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Cheshbon haNefesh and Where is the pain?

Cheshbon ha-Nefesh translates as the Accounting of our Soul. In Modern Hebrew, Cheshbon, is the “check” we ask of a waiter at a restaurant. When we take the car in for a tune up, we get a cheshbon, an itemized bill when the work is done. We pull out our credit card and pay. In Hebrew we’d say, Sh’lam-ti, I have paid. Interestingly enough, Sh’lamti also means from the root Shin Lamem Mem, Shalom- I completed, I have made peace.

The second word, Nefesh, is one of the five levels of soul described by Jewish mystics. Nefesh is our behavior, the way our soul manifests itself in words, and deeds.

Cheshbon ha-Nefesh, Accounting of the Soul, is a personal spread sheet produced at the end of the year to see how we spent our time and the value we placed on life itself. We look at the spreadsheet objectively. We might enlarge the font and turn on a bright light. The goal of Cheshbon na-Nefesh is not to sink into despair for our mistakes, but to pay close attention so that we can be complete and move ahead.

In contrast to the spiritual accounting of our lives, we inhabit a secular world of snap judgement and reactivity; a world where blame is more prevalent than looking into the mirror. Socrates said that the unexamined life was not worth living. The practice of Cheshbon haNefesh would have to agree. Embarrassing or even painful moments of life, when, reflected upon instead of deflected, bring relief.

I have learned that the technique of Cheshbon, paying close attention to the details, even being curious about details, works with the physical body as well.

The itemized technique of Cheshbon can be applied to even, the occasional headache that comes our way.

I pride myself on eating healthy food, and exercising regularly, and yet sometimes I get migraine headaches. I am not thrilled about it. Usually I will take something to make it go away, but sometimes even that does not suffice. I used to feel embarrassed about headaches. In the scheme of things, what's a headache? And yet, for those who know, it can disrupt what you are trying to accomplish.

Over time, I have learned an accounting technique, a Cheshbon, that brings great relief from headaches. I have shared it with people from the dog groomer at Petsmart to fellow passengers on a plane, to my own children. I call this accounting of pain, “where’s my headache?” Over time it has dawned on me that that the technique I use for migraine headaches, is connected to life.

Years ago, when attending a conference, there was one highly participatory lecture where participants knew they’d be actively engaged. There was one participant in this session who seemed to have checked out, not engaged at all. It turns out that she was suffering from a bad headache. The facilitator asked if he could lead her through a focused experiment on her pain.

The experiment was a list of four questions. After receiving an answer to his question, the facilitator said, ‘thank you’ and then repeated the 4 -question series, many times. This went on until the woman shared that the headache was gone.

I thought this was possibly a rigged experiment until the next time I had a bad headache and tried it out. Instead of sinking, I practiced curiosity. I asked myself the same four questions, answered them and said a quiet thank you, then repeated the sequence until the headache had diminished into nothing worth talking about.

These are the questions: **1. Where is your headache? 2. What shape is your headache? 3. What color is your headache? 4. How much water could it hold?**

Becoming well acquainted with the headache, even saying thank you for specific details, made it go away. Sure, there *might* be a trace of where the headache once lived, but I could then look at the trace with curiosity. “Wow I felt that headache, got to know it, and now its gone.”

Our Yom Kippur Cheshbon works in a similar way. We go through a probing reflection of our lives, our past year and our failings. Our liturgy calls it Vidui, or confession. The root of the word, Vidui, confession, is comprised of three Hebrew letters, Yud, Dalet and Hey. That root carries three English meanings, acknowledge, thank you and put aside, even throw aside. For within the word Vidui is the word YAD meaning hand.

The words of Vidui are not pleasant. Among other embarrassing things we sing out: “We betray, we steal, we are violent, we kill, we go astray and we lead others astray. “

There are two kinds of Vidui; the short and the long. The shorter version is Ashamnu and the longer version are the Al Cheits. The Ashamnu focusses on general themes of going astray. The Al Cheits are highly specific sins.

If we chanted all of this one time, we might find it sufficient. Twice, a little excessive. Three times, *Genug!* Enough already. However traditionally the Ashamnus are recited ten times and the Al Cheits are recited eight times.

Like the headache technique from acknowledgement to a lifting of pain, our Vidui, our confession, when prayed sincerely, is an extensive inventory of remorse and embarrassment. Most people don't like this part of the service even the first time, it's better of course, because we do this all together, but here we are repeating and repeating. Why do we need to review our list of hurt to this extent?

Sylvia Boorstein, is a Jewish woman, wife, mother of three, grandmother of seven. She is a counselor and author of titles such as “Making friends with the present,” “Happiness, an inside job” and “Funny, you don't look Buddhist.”

Boorstein teaches that there are only four truths in life. **1. We all have pain 2. It is inevitable. 3. We make it worse. 4. Then we die.**

And only number three, about *making it worse*, is optional.

Boorstein's ethos is that "pain is inevitable. Life comes with pain. But suffering is not inevitable. Suffering is what happens when we struggle with our experience because of our inability *to accept* it. Suffering is optional."

This approach to life suggests, that acceptance of pain, curiosity about the pain, allows pain to lift. Properly examined, the pain we experience in life whether unfairly or not, will move aside.

We may recall difficult times in our lives where rather than run away, or cover it up, we tried the "thorough examination" technique. Using a metaphoric flashlight, we checked the corners and crevices and cracks of the pain or hurt, getting to know it well, so well that we hoped we would never need visit it again.

Pain is inevitable in life. Suffering is not.

It may seem counter-intuitive to get to know pain intimately, especially in our culture where there is a pill, a drink, a cream, an excursion for most things if we can afford them, and yet, when we allow for genuine grief to surface there is a natural progression. We may have traces of it from time to time, but we are free from the nightmare it once was.

The pain of a headache, the pain of acknowledging our mistakes, even the pain from loss, share the same theme. By looking closely at the challenging moments in our life, we don't drown; we heal.

The story is told of two monks who had an oath of not touching a woman. As they walked toward a rushing river, they saw a beautiful woman dressed in a silk kimono crying at the shore. She needed to get to the other side but was terrified not only of ruining her kimono but of the water. Wading through the river took time, and it was treacherous. Upon reaching the other side, still without saying a word, he set her down and the two monks continued walking.

For hours there were no words uttered between the monks when suddenly, the monk who had not carried the woman shouted, “How could you have touched that woman, carried her, in her silk kimono across the river. You held her in your arms, you felt her hair, you heard her cry closely in your ear. You, who swore you’d never touch a woman, touched a woman.”

“Ah, yes” said the monk. “I did all those things and was mindful as they occurred. However, I set that woman down miles ago at the river’s edge and you, I see that you have not.”

Vidui, Confession comes from the word, admit, thank and put aside. Cheshbon haNefesh is a detailed accounting of our pain and mistakes in order to put it down and move onward in our lives. Where did we miss the mark? What is the shape of that mistake? What color is that mistake? How much water can it hold?