

*Jewish Wholeness - Erev Rosh Hashanah*  
*September 2, 2025 – 1 Tishrei 5786*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
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Allow me to set the scene: It is my first semester in college, three days before Halloween, the year, 2015. Earlier in the day my friends and I had all bought our Halloween costumes and excitedly decided to try them on. I do not recall their costumes, but I will never forget mine - between the final options of “rabbi” and “bacon,” I dressed as the bacon. This was before I started to keep Kosher. One thing led to another and a few of us decided to have a race down the hall of our dorm building. Costumes worn, masks on, we lined up and ran. I was in the lead. At the end of the hall, just beyond the finish line – a brick wall. I slowed down to get out of the way, and a force slammed into me from behind. One of my larger friends couldn’t see out of his mask – and I hit the wall hard. I took a few steps back, my feet buckled, and there I was, *a strip of bacon*, bleeding on the ground.

In a panic, my friends took me into my room, my lip was split open, and they were worried that I had lost a tooth. Everyone was so concerned about my lip that they didn’t register when I mentioned that my arm felt funny. I couldn’t move it. Thirty minutes later, it had swelled to the size of a small grapefruit. My elbow was completely shattered.

When a joint is broken, proper mobility is completely lost. After some reconstructive surgery, I required physical therapy for the better part of the year, and, to this day, my arm still does not have the same range of motion as it had before. I also quickly learned that another side effect of my injury would be an ever-present sensation in my joint - a sensation near impossible to describe. Even now, as I speak to you, I can feel the blood in my veins pulsing around the titanium in my arm. My very body became a constant reminder of my poor decision making. I was eighteen. I “shouldn’t” have had arthritis that will act up every time I go to the gym for the rest of my life, nor “should” my elbows be different shapes on account of the screws in the bone. After that moment, ten years ago, I didn’t feel like my natural self anymore. I felt different, both physically *and* mentally, and I was certain that I would never be whole again.

Years passed, as they do, and I had moved to Jerusalem to begin my studies to become a rabbi at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. One morning, the Director of our program, Rabbi Reuven Greenvald, decided to bring a few sets of tefillin to campus – so that he could teach the female, and gender non-binary, members of my cohort how to wrap tefillin, since the practice is usually barred to them. As it would happen, one of my friends, who, in all of their life had never wrapped tefillin, decided to try it that morning, and since we often schmoozed before our morning prayers, I decided to join them. I had wrapped tefillin twice before, but both occasions were the forced end-result of a Chabadnik asking me if I was Jewish, never a choice of my own. This time, however, I was curious.

The practice of tefillin, as I would later learn, is ancient, going back thousands of years, to the time of the Second Temple. Taking the words of the V’Ahavta to heart: וקשרתם לאות על-ידיך והיו: *And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be a symbol between your eyes*, these small leather boxes literally bind the words of the Shema onto the body for the purpose of prayer. The leather straps of the tefillin, wrapped around the forearm seven

times, mirror the days of Creation, and at the hand, it is wrapped in such a way that the straps form the letters ך - 7 - ש spelling out Shaddai, one of God's many Biblical Names. While tefillin has been viewed as an exclusively male practice in the past, especially by our Orthodox peers, the more progressive branches of Judaism have, in the spirit of egalitarianism, opened the practice to everyone. Indeed, some women have long ago taken on this practice in the United States and in Israel. It was with this mindset that Rabbi Greenvald brought a few sets of tefillin to school, and it was through his guidance that I chose to try it myself.

"Are you right-handed, or left-handed," Rabbi Greenvald asked me as I approached.

"Left," I replied.

"Okay, so then you must wrap the tefillin around your right arm, as it is supposed to be wrapped around your non-dominant hand."

My non-dominant hand? My injured right arm. The constant reminder of my poor decision-making, and the physical toll of that error that will never be undone? Alright then. I put on the tefillin and wrapped the leather strap around my arm, twice at the triceps, once by the bicep, then seven times around the forearm. As I said the blessings, and finished wrapping, I noticed something, or more accurately, I did **not** notice something. For the first time in years I couldn't feel my *right* elbow. I'm not saying that it was numb, but that the sensation had stopped. That constant reminder of my mistakes, gnawing at my psyche, was finally silent. For the first time in years, I felt whole again. And so I began to wrap tefillin – a practice that I still do today.

I didn't take on this mitzvah, this obligation, because God commanded me, nor do I continue to do it on account of its centuries of Jewish tradition. I chose this practice because it made *me* feel whole, and it *still* makes me feel whole. It didn't "fix" me in a medical sense. When I'm not wearing tefillin I still feel that indescribable sensation in my elbow. But when I wrap tefillin, I feel whole, and I am reminded that we can transcend old injuries, find grounding where we need it, and move forward from the past. Tefillin, and Jewish practice as a whole, has been the salve that helped soothe not only my physical wound, but the spiritual scars, as well.

The world can often batter and beat us, wearing us down and tiring us out. All of this can be an *exhausting* experience. We wake up earlier than we'd like, we work later than we expect, and throughout the day horrible news from across the world and at home continuously saps us of our strength. It all takes a toll. We each have wounds in need of healing - the toll of the day-to-day as well as deeper spiritual needs that cannot be met by the secular world. That is where Jewish tradition can help. It is a salve that we can find by being our simple selves – Jews in the world.

Our High Holy Day Prayer Book, our Machzor, has many moving contemporary and traditional prayers, but I would like to share some words from a prayer that did not make it into Mishkan Ha'Nefesh, אהוז קטנה, "Little Sister." This 13<sup>th</sup> century liturgical poem was written for and is traditionally sung at this moment of the year, on Erev Rosh HaShanah when the old year ends and the new year begins, and it has important things to say concerning our wounds and woes. Rabbi Abraham Hazzan of Girona, thinking of the persecutions and exiles of his time, wrote this poem as a plea, using the imagery of a "Little Sister" to embody the pain of the Jewish People, and express his deep desire for hope. The first stanza states:

“Little Sister,  
long are her prayers and her praises,  
Oh God, please, heal her of her ailments.  
*May this year and its curses be over.”*

Five times the text repeats, “May this year and its curses be over,” once at the conclusion of each stanza. Looking back at the past year, looking at all our wounds and woes, our curses that we’ve accumulated, we express a deep desire to be rid of them - to be whole again. Little Sister, *for her sake*, make us whole again! Wipe away our reminders of suffering, and let us be as we should be! It can *sound* a little desperate - and when our “curses” are nagging at our minds day in and day out, it can *feel* desperate. And then, at the final stanza of the poem, the words change slightly, declaring, “May this year and its blessings begin!” Rather than continue to focus on all the ways that we have been worn down by the world, we turn that desperation into a declaration of hopeful optimism. We’re not looking back any longer. May *this* year, this *new* year, and the *blessings* with it, begin. May our prayers at *this moment* be the start of continued blessing. As an opening prayer recited on Erev Rosh HaShanah, אהות קטנה promises that the High Holy Days, that Judaism itself, can be the salve that soothes us from our daily woes, from the wounds that we carry within, and carry us forward.

Throughout the year, we each engage with our Judaism in different ways, “traditionally” or “non-traditionally”. We come to synagogue and pray our hearts out, or we sit respectfully and quietly in the back, or we stay at home and simply light candles. *Or* we *think* of lighting candles, and continue with our nightly plans undisturbed. Tonight, however, at least on a physical level, it has manifested in the same way in all of us. By being here - in person or on Zoom - tonight, at the start of our new year, you are taking this moment of transition and using it as a salve to – hopefully – help make you whole again. We throw our past sins away with Tashlich; then we meaningfully atone by returning here on Yom Kippur. We remind ourselves that miraculous things *can* happen by lighting the menorah on Hanukkah; and we connect with our collective pasts and future with the Passover Seder. We find comfort and guidance in community, by being here for one another. In our values, in our ability to think “Jewishly” and pursue ethical and just treatment not only for ourselves, but for others, we engage with Judaism. Judaism is not a one-and-done-fix-everything pill, but it is a constant commitment that we observe by striving to exist in this world in the best way possible; by simply doing what we are doing right now. *This*, Judaism, *being Jewish*, can be a salve for whatever is broken. Small, simple, and often unexpected.

The High Holy Days are a moment of hope. We put our past curses behind us, and just as I discovered a way that Judaism could make me whole through binding tefillin upon my cursed arm, we can use our Judaism as a salve to soothe our spiritual wounds. We can take the spiritual, make it manifest, and make ourselves feel more complete in this new year. Having taken these first steps, choosing this moment to engage with Judaism in an increasingly secular world, we transform these days into a source of blessing - a salve - to once again make us whole; tonight and in the year to come.

כן יהי רצון  
May this be God’s will