

Kol Nidre 5782
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***M'chyei ha-meitim...* Returning to Life, Returning to Each Other**

A vignette: “I used to live in a very old apartment building with super sketchy electrical wiring. Were I to audaciously assume my hair drier could run while my stereo was on, I would once again find myself opening the grey metal fuse box next to the refrigerator and flipping the breaker. My apartment had been built at a time when there were no electric hair driers, and the system shut down when modernity asked too much of it. I think of that fuse box often these days [because] I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day. The human heart and spirit were developed to be able to hold, feel and respond to any tragedy, injustice, sorrow or natural disaster that was happening IN OUR VILLAGE. So [today, our] emotional circuit breaker[s] keeps overloading...”¹

These evocative words were written by the Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber, celebrated author, Lutheran pastor, theologian, and activist. They give language to this particular moment, different from any other we have known – an ongoing pandemic now made worse by human selfishness and stupidity, fires ablaze around the globe, devastating earthquakes, humanitarian crises abroad...alongside the ongoing struggles that come with (just) living. We cannot take in and respond to so much uncertainty, all of this pain. Reverend Bolz-Weber once more: “I’m not saying we should put our heads in the sand, I’m saying that if your circuits are overwhelmed there’s a reason and the reason *isn’t* because you are heartless, it’s because there is not a human heart on this planet that can bear all of what is happening right now.”

Think about just how much we are trying to hold. Think about how much **you** are trying to hold. We are living with so much loss, so much fear, and so much pressure to respond to what’s happening, to fix everything that’s broken, to care for all who hurt. It is not hard to see how we might find ourselves in a dark place. I suspect that most of us here can think of at least one instance like this in the last year, when our circuits felt blown.

¹ Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber, <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres?fbclid=IwAR1yt1OgMnYIMvHodp6lK1bjD6VWTKRbv8uwnaob0SH9c79Mgyyii58XHRo>

The Chasidic master, Rebbi Nachman of Bratzlav, calls this human experience *chalal ha-panui*, the Divine Void². The Divine Void is tremendous, a chasm through which we sometimes must pass. It is, as it were, the “presence of God’s absence.” It describes the experience of feeling wholly untethered, alone.

When we fall into the *chalal hapanui*, this Divine Void – the Chasidic masters teach – the only way out is for another person to descend, to meet us where we are, in the chasm, and then to accompany us as we come back up. The instruction is **not** to tell us **how** to get out, or even to reach down from above, with a helping hand and reassuring words. If we’re in the position to help another in the chasm, this is a big ask. On one end of this equation, we are being asked to hear the silent scream of someone suffering. And if we are the one who is suffering, we are required to widen the space we occupy to make room for another beside us, when it’s dark and lonely and perhaps we aren’t so open to sharing the experience, aren’t ready for company.

The West Wing character Leo McGarry said it well. “This guy's walking down a street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep, he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey you, can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up "Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me, can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.”³

Sometimes we are the person in the hole, and we have to acknowledge we are stuck. To allow someone – a friend, a family member, a therapist – to meet us where we are, to join us in the hole. We don’t have to endure the void alone.

And sometimes we are the other person, the friend walking by. When we meet another in this place devoid of God, devoid of connection, we may find the opportunity to serve as a reminder of God’s presence for another. This requires that we go where another is, and stay there: no sugar-coating, no false reassurances, together until a way out materializes.

Author and former United States Marine, Phil Kay, shared his early pandemic-induced experience of *chalal hapanui*, this great void, when his pregnant wife contracted Covid. Reflecting on the terror of this moment while caring for their two young children, he shares the comfort he found in talking with a dear friend. “When my friend the doctor called to discuss Covid-19 symptoms with me,” Kay writes, “he didn’t have much in the

² Sourced from a lecture by Dr. Susannah Heschel & Dr. Shaul Magid, “Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Naḥman of Bratzlav’s “Likkutei MoHaRan,” The Harvard Theological Review, Oct., 1995, Vol. 88, №4 (Oct., 1995), Cambridge University Press, p. 495.

³ The West Wing, “Noel” (Season 2, Episode 10)

way of information that I didn't already know. I had Google, after all. I can read medical studies. And so little was known then that mostly it boiled down to: The disease would either continue to get worse, or it wouldn't. But a good conversation between two old friends is never simply about the exchange of information. There's a rhythm to it, an arc, an undercurrent of emotion and history that makes each exchange its own kind of story, a small, impermanent work of art. Here for a few puffs of breath, and then gone."⁴ These puffs, the presence, witnessing the silent scream...these buoy us amidst the storms.

How *do* we give someone the space, and then the ability to articulate the experience of *chalal hapanui*? And when it is **our** experience, our turn in the hole, how do we emerge from what feels so despairingly empty? Reb Nachman says music, especially wordless melodies, create avenues up and out. And through prayer, whose gift to us is to provide representation for what is otherwise un-representable. To sing, to pray, is to give voice to what is deepest in my heart, that which I don't even know how to articulate on my own. I don't mean the pre-scripted words in the prayer book or High Holiday machzor. I mean the deepest prayers, the realest prayers, the words and melodies that only our hearts know.

There are other ways our tradition can help us out. In the language of Torah, we can become for each other *malachim*, angels or messengers, which, by the way, figure prominently in the Bible stories we tell on these High Holidays. "These Torah stories remind us," says my colleague Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, "of the hope to be found in tough times. An angel opens Hagar's eyes to a flowing spring, and she and her son are saved. An angel opens Abraham's eyes to the ram caught in the thicket, and Isaac's life is spared. The Days of Awe open the door to new beginnings, even when (or especially when) we can't see our own way back to hope for change. We just have to be like those biblical angels for each other: helping each other see the hope we can't find alone."⁵

On this evening of Kol Nidre, this beginning of The Day of Atonement, we are asked to be more vulnerable, more raw, more open to change. We revisit our emotional scars and the stories each one of them carries. Our Jewish tradition holds us this through this harrowing night and Day of Atonement, offering wordless melody, holy words, and sacred stories to guide us through the inevitable human experience of what Reb Nachman called *chalal ha-panui* and what our Catholic friends call "the Dark Night of the Soul."

The ancient world knew of the pain of disconnection: feeling exiled from God, from meaning, from joy; feeling distant, estranged, even from loved ones. The ancient world

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/07/opinion/sunday/data-science-limits.html?partner=IFTTT&fbclid=IwAR0VWuZaOqHqXaDYzoswXFt69BcdFXZcVUCDVd3jbCZyelgxeU20hqOH7e8>

⁵ https://www.jta.org/2021/08/05/opinion/rabbis-are-supposed-to-offer-hope-on-the-high-holidays-what-if-i-cant?fbclid=IwAR2eytmO11OtWF06qFOgP7SGxCb6KiCe-MTSaNUkAkZWWhWY_I862xpz1Cnk

also knew the joy of reconnecting. The Talmud asks (in *Masechet Brachot*) what blessing we might offer after prolonged separation, say, if we haven't seen a loved one in a year or more. Should we say the familiar words of Shehecheyanu? It could be appropriate. But in fact, the Talmud prescribes a different prayer, one that goes beyond thanking God for the blessing of life. We say, "*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, m'chayei ha-meitim*. Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Source of all creation, Who revives the dead."

You heard me right. After a prolonged separation from a dear friend or family member, we offer a blessing that suggests a belief in the literal resurrection of the dead!

Why? The rabbis offer two different possibilities. One is that we recite this blessing because after such a long time of not seeing someone, holding them, or even being close to them, we experience loss and grief for them; we regard the loss as a death, even though they are still very much alive. When we are together again, therefore, it feels like those individuals have been brought back to life for us. *Blessed are you God, who makes present for us those whom we feared we had lost.*

The other interpretation, that I learned through my colleague Rabbi Ilana Schachter, is not that the prayer acknowledges how our loved one has been "brought back to life," so to speak, but, rather, how we have. Seeing a cherished person after a long absence revives in us an "aliveness," the palpable and sacred connection between us and our nearest and dearest. So when we are together again, we offer this blessing, "we thank God for reviving *us*, for *we* were not wholly alive until that moment of reunion."⁶

Tonight, the holiest night of the year, let us pledge to help one another out of the chasm. Let us pray for a 5782 in which we feel an enduring connection to living and to the living. And when we do meet the inevitable darkness, in ourselves or in others, may we be gentle and patient, offering loving melodies, prayers from the heart, stories from the Torah of our lives, and, above all, our human presence.

May we emerge, and reemerge, from separation, both physical and spiritual.

May we greet each other as we re-familiarize ourselves with feeling alive, out of the dark and into the holy connection of living.

May we offer these words of blessing together: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, m'chayei hameitim*. Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Source of all Connection, Who revives the dead, reminding us that we are not lost when we are together.

⁶ These interpretations and words were shared with me by my colleague Rabbi Ilana Schachter. The second comes from *Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Laws of Blessing on Sights and Other Blessings 1:1*. (Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz, a 19th century Chasidic rabbi)