

**“Gene-hunters, gene-breakers”**

*Joel Lazar, Yom Kippur 5777*

**T**his is a poem about remembering to forget  
and it all began with my yearbook

A grainy class photo  
I am nine years old  
in a class of twenty-three  
I sit in the second row  
three seats from the right  
shirt tucked deep into my shorts  
peaking out onto my knee  
I have a small body and sneaky grin

I stare at the photo

my classmates recede  
my face crystallizes  
a strange feeling of familiarity makes me smile  
a confused feeling of disembodiment makes me wonder

I don't want to ask  
I want to look away  
but I look the child in the eye  
and I ask myself:

*Is that me?*

strange question

after all  
the photo bears the same name  
and the parents are the same  
decades of continuity  
beginning with a nine year old me

but that's just some boy  
like millions of others  
with small lexicons and small wardrobes  
huge hopes and larger dreams  
coy mannerisms and earnest beliefs

*that boy is not me*

so if the nine year old me  
isn't the current me  
save for a few common memories  
    what about the thirteen year old me  
    or twenty year old me

What about *yesterday me*?

cannot be  
must not be

if we are all the grown children of yearbooks  
then Yom Kippur must be dismantled

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**T**his day is about renewal  
yet the world is terrible  
at exemplifying change

look at the sprouting plants  
and solid train seats  
brick-patterned walls  
rows of groceries  
the job that begins and ends  
at about the same time  
and the heart of comedy –  
    we laugh because we are still surprised  
    that things are not as we expected them to be

in all of these  
    *an expectation of consistency*  
of sameness and harmony  
a warm spray of relief  
antidote against Uncertainty  
perhaps we see *Justice* in the link between things  
and what better role model is there than Justice?

so naturally we emulate our role models  
    demand consistency  
    from our Selves and identities  
    from each other

John Locke says it like this:  
    as far as your consciousness extends *back*  
    to any past thought or *act*  
    so far reaches the identity of that person  
    *that* person  
    is the same *that*

But Locke is incomplete  
and his chain misses links

Rambam says something better:

repentance is only true when you change all your actions for good  
Rambam says you can cut chains  
he says exile yourself  
he says change your *name*

this is a way to say:  
*I am someone else and I am not the same*  
*person who did those things*  
in Hebrew 'shem' isn't just *name*  
it is reputation.  
what is reputation?  
it comes from 'putare' – *to suppose, believe, suspect*  
not a name below a cheeky yearbook face  
just a common suspicion  
capable of alternate supposition

Yom Kippur realises its true value  
*as a weapon against consistency*  
a lesson in possibility  
a day that affirms multiplicity  
as a unique feature of the human faculty

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**I**n the sixties psychology introduced a new idea  
sweeping the earth  
with frightening force and acceptance

*that we have consistent and constant personalities*

how often have we heard:  
*that's just who she is*  
*that's just who I am*

Once-A-Stealer-Always-A-Thief  
Bad with Secrets  
Disloyal with a Capital 'Dis'  
Critical of others?  
Judge-Mental

we are capital letters to each other  
improper nouns to ourselves

and so Yom Kippur lays down  
the most difficult project imaginable to man

*it asks us to change*

it seems so unlikely  
so rare  
after all here we are again

\* \* \*

**T**he language of genetics may offer an answer  
from the Greek *Genno* – to give birth; to bring forth  
genetics – the study of constancy and change

the task of the early geneticists  
poking peas and fruit flies  
is the biggest question of the last two centuries

and we ask the same today

*how much can we change?*  
*how much will we stay the same?*  
*and what causes it to be this way?*

ah, but a difference  
between the geneticists  
and us

on this day  
there is no Natural Selection  
no choosing of the animal who by chance and luck  
has the fixed feature to help her weather the rain  
and advance on to the next level of the game

No

I am not fixed  
I am multiplicity  
I am all traits  
I am capable of meeting  
all of the Fates

I think of different people

the short-tempered father in the Coles line  
is also the man at peace in the glow  
a small-business owner who on many days  
notices the smooth ebb and flow

he is some and all

or the suited city worker  
battling the mundane  
is also the hiker who sits under the sun  
wondering what giraffes would look like in neck-warmers

she is some and all

and you –  
you are often forgiving of faults  
of shallow materialism of  
over-sharers and over-talkers  
underminers and social climbers  
so you are all of these  
and none of these  
and thousands of possibilities

in *U'netaneh Tokef* we are about to ask:  
*mi yichyeh u'mi yamut*  
*mi ba'mayim u'mi ba'esh*

who will live and who will die?  
who by water and who by fire?

‘who’?  
these are not real people –  
these are You

unlike the species that dies  
in flooding waters with short legs  
by chance it cannot choose

in your humanity you can  
select who in You will be born – *Mi yichyeh*  
and who will drown – *Mi yamut*  
this is your task  
your natural selection  
no smaller in size or importance  
than the blazed trails of gene-hunters

Genno. Bereshit.

our liturgists were attuned to this task  
they gave us words with which to make imaginings  
serious games of make-believe  
to help us embody new You's and new Me's

in moments our chazzanim will make our case to the Divine:

Almighty, let's play a game  
*kabel te'filati ki-t'filat zaken ve'ragil* they will begin...  
accept my tefilla – my prayer  
not from the usual Me  
but from The Experienced Elder  
The Life Traveller and Learner  
The Sweet Singer  
The Lover of Creatures

I am some and all

You Almighty  
are infinite shards of possibility  
and I was created in your Image  
just like You  
these are all the Me's

our chazzanim will then play the Memory Game  
at great cost we Jews always win  
the First Decoders of the memory gene

*Remember, Almighty, they will say....*

You are the God  
and we are the memory-children  
of Avraham, Sarah and their families

Bereshit. Heredity. Heritage. Yearbooks.

our texts made them models

look to that inheritance  
they were good people

they changed their names and were born  
we can change our names too

Avram and Sarai  
refashioned themselves  
by adding one letter to their names

*this only worked though  
because they let each other change*

how will you help those you love or know?  
how will you make it easier for them to grow?  
re-write new names and new nouns  
lower the case of their capitals  
and raise them new-born?

it takes a village  
to clear land for planting  
to stand gently beside new soil  
to show vital interest  
in the Becoming of every human being  
to celebrate every inch of that sprouting

finally, returning to *memory*

nucleus of heritage  
our gilded helix

*yizkor*

our consciousness extends back  
said John Locke  
lacing a lattice  
from which we feverishly hang

*how can we let go  
and still Remember all the same?*

psychology may have birthed the fallacy of Self  
but it also taught us about

*useful forgetting*  
a memory smelting that frames  
the past not as bread but as grain  
as tablets hewn from sapphire  
to be read a million ways  
that clears our land  
of some of the pain

let this day support you in useful forgetting

Bereshit.

Today read your name differently  
at Kabbalat Shabbat we say  
*al tikri banayich* (your children) *elah bonayich* (your builders)  
don't read yourself as children  
forget the You of yesterday  
close the yearbook  
give it to an opp-shop  
read yourself as builders  
gene-breakers  
and master-gilders  
don't read yourself as 'protein'  
but 'protean'

I look forward to a year  
filled with new You's and new Me's

new names  
read differently  
and infinitely