

Yom Kippur Drasha 2020- Ne'ilah

On the last day of 2019 I woke up in my tent in Bitangabee Bay, a beautiful camping ground on the coast of southern NSW . I knew that the sun had come up, but the light outside looked dim, there was an orange haze that filtered through the dark walls of the tent.

When I got out of the tent, I looked into a grey sky and inhaled smoky air. I noticed a thin layer of ash covering all our belongings. The children asked us why we could look directly at the sun without squinting and we explained that we were inside a cloud of smoke. There was a hushed stillness throughout the campsite. The animals had taken flight- no birdsong or rustling of wallabies in the bushes. Fellow campers used all their senses to decide what to do next. Ultimately a ranger came speeding into the campsite to tell us to “pull up stumps and hit the road”, the fire was coming and there was only one road out. From that moment on the day unfolded with solid intensity- we packed our things (a job that would usually have taken a full day done in 2 hours!), queued for hours for fuel, entered apocalyptic scenes of harsh and hot winds. As chaos and confusion ensued around us I remember telling myself that we just needed to keep moving, *one step at a time, one decision, one action*. We were lucky that we found a place to stay that night and that we were able to make it home, to Melbourne, on New Years Day. From within the shrouds of smoke we galvanised ourselves and took one step at a time.

The image of our beautiful country being consumed by fire reminds me of another fire that did not consume. Of course this is the burning bush- which caught Moshe's eye and captured his curiosity in the beginning of the book of Exodus. In this encounter God calls out to Moshe by name and Moshe replies “Hineni- here I am”. God introduces Godself as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and gives Moshe a quick resume- “I have come down to rescue the people from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” But this description is not enough for Moshe. He needs another name. “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you’ and they ask me, ‘what is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” (Shemot 3:13) Moshe wants to give the people certainty. He believes that they would prefer the familiarity of their slavery to the uncertainty of freedom. So God replies to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” This name is a verb rather than a noun, and it is the verb “to be” but conjugated in several tenses simultaneously. Effectively God is saying, “my name is I

Will be What I Will Be” or “I am becoming what I am becoming”. It has become a very famous name for God- unspecific, mysterious, undefined. By choosing this name God is asking us to be comfortable with such elusive qualities, to be able to sit with uncertainty and still trust. *I am who I am-* I am risk, I am surrender, I am life, I am the present, I am the future. *One step at a time, one action, one decision.*

2020 began in flames and has continued to be the most surprising, frightening, challenging year that many of us have experienced. Seeing inside the cloud of smoke during the bushfires and now under the shadow of COVID-19, reminds me of the words of my friend and teacher Debbie Masel, who said that when we are in the twilight and it's hard to know what is true or real in the world, the only real truth is what we can see within ourselves. The shadows outside illuminate our inner workings.

Which brings me to Ne'ila. The service that happens in the twilight, as the boundaries of light and dark, holy and mundane, human and angel collapse. During Ne'ila we are nearing the end of Yom Kippur, the day on which we become like angels, relieved of the obligation to eat, drink or engage in other worldly pleasures. It is during this service that we feel the full transformational power of the day of Yom Kippur, we can touch a sense of freedom that is unique to this moment. It is an intensely collective experience.

During Ne'ila we lean in to one another as we beat our chests for the last time and call out the collective names of the sins for which we repent. We spread our wings and fly together in ecstatic song. The idea of doing Ne'ila in isolation seems impossible, yet, this year we are engaged in another kind of collective experience. This thought comforts me. I was inspired by the words of author Elizabeth Gilbert who said, “Our spiritual practice is no longer practice, we are living through times when we need to spend the spiritual capital that we have been saving up.” Every Ne'ila that has come before this one has filled us up with the resources necessary to be in this moment. We have been flexing and building our spiritual muscle to hold us in good stead for precisely these challenging times. The work is done, now we just need to be present and take one step at a time.

One of the iconic images of the Ne'ila service is the image of a gate. The service is known as the “Closing of the gates”. This refers to the gates of heaven which have been open to receive our prayers and our teshuvah over the past weeks. We adopt a sense of urgency as we feel that this is our final chance to pour out our hearts before the Divine.

To quote Debbie Masel again, "After a day of openings the gates of heaven are shutting. So why do we feel so high, so expanded? Because, say the mystics, after a day of living like angels, we are no longer shut out. The gates are closing, behind us, and in a world that transcends dichotomies, we hear, as one, the primordial, pre-articulate cry of the ram's horn- The sound of a new beginning. Yom Kippur is a true day of at-one- ment." We know now, more than ever in our lifetimes what it means to be locked in, what it takes to find freedom from within a confined space and make meaning from limitations. Over the past few months we have internalised the tension between boundaries and the infinite. As days roll into each other, each one similar to the last, work and leisure, private and public are blurred, we sink into the fluidity of this time. We are floating in a tidal river of infinite time. And simultaneously never have boundaries been stricter and stronger- staying within our own 4 walls, our own 5 kms, our own state lines.

Throughout the service the tension builds up to an ecstatic crescendo, the time when the Cohen Gadol was allowed into the forbidden inner sanctum, the holy of holies, and as day meets night and heaven meets earth and the Cohen Gadol emerges unscathed, we find ourselves in a swirling melting pot of holiness and humanness.

So this is my message: Ne'ila brings us into a time of both folded boundaries and divine uncertainty like the name of G-d. Ironically, from this place we may be able to see more clearly, by looking within. I think about the smoke and the panic I felt in Bitangabee Bay and I remember- All we need to do is take one step at a time. We have been storing spiritual capital by engaging in prayer, ritual and community over many years- now is the time to use it. And then as the shofar sounds and we lose our angels' wings we start the year with our feet firmly planted on the ground, in all our human power, ready to internalise the words of our heroine, the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg: *"Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."*

