

Enough Love  
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Ohef Sholom Temple  
Erev Rosh Hashana 5778  
September 20, 2017

Every year, Marty and I spend a few days with our kids and grandkids in Rehoboth Beach, DE. Like all annual family vacations, we have our traditions, one of which is a nightly pilgrimage to Fun Land, the Boardwalk Arcade. Several years ago when Brooke was probably six and Blake three, the little guy was playing some kind of bean bag toss with his dad and, wouldn't you know it, by some stroke of sheer luck, the bag he threw landed right smack in the middle hole and he won the grand prize, a life-size stuffed tiger. He was both shocked and delighted as were his parents and grandparents. But his big sister . . . not so much. Through her sobs about how unfair his win was, we adults tried to explain that it was just dumb luck and that she would get lucky the next time, or the time after that, and win a prize too. Not to be consoled, she choked out through her tears, "No I won't. Blake used up all the luck and there is no more left for me."

Not remembering the futility of arguing with a distraught six-year-old, we tried to convince her that that isn't how luck works: that there is more of it, that she will get some too, that her turn will come, since luck can, and does, change. We tried not to laugh, or at least smile, at a little one's first encounter with the reality that life isn't always fair, that some people do seem to have more luck than others, or get what they want or need with little effort. The realization that some things don't come as easily to some as to others, that the universe doesn't mete out rewards or prizes equitably, or that we would be happy if only we had what someone else got was just too unfathomable and painful for a little one to bear, let alone comprehend.

Fortunately, as is the blessing of children, by the next morning, Brooke had forgotten the whole thing . . . but that experience has stayed with me for years. I don't think it is just little kids who feel like luck is finite or that some thing will make us feel better about ourselves. In fact, I think we often feel the same scarcity when it comes to wants in our life. Whether it is enough money, or enough time, or, even, enough love, we adults suffer from this same yearning for whatever it we think we need to feel whole, content, or at peace with ourselves.

The Kabbalists describe this profound sense that there is something else out there for us, something missing in our lives -- a void. This missing something hovers on the edge of our consciousness, bringing with it an essential longing for . . . well, for something. Something more. And this void pulls us relentlessly toward the next high, the next success, the more exciting relationship, the bigger, flashier toy.

Even if, on the outside it seems that we have everything we could ever need or want, why is it that we are constantly in pursuit of stuff, whether over-working ourselves for bigger and better homes, cars, and vacations, or amassing so many other things that clutter up our living spaces and lives? We spend tens of trillions of dollars on this stuff every year and you know what studies show? They don't make us happy. In fact, these things have the opposite effect on our lives, bringing us less fulfillment the more we pursue them. Indeed, a spending binge triggers emotions of

euphoria followed by sadness, depression, anxiety, or dissatisfaction and can drive us to eat too much, drink too much, work too much, and need too much; in short, whatever it takes to avoid facing what that something missing really is.<sup>i</sup>

These same feelings of want and yearning also apply to how we look. We're never thin enough or beautiful enough, always seeking the newest diet or exercise plan, or the latest injection or enhancement to make us feel better about ourselves. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for a healthy lifestyle, including good food choices, a beneficial weight, and a fitness routine to keep you physically and mentally strong. And Judaism has no problem with making oneself more handsome or lovely, citing that Queen Esther beautified herself to meet King Ahashverous for six months! The problem is when we do these things because we don't feel okay about who we are on the inside and we think that, like the stuff we amass, those diets and surgical procedures will make us feel better about ourselves . . . because they truly don't.

The same is true when we search for wholeness or completion in another person -- a beloved. Of course there is nothing wrong with seeking companionship; the Torah teaches us that we are not meant to be alone, that it is not good. But even if you have the perfect partner, who never drives you crazy (don't we all), they still can't be everything you need. I don't have to tell you how many people think that a relationship will make them whole. You can be married to someone you love and feel lonelier with them than on your own. If you are single, you can, as is the new way of relating, "hook up" and feel even emptier and like yourself less afterward than you did before. You can busy yourself with myriad activities and friends, so you don't have to think about that gnawing feeling inside that you are not enough.

I really get it. No matter how well I appear to be doing, or the many sentiments of appreciation you and our community express to me, I often feel unworthy, like I am not doing enough, as if I am not enough . . . as a rabbi or as a human being. I fear that this is the year you will find out that I am not really who you think I am, that I am, in fact, a fraud, passing by some stroke of luck. It isn't rational, but it is real. And no matter how illogical these thoughts seem, understanding their foolishness in my head and believing that they are false in my heart are not the same thing.

It is no wonder that the rabbis teach us that every person walks around with two notes. In one pocket, the message reads, "I am nothing, but dust and ashes." This note-to-self takes us down a notch. It is for the days when we are on top of the world, when we feel as if everything we touch turns to gold, we can do no wrong, and nothing can topple us from our gilded throne, or diminish the high we feel. Yet the reminder in the other pocket, says, "For me alone was the world created." This affirmation is for the times when we feel wholly inadequate to any task before us, that we are scarcely fulfilling our potential, and simply not enough as we are.

I read an article entitled: "Why hasn't the self-esteem movement given us self-esteem?" Likely because it is an inside job to identify those things which cause us to judge ourselves so harshly, to measure success unrealistically, to fear failure so completely, to have no concept of how to fully experience contentment and joy, in other words, to figure out what that something missing -- that void -- is. And I get how hard it is to take the time, and risk the pain, of delving into those dark crevices in our hearts and minds, to slow down enough to notice those thoughts and feelings

that cause us discomfort and even agitation. We are all so good at being busy, at running away from the thoughts that haunt us, of living in our heads rather than our hearts, of ignoring the life of the spirit -- the soul within us that yearns so desperately for peace.

Isn't that why we are here on *Rosh Hashanah*, to take our *cheshbon nefesh*, an accounting of our souls? Don't we come year after year for precisely this reason: to ask ourselves the tough questions so that we can engage in the work of *Teshuvah* -- of turning and returning -- to become better selves, with healthier families, a stronger community, and a deeper connection with God? Isn't the purpose of Judaism, and these High Holidays in particular, to be a transformational practice that turns our fears and struggles into paths of goodness and connection?"<sup>ii</sup> These ten Days of Awe are a gift, an opportunity for self-exploration, reflection, growth and change and our High Holiday prayers, texts, and teachings are designed to help us do just that.

Tomorrow we will contemplate the dreaded words of the *U'netaneh Tokef*, "Who shall be secure and who shall be driven; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled; who shall be poor and who shall be rich; who shall be humbled and who exalted?" Those questions are rhetorical. Are we asking them of ourselves? God doesn't need our prayers because God knows our hearts, our deeds, our deepest insecurities and fears, and our greatest yearnings, that void, that something else we long for, already. We need these prayers. And we need to pray them here because we need each other. We have proven time and again that we are not likely to do this hard work on our own hiding out in our bedrooms or offices, or faking it through the business and busyness of our daily lives.

Yet this prayer comes to remind us that during these High Holidays, indeed every day, we have the power to write the book of our days with our own hands, and heads, and hearts. We can validate our own being. We can fill the emptiness within us. We can find the connection we seek. We can figure out what makes us happy. We can satisfy our yearning for something more. We can live lives of purpose, meaning and joy. How? Through any one of these three avenues the *Unetaneh Tokef* gives us: We can engage in *teshuvah* and cultivate a meaningful spiritual life for ourselves. We can practice *Tefillah* and live with gratitude while connecting with loved ones, our community and God -- the transcendent values that last. And we can engage in *tzedakah* living generously and pursuing justice.<sup>iii</sup> I will be talking about *tzedakah* quite a bit during the rest of these High Holidays, but tonight I want to address the first two pathways to what the *Unetane Tokef* calls tranquility.

*Teshuvah*: I could teach a yearlong course on what it means to engage in a spiritual practice. Developing the capacity to be tranquil long enough to hear the still small voice inside you is essential to finding purpose, joy, and peace. We Jews are terrible at it. We can barely sit through the silent prayer for one minute (that is how long we give you) during services without fidgeting, whispering, and, sometimes even giggling. I'm not much better. In all the Jewish spiritual practice trainings I've done, I was a failure at meditation. The teacher would instruct us to notice thoughts that came into our heads during the silence and then to let them go. But my head was like a pinball game with thoughts shooting through and pinging in my brain at break neck speed.

It wasn't until I found chant as a practice, where my mind could focus on the sound and vibration of my voice, that I could finally be still enough to listen to my inner voice. Anywhere from four to fifty of you have joined us in our monthly chanting circle and we are all experiencing the healing effects. I have told the true story many times that when I returned from my first five day retreat I had a regularly scheduled check up the next day and my blood pressure had dropped thirty points.

But it certainly doesn't have to be chanting. Many of you find inspiration and uplift in our regular worship services. Others of you find quiet in walking, yoga, gardening, or golf. It only matters that you take the time to try to discern the questions. Who am I? What am I yearning for? Where is God's presence in my life and what does God want of me? What brings me joy and why am I not doing it? It is only in being willing to embrace our vulnerability, to stop running away and instead to work to expand our ability to see and hear that we can begin to feel we have enough, to know that we are doing enough, and to believe that we are enough.

*Tefillah*: For thirteen years now during these High Holidays, I have given entire sermons on what it means to cultivate gratitude and about how important it is for a life of self- acceptance, self-love, and wholeness. We've talked about generating gratitude lists for all of the blessings in our lives. No matter what our circumstances, how much we struggle, or what difficult times we are passing through, every one of us can find a myriad of things for which to be grateful:

If you've lost money in the stock market, but you still have your family, you can be grateful.

If you've lost your job, but you still have your health, you can be grateful.

If you can't move your legs, but you can move your arms, you can be grateful.

If you've lost one you loved dearly, but you can still get out of bed each day and honor his or her memory with your very life, you can be grateful.

That is why the Hebrew term for gratitude is "*hakarat hatov*," "recognizing the good." The secret embedded in the *Hebrew* is that gratitude depends not on getting something good, but on recognizing the good that is already yours. And these things include the most transcendent ultimate values -- your relationships, your community, and God. In a year when fires, floods, and earthquakes have ravaged our nation and world, how much more clear is it that stuff is replaceable and how much of it you have matters not when it is consumed by flames, floating down a street, or buried beneath rubble. What is eternal, what is irreplaceable, what is precious is love.

A 75-year-long Harvard study tracked the physical and emotional well-being of 700 men from 1939 to 2014.<sup>iv</sup> They found that one thing alone surpassed all the rest in delivering happiness and fulfillment and that is love, more specifically good relationships. And it isn't about having the perfect partner (don't we all!?) or being popular. What matters is the quality of our close relationships. If we're sitting at the table with our loved ones and checking e-mails, scrolling through Facebook, and posting Snapchat or Instagram photos instead of talking to the people we are with; if we consistently choose to stay at the office late rather than spending time with our significant other, or our children, or a good friend; if we retreat into isolation rather

than reaching out to those closest to us when we undergo a trauma like losing a job or a parent, or making a bad investment; then we are not cultivating the transcendent value of love. Check in with the people closest to you and ask them if they feel that they get enough quality time, enough emotional intimacy, enough physical affection, enough love from you and you'll know how you're doing and, hopefully work on doing better. As I said to my ex-husband, he should live and be well, marriage is not wash and wear or permanent press; he didn't get it, hence the ex.

There is one more transcendent value -- the most essential of all -- to filling the void, to knowing wholeness -- that combines both *teshuvah*, developing an authentic inner life, and *t'fillah*, cultivating gratitude and connection. It is establishing a relationship with the one Being for whom we are always enough and that is God. God's love for us is infinite and in God's love we need never fear our frailties or our failings. After all, it was God's loneliness that birthed us and God is the deepest source of love we have. Trusting in God's love is a powerful force for healing, because in God's love, we are never alone and we are always enough. Our task in life is to live in such a way so as to develop a life of the spirit that is strong and clear enough to see the light and love of God that is forever streaming through us and around us.<sup>v</sup> It is then that we connect with what has been concealed from us, the part of us that is most truly and infinitely alive.<sup>vi</sup> It is from this place of love and peace that, unlike a six year old, we can put our envy and jealousy aside and truly rejoice in the success of those around us.

It is a struggle to rise above the judgment, noise, speedy competition, distraction and excessive stuff of life. It takes great courage to be willing to embrace our vulnerability, to stop running away and to ask ourselves the painful questions that will make us whole . . . and it is even more difficult to sit with not having all the answers.<sup>vii</sup> It takes great effort to strive to be authentically ourselves, to embrace all of who we are, and to love ourselves for all of it. It is so hard to find a balance between, "for me alone was the world created" and "I am nothing but dust and ashes;" to really know in our heart that our flaws are holy, that the deepest comfort and joy come from accepting our personal vulnerability. But it can be done.

During this New Year, may you find a path and a practice that open your heart, fill your soul, deepen your love for yourself, enhance your connection with others, and lead you to embrace a new level of being alive. *Shana Tovah*.

ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Shifra Hendrie, "The Secret of the Void: The Kabbalah of Self-Discovery," *Chabad.org*.

<sup>ii</sup> Sheila Peltz Weinberg, *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir*, (White River Press: Amherst, Massachusetts), 2010, 52.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi David Teutsch, *Mishkan Hanefesh for Rosh Hashanah*, p. 173.

<sup>iv</sup> Melanie Curtin, "The 75-year Harvard Study Found the 1 Secret to Leading a Fulfilling Life," *Inc.com*, February 27, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Weinberg, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>vi</sup> Hendrie, *ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> "Our task," in the words of the philosopher Rilke, "is to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, Rilke says, which could not be given you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday, far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."