

Beginning with a Leap of Trust (Rosh HaShanah 5779)
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Once upon a time, there was a mountain climber
who embarked upon a very dangerous solo climb.
She hiked all day under the bright, hot sun.
But as the sun set, and it grew darker, she found it harder to see,
and at one point, she got scared.
She lost her footing and slid downward,
tumbling over the mountain's edge.
Summoning every ounce of strength,
she reached out her hand to grasp a branch to stop the fall.
Then, stunned and out of breath, she held on for dear life.

Minutes seemed like hours.
Every muscle in her body strained for release.
Tremendous shooting pains pierced her shoulders.

And finally, she realized she could hold on no longer.
She knew that there was no human being
within miles of the mountain,
but that didn't stop her from crying out:
"Is anybody out there?
Can somebody save me?"

And then, to her astonishment, God answered:
"I am up here. I can save you."
The climber, now in unbearable pain, cried out again,
"Hurry, God! Save me! I can't hold on any longer!"

God replied with a question:
"Do you trust me?"

The climber, flabbergasted that God would ask this
at such a moment, said without hesitation,
"Yes! Of course I trust you! Save me!"
At which point, God said, "Then let go."
Silence.
The climber's hands began to slip,
as she called out once more, "Is there anybody else out there?"

* * *

Trust does not come easily in our world—even in the foxholes or mountain-edges of life, when there seems no other option but to trust, do we nevertheless find trust to be elusive, irrational, or just too risky.

Long ago, a handshake was enough to affirm trust. In antiquity, the message of a handshake was far more literal than it is today. With the extension of a hand, one person said to another, “See, my right hand holds no weapon. And I see that neither does yours.” The hands embrace, and the message was clear: “I will not harm you. I will even hold you and protect you. I trust you, and you can trust me.”

Today we rely on far more than a handshake to trust. We could spend days listing all the mechanisms in our lives that help us trust, or prevent us from distrust: alarms for homes, passcodes for phones; or finger prints or facial recognition software. For most websites, of course, we rely on passwords.

Can I tell you one of my passwords?

Can I trust you?

Oh—and you, the thousands of people watching over the web— can I trust you?

(Can I trust that they said, “yes”?)

Ok then, here we go:

Gonga. That was my very first password, my family password growing up. Yes, we had a family password—in the event of an emergency, in case someone other than my mother or father had to pick me up. How would I know I could trust them? If they knew our highly classified family password! Gonga.

And why “Gonga?” My parents chose that word because, in the unlikelihood of a scary worst-case-scenario, they needed an image of safety, of security. And to a small child perhaps there is no more treasured item, no greater symbol of security, than a stuffed animal. For kids stuffed animals keep them safe in the night, when no one else is around, when it’s pitch-dark. When it was pitch dark, in my youngest years, it was Gonga who added a little bit of light and a whole lot of trust.

I don’t recall ever needing to use the password, but I remember time and again imagining how it might play out. I’d be waiting to be picked up, but no one would show—until eventually a stranger would approach me.

If they knew the word, “Gonga,” they were safe.

If they knew the word, “Gonga,” they were worthy of my 5-year-old trust.

So now YOU know my top-secret family password.

And I’m trusting you to keep it just between us.

Amen? (Amen.)

* * *

Amen. You know, that word, “amen” – it’s really a trust word. It doesn’t translate perfectly into English, but “Amen” shares a root with the word *emunah*, which means faith – or trust. Every time we say, “Amen,” we affirm a degree of belief or trust in one another. We don’t think of *trust* every time we say “amen,” but we are liturgically conveying it. It is perhaps the closest thing we have to a family password. It says, “Okay. I’ll go with that.” Amen? (Amen).
(And “Amen” sounds so much better than “Gonga”!)

Trust comes in all shapes and sizes—large and small, weighty and trivial. We are always exchanging trust—giving it, receiving it, withholding it or having it withheld from us by others. Trust is like a currency. But let’s get real: today, that currency is in crisis!

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Recent Gallup polls show that in the US, trust in institutions is at a near-historic low, with alarmingly little trust in government. Just a month ago Gallup indicated that Americans view government as the nation’s leading problem¹.

No wonder that according PEW research, an average of just 56% of eligible voters in the U.S. vote—that’s worse than most developed countries in the world. What could be more critical to the currency of trust in a democracy than citizens participating in elections? When we vote, we choose who is trustworthy. As Samuel Adams said a century ago, “let each citizen remember at the moment he is offering his vote that he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society...” What does it say about our level of trust, if half of those who *can* vote either choose not to or have others working hard to rob them of that right?

Trust in media is at an all-time low, and we are not off the hook here in the religious sector either, with houses of worship at an all-time low level of trust as well.²

That’s the data. And if you don’t trust data, well, we have our lived experience. And what we have witnessed over the last year only reinforces what studies show—countless travesties that beg the question: *how can we trust anyone?*

- The #MeToo movement, and its courageous champions, leaves us asking, “How can we trust people – especially men in positions of power?”
- The spate of mass shootings- now increasingly commonplace- haunts every single parent, with the question, “how can I trust anyone other than myself to keep my child safe?”
- The near constant news of companies suffering data breaches prompt us all to question if we can trust any website for privacy—the very phrase “password-protected” is now an oxymoron.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/240983/government-back-top-nation-leading-problem.aspx>

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

- The denial and deceit in the wake of the disastrous Hurricane Maria that struck Puerto Rico one year ago—and to learn only recently that the death-count was not 64, as the government said in December, but actually 2,975
- The hacking of election campaigns, the organized, well-funded efforts to keep non-whites from voting
- The barrage of lies and cover-ups
- The mainstreaming of the phrase “fake-news”

The list goes on and on and on. We are all like that mountain-climber, dangling by our finger-tips, as darkness sets in, crying out: *Is anyone else out there? Who can we trust?*

Rosh HaShanah is called in our liturgy *HaYom Harat Olam*, “the Day of the Beginning of the World.” *How can we begin in a world without of trust?*

Well, according to the late psychologist Erik Erikson, that’s precisely how we all begin in the world. In his famous eight-stage theory of psychosocial development, trust is the very first stage, the first “crisis” of childhood. In that respect, we are beginning this year the way that the human being begins life itself – with a crisis of trust, a clashing of trust and mistrust, or as Erikson put it in his seminal work *Childhood and Society*, “[with] the nuclear conflict of sense of trust versus sense of evil.” That’s right, for Erikson this was a matter of trust versus evil, and an institution that Erikson identified as responsible for collectively guiding humanity through this crisis was religion.

“Religion,” he wrote, “[can cultivate] trust in the form of faith...” And to be clear, Erikson was not referring to a blind faith, or even literal theism. Rather, he wrote, religion aims to “restore[s] faith in the goodness of one’s strivings and in the kindness of the powers of the universe.”

HaYom Harat Olam, the Day of the Beginning of the World. Rosh HaShanah, Stage One asks: Do you trust in the goodness of your strivings? Do you trust that there is powerful kindness in the universe?

* * *

The behavioral economist at Duke University, Dan Ariely, put these questions to the test, with an experiment he called, “the Trust Game.” He put two people in separate rooms, person A and person B. He gave person A \$100. He said to person A: “You can either keep it or give it to person B. If you give this \$100 to person B, it will quadruple, becoming \$400. Person B will then have the choice whether to go home with \$400, or split it.” Now, you can imagine being person A and wondering, “Do I trust that they will share it with me?” The rational prediction would be that person A would probably keep it, and if they did send it over, then person B would walk away with \$400. But what actually happened? Most people sent the money over. And most recipients, playing person B, sent \$200 back.

What Ariely's study shows is that we are surprisingly trusting and more trustworthy than we might think. In other words, despite the evidence and rationales that say otherwise, seeds of trust are implanted within human beings.

* * *

The Hebrew word for human being is *adam*, or Adam, the first human being. There's a midrash that argues that today is not *HaYom Harat Olam*, the day of the world's creation, arguing instead that the world was created on the 25th of Elul, 5 days ago. That means that today, Rosh HaShanah, is the 6th day of creation. The 6th day: the day when God created *adam*, the human being.

The Rabbis in the Talmud imagined that mythic day, when Adam was brought into Creation. They pictured Adam, amazed at the universe, noticing the beauty of it all, with all the life around him, the sun overhead. But Adam noticed that the sun was moving across the sky and sinking down, as it grew darker and darker all around. And Adam was afraid, like a child in the dark. No stuffed animals to provide comfort. No family passwords to assure him of his safety. He cried out, "Woe is me," as he faced the darkness, "I did this, this is my punishment, this is my death." And he wept all night long. But then the sun began slowly rising, and Adam, the very first human being said, *minhago shel olam hu*, "this is the way of the world."³

Adam learned something that morning, the morning of the 7th day.
He could trust that after darkness, dawn would break.
He could trust that light would return.
He could trust.
That was his first Sabbath gift—the discovery of trust.

Elie Wiesel wrote that on that day, "God gave Adam a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again."

Let us begin again, like Adam, on Rosh HaShanah, with trust. Not with blind faith, but with the opposite—with what business writers Stephen Covey and Greg Link call, "Smart Trust," a trust rooted in sound judgement and truth, a trust that leads to "prosperity, energy, and joy."

In November, we have a power-tool in the practice of "smart trust," an election, when we vote, or as Samuel Adams said, when we "[execute] one of the most solemn trusts in human society." This is the closest thing we have to a handshake between "We the People," and the people in whom we trust to keep us safe in the darkness of night.

Whether as citizens in a voting booth or colleagues in a workplace,

³ Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

Whether as friends in community or family in a home,
Let us begin again with “smart trust.” Amen?

Let us begin again with smart trust “in the goodness of [our] strivings and the [powerful kindness] in the universe. Amen?

Let us begin again with smart trust:
 in those human beings who practice honesty and humility,
 in those who champion truth and integrity,
 in those who prove that love is stronger than hate.

Let us begin again with trust that we are, each and every one of us, *shomrei emunah*,
guardians of trust.

Guardians of Trust: that is who we become on Rosh Hashanah, returning to Stage One, like
the very first human being, responding to the dark crisis of trust, with a Divine handshake,
a leap of trust.

This Rosh HaShanah 5779,
May we begin again
with a *leap of trust*
that, no matter how dark the night,
we have the inner-goodness and the powerful kindness
to hold hands with God,
and, together, make the sun rise again

Amen.