Kol Nidrei -5776

Reb Moshe Waldoks

My Uncle Harry thought that my Aunt Ethel was becoming hard of hearing.  So he called the doctor to make an appointment to have her hearing checked.  The doctor said he could see her in two weeks, and meanwhile, there was a simple, informal test the husband could do to give the doctor some idea of the dimensions of the problem.  
"Here's what you do: When you're out of her range of vision, start at forty feet away from her, and speak in a normal conversational tone and see if she hears you.  If not, go to thirty feet, then twenty feet, and so on until you get a response."  
  
So that evening she's in the kitchen cooking dinner, and he's in the living room, and he says to himself "I'm about forty feet away, let's see what happens."    
  
"Honey, what's for supper?"  No response.  
  
So he moves to the other side of the room, about thirty feet away.  "Honey, what's for supper?"  No response.  
  
So he moves into the dining room, about twenty feet away.  
"Honey, what's for supper?"  No response.  
  
On to the kitchen door, only ten feet away.  
"Honey, what's for supper?"  No response.  
  
So he walks right up behind her.   
"Honey, what's for supper?" "For the fifth time, CHICKEN!"

To hear, and to be heard.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the art of dialogue in an interfaith context prompted by the story of Isaac and Ishmael. As we begin Yom Kippur I’d like to concentrate on what I call *inner faith* dialogue. This is the dialogue between God and the children of Israel, the dialogue between God and Us.

As I mentioned last week, the most important ingredient in an active and lively dialogue is that each of the interlocutors, each of the sides in the meeting bring forward the best they have, the gems in their storehouse of tradition. The best of what they possess.

This is also true in the inner faith dialogue. The gems that are presented can be encapsulated in two existential demands:

The first:

שמע ישראל יי אלוהינו יי אחד

Hear of Israel, YHVH Gods us YHVH is One

And the second from our selikhot ritual tonight and tomorrow:

שמע קולנו יי אלוהינו חוס ורחום עלינו וקבל ברחמים וברצון את-תפלתנו

*Hear our voice* (notice that it is in the singular) *Yah Eloheinu, spare us, have mercy on us, and receive our tefila (our appeals) with compassion and kindness*

God asks us to hear and we ask God to hear. God wants to be heard and we want to be heard. These mutual requests - or demands- if you will are the gems that maintain our covenantal connection with the Divine Universe. Mutuality is the Essence of covenant. This rings true not only between the Divine and the human but in all of our deep and loving relationships.

Let’s start with the Sh'ma:

This verse can, and has, been understood in so many ways.

One of more poignant interpretations is that this statement is the vow of the children of Jacob as he lay dying “Hear! Our father Israel –we accept your path and vision. As the children of Israel we will keep this message *YHVH (Yah) eloheinu YHVH (Yah) ekhad* echoing through the generations.

The sons of Israel and the daughters of Jacob have fulfilled this vow. We are here tonight as the descendants who continue to receive this inheritance and testimony from the generations that have preceded us. We utter this call, channeling God’s voice into the world as we rise in the morning and lie down at night, as we sit and as we walk through our lives, we teach it to our children and we hope that it will be the last phrase we will utter on our death beds, that the last echo of our physical existence we will leave this phrase as a testimony onto our descendants.

What Divine gem does this phrase contain that can be placed before us in our inner faith dialogue?

The Sh’ma is a cry into the world, it is a *gevalt*, Listen, all of those who inhabit this World the sh’ma cries out, there is much left to do. Listen! Morning and evening to this voice that calls you to awakening, to consciousness. To the voice who calls you to live and love.

Yisrael - you who struggle with God and man and are victorious –the name awarded to Jacob as he struggled with his alter-ego in the form of a man the evening before he was to encounter Esau, a brother he betrayed.

Yisrael – you who struggle with God and human and are victorious- the existential name change, from Jacob, Yaakov, the heel –the manipulator into Yisrael – one of our great Rabbis, Rav Kook, said that one can read the word Yisrael (the Torah has no punctuation as Yaakov becoming Yashar-El –straight with God =rather than trying to get around God Jacob faces God and emerges a new self- newly empowered his inner faith struggle becomes and inner faith dialogue, The ironic end of the Torah narrative is that he , in his struggle, is made lame –his hip bone dislodged from its socket –in his struggle he realizes that one does not ever get through this life without some kind of limp –that is what it means to be human –that’s what it means to take one the commitments we make to each other. There will always be pain and a level of suffering –but in the inner faith dialogue we also recognize our value –our worth. This transformative moment remains the exemplar of the teshuvah process.

YHVH -In our *inner faith* dialogue we are asked to hear each other. We are asked to become aware of the YHVH (Yah) that resonant unpronounceable Name for the life force- that which only breath can capture fully. We are called to the task of making sure that we do not fall into idolatry and make an image of this ineffable name –not only a physical idol –but even a mental one. God asks us to hear the deep rush of the ongoing rush of the Universe in our fleeting breaths. God asks us to hear and to refuse to make the Divine into an object of manipulation but rather to free it of the concretization of our projections –to leave YHVH as a dynamic verb the flowing mystery that underlies all of our lives.

Elohenu – Who Gods us. Who is the reality we face every moment when we are not distracted by the stories we tell ourselves, our regrets form the past and our anxieties about the future. Eloheinu –who Gods us in the very now of our existence.

YHVH Ekhad

This unpronounceable Essence- Hashem –the four letter name is One/ but more than that it is oneness – the underlying premise and what we should hear in the call of the Sh’ma is that the Universe and all of its creatures are truly interdependent. We all know this in our gut but our tradition asks us to articulate and absorb God’s call morning and evening. We all must be jolted into awakened conscious by call of the Divine voice.

This has led many to read our special and precious time together not as the Day of Atonement, but rather as the Day of At-One-ment.

The gems that we set before us as we enter the inner faith dialogue are our voices who desire to be heard. Our call to God is couched in humility for we all are so frail. Our desire is to be loved and understood despite our weaknesses. This is the kind of dialogue we hope to have with our dear friends and our loved ones. This is the framework of our dialogue with the Divine.

שמע קולנו יי אלוהינו חוס ורחום עלינו וקבל ברחמים וברצון

Hear our voice (notice that it is in the singular) *Yah Eloheinu , spare us, have mercy on us, and receive our tefila (our appeals) with compassion and kindness*

We don't use our tefilot as magical formulae, as special words to control the forces of nature, but rather we harken back to the reflexive verb le’hitpallel that our tefilot be a reflexive act –it is what we offer to ourselves- to fulfill our need for articulation of words and language. tefila might be best translated as a process of self- reflection rather than prayer.

Our tefilot, especially the sh’ma kolenu, is inspired by the gems that are imbedded in the Sh’ma Yisrael. The Sh’ma kolenu is a mirror to the sh’ma yisrael. We hear and we are heard. God wants us to hear and we want God to hear.

We conjure up the humility necessary to ask for compassion and mercy –We dig deeply into ourselves so that we make this compassion and mercy models for our our own lives.

As we celebrate the creation of the universe and our reflection on our deeds and how they affect the universe we pour out our hearts and feel lighter- a stone lifted from our hearts, *a shteyn arup fun hartzn* we say in Yiddish. Our hearts, as we read a few weeks ago in the Torah must turn from stone to flesh. This is possible when we realize that love and compassion are the ingredients of our inner faith dialogue.

In this 25 hour period of self-reflection we offer up the core of our being, ours sparkling souls. The gem we place between us and God in this inner faith dialogue is that we articulate and release all of our possible transgressions; as we begin to emulate the process of dying to our bodies, our souls emerge. I’d like to suggest to you, as my teacher Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, of blessed memory, not to beat your chests during the al-khet recitations tonight and tomorrow but rather to use our fists not to beat ourselves up but rather to polish our hearts with gentleness and compassion. With compassion for ourselves we ask for God’s compassion. Polish your heart and soul until it gleams like a gem. All of us, in our own ways, possess gems of love and experience. I urge you as we will go through the vibrant poetic acrostic of our vidui –our communal confessional recitation of all the possible ways we missed the mark over the last year -–to offer up our singular souls, our uniqueness, our passions, our capacity to love and be loved.

Our tradition insists that there is no corporality in the Divine essence. God has no larynx. God’s voice reverberates within our very selves. We who are fashioned in the image of God express the Divine’s imminent presence in the faces of those around us.

It is within community that we exhibit the capacity for compassion and mercy. In this we emulate God and we hope that God emulates us.

We often feel that our voices are too weak and insignificant to be heard amidst rambling voices that surrounds us so often. As we develop the skill of listening carefully to our inner desires and wishes we also make room to hear all of voiceless whose struggles of and suffering surrounds us, This is so palpable today with so many, so many human beings homeless and stateless. There are so many who feel that their voices are not heard; so many voices stifled by tragedy and terror. As Jews we hear the cry of both the human and the Divine who sees God’s children suffering. Who sees the choices that we make; who has granted us freedom of choice - to choose death and evil or to choose the good and life. The voice of God demands of us to choose life.

Our contemplative community at Nishmat Hayyim - the Breath of Life project at TBZ, so marvelously organized by our dear Reggie Silberberg and my wonderful teachers Bobbie Isberg and Sheila Katz offers us the practice of mindful listening. What makes this listening different than just hearing is that the listener tries as much as possible to refrain from beginning to formulate the responses to what they hear but rather to offer a "blank screen” neither showing approval or disapproval but rather to be there in the presence of the other. This may have been the reason that in early psychoanalysis the analyst sat behind the patient so the clients would not see whether he or she was offering encouragement by nodding the head or smiling - or judging with disapproval with the shaking of the head or a grimace.

This is reminiscent of a contemplative practice offered to us by Rabbi Nakhman of Bratzlav an early Hasidic master (He died in 1815). He was the grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov the inspiration for the Hasidic movement. This practice called Hitbodedut , literally means being in self-isolation. One goes out into the fields alone (or in some cases to a special room in one’s house when no one else is there)

And to pour out one's heart in any language in which one is conversant to God who serves as the “blank screen” who receives and hears us. One could pour out one’s heart; one could pour out one’s desires; one could pour out one’s failings, and one’s fears without judgment. This is a sort of “primal scream “therapy practice that restores the balance between the human and the Divine. It provides an opportunity to empty oneself. This inner faith dialogue –this feeling of being heard is an essential way we prepare ourselves to hear the voice of God in the universe.

This is what we hope to accomplish as we gather together - not in isolation but rather in community- the possibility of crying out to the Universe with all of our needs and desires; aspirations and disappointments comforted by knowing that we will be heard.

Let me assure you that even our disappointments and anger towards God, as we struggle in our inner faith dialogue, are not exempt from this contemplative process. Our loss of faith and our hopelessness is also a gem that we lay before God.

So as we gather together tonight to offer up our voices together and to offer a recitation of our opportunities that have been missed during the year; our actions that have missed the mark we are hopeful that our words will be heard   The beauty of doing this together and community is that our voices blend together as a chorus of creatures trying to realign ourselves with the greatest gift we have- a gift of life the gift of the divine presence in our lives- and in our very planet

As we refrain from earthly comforts from food and drink anointments and other things that we associate with our daily lives Yom Kippur offers us an opportunity to be mindful; a way to deeply listen and a way to express ourselves so we are deeply heard. In our dialogue with the Divine that continues this evening I wish all of us the capacity to be articulate and to offer up our words with humility with conviction and with faith and the desire that our aspirations to be truly change and to acknowledge the change always occurring and not to be frightened by it - but rather to embrace it and see that it enhances and enriches our consciousness - our lives and the lives of those who are around us.

I ask forgiveness from anyone in the congregation who feels that I have not heard them. I look forward to making amends in this New Year. To hear and to be heard can be a challenge I hope that I’ll be up for it. I hope we will all be up to it.

May we all be sealed in the Book of Life.