

We start Yom Kippur by taking back all of our promises from the past year. This is the literal meaning of Kol Nidrei. We say, all of our vows and our oaths, we take them back. We nullify what we promised, we cancel our commitments.

Last year, on Kol Nidrei, I arrogantly declared that it was a night of broken promises and of broken hearts. And yet, I stand here tonight endlessly more shattered and heartbroken.

So many promises broken. So many hopes destroyed. So much pain, so much grief and endless loss.

A great religious tradition does not deny the pain of loss, in the words of the Kotzker rebbe - the only whole heart, is a broken one. No awake spirit can move through this world without enduring a broken heart. There is nothing real that makes life painless.

Tomorrow we will hear in the Torah reading about God's instructions to Ahron; about how he should conduct himself in the priestly services. This is the only time in the Torah that God has a message specifically for Ahron. This direct divine communication is given immediately after the death of Ahron's sons. This seems paradoxical but then there is a way to understand this. Ahron is changed by this greatest tragedy. A part of him is opened and through this he can hear something that until this moment was too muffled, too distant. Through loss Ahron hears the voice of God. The Torah text describes Ahron in the moments immediately after his son's deaths. "Va'Yidom Aharon" - And Ahron was silent. He had no words. But perhaps in that silence he could finally hear. Tomorrow in U'Netaneh Tokef the voice of the divine is described as a Kol Demama Daka - a still small voice. Perhaps when Vayidom Aharon - when Ahron was speechless, that this was the moment, that the Kol Demamah Daka, the still small voice could reach him.

Rabbi David Wolpe teaches that when we experience a loss a hole opens up inside of us. It is almost as if the loss itself ploughs right through us, leaving us gasping for air. We bleed through that opening and sometimes old wounds are

reopened. Things we thought were safely inside, patched over, healed, become painful again in the wake of the new pain. But very slowly the agony subsides, around the edges of that wound things begin to heal. Scar tissue forms. The hole remains but instead of allowing only a constant stream of emptying, it begins to permit things to enter. We receive some of the love and wisdom that loss has to give us. Now is when loss can have content beyond the ache. This is the time to create meaning. Pay attention to what comes into that open space. Nothing can make the pain go away. Making loss meaningful is not making loss disappear. The loss endures and time will not change that truth. But now it has some purpose.

The Esh Kodesh, the Hasidic Rebbe, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaczezno continued to teach his Hasidim while in the Warsaw Ghetto. His teachings were written down each motzei shabbat and were then preserved by the historian Emmanuel Ringleblum and the Oneg Shabbes collective who valiantly sought to record life in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Rebbe's teachings were buried under the ghetto in milk canisters and we recovered after both he and his wife and children were murdered by the Nazis.

He provides insight into an incident in the Talmud. The Talmud teaches that R'Yose entered into a ruin in Jerusalem to pray, whereupon he heard a Bat Kol - a heavenly echo cooing like a dove lamenting: woe to me that I have destroyed my house and exiled my children - the rabbis ask - why did he not hear this heavenly voice until he was in the ruins? The Esh Kodesh teaches that when R'Yose was in the destroyed city of Jerusalem his heart was even more broken than before, and in that state of brokenness he was able to hear the divine voice.

And so I offer to you the possibility that tonight, with our broken hearts and our broken promises, that we might be more open to hear the Kol Demama Daka - the echo of the divine in this world.

However, the Esh Kodesh has other teachings, different understandings of what it is to be heartbroken.

The Rebbe gave a Rosh Hashanah drasha in 1940 in the Ghetto. On Erev Yom Kippur there was a German bombardment of Warsaw that resulted in the death of 60,000 people. From this assault the Rebbe's only son was murdered. Further bombings in this campaign then killed the Rebbe's sister-in-law and daughter-in-law. Following these deaths the Rebbe did not teach for a month. His drasha on parshat Chayei Sarah is his first teaching after the loss of 3 of his family members. On Rosh Hashanah we read of Akeidat Yitzchak - of the binding of Isaac. We read about how Abraham was willing to end his son's life if this is what the divine demanded of him. Perhaps we would have thought that the rebbe, in the weeks after his son's death, would identify with Avraham. A wise and pious man who is willing to endure anything in service of the divine. But that is not what the Rebbe teaches. Instead he focuses on Avraham's wife, Isaac's mother; Sarah. There is a well known midrash that Sarah heard of Avraham's intention to sacrifice their only son and the grief of this caused her heart to break and for her to die. Avraham might have had a message for us about piety and dedication but the Rebbe says that Sarah had a message for the divine. The Rebbe taught that Sarah's death was a lesson to Hashem: we won't always pass the test. Human beings have limits and we may not be able to withstand our broken hearts. The Rebbe teaches his Hasidim in the Warsaw Ghetto that our matriarch Sarah intercedes on behalf of all the broken hearted to the divine - don't push us too hard because we might break. She is the voice in God's ear warning him, not everything that doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The Rebbe, in the weeks after losing his only son - channels Sarah Imeinu - he challenges G-d: you might not have killed our bodies but we are barely alive under all of this grief and loss.

**Natasha Sholl, a Melbourne Jew of wisdom and author of her memoir "Found, Wanting" writes:**

I was in my early 20s when my partner Rob died suddenly and unexpectedly. As I grappled with the loss, I was told to be grateful for the time we had together. That he wouldn't want me to be sad. I was told I needed to be strong. That I

was lucky I was young enough to find another partner and move on...I was no more prepared for my life to implode than anyone else. I was no stronger, braver, more equipped to manage the situation. We position those grieving as somehow superhuman, which is easier than acknowledging that there is nothing more intrinsically human than grief. The grief is not a separate entity. It exists within us, and wherever we go, it will follow. The world wants to see post-traumatic growth. It wants to see happy endings. She writes: In the worst moments of my life, people were telling me that I would learn from this. Come out the other side with a greater appreciation for the small things, as if my partner's death was some kind of narrative plot device. As if it was a tool for character development and not a tragedy in its own right. Not only do people want you to experience grief and loss unscathed, you must emerge a better person. We tell those grieving to move on. We hear that we need to get over the loss. Over. On. As if it is something to be climbed. And this is what is missing from the language of loss. It fails to acknowledge that the grief is not a separate entity. It exists within us, and wherever we go, it will follow.

So which is it - does loss make us wiser or might it crush us under its endless weight?

I don't know.

It might be neither, it might be both.

And that is the humility that we reach for each year on Kol Nidrei. We take back what we said. We forgive ourselves of our broken promises. We are forgiven for the times we said - I can do this, I can keep going, only to collapse in a sobbing heap in the shower. And we are forgiven for the times we said - the pain is too much for me, only to find ourselves still here. Tonight we forgive ourselves and each other for what we thought was true, for the certainty that we previously held as we walked through the world.

R' Alan Lew has an insight into the introduction to Kol Nidrei - the tefillah opens with

עַל דְּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דְּעַת הַקֶּהָל. בִּישׁוּבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישׁוּבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה. אָנוּ מִתִּירִין  
לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִינִים:

With the consent of the Almighty, and consent of this congregation, in the heavenly court, and in the worldly court, we hereby grant permission to pray with transgressors.

He notices this word - Avaryanim - an avaryan is a criminal or a sinner but within that word is Avar - passed. He says that when we come to Kol Nidrei we bring our past selves to the service. We cannot leave any of our experiences behind us - they walk alongside us throughout all our journeys.

Tonight we bring our previous selves into the room, those almost strangers who we were a year ago and we nullify their vows. Those past selves spoke with certainty and today we are humbled.

Elie Wiesel told the following tale of a young man, assailed by doubts, who seeks the solace of a rebbe.

Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz invited the young man to come closer, and then he said with a smile - know my young friend that what is happening to you also happened to me. When I was your age I stumbled over the same obstacles. I too was filled with questions and doubts. I was wallowing in doubt, locked in despair. I tried Torah study, prayer, and meditation. In vain. Penitence, silence and solitude, in vain. My doubts remained doubts and my questions remained threats. I simply could not go on. Then one day I learned that the rebbe Israel Baal Shem Tov, the BESHT, the founder of Hasidism, would be coming to our town. Curiosity led me to the shtibel where he was receiving his followers. When I entered he was finishing the amidah prayer. He turned around and saw me, and I was convinced that he was seeing me, me and no one else. But so was everyone else in the room. His gaze overwhelmed me, and I felt less alone. And strangely I was able to go home, open the talmud and plunge into my

studies once more. You see, said the rebbe of Koretz, I was no longer alone and though the questions remained questions, I was able to go on.

The wise woman Dr Rachel Naomi Remen shares a story of one of her patients. A very strong and capable woman who lived alone. This woman lived with a chronic illness and one day she experienced a significant flare up. She was in agonising pain for 2 days at home before she realised that she needed to attend the hospital. So she packed a bag, put on her makeup, packed herself a book to read in the waiting room and commenced the 50KM drive to the hospital. She was in such significant pain that she had to pull over to the side of the road several times along the journey to wait for the pain to subside before she could continue. She had brought a bowl and a towel and had thrown up several times in the trek to the hospital. When Dr Remen asked her why she hadn't called for a friend to assist, she answered that it was in the middle of a work day and everybody would have been busy. She then spent the next day at hospital alone. Dr Remen asked her why she hadn't called any of her friends then. She said none of her friends have any knowledge about medical things. How could they assist? Dr Remen responded - Why didn't you call me? Well, the woman answered, this isn't your area of specialty.

Dr Remen said: Jessie, even children instinctively run to others when they are hurt.

The woman responded: yes, I've never understood that. It's so silly. It doesn't help the pain at all.

Dr Remen replied - Jessie, it doesn't help the pain, it helps the loneliness.

Ultimately perhaps that is why we are here tonight. If we have to face our broken hearts and our broken promises and not know if we will be able to withstand our pain, our grief and our losses, at least we don't have to do this alone.

Nick Cave was interviewed this year by Krista Tippett reflecting on the death of two of his sons. He spoke about the importance of religion in his life. He said many people scoff that religion is a crutch. But he countered, we are all

hobbled by the pain of life, we need something to hold us upright, to enable us to get through our days with dignity. We are blessed to have these ancient tools in our time of need.

Tonight we are together. Our tradition and ancestral wisdom means that not only are we not alone in this moment but we are also not alone across time and space. The prayers we recite tonight are many layers of people like us and not like us, who continued to walk this path together, last year, this year and next year.

And so as is our very ancient tradition here, I will conclude with a poem from Reb Leonard HaCohen

This is the way we summon one another,  
But it is not the way we call upon the Name.  
We stand in rags,  
We beg for tears to dissolve the immovable landmarks of hatred.  
How beautiful our heritage,  
To have this way of speaking to eternity,  
How bountiful this solitude,  
Surrounded, filled and mastered by the Name,  
From which all things arise in splendour,  
Depending one upon the other.

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