

## KOL NIDREI

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The prophet Jeremiah who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem said in his distress that he wished his mother's womb would have been his grave meaning of course that he would never have been born. There is a lot of sadness in our lives and world and much of it is caused by people. For the Jewish people, all the hatred and persecution we have experienced over centuries is sad enough; how much the sadder is it today with the rise of anti-Semitism?

In the Talmud a story is told of a very sad woman who goes to her rabbi for relief. The rabbi tells her she needs to bake a cake but must only use ingredients she receives from homes where there is no sadness. She begins going around the town knocking on doors and asking. That evening she returns to the rabbi and tells him that she could not find one ingredient for her cake.

Every day in our Amidah prayer we ask G-d to remove from us grief, sighing and sorrow.

Life hurts. When we discover what is causing our pain we can begin healing. We are challenged not to succumb to the difficulty in our personal lives and what is going on in our world. Samuel Beckett wrote: "To be born was a form of damnation, an irredeemable fall from the grace of nonexistence." Beckett's statement is cynical and depressing. Judaism has as its first commandment that we are to be fruitful and multiply. What greater statement of hope for the future is there than the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Holocaust survivors?

Mark O'Connell, a psychotherapist, wrote: "Shortly after their first child was born his wife said that if she knew she was going to love him so much she was not sure she would have had him." Loving someone, loving life, makes us vulnerable. To be alive means there are risks because of nature, happenstance and the behavior of human beings. The author Marcia Cohn Spiegel tells us: "We are proof of G-d's presence in the world—when we reach out to others in time of need, when we offer words of healing, when we comfort those who have fallen, when we give of ourselves. It is this faith that sustained those who came before us and will sustain us today." As clichéd as it may be, when it is dark, we need to turn on a light even if it involves fumbling around in the dark for the switch.

In Buddhism, Shambhala is a mysterious place of inner peace and tranquility. Shambhala teaches that in the midst of loneliness, fear and despair is the heartbeat of all things. The genuine heart of sadness is like a jewel buried for a million years that is not discolored or harmed. Shambhala teaches that when we try to protect ourselves from the pain and sadness of the world we are separating ourselves from the world and others. Our rabbis taught that our synagogues must have windows to ensure what is going on in the world outside can enter our hearts and prayers inside.

When we do not feel the pain of children who are hungry, innocents who are imprisoned, those abused and neglected, we add to the suffering in our world. When we do not close ourselves off, when we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with others and fulfill the commandment of loving our neighbor as ourselves. The Kotzker Rabbi taught that only a broken heart can ever become a whole heart. It is holy and sacred work to feel the pain of another and it is holy and sacred work to lessen that person's pain.

Feeling guilt for what we have done and being angry with ourselves creates sadness. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that guilt tells us our finger is in the fire so we will know to take it out. It is very difficult for us to move on; we hang on to guilt which is destructive, dark and damaging. A Midrash has Moses telling the Israelites that their going into the Promised Land, entering the land of Israel, represents for them learning from their sinful past and moving on.

Harboring anger is clinging to resentment and a source for a lot of our pain. Resentment is our refusal to cross the bridge of forgiveness which allows us to enter back into relationship. Dr. Ernest Kurtz teaches: "To forgive requires us to let go of a self-vision of being wronged and seeing ourselves as victims. To see oneself as a victim is to adopt a worldview in which forgiveness becomes impossible. Being forgiven and forgiving leads to a rebirth that allows us to once again be close to others and be in relationship. Feeling distant from people, especially family and former friends, is a source of profound sadness." Forgiveness dispels sadness and not forgiving prolongs it. Sadly, we can be our worst enemies.

Gregory Orr, a professor of poetry at the University of Virginia, writes about accidentally shooting his brother when hunting when they were children and his

concern for the nine year old girl who recently killed her gun instructor. He says that when these accidents happen most people—parents, family and others including clergy and therapists—often deal with guilt as compared to something much scarier: the fact that accidents happen. *Netaneh Tokef* tomorrow will dramatically remind us that we do not know what will happen a second from now yet alone a year from now. Perhaps this is why *Netaneh Tokef* causes some of us to stand in silence and cry and others to chatter and disengage. Orr's hope is that someone will help with the sadness when such accidents happen, that someone will hold this nine year old child as he wished someone held him and tell her that sadness is real and it's alright to feel the way she does.

The Alexanderer Rebbe told his community that there is only a hair's breadth between sadness and bitterness and bitterness leads to heartbreak and heartbreak leads to death. We even see G-d being sad. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of the Warsaw Ghetto said that the Holocaust made G-d sadder than anything that ever occurred in the Universe; the Holocaust made G-d cry as G-d never cried before. And we are created in the image of G-d.

So much sadness and pain is caused by us, people, including the sadness and pain we bring upon ourselves. Joseph Campbell writes of our existential anxieties and fears over the future of our planet and our failures contributing to this threat. Governor Jay Inslee of Washington State said: "We're the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it." We will not only have to live with the knowledge that the environment will be destroyed as we know it for our great, great grandchildren but we will have to live with the guilt and sadness that we could have prevented it and did not. There are deeply moving and sad memoirs of people who were in positions to save someone, do something to avoid tragedy, stand up to evil doers and did not. We do not want this to be our memoir. How will we be judged for being able to save our planet but did not; and as Jews, that we did not fulfill the commandment of being guardians and stewards of our world? How sad would this be?

Vincent Van Gogh observed that one may have a blazing heart in one's soul and yet no one ever comes to sit by it. Loneliness brings on much sadness. How much sadness could be relieved if we simply reached out more to others and welcomed them into our lives? In our bar/bat mitzvah class on ethical behavior we talk

about the mitzvah of opening our hearts and homes, *hachnasat orchim*. As parents, do we role model this for our children? How many of our children grow up having different people in need of company welcomed into their homes and to their holiday tables and not just people who are just like us?

I ask them when at a bar mitzvah party and you see a kid sitting alone, are you going to invite him to be with you or leave him all alone? Much of this kind of behavior is learned when we are children. We underestimate the significance of kind and welcoming behavior and how it can dispel sadness. The great Shammai taught that we should greet every person with a pleasant and warm countenance. How many times have people walked by you or me as if we are invisible? G-d forbid that you or I will ever do this to others.

Studies have shown that many people do not enjoy being alone. This was correlated with people having less joy in their lives. There is a relationship between experiencing joy and being able to enjoy time alone. We need quality time alone including the proverbial walk alone in the woods to think and reflect. Sartre sarcastically remarked that someone who is lonely when alone is keeping bad company. We will experience more joy and less sadness if we learn to enjoy being alone. How important is this to teach our children to do given the world they are growing up in and influenced by? Being alone with our computers and iPhones doesn't count.

We know that to live a life of meaning and joy we need to be around positive people. We underestimate how we affect each other's moods and states of mind. Good friends are like gold and I am not speaking about friendships in the loose and easy way we throw this word around today. Paulo Coelo writes: "Friendship is like a river; it flows around rocks, adapts itself to valleys and mountains, occasionally turns into a pool until the hollow in the ground is full and it can continue on its way." He tells us: "Stay close to those who sing, tell stories, and enjoy life, and whose eyes sparkle with happiness."

We need such people in our lives and to be such people for others. We do not want to be the person who brings the room down when we enter and we do not want to be in the room when someone does. A recent study in the journal *Neurology* showed that people who are highly cynical are more likely to develop

dementia. Whether these findings will hold up or not, we all know that the more cynical, sarcastic, negative, critical and kvetchidikka we are, the sadder we are.

There are many views ranging from philosophical to neurological as to what makes us happy: inner states of being where there is contentment, positive outlooks, thankfulness and peace of mind. These are the ingredients for happiness. Material things cannot make us happy, cannot fill the emptiness inside of us; only meaningful relationships can. Yet there is an increase in our efforts to keep buying and acquiring things in a futile effort to fill our emptiness. Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, stresses: “We should be sure to fill our lives with love and use things. We should deny love to things and only love people and love living an ethical life.”

Nietzsche said: “Hope is the evil of evils because it prolongs man’s torment.” How much work is required to fight cynicism and negativity? How much work is required to be positive and hopeful individuals? The science writer, Hillary Rosner writes: “That humans have caused hardship and heartache for scores of people, other creatures and our planet. However, she points out: “Human beings have done great good, behaved with extraordinary kindness and compassion, demonstrated profound righteousness and altruism.”

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught that it is no small thing to bring a little joy to another human being. Let us never forget this: to bring a little joy to another person is a huge mitzvah. He also taught that it is no small thing to relieve another of some of his or her sadness. Let us remember this also. Reb Nachman taught that we should never despair and we should never give up hope because we are not alone, G-d is with us. He taught that we should not be sad if we break something because we if we have the power to break something, we have the power to repair it; not only but especially, our relationships.

As I tell our bar/bat mitzvah kids, we should never underestimate ourselves in regard to how much good we can do with our lives. No, no one here is so lucky to not have been born. We are all blessed to have been born, blessed to be here this Kol Nidrei evening and blessed that we can do so much good with our lives, relieve so much sadness and bring so much joy and kindness into our world.

SHABBAT SHALOM AND GOOD YOM TOV.