

Yom Kippur 5769 – God Wants the Heart

On the 1st day of RH, I said that Judaism is primarily a religion of action – that the *mitzvot* (commandments) were given to us in the Torah in order to guide us to do the right thing even when we don't feel like it. I gave the following example from the book of Exodus ch 23: "When you see your enemy's ass lying under its burden and would refrain from helping him, you must nevertheless lift up the burden with him." Of course, while we are required to fulfill *mitzvot* even if our hearts are not 'with the program', our tradition teaches that performing *mitzvot* with ***kavannah*** – with intentionality -- is desirable, and the more whole-hearted our *kavannah*, the better. This is true whether the *mitzvah* is hearing the call of the shofar, lighting Shabbat candles, doing dishes at the soup kitchen, writing out a check for tzedakah, helping your enemy lift his pack animal who has fallen under its burden – or, to adapt that particular *mitzvah* to a more contemporary framework, helping someone whom you don't like change a flat tire on his or her car.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov, whom I mentioned on Erev RH as the Rebbe who taught about the vital spiritual importance of joy, also taught: *"Do not think that the words of the prayer as you say them go up to God. It is not the words themselves that ascend; it is rather the burning desire of your heart that rises like smoke toward heaven. If your prayer consists only of words and does not contain your heart's desire – how can it rise up to God?"* Perhaps in the case of prayer, the need for *kavannah* is most obvious. What's the point of praying, however well we pronounce the words, and however beautifully we sing them, if there is no *kavannah*? Even if you don't understand the Hebrew, you can pour your heart out to God as you sing, or as you listen to the choir -- or the chazzan -- or the rabbi sing.

There is a sacred, transformative power in the Hebrew words – in the ancient sounds themselves. The fact that most of the Hebrew

and Aramaic words in the machzor and siddur have been spoken by millions of Jews across the globe for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, gives them a weight that contemporary English translations, however accurate, sensitive and flowing, cannot do justice to. To complement these ancient words, the poems of contemporary Jewish liturgists such as Marge Piercy, Rami Shapiro, Linda Pastan and others included in the Supplement, help us to understand and feel what these Holy Days are all about. People who don't understand Hebrew may have an easier time pouring their hearts out if they pray in English instead. Traditional Hebrew liturgy and contemporary English liturgy can both serve as vehicles for the heart's intention.

HOWEVER, ULTIMATELY, THE HEART'S INTENTION IS BEYOND ALL LANGUAGE.

Two years ago I shared the well-known Chassidic story about a poor Jewish shepherd boy, who entered the synagogue where the Ba'al Shem Tov was praying. The boy was deeply moved by the service, but being illiterate, he was frustrated that he could not read the prayers. He started to whistle, the one thing he knew he could do beautifully; he wanted to offer his whistling as a gift to God. The congregation was horrified at the desecration of their service. Some people yelled at the boy, and others wanted to throw him out. The Ba'al Shem Tov immediately stopped them. "Until now," he said, "I could feel our prayers being blocked as they tried to reach the heavenly court. This young shepherd's whistling was so pure, that it broke through the blockage and brought all of our prayers straight up to God."

Like the shepherd boy's whistling, the sound of the shofar, when blown with *kavannah*, transcends all distracting thought. It wakes us up to God's presence, to the significance of these High Holy Days, to our mortality, to the need to return to God completely. It is meant to pierce through any and all barriers to our hearts. When I am in the presence of someone who is weeping, it touches my heart and often, I find myself weeping with him. The shofar is

the sobbing cry of a Jewish heart yearning to connect, to grow, to return to God. Isaac Luria, also known as the Ari, the great 16th c. Tzfat Kabbalist, said: "One who doesn't cry during the 10 Days of Teshuvah – his soul is not complete." The cry of the shofar, the fast, and the repeated recitation of our collective sins with the accompanying gesture of pounding on the heart, are all intended to help us allow our hearts to break open. May we summon the courage and strength to let our hearts break, and allow the light of renewal, healing and wisdom to stream into those broken places so that in our wholeness we may shine.

The Ba'al Shem Tov was the early 18th century founder of *Chassidut*, a movement to counteract what he felt was an overly legal and "underly" heartfelt approach to Judaism at that time. He was particularly fond of the Talmudic statement, "God desires the heart" (from tractate *Sanhedrin* 106b), which he interpreted as meaning that for God, pure devotion mattered more than knowledge of the Talmud. On that page of Talmud, there is a story about Rabbi Yehudah who took off his shoes to pray for rain, and before he even began to pray, the rain came down. In saying that **God desires the heart**, the Talmud teaches that as important as study is, and although our traditional prayers follow a structure designed to help us express ourselves and communicate with God, **what matters most of all is the state of our hearts.**

I mentioned on Erev RH that we affirm at the beginning of the morning prayers each day that our souls are pure: *Elohai Neshamah....* On Yom Kippur, we sing: "*Lev Tahor Bara li Elohim* -- God, please create in me a pure heart," (from Psalm 51). While the soul is pure, the heart can apparently get "*schmutzy*," or perhaps a more helpful way to think about this is that "*klipot*" – shells or husks -- form over the heart. The inner heart remains forever pure (synonymous with the soul), but layers form over it which block it from guiding our speech and actions, and prevent us from connecting fully with God and one another. There are

many calls in the Torah and our Prophetic writings to circumcise our hearts. In Lev 26:41, we read, "When I, in turn, have been hostile to them [the Children of Israel] and have removed them to the land of their enemies, then at last shall the foreskin of their hearts be humbled and they will atone for their sins." In Deut 10:16, Moses appeals to the People to "Circumcise the foreskin – thickening – around your heart and be no more stiffnecked....uphold the cause of the fatherless and the widow, befriend the stranger and provide him with food and clothing – for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And on the Shabbat before RH every year, we read in *parashat Nitzavim*, Deut 30:6: "YHVH your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of all your offspring to love Adonai your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live."

How does this foreskin, (in Hebrew, *orlah*) – this thickening, form around the heart? We have all had our hearts broken at some point. The natural reaction for most of us it to protect our hearts by erecting barriers, whether consciously or unconsciously. Unfortunately, when we do this, we are not vulnerable to the same sharp pain, but often a dull ache still remains, and we also do not let in even a fraction of the love that is always available to us.

How do we remedy this? How do we open our hearts? First, get in touch with your own heart energy. Know that your essence IS heart. Feel yourself as a beautiful, loving heart. Then feel the hearts of everyone around you, and the heart of the particular person you are interacting with at any given moment, regardless of personality. Let everything but heart fall away.

During these next 24 hours, let the words in the Machzor and supplement move through you as you open your heart and give yourself fully to God and to Love. That's all that matters when we are in synagogue, and it's also what matters most in our day to day lives.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May we all be sealed for a year of good health, faith sustenance, happiness, peace, and open-heartedness.