

The sun is setting and the gates are closing. We are nearing the conclusion of the long, arduous journey that we have taken together. For some of us, that journey began 39 days ago at the beginning of Elul. Others joined us 10 days ago on Rosh Hashanah. And for some of us here tonight, the soul-searching journey has been a shorter one, comprised primarily of the 25 hours of Yom Kippur. Whenever and wherever you started your journey, we will complete it here together this evening - ultimately, having traveled a similar route along the way.

We began Yom Kippur with the Kol Nidre prayer - releasing ourselves from all vows and bonds, and giving ourselves permission to pray with our neighbors, knowing that none of us is perfect. We've been fasting since last night, forgoing physical pleasures to encourage our minds to stay on task, to stay focused on *tshuva*, *t'fillah*, and *tzedakah*. We've complained about being hungry, we've worried about friends who ought not be fasting, and we've read a haftarah about God desiring a different kind of fast than the one we're doing. We've collectively confessed to sins that we did not do, to things that we don't want to admit that we did do, and to behaviors that we know are wrong but have no intention of changing.

We've anticipated the sound of the shofar, heard the sermons, and recounted our people's horrific history, remembering the martyrs who bravely died for their beliefs. Maybe we paused and remembered a loved one during Yizkor, or perhaps we uttered a small sigh of relief and thanked God that we do not have someone for whom we need to say a memorial prayer. The journey through Yom Kippur has been an emotional one, full of ups and downs, and has left some of us wondering how we're supposed to feel .

Rabbi Art Green, from the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College, teaches us one way to look at this journey. He suggests that our travels through the holidays are mirrored in the blasts of the shofar that we heard on Rosh Hashanah. He says that:

the shofar sound represents prayer beyond words, an intensity of longing that can be articulated only in a wordless interpretation. But the order of the sounds, according to one old interpretation, contains the message in quite explicit terms. Each series of shofar blasts begins with *tekiah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings”. “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.” Then following, *teru’ah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying “I was entirely smashed to pieces”. But each series has to end with a new *tekiah*, promising wholeness once more. The shofar cries out a hundred times on Rosh Hashanah: “I was whole, I was broken, even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again”.

On our emotional journey through Yom Kippur, we have spent the better part of our time together beating ourselves up and breaking ourselves down. *Al chet sh’chatanu l’fanecha* - We have sinned against You. We have sinned against You willingly and unwillingly. We have sinned against You thoughtlessly, in gossip, in idle chatter, openly and in private. We have sinned against You by rushing to do evil, by defrauding others, and by making empty confessions.

For the rest of the evening, we will continue to break ourselves apart, beg for forgiveness from God, and plead, as if our lives depend on it, to be sealed in the Book of Life. We will end this evening with a final *t’kiah gedolah*, bestowing upon us a wish for a full year - a year of feeling complete, content, and whole.

I only began to understand the feeling of the brokenness of the *shevarim* on Yom Kippur two years ago.

On the Friday afternoon before Yom Kippur in 2009, I walked through the door of my apartment to the sound of the phone ringing - riinnng, riinnng, riinnng - like the sound of the *shevarim*. Caller ID told me it was a friend from rabbinical school. As I put my bag down by the door, I leaned on the arm of my couch and listened to the voice on the other end of the phone.

“I just wanted to make sure that you knew,” she said, “Things don’t look good. He is probably not going to make it much longer - please make sure your classmates are prepared; I really don’t think they’re ready for it”.

It is beyond me how anyone could be ready for the news that their 27-year-old friend and classmate was days away from death. But I assure you, we were not ready.

That Yom Kippur, I prayed like there was nothing else in the universe but me and God and my prayers. I poured out my heart and soul to God - questioning Him, begging Him, pleading with Him, and storming the heavens with my prayers until there could be no possible doubt that I was only praying for one thing.

The gates closed after Neilah - and he died the following day.

I walked around in a fog for days and weeks, mostly due to my immense sense of loss, but partially because after praying at such a deep level, I was utterly broken and spent. There is a certain rawness and sense of exposure that comes from that kind of heart-wrenching prayer. The *tekiah gedolah* marking the end of Yom Kippur that year may have held the promise of *shleymut*, wholeness, but all I could feel was the brokenness of the *shevarim*.

The weeks turned into months, and still I struggled with prayer. So much of our prayer is about praising God - how could I praise a God that would allow this to happen? During the Sukkot that followed, I stood next to a close friend during services, holding her hand during Yizkor and during Hallel to give support and to be supported. After losing someone, the idea that Yizkor should feel difficult is not a hard one to comprehend. But it was the rawness of Hallel that surprised us both.

הללו את שם יי. יהי שם יי מברך מעתה ועד עולם. - Praise the Lord, let the Lord be praised
.now and forever

רם על כל-גוים יי, על השמים כבודו - He is exalted above all nations, His glory extends
.beyond the heavens

מקימי מעפר דל, מאשפת ירים אביון - He lifts the poor out of the dust, He raises the
.needy from the rubbish heap

And those are just from the FIRST psalm of Hallel! The siddur was full of words that I couldn't relate to and beliefs that I was struggling to uphold.

Eventually, as time passed and the wounds began to heal, I found myself following the words of Abraham Slonim, a Hasidic master, who taught: “You should act in prayer as if you were a farmer: first you plow, then you seed, afterward you water and finally things begin to grow. In prayer, first you have to dig deeply to open your heart, then you place the words of prayer in your heart, then you allow your heart to cry. That’s how salvation grows.”

Salvation grows when we allow ourselves to fully break down, in order to eventually build ourselves up again - and one of the tools that we use for that deep soul searching is prayer. Whereas the dynamic in the Bible is that God speaks and we listen, during prayer WE are the ones who speak - and it is God who listens.

Even in my darkest, saddest moments, I DO feel that God listens. Often God doesn’t do what I want - but I feel heard. I feel a deep sense of compassion from God, a sense that God is sharing in my sadness with me. And that is the goal for the rest of our journey today: to feel heard. To feel that God is with us, supporting us. And to allow ourselves to be transformed by the experience that happens when you feel heard by God.

I shared the story of the death of a friend not because it changed the course of my life - I shared it with you because it is a constant reminder for me, that even after a devastating tragedy, one which I can not even begin to understand, it IS possible to rebuild a relationship with God and eventually, to feel that sense of wholeness again.

There is a poem that I want to share with you. It is by Yehuda Amichai and it can be found in the new Conservative Machzor, Lev Shalem. It is found towards the beginning of the Neilah service (page 410 if you have the book with you) - and it is called "Before".

Before the gate closes,
before everything is said,
before I become estranged.

Before the discerning blood dries up,
before things are boxed in,
before the concrete hardens.

Before all the flute holes are blocked,
before all principles are explained,
before everything is broken,
before the law goes into effect,
before God's hand closes,
before we go away from here.

And that is where the poem ends - leaving us hanging, on the edge of the Neilah service - **before** the end of Yom Kippur. Before we leave here tonight, there is much work to be done. While we are still feeling connected to God, while the gates are still open, and while our hearts are still judging ourselves generously, there is work to be done, inner souls to be searched, and forgiveness to be granted. Allow your heart to cry and your soul to be shattered by the sounds of the shofar. Allow yourself to feel broken, so that you may start the process of becoming whole again. And know that the gates of Heaven are open and that God is listening, waiting to hear your prayers.

People often say that wearing a tallit is like feeling God's loving presence, the Shechinah, wrapped around us. We have been wearing a tallit since last night - the only time all year that we wear a tallit in the evening. Perhaps this tradition to wear the tallit at night on Yom Kippur came about because this is the most emotionally exhausting day of the year. It is the time when we most need the warmth and security of God's arms around us.

That support is crucial because the liturgy of Yom Kippur does not expect you to be done with the breaking apart and the pleading with God by the end of the day. In fact, quite the opposite. We've still got another Amidah, another Slichot section, another Viddui (a confessional), and for the first time all day, we'll say Avinu Malkeinu. To expect that the Neilah service will put us back together and give us a sense of *shleymut* is to set ourselves up for disappointment.

We like to say that the gates are closing tonight because we seek a sense of closure and a dramatic ending to an already emotionally full day. However, our tradition tells us that the gates remain open through Hoshanna Rabbah, at the end of Sukkot - and as the Sefat Emet says, the gates to God are always open as long as we pray.

The gates remain open until Hoshana Rabbah because we need that time to recover from today and to heal ourselves. We need that time to draw on the inspiration we may have felt today and to make adjustments in our lives.

Before we leave tonight, before we blow the shofar, before God seals the Book of Life. Take time to allow yourself to be open to doing the kind of work there is still left to do. Allow yourself to fully complete this cycle of emotions that Yom Kippur is designed to have you experience. And in the closing moments of Yom Kippur, hear in the *tekiah g'dolah* - the promise of wholeness and the hope for redemption.

G'mar chatimah tova.