

Gate of Tears
Erev Kol Nidre 2015

Kol Nidre:

Prayer of Ancient anguish,

Let it form our lips into the anguish of what we have not dared to be,

Let its painful strains seize hold of our inconstant hearts

Till tears of grief pour forth...

What lies within the cellars of our souls tonight? (Wings of Awe)

We rise for Kol Nidre, and our hearts are moved by the comforting, if not really ancient, melody. “All solemn vows, all promises of abstinence, and formulas of prohibition, and declarations of austerity and oaths, whatever we have sworn and then forgotten... As I hear the solemn phrases I review the broken vows that underlie my recitation of Kol Nidre this evening. The vow not to lose my temper- lost. The vow not to make the unkind remark, even when exceedingly (it seemed) clever- oops. The vow not to judge those close to me for failing to read my mind- Don’t you get it? The vow not to obsess over situations that I can’t really change? Again. And again. And again!

Perhaps, I think, Kol Nidre is just a formula, a beautiful ancient ritual that ties me to my People, but has little to do with the reality of my existence. A beautiful chanting of Kol Nidre, three times through, comforting melody, and then God says-“V’Yomer Adonai salachti k’dvarecha’, You have been forgiven according to your words”. How can I be “forgiven according to my words” if I don’t really know what to say? Does any of this have any meaning beyond a link to our Jewish past?

In the words of the late Rabbi Alan Lew, “This is Real, and You are Completely Unprepared”. We did not come here this evening just to hear a great melody, or even to join with others in our

community in affirming our Judaism. We are here to open our hearts to find forgiveness for those who have harmed us, and to ask forgiveness from those we have harmed. We are here to because during these hours of Yom Kippur, “Etzem Hayom M’kaper”, the day itself brings forgiveness for those sins known only to God and ourselves, if only we will open our hearts and speak to God in truth.

“I cry out to you that you might answer me, God
Incline your ear to me, and listen to my utterance”

So says the Psalmist- but how do I begin to open my heart ?

As always, we begin with a story:

Once the Baal Shem Tov dreamed that he was walking outside his hut, and he saw a tree shaped like a shofar, twisting in and out of the earth, as if a giant ram’s horn had taken root. And in the dream the Baal Shem gathered all of his Chassidim together by that tree, and told them to see who among them could sound it. So, one by one they approached the mouth of that mighty shofar, but none of them could bring forth a single sound. At last, Reb Wolf approached it, and this time a deep and a long sustained blast came forth like a voice from deep within the earth. He only blew one note, but it rose to heaven.

When the Baal Shem awoke, he was still being borne on that long note, and he sighed because there was no such shofar in this world, only in the world of dreams.

The next day the Baal Shem called on Reb Wolf, and told him that he wanted to teach him the secret meanings of the blast of the shofar, so he could serve as the shofar blower for the final note of Yom Kippur. Of course, Reb Wolf relished this chance to learn the secret meanings of the blast of the shofar. So it was that he learned that every blast of the shofar is a branch of the tree of life, and that

there are great powers residing in the shofar. So mighty is it's blessing that a note blown with the right meaning and intensity could rise on a single breath all the way to the Throne of Glory.

Reb Wolf listened carefully to the words of the Baal Shem, and wrote down the secret meanings of each and every sound so he could remember it precisely as he blew the shofar at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

The day before Yom Kippur, Reb Wolf went to review his careful notes- and the paper was gone! He frantically searched everywhere, but to no avail. The next day, weeping bitter tears, he blew on the shofar with his broken heart, without concentrating on secret meanings. And the sound of the shofar rose up in one long blast and carried their prayers with it into the highest heavens. Everyone who heard him blow the shofar that day knew that for one moment heaven and earth had come together.

Afterwards, the Baal Shem Tov said to Reb Wolf, **“In the palace of the King there are many chambers, and each one has a lock of its own. BUT THE MASTER KEY IS THE BROKEN HEART.”** When a person truly breaks his or her heart before the Holy One, Blessed Be, then that person can pass through each and every gate. (Howard Schwartz, Hasidic Tales)

From the “cellar of my soul” I know that only my tears will open the gates of Forgiveness and Repentance. Please God, I pray, Help me to cry the tears that have been blocked for so long. Help me to open my heart. May my tears move You from your seat of Judgment to your seat of Mercy. See my tears, Holy One, and grant me forgiveness on this Day of Atonement.

God leans over and says... “ Have you forgiven yourself?

Have you forgiven yourself, not just for vows left unfulfilled, but those burdens that you carry with you, year after year? Have you forgiven yourself for all of the misgivings and misdeeds that you have already atoned for, but just can not let them go?

No, I have not forgiven myself. I have not forgiven myself for dismissing the feelings of my parents, as I struggled to find my own life as a wife and mother. I moved to Mexico City, and their two grandchildren were born there. Then, to add to my chutzpah, I returned to America via Taos, and stayed here for eighteen years. As a Grandparent, I can feel their pain, but they are now gone. I do not forgive myself for the flippancy of my early twenties as I left relationships behind, sometimes causing others real damage. I do not forgive myself for the times that I did not truly listen to my children and their pain and confusion, but focused on my own life challenges. I have not forgiven myself for the hardness of my heart.

“Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, as I have commanded”, God says.(Deut.30-16) And exactly how am I supposed to do that? Surely, not with a knife! The Holy One leans in a little further, and whispers “The Master Key is the Broken Heart”. Allow your tears to soften, wear away the scar tissue that surrounds your heart.

Erev Kol Nidre is the night for tears. If I cannot soften and forgive myself, how can I expect God to open God’s heart, and forgive me?

My tears reach beyond words. I feel my heart open to others, and then to my own shortcomings and to myself. I am sorry- to my parents for robbing them of the years with their grandchildren, for relationships with friends and lovers taken for granted, for the cutting words that I have said to others. I am sorry that I did not tell those close to me how much I loved them before it was too late.

It is a river of tears that leads me back to the land of my soul. On Erev Yom Kippur, tears wash away the excuses and false stories that harden my heart, and keep me from the essence of my being, In the words of Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel (Lights of Penitence):

The primary role of tshuvah is for the person to return to his or herself, to the root of his soul. Then he or she will return to God, the Soul of all Souls. It is only through the great truth of returning to **oneself** that all will return to their creator, to be illumined by the light of life.

It is from that place of inner truth, returning to oneself, that we can reach out to others and ask for- and grant- forgiveness.

Tears flow as I review the lost opportunities for tshuvah in my life. I never called an aunt in Florida who was dying, because she was “on the outs” with other family members. I tossed off my grandmother’s death, without prayers, without blessings, because I was spending a year in Israel and it seemed so far away. I was not always a considerate sister.

“God, help me”, I cry! Help to seek forgiveness while there is still time. Help me to let go of the angers and resentments that clog my heart, so that I may forgive.

And God Says: **I made families so you can do Tshuvah.**

It is easy to ask for forgiveness from our fellow workers, or even a friend whose feelings we may have inadvertently hurt. It is easy to forgive a boss who makes unreasonable demands, or a business associate, even someone whose advice loses our money. But family? Most often, there is no forgiveness, but only a Cone of Silence.

The irony is that for a very verbose people, the ultimate Jewish curse is “I am not speaking to you”. Families then align themselves on one side or the other, without an inkling of the original cause of the disagreement. More often than not, its origins are buried in an offhand remark made at a Seder, or a disagreement over the interpretation of a will. Is that piece of jewelry really worth a lifetime of not speaking to your sister? Does that mean that you will never attend the bar/bat mizvahs and weddings of your nieces and nephews? Is the loss of family connections worth the disputed inheritance that you probably will not receive anyway? The doors close, and we live a life of self-imposed exile, with an “uncircumcised heart” ‘L’ dor V’Dor”, from generation to generation. The only way back is to turn, to do tshuvah. We must to examine our own role in the separation, and to forgive our own stubbornness, and then turn, and forgive the other. “But that’s not fair!” we say from the side of Justice. “I was right”. Do you want to be right, or do you want to be lonely?

Often, I repeat the story of Joseph, whose brothers tossed him, and his beautiful Technicolor Dream coat, into a well, only to be rescued and sold as a slave to the Egyptians. He changed his name, married an Egyptian, and called his children names that roughly translate as “Thank you for letting me forget my birthplace”. He never let his family, including his beloved father Jacob, and know that he survived in Egypt as second only to the Pharaoh. When Joseph’s brothers arrive in Egypt, seeking relief from a famine, Joseph recognizes them-for they have not changed all that much-but does not reveal his identity. Joseph is not ready to forgive, and he toys with the brothers, demanding first Shimon and then the youngest brother Benjamin to be left with him in exchange for food. The brothers have not forgotten their misdeed, and whisper to each other “ *Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother, this is why this anguish has come upon us*”.

Joseph is unable to reveal himself to his family, to embrace and forgive, until his brother Judah speaks of his father Jacob. Then, Joseph can hold back his tears no longer, and says:

I am Joseph, Does my father still live? With that, he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck, and wept, and Benjamin wept-tears! On his neck. He kissed all his brothers, and wept upon them, only then were his brothers able to talk to him.

Those tears determine the history of the Jewish people. The patriarch Jacob is brought down to Egypt where they survive the famine, the brothers reunite, and his twelve sons, the progenitors of the tribes of Israel, surround Jacob's bed as he dies twenty years later. The family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, now twelve tribes, eventually leave Egypt to stand together at Sinai and receive God's covenant. It could only happen through tears.

So many tears in the Jewish story. Two thousand years ago, we were driven in tears from our Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and it is said in the Talmud (Berachot 32) "From the day that the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed ... but even though the gates of prayer are closed, the Gates of Tears are not closed." Pitchu li, we cry . Open for us the gates of Repentance. Open for us the gates of tears.

What stories are reflected in each one of our tears? Each holds a shimmering drop of truth, precious beyond belief to the Holy One, who will help us through the gates, back to wholeness, forgiven according to our tears.

And so we end with one more story:

One year, right before the High Holy Days, God gave one of his angels a task. He was to go to earth, and bring back the most precious gift that he could find for the New Year.

The angel appeared at a house where a young woman had just given birth to a beautiful baby. The mother smiled with such love and tenderness that the angel thought “This smile is the most precious thing in the world” With great excitement, the angel brought the smile to God, who smiled in return, but said” Although this smile is indeed wonderful, it is not the most precious gift in the world”.

Just before Shabbat, the angel returned to earth, and found himself at the doorway of a home where the family was lighting Shabbat candles, and singing “Shalom Aleichem”, Welcome Sabbath Angels. The angel loved it, and brought the moment to God, who again smiled, but said, “This is still not the most precious gift of all.”

The angel was disheartened, but returned to earth one more time. As the angel sat on a rock to rest- even angels get tired at this time of year- he heard the sound of someone crying. It was not the sound of a child, but of a grown man. He was walking through the woods, with tears rolling down his cheeks. “Tomorrow is Yom Kippur. I have not spoken to my brother for many years because of a trivial argument over money, something that seemed so important at that time. *Ribbono shel Olam* , God help me, he said. Give me strength to seek forgiveness, and to forgive. The man wept openly, alone in the woods.

The angel caught one of the tears, and put it in a small glass bottle. He then flew back to the Holy One, who brushed away his own tears as he spoke:

This is the most precious gift that you could bring me, a pure tear of repentance. It is a tear wrested from a broken heart, a heart once closed, but now open to love and healing. This tear will bring peace between families, and to the world.
(Howard Schwartz, Hasidic Tales)

“In the palace of the King there are many chambers, and each one has a lock of its own. BUT THE MASTER KEY IS THE BROKEN HEART.”