

YK 2016/5777 Drashah

©2016 Rabbi Adina Lewittes

Sha'ar Communities

A story.

A man got lost in a forest. He tried his best to find his way out but he couldn't. As night fell, he was growing desperate. Suddenly he spotted a light in the distance. He started walking towards it. As he got closer he saw it was a man carrying a lantern. He was so relieved, certain that his troubles were over. He approached the man and said, "I was lost, but thank God I found you." The man with the lantern responded with a voice filled with pity, "I'm so sorry, but I'm lost too. But don't worry. You know where you've looked for a way out, and I know where I've looked. Together we have a much better chance of finding our way home.

They started walking while the man tried to console himself that he wasn't yet out of the woods. And then he noticed something strange about the man with the lantern – his eyes were closed. He cried out, "Are you blind??" "Yes," said the man with the lantern. "So why do you need a lantern?" "The lantern isn't for me", he replied, "I carry it not so that I can see, but so that others can see me."

How often in life we confuse external light with internal light; the light that directs our footsteps with the light that orients our souls.

How often we lean on one another to show us our way when we're lost, when the true essence of companionship is to help another discover their own life map.

How often we gaze upon another and see only the shell of their lives and remain blind to their inner being. How often we yearn to be seen by those whose eyes behold us every day. To be heard by those whose ears listen to our words each night.

To be acknowledged by those in whose presence we exist. How often we long to be understood, long to be known – by loved ones human and Divine.

Today, on Yom Kippur, we find ourselves in the midst of our forests, considering the thick brush of our relationships, our beliefs, our values and choices all of which can obscure our path home to our fullest potential for kindness, compassion, integrity, and truth.

Too many of us make the mistaken assumption that when we feel lost or disoriented in life, the way out of our confusion is one that leads us away from the particulars of our landscape. We're drawn to false messiahs who lure us to new places and new ideas with promises of peace, serenity and success. In our disposable society, we are so quick to discard and replace friends, jobs, communities, and interests. We seek an escape from what troubles us, instead of facing, and embracing, the struggle to mine our darkness for its own illumination; to find our home within life's intricate, and often confusing, terrain.

Yom Kippur is about finding the renewable resources of our darkness and the sustainable light that emerges not from fleeing but from standing still and facing that which makes us lost or afraid.

Our pain and disappointment aren't feelings to deny or ignore. They're profound sources of insight into the choices we've made in life. Our remorse and fear are messengers calling us to think deeply about the paths we've taken in our journeys to be who we wish to be, to live the life we wish to live, and to do the good we're here to do. They are signals, showing us where we've gone off-course, alerting us that we may have stopped moving. Regardless of whatever decisions or changes these feelings may lead us to make, to simply ignore or flee them only guarantees that when we meet them again, as we surely will, we will be woefully unprepared.

Pema Chodron, head of a Tibetan monastery in Canada and author of When Things Fall Apart, puts it this way:

“To stay with that shakiness – to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge – that is the path of true awakening. Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic –that is the spiritual path...”

She suggests, *“Instead of asking ourselves, ‘How can I find security and happiness?’ we could ask ourselves, ‘Can I touch the center of my pain? Can I sit with suffering, both yours and mine, without trying to make it go away? Can I stay present to the ache of loss or disgrace-disappointment in all its many forms-and let it open me?’”*

Or, as my colleague Nilton Bonder whose book, Boundaries of Intelligence, I spoke about over Rosh Hashanah, says of the darkness, *“Our way out isn’t a new path but a new way of being.”*

He notes that the story of the two men in the forest also reveals that the light that ultimately guides us, allowing us to see and be seen is a light kindled by encounters with others, that creates connection within the contours of our lives, a light of deep spiritual fellowship that invites us to truly behold one another, leading us to together find our way around life’s inevitable periods of discomfort and dislocation.

But as the blind man explains, to be seen we have to live in a way that makes us visible. Sharing our thoughts and beliefs, living our values and dreams, contributing our skills and knowledge, expressing ours hopes and fears, communicating our needs and desires – these revelations are acts of love between us and the ones whose recognition we seek.

To truly see another requires more than looking at them, but observing their ways of being, contemplating their truth. Deep listening requires that we stop talking, stop interrupting, stop finishing each other's sentences and assuming each other's thoughts. To truly acknowledge another, to create emotional intimacy, we have to start really listening, suspend judgment, avoid problem solving, offer our undivided attention, and resist glancing at our ubiquitous screens.

Andrew Sullivan, in his searing essay that appeared recently in New York Magazine entitled, 'I Used to be A Human Being' bemoans the toxicity of our digital culture. He writes, *"You are where your attention is. If you're watching a football game with your son while also texting a friend, you're not fully with your child – and he knows it. Truly being with another person means being experientially with them, picking up countless tiny signals from the eyes and voice and body language and context, and reacting, often unconsciously, to every nuance. These are our deepest social skills, which have been honed through the aeons. They are what make us distinctively human."*

Even our public space and the opportunities for real human interaction have yielded to our virtual worlds. Once-cherished nods or exchanges of pleasantries between folks at a coffee shop or on the street can no longer compete with the allure of our phones and feeds, creating a world of infinite connections only for people to remain totally isolated from one another. Or, as sociologist Sherry Turkle calls it, being "alone together".

Last fall while touring Northwestern University with my son Isaac I found it strange that there were so many student club fliers pasted onto the pavement along the campus walkways. Then someone pointed out to me that because students walk around with their faces looking down at their phones, the only way to get their attention is by posting advertisements at their feet.

To be seen and to see, we need to recover the basic human skill of being present. We have to remove the endless distractions that keep us from one another. Multi-tasking simply doesn't work. Not only does each task suffer, often requiring a redo, but, most critically, we suffer. And none of us is guaranteed a redo. That's why we're here today.

Another mistake we often make when we encounter a soul lost in their forest is trying to relieve them of their burdens, of their fear, rather than helping them learn to live with them.

The Torah says,

ה כִּי-תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֵׁנְאָךְ, רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מְשָׁאוֹ, וְחִדַּלְתָּ.
מֵעֶזְבֹּ לּוֹ--עֶזְבֹּ תֵעָזֵב, עִמּוֹ. {ס}

“If you see your enemy’s donkey sagging under its burden, you shall not pass by. You shall surely release it with him. (Ex. 23: 5)”

There is more to this verse than the Torah’s clarion call for our ethics of compassion to extend even to those we consider our enemy and their property. In a fascinating ruling in Bava Metziah derived from this verse, the Rabbis teach an insightful lesson about sharing in each other’s burdens. They focus on the end of the verse which states that we must stop and relieve the animal of its burdens “with him”, meaning together with its owner. But if the owner isn’t willing to help his own animal, we are exempt from our obligation to help. Why should his unwillingness to help his own suffering donkey relieve us of our responsibilities to it?

The answer is that when we help people who are unwilling to help themselves, we often do more harm than good. Removing their burdens for them precludes them

from being able to learn from their struggles, to listen for the messages of their own pain, and to make room for it in their lives.

“We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem,” Pema Chodron teaches, “but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”

When we try to just take away someone's burden we end up prolonging their sense of helplessness. Of course, if they're unable to help themselves, our obligation stands. But simply turning on the light to chase away someone else's darkness only reinforces the fear they'll feel when they experience it the next time. And chances are if our goal is to simply eliminate someone's troubles, it reflects our own discomfort with our personal pain as well.

Pema Chodron again: *“Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.”*

In his article on the toxicity of technology, Andrew Sullivan offers a thought on why our society is increasingly secular, and it's not because we've sacrificed our souls at the altar of science or reason. He realizes that spirituality and contemplative practice are born of a relationship with silence. Yet our technology-obsessed world of endless noise and action has all but eradicated our experience of, and our tolerance for, stillness and quiet. Instead of evocative and inspiring, we find the tranquil, dark solitude of the forest unnerving and threatening. Instead of following the light of the

moon or the rays of our intuition, we try to chase away its shadows with the glow of our screens and the flashlights on our phones.

We attempt to divert ourselves from life's inevitable aloneness by achieving and acquiring, yet we still feel empty and unsatisfied and so we swipe, like and post again and again. Sullivan refers to this exercise in futility as "the deadliness of doing" -- a phrase coined by the late British philosopher Michael Oakeshott.

But our plague of distraction only reveals that our hunger for the possibilities that stillness yields hasn't abated. There are signs that we desperately want to be reacquainted with what emerges when we lose ourselves under cover of the forest, when we reconcile ourselves to life's inevitable silences and uncertainties.

Sullivan writes of the allure of the Burning Man retreats in the Nevada desert, an annual gathering of people, mainly from the tech industry, in a place with no cell service, giving them a respite from the oppressiveness of their own creations. The explosion of mindfulness training in corporate offices, the meditation phone apps, the 40 million people in the US who practice yoga, double that of just 4 years ago, and the growing debate around recreational marijuana are all signs of people craving a quick and reliable path to quiet, to calm.

He acknowledges the power of Shabbat, and other religions' days of rest, as a necessary pause from life's pressures and demands to "*reflect on our lives under the light of eternity.*" Without such a refuge, he concedes, a sustained spiritual life is impossible. "But", he laments, "*just as modern street lighting has slowly blotted the stars from the visible skies, so too have cars and planes and factories and flickering digital screens combined to rob us of a silence that was previously regarded as integral to the health of the human imagination.*"

It's not a lack of faith or hedonism that keeps people from spirituality, Sullivan contends. It's that we're just too distracted. Rather than excitement, noise and fun, he thinks spiritual services ought to offer stillness, quiet, even darkness. This was precisely the purpose of our spending time after Kol Nidre last night with the lights off, immersed in meditative music and soft, mellow song. I shared a Hasidic play on the phrase in the siddur "*habocheh beshirei zimrah*" which is usually read as "[God] delights in musical poems and songs". In a Hasidic teaching its rendered as "*habocheh b'shayarei zimra*" – "[God] delights in the leftovers of songs", in the moments of silence after a song which become as sacred, as expressive a language, as the very sounds, or cries, of our voices.

Far from imbuing darkness with fear and negativity, Jewish teachings attribute deeply redemptive power to it.

King David would arise at midnight each night to compose his beautiful psalms, words so often recited by people facing adversity not for their trite prescriptions for avoiding pain, but for their soothing balms of hope right in the midst of it.

Our relentless belief in darkness not as a state that gets replaced by light but one that ultimately yields to light is what explains our conception of time wherein days start in the evening and gradually unfold into sunlight. Darkness itself contains the seeds of growth and understanding. We need to learn to discern in the night the very possibility for light. We need to find blessing in the darkness.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ;

"Elohim said, let's make Adam 'Betzalmeynu'." (Bereishit 1:26)

When we speak of human beings created “B’tzelem Elohim” the phrase is always translated as, “in the image of God”, and serves as the bedrock of our commitment to accord every person’s life infinite dignity, value and uniqueness.

But there’s a deeper, darker layer of wisdom to these words.

“Tzelem” is also related to the word “tzel” which means shadow. To be created “B’tzelem Elohim” can also mean to be created in the shadow of the Divine. But what is the nature of this shadow?

We sing in Shir Lama’alot from Psalm 121:

יְהוָה שֹׁמְרֵךָ; יְהוָה צִלְךָ, עַל-יַד יְמִינֶךָ.

“Adonai is your protector, your shade by your right hand.”

And in Psalm 91:

יָשֵׁב, בְּסִתְרַת עֲלִיוֹן; בְּצִל שֵׁדַי, יִתְלוֹנֵן.

“One who sits in the secret place of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of Shaddai.”

Something about the shade of the Divine is both protective and redemptive.

Think of the Sukkah we’ll sit in just days from now. The tradition requires that we build this temporary, fragile hut paying most careful attention to its roof, the most important part. Why? Because the roof, covered by *schach* – cuttings from plants that were once attached to the earth – provides us shade. And the halacha is that the shade it provides must exceed the sunlight it allows in.

The mystical text of the Zohar explains: “Whoever is of the root and the trunk of Israel shall sit in the Sukkah under the shade of God.” Being of the root refers to one who is

able to draw insight and wisdom as tree draws from its roots. Being of the trunk refers to spreading wisdom throughout the people as roots send water and minerals through the trunk to the leaves of a tree, even as the trunk gives the tree shape and strength.

One who reaches down into the dark, fertile soil only to share its nourishment with others is destined to sit in the shade of the Sukkah with God, is destined to derive blessing from the cover of darkness.

Even Eve is created from the “Tzela” of Adam, not just the rib, but the “tzela”, the shadow, signifying that human partnership, protection and true intimacy is borne of engaging with shadow, with darkness, and of being able to discern the possibility of love and light from within its gloom.

Our prayers today are filled with special words written for Yom Kippur, and there are many elaborate compositions we recite. But there is a prayer we say every morning of every day, so simple in its phrasing, so uncomplicated in its theology. It goes like this:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה:

Blessed are You, Eternal One, who has given the rooster the understanding to distinguish between day and night.

Many have offered compelling insights into the rooster’s power to discern not daylight itself, rather the imminent arrival of the sun, crowing as it does while it’s still dark. Its power lies not in its ability to declare what is, but to declare what is coming.

Similarly, “Who is wise?” asks the Talmud, and answers, “the one who sees ‘hanolad’, that which is being born.” (Tamid 32a) Wisdom isn’t about negotiating what already exists. Wisdom is the ability to see in what exists the unfolding of what is yet to be, of what can be.

The thicket in which we find ourselves on Yom Kippur, the branches of the forest which for the last year, or perhaps longer, have snagged us, obscured our light, tripped us up, and confused our moral compass, is the very thicket that contains a way out of our gloom of failure and disappointment. What we seek is not an escape, but the courage to stay in it for a time, to explore its edges, to risk its thorns, to listen for its whispers and heed its lessons.

Here we are– not eating, not drinking, not beautifying ourselves or having sex, dressed in this white burial shroud – dramatizing, some say, the day of our death as a catalyst for better choices while we are still able to make them.

Maybe it’s not a rehearsal of our final ending. Maybe it’s a rehearsal of our never-ending endings. Maybe Yom Kippur is an invitation to walk in the darkness of the forest, training our eyes to see and be seen, to light the lanterns of self-discovery and discovery of one another.

After all, like the fragile Sukkah whose roof allows in rays of light but protects us and provides for our continued vitality with its shade, the landscapes of our lives beckon us to moments of illumination, but it’s their darkness that protects us by teaching us to navigate every bump, to feel our way across every ditch, and to discover our route to freedom and fulfillment by simply standing still.

Pema Chodron, one last time:

“To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again.”

Maybe that's the essence of Yom Kippur. Not learning to change course in order to avoid the wilderness – the unstructured place of possibility, the home of Sinai, sin, Torah, and forgiveness. Maybe the essence of Yom Kippur is learning to embrace and to immerse in our wilderness, in our darkness, over, and over again.

Today's name, *Yom Hakippurim*, is often read as “a day ‘like Purim’”, prompting us to ask what possible connection there is between the most solemn day of the year and the holiday of total revelry; between a day devoted to confession and truth and a day devoted to masks, deception and reversals.

The late Rav Yitzchak Hutner spoke eloquently about the superiority of Purim to all other festivals, especially to the other holiday of redemption, to Pesach. The story of the Exodus was filled with divine miracles and wonders for all to behold, while the story of Purim was completely devoid of any Divine intervention or presence. Mordecai and Esther were left to find freedom by negotiating their troubles head on and to save the Jewish people using their own initiative and daring.

Their legacy is our ability, even our responsibility – as individuals and as a nation – to bring light to the world's darkness, to bring relief to the world's pain, not by relying on external sources of illumination, and not by evading our troubles, but by allowing our inner luminescence to dissolve our emotional, cultural and spiritual gloom. And that is what today is all about, this day *like Purim, Yom HaKippurim*.

As Rav Hutner taught, true and lasting vision will come when we learn to see without light, when we learn to make our way through the darkness with lanterns that enlighten each other's souls.