



**SERMON EREV ROSH HASHANAH:
LEANING INTO THE NEW YEAR**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 6 September 2021
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

I am standing on one foot
at the prow of great Manhattan
leaning forward
projecting a little into the bright harbour.

If only a topographer in a helicopter
would pass over my shadow
I might be imposed forever
on the maps of this city.¹

- 1 The American Jewish poet Grace Paley was writing about the natural human desire to make a mark on the world. And she recognised that it was only possible by – and this phrase formed the title of her first poetry compilation – leaning forward. Extending our reach into the distant waters at the edge of New York City by leaning on something, a bench maybe, for support.
- 2 Benches and seats are incredibly unobtrusive pieces of furniture. We might notice their absence, but when they're there, they're just there. We rarely stop to think of what they do, how they're constructed, where they come from. Yet, like so many tools that exist to make our lives easier, they are extraordinarily important. They allow us to extend, somehow, our natural human reach or our natural human stamina. To achieve something we couldn't achieve with our bodies alone.



- 3 The Mishnah lists² five ways in which one is considered to be ‘using’ a chair or bench – five things we can do which allow us to benefit from the support the bench offers. Those five actions correspond, I think, to five moments in the High Holy Day journey on which we’re all currently embarking. Tomorrow, we’ll look at the significance of lying down, but tonight is about leaning forward, as Grace Paley wrote. Leaning forward, into the unknown, and being immortalised there.
- 4 On Erev Rosh Hashanah, the Book of Life is opened. We are soon to be recorded for perpetuity. The mark we’ve made on the world over the last year is shortly to be immortalised. As Rabbi John D Rayner z”l put it, we strive to conduct ourselves such that “generations hence, it will be true to say of us: the world is a little better because, for a brief space, they lived in it”.³ We want, like Grace Paley, to leave a legacy that is both positive and permanent, and the blank pages of this year’s Book of Life are shortly to be filled.
- 5 At the same time, we recognise that we can only make this mark thanks to the Divine providence that sustains our lives. We don’t stand unaided; we’re constantly leaning.
- 6 These two ideas are encapsulated in consecutive lines of Avinu Malkeinu: inscribe us in the book of life; bless us with prosperity and wellbeing. One is about us; one is about God. We yearn to make a good and lasting impression, but we need support in order to do so. We lean – and we lean forward.
- 7 We lean forward, indeed, into the new year. We woke up this morning in 5781, and now we’re on tiptoes, peering gently into the nearest section of



5782. We distance ourselves from the year just gone, with our head firmly gazing at 5782 – but we don't lose sight of 5781, where our feet are still, just about, standing.

- 8 That, ultimately, is what the Book of Life is all about. Standing at the edge of Manhattan – or at the end of the year – leaning into the new year, trying to mark it by reference to what went before. Our conduct over the last year, as we stand in the strange, liminal 10-day period beginning with Erev Rosh Hashanah, will determine how we're inscribed for the coming twelve months.
- 9 And it's those twelve coming months into which we're leaning right now. We're trying to touch just a little bit more of the future than we can normally reach. The Rosh Hashanah tradition of Tashlich is about doing all we can to shed ourselves of remnants of what went before. It comes from the Hebrew root שלך, meaning 'to cast off'. But there's another Hebrew root which is also pronounced שלח – but this time using a chet instead of a chaf – with a slightly different meaning. 'To send'. The remnants of our past which we cast off are thrown forwards, into the water, in front of us, moving onwards, sent forth to shape our future.
- 10 Grace Paley wrote: "If only a topographer in a helicopter would pass over my shadow", that moment in time could be frozen. Well, we have that opportunity every year. Our position now will be recorded for evermore.
- 11 זכרנו לטובה, הושיענו לחיים. Remember us for good; preserve our lives. When we remember on Whom we lean, we can get a glimpse of eternity, and be immortalised into it. Lean well. Shanah tovah.



GKW 06.09.21

¹ Grace Paley. "At the Battery" in *Leaning Forward: poems by Grace Paley* (Penobscot, Maine: Granite Press, 1985): 24.

² m.Zavim 2:4

³ *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*, p 391.