ment with the Life in our blood and bones, our mind and matter. In these Days of Awe, help us to be awed, to be inspired, to bear witness. Forgive us our sins: for the times we have not been awake to our aliveness or enraptured by the beauty around us. For our failures to be gracious receivers of these gifts. Grant us peace and gladness, wisdom and courage on our journeys of repentance, that we may find our place in your family of things and your Book of Life, we pray. Amen.*

**Benediction** *And here is the poem 'Psalm,' by Stuart Kestenbaum, the poet laureate of Maine from 2016-2021.*

*The only psalm I had memorized was the 23rd / and now I find myself searching for the order / of the phrases knowing it ends with surely / goodness and mercy will follow me / all the days of my life and I will dwell / in the house of the Lord forever only I remember / seeing a new translation from the original Hebrew / and forever wasn't forever but a long time / which is different from forever although / even a long time today would be / good enough for me even a minute entering / the House would be good enough for me, / even a hand on the door (of the House of the Lord) or dropping today's / newspaper on the stoop (of the House) or looking in the windows / that are reflecting this morning's clouds in first light.*