

I once worked for a rabbi who used to say, and I quote him,

“Christians have the market cornered on

God

talk.”

While I might use different language, I think he is right – as contemporary, progressive American Jews we have developed a skittishness in talking about God. Talking about spirituality. Talking about things that are vast, immense, bigger than ourselves but also, things that are deeply personal and at the core of who we are.

What’s interesting is that we do it in Hebrew all the time.

Much of our opening liturgy,

our beginning prayers in the morning talk about our souls.

First, we say Modah Ani L’fanecha, how grateful we are that while we slept, God held our souls for us, keeping them safe and then as we awoke in the morning, returning them to our bodies. This concept is really miraculous – that our souls are kept safe and then that my soul is returned to me and your soul is return to you and we wake up as ourselves in the morning.

We thank God for this miracle and then offer words of gratitude for the physical form, for our bodies that house our souls,

and then we say Elohai Nshama Shenatata Bi,

God the soul you have given me is pure.

This is one of the distinct differences between Judaism and many forms of Christianity –

We believe our souls began pure and we praise God for the opportunity to start with a clean slate.

So we talk about, we pray about our souls in Hebrew, in a language in which we tend to have less facility and often less understanding, but in English, when we have more awareness, we shy away.

Tonight, I want to talk about our souls.

If you have not yet had the pleasure to explore Rabbi Naomi Levy's book *Einstein and the Rabbi*, I highly recommend it as your first Jewish read of 5780.

The book chronicles Rabbi Levy's deep dive into a quote from Albert Einstein.

In a letter written to a grieving father, Einstein explained his conception of humanity's relationship to the universe.

These words sent Rabbi Levy on a three year journey as she sought to understand the human soul.

In her book, she flashes to a scene from an Israel trip she took with a group of American rabbis.

When they arrived at the Haas Promenade, a panoramic overlook of the Old City of Jerusalem, Rabbi Levy watched every one of her colleagues stand with their back to the view, pull out their phones and hold them out in front of them. She was confused, why are they all taking pictures of the other side of the street? Did I miss something? Is that a holy site I don't know about?

Too embarrassed to ask a colleague why they were photographing the other side of the street, she thought to herself ok, maybe I'll take a picture of what they're taking a picture of and I'll find a way to secretly ask someone later what it was I snapped a photo of.

As she took the photo, she realized her colleagues were not taking pictures of the run of the mill Israeli sidewalk but rather,

they were taking selfies, photos of themselves with the Jerusalem view behind them.

This prompted Rabbi Levy to reflect on the very idea of a "selfie."

She writes, "we call the picture that we snap of ourselves a selfie, but it doesn't capture the self at all.

It doesn't take in our interior world.

It can't capture your mind, your soul, your longings, your feelings, your prayer. A selfie is all surface."

She goes on to explain that a selfie, though sometimes a fun way to capture a moment can also be a distortion of our reality, an exaggeration.

Rabbi Levy challenges us - instead of thinking of selfies, we should learn how to take a "soulfie" – S- O -U -L -F- I- E, a soulfie,

To look within ourselves, to make a daily attempt to meet our souls.

She writes,

"Taking a soulfie is a way to get to know your soul's contours, its yearnings and longings, its knowledge and its wisdom."

There is a teaching in the Talmud that says that King David inhabited five olamot, five universes.

The rabbis identify these five universes from Psalm 103 and 104 with David's use of the phrase "barchi nafshi."

This is an instance where translation is really hard, but essentially, in English barchi nafshi means, "please, let my soul have the ability to bless."

5 times David says "barchi nafshi"

1. When he began in his mothers womb
2. when. he was born unto the world
3. when he was nurtured and sustained by his mother as a child
4. when he witnessed the downfall of wickedness in our world

And 5. When he looked upon the day of his death.

Our Babylonian sage Rabbi Shimi bar Ukva questions "why and to whom did David say "bless, my soul." And as Talmudic rabbis are want to do, he goes ahead and answers his own question.

He explains:

1. Just as God fills the entire world, so too the soul fills the entire body – a parallel to David beginning in his mother's womb.
2. Just as God sees but is not seen, so too does the soul see but is not seen. – think David being born unto the world
3. Just as God sustains the entire world, so too does the soul sustain the entire body – think about David being nurtured as a child.

4. Just as God is pure, so too is the soul pure – an observation found through David witnessing the wickedness in the world
5. Just as God resides in a chamber within a chamber, so too does the soul reside in a chamber within a chamber – a parallel to David looking upon the day of his death.

These five characteristics align with the five universes of David and draw a powerful analogy –

God is to the world what the soul is to the body.

If we think of God as a guide, as a moral compass, as something to believe in, then so too is our soul.

Our souls can guide us.

Our souls can be a part of ourselves that we believe in, that we are confident in and can rely on to be our true north.

In his book about the High Holy Day season entitled “This is Real and You’re Completely Unprepared,” Alan Lew titled his chapter on Kol Nidre, “The Soul Hears its Name Being Called.”

He talks about a trip he took to Alaska where he learned about the life cycle of the chum salmon.

In the final stages of the salmon’s lives, they jump out of the water repeatedly, propelling their bodies high into the air.

Poetically, some say that when they jump out of the water, they're leaping for joy, celebrating that they have successfully lived, they spawned and ensured that their lifeline continues.

Perhaps more practically, some think that this practice is an instinct, a leftover response from when the salmon would be swimming up rivers and need to jump over obstacles.

Lew writes that just as the salmon may jump as a result of a vestigial instinct, a call from biology, so too do our souls receive a call,

He writes:

“God calls to us from the depths of our despair. It is often the case, I think, that our soul hears its call in the midst of great trial and pain. The soul's journey through the world is a twisted and often painful path. But the soul seems to grow from its suffering, and from the impediments it encounters.”

Tonight, we hear that call.

As the haunting words of the Kol Nidre prayer echo in our sanctuary,

And the air has a little more weight to it,

Our souls hear a call,

A call to be present, to engage in the work of Yom Kippur and beyond.

As we allow our souls to open to this call, as we become more in touch with the core, the essence of our being,

I want to share with you a story that was once shared with me,

the story of Shnai Weiss.

Shnai Weiss was a Jew living in World War II Europe.

Shnai Weiss despised that he was Jewish – he wanted nothing to do with his heritage, his culture, his people.

As the Jews from all over Europe were herded to concentration camps, the Nazis would choose Jews to work for them in the camp offices and often, to make some of the horrific decisions of who would live and who would die.

Shnai Weiss was perfect for the job because while he was Jewish, he too hated the Jews and had little regard or care for their humanity.

The Jews in Shnai Weiss' camp counted the days as they came and went until Yom Kippur was about to arrive.

They came to the rabbi,
still their source of spiritual guidance though he was in the same terrible place as they were.

They said "Rabbi, Yom Kippur is here. What do we do? How will we observe?"

"Well" the rabbi told them "we hardly eat here anyways so we will fast.

And we will do what we can to have a service,

even if it is just to sing the words

Kol Nidre. V'erarei, v'chamei

We will make a Yom Kippur."

The Nazi officers in the camps made certain to know about the Jewish holidays and the calendar so that they could torment the Jews even further.

They knew that on Yom Kippur, Jews fast.

They knew that Yom Kippur was the holiest day of the Jewish year.

As the Nazis heard rumblings that the Rabbi was going to make a Yom Kippur service, they were infuriated.

On Yom Kippur morning, the head officer called the Rabbi into his office.

“Stay here” he told the Rabbi and left the room. He came back a few moments later, rolling a cart piled high with food. Fresh vegetables and fruits, meats, breads.

The rabbi looked at the cart – he hadn’t eaten more than a piece of potato or a moldy scrap of bread in months – he was literally starving.

The officer looked to the rabbi – “eat Jew.”

The rabbi didn’t move.

“Eat!” he yelled “Eat Jew eat!

Quietly, the rabbi said “no, I won’t eat”

“Eat Jew!” the officer shouted and pushed the rabbi onto his knees.

“I won’t eat – its Yom Kippur, Jews don’t eat on Yom Kippur.”

The officer raised his arm, held his gun to the rabbi’s head – “Eat!”

Still nothing.

The officer was incensed. He yelled to the guard at the door – Get me Shnai Weiss!

The guard ran off and returned with Shnai Weiss behind him.

The head officer, his arm raised, gun still pressed to the Rabbi's head called to him,
"Shnai Weiss, come, stand beside me.

This Jew won't eat. Tell him to eat."

Shnai Weiss looked down at the rabbi's face.

Shnai Weiss, who hated the Jews and hated that he was one of them,
shifted his eyes from the rabbi's face up to the officer's.

Shnai Weiss looked at the officer and quietly but firmly said "No."

Outraged, the officer began to yell and scream "Shnai Weiss, you dirty Jew, tell him to eat!"

Not a word left Shnai Weiss' mouth. He stood completely still and just looked at the rabbi
on his knees.

The officer moved his arm away from the rabbi, repositioning his gun to the side of Shnai
Weiss' head.

Again he yelled for Shnai Weiss to tell the rabbi to eat and again, even with a gun to his
temple, Shnai Weiss said nothing.

"You fool! You foolish Jew!" yelled the officer. "I'm going to shoot you! Why won't you tell
him to eat?"

Calmly, Shnai Weiss looked the officer in the eye –

"Because Jews don't eat on Yom Kippur."

The officer pulled his finger on the trigger and shot Shnai Weiss in the head.

He was willing to die for something he wasn't willing to live for.

Shnai Weiss was willing to die for something he wasn't willing to live for.

On Rosh Hashanah, we ask who shall live and who shall die.

Today, as we begin Yom Kippur, this is no longer our question - the book has been written and awaits sealing, the gates are slowly closing.

We're too late for the question of who shall live and who shall die.

Today, our questions are what will I live for and what will I die for.

This is a soul question.

To begin to even knock on the doors of the answer, we have to take a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul - a soulfie.

Over the next 25 hours as our stomachs may churn on empty,

as our heads begin that dull throb

and our minds wander off to other plans and other days,

may we have the strength to pull ourselves back.

To think about what is important in this next year,

to think about what we live for and what we die for,

to open our souls and allow them to guide us.

Kol Nidre is calling, may we have the strength to pick up the phone.

Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.