

An Invitation to Move Beyond Words- Yom Kippur drash (N'ila) 2024

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I wish to begin with a story told by Ariel Burger in his book *Witness- Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*.

Professor Wiesel is singing to his students. He is singing a song from his childhood, conveying the beauty of a lost world. The song has no words – it is a niggun, a wordless melody – and it is chilling. His eyes are closed, and he sways with the rhythm. His hands move, gently up-and-down, as if he is conducting an invisible choir.

After several days, Ariel Burger asked Prof Weisel “Why did you decide to sing? You’ve never done that before. Why at that moment?” The Professor looked soberly at him and said, “Sometimes we must move beyond words. As you know, teaching, and learning do not happen only through the sharing of information; there must be an added element. I had been lecturing all semester, the students were less engaged. I felt that something was missing: the melody. So I decided to sing. Prof Weisel continued: “That moment of song opened some hidden door, and in the classes that have followed, the discussions are more alive; they ask deeper questions.”

For me, Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur can feel like a barrage of words on a page, an avalanche of prayer, a litany of lyrics. When N'ila arrives, we are at last invited to go beyond words, to transcend the machzor pages and to open some hidden door. Like Elie Weisel's students who needed music to access their learning, in this hour, we can unlock these days of awe through song and collective presence.

Over these days, words have been chanted, channelled, listened to and lamented , processed, pondered and pleaded. Words of longing, words of gratitude, words of forgiveness, our stories and words of our tradition have swirled around us and have brought us to this moment dizzy with anticipation. The moment of twilight, the time between the day and the night, when the light can play tricks with our eyes and our heart. It can be hard to know what is true or real in the transition, the only real truths are the ones we find within ourselves. We become like angels, relieved of the obligation to eat, drink or engage in other worldly pleasures. N'ila is a time of uncertainty, a time beyond words.

I have always loved this time on Yom Kippur. Standing, light headed in the firm embrace of the community, the music of N'ila builds until it reaches a crescendo and our hearts are pierced by the still small voice of the shofar. I emerge from N'ila feeling touched and energised. I have come to understand this as the experience of AWE.

Social scientist Dacher Keltner, who has studied Awe, defines it as a brief state in which we encounter vast mysteries. **Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something that transcends your current understanding of the world.** It accompanies visceral sensations like goose bumps or going very quiet.

Keltner proposes that there are several main triggers for awe, 4 of them apply to N'ila. Music, collective effervescence, life and death and moral beauty.

Music

Firstly, Music stirs awe in us by opening up our minds to the sublime. Like Weisel's students, the musical experience makes the individual feel connected to something larger than the self and the science suggests that with this type of awe people are more inclined to volunteer their time and donate their money. They are more motivated to create meaning. The Talmud states; *"Bimkom rinah sham tehay tefilah"*: "Where there is song, there is prayer."(B'rachot 6a). Our prophets often used song to dialogue with the Divine. Music takes us beyond the rational, beyond words.

Music is a transcendent offering of N'ila.

Collective Effervescence

No. 2: Keltner defines awe as triggering collective effervescence: This is an experience in which people feel as though they are buzzing and crackling with some life force that merges them into a collective self, a tribe, an oceanic "we". This is an intoxicating feeling of connection, sometimes with **complete strangers**, through a shared interest. The days of awe are a collective experience. We gather, we raise up **our voices as one and we pray as a collective.** Every person in this room is an important part of this. We need each other. We take each other

higher. By being here together we are able to have an experience which touches us and which goes beyond words.

This is the second transcendent offering of N'ila.

Life and Death

Thirdly, Life and death are also awe triggers: On Yom Kippur we repeatedly ask the question, "who will live and who will die?" We do this because we have more clarity around what matters most when we recognise how profoundly vulnerable we are. The expectation is that an encounter with these ancient rituals will empower us to use the time we have to live with both humility and urgency. But some years, we don't need these days of awe to remind us. After the horrors of October 7, all of us know too well the pain that tears through our community and we're all too aware of how very fragile life is.

Rabbi Buchdahl reminds us that Judaism is a life-affirming tradition. The Torah instructs: "Life and death I have put before you. A blessing and a curse. Choose life!" In normal times, this seems self-evident, of course we should choose life. But after the massacres and bloodshed, how do families and bereaved communities resolve this tension between grief and life? The Talmud asks: when a funeral procession and a wedding procession meet in the street, who should give way to whom? The answer is that the people in the funeral procession are required to take a few steps in the direction of the wedding procession, dance with them for a moment and then return to the funeral. When faced with the choice between life and death, choose life.

This is the third transcendent offering of N'ila.

Moral beauty

Finally, Keltner talks about the awe trigger of **moral beauty** in shared humanity. For me, moral beauty is about witnessing people at their best - transcending the sludge of social media- and the tribal bubbles of 'us and them'. This year, more than others we need to remind ourselves of the moral beauty in people doing their best to understand the world. We cannot demand nuance if we do not also practise it.

Rumi (Sufi poet) writes:

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down to sleep in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense."

Noticing the grace and beauty of other people is another transcendent offering of N'ila.

The research on awe helps us to unpack our final passage through YK, it helps me to understand why I feel so high after N'ila. Music, collective effervescence, life and death and moral beauty are all powerful awe triggers and they are the pillars of the N'ila service. They make us feel good, they humble us and they improve our relationships, they open our eyes and our hearts. Through them we can move beyond words.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "The meaning of awe is to realise that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life.... Awe enables us to perceive... intimations of the Divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal."

N'ila invites us to experience awe, and perhaps this is something we can cultivate in our daily lives too.

After singing to his class, Ellie Weisel **ends the melody and waits a moment in silence before opening his eyes. He says, "This niggun of the Vizhnitzer Hasidim, is the best way I know to return to myself. Why do I sing with you, other than because it is an essential part of my childhood? Because song teaches how to build on ruins."**

So let's now leave behind the ruins of the past year and surrender to the immersive moment of N'ila- the service that happens in the twilight, as the boundaries of light and dark, holy and mundane, human and angel collapse. The spiritual reckoning is done, now we sing with the angels.

