

## “Restoring Our Soul”

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The Children of Israel are poised to enter the Promised Land. Moses stands before the people. Aware that his fate is to pass away before the Israelites are to pass over into Israel, Moses offers his people final words.

**‘Remember where you came from:’** he says ‘.....the generations-old vision of Abraham and Sarah.....the dreams of Joseph.....the years of slavery in Egypt and the miracles that eventually paved your path towards freedom.’

**‘Remember the Covenant:’** he continues.....‘the foundation of your relationship with Gd’.....your pledge to follow the Torah’s teaching in all that you do, so that you might become a blessing to others - a light to the nations.’

And then....Moses utters a curious phrase ....

*Rak....Hi’sha’mare.....l’cha.....U’sh’more....naf’sh’cha....*

“And remember,” Moses said, “as you do all of these things, be sure that you take care of your soul.”

In a Torah text that often focuses on the more dramatic physical elements of the story – splitting seas, thunderous Mount Sinai, the great pillar of fire and cloud - it is striking to hear in Moses’s words a call for the people to consider the state of their souls. This is particularly true given the story’s context. One might think that, with all of the important things demanding the people’s attention – the work needing to be done to establish themselves in their new homeland -- everyone involved would be wanting to just get down to business. After all, the people had wandered forty years in the wilderness to reach this moment.

However, Moses – with a lifetime of leadership behind him – had learned a thing or two along the way. And so, Moses, the sage that he was, instructed them: ‘Yes.....There is much to be done....Awesome responsibilities to fulfill...and promise to be realized..... However, as you go forth: “*U’sh’more Naf’sh’cha*” - don’t forget to mind the health of your soul.’

Jewish tradition teaches that each of us is endowed with the Gd-given gift a soul – that which brings life to each person. The Biblical legend that most fully informs this understanding of an ‘inner-life’ is found in the story of Adam and Eve. With creation having been completed with

Eden's great garden, Gd sets about creating the humanity that will dwell there. Gathering together soil from earth, Gd forms the body of Adam. After which, the text tells us:

*VaYipach b'Apiv Nishmat Chayim.* --- And Gd breathed into Adam's nostrils "*Nishmat Chayim*" – the "*Neshamah*" – the soul – of life.

Often, during discussions on Jewish spirituality, I will ask people to take a moment and point to where they believe their soul happens to be. Usually, people tend to point in one of two places. Most frequently, I would say, people place a hand over their heart. This is understandable, of course, as the heart is the seat of our love. Others, instead, raise a hand towards their head. This too, makes sense, as the mind is the seat of intellect and reason. Scholars and spiritual seekers in most faith traditions – including Judaism – honor the gifts of heart and mind as being essential to life itself. However, according to our sages, the soul of a person is not to be found in either place. Rather, we are taught, the soul is to be found in a person's breath.

It is why, for example, before we step into prayer in our community.....or begin a ritual celebrating a special life moment.....I – like other rabbis and clergy – often invite everyone present to pause and take a deep breath. So often, in our day-to-day lives, we are moving so quickly. Taking a moment to breathe deeply slows us down.....helps us to focus.....and, spiritually, we are taught – to regain a measure of our own life-force.

Moses's call to care for our soul is unquestionably a personal one....And, while the Torah text is ancient, it is exceedingly relevant in our technologically enhanced 24/7 society. The demands of daily life – for many - are filled to overflowing. We are constantly running.....running to get things done, to accomplish, to achieve, to get ahead. More and more, we find ourselves to be actively engaged and "on."

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke eloquently of the risk that all of this brings to heart and soul. He wrote:

"We have just so much strength within us to give. And if we give and give and give, we have less and less and less - and after a while, at a certain point, we're so weak and worn, we hoist up the flag of surrender. We surrender to the worst side of ourselves, and then we display that to others. We surrender to self-pity and to spite and to pre-occupation. If you want to call it the triumph of sin - when our goodness has been knocked out from under us - well, all right."

According to Dr. King, the consequences that come from doing and doing and doing more include not only the giving up of our physical energy and our time, but also, possibly the sacrifice of something deeper: our better selves....our understanding.....our grace.

At the same time, technology, so often a helpful tool for us in making life easier and more efficient, in many ways - for many – has deepened our sense of overload and of being overwhelmed. The constantly available on-line stream of information via applications: Facebook...Twitter.....Text.....and, of course, e-mail --- all in the palm of our hand -- possesses a gravitational pull that is hard to ignore.

Not so long ago, communications experts were declaring that e-mail was becoming a thing of the past. However, a recent survey undertaken by the Adobe Corporation found that, in fact, the opposite is true. Their findings – are sobering, if not surprising. According to the survey, American adults are constantly checking their e-mail – on average, spending six hours a day writing and replying to messages. The line separating work and home has vanished – as nine out of ten respondents said that they check work e-mail at home and personal e-mail at work. 70% of those surveyed said that they check e-mail while watching TV, 52% do so while lying in bed, 50% do so while on vacation, 43% do so while they are on the phone with other people, and most dangerously – 18% admitted to checking e-mail while driving. (By the way....based on personal observations during a few random trips around Needham, I think it safe to assume that that number is actually much higher.)

For many, the call to being constantly plugged-in-on-line has taken on a life of its own.

Business Executive and Author, Tony Schwartz, in a column entitled “Addicted to Distraction” wrote:

“One evening early this summer, I opened a book and found myself reading the same paragraph over and over, half a dozen times before concluding that it was hopeless to continue. I simply couldn’t marshal the energy necessary to focus. I was horrified. All my life, reading books has been a deep and consistent source of pleasure, learning, and solace. Now the books I regularly purchased were piling up ever higher on my bedside table, staring at me in silent rebuke.

Instead of reading them, I was spending too many hours online, checking the traffic numbers for my company website, shopping for more colorful socks on Gilt and Rue La La, even though I had more than I needed...I was checking e-mail more than I cared to acknowledge, and spending far too much time hungrily searching for tidbits of new information about the presidential campaign.”

Schwartz, as we can imagine – and perhaps, with whom we can empathize - is far from alone. Author Sherry Turkle, in her best-selling book: “Reclaiming Conversation – The Power of Talking in a Digital Age” describes the challenge this way:

“We say we turn to our phones when we’re ‘bored.’ And we often find ourselves bored because we have become accustomed to a constant feed of connection, information and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere. At class or at business meetings or at church (...or *temple*?), we pay attention to what interests us and then, when it doesn’t, we look to our devices to find something that does.”

We are, of course, mindful of the impact that all of this has on our children, as well.

In 1947, Margaret Wise Brown published her children’s bedtime story, “Goodnight moon.” Page after page the narrator helps a little bunny go to sleep by bidding goodnight to the many things important to her. Good night moon. Good night doll house. Good night red balloon. Its rhyme and rhythm have made it a classic for generations of families over the years --- including my family. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been too surprised when Emily came home the other day and shared with me a new 21<sup>st</sup> century take on “Goodnight Moon.” It’s a children’s bedtime book entitled: “Good Night, iPad.” And especially for those who are familiar with the original.....some of will most certainly inspire a smile: “In the bright buzzing room – there was an iPad --- and a kid playing Doom --- and a screensaver of (an angry) bird launching over the moon.....Good night iPad, Good night Doom, Good night (angry) bird launching over the moon.... Good night Facebook friend, ....and Netflix streams.....Androids, apps, and glowing screens ....Good night MacBook Air...Good night gadgets everywhere.”

New York Magazine columnist, Andrew Sullivan, noting the importance of this phenomenon for all generations, has written that:

“...This new epidemic of distraction is our civilization’s specific weakness. And its threat is not so much to our minds – even as they shape-shift under the pressure. The threat is to our souls...”

The power of Yom Kippur is in its call for us to withdraw from life. The day extending from one evening’s Kol Nidrei to the next night’s service of Ne’ilah is supposed to be spent in reflection. We pause in our eating, our drinking, our pursuit of pleasure and entertainment – all in order to unplug us from life’s regular rhythms and stimuli. During this time, we reconnect with that which is more simple and organic: a community of family, friends and shared values – traditional words, chant, and song – the earthy call of the shofar - the memory of loved ones. It is a day when we not only fast from food and drink --- but we are reminded of our life-need to regularly step-back.

A story is told of a professor who began a science class by holding up a glass with some water in it. He then asked his students, “How much do you think this glass weighs?” The students, curious, began calling out answers. “Fifty grams!” “One hundred grams!” “One hundred twenty five grams!”

With a curious grin, the professor said, “I really don’t know unless I weigh it. But my question for you all is: “What would happen if I held it up like this for a few minutes?”

A few of the students spoke quietly amongst themselves, until one answered: “Nothing.” To which, the professor nodded.

“OK, then. What would happen if I held it up like this for an hour?” “That’s easy,” said one of the students. “Your arm would begin to ache.”

The professor again nodded in agreement. “You’re right. Now what would happen if I held up this glass for several hours?”

One student called out: “Your arm could go numb.” While another said: “You might experience severe muscle stress and may even have to go to the hospital.”

Several students and even the professor laughed.

“Very good,” said the professor, “but during all of this time, did the weight of the glass change?”

After a brief pause, the class murmured a unanimous “No.” The professor stared at them. “Then what was it that caused the arm ache and the muscle stress?” The students weren’t sure how to answer: “Let me put it this way,” continued the teacher, “What do I need to do to be relieved of the strain.”

“Put the glass down!” said one of the students.

“Exactly!” said the professor.

In many respects, at the heart of Judaism is a call for us to set things aside and to stop. Shabbat – which is the heartbeat of Jewish time. Taking a moment to recite a blessing before study, before a meal, or over our children before bed. Indeed, every holiday and life ritual is a time when we pull back from life as it is normally lived so that we might restore a measure of equilibrium and soulful balance in our lives.

In fact, our rabbis provide spiritual language for this inner calm. It is called: “*Yishuv*” – “settledness” or, even more specifically: “*Yishuv Da’at*” – “peace of mind.” And while we might think of this as being a phenomenon of a newer, more modern age, it is actually first referenced in the pages of the Talmud. There, Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak notes the challenges that some are having to focusing on their learning. As Torah study was a primary responsibility of the day – the ability to concentrate was essential. And so, the text speaks of the importance of

this state of settled-ness. Reb Nachman describes it as being like a “day when the north wind blows gently.”

John Luther Adams is a Grammy and Pulitzer Prize winning composer and musician. His internationally renowned work – particularly his orchestral pieces - has been deeply influenced by the natural world. According to Adams, in order to successfully create his music, from time to time - he needs to let go completely of his work.

He explains: “During my busy periods of performance and teaching, I hear a great deal of music. And just as I might feel the need to fast during a period of feasting on rich foods, after several months of intensive listening, my ears tell me that they need a time to rest from music. As I begin my new work,” he continues, “my hope is that my fasting may help me hear sounds that I haven’t heard before and to hear familiar sounds with new ears.” Adams concludes: “For years, I’ve kept near my piano my variation on Thoreau’s dictum – a reminder of how I try to work: Believe. Concentrate. Simplify. Simplify. Simplify.”

Living, as we are, as one writer has called, in an age of “web-weariness” – a time when “we have learned to find our identity in our velocity”- Yom Kippur reminds us of our need to preserve our own souls and the souls of our relationships with others. To do so, we are called upon to apply the discipline that is asked of us on this day to the way that we live during the rest of the year. Among some of the things that we might consider to help us:

- \* Set aside regular time for being with others – and not lost on-line.
- \* Schedule regular opportunities to be out in nature.....to breathe fresh air....  
to expand your *Neshamah*. Even half an hour can make a full-day’s difference.
- \* Find for yourself a personal spiritual practice: regular prayer – whether at TBS, at home, or while observing the horizon -- meditation, study, or yoga.
- \* Volunteer – Rabbi Israel Salanter, when asked: “How do you take care of your own spiritual needs?” responded: “I take care of the physical needs of others.”
- \* Set aside regular moments during your week to read for pleasure....or to listen to music....or.....
- \* Commit yourself to a regular phone-fast for yourself and, if possible shared with your family – perhaps from Friday night through Saturday sundown. But regardless of when you fast, make sure that it is for a duration that will allow your time ‘un-plugged’ to be restorative.

This Yom Kippur, Moses’s call to care for our souls is a call for us to ensure our own well-being.....and, in doing so, to help us ensure that all that is precious and important to us is cared for, as well.

In the quiet calm of this holy day – in pursuit of the peace that brings greater balance and perspective.....a prayer, adapted, from the words of poet Wilferd Peterson.

Dear Gd....Slow us down.  
Ease the pounding of our hearts  
By the quieting of our minds.  
Steady our harried pace  
With a vision of the eternal reach of time.  
Give us,  
Amidst the confusions of our days,  
The calmness of the everlasting hills.  
Break the tensions of our nerves  
With the soothing music  
Of the singing streams  
That live in our memories.

Help us to know  
The magical power of sleep,  
Teach us the art  
Of living with greater awareness and focus  
Of embracing the joy of a child's smile  
Of appreciating the wisdom in the words of one older than ourselves  
Of being patient when patience is called for  
Of remaining silent when our words are not necessary  
Of growing in humility, goodness, and grace.

Remind us each day  
That the race is not always to the swift;  
That there is more to life  
Than increasing its speed.

Let us look upward  
Into the branches of the towering oak  
And know that it grew great and strong  
Because it grew slowly and well.

Dear Gd, slow us down.  
And inspire us to send our roots deep  
Into the soil of life's enduring values  
That we may grow toward the stars  
Of our greater destiny.

*Cain Y'hi Ratzon*....Be this Gd's will.