

Cantor Micah Morgovsky  
Erev Rosh Hashana 5781

The opening stanzas from the poem, A Blessing for One Who is Exhausted, by John O'Donahue:

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic, time takes on the strain until it breaks;  
Then all the unattended stress falls in on the mind like an endless, increasing weight.  
The light in the mind becomes dim. Things you could take in your stride before now become  
laborsome events of will. There is nothing else to do now but rest and patiently learn to receive  
the self you have forsaken in the race of days. At first your thinking will darken and sadness take  
over like listless weather. The flow of unwept tears will frighten you. You have traveled too fast  
over false ground; now your soul has come to take you back.

*You have travelled too fast over false ground. Now your soul has come to take you back.*

Six months ago, we had places to go, people to see, and things to do outside our homes; going to  
work, attending school, dining at restaurants, working out at the gym, socializing with friends,  
attending sporting events, visiting museums and enjoying the theater. Six months ago, we never  
imagined wiping down our groceries and mail deliveries with disinfecting wipes. Nor did we  
expect to wear masks every time we left our homes or wash our hand compulsively countless  
times a day. We never could have imagined the loneliness and isolation of social distancing and  
the painful separation from friends and family.

For some, life is simpler now; no long commutes back and forth to the city, more time at home  
with family, and the chance to rekindle relationships over phone and email. Many, however, feel  
as if they are living in a muddled haze of endless multi-tasking; simultaneously folding laundry,  
preparing dinner, and caring for young children, all while listening in on a Zoom meeting for  
work. Now, more than ever, our attention is pulled in myriad directions. Our thoughts race as we  
engage in endless mental story-telling; reliving regrets of the past, ruminating over the “what-ifs”  
of the future. Often, we turn to mindless distractions to ease the suffering of our busy mind. We  
run from task to task and when we collapse at the end of each day, our thoughts take up the  
running in an exhausting, seemingly unending, cycle.

In this *mitzrayim*, this narrow place in which we find ourselves, it's easy to feel trapped and  
hopeless. But in many of our Jewish spiritual traditions, everything new and beautiful starts from  
within the small places. The big bang that sparked the creation of the universe, the tree that takes  
root and flourishes in the crag of a mountainside. Perhaps, from within *this* small place, there is  
the potential for renewal and return.

Mindfulness Meditation is a practice whose aim is to focus the attention on one thing at a time in  
order to be more fully aware of the present moment. To begin, one might start with a simple  
practice of sitting in stillness and focusing the attention on the breath. In and out. In and out.  
After a few intentioned cycles of breath, the mind will inevitably wander and diverge in different

directions. When this happens, we need not get discouraged. Rather, we can simply *notice* our straying thoughts and then gently return our attention to the breath. This cycle of attention and inattention will happen over and over again, but the moment of *noticing* is the true purpose of meditation. In that small moment, we are presented with an opportunity. In that small moment, we can choose to lovingly return our attention to the breath. To return to our truest self. To return to the singularity of the present moment.

This present moment is ripe with potential – the potential for true experience. And so it is in this moment. And in this one. When we can train ourselves to focus on what is happening right now, when we can quiet the unwholesome story-telling in our minds and choose to return to the present, each and every moment is new, as is everything in it. Each passing moment is unlike any I have lived before. With each cycle of breath, I am a new and different person. In this mindset of ongoing renewal, we can live more fully. Mindfulness allows our hearts to break open, enabling us to live more courageously; to love more fiercely, mourn more deeply, and to respond to others with greater kindness and compassion.

Like mindfulness meditation, Judaism provides us similar opportunities, year after year. Tonight concludes the month of Elul, the period of time leading up to the High Holydays. The month that has passed and the days that lie ahead are a call to mindfulness. They beseech us to pause, look inward, notice our thoughts, forgive ourselves and do the work of returning, of *t'shuva*, so that we may live a fuller and more meaningful life. If we are mindful, the Book of Life is not sealed on Yom Kippur, nor do the gates clang closed as we hear the last *t'kiah g'dolah* of *N'ilah*. The opportunity to return is all the time.

The Psalmist wrote: *Kol hanshama t'haleil Yah*. “Let every soul that breathes praise God.” Until our last, each inhalation is accompanied by an exhalation. In this way, we are in constant dialogue with God and with the world around us. Our attention on the breath acknowledges our relationship with the Divine and gives honor to that sacred partnership. With each breath cycle we are presented with the opportunity to begin again, to become the best version of ourselves, to bring our Divine light into the world.

The breath reminds us to start right here. Right now. Over and over again. There will always be *mitzrayim*, constricted places; whether in our bodies, in our minds or in the world, and we can use our breath as a response to the narrowness we encounter. When we breathe into the small spaces, we bring hope and openness. If we want change to happen out there, out in this crazy, chaotic world, we must begin from within. With every breath cycle, the potential for change arises as we are reborn and renewed. Each time we notice our straying thoughts and actions and choose to return to breath, we recognize the inherent holiness of each moment. In being truly present, we know strength and vulnerability, love and loss, fear and hope.

The poet O'Donahue concludes:

Take refuge in your senses, open up to all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain when it falls slow and free.  
Imitate the habit of twilight, taking time to open the well of color that fostered the brightness of day.  
Draw alongside the silence of stone until its calmness can claim you.  
Be excessively gentle with yourself.  
Gradually, you will return to yourself, having learned a new respect for your heart  
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

May these High Holydays allow us a return to the small miracles we may have rushed through these last many months. May we be excessively gentle with ourselves and with those around us. And may we gradually return to ourselves, over and over again, having learned a new respect for our hearts and the joy that dwells within. Allow us to breathe into the small spaces, knowing that from within this narrow place we may yet bloom again and again and again.  
Shana Tova