

It's All Holland

YK 5784, 2023

Early in my career, I had a conversation with one of my dearest mentors, Rabbi Bill Lebeau, my rabbinical school dean. He is beloved, as the rabbi's rabbi. A true master of his craft. As wise as he is gentle and loving. I was going through a rough patch. Hard things in my own life. And confronting what seemed to be relentless waves of painful things that members of my community were dealing with. Plus things were just challenging in the shul itself. Financially. Regarding leadership and logistics and the shul's future. I was struggling.

I took Rabbi Lebeau out to dinner. I vented. And complained. This was not the way it was supposed to be. It should be easier than this. I may even have cried. He listened with great patience and empathy. And then he responded with a simplicity that, were it any other person, could have come off as cold and heartless. Instead, it landed as filled with wisdom and understanding, a firm but loving slap in the face to bring me to reality.

He said, "Adam. This is life. Life is pain." I remember sitting there stunned. I was hoping for a hug. What I was getting was a version of tough love. He continued something like this. "Life is divorce. And life is struggling to pay bills. And life is losing your religious school director a week before the school year. And life is illness. And life is death. Sure, there are, we hope, many great moments of unexpected and planned joy, and sweetness and serenity. But...what you are going through now, and what your community is going through now? This is life. So the questions are: Do you want to live, if this is life? And if so, how do you want to live?"

On some level, that's the whole sermon. *Gut yontef!* For there may be no truer and more important words to let sink in, over and over again. Life is hard. For us. For everyone. Now, go live it.

I am reminded of the hauntingly beautiful words written by the late, great Rabbi Alan Lew. Particularly this time of year, Rabbi Lew's most well-thumbed book is his masterpiece on the HHD season, called "This is real, and you are completely unprepared."

When he got to writing about Ne'ilah, Rabbi Lew writes about what he sees, and feels, when he looks out at his *kahal*, his congregation, as YK wanes. He, the rabbi, who knows this community's pains and broken bones and broken hearts and cancers and bankruptcies and embarrassing intimacies. In his words, "When I see this great trembling multitude sitting before me at Neilah, I feel as if I am in the presence of a single trembling heart. And I look down at the thousands of faces washed over by an innocence so immense that it covers over everyone, and everyone becomes one suffering, innocent heart."

I identify with Rabbi Lew, and his identification with, and almost inhabiting, the full array of emotions and human experiences and frailties represented by his whole community. You all share so much with me. I see and am lifted up by your high moments. And I feel your many many low moments palpably. Rabbi Lew continues, "Each face, I now see, has been formed by the same suffering, a suffering that has sunken its cheeks and lined its brow and hooded its eyes. Every face, I now see, is like this; the suffering is visible, like the lines of force on a geological formation, like the garland of all their prayers taken together, which came to rest on God's head."

It seems to me that Rabbi Lew understood the powerful truth of Rabbi Lebeau—life breaks us down. Life is different than we expected. Life can be less than we think we deserved. And that is life. So try to live.

Raise your hands if you have come across the meme “Welcome To Holland.” Or “It’s All Holland.” The former phrase was coined by the poet Emily Perl Kingsley in a short essay she wrote in the late ‘80s. In “Welcome to Holland,” Kingsley analogizes the experience of having a disabled child to preparing for a trip to Italy, only to land and hear the pilot announce that you’re in Holland. It isn’t what you expected, what you planned for, what you wanted. The question is, what do you do now?

And in a piece written by Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz, a NY-based Jewish educator, she wrote this: “I find the essay powerful and moving—but too narrow in its focus. It’s not that parenting a disabled child is Holland. All parenting is Holland. All of life is Holland. You make plans, get a guidebook—and find out you’re ending up someplace entirely different than you expected.

“That another parent’s Holland may be harder or more painful than yours doesn’t negate that every single one of us... faces things that aren’t what we planned for, that we have to adjust to. Sometimes you know you’re in Holland as soon as your child arrives in the world. Sometimes you learn you’re in Holland 3 or 13 or 30 years later. Some Holland is temporary and passes. Some Holland is lifelong. Some is awful and some is just unexpected. But it is all Holland.”

Nothing against Holland, by the way, for the Dutch-born and raised amongst us. Nice canals. And when it gets really cold there is the Elfstedentocht to enjoy (Ask the Steuers). But if you expected Rome, and you walk off the

plane in Maastricht, it can throw you for a loop. And such is life, in the micro and in the macro, seemingly every darn day.

What can be done about this? Some circumstances can be changed. And if they are miserable, and changeable, might as well try. But many cannot. What do we do when we confront those?

Those children that are harder to raise and educate than we imagined they would be?

Those professional situations that are ok, and tolerable, but somehow less than we thought our careers could aspire to?

That lump that might be a tumor, which threatens so much in our lives or the lives of those we love?

The expense of life, which just leaves us with less discretionary income than we thought we would have, to play, to travel, to treat our loved ones. To spend on the things we want beyond the things we absolutely need.

I learned a deep wisdom from my dear friend, Rabbi David Ingber. It speaks to this common and ubiquitous phenomenon, of finding ourselves in Holland, as it were. The wisdom is true, I think. It can also land as harsh, at least at first, though I think beyond the pierce of harshness, there is a possibility of serenity and a full embrace of what life is, and what isn't.

He and I were talking about עבודה זרה/*avodah zarah* one day—idolatry. In the ancient world, idolatry was worshiping other, false deities. Not sure we have a whole lot of Baal-worshippers among us today, or those who would be tempted to bring offerings to the God molekh. But we have idols, and we

engage in idolatry, and we bow down to things to which we ascribe far too much authority, things to which we are far too deeply bound.

And then Rabbi David said this, “I think the most insidious idolatry is bowing down to the idol of what you thought your life was going to be, what you were sure you deserved.” What is harsh about this is that it names you, me, everyone in a less-than-ideal circumstance as, ultimately, responsible. Not responsible for creating it. But responsible if we wallow in it.

We all like to vent. It is cathartic to complain. No one looks forward to unloading a burden they are struggling with on the shoulder of another, and then being told, “Deal with it.” But I wonder if, past our initial discomfort with it, if what Rabbi Lebeau told me years ago, and what Rabbi Ingber said about idolatry, is our best chance at living, in Holland. And finding light there.

Do a quick thought experiment in your head. What version of life that you are not living are you still worshipping? Are you still certain you deserved? And maybe even were owed? And in what way is that worshipping, that hoping, that idolizing about Paris, or Rome, or a different health situation or financial situation or love situation...in what way is that making it harder to live in Holland? Because, after all, that is where you live.

Not all Hollands are the same. There are degrees. Some live in a Holland with just slightly more rain than they expected on their vacation. Or even a Holland prettier and more joyful than they ever could have imagined for themselves. And some live in a Holland beset by flooding where they can barely keep their heads above water. Most of us live in the middle of those extremes. But wherever we are on the spectrum, idolizing, and idealizing, and pining for the life we want, but don't have, rarely helps.

Rabbi Ingber had a childhood friend named Alan Brown. When Alan was 21 years old, tragedy struck. This is Alan's telling of what happened: "On January 2, 1988 I was lying in the surf in Martinique, the undertow had pulled my legs out from under me and flipped me upside down onto the hard sand. Face down under the water and unable to breathe I knew something was dramatically wrong. I was in the prime of my life and now immobile...nothing moved. I was paralyzed. How could this have happened? My life flashed in front of me...playing ice hockey, walking around New York City, running races in Central Park, throwing baseballs . . . In a split second my life changed forever. At the age of 21--a quadriplegic -confined to a wheelchair. How would I continue?"

Alan found himself in an excruciating Holland. A Holland as close to intolerable as possible. I can't imagine the morose feelings, the demoralization, the railing against what was, and what now could never be, that Alan must have gone through. How tempting it must have been for Alan to bow down to the idol of a life with four working limbs, a life he deserved. To bow down to that idol, forever, and then not just be paralyzed from walking...but be paralyzed from living. I am certain Alan had dark days.

But at some point, he stopped only wishing he were in Rome. He began to live, fully, in Holland. Among other things, Alan dedicated his life to trying to cure paralysis. He worked closely with the Christopher Reeve foundation, and has a named fund within that foundation. Through immense struggle, he regained some use of his hands, and he uses them to hold his kids' faces. He regained some use of his legs, too, and more than two decades since his catastrophe, and since his last time alone in the water, he did the first leg of a team triathlon, and swam nearly a mile off the coast of Belmar, NJ. He may

have been swimming in New Jersey. But deep down, he was living, and finding a way to thrive, in Holland.

This life is not what he asked for. Not what his parents hoped for him. But it is what he got. And rather than worshiping the version of life he never got to live, he decided to live the only version he had. He was living Rabbi Lebeau's wisdom. If this is life, do you want to live it? And if so, how?

Holland can be ruthless, becoming a quadriplegic while swimming in the Caribbean. Holland can be shared worldwide, trying to raise and educate kids during COVID, on screens. Confronting the end of high school or college in a pandemic, and never getting those moments, those quasi-graduations back. Holland can be bitterly sad, losing loved ones before their time. Always wondering what more years would have been like, years that will never return.

Holland can overwhelm us, because it is hard. And Holland can overwhelm us more, if we keep idolizing what it would have been like in Rome.

Of the many associations with Yom Kippur one of the least well known is connected to our patriarch, Joseph. The connections themselves are for another class or sermon, but for now I mention this because Joseph's story took place, of course, in the land of Israel. And in Egypt. But also very much in Holland.

Can we give voice to Joseph during the many stops on his descent into Egypt, away from the life he thought he would live? How did I get here? I was just dreaming. It felt good to imagine being royalty. And now my brothers want to kill me. I am in a pit, rather than being with my father. I am sold to slavery.

The pit, and Potiphar's house and the prison—those were all Hollands, for Joseph.

And even when he emerged, and life turned better, he was far far far from home. He shaved his head. Learned a new language. Changed his name to Tzofnat Paneah. As he adjusts to Egypt, to Holland, the Torah gives us clues that Joseph is embracing his new reality. Painfully. But in a determined way. When he names his son Menashe, it is because נשני אלקים את כל בית אבי/*nashani elohim et kol beit avi*—for God has helped him forget his father's home. Tragic, on some level. But how could Joseph have survived, and thrived, if he didn't in some way put his former life, and the life he thought he would get, behind him?

And we know how it turned out. Without that successful adjustment to Holland, without somehow jettisoning the fantasy that he could undo everything, there is no being second to Pharaoh. There is no reunion with his brothers, and then his father. There is no launching of the full עם ישראל/*am yisrael*, the people of Israel, descended from all the sons of Jacob.

There is a poignant scene with all the brothers after Jacob dies. They fear Joseph will take revenge. For they shipped him off to Holland. Instead, Joseph says the following: אלקים חשבה לטובה/*Elohim hash'vah l'tovah*. Hard to translate. Something like: whatever you all tried to do to muck up my life, to throw me into endless pits, to consign me to the worst version of Holland, God determined that it would be for good. If you struggle with the theological connotations there, consider the following rendering by my colleague Rabbi Shir Yaakov Feit. What Joseph was saying there was “my detours were my destinations.” I made Holland my home.

Joseph's embrace of Holland brings me to the memory of Dr. Paula Neyman. She was my children's first pediatrician. When I met her, in the spring of 2000, she remained an active physician in her mid '70s. She had a gentle touch, an incisive mind, and the most exquisite bedside manner. But her life had been recently turned upside down.

She and her husband Teddy, also a physician, had just recently moved up to Monroe full-time, closing their NYC practices, and making what had been a weekend escape into their new life normal. They had earned this. He retired completely. She worked part time. And they were both eager for these long-awaited golden years. Their love intact and palpable. Their physical bodies hale and well. With trips and theater and opera and communal service and memory-making with grandchildren their new full-time jobs.

And then, Teddy started showing signs of Alzheimers. The descent was quick, and brutal. On him, for sure. But so much so on Paula. She tried to keep a stiff upper lip, including when she drove to my home in a panic, on Shabbat afternoon, because she didn't know what to do. Teddy was out of sorts, and screaming, and incoherent and demanding to see the rabbi. I can still remember the look on her face as I came out of my house that day. This was the look of a woman who had just realized she landed in Holland.

And this was not Paula's most horrific Holland. In 1941, the Nazis invaded 15-year-old Paula's hometown. Her family was transported to the Vilna Ghetto. When Paula and her mother were transported to a labor camp, they hid her 5-year old sister, Linka, in a large knapsack. When they arrived at the camp, Paula's mother asked her to guard her Linka. But the Germans discovered Linka. She was ripped from Paula's arms. Linka was murdered in Auschwitz. Paula's world was destroyed.

Paula survived five concentration camps. She was in the Holland of Hell. And then she arrived in NYC as a refugee in 1947. Got a college degree, and graduated as one of only 3 women in her medical school class. She taught at Einstein. She mentored generations of future doctors. She nurtured and healed and, because I know some of the stories, saved countless children from death, doing for them what she could not do for Linka. She committed her life to healing. And to combatting antisemitism, telling her story to countless public school kids all around NY.

Years later, when Teddy got sick, Paula persevered, taking him to shul as long as it was safe for him, and others, to do so. Getting the home care he required, and enough of it so she could continue her vital life. And making of Holland, perhaps not a Garden of Eden. For that is the realm of fantasy and not reality. But making of Holland a home, as she had decades earlier, after the war. She engaged in little to no fantastical idolatry. Did she wish her circumstances were different? Who wouldn't? But then, day after day, she resolved to make of her circumstances, her painful, dislocated, unexpected and at times tragic circumstances—the fullest, richest and most beautiful life one could live, in Holland.

Rabbi Lebeau was so right, and he reoriented my life's compass. Without his guidance, I would not have stayed as a rabbi. I would have sought after my Rome, and probably always would have found it elusive. He made Holland, for me, whole and holy. He did not say to me, "Adam...those are hard problems. Let's figure them out together." Which would have been its own version of a helpful lifeline. Instead, he said "This is the rabbinate. Do you want it?" And I say to us all, "This is what it is to be human. Do you want it? And if so, how will you embrace it, and eke from it wellness, and beauty? On the rainiest of days, how will you make it sunny? And beautiful. Here in Holland?"

At the end of the section on Ne'ilah in Rabbi Lew's book, he writes this, after describing the accumulation of pain and longing he witnesses in the faces of his community, all in their own versions of Holland. "And just at that moment—just when I think I can't bear to see this one second more—I see a great light beneath the suffering in all these faces. I suddenly come to realize that what I am seeing only looks like suffering, but really all of it—the sunken skin, the lined brow, the clouded eyes—is just the convulsions a great love makes as it struggles to come to the surface of our lives. And I always feel then that I am standing at the head of an army of infinite power."

I feel that right now. And I charge this army: Go seek out your answers. And discover and create the lights that are present in the darkest dark. Go explore your Holland—and go make it holy.

**Yizkor Ending:**

I feel that right now. Particularly as we remember the lives of those we loved—lives lived with their own doses of pain and disappointment, but also we hope with perspective and light and love. I charge this army: Go seek out your answers. And discover and create the lights that are present in the darkest dark. Your loved one's lives' are over, and are in the realm of sacred memory. In the life you still are blessed to live, go explore your Holland—and go make it holy.



## אַשְׁרֵי הָעַם יוֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה יְהוָה בְּאוֹר פְּנִיָּה יְהִלְכוּ.

Why one person will respond to adversity differently. But secret to moving from tourist to ger toshav. Tom Hanks in Castaway. Not trying to get back. Made a life in HOLLAND.

This is Holland. You are never going to make it back to Rome. How are you going to make Holland beautiful? Without Lebeau, I would not have stayed as a rabbi. He didn't say, "lets figure it out." He said, this is the rabbinate. Do you want it? This is what it is to be human. Do you want it? You can keep fighting it, but eventually you find a way to say yes to it, and stop fighting.

Sometimes it rains and pours in HOLLAND and there are floods. And sometimes it is sunny, if you look for the sun.

This is life. This is not a bug in the system.

On YK—acknowledge our mortality...death is just part of our life. QUESion is not why? It is what do you do?

I have posed the question. What's the answer? That is for you to discover.

Buddhism. We want this, but we have that.

(Come back to Lew, bottom of p. 260, at the end)

[https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.56.9?lang=bi&p2=Rashi\\_on\\_Psalms.56.9.2&lang2=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.56.9?lang=bi&p2=Rashi_on_Psalms.56.9.2&lang2=bi)

<https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.56.9?lang=bi&with=Ibn%20Ezra&lang2=en->

Ibn Ezra—not one of my tears is lost. You hold them all.

Vachai

### **It's all Holland.**

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Decades ago, Emily Perl Kingsley published a very brief and rightly famous essay about having a disabled child. In “[Welcome to Holland](#)”, she analogizes the experience to preparing for a trip to Italy, only to land and hear the pilot announce that you’re in Holland. It isn’t what you expected, what you planned for, what you wanted. The question is what you do now.

I find the essay powerful and moving—but too narrow in its focus. It’s not that parenting a disabled child is Holland. *All* parenting is Holland. All of *life* is Holland. You make plans, get a guidebook—and find out you’re ending up someplace entirely different than you expected. That another parent’s Holland may be harder or more painful than yours doesn’t negate that every single one of us, in raising our children, faces things that aren’t what we planned for, that we have to adjust to. Sometimes you know you’re in Holland as soon as your child arrives in the world. Sometimes you learn you’re in Holland 3 or 13 or 30 years later. Some Holland is temporary and passes. Some Holland is lifelong. Some is awful and some is just unexpected. But it is all Holland.

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<https://18forty.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/18forty.org-A-Letter-to-Parents-of-Intergenerational-Divergees.pdf?fs=e&s=c>

Biggest idolatry is worshipping the version of the life you thought you were going to get/deserve

Some family she knows having a really hard time. What do you do with that?

Life is suffering, punctuated by... (kim’s funeral)

Relationships—expectations of a healthy, satisfying relationship. You have to adjust your expectation of what it is going to look like.

Everything in me wants to think that something good in lamenting what is. Venting. Cathartic. Does not get us anywhere.

Coming to terms with what is is hard.

YK—we tried our best, didn’t succeed.

[https://www.google.com/search?gs\\_ssp=eJzj4tFP1zcsNM2qSjLNzTNg9BJly6xQqMwvVUjOz0k](https://www.google.com/search?gs_ssp=eJzj4tFP1zcsNM2qSjLNzTNg9BJly6xQqMwvVUjOz0k)

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Not out of COVID. It is never untrue that we have a hard time reconciling with what is.

You've got hard stuff. And it is not what you wanted, or expected. And I see you. And I love you. And we can march through this landscape, together.