

# A Ritual Dismantling of Walls

## Healing from Trauma through the Jewish Days of Awe

BY WENDY ELISHEVA SOMERSON



**T**HREE PELICANS SOAR in a synchronized formation high above the ocean. Massive and slightly awkward with their giant beaks and perplexing throats, they surprise me with their unlikely inevitability. Their fringed wings stretch across the sky like monstrous combs with a few missing teeth, holding the secrets of both sea and sky between their slightly curled tips. I watch as their pterodactyl-like silhouettes fade into the horizon, taking with them their giant and uncomfortable beauty.

I am pulled into a recurring nightmare. I sense the presence of a man in my bedroom. I am lying in bed on my stomach and he is suddenly on top of my back. His weight bears down on me; I cannot move. His hands circle my throat; I cannot speak. I can barely breathe. My body goes rigid with terror, but my freezing does not reduce the pressure. I decide to twist and turn my body in inviting ways; perhaps I can seduce the threat into something else. I wake up. The man is still here, pressing down on me, hands on my throat. I wake up again. He is no longer on top of me, but his presence lingers in the room.

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“Three pelicans stretch their wings over our heads, opening the gate between this world and the one to come,” Wendy Somerson writes, describing the Rosh Hashanah ritual she enacted with two friends. The healing ritual drew her to create this encaustic painting, *The Day the World Was Born*.



## Holy Days

The Jewish Days of Awe revolve around the destruction and creation of two physical structures. In midsummer, the Days of Awe begin with *Tisha B'Av*, a day of mourning that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem and the calamities that have befallen the Jewish people since then. In the fall, we complete the cycle of the Days of Awe with Sukkot—a joyful celebration of our transformation over the previous two months by building and spending time in the sukkah, a structure with temporary walls and a partial roof, which we later dismantle. This journey of removing our walls is heightened in a concentrated form during the Days of Awe, but it is a circular process that we continually repeat over our lifetimes.

As I begin body-based therapy, the walls of my house—my body—start to crack open. My work with a somatic therapist begins the slow process of opening up spaces in my body that have been sealed shut. With each opening, more memories arise.

In massage, feelings of panic move out of my sacrum and fill my body with their revelations. My heart beats its way into my throat, and I fight the urge to retch. Memories suddenly line up next to each other precariously, like a row of dominoes just before the fall. I remember being at my best friend's house in first grade. We're lying on her bed. I tell her that I can only sleep on my stomach with my hands between my legs for protection. I recall the terror of waking up, over the years, from the recurring nightmare of being strangled. When I told my sister about the nightmare several years ago, she told me that Dad used to come into our room at night to drag her out of bed. She told me I pulled the covers over my head, pretending that it wasn't happening.

These memories from the past, stored in my sinews for decades, have found their openings. I have invited them in by making space for them in my body. Feeling my invitation, they have been lapping their brackish water against the wall, slowly eroding its function. Finally, our joint labor has created these openings, both holy and horrible. And my current panic can't close the holes or send the rushing water back.

I dream that an invisible force drags my body into a horizontal floating position about a foot above the floor. I gaze down at the wooden floorboards. I recognize that I am in one of the bedrooms I grew up in, being given an opportunity to make sense of my recent memories. Salt is scattered across the floor. I reach down and sort through the salt granules by pushing them to the left and to the right on the wood, but no patterns emerge. I wake up. I feel as if I've been given a question that reveals everything and nothing at the same time.

In midsummer, as we approach *Tisha B'Av*, the walls of my body begin to crumble. Although I have spent years building trust with Patricia, my somatic therapist, she and I have a moment of profound miscommunication. I am lying on a massage table. Energy runs from the center of my body through my legs in rough jagged spurts. My legs twitch in jerky movements as though they are trying to shake off grasping tentacles. Eventually, as I continue a steady breath pattern, Patricia and I get the energy to flow more evenly, like a gently rocking boat.

But the area in my chest grows very still. Sometimes one part of my body will resist the opening. My chest tells me to go ahead and recklessly throw open the windows and doors to let in the elements, no matter the weather. “Let the air, wind, or rain sweep through our dwelling and indiscriminately carry out these precious, moldy possessions,” it tells me. “But I'm going to keep something hidden, safe in a secret enclosure, far from the light of the present.”

“I'm going to do something I've done before. Just let me know if it's too much,” Patricia says. Her hands encircle my throat. But this is not something she has ever done before. I immediately feel an immobilizing

panic, but I manage to tell her to loosen her grip. She wants to know what my tears mean, and I tell her briefly about the man from my nightmare. Her hands seem to tighten around my neck, and I ask her to loosen her grip again. The session ends.

My insomnia grows much worse. I can sleep only on my stomach, no longer on my side. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I feel as if the man is just outside my door or lurking by my window, and on some nights he hovers just over my bed.

## Trauma and Teshuvah

As I try to make sense of what has been happening in my body, the summer days threaten to shorten, and my mind turns to the approaching High Holy Days and the central concept of *teshuvah*, which can be translated as a turn, return, or repentance. I turn and return to trauma from my childhood because something about it haunts me; it eludes my conscious memories and returns to me mostly in nightmares, dreams, and bodily symptoms. Reading *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, I consider Alan Lew's words:

If the purpose of ritual is to render the invisible visible, then what is the profound, universal, unseen, and unspoken reality that all of this ritual reflects? What journey of the soul, what invisible journey of transformation, does all of this make visible?

Have I been handed an opportunity to return to and resolve this trauma? Terror and insomnia are assaulting my days and nights, yet I recognize the edges of an opening: what may become possible when the walls of my house are in shambles? When my usual protection fails, when my heart is surrounded by fewer brambles, am I somehow closer to resolving this story? We tend to move toward transformation only when we have no other choice. While tearing down is often necessary before rebuilding can begin, few of us willingly choose to break down our walls. The destruction often feels like something that is happening *to* us without our consent, yet I long to find a way to assert my agency in this time of re-injury. As I sort through the rubble of my fallen walls, I search for new ways of relating to the past.

I keep mulling over Lew's idea that teshuvah "is only complete when we find ourselves in exactly the same position we were in when we went wrong—when the state of estrangement and alienation began—and we choose to behave differently, to act in a way that is conducive to atonement and reconciliation." As I turn to face the past, I am reliving my response to the original trauma, but I don't feel that I had control over what went wrong in the first instance. My alienation is more a result of being harmed by the people who were supposed to protect me.

So what is my responsibility to behave differently now? I am experiencing an opportunity to repair one of the consequences of abuse—the way in which I leave my body to repress the knowledge of what I experienced as a child. Although this leave-taking has helped me survive, it also prevents me from fully knowing myself. Making teshuvah, in this case, means turning away from denial, returning to my body, and choosing reconciliation—a reconciliation with myself that allows me to choose authentic connection with others.

## Making Amends

When I get advice from another somatic therapist, Jennifer, about how to approach my concerns with Patricia, she asks, "So the original trauma was coming from your right?" I mumble something vague while my mind sprints to catch up with that possibility. Chronic pain runs up and down the right side of my body from my numb foot to my right shoulder, which perpetually shrugs upward as though it is attempting

This encaustic painting, *Softening*, depicts Somerson's process of healing from within.





“During Sukkot, we sit in the temporary sukkah, which is open to the sky,” Somerson writes. “We let go of the illusion that our walls can protect us from pain, disconnection, and death.”

to kiss my earlobe. Jennifer tells me, “Both times you’ve talked about it, you’ve turned your head to the right.”

At the end of summer when I make my yearly return to the coastal area of La Push, Washington, I recognize for the first time its gravitational pull as the corner of the earth where I feel the perfect balance of opening and containment. Night after night, as I sit on the pile of stones and logs watching the sun set behind the jagged sea stacks, my left side faces the ocean—open to the possibilities of its powerful tides. My right side is held by the sturdy land: the beach, and beyond that the tiny rows of cabins sitting on scrubby hills dotted with miniature Sitkas. Paths from the cabins, lined with wildflowers and tangled blackberry brambles, lead down to the sea, where migrating pelicans glide overhead.

Attempting to repair the broken trust in our relationship, Patricia and I practice the art of apology. While Patricia is the one literally making amends or teshuvah, my ability to accept her apology must come from an ability to forgive and trust—not only her, but also myself.

Walking toward me from the other side of the room, Patricia stops several feet away. She asks if she can come closer. I say yes or no. “I am sorry,” she says. Each time. And then she moves forward or backward. We repeat this process many times. We stare straight into each other’s eyes. At first nervous laughter escapes from my mouth, and my heart beats erratically. My shoulders shrug up, and anxiety prickles my chest. I say thank you to the first few apologies, and questions tumble through my mind: “Do I deserve an apology? Am I asking for too much? What is Patricia thinking? Does she resent me?”

But the simple repetition of the activity allows me to drop more deeply into my body. My laughter fades. I stop externally acknowledging her apologies at all, and I focus my attention inward. The questions change: “Do I believe her apology? What is her body saying to mine? How is my body responding?” I notice Patricia’s shoulders are back. She is fully present in her body and within her dignity, but she is not rigid. Nor is she shrinking or appeasing or making herself smaller in any way. Her eyes are soft. She moves back when I tell her to. She moves forward when I tell her to.

I accept that she is genuinely sorry. I accept that she hadn’t intended to cause me harm. The poured water of her apology fills my stomach and then spreads out, dousing my nerves with calm. My shoulders relax downward, and my center of gravity shifts and settles lower in my belly. I feel my breath unfurl into the space surrounding me as I reclaim my place in this relationship.

I notice: Her brown eyes are not vacant. Her brown eyes are not trying to annihilate me. Her brown eyes are not my father’s.

At the end of the session, Patricia asks if and how she can hold me. I let her sit next to me on my left, and I slump sideways against her, while she puts her arm around my back. I sob while she comforts me in a way that I wasn’t comforted as a kid.

## The Day the World Was Born

Rosh Hashanah, which kicks off the ten High Holy days, commemorates the day the world is born, the day we start over, the day that something was created from nothing. It begins with the blowing of the shofar, the ram’s horn, which forms a bridge between heaven and earth. When this bridge appears, we have the opportunity to feel our own divine origin. Yet this divinity is not based in our worldly achievements. We find divinity, instead, in our murky, shameful parts—the ones we hide away and see as faults. When we turn our attention inward, we can find the holy spark that resides within our darkest places.

Although I purposefully scheduled a somatic practice session with my friends Nathan and Elizabeth to begin right before the High Holy days, I did not realize that the three of us would enact a Rosh Hashanah ritual. The intention of an “ally practice” is to bring the present to bear on the past. In this session, my friends ally with me to help me experience safety and protection in a situation—the trauma represented by the nightmare—where I originally felt neither. Our ritual has three essential elements of Rosh Hashanah: We stand together before G-d or spirit by creating a sacred space. We reconcile to the past by opening our hearts. We perform a ritual of transformation.

I cry for an hour and a half—the entire length of our session.

We try out different positions: Elizabeth stands in front of me, behind me, to my left, and to my right. It feels most calming for her to stand on my right. Nathan asks me to check in with my body. Movement is stirring; my chest is burning and tight with anxiety. My legs are starting to twitch, and I can feel the space around my fingers buzzing. My hands don't know what to do with themselves. Nathan asks, “Is there anything she can say right now?”

“Leave her alone,” Elizabeth says.

*I internally address the man in my nightmare by echoing Elizabeth silently: “Yeah, leave me alone.”*

Crying and shaking, I fall into the feeling of terror immediately. I am afraid of dragging my friends into an undercurrent of plummeting revelations where we will be tossed about until the end of time. But that is why we are here, so I keep heading further down.

I try lying on the floor, but it feels unsettling because I need to be able to see more of the room. Instead, the three of us sit on the floor facing my front window, and I am cross-legged in the middle. My knees touch the outside of their thighs, and I place one hand on each friend's leg. I feel their attentive presence as I sink into the past. My legs tremble, my shoulders convulse, and I feel energy streaming up and down my spine. There is movement, but there is no connection between the upper and lower halves of my body. They feel like they are in two separate compartments, as if a magician had sliced through my torso and pried the two halves apart to show to the waiting crowd.

“We see this,” my friends say, in several rounds.

*“They see you. You can't hide from them.”*

My friends also see me. Their presence highlights how alone I have felt with this terror for so long. Bringing my friends into the nightmare with me is both deeply satisfying and deeply vulnerable. I weep with gratitude that they are bearing witness for me. I weep with sadness about how lonely I have felt. I weep because relief and shame about this revelation are competing to capture this moment.

My legs start twitching faster, bringing more movement and energy through them. My shoulders move up and down, while warmth spreads from my heart out through my arms and down to the tips of my fingers.

Henry, my Siamese cat, is fascinated by what we're doing on the floor; he fixes us in his cross-eyed stare and comes over to rub his cheek against our legs.

My friends each hold up one hand to prevent the man from coming near my neck. They each put one hand on my sacrum, and it responds with pulsating movement. Energy that was stuck in my sacrum spreads out to meet each of their hands and allows me to feel open and deeply held.

“Go away,” they say in rounds. “Go away.”

*“We won't tolerate your presence.”*

The energy in my body speeds up and widens outward as my gaze encompasses the width of my living room.

I watch as the man's shadowy figure retreats into the corner.

Henry chases after him. The man's figure evaporates.

*“Don't come back. You don't belong here.”*

The two halves of my body click back together, making room for powerful tides to rush up and down through the widening canal of my pelvis. I can feel my whole body vibrating powerfully, pulling in strength and connection from touching Nathan and Elizabeth. Alive with this movement, I feel a sudden flush of heat and wholeness. Three pelicans stretch their wings over our heads, opening the gate between this world and the one to come. A cream-colored egg bobs amidst the waves of the ocean.

“He went away,” they each say once, but I put an end to that. It feels too bold, like tempting fate. He may sneak back in if we’re too obvious with our triumph.

Instead, I ask them to say, “We got this,” which they do in rounds.

I am soothed by the feeling that they are taking care of it. I don’t have to do anything. The energy slows as it continues to rock rhythmically through my body.

“I think we’re done,” I announce.

Sitting on the couch after the session, Nathan asks me what this self, still humming with my own power, would tell the self who can’t sleep at night. “You are not alone,” I say. “You are not alone,” he repeats slowly.

## Release

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is the last of the ten High Holy days and the holiest day of the year, we rehearse for our death by refusing our regular routine of life-affirming activities for our bodies: we avoid eating, bathing, and having sex. By making our bodies uncomfortable, we experience the physical parallel to the discomfort in our souls as we ask for forgiveness from G-d. Remembering the sacrificial offerings from the days of the Second Temple, we are reminded that we must still make an offering; we have to release something old in order to make room for something new.

For several days after our ritual, I can’t sleep, yet I am not afraid at night. During the day, I can’t digest my food. It goes right through me as if there were nowhere solid for the nutrients to land. My body is neither relaxed nor tense; it mostly feels unfamiliar, as if it were someone else’s.

Having just relived my trauma, I go through the motions of life, feeling very close to the nothingness of death. Our ritual has taken me on a journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, from rebirth to death, from connecting to holiness to connecting with emptiness. This emptiness demands that we consider what will remain when we are on our death bed—what do we most care about in this world? In this stripped-down state, I feel disoriented. I have let go of my familiar trappings, but I can’t see what is coming next. I wade through the thickness of this time slowly, sensing the outline of a nearby body of water filled with something previously untasted.

## Letting the Light In

After the High Holy days, during Sukkot, we sit in the temporary sukkah, which is open to the sky. We pay respect to our ancestors, who inhabited fragile dwellings during their forty years of travel in the desert after having escaped the slavery of *mitzrayim*, a narrow place. Having completed one round of our own journey from a place of constriction to a wider, more spacious world, we let go of the illusion that our walls can protect us from pain, disconnection, and death. We turn toward these difficult experiences—previously pushed away—and let them into our homes to claim them as part of who we are.

In this return to my body as a home, I, too, feel more open to the world. I have been unable to keep the walls of my house intact. As I felt them falling apart around me, I was terrified of losing myself, but their collapse has allowed me to make a more conscious return to a past that has been challenging to face and a body that has been difficult to inhabit. And while new temporary walls have been erected, they are more porous and spacious, allowing more air and light to come streaming in. I finally find the room to turn and stretch my wings. I reach toward a different relationship to my past with the knowledge that I am not facing this return alone. ■