The Impeded Stream is the One That Sings

*Kavanah Delivered on Rosh Hashanah Day 2*

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I recently came across a video on YouTube that truly shook me, and it is not that often that I can say something like that about an online video.

An artist, trying to come to terms with the nearly 200,000 Americans who have died from COVID-19, set out to draw 200,000 tiny circles on one very large sheet of paper. In the video explaining his work, he spends four minutes talking about his inability, really all of our inability, to be able to conceptualize a number of this size.

As he speaks, he continues to methodically draw tiny circles, a few each second, and by the end of the video he has drawn less than 500. So many more to go. Watching this project continue onward, I experience the opposite of a radical amazement. It is a radical horror. Because each of these circles represents the fullness of a life, and there are simply too many circles, too many lives, to wrap my head around. Our sages teach that to destroy one life is to destroy an entire world. So Today I am mourning a cosmos that has been lost, and I want to cry.

When the pandemic reached us in March, I wondered what we would say to each other when we gathered all together for this Rosh Hashanah. Would we celebrate the triumph our collective action? Would we meditate on the new insights we had learned about the meaning of our lives in quarantine? Well, Rosh Hashanah is here, and we are not yet past this moment. Thousands are still dying. The number of circles we must draw even to conceptualize the devastation continues to grow.

It just makes me want to cry.

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In a moment, as we move through the three sections of our Musaf service, we will hear the blasts of the Shofar. These blasts are the manifestation of our crying, of our collective tears. Our sages connect the wail of the Shofar to the cries of a mother from the biblical Book of Judges. A mother cries for her son named Sisera, who has not returned from war. The text explains:

“she peers through the lattice whining: why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels? (Judges 5:28).

Another Midrash connects the wailing of the shofar to the tears of our matriarch, Sarah, witnessing her son leave with Abraham to be sacrificed, as told in the Torah reading, we just heard a short while ago. While Isaac is not sacrificed in the end of that story, this is the final time mother and son will ever be together.

The tears of these mothers are tragic. They represent a reunion and a redemption still delayed. The sound of the shofar this year gives me that same feeling. How will we get through this moment? What will our world look like on the other side? When will our redemption come?
This Rosh Hashanah, tears roll down my face. Because we have been distancing, and supporting each other, and hoping, and praying. The end of this moment in our history has not yet arrived. Our reuniting with each other has been delayed.

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This year the shofar is a symbol of tears and pain, but especially this year, it cannot be a symbol of despair. The Talmud teaches:

Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked, however, the gates of tears were never locked. (BT Berachot 33b)

When the Jewish Temple, the primary point of Jewish prayer and the focal point of access to God was destroyed, it felt to the people as if their redemption was being denied. The text teaches though, that at the moment when the path to God seemed most obstructed, the gates of tears began to creak open. A connection to God was still possible. The possibility of change for the better remained open.

The Shofar, the manifestation of all of our tears, is our way in. We cry by ourselves; we cry together; we cry to God. It, like the Shofar is a cry to help us return to our truest selves. It helps us clarify our values, directing us toward what we need most. It is a primal cry the connects us with what is most holy in our souls. And when we connect with that place, when we have entered the gate of tears, a path appears, and we are ready to move forward into the haziness of what is to come.

The poet and farmer Wendell Berry wrote:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

The impeded stream is the one that sings. Put differently by Rebbe Nahman of Breslov, the entire world is a very narrow, an impossibly narrow bridge. It looks as if there will be no way to cross, but the main thing is to not be afraid.

Let us listen to the Shofar once more. Its wail is our wail. Its tears are our tears. But as we pray and we listen, we know that those tears will find the open gates. Our tears will not be ignored. Light is coming. The small circles being drawn will continue to appear on the paper, and hopefully they will inspire a powerful action within our communities. But most importantly, within us exists the moral imagination to see the Shanah Tovah, the year of mystery and possibility that is ahead of us. The possibility to have courage, and to not be afraid

Here is a link to the video I referred to in the beginning of this D’var: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILMEVnVD8m8&t=171s