

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

By Rabbi Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin

Good Yontif and Good Shabbes. You look very beautiful.

On a recent run to the store I bumped into a friendly acquaintance, someone I hadn't seen in many years. He'd moved from Eugene, and was in town tying up some business before going back to his home in Southern California. We stood there in the aisle of the market reconnecting, sharing a few words, enjoying the sense of a very deep soulful rapport that we've always enjoyed over the years, and checking in a little bit about each other's spiritual explorations – his in Buddhism, mine in Judaism. As we were tapering toward the end of our conversation I started to move away, preparing to go on my way, and my old acquaintance startled me with some words that he said:

“I almost died recently. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I was startled, and he continued:

“I had an infection in the tissues around my heart and I was getting weaker and weaker, and terribly sick. I said my last goodbye to my son.

They tried a new medicine soon after that, and it worked. I almost died, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Every day I wake up, I feel the incredible gift of a new day. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

We shared a few more words and hugged, and went our separate ways.

I immediately thought I would share this story with you on Rosh Hashanah because it is truly at the heart of what we're given to consider during these Days of Awe – an opportunity to encounter our mortality.

It is through this encounter that the Rabbis hope we will awaken to the wonder of life. The liturgy and the traditions of these Days of Awe are very much focused toward allowing us to experience the fragility of our lives – to awaken with empowerment, to awaken with a new and deeper appreciation for the gift of every day.

In the liturgy we plead *zokhreinu l'chaim* (remember us for life), *v'katveinu b'Sefer HaChaim* (inscribe us in the Book of Life). In our prayers we find the terrifyingly confronting words *Adam Yesodo M'afar V'sofo L'afar* – “We are from dust to dust. Our lives are fragile like a clay vessel to be broken, like a dream that vanishes.”

The value of life comes into sharp clarity when we lose someone we love dearly, as I have this past year with the passing of my beloved friend Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield, *zichrono livracha*. When Aryeh passed from this world I, along with all of the friends and family, remained at the

edge of our understanding – left with an overwhelming sense of awe at the mystery of life and beyond. Who can but wonder at the vastness of the unknown.

These encounters with our sense of awe are gateways into awakening to life. Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel said that “Awe is the reference everywhere to the mystery beyond all things. What we cannot comprehend in analysis, we become aware of in Awe.” But to experience this sense of awe we must slow down - still the busy pace of life - to listen inward to experience the fullness of a moment. How often do we ever slow down enough to feel the vitality rushing through our being, the flow of air, the exquisite inundation of our senses of touch and taste, smell, sight and hearing? Do we take time to feel the miraculous nature of our minds that can focus on the most minute details of daily affairs and can reach the furthest expanses of wonderment for the cosmos, in which we are infinitesimally small specks? How can this, a tiny speck of matter, extend through awareness to such far reaches of time and place? This all leads to a sense of awe for the incomprehensible dimensions of life and creation.

As we rush across the surface of our days, we are like sleepwalkers. The shofar – the call of the shofar – the piercing call, according to Rambam (Maimonides) is to awaken us from our slumber, from our sleep. Rabbi Nancy Flam, a friend and teacher, puts it this way: “My best understanding of the High Holy Days, and of spiritual practices in general, is that they are meant to wake us up - to bring *da’at* (awareness) out of exile; to remember our Creator; to be present, moment after moment, to the awesome gift of creation; to the moral demands made on us at all times; and to the possibility for love and healing everywhere. The sad truth is that for most of our lives we are far from being fully awake. Sadder still is that we are often unaware of being asleep.”

What is the impact of our lack of awareness? First of all, we don’t know ourselves deeply, for this requires time, reflection and contemplation. We don’t see who we are, and we don’t see who we can be. We don’t see the world as it is, and we don’t see what it can be. It’s a sad and a dangerous state of affairs. We stumble over habits that harm ourselves and others. We tolerate intolerable social conditions because we are not fully sensitive to the crushing impact they have on lives that are sacred, for we have not learned the sacredness of our own lives. As humanity sleeps, we tolerate a painfully broken world. As humanity sleeps we tolerate human trafficking, slavery, starvation, curable diseases ruining lives, injustices rampant in our judicial system, and greed polluting financial systems. As we sleep, we tolerate endless wars. All of this, and so much more, as humanity sleeps – seemingly barely aware of its condition and its possibilities.

As well as the call of the shofar, Judaism offers other spiritual practices that are meant to awaken us to the wonder of life. *Tefillah*, prayer, is a practice of self-examination with a critical inward directed eye, and a compassionate heart that supports and nurtures and urges us toward growth. *Tefillah*, prayer, is a vital spiritual practice.

We will spend many hours these next several days in prayer. I recognize that for many, prayer is a tremendous challenge – the language, the imagery, and theological questions are among the many obstacles to prayer. The feeling of foolishness to speak - to what? To whom? What do we know? But we are reminded by tradition that above all prayer is *Avodat Halev* (Service of the Heart) and I hope that through these days of prayer – the Days of Awe – we will open ourselves to a deep experience of the precious inheritance that we have. I want to invite you to the fullness of this practice, and would make some suggestions about how we might best use the opportunity to awaken ourselves.

Our central prayer in every service is the *Amidah*. It's repeated many times, but if we're praying the *Amidah* it's never the same, for every time a prayer should be different – never read like a letter. Something personal and new should always be added.

We begin with a personal prayer: *Hashem s'fa-tai tif-tach, u-fi ya-gid t'hi-la-te-cha*. "G-d open my lips so that I can declare your praise." We pray to be able to pray.

We step into sacred space, taking three steps backward and then moving forward, with a sense of humility and confidence. We begin by bending our knees as we say, "*Baruh* (blessed)" - we bow - "*atah* (are you)." And as we make reference to the sacred, ineffable Name, we rise again, as G-d raises up the humble.

Our prayer is an intimate whisper, like speaking to a dearest friend. We're to say words loud enough, and only loud enough, to be heard by your own ear.

The *Amidah* creates a context for many dimensions of our lives. While we began this prayer as an individual voice, the language turns to *Eloheyinu* (our G-d). We become members of the community, and soon *Elohay Avraham, Elohay Avotaynu v'emotanu* – the G-d of our ancestors – we remind ourselves that we are inheritors and descendants of a spiritual lineage that goes back thousands of years. We are members of a family, and specific individuals are mentioned: The names of Avraham, Rebecca and Leah – each one mentioned because each one, as we do, has a unique relationship, a unique understanding of the Divine Mystery. And yet together, we are a family.

These gestures that we experience in prayer open us up to moments of insight. I hope that even as we collectively hold a field of consciousness in prayer together that bonds us with Jewish people everywhere at this season who are praying these same sacred prayers, these ancient words that G-d willing will be said far into the future, that in the midst of that field of consciousness that we collectively generate - as individuals, we take the time to go into our own hearts. To not feel obligated and driven by a fixed liturgy. Let that be second on the list of priorities, after making sure our heart is present and taking the time we need for self-discovery – to look inside, to listen to places that we don't listen to usually – to discover something new about our own hearts. What is it that we are carrying that is sacred in our lives? What are our yearnings and our gratitudes that go unexpressed and even unknown? As

we repeat these prayers, I hope no one will feel “Ech, here we go again. Here comes the *Amidah*. Oy. I gotta stand a long time.” Sit down, if that’s the posture that lets you elevate; but elevate, inside.

These gestures that we practice in our prayer give us an opportunity for insight. They are also gestures that we see in everyday activities – if we are looking with a sense of Awe.

A couple of weeks ago I was riding my bicycle in this neighborhood on my way to TBI. (One of my ways of slowing down to experience where I am is to travel on a bicycle.) I noticed a woman stepping forward from her doorway with her hand outstretched and she knelt down to feed a small cat. In that moment I laughed inside and said, “There’s G-d.” It felt so beautifully pure to see the flow of kindness going through that hand to that sweet little animal. That was G-d.

My friend, who I ran into in the market a few nights ago, had discovered the preciousness of his life through profound illness and healing. He now lives so much more fully in gratitude for each day. May we too, in these Days of Awe, awaken ourselves and each other to the wonder and awe of life that permeates our every cell and all of creation. May we awaken to our capacity to choose ways of living that elevate ourselves and each other, which transform our society as we understand the beauty and sacredness of life. May we be blessed with profound renewal – renewal of our vitality and love of life – as we enter this New Year. May each of you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of abundant awareness of the infinite blessings that fill our lives.

Shana Tova Umetukah (a sweet New Year) and *Shabbat Shalom*.