

Rosh Hashanah Sermon “Opening Our Hearts” by Abby

Gostein

Sung:

Open my eyes to truth, open my hands to give freely. Open my
lips to good words, to pure words, open my heart to love

Why did I *open* my words today with Judith Silver’s
composition, “Open?”

As many of you may already be aware, our theme for the High
Holy Days at Temple Beth Shalom this year is “Opening our
hearts.” And, please, we pray, **not** in the sense that would call
upon the cardiologists of our congregation!

Opening our hearts –

Over a decade ago, I was on a plane heading to a Women Cantors' Network conference in the northeast. A woman in her early 60's sat down next to me and I greeted her, as I always like to do when a stranger sits by me. We started the small talk: She was a somewhat inexperienced traveler. I was (and still am) a very anxious traveler. I don't remember how the conversation started, or what questions were asked, but suddenly I was listening to this stranger's story – her deeply personal account of family strife and abuse.

I don't believe I had mentioned my clergy role to her. And this encounter was before I had ever received training in pastoral counseling. Yet here I was, having been welcomed into another person's sacred narrative. When she finished saying what she needed to say, she looked at me with an expression of wonder and said quietly: I've never told that to anyone before.

What made this moment happen? How was this woman's heart suddenly open to sharing her humanity with a stranger? How was my heart open to receiving what she needed to express? Was it because we were both willing to be vulnerable? Because we were unlikely to ever meet again?

Opening our hearts:

We sit here today amongst people we are *very* likely to see again, family, friends, congregational family, acquaintances. Do we feel open enough to share our humanity with those around us? How high are our protective gates throughout the year and as we gather here now, as we enter the holiest of days? How vulnerable are we willing to be? How far can we open our hearts?

During the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, we are called to refocus ourselves on teshuvah, the self-transformation we are supposed to strive towards each year. But how do we open our hearts enough to get there? And how do we know how "open" is enough?

Does this opening involve letting down our defenses? That's scary. Is it possible that the heart could open too far so as to rip apart beyond repair? Opening one's heart seems like it should be, as my boys would say, all rainbows and unicorns, but it can entail vulnerability and pain.

There's a Chassidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put the sacred words on their hearts. One of his followers asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put the words inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."

Usually a broken heart is viewed as something terrible, something that one would seek to avoid. I appreciate the story's image of a heart, broken open, enabling holiness to dwell within. Whatever it is that enables our hearts to break, this story speaks to the necessity of cracking the heart open in order to transform.

The great sage and musician, Leonard Cohen, writes: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"

Perhaps we can adjust his lyric, for our purposes, to say: We need a crack in everything, including our hearts; that's how the light **will** get in.

On Yom Kippur morning, in the Torah portion, Nitzavim, we will read, “And the Eternal, your God, will open your heart and the heart of your offspring, [so that you may] love the Eternal your God with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

The text teaches us that opening our hearts is really important stuff – in the end, as we just read from Deuteronomy, it is “*for the sake of our lives.*” It enables us to love God with *all our heart.*

Opening our hearts enables us to love fully, and loving with all our heart may be seen as equal to life, itself.

But the text also teaches us that opening one's heart is not easy. In the particular verse I just read, it is clear that we will need God's help with this opening. When we delve further into the Hebrew of the Deuteronomic text, we find that the words translated as "God will open your heart," **וּמַל יְהוָה אֶל־הֵיךָ אֶת-** **לְבַבְךָ**, actually indicate that God will "circumcise" your heart. God will peel off a layer. It's like when someone loosens a bottle top for us so we can open it the rest of the way; perhaps this "circumcision of the heart" is just enough assistance for us to finish the job of opening our hearts - but we still have to do the work.

How do we do that work? As I was discussing the theme of this drash with my very wise sister, at one point she said, “You can’t *think* yourself into an open heart.” How spot-on. Judaism is a religion of deed over creed. We can’t just sit and pray that our hearts be opened. We need to get up and do something.

Opening our hearts might mean adopting the habit of saying a blessing or more each day, simply to stop and recognize something or someone we appreciate in the world, in our lives, in God’s creation.

For example, there are blessings for when we witness a phenomenon like a rainbow or seeing a friend we haven't seen in years (even on Facebook). Opening our hearts might entail writing notes to friends or loved ones, "just because" or offering a kind word or listening ear when we see pain in the face of another.

What would it look like if we opened our hearts more?

Remember – the text says this is "for our lives" – we benefit from opening our hearts. Our lives are enriched. It may not all be easy and a bed of roses. But it can move us beyond our own needs to see the needs of another, or those of the larger community. It can lead us to *connect* with those around us and with our own souls. We lose out when our hearts are closed. We lose relationship and inner peace.

During the High Holy Days we sing: Pitchu Li Sha'arei Tzedek

Avo Vam Odeh Yah

We are used to asking, during the High Holidays, for the gates of righteousness to *open* for us, that we might enter and give thanks to God.

But perhaps WE need to open before we can even realize that the gates are open. Perhaps we need to petition, "pitchu li," open for me more than gates of righteousness, open for me the possibilities of what can be if I let in new ideas and experiences and feelings and ways of being in the New Year, if I open my heart.

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