

The Power of Breath: Rosh Hashanah in the time of Pandemic

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Rosh Hashanah 5781 / September 2020*

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Again, join with me. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Keep that breath going, slowly, steadily. Breathe in. Breathe out.

We are tired by the strains and challenges of our current world, this year especially. We are mentally, emotionally, and physically fatigued by the stress and limitations of quarantine and how much we have been through these past few months. We are overwhelmed.

Perhaps through this all, we forgot the most simple, most basic, most crucial necessity of life itself – breath.

On the screen is an image that grows and shrinks every few seconds. Follow it to guide your breaths, inhale and exhale, even if you do not listen to another word I say. Feel free to use this time to just breathe. Slow your heart rate. Clear your mind. Let yourself rest.

Breath is something amazing, so necessary, yet often overlooked. They come and go, around 20,000 per day.¹ Breath can mark moments of poignant sadness, such as saying goodbye to loved ones who breathed their last. Yet, breath can mark moments of unfathomable joy and new beginnings. This year I witnessed the very first breath of our newborn daughter. In that moment, life began – her life – and all of the personality, growth, sleepless nights, and astounding wonder that comes with new parenthood. With that first breath, we had hope, and a new chapter began for our family.

This year, we have also witnessed how powerful and crucial each breath can be. We think of those who struggled with the respiratory impacts of the COVID-19 virus, fighting for their lives with each breath. We think of the breathless effort of health care and essential workers, fighting tirelessly to help, heal, and keep our communities going. We think of our air, our world literally on fire, and the burning in our lungs from the smoke, as we struggle with each breath outside. We think of George Floyd and his dying words, “I can’t breathe.”

Now, in the spirit of this New Year, the chance to catch our breath, let’s focus on two main areas – how we care for our own breath and how our breaths connect us all.

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/lung/qa/how-many-breaths-do-you-take-in-a-day>

First, in order to fully appreciate our breath, we must realize that, for our sages and our tradition, the breath of the individual is not merely air; it is life itself. In Genesis we read, “God formed human from the dust of the earth. God blew into their nostrils the breath of life, and human became a living being.”² The word used for “breath,” “neshamah” is very close to the word for “soul,” “neshimah,” so close that our sages link the two. We each may understand “soul” differently, but I see it as the undefinable, indescribable part of ourselves that connects us with all Divinely created beings, perhaps even outliving us.³ From the beginning of Creation, our breath, and our ability to use it, creates and sustains within us our very soul.

Even the unpronounceable name of God, with the Hebrew letters yud-hay-vav-hay, are said as a breath.⁴

Our Torah often returns to this theme, connecting breath with our relationship to the Divine and our power in this world.

Genesis 7:15, “They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was breath of life.”

Ezekiel 37:5, “Thus said the Eternal God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again.”

The final verse of all Psalms, 150:6, which we will sing following this sermon, “Let all that breathes praise God. Hallelujah.”

And the classic verse, “take my breath away.” ... Wait sorry, that was the theme song from a popular 80’s movie.

The sages of the Talmud⁵ suggest that upon waking in the morning, a person should say, “Elohai neshamah shenatata bi tehorah hi – My God, the soul that you have placed within me is pure. You created it. You formed it. You breathed it into me.” These simple yet poignant words, now included in our morning prayers, teach that with our first morning breath, our day is fresh and untouched.⁶

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov goes further teaching “that with each breath, every moment, we are given the opportunity to connect anew to our life’s source and to our soul. As [we] receive our breath, intend to receive nourishment and sustenance from the universe.”⁷

² Genesis 2:7

³ Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2014/06/nishmat.html>

⁴ Rabbi Art Waskow, <http://archive.jewishrecon.org/resource/blessed-one-who-breath-life>

⁵ Brachot 60b

⁶ Rabbi Diane Elliot, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/elohai-neshama-breathing-the-soul-alive>

⁷ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, adapted from Chayei Moharan #37

By being more aware of our breath, our soul, the power that each of us, and each moment, has, we have a simple and essential way to pause and grasp a bit of control, especially a bewildering world. Then, after our breath has helped us reset and regain focus, we are better able to make decisions and prioritize how to deal with all that is front of us. We can see complex situations more clearly. We can decide on the best course of action. We can react, not out of unease, but with presence of heart and mind – be it related to the pandemic, injustice, personal failings, relationship strife, school and work stress, whatever our burden. Then, our breath will be our guide, helping us return under control.

This practice of using the breath, as a representative our whole being, is built into Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Benay Lappe reminds us of the “yearly process a cheshbon hanefesh, an ‘accounting of our life,’” perhaps better translated as the accounting of our breath? Lappe asks us to consider our past year and begin anew, ‘Have I really used every breath that I was given? When is it that I feel myself truly breathing deeply? What do I need, to fully breathe?’”⁸

On this New Year, let us engage in cheshbon hanefesh, account for how our breath can help us face the struggles of our daily lives, connect with our souls, and do the work of the divine in our community around us – which transitions us to our second focus, how our breaths do not impact us alone. Through them we are intertwined, all humanity imbued with the divine breath of life. And this is not just metaphor.

It is estimated that atoms of oxygen and carbon dioxide can circle the entire earth in one year’s time. Astrophysicist Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson describes this as the earth itself breathing.⁹ Every human breath is being, and has been, constantly recycled since the birth of our planet. “To live, is to borrow and repurpose the elements of the world around [us... We breathe the same air as Moses], Da Vinci, Shakespeare—and even with a few bits of air that carried our own first cries as a newborn.”¹⁰ Our breaths literally keep us eternally linked.

This connection is not only scientific. Reb Zalman reminds us that “Earth is alive. In the chain of life there is an [interdependent] relationship among all things,”¹¹ which we have a clear responsibility to uphold. We are meant to ensure, through our actions and our approach, that all human beings are safe, whole, and loved, not to mention our responsibility to this breathing planet itself. I fear that we have missed the mark in recognizing how interconnected our breaths are. It is understandable, even reasonable, to prioritize our own needs, especially in challenging times.

⁸ Rabbi Benay Lappe, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/did-you-see-my-alps-and-other-questions-were-asked-in-heaven>

⁹ Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2014/06/nishmat.html>

¹⁰ Curt Sager, <https://www.wired.com/2014/12/your-atomic-self-how-your-breath-connects-you-to-universe>

¹¹ Reb Meshullam Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/1395>

Yet, our social connections are slipping away. Our friendships need more work to sustain. Or worse yet, we devalue the breath of other human beings, each imbued with a divine soul. This issue is not new and in need of great repair. We must collectively breathe together, in recognition of how we impact each other, how we have a deep, unwavering responsibility to care, protect, and uplift each other, how much we need each other.

We often take our breath for granted. They are only appreciated when lost, hindered, or fully extinguished. Yet, Rebbe Nachman teaches the our breath assists our process of teshuvah, repentance, because through it, our whole being is renewed. In the ways that we have missed the mark and seek teshuvah – be they in failings of upholding systems of racism and oppression, disregarding the most marginalized and at risk, neglecting our communal health, damaging our planet, not speaking up for what is just, moral, and kind– for whatever else has been metaphorically starved of air, we can renew.

“Elohai neshamah shenatata bi tehorah hi – My God, the soul that you have placed within me is pure. You created it. You formed it. You breathed it into me.” With each new day, each new moment, a new breath, and a new chance to bring life to our shared global lungs.

I cannot offer easy solutions or quick fixes to our air-starved and suffocating world. What I do bring is the reminder and determination that we must never cease from our work, and we must return to knowing the value of our breath. The breath is the outward reflection of the soul. It is the proof that we are divine and have the capacity for so much more. The breath is the tool to slow down, center ourselves, and find the clarity to proceed into the complexities of each day. It is literally our lifeline. The breath is a connecting force, bringing our world together, reminding us of the responsibility we have to all other breaths.

“As we [begin] this new year, we stop to take a breath, [to wonder, to reflect on these questions: Are we noticing our breath? How are we using it?] Are we living with a deep sense of connection to our lives [and how we connect to each other]? The most simple and yet soul-stirring gift that we can give to ourselves during these Days of Awe is an invitation to [breathe], to be present for our lives and our loves; to return to the ‘breath – neshamah’ / ‘the soul – neshimah’ and God’s innermost name.”¹²

One more time, let’s slow ourselves together to breathe in. Breathe out.

With each breath, we praise.

With each breath, we appreciate our responsibility to ourselves and connection with others.

With each breath, we renew and refocus our souls.

With each breath, we live.

¹² Rabbi Greg Wolfe, <https://www.bethaverim.org/rosh-hashanah-5773-rabbi-greg-wolfe>