

Shanah Tovah

At the beginning of the secular year 2019, I had one of my first conversations with the representatives of the Board of NSTE and Rabbi Nicole. It was a mere few days after I had returned from a silent Jewish meditation retreat.

Yes - I know what you are thinking: Jews? Silence? I was surprised as well.. But trust me, it is a real thing.

So I would like to bring things full circle as we now enter into the Jewish new year, and I celebrate my first Rosh HaShanah here with the NSTE community.

As such, I would like to reflect on the same themes that I was exploring in the first few days of 2019, right before my journey down-under began all those many months ago.

Two of the main themes of the Jewish retreat that I was on were listening and healing.

Both of those themes - listening and healing - were applied not only to how we interact with others but to how we sit with ourselves as well.

On the surface, it seems as though we are all gathered here this evening to predominantly listen to the voices coming from the bimah.

However, as I understand it, the purpose of these next ten days is to be provided with an opportunity to listen to ourselves. More important than anything else, we are here to listen to our own hearts and the still small voice within us.

The voice from within calls out to us from every corner of our heart and soul. Both - the corners that we are proud of and are well maintained, but also the dark corners that we attempt to cover over or discard altogether.

Coming from this place of listening with the intent to heal when it comes to our own still-small voice we are then able to listen to the voice of others as well.

If we come from a place of curiosity and compassion rather than timeliness, efficiency, and pre-assumed expectations only then will we be able to truly hear the still small voices from the hearts of other people. Both the people that are easy to deal with and also those that present us with our daily test to see how compassionate we can be.

The shofar of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is like a torch that shines a light into the dark corners of ourselves - the parts that seem so strange or foreign to us.

When we look back at ourselves over the past year we say: who was the person that lashed out at the people that are nearest and dearest to me?

But the shofar does not demand a shaming of ourselves for the possession of dark corners. Nor does it ask of us to shame others for their dark corners. Instead, the *tekia* calls for a *tikkun*. It calls us to embrace these dissonant parts and to work towards healing.

The piercing call of the shofar blows away any coverings that hide the dark corners.

On Rosh HaShanah, we are open and vulnerable. The question is: what will we do now that we acknowledge the ugly sides of our past? Will we turn those moments into villains that need to be conquered and vanquished, or will we see those moments for what they really are - teachers in disguise.

These moments tell us that we must pay attention. Clearly some parts of ourselves need to be tended to, need to be cared for.

At the end of the silent meditation retreat when everyone was allowed to speak again finally, one participant shared a teaching with me that I think is particularly relevant for the high holy days.

It comes from the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh:

He says:

“It possible to compare our anger to a small child, crying out to his mother. When the child cries the mother takes him gently in her arms and listens and observes carefully to find out what is wrong.

The loving action of holding the child with her tenderness, already soothes the baby’s suffering. Likewise, we can take our anger in our loving arms and right away... we will feel a relief.

We don’t need to reject our anger. It is a part of us that needs our love and deep listening just as a baby does.”¹

This same philosophy applies to us facing our anxieties or feelings of inadequacy.

Rather than lashing out at these dark corners within ourselves, we need to approach these qualities with tenderness and healing.

Who was that person that hurt those closest to me, we ask. Was that really me? The answer is: let’s find out. Let us check in with ourselves and also be reminded that we are worthy of love regardless of anything.

¹ <https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/taking-care-of-anger/>

In the same way that we may attempt to cast away the ugly or supposedly useless parts of ourselves, so too are there people in this world that are ignored and herded towards the corners of society.

When it came to the building of the holy temple in Jerusalem, Psalm 118 reminds us that it's precisely the elements that we are so eager to dispose of that are actually our greatest strengths.

אָבן, מְאַסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הִיָּתָה לְרֵאשׁ פֶּנֶה

“The stone that the builders rejected - rejected! - has become the chief cornerstone!”

The foundation for the house of God was a rejected stone.

The father of the twelve Israelite tribes, Jacob, was the second born and second in being loved by his father Isaac.

King David, the youngest of eight children, a man with many dark corners is considered to be the corner-stone of the Messianic line and the redemption of the world.

It is our dark corners that become cornerstones.

God doesn't require us to be perfect. Quite the opposite. We are told to do a *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* - an accounting of the soul.

We are encouraged to see our dark corners, to engage with them, and to work towards a *tikkun*.. Towards healing.

It is for this reason that Abraham who placed his son on the sacrificial altar; King David with all of his imperfections; and even Moses, who lashed out against the Israelites, that all of these imperfect individuals are considered to be the paragons of Judaism.

It is precisely for their wrestling with their dark corners that they were elevated to their esteemed statuses.

So tonight, I ask myself what is the quality within me that I have wrestled with more than any other throughout my life? And if I have yet to vanquish it perhaps it is time that I learn from this quality.

So too for the people that society thinks the least of, perhaps it is time that we ask and then we listen with the hope of healing: who is the person behind the label?

In the United States, there is a man named Bryan Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson is a defence attorney who focuses on filing appeal motions to free wrongfully convicted men and women that currently sit on death row.

Mr. Stevenson in sharing his story reflects that the genesis of his journey towards freeing the wrongfully convicted started in two places: one is the church pew and the other was on the school playground.

There is one story in particular that he remembers from his childhood when it comes to encountering the rejected and overlooked.

One day when he was on the playground, he saw a new student. He didn't know this boy and as it turned out this little boy had a stutter.

Mr. Stevenson doesn't know why, but he remembers making fun of this little boy with a stutter.

His mother, who had witnessed the whole episode, grabbed Bryan immediately by the arm and told him to go and apologise to the young boy and to tell him that he loved him.

So, little Bryan shuffles over to the other boy. He then awkwardly jumps on him and shouts: "I love you and I'm sorry."

This part, Mr Stevenson says he remembers vividly to this day, that the little boy with a stutter looked Bryan in the eyes and said flawlessly: "I love you too."

Because of Mr. Stevenson and others like him, individuals that refuse to let the ignored and disposed cries go unheard 166 former death-row prisoners have been exonerated of all charges and set free² in just the last four decades!

Tomorrow morning when we return to this sanctuary, we will read the story about Abraham and his son Isaac. It is perhaps the most famous - or infamous - story from Torah, and it is undoubtedly the most poignant for Abraham as he neglects the life and needs of his son for the sake of his own spiritual journey.

However, that is tomorrow. Tonight, I would like to reflect on another story of Abraham in the face of innocents under the knife.

In this earlier story, Abraham finds himself in the cities of Sodom and Amarah.

² <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/innocence>

Abraham, who is one of the only two monotheists in the world is considered to be by far one of the strangest people alive.

In addition to reckoning with that label for himself, Abraham is also known for his compassion towards other strangers. He runs to greet them and welcome them into his tent.

Abraham's affinity for strangeness compels him to stand up for the stranger.

This is his whole modus-operandi.

In contrast to Abraham are the cities Sodom and Amorah.

These cities, in particular, are known for their cruelty to strangers. Whenever they hear that there is a stranger in their midst, they understand that this individual is vulnerable, without a support network.

So, the residents of Sodom and Amorah pounce, pillage, and assault.

There is no desire to listen. There is certainly no hope for bringing healing towards others.

God says enough!

The entirety of these cities are to be wiped out.

But Abraham, despite not knowing these residents that are soon to be destroyed, decides to stand up for them. To stand up against God's decree.

Abraham bargains with God hoping to save even just one innocent life from death-row,

However, like Mr. Stevenson himself sometimes experiences; Abraham fails to make the case and innocents perish from an all too swift judgement.

On Yom Kippur, we will read about Jonah: the anti-hero prophet that runs far away - the young man that refuses to listen or bring healing.

God saw the residents of Nineveh in the same vein that Sodom and Amorah were viewed. These people have gone astray. However, there would be no flood and no ark, nor would there be any fire or brimstone this time around.

Listening, healing, and repentance become the new desired path by God.

Yet, Jonah does not get the memo. He refuses to travel to Nineveh and to listen about their lives. He refuses to bring healing, or to teach about the possibility of *Teshuva* - repentance.

With the sole exception of Jonah; the remainder of the Israelite prophets teach about the merits of wrestling and growing - the necessity for listening and for healing.

During these high holy days, when we hear our inner-call, will we run towards it like Abraham, or will we be like Jonah and run away - straight into the belly of a fish?

Rosh HaShanah is called *Yom Truah* - the day of the call or the blasting of the shofar. It was also called initially *Yom HaZikaron* - the day of remembrance.

Over these next ten days as we hear the blast of the shofar, may we remember the parts of ourselves that we have hidden away due to shame or embarrassment.

When we hear the call of the shofar, may we remember the people who have been hidden away by society.

As we commemorate the birthday of the world on this new year, may we learn from God at the opening of the Torah who looked into the darkness, and did not shy away from it, but instead said: there is an opportunity for renewal here.

So, when we look at our own dark corners or those of others.. let *us* also say:

May there be light...

May there be healing.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah.