

Aleynu
Kol Nidre 5766

Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity to think about ourselves in relation to many things—in relation to ourselves; in relation to the people around us, our family, our close friends, the people we work and interact with on a regular basis; in relation to our larger society, to the world, to the earth; and in relation to that which encompasses and in some way surpasses all the rest—to God, to the Source of Life. For me, every year one or another of these basic relationships stands out as the one that in this moment is the most challenging, the most in need of attending to, the one that is causing more struggle or questioning in my life.

I think this year, I am in a challenging place as regards my relationship with the category of “the rest of the world”—American society at large, and my commitments to other people and places on the planet. I don’t know if this past year, if these last few months, were particularly more problematic than any other year. Every year brings natural disasters; every year there are parts of the world wracked by violence, war, oppression; every year there are too many people right here in America who are suffering from extreme poverty, from racism, from all types of injustice. But however exceptional or unexceptional these recent months may have been, I have to admit to feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Hurricanes, earthquakes, global warming. The AIDS pandemic in Africa, genocide in Darfur, the unbelievable mess in Iraq, the rickety hopes for a viable two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. And don’t even get me started about the calamity here at home, the assault on civil liberties, on the social safety net, on basic American values like separation of church and state. And people wonder why I prefer to open up the paper and read about the Red Sox, even when they lose...

So, faced with all of this, the question arises: how do I respond to these realities? Beyond writing checks, calling my Congresspeople, supporting organizing efforts, how do I respond internally, how do I continue to face all of this?

As we studied this past Shabbat, one meaning of the word “teshuvah”—often translated “repentance”—is “answer” or “response.” So what is our “teshuvah,” our response, in times like these, in a world like this?

As I thought about this the other day, what came to me is the prayer we are about to say—the Aleynu. You can find it on page 1202 of the machzor.

“Aleynu” means literally “it’s upon us, it’s up to us.” But to do what? *Aleynu l’shabeach*: It’s up to us to praise. A prayer that in a later section calls for “tikkun,” repair, begins with the obligation to praise. *Aleynu l’shabeach l’Adon hakol, la-tet gedulah l’Yotzer bereshit...* It’s up to us to praise the Source of all, to declare the greatness, the vastness, of the Creative Force of the universe.

Faced with ongoing calamity and catastrophe, it is intriguing to me that our first response should be praise. It's as if the Aleynu is telling me to step back, to view the entire context in which I live and in which I gaze out at the world. The Aleynu asks me to affirm a most basic Jewish teaching: Creation is good. These are the very first words of our Torah—God created the heavens and the earth, and saw that it was good. Whatever we make of the Biblical account of creation, this is the essential point: Creation is good, and it is therefore worth preserving.

We shouldn't necessarily take such a stance for granted. There are religious teachings—like a strand of Christian thinking currently popular in segments of the evangelical world, the doctrine of the Rapture—that suggest that God will simply wipe out this corrupted earth and create a new one in the messianic age. In fact, the worse things get, the more we can see the hand of God at work, and prepare ourselves for our individual salvation. Environmental devastation, violence, war—these are of little concern, as long as one has made the proper personal arrangements for making it into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is an incredibly dangerous religious ideology. Against such teachings, traditional Judaism affirms that this creation, this earth, these creatures, even we human beings—are at our core good. Rabbinic and Hasidic teachings affirm that our particular human job is to offer praise to that which is good, to praise the Source of Creation. To be witnesses to the blessing of life—that's why we're here. The midrash teaches that where it says in Psalm 150, 'Kol han'shama tehallel Yah"—"every soul shall praise Yah—we should read 'Kol neshima v'neshima tehalle l Yah"—with each and every breath, praise the Creator.

As Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches, teshuvah as "response" means "taking it personally." She writes:

When I walk outside and look up at the sky, I can open myself to receive its blue as a gift or as a letter that is addressed to me. Its beauty calls forth a response.... gratefulness, praise, wonder. Something in me rises to meet that presence which calls to me through the purity of Blue.

Part of the miracle of the evolution of consciousness on this planet is that that consciousness is then called to witness Creation and to praise it. No matter the darkness of the moment, the suffering we experience ourselves and in the world around us—we are called to remember that which is good, that which is possible, and the praise that arises with each and every breath.

In our praise, we come to realize our humble status in relation to the incredible awesomeness of Creation. Continuing on page 1204: *Va'anachnu korim u'mishtachavim umodim...* And so we bend the knee, we bow, we prostrate ourselves, we acknowledge *melech malchai ham'lachim*—the Ultimate Power that rules over all those who rule here on earth, the very Source of Justice and of Compassion. *Hakadosh baruch hu*, the Source of Holiness. Our praise brings us to a place of acknowledgment, a place of knowing, in some deep way, the power of that before which we stand.

The prayer goes on to say: *V'hashevota el levavecha*.

When we acknowledge *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the greater Whole of which we are a part, the existence of something beyond us that calls to us, that obligates us, then *hashevotah el levavecha*—as the translation here reads, we will bring this truth “home inside” our heart. More literally, we will be turned towards our own heart. After praise, after awareness of the complex whole of which we are a part, comes a next step: turning towards our own hearts. The teshuvah, the response, here, is to have our capacity for compassion awakened.

To really stand before the universe, before its heartbreaking beauty and its seemingly endless suffering, to realize the essence of each being we confront, is to have our hearts opened. And then we can realize *Adonai, hu ha'elohim*—YHVH is what is ultimate. To put it another way: there is indeed something connecting all of this, and connecting us to it. With an open heart, we can more fully experience that connection, and hear the call that comes to each of us. This is what compassion is—experiencing the connection, and hearing the call.

From here, the prayer comes to a place of hope: “And so we hope in You, Adonai, to see soon, in the beauty of your Godly power, that all idolatry will vanish from the earth, all false gods uprooted, so that the world may be repaired through the power of your rule—*l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*.”

We praise, we open our hearts, and then we are opened to the possibility of a total transformation in the current state of affairs: the possibility of helping create a world where all the false gods which feed our arrogance, our desires for power, our violence, our small-mindedness—a world where all of that is swept away. The prayer speaks of a world repaired as one in which people serve that which is Godly rather than their own creations. It calls upon us to sweep away all the obstructions, the distractions, that keep us from realizing who we are and what we can do. From this place we can come into our basic obligation, our basic intention: *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*. To repair the world with the “*malchut*” of Shaddai.

The word “*malchut*” literally means “kingship.” but “*malchut*” is also another name for Shechina, the indwelling aspect of God. Shechina is that aspect of Godliness most accessible to us, the aspect that, according to rabbinic tradition, went into exile with us. There is a part of God Godself that is broken, and that part resides within us. It is up to us, *aleynu*, to partner with Shechina, with *malchut*, in order to return both her, and us, to wholeness.

This, then, is the ultimate moment, captured in the prayer with these words: *Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed...Bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai echad u'shmo echad*. On that day, Godliness will rule, and Adonai will be one.

What an audacious thing to say, in a Jewish prayer—that God *will* be One, implying that God is not yet One! The teaching here seems to be that Oneness in our day is disrupted, is not yet achieved. You could say there is a disturbance in the holy force-field. The ultimate unity of which we dream can be achieved, but we're not there yet. We are always pointing towards that day, oriented towards that day, when somehow the chaos that at times seems to threaten to engulf us will diminish, when peace and wholeness will emerge. A day when humanity will be at one with itself, and with the rest of creation.

This does not mean a day with no illness, mortality, pain. That is what being alive entails. But the needless suffering which we add to our basic human condition—is this necessary? The anger, the violence, the environmental degradation, the oppression? I would prefer to think not—to affirm, with this prayer, with our tradition in general, that *mashiach-zeit*, a time of relative completeness and peace, is possible and attainable.

Our task, during this Yom Kippur, and every day, really, is to come to a better understanding of our role in this work of repair. What is my piece of this overall tikkun? How am I meant to serve? This is a challenging question: how am I meant to serve? There are as many answers to that question as there are people in this room. We each need to find the right expression for our gifts, the right channel for our strengths. In this moment, I know I feel a call to do a good bit more than I am currently doing, even if I'm not yet sure of what that might be.

But as the Aleynu reminds us—we begin with praise. So I invite you right now to sit for a moment, and think about some aspect of Creation that you would really like to praise, to acknowledge. Something that helps you see the goodness, the beauty of the Universe. And then once you've got something in mind, in your own time, rise to say the Aleynu. And when we're all ready, we'll recite it together.

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