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Speaking of Faith®
with Krista Tippett

Days of Awe

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Billboard:

Krista Tippett, host: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Days of Awe." We'll explore the meaning and sounds of the approaching Jewish High Holy Days, from the New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah to the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. My guest, Rabbi Sharon Brous, is part of a Jewish spiritual renaissance that is taking many forms across the U.S.
Ms. Sharon Brous: You know, the rabbis say that the Torah was handed down in fire. And in fire, it is to be transmitted from one generation to the next. And that's sort of the, you know, the great power of a religious tradition. It's versatile enough to really sustain itself over the course of many thousands of years, to say, you know, the text is the same every year, but we are different. There is something newborn every time that I encounter this text or this holiday or this piece of liturgy.
Ms. Tippett: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett. This hour, we'll delve into the world and meaning of the upcoming Jewish High Holy Days, from the New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur's rituals of atonement, a span of 10 days known as Days of Awe.

My guest, Sharon Brous, is a young rabbi and one voice in a Jewish spiritual renaissance that is taking many forms across the U.S. The vast majority of her Los Angeles congregation is in their 20s and 30s. And they, she says, are making life-giving connections between ritual, personal transformation, and relevance in the world.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Days of Awe."

The Jewish year 5768 begins at sunset this September 12 in the Western calendar with Rosh Hashanah. But Rosh Hashanah is more than a New Year celebration. For observant Jews, it follows a month of ritual soul-searching. The two days of Rosh Hashanah are a commemoration, not only of a new year, but of the creation of the world. And in them, the faithful stand before divine judgment of their deeds and omissions in the year ending.

Rosh Hashanah initiates 10 days of repentance, an attempt to clean the slate for a new year, a renewed life. This culminates in the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur entails long and complex communal prayer, ritual, and fasting, and is accompanied by the long blast of the shofar and High Holy Day melodies composed to cross the centuries.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: TIPPETT: This is a traditional setting of Unetane Tokef, a seminal prayer/poem recited during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. It includes the lines, "On Rosh Hashanah, it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed. How many shall pass away? And how many shall be born? Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall perish by water and who by fire? Who by earthquake and who by plague? Who shall be at peace? And who shall be pursued? Who shall be exalted? And who shall be brought low?

(Sound bite of music)
Ms. Brous: I think part of the challenge of High Holy Days is to, at some point during the hours and hours and hours that we spend really trying to focus our hearts and our minds over High Holy Days, to bring people to one momentary understanding of the fragility of life. But to take that and to leave with a commitment to live a life in which they're able to transform themselves and their relationships and the world, knowing that every day they have might be their last.
Ms. Tippett: Growing up in New Jersey, my guest, Sharon Brous, never dreamt that she would one day be making such ideas fresh and powerful for a new generation. She saw synagogue as a familial obligation and experienced the High Holy Days, in particular, as a trial to be endured.

Today, she's a rabbi in the Conservative school of Judaism. And she leads a Los Angeles community she helped to found in 2004. It is named IKAR, after the Hebrew word for essence or core. As Sharon Brous approaches the High Holy Days, I wondered, how does she bring words like judgment and atonement alive in herself and for her 21st-century urban congregation? How does she understand the meaning of the word *teshuvah*, often translated as "repentance," which is a watchword for the entire High Holy Day experience?
Ms. Brous: A couple of things. I mean, one for — as alienated as people are by the Hebrew in the prayer book, often the English is far worse than the Hebrew, because using words like that that don't resonate for many of us. At least, the Hebrew, you know that you don't know it, and so there's some kind of air of mystery to it.

Ms. Tippett: OK. Yeah. Isn't the, that word in Hebrew quite visual, like stopping in your tracks and turning around the other direction or something like that?

Ms. Brous: That's exactly what it is.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: It's return. It's literally returning to a right path. And, I mean, the whole Jewish notion of sin is you've just gone astray and you can turn it around. And, you know, the principle, the fundamental principles of *teshuvah*, of return, is that human beings have free will. We have the capacity to make great mistakes. And we have the capacity to turn it around. And of course, there are certain things that there is no full Teshuvah that can be affected for because the damage is irreparable, things like murder and sexual assault and some kinds of public humiliation, that it's impossible to ever fully turn back.

But for everything else, our tradition says it's possible to turn your life around and to make amends in a way that will heal the breach that you've caused in the relationship, either, you know, with yourself, with God, with someone in the community, with the world. And that's really, I think, also, the ultimate challenge of Rosh Hashanah, which is, we call it, you know, it's — in the prayers, we say, "*Hayom harat olam*" — "Today is the birthday of the world." And Rosh Hashanah is this, it's this moment in which we celebrate the creation of the world, which meant nothing to me, you know, when I heard that growing up is…

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Ms. Brous: "Today, we celebration the creation of the world," that means nothing.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: But what does mean something to me is the fact that each one of us participates in creation every single day, when we make a choice about how we want to live in the world. And then, you know, there are ways in the liturgy and in the religious — in Jewish religious practice, in which every single day, we strive to kind of identify the things that need to be transformed in our lives. But the tradition also gets that it's not enough to, you know, that doing it every day sort of, it might lose some of its power. And so we need to have this, you know, this moment in time that's part of the calendrical cycle, that's, you know, sort of built in to the calendar.

Ms. Tippett: This kind of dramatic High Holy Days — everything stops.

Ms. Brous: Exactly, in which we stop everything.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: And, I mean, even many — you know, secular Jews or people who don't identify, oh, will still stop and kind of recognize it's Rosh Hashanah or it's Yom Kippur. And we have this shofar, which blasts in our ears. And it's not supposed to be beautiful and melodious. It's just supposed to really wake you up and say, 'Look at yourself. Are you the mother you want to be?

Are you the friend you want to be? Are you the American you want to be? Are you the human being that you want to be in the world?'
(Sound bite of shofar)

Ms. Tippett: The call of the ancient ram's horn, or shofar, punctuates the 30 days of introspection leading to Rosh Hashanah and the 10 Days of Awe through Yom Kippur. The sage of the Talmud, the 12th-century philosopher Maimonides, interpreted the call of the shofar at Rosh Hashanah in this way. "Awake, you sleepers, from your slumber. Examine your deeds. Return in repentance and remember your creator." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services build on prayers and confessions of mistakes, transgressions, and ethical lapses, both individual and communal. Again, Rabbi Sharon Brous.
Ms. Brous: My sense is that a lot of what's happening in the liturgy, and it's incredibly rich and complex liturgy of High Holy Days, is that the rabbis are trying to very cautiously push us to confront the parts of ourselves that we are simply not open to confronting when we walk in the door. And so it's, in some ways, it's very subtle, what they're trying to do. But listing, there's the *Viddui*, the confessional, which is always said in the plural "*Ashamnu, bagadnu*," "We did this, we did this" and…

Ms. Tippett: And you go through, is it right, you go through every single letter of the alphabet, am I right?

Ms. Brous: Yes. Yes, that's right, and over and over and over. We do the *Viddui* multiple times over the course of the day of Yom Kippur. And the idea is, 'I didn't do that.' You know, you sort of walk in and someone gives you a list of sins that you're supposed to publicly state that you committed.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: And as you said, this is intensely countercultural, because all of our impulse and all of the norms of society push us to deny and reject responsibility for the things that we're doing wrong.

Ms. Tippett: You know, or I think to — you know, to get over it, to move on once, right, and not relive it every year.

Ms. Brous: And this says, 'We did these things. Each one of us did these things.' And even if you personally didn't do it, someone in this community did it. So…

Ms. Tippett: So, what — give me an example. So what are you saying, for example, ethical lapses, sins? I mean, what would they be?

Ms. Brous: I immediately go to, you know, to think about sort of the broad social and political,

ethical lapses that we have. I mean, the fact that we, in Los Angeles, live in a city with 86,000 people sleeping on the streets. And so does that mean that I personally am responsible for making, you know, people, creating homelessness? Or does that mean that I am responsible because I live in a society that allows certain people to remain in positions of privilege and power and to turn a blind eye to people who — you know, who have tremendous suffering in their life? And so how can we take — start to take — ownership and responsibility of some of the terrible problems that are happening in our society and in our world? So, I mean, it's the…

Ms. Tippett: So that's a sin that you would confess at Yom Kippur?

Ms. Brous: Yes. Yes. And we, I mean, and in the beginning, when you walk in the door, you're not necessarily ready to take responsibility for that. I mean, I'm thinking about, you know, the way that I hurt my sister's feelings, the way that I was embarrassed by my mother in the supermarket because, you know, even though I'm in my 30s, she can still embarrass me in the supermarket. You know, I'm sort of thinking about those things. But, and I think that there's this development, there's this flow to the service, in which you start by — you know, sort of in the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, you start by acknowledging and taking responsibility for the little things that have happened in your life, the little ways in which you've made mistakes.

And by the end of Yom Kippur, you're just, your soul is on fire because you start to recognize that it's all connected. And it's not just, you know, the conversation that I should have had with, you know, with my best friend that I didn't have that led her astray. It's also about, you know, the genocide in Darfur. And it's about poverty and hunger and homelessness. And it's all connected. It's — like you kind of awaken yourself or open yourself up to this much broader sense of responsibility, which we, I think we protect ourselves from during most of the year because we simply can't hold all of that at once without being paralyzed.

Ms. Tippett: Right. There is this paralysis. I mean, I think about this a lot. I think about how people in my profession, journalists, how we present people with these images of suffering, right? And violence and things that go wrong that, therefore, become headlines. And I think it's, it's overwhelming for people. And it's very hard for people to make that connection when they are often just struggling to hold their lives together, right? Or to be a good parent or to be a good spouse or just to be a good force in their community or their neighborhood, right? Or their city.

Ms. Brous: Yeah.

Ms. Tippett: It's very hard to connect the dots between my life and that world of pain and suffering out there. So I guess what I want to ask you is, is there something that happens when those connections are made in that liturgy, in that context of religious community, of Jewish community? Is there someway in which people are able to live with that differently, to hold those tensions, to walk out of there, you know, and have an idea about how to live differently because they've made them?

Ms. Brous: I hope so. And I think that that's really our job. And the way that we do that is taking people on a journey. You know, we don't, I don't start off by when people come in on Erev Rosh Hashanah, you know, the first night of our Hashanah, I don't start off by saying, you know, 'Look at you. What are you doing about the mess of the world?' You know? We start off by saying, because I see this journey that sort of takes us from, as I call it, you know, as I understand it, it's really journey from *Heshbon HaNefesh*, which is an accounting of the soul of the individual to *Heshbon Nefesh HaMishpaha* to, sort of, looking at the way that we are in our family's accounting of the soul of our families. *Heshbon Nefesh HaAm*, this is by the time we get to Yom Kippur, an accounting of the soul of the Jewish people. And ultimately, *Heshbon Nefesh HaOlam*, an accounting of the soul of the whole world.

And, you know, our rabbis acknowledge that the way to transformation of the world starts, it starts with the self, it's through the self. And so we have to, not only not disregard, but be truly attentive and sincerely attentive to really accounting for what's happening in our own personal lives first, you know, first and foremost. And so we do that. We look with, really, we scrutinize what's going on in our own lives. And, by the way, sometimes it's hard to get there because people have so many barriers up. They don't want to look at their own lives and it's much easier for them to think about Darfur than it is to…

Ms. Tippett: To look at poverty in Africa, yes.

Ms. Brous: Exactly, exactly. And, you know, I often think about those Matryoshka dolls, those little Russian wooden dolls?

Ms. Tippett: Yes, yes.

Ms. Brous: And, you know, I remember my, my grandparents used to have these in their homes. And when I was a kid. I was, sort of, obsessed with playing with these little dolls and you'd, sort of, peel away layer after layer after layer and you'd finally come to this tiny little doll in the middle, which, like, almost didn't even resemble the biggest doll on the outside anymore because, you know, It's just this tiny, pure essence of doll in the middle of all of these layers and layers of, you know, beautiful paint and gloss.

And I feel like that's what the experience of High Holy Days is about, you know? It, sort of, begin by saying there is a *Nekudat Tovah*, there is something so pure and so good inside of you, inside of all of us, but we can't even see what it is anymore because we spend all year kind of papering over it and covering over it either because we're too busy, because, you know, our lives and our work are too challenging, you know, or because we're too embarrassed of it and we don't, you know, we're, sort of, ashamed, embarrassed. And so we cover over them, we paper over and layer over it and the, and, you know, you kind of walk in on Erev Rosh Hashanah and you hear these melodies that just, kind of, stir the soul of even a person who's, you know, maybe

only been to services, you know, in their early childhood and only out of guilt, you know…

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Ms. Brous: …that we hear these tunes that are only sung on High Holy Days. And, like, layer by layer, you're, sort of, stripped down to the core.
Ms. Tippett: Rabbi Sharon Brous. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "Days of Awe." We're walking through themes and traditions of the approaching Jewish High Holy Days. Readings from the Torah are another central part of this experience. They begin at Rosh Hashanah with the 21st chapter of Genesis and the birth of Isaac the Patriarch, the son and heir God promised to Abraham and Sarah. The stories recounted here are rich with the light and dark of human nature.

The name Isaac, Yitzhak in the Hebrew, means "he laughs," a play on the fact that his mother laughed when God told her she would bear a child in extreme old age. But an Egyptian slave, Hagar, had already given Abraham a son, Ishmael. And after Isaac is born, as the biblical story recounts, Sarah orders Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. He does so reluctantly. The God rescues them and says, "I will make a nation of him also because he is your offspring." Ishmael becomes the ancestor of Arabs. And through him, Muslims traced their ancestry back to Abraham.
Ms. Brous: The stories that we read from the Torah and Rosh Hashanah are so interesting. What I find somewhat outstanding is how it's not obvious what the rabbis were trying to do here, but it's brilliant that they chose these readings for these moments. So…

Ms. Tippett: OK. Tell me about that.

Ms. Brous: It's the first day of Rosh Hashanah, you know, Jews who never go to synagogue all yearlong will show up on, you know, Rosh Hashanah morning and, you know, this is a, it's a Torah portion. The Torah portion that it comes from has, you know, arguably, two of the most famous and most profound episodes of the entire Torah. They have Abraham arguing with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and where you see this real, like, this fierce human defiance in the sense of, you know, that there's no moral ambiguity here. It's just human beings fighting for what's right in the world. And then on, you know, on the other side of the Torah portion, there's the Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac, you know, God saying to Abraham, 'Take your son and sacrifice him.'

Ms. Tippett: Right, right.

Ms. Brous: So what do we read on Rosh Hashanah? Neither of those things. We come and we read these little stories that come in the middle, in between those two things, which is, it's so fascinating. It's like you have all the Jews you want in the world sitting in services and you're not telling them, you know, the great major moral lessons of the Torah, but you're telling them

instead, you know, about Sarah being jealous of Hagar…

Ms. Tippett: Yes.

Ms. Brous: …because, you know, and the way that, that Isaac and Ishmael fought with each other and Abraham, sort of, struggling — should he listen to Sarah or Hagar — and needing to kick his own, you know, family out of the house. It's, kind of, these very small stories of dysfunction in, you know, in our ancestors', you know, families.

Ms. Tippett: Yes, perhaps, small stories of dysfunction, but a family feud that is arguably at the center of some of the hardest things that are happening in the world today, right? Because Ishmael, it becomes an ancestor of, of Muslims. I mean, how do you think about what that story says to Jews today in 2007?

Ms. Brous: I understand it in a couple of different ways. I mean, on one level, it's really saying, you know, our God is not the God of the Jews. Our God is God. And, you know, Abraham was not the father of the Jewish people. Abraham was, you know, was the father of, of Ishmael and Isaac. He didn't have only one son. He had two sons. And, you know, ultimately, like, taking us back to, you know, to, sort of, the creation of our faith, the origin story of our faith, where we realize that we are in this story with other human beings in the world.

So our obligations in the world cannot, simply cannot extend only to other Jews. So this is one rendering of, you know, of what, you know, these particular Torah stories are doing on Rosh Hashanah. And the other pieces of it that I also think is very powerful, which is not about the universalism, is actually, I think, about honoring and recognizing that these small stories and the jealousies that one woman feels toward another and the confusion that one man feels about his, you know, his partner and his love and the jealousy and the conflict between two siblings. These stories of dysfunction are ours, they are our stories.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: That, you know, every single one of us has some kind of conflict in our families and in our homes that has shaped who we are in the world for better and for worse. And so I look at these stories as an opportunity for us to, to hear the absence of the big stories and really focus on the small stories in between. It's not just, you know, what, like, you know, your father died this year. There was this incredibly painful thing that transformed your family, or you got married this year and there's this incredibly beautiful celebration. But what happened in between those things?

How are you treating your partner on the day when there aren't any, you know, camera crews and families that have flow in to celebrate with you? How do you look at each other when you wake up in the morning? How do you talk to your kids when you're frustrated because you've called

them down for dinner seven times and they're not coming? You know? How do we engage each other in the small stories? And I think that's incredibly important in this moment of *hayom harat olam*, today is the birthday of the world. We have this big mission in the world. There's something for us to do as Jews. Well, how are you treating your family, you know? How are you talking to the people you love?

Ms. Tippett: You know, I have to say that, while I'm listening to your talk, both about, about that, about how we think about family these days and how we're able to talk about it. And also about this large themes of being Jewish and also this, you know, being Jewish, maybe, meaning, you know, you have to be in relationship with those others. I think about these, the richness of Jewish tradition and I just, you know, I mean, the whole historic tradition and, of the Talmud, of conversation across generations, of midrash and, kind of, making the story your own in every new generation.

And, I mean, I really hear you doing that because I think the way you're reading that story of the relationship with, between Isaac and Ishmael is going to be different in the 21st century than a rabbi would have been reading it 50 years ago or, say, 60 years ago in the middle of a world of, you know, of the Holocaust and World War II. I mean, it does speak to our dynamics in a completely new way, doesn't it?

Ms. Brous: Yeah, that's right. And, I mean, that's what, that's what I think the rabbis meant when they said that the Torah was given down in fire, meaning on Mount Sinai. The mountain was on fire when the Torah came down. And in Torah, it has to be transmitted. And if we don't find some way to make this religious experience about more than just the memory of something that once touched our great-great-grandparents…

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Brous: …it's simply not going to exist anymore. And so, I mean, so what does it mean to me? And, by the way, not only does it mean something different to me than it meant to my grandparents, it means something different to me this year than it meant to me last year.

Ms. Tippett: Right, right.

Ms. Brous: And that, sort of, you know, the great power of a religious tradition. It's versatile enough to really sustain itself over the course of many thousands of years to say, you know, the text is the same every year, but we are different. That really is, there is something new born every time that I encounter this text or this holiday or this piece of, you know, this piece of liturgy.
Ms. Tippett: Rabbi Sharon Brous. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, how she sees Yom Kippur as a time to renegotiate the marriage between God and humanity. Calling God as well as human beings to account for the state of the world. The rich and evocative music inspired

by the High Holy Days spans ages and styles. From Max Bruch to Leonard Cohen, from Beethoven to Barbra Streisand. You can listen to these and to others on our Web site at speakingoffaith.org. And we're continuing to make my unedited conversations available as MP3s to our podcast and Web site. Here's your chance to hear what was cut from my interview with Sharon Brous. Continue the conversation at speakingoffaith.org. I'm Krista Tippett, stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

Ms. Tippett: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Days of Awe." With the young Los Angeles rabbi Sharon Brous, we're delving into the rituals and meaning behind the upcoming Jewish High Holy Days, 10 days that begin with the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and end with the intense ritual and total fasting of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

Sharon Brous is a rabbi in the Conservative school of Judaism and is part of a Jewish spiritual renaissance that is taking place in various forms across the U.S. It melds deepened spiritual practice and Jewish identity with social justice engagement. Sharon Brous is a rabbi to REBOOT, an eclectic gathering of Jewish cultural creatives. Her community, IKAR, was inspired by Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City where she came back to Jewish worship after years away and later served as a rabbinic fellow.

B'nai Jeshurun is considered revolutionary by many for its inclusive approach to liturgy, social justice, and interfaith matters. IKAR, which is composed primarily of people in their 20s and 30s, describes itself as both traditional and progressive.

This is Sharon Brous's congregation singing Psalm 1:37.

(Sound bite of Psalm 1:37)
Ms. Tippett: One of the ideas at Rosh Hashanah is that two books are opened before the heavenly judge the book of life and the book of death. And those are such huge and strange images. So, I mean, how — do you think images like that can come to life for — or how do images like that come to life for modern people in Los Angeles?

Ms. Brous: Right. Look, not everything works. I mean, not everything resonates.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Brous: And so, and I think this is part of the beauty of really engaging in the tradition

seriously and with an open heart. It's just like how in your own family everything doesn't always work.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: That's sort of recognizing that this is mine and what works for me now might not work for me next year. And what works for next year might not work for me now. And, I mean, I've had people in my community who have been diagnosed with cancer who say, 'I now get for the first time what it means to pray to a warrior God, because I want God to be fighting the cancer in my body.' And I never would have thought about God that way before because I'm a pacifist, you know? And so I mean, and there are things that happen in our lives and in the world that open us up to the possibility of, you know, different interpretations of things. And so I don't take things out of the book. I struggle with things, and there are things that I scream out against. I mean, I see them and I think, oh, this, you know, this either just doesn't speak to me or this just seems wrong, but it's still in the book because next year I might get it in a different way. And I think that's kind of, it's sort of some kind of religious humility in a way. It's to say, like, it doesn't work for me at all, and yet I'm going to continue to struggle with it, or I'm at least going to continue to keep it on the page. And I had this experience, you know, in rabbinical school about every six months, and I was really in a love affair with the study of Talmud and…

Ms. Tippett: Yes.

Ms. Brous: …rabbinic text. And about every six months I would come across some text that I found utterly paralyzing as a woman, as a human being, as a Jew, I just felt like this is the text I'm in love with and this is what it's saying. How can I, you know, how can I deal with that? And I came to recognize those moments as incredible gifts also, because the relationship with Judaism should be no different than your relationship with your, you know, with your partner, your spouse or your kids.

Ms. Tippett: When you find things about them that you don't like and you have to live with nevertheless.

Ms. Brous: That's exactly right. And you struggle with it.

Ms. Tippett: Can you remember an example?

Ms. Brous: Yeah, sure I can.

Ms. Tippett: OK.

Ms. Brous: There's a story in (speaking Hebrew), this track (unintelligible) Talmud that talks — it's talking about sexual relationships. And it's — it says that a husband and wife are allowed to

do — basically, they're allowed to do whatever they want with each other sexually. You can enjoy each other, that's OK. That's not heretical. I mean, we're not an ascetic tradition and that's permissible. So then there's a story in which a woman comes before Rav, one of the great rabbis, and says, "My husband did this thing to me, and it's caused me incredible pain." And Rav says, "What can I do? The Torah permits you to him." And like, sort of throws his hands up in the air. And so, you know, I read things like that and I think of where is the, like, where is the understanding of human relationships, like, where is the understanding of how men and women operate and how law interacts with humanity. And you know, sort of read things like that.

Even in the Book of Deuteronomy. I mean, this is not a rabbinic text but a biblical text, but you know, the punishment for raping a woman is marrying her. But you — your punishment is that you need to spend — you marry her and you're not allowed to divorce her. And you know, you read things like that and, I — read things like that and I think, my god, you know, this tradition is so painful in some ways and if I were writing the book, I would not have written that, I'm quite sure of it.

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Ms. Brous: You know? But I didn't write the book and the wisdom that flows from this text comes from the same source as the excruciating pain that flows from it. And I feel now that that's part of being in a relationship with the, you know, with a tradition that's thousands of years old. And what's so powerful to me about this is, because I've cried so many tears over texts like this, I feel like my tears are now part of the mix of the, you know, of the conversation of Jews who, for the past 2,000 years, have used these texts as their, really, as their sustenance.
(Sound bite of music)
Ms. Brous: There's an amazing story that one of my teachers, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, teaches and shares in one of his books. He's a Holocaust survivor and he was in one of the death camps and he was working and they came back for this day out laboring all day long, you know, on the verge of death, and from exhaustion and from hard labor, and from despair. And he saw this security guard who was eating this sloppy sandwich in a wrapper. And it was wrapped in this piece of paper, and he couldn't take his eyes off because he recognized that there were Hebrew letters written on the paper. So they traded their, you know, their food for the day in order to get this piece of sloppy paper that was holding together this sandwich. And he gave it to them, and they dried it out and it turned out to be a piece of Talmud. And I guess one of the ways that said, you know, the Jews were degraded was they would take our holy text and use them in really, you know, like, you know, a variety of reasons. And so they took this piece of Talmud and he describes how the men in the bunker used to sit together every night when they come home from the field and just read this piece of Talmud together. And it saved their lives. But just looking at this text made them feel like human beings again and made them feel like they were part of a story that was, you know, thousands of years long and wouldn't die with them. It would continue, somehow, beyond them.

And I think about that often, and I think about the voices that were — that have been a part of that story. And the voices like mine, you know, women's voices that weren't part…

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Ms. Brous: …of those stories. And how do we start to fill in, you know, the conversation that's in the white parts of the page in between the black letters? You know, the white space in between the letters and part of it is still here.

Ms. Tippett: And how does the spirit of *midrash*, isn't it?

Ms. Brous: That's right. That's right.

Ms. Tippett: OK.

Ms. Brous: And so, I mean, literally like I love when I'm studying and I cry and I see a teardrop fall into my book. I feel like that's the holiest act, because I'm living my imprint here, too, because men could have read that thousands of years and not cried. When I read that, I cry. I really do.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: So, and now I feel like that's part of being in love, that, you know, sort of really struggling in that way, and knowing that something's wrong and that my partner, this tradition, has made mistakes and you know, God knows so have I. And it's, in some ways, you know, it's good to know that the tradition is not perfect.
Ms. Tippett: Rabbi Sharon Brous.

I'm Krista Tippett and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "Days of Awe." We're exploring the rituals and meaning behind the upcoming High Holy Days of Judaism: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
Ms. Tippett: You've written about one of the things that is affected by the High Holy Days as a renegotiated marriage, right? Between God and humankind and that the people who are observing this holy days. Talk to me about what kind of God and what kind of relationship between humankind and God is made real in you through these liturgies and through these religious ideas behind them. And maybe you can only answer that question for this, because next year will be different.

Ms. Brous: I think this idea — I'm very struck by the idea of a renegotiated marriage, which, I think I heard for the first time from Rabbi Art Green, is this idea that we get to set the marriage back on course. We're periodically given this opportunity to realign and to set straight our priorities again, and to redefine what kind of relationship we even want to be in. I believe that…

Ms. Tippett: With God?

Ms. Brous: With God, and I believe that we need to fix ourselves and God needs to fix God's self also. And — I mean, there are some incredibly beautiful prayers. A very famous one from Rav Levi Yitzchak, the Berditchev rebbe who writes this prayer, where he says, you know, 'God, I did my work this year but where are you?' You know, 'How could you let the world look the way that it does?' And this is an opportunity for us to look in a really brutal way at ourselves and say, you know, 'Where have I not been the human being I need to be in the world? And where have I let myself down and let other people down, and let God down?' And also to look at God and say, 'Where are the ways that I feel that I have been let down by God?' Because what I believe ultimately the *brit*, the covenant, is about God wanting us to make those demands also. God wanting us to hold God to the fire and say, like, 'Wait a minute, this isn't what you promised? Like, how could you let this person get sick? Or, how could you let this thing happen in the world?' And that's OK for us to, you know, to offer that kind of expression to God. God actually wants to be in a relationship like that with us.

And, but we have to do it for ourselves also. I mean, that's, you know, that's the first step is to really have the courage and the integrity to look at ourselves and say, 'God, I've fallen short.' You know? 'I haven't been what I could be in the world and here You gave me, you know, the capacity with my mind and my body and my spirit to do extraordinary things in the world. And because of my distractions and my insecurities and my self-doubt and my, you know, and my sins, you know, the things I've done that have just been wrong, I haven't been everything You've wanted in the world.' To really start from that place and then grow, you know, to the place where we say, 'God, and You haven't either.'

Ms. Tippett: And you said mind, body and spirit. And one thing I've heard about worship in your congregation is that it is full-body worship and I think Jewish prayer is a full-body prayer. But I've also heard that you, that people are fully prostrated in your synagogue and, you know, that's something, that's a very ancient practice but it's a — and it actually is a practice in many other parts of the world and in other traditions, but it's pretty much lost in Western culture except in Orthodoxy, I suppose.

Ms. Brous: Right. Right.

Ms. Tippett: And so talk to me about what that means in a very modern congregation in a modern American city. Why is that important to you? And what does it do to people? I mean, how does it play into this renegotiated marriage?

Ms. Brous: Yeah. There was recently a terrible tragedy in my community. There was a man who died. And I was speaking with the family, and part of the challenge for them was — in particular, for the mother — was not being able to control what was happening because she just wanted to

take care of everything and make everything OK. And, like, there was just this recognition that she simply couldn't — that there was nothing that she could do to change what had happened and to, you know, and to bring some closure to this any more quickly, you know, that it would come.

And I thought, as I was talking to her, I thought about *Aleinu*, this moment that you're describing in the High Holy Day service, where, I mean, this feels so un-Jewish to people. What, the idea of prostrating like putting your whole body on the ground.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Brous: It feels, it just feels like it's, you know, from another tradition and from another time. But it's this idea of recognizing for one moment that we simply cannot control everything. And you know, for people who really spend their days trying to get control over their inbox and control over their…

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Brous: …you know, their work-life and control over their kids and control over their — the way their bodies, you know, look and the way that, you know, the way that everything, which I mean…

Ms. Tippett: Our aging. Yeah.

Ms. Brous: Exactly. Like, you don't like the way you look, you get surgery. You know, we try to exert control over all aspects of our life and there are just moments when you realized that you just can't control everything. And what happens to a person kind of spiritually when they allow themselves to acknowledge that the world is bigger than them, and that there is, there sometimes, there's something greater at play than just what we're able to control with our own hands. And the act of putting ourselves down on the ground, and I, you know, when I do it, I hold my hands up to, like my hands are facing upwards, it's just saying, I can't do it all. I just can't — like I need you to hold me in this moment because I can't control it, I can't do it, I don't have all the answers.

There's this moment of incredible profundity that comes from the recognition that no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot control everything. And I, you know, I ask everyone to do it and I say, the more uncomfortable you are with this, the more important it is that you do it because, you know, spiritual wakefulness does not come from doing the things that feel easy and comfortable to us. It just doesn't. It comes from really pushing ourselves, like we get this about physical workouts. I mean, think of physical therapy and like, you aren't going to get better…

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: …if you don't push yourself in a way that hurts. And people who are in mourning

and have suffered loss and who just need to be held, I want to hold them. And those people who just, who created &3151; some image or some understanding of their lives as, you know, as perfect and everything's fine, and, you know, that sort of leads to this great complacency. My job is to break them down, you know, to say get down on the ground and put your hands up in the air and say, 'I cannot do it. I need help from someone or something bigger than me in the world.'
(Sound bite of music)
Ms. Tippett: You know, when I was preparing to interview you, I was reading just a number of things. And I've had a *New York Times* article — this is from a decade ago — about B'nai Jeshurun, the congregation, that really cutting-edge congregation that you were at in New York. And here's what a journalist said, "The reasons for this sudden growth are reflective of the times when baby boomers of all denominations are turning to religion to ease the ragged passage through middle age."

Ms. Brous: Mm-hmm.

Ms. Tippett: What you're describing, though, is not about, and not about making yourself feel better, you know…

Ms. Brous: In some ways it's about making yourself feel worse.

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Ms. Brous: Right.

Ms. Tippett: And yet you're also having a wonderful, growing, vibrant congregation. So how do you explain that?

Ms. Brous: Right. Look, I mean, this kind of dismissive observation about B'nai Jeshurun, you know, I hear people talk about my generation, about people in their 20s and 30s all the time by saying this is the most narcissistic generation…

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: …in the history of the world. Now I believe that they probably said that about every generation, but they specifically say about this one.

Ms. Tippett: But if that's true, your congregation should be empty, right?

Ms. Brous: Right, exactly. I mean, they particularly say it because, I think, because of technology, because of iPods and e-mails and instant messaging. This generation does have the ability to sort of access whatever it wants, when it wants it. You know, you don't listen to the radio anymore, kind of, and you know, hoping to hear your favorite song, you just download

your favorite song. And as soon as you don't like it anymore, you wipe it off to your iPod and you know, it just, it's just different. And so you know, there's this question like in this generation a kind of instant gratification and instant access and you know, and real narcissism. How do you, you know, how do you move people from the service of the self into a service of the world? And a lot of people just throw their hands up in the air and really, I will tell you that what I hear over and over and over from the institutional Jewish world is, 'Let's forget about them. They'll come back when they have kids and they need religious school.'

And you know, there's this kind of like, throw your hands in the air. They don't want this because they're narcissistic or they want…

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brous: …instant gratification and you don't get that from a serious study of Talmud. You know, it takes, you can study one paragraph for five weeks and you come to the word *teiku* at the end, which means "there's no answer." We don't know the answer. And like, the common wisdom is this generation wouldn't go for that. And I say, you know, it's just, it's not true. It's simply not true that, I mean, there is a human need that I believe transcends generational differences, transcends time. There's a human need for meaning, for purposeful connection, for community, and for real engagement in the world.

Ms. Tippett: I love this line from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that I've seen you quote a couple of times. "Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."

Ms. Brous: Beautiful. Yes. And so many people who will come into services, like, and so many people walk around in life so aware of what they don't have, you know, what they long for: the love that they haven't found yet, the, you know, the absence. They're so aware of the absence and what Heschel says to us is, 'Look at the presents, like figure out what you do have. Look at the world with awe and wonder, and the amazing miracle that your skin holds the blood inside your body.' You know, that nature works the way that it works, that the world is as extraordinary as it is because there's so many things wrong but there are so many incredible blessings around us. And our, part of our spiritual challenge is to, he says, it is gratefulness that makes the soul great. And so, you know, find a way to be grateful for what we do have because it's simply not fair to live in a world and only be conscious of what you do not have.

I was talking earlier about this, about *Unetane Tokef* this incredible climactic prayer that comes in the High Holy Day services, and you know, it's kind of pushing us to engage the reality of our, the possibility of our own death, who will live and who will die. I mean, what this prayer basically says is realize that you cannot control if you will live or die, but you can control the way that you're going to live and, you know, over the course of the year, and that's not some big, you know, amorphous, you know, like ambiguous statement, like feel good. But it actually

means go out and do these three things: build a spiritual life for yourself, fix your relationships, and fight for justice in the world, because ultimately those are the three things that matter in life.
Ms. Tippett: Sharon Brous is the founding rabbi of IKAR in Los Angeles.

(Sound bite of music)
Unidentified group: *(singing)* And who by fire? Who by water? And who in the sunshine? Who in the nighttime? And who by high ordeal? Who by common trial? Who in your merry, merry month of May? And who by very slow decay? And who shall I say is calling?
Ms. Tippett: Read Rabbi Brous's sermons from last year's High Holy Day services at speakingoffaith.org. Her reflections on the accounting of the soul within ourselves, our families, and the world. And we're continuing to make my unedited conversations available as MP3s, through our podcast and Web site. Here's your chance to hear what was cut from my interview with Sharon Brous. Continue the conversation at speakingoffaith.org.
Unidentified group: *(singing)* And who shall I say is calling? Who by brave assent? Who by accident? And who in solitude? Who in this mirror?
Ms. Tippett: The senior producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Mitch Hanley, with producers Colleen Scheck and Jody Abramson and associate producer Jessica Nordell. Our online editor is Trent Gillis with assistance from Randy Karels. Bill Buzenberg is our consulting editor. Kate Moos is the managing producer of *Speaking of Faith,* and I'm Krista Tippett.

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