

Yom Kippur Day 5784
Monday, September 25, 2023
Judea Reform Congregation
Hallelu-Yah
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Sing: Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-u-Yah

Leonard Cohen sang this word in his song of the same name that has become so famous it is sung 'round the world, with over 300 versions performed or recorded. I learned in the documentary about him: *Hallelujah, A Journey, A Song*, that he wrote about 80 verses to this song. It was a life work for him. We only have a scant few of these verses ourselves, as many of them filled only the pages of his journals, but even in the verses we do have we see a man who had a rich spiritual life, and as any Jew, was struggling. He was Yisrael – a God wrestler.

What is this word, Hallelu-Yah, and why would it occupy the life of a poet and songwriter?

For starters, Hallelu-Yah is found in 24 of the 150 Psalms. In Hallel we sing a number of them. Hallel is a service of praise that we chant on Rosh Hodesh and other holidays. You might remember it from your Passover Haggadah, connected with the fourth cup of wine.

Actually, we sing this word, Hallelu-Yah in all of our prayer services. In our Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur morning service it appears in four Psalms. 145, 146, 148, and 150. Hallelu-Yah.

So what is it? What is this thing called Hallelu-Yah, and what does it mean to me? And furthermore, what does it have to do with the Days of Awe in general and Yom Kippur in specific?

Whew. I'm glad you asked!

I mentioned the word Hallel, and that it is a service of praise. Hallel is the first segment of the word Hallelu-Yah. Hallel is a noun, while Hallel-u is a verb. Hallel-u is plural, and it means you guys, ok, I'm getting a little more familiar with y'all – you guys: praise. Oh, and it's in the imperative form. So not only are us guys praising, but we're commanded to be praising.

Huh.

Okay.

Praising what?

Let's start with praising ourselves. Not like, "Oh, I'm all that!" Because that is the antithesis of these Days of Awe. But how about praising ourselves for one of our good qualities? Let's start here. Think of something about you that is praiseworthy. Good job, me. On this day of Yom Kippur when we spend so much time looking at our foibles and flaws, let's find something inside that is praiseworthy.

See how that feels.

Now praise someone else. You don't have to do it out loud to your neighbor in this minute, but think of someone who has a quality you appreciate or are grateful for. Praise them internally. Praise them in your heart. And when you get the chance, acknowledge them in real time.

Notice how that feels.

Praise something in the natural world – in the universe. Something for which you have awe and thankfulness. Something that makes you happy.

Notice your body as you focus on praise. How does it affect your posture? Your breathing? Even your smile?

Finally, we get to the heart of these Days of Awe. Praise God. Some of you might say, "Uh oh. I'm not really sure I know how to do that, what that is, or if I'm in a good place with God. Or if God is in a good place with me. Or is there a God anyway?" Others might say, "I do it all the time."

What is it like, or would it be like, to praise God? What is your understanding of God?

We've snuck in through the back door, because we have arrived at the Yah part. Hallelu-Yah. Here's the Yah. The first two letters: Yud – Hey, of the tetragrammaton: Yud – Hey – Vav – Hey, make the sound Yah. Yah is a short form of these four letters that we usually pronounce as "Adonai." Yud – Hey alone is an easily pronounced version that is closer to the essence of YHVH (Yud – Hey – Vav – Hey).

So Hallelu-Yah, quite simply means: yous guys – imperative – you MUST – praise the Holy One.

Why? What? How?

You may have heard me teach on this before. Breaking apart the four letters of the tetragrammaton into pairs, we have: Yud Hey – Yah, and Vav Hey – something that could sound like: Veh or Weh. I learned from Rabbi Arthur Waskow that these letters are not pronounceable in the traditional sense because they are all vowels. However, they do make sound. Listen.

Breathe – Yah... Veh...

Quite simply, the four-letter name of the Holy One is Breath. "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh" is the name that the Creator gives to Moses when Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me to free the Israelites?" "I am that I am. I will be that I will be," is the answer. Breath – the very essence of being.

So when I invite us to take a breath, which I do often, I am inviting us to connect – quite directly – to Divine energy. That Divine energy which pervades all of creation.

Leonard Cohen sings: "I heard there was a secret chord that David played, and it pleased the Lord..." Is this chord praising the breath inside of us? The Breath of All Life?

Psalm 146 says:

Hallelu-Yah, Halleli nafshi et YHVH

Hallelu-Yah! Let my soul praise the Creator!

I will praise the Divine One all my life,

And sing to my God with all my being

Psalms 150, the very last of the Psalms, with which we might be most familiar:
Hallelu-Yah! Praise God in the sanctuary, praise God in the powerful heavens

And what we do on Rosh Hashanah and will do later this evening:
Hallelu b'teka shofar –
Praise the Holy One with the shofar call.

Which takes breath.

The last line of this Psalm, the crown of the book of Psalms reads:
Kol ha'neshamah tehalleh Yah, Hallelu-Yah!

Often translated as:

“Let every living thing praise God. Hallelu-Yah!”
“Or let every soul praise God, Hallelu-Yah!”

The translation that makes the most sense to me, and all the more so for this season of life and death and renewal, being called forth to choose life, is:

“Let every breath of life” – every single breath we breathe – “praise Yah. Hallelu-Yah!”

The beauty of saying or singing Hallelu-Yah, or even better, when we LIVE Hallelu-Yah, is that we are praising our *very breath* – praising the fact that we are alive. That we are sitting here today, together. Whether in pain or joy, in a life that feels successful or broken apart, wealthy or economically in strife, alone or with others... we are all here. Is that the secret chord? Vitality? Community?

We prayed the Unetaneh Tokef prayer this morning – the prayer of judgement on our lives. It begs the question: What are we doing with this breath? How are we expressing this remarkable gift of life? Are we using it to tend to ourselves well? We all know we can't serve others when we are not taking good, good care of ourselves. That's where we begin.

On Friday night I talked about Tractate Sanhedrin in the Talmud that says the Holy One stamped each of us at birth with our own unique stamp.

Our own unique breath. Unique purpose. Unique Entity.

How are you using that breath? We have a world in pain. After we nourish ourselves so we are strong, we have work to do.

- Our planet is in dire straits, as Rabbi Soffer eloquently put in front of us in his Rosh Hashanah sermon. Are you using your life breath to make a difference in reducing the warming of our planet?
- Our government is falling off the hill of democracy every moment. Israel's as well. Are you using your breath to counter this oppression, as we are taught in our Passover narrative?
- Our children are becoming more and more undereducated. Is that the place that stirs your soul's breath to act?
- Racial hatred, bias against sexual or gender orientation, ethnic prejudice. Do these issues stir your life breath?
- Family – yours or someone else's. We are all in need of love and care. Is this where your vital breath is called forth?

What contribution makes your whole being sing to Yah?

1 Samuel, (14-23) tells us about Saul who, the text says had a “bad spirit of God” fall over him. He was told he needed someone to play the lyre for him to bring him back to a sense of well being. David was summoned and he played for him, and Saul was renewed. The secret chord.

All of these are possible ways to use our life breath for good in the world. For the unique role that is ours to play.

We also need to remember our life breath can’t always be about work. What lifts your soul? Breathing in fresh air on a hike or sitting on your porch? Visiting with family? Reading? Cooking? Planting the earth? If we think about Yud – Hey – Vav – Hey as the inhale and the exhale, we must do both not only to survive, but to thrive. We must inhale that which brings us joy, that which feeds us, that which reJEWvenates us – (ok, bad joke) – so that we literally have the air to exhale; the strength to do the work of our life breath, our soul’s mission. The secret chord is something that brings life to you, and life to others.

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But wait a minute. Your faith is shattered. Or you never had any. Life has handed you illness after injury after hospitalization. You have lost the love of your life. You have not succeeded in your work. You have PTSD. You had parents who were hurtful, or abusive. You struggle with addiction. You are descended from Holocaust survivors. The world has hurt you. Or perhaps you have done something that you feel so badly about that you think you don’t deserve to be forgiven.

I hear you and I share your pain. Even that – all of that – and we breathe. We’re still here. Another Leonard Cohen song states: “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” Every breath can heal. Every breath is a new beginning. A new expression and impression – giving and receiving – of the life force. No matter how lost or how much pain you have experienced, you CAN renew. And as you do so, you renew others. just like a rock’s ripples in a pond.

I think this is also the secret chord that Leonard Cohen was writing about. The one he was fervently seeking throughout his life. When he acknowledges that he has sent up not just a holy, but also a broken Hallelu-Yah, he reminds us of our lives. All our brokenness, all our uncertainty, all our “unholy” moments. And yet, again, we are here, still breathing, an ever-present reminder of our interconnection with Divinity. And like Cohen, we are seeking and finding moments of glory alongside moments of shame and dismay. And still breathing to open to new possibility for healing, for vitality.

Let’s breathe out that Yah and breathe in that Veh. Together. It may feel or sound weird to you. Again. Feel the power of this moment, this life. Find your life breath, your intake and release of Hallelu-Yah – praising your life. Right now.

And sing:

Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-Yah, Hallelu-u-Yah

Praise God! Praise the Lord! Praise my life. I bring praise in every breath.

Gamar hatimah tovah – May you be sealed for a year of vitality, appreciation and meaning in your life breath this year.