

The Bucket

Kol Nidre Taos 2021

Open Closed Open.
Before we are born,
everything is open
in the universe without us.
For as long as we live,
everything is closed within us.
And when we die, everything is open again.
Open closed open, That's all we are.

– Yehuda Amichai, *I Wasn't One of the Six Million:
And What Is My Life Span? Open Closed Open*

Rosh Hashanah begins with birth. Today is the Birthday of the World! And closes with death.

As we cry out in the *Une Tane Tokef* prayer:

“On Rosh Hashanah, all is written and revealed,
and on Yom Kippur, the course of every life is sealed”
All of humanity is founded on dust-
Of dust they are made, and to dust they return.

In these ten short days, we are reminded of our lifespan, from conception to death. Only the timing is in question- not our final end. This year, we needed no reminder of the presence of death, it was on our news nightly.

“Who dies by fire and who shall be drowned?”

This summer, we saw the forests of California continue to get out of control with no end to the conflagration until the heavens opened with merciful rain. The shocking scenes of New York and New Jersey, coping with just the tail end of hurricane Ida, brought the story home to this Jersey girl. I can understand the destructive power of hurricanes in Louisiana, or even Florida, but New Jersey? The death toll was sobering, and the season is far from over.

Last year, in a Rosh Hashanah sermon, I bemoaned the fact that 175,000 people had died from Covid from January to September 2020. Today, the

number of deaths due to Covid-19 in the United States has risen to 650,000 and continues to climb, despite a breakthrough vaccine.

We all remember the old story, now in a twenty- first century version. Abe dies of covid in a hospital ward, a breathing tube attached to his face and only a nurse by his side. He gets to heaven and is furious. God! He shouts angrily! It clearly says:

“The Lord is good to those who trust in Him,
to the one who seeks Him;
It is good to wait patiently till rescue comes from the
Lord”(Lamentations 3:25-26)

Eli, Eli, My God -why did you abandon me? Abe demands

Abie , Abie, God answers. I sent you masks. I sent you Dr. Fauci.. I sent you a vaccine.....

Hmmm....

And so, the death toll continues to climb. Another year stretches before us, as variants of the virus continue to circle the globe. Will we be on zoom again next year? Next year, will WE be here at all?

“Who shall live on, and who shall die,
Whose death is timely, and whose is not?”

This is the year that we understood that death doesn't only happen to others, but to us. We really don't need this Yom Kippur to remind us. These are scary times.

In the words of Rabbi Nachman of Bretzlov,
“*Col Haolam culo gesher tzar meod*”
“All the world is just a narrow bridge,
and the most important thing is not to be afraid at all”

According to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman, who struggled through a difficult life time at the end of the eighteenth century, we walk suspended on a narrow bridge of life, balancing between the empty void on either side. Open Closed Open. It is vital not to fall into an unconscious sleep while making one's way across, or to lose one's balance

by careening into despair. And.. We will lose our footing if we insist on shlepping a lifetime of guilt and resentment across the bridge.

Tshuvah helps us to put down our heavy load.

As we repeat in the great Une Taneh Tokef prayer tomorrow:

“But teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah
Make easier what God may decree,
Make easier what life holds in store,
Make easier facing the world,
Make easier facing ourselves.”

Make easier facing ourselves... Kol Nidre begins with the words

Anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha-avaryonim

“We who have ourselves transgressed,
declare it lawful to pray with others
Who have wronged either God or human beings”

Im Ha-Avaryonim. The word *Avaryonim* means sinners, and in the prelude to Kol Nidre, we declare that we pray with ALL of the community, no matter what burden of sin they may be carrying across that narrow bridge. We are the avaryonim, as we have ourselves transgressed.. We may be anxious to assign blame, but let's face it, “tshuvah” must begin with examining our own mistakes and misdeeds.

According to Maimonides, as known as the Rambam, as outlined in his Laws of Tshuvah:

When we commit a sin, whether intentional or unintentional, and then make repentance, we are obliged to make confession before God, and this confession must be in words. We must then confess to those we have harmed, and seek to make restitution in an appropriate manner.” Rambam then continues:

“And this is tshuvah; that we abandon our sin, remove it from our thoughts, resolve in our hearts that we won't do it anymore. We need to make this confession with our lips moving; to say these things out loud we have resolved in our heart.”

Our confession must not only be heartfelt, but it must be specific, not the usual” Forgive me if I have done anything this year to

offend you” phrase. If we make a verbal confession without sincerely resolving to change in our hearts, the sages say that we are like “someone who goes into a purifying mikvah with a pork chop in his hand.”

Last winter, while waiting out the arrival of a vaccine in my snow-bound Santa Fe sanctuary, I took an advanced Zohar class with my beloved teacher Melila Hellner-Eshed in Jerusalem. (Blessings on zoom) I signed on to learn Aramaic, but quickly learned that this was a class about myself .

The Zohar text began:

My Sin I acknowledged to you and my iniquity I did not conceal..

The text then segued to the quote

Yet even though the gates of prayer have been locked, the gates of tears are not...

We were offered a creative writing assignment, which I thought I should do since my contributions in Aramaic were non-existent. I looked at the text, and alone in my room, my tears began to flow. I would like to share my offering with you, in the hopes that it will make your own road to tshuvah a little bit easier. It is titled “The Bucket”

I stand before the Gate of Tears, clutching the sloshing bucket to my chest.

The bucket is made of ripped skin and fragments of bone, torn ligaments, and broken pieces of heart, fused by anger and sewn together by threads of forgiveness.

The bucket holds the tears of a lifetime.

“Pitchu li. Open the gates,” I cry. My sobs shake the bucket, tears spill to the ground, but the Gate of Tears does not open.

A voice issues from behind the locked gates. *“Place your bucket on the scales beside the door”*. I lift the bucket of tears onto the golden scales, careful not to let my precious tears escape.

“Are these the tears that I have asked for?”

I gaze into the bucket, and recognize each tear shed over the course of a lifetime

Tears of self-pity
Tears of rejection
Tears of doubt
Tears of judgement
Tears of resentment

A voice cries out “These are not the tears that are required. The Gate of Tears remains sealed”

I am shocked. I thought that the instructions said clearly that the Gate of Tears was never locked. I have brought so many tears, a bucket overflowing, yet the gates do not open.

I gaze into the bucket, and see the tears that I have accumulated over so many years:

Tears of joy
Tears of recognition
Tears of reunion
Tears of relief
Tears of laughter

The voice cries out. “These are beautiful tears, but these are not the tears that are required. The Gate of Tears remains sealed”

A tear of frustration slips down my cheek as I gaze into the bucket and again offer my tears:

Tears of anger
Tears of depression
Tears of loss
Tears of loneliness
Tears of shame

The gate shudders but does not open before me. A tremor runs through the bucket, and I feel my heart ache in my chest. The heavenly voice is kinder now, but firm in its request:

“Bring me the missing tears, the tears still locked in your heart. Bring me your tears of True Repentance .”

I gaze into the bucket, searching for tears of true repentance. I see “tashlich” images of breadcrumbs and stones, transporting my tears into the waters but barely skimming my heart. I see season upon season of excuses and blame.

The ache inside my heart turns numb with cold. There are droplets of barely formed tears lurking there, but they are frozen, protected, immobile.

The voice is now a whisper. “Go inside of your heart. Bring me your tears only when you are ready to acknowledge the harm that you have caused to others, and to yourself.”

I feel my heart constrict with searing pain, and then soften. I look inside my heart, and see my life reflected on its beating walls. A childhood of parental drama. Teenage breaking of boundaries. Rejection of the possibilities that an excellent education bestowed upon me. The tossing of an engagement ring into the sea. A willing blindness to the dangers of marriage to an almost stranger. Israel. Mexico. Taos. Santa Fe. Malibu. Broken promises, broken hearts.

My Sin I acknowledged to you and my iniquity I did not conceal...

I see my obstinacy and disrespect towards my parents as I forged a life in a far- away land. I see the times that my own melodramas seemed more important than the welfare of my children. I see my heart, warm and compelling on the outside, but frozen inside, shutting out those who would love me.

I see the truth.

My heart is a fist closed tight, and the pain is almost unbearable. “Forgive me, I cry out. “Forgive me. I am sorry. Forgive me.” The chambers of my heart squeeze within my chest until I can no longer breathe. I bend over the bucket in agony. Slowly, one small tear slides out between the crevices of my heart and makes its way to the surface. It floods my eyes

and then furrows down my cheek, dropping into the bucket below. It is a tear of true repentance, wrested from a heart in pain.

The Gate of Tears shudders, and then slowly creaks open, revealing a cave, its walls encrusted with an infinity of shimmering crystals. The entrance to the cave is partially hidden by a verdant garden, with trees and flowers of every variety imaginable sparkling in the sunshine. The fragrance of roses permeates the air.

A soft voice, filled with sympathy and compassion, whispers. “Welcome to the Cave of Holy Tears. Your one tear of true repentance has granted you access. Now, however, you must return and do the work. You must seek out those whom you have harmed, and ask for their forgiveness, even if those harmed are no longer among the living. The Gate of Tears is now open to you, but you must retrace your steps and seek forgiveness before you may re-enter the cave. Your crystal tear of true repentance will remain in the cave, and its light will guide you in your task. As for the other tears, please use them to water the garden on your way out.

I take a deep breath, and feel warmth flood into my heart space, melting the angers and frustrations of a lifetime. I turn and retrace my steps, exiting the Gate of Tears, daunted by the painful task ahead. Another tear slips down my cheek and falls to the ground. A small wild rosebud blooms, and its fragrance gives me strength as I exit the garden, ready to begin the Path of Return.

This is Erev Kol Nidre, and those first incredibly sad notes of the melody penetrate our hearts. On these notes, we travel “Im col ha-avaryonim” with all others who have sinned, and all who wish to return. This is the moment to put down our buckets of tears, and ask for forgiveness, and lest we lose our balance on the shaky, narrow bridge of life.

Rabbi Eliezar famously said in the Talmud, “Repent one day before your death”. Ah, but does a person know on what day they are going to die?” All the more reason”, Rabbi Eliezar said,” to repent today, lest one die tomorrow. In this manner one’s whole life will be spent in repentance.” (Shabbat 153a) Excellent advice. The time is now.

“*Avaryon*” in Hebrew means sinner, but “*avar*” also means past or passing. On Yom Kippur we acknowledge that we are all “*avaryonim*”, just passing through, on the way to our final destination.

Open Closed Open. Before we are born, everything is open in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed within us. And when we die, everything is open again. Open closed open, That’s all we are.

Enjoy the journey. Water the garden. Bring your tears of true repentance to the gates. Open the pathways of your heart and give thanks. Try not to be afraid on this shaky bridge between the worlds, as we journey, *avaryonim* together, passing through to the coming year.

May it be a year of healing and peace.