

SACRED VESSELS

Yom Kippur Morning
5769

Rabbi Steven Kushner

I've been thinking a lot about *pain*. About how it weaves throughout our lives, about how it can immobilize us, overwhelm us. Everybody has pain. And you know what I mean. I'm not talking about the pain you feel when you sit in a chair too long. I'm talking about the anguish of the soul, the kind of pain we feel in our hearts, the kind of pain that challenges our very being. The kind of pain we bring with us to Yom Kippur.

More than any other day, Yom Kippur exists for us to come to grips with our pain. How do I make it go away? How can I get past it? What can I do to resolve this struggle that wages deep within my soul? Is it something I have done? Is it my fault? Is it something that someone else has done to me? God, can You help me find a way out of this morass? Of course, that is the question, the *religious* question. God. Where does God fit into this?

You know there's this wonderful story that has virtually universal appeal. It's called *Footprints in the Sand*.

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

"You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

It's not hard to see why the story has such universal appeal, if for nothing more than its dramatic content—a tale taking God to task for failing to be at our side during times of need only to be upended by the revelation that God was actually carrying us. It touches one's heart. It uplifts us. To suggest that God is always present, that God carries us—like a parent picking up a child—is beyond reassuring. It is the stuff of faith. And it is decidedly *not* Jewish.

Now in no way do I mean to suggest that the story or its theological underpinnings are somehow invalidated because its orientation comes from another religious tradition. On the contrary, I confess that there are times when I—as a Jew—wish our tradition was more *faith*-based, was more focused on God as *Protector* than *Commander*. There are times when I want God to do nothing more than just hold me. And carry me.

Have we not all had days like that? For all the beauty that life offers us, the pain of living can sometimes be so deep, so overwhelming that we cannot help but wonder how we can go on. “*Mi-ma’amakim kara-tikha Adonai*—Out of the depths have I cried unto You, O Lord....” Out of the *depths*. Somewhere inside, somewhere *deep* inside, in the depth of my soul, in my gut is a pain so great that only You, God, can take it away.

The truth is Judaism is not uncomfortable with a God who answers us in our hour of need. Actually, we invented it. As Thomas Cahill points out in his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, the ancient Israelites introduced the notion of a deity who *cares*. Just think the crossing of the Red Sea. God didn’t just “carry” us, God bore us from the House of Bondage “on the wings of eagles.” Yet even as we affirm that God loves us, no sooner do we affirm God’s love for Israel then we remind ourselves that we are commanded to love God—with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might. When all is said and done, we Jews talk more about what God expects of us, what God demands of us.

For Judaism, it’s not that God doesn’t care. It’s not that God doesn’t suffer along with us. It’s just that the foundational truth of Judaism is that we must be part of the equation. In Judaism God’s response to our pain is not to hold us (as nice a thought as that might be), but to challenge us to rise above our pain, to resolve our anguish by ourselves—because that’s where life takes on meaning.

As a child, being held when you’re upset will suffice; but as adults, we must be able to become the purveyors of our own healing. That is, to find joy and peace and comfort and love, we must start with ourselves. If we depend on getting it from an outside source (including God), we will always end up *wanting*. It won’t last. It must come from within.

So how do we do that?

The other side of the “Footprints in the Sand” story is the *U’netaneh Tokef* prayer we offered this morning. It is hardly comforting. On the contrary, *U’netaneh Tokef*, by virtually all accounts, is the most disturbing and provocative text of our liturgy.

B’rosh Hashanah yikateivun
Uv’yom tzom kippur yeikateimun
On Rosh Hashanah it is written,
on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
Who shall live and who shall die...

We might like to sing it (it does have that catchy sing-song melody), but I wonder if we ever really think about what exactly it is we’re humming? *U’netaneh Tokef* is the gravest text of our tradition. And even if you don’t read it literally, even if you don’t embrace the exact meaning of its words, even if you categorically reject the notion that our fates for the coming year are influenced by what we have and have not done during this past year—the overall *sense* of *U’netaneh Tokef* still rings true. So much of what happens to us, particularly the things that cause the greatest amount of pain and anguish, are ultimately things that *seem* out of our control. Just look at the list: life and death, fire and flood, disaster and catastrophe. Indeed, those are the very things that drive us to call out to God “...out of the depths....” But are they? Is the pain we suffer truly out of our control?

The fact of the matter is that the most important words in *U’netaneh Tokef*, the ones that get lost in the shuffle, the ones that invariably get overshadowed by the *fear and trembling* of “who

shall live and who shall die,” are the words that come immediately afterward—*u'teshuvah u'tefilah u'tzedakah*—but repentance, prayer, and acts of justice—*ma'avirin et ro'ah ha-g'zeirah*—temper judgment's severe decree. In fact, they don't just “temper” it, they reverse it.

And herein lies the Jewish view of God's compassion. It's not that God doesn't care about us; it's just that God expects us to take responsibility for ourselves. Judaism is a covenantal tradition. A two-way street. For Jews the way out of the depths, the way to prevail in the face of life's seemingly insurmountable odds, is for us to be proactive, to do these three things—repentance, prayer and justice. The rest, according to *U'netaneh Tokef*, will follow.

So let's talk about *teshuvah*.

The process begins with making repair. If *I* am feeling pain, chances are pretty good that someone else is, too. *Teshuvah*—repentance—is when we recognize and affirm that we are not alone. No matter how painful our burdens, no matter how mired we are in “the depths,” *teshuvah* is our acknowledging that others are involved. This is not to say that our pain and suffering are a direct result of offenses we have committed against others. It may very well be the other way around. But it is also just as likely that we *have* done something, we *have* said something that is the seed of pain.

To be a human being is to be in relationship. *Teshuvah* is the act of nurturing those relationships. Of repairing and healing them. As Martin Buber has taught, whenever two people are engaged in a true *I-Thou* encounter—and what can be more *I-Thou* than two individuals making peace with each other—then God's presence is manifest as well. In other words, if it is God we seek, then we must first reach out to each other. Only once we have made peace, only once we have endeavored to soften the pain of others can we truly address the pain within. That is what we are supposed to be doing here today—serious praying.

Tefilah is the art of talking to yourself. Only now, once I've tried to amend the wrongs I've inflicted on you, am I free to sit down and have an honest dialogue with myself. Prayer is not some open-ended discussion with empty space. True prayer, authentic *tefilah* is an internalizing, a private reckoning of what is wrong, of what hurts, of what is desired and what is shunned. For what is prayer if not, at least in its initial stage, a communion with the self?

The root of the Hebrew word for prayer *tefilah* shares the same root as “to fall”. No doubt it is a reflection of our original mode of worship—as we would *fall down* on our knees. But at its core is the notion of humility. To pray is to humble oneself. It's to turn the mirror inward, to ask the questions we dare not speak aloud, to converse with one's self, to have that dialogue with one's soul.

Of course the presumption is that God is listening. The presumption is that the direct line to God is not a long-distance call. We don't have to do a “shout out” to God, because our *neshamah*—our soul—is God-stuff. More than even what connects us *to* God, our *neshamah* is what makes us part *of* God.

The challenge, in this approach to prayer, is to re-conceptualize the object-oriented notion of God as *Other*; rather than seeing God as transcendent, as being *outside* of us, and rather than thinking of God as being *within* us, think instead of us as being within God—and that our *neshamot*, our souls, the God-stuff are the pathways to that sacred connection. In this way then, prayer, a pouring out not *of* our soul but *to* our soul, is the next step in the process of our at-one-ment.

And yet, the pain is still there. Enter the last stage—*tzedakah*.

If the doing of *teshuvah* is making peace with others, and *tefilah* is a making peace with one's self, then *tzedakah* is a self-transcendence. No matter how you look at it, *teshuvah* and *tefilah* revolve around the *I-Thou* equation. And the truth be told, their focus is on the *I*. "I'm sorry for what *I* did to you." "Help *me* God with *my* pain." *Tzedakah*, by contrast, moves on and beyond the *I*. Indeed, more than just a reaching out of ourselves, *tzedakah*—the act of making things right—is a total rejection of the needs of the self in the service of the other.

Victor Frankl, author of "Man's Search for Meaning" and the founder of *Logotherapy*, said that it was while he was in a concentration camp that he learned how to rise above his own suffering—by focusing on the pain of others. *Self-transcendence* he called it. Instead of thinking about my hunger, let me feed the hungry. Not only, Frankl observed, were those who acted in such selfless ways more likely to lose their own sense of pain, they were also the most likely to discover the holy grail of human existence—*meaning*. Through acts of self-transcendence we find meaning. And once we have done that, the need to call out to God from the depths just disappears.

Here is the core of *our* faith. This is why we exist as a people. For Jews, we connect with God, we rise above our own pain when we learn to heed the pain of others. *U'netaneh Tokef* teaches us that it's not so much about God carrying us as it is about us carrying God—inside of us. We are each vessels of the holy, imbued with sacred potential. The three-step process of *teshuvah*, *tefilah* and *tzedakah* helps us find it and bring it out. These are the seeds of redemption—not just ours but the world's.

Of all the stories in the Bible, the one I keep coming back to is the story of Elijah in search of God. Running away from mortal enemies, he flees to The Place. The Place where Israel and God first met. The Place where Israel and God first covenanted themselves to each other. The mountain. In the middle of the wilderness. Three times God overwhelms Elijah with extraordinary natural phenomena—earthquake, wind and fire. And each time we are told, "...but God was not in the earthquake...the wind...the fire." And then God comes to Elijah in a *kol d'mamah dakah*—a still, small voice.

Perhaps even more to the point is God's message. Elijah, running for his life, runs to God. He seeks refuge and help. And what does God say to him? "Why are you here, Elijah?" Twice God asks Elijah this question, and both times Elijah responds, "I am here out of zeal for the Lord...Your enemies seek to destroy me." Finally, after Elijah's second utterance of seeking help, God says, "Go back the way you came." Go home.

As I've gotten older I've come to read this story in a more critical way. Sure it's there to teach us that God is to be found in silence as opposed to the flashes of wind and fire. But even more, I think the story is there to teach us that Elijah blew it. He goes in search of God. He goes to a particular place. He waits for the theophany, the sound and light show of the divine. But instead, God comes to him in a whisper. And even more, by sending him home without ever saying anything of substance to Elijah, God tells him, "Dummy. You didn't need to come here to find me. I'm as close to you as the voice inside your head. Do you really think I would abandon you? Go home."

Last night I shared with you my experience of walking through the Negev desert on the night of a near complete eclipse of a full moon. It was a night I will not soon forget. But the evening was more than just a hike. Along the way we learned about life in the wilderness. In particular, the *aytz shittah*—the acacia tree.

Now I've read the word countless times in Torah. And I've seen them along the side of the road driving from Jerusalem to Eilat. Only this was the first time a tour guide had ever pointed one out. Up until that night, it was just a tree, a solitary tree, sitting by itself, amidst the rocks and sand of the desert. And you wonder, "How does that thing survive? There's no water here. The temperatures are in the triple-digits. The soil—and that's being generous—is like concrete. And, oh yes, we're below sea level. The Dead Sea, where nothing can live, is just a stone's throw away. How does that thing survive?"

What we learned that night is that the *aytz shittah*, the acacia tree—which grows to a height of about 15 feet—has a root system that goes three times as deep and wide into the soil. Unlike the magnificent oak trees that shade our back yards here in New Jersey (and topple over when strong winds blow in from the southwest), the *aytz shittah* is virtually immovable. And that expansive root system, in one of the true miracles of nature, is able to capture the torrents of water that rush by but once a year and hold that water for an entire year.

How often are the times when we all feel like that acacia tree? Isolated. Alone. Without water. In the heat of the desert sun. And yet we survive. We draw deep inside, into *our* root system, and somehow we find the strength to persevere. Just as God has not abandoned these desert trees but given them the ability to prevail amidst a challenging environment, so has God created us resilient. It's not that God isn't with us. It's not that God isn't there to carry us. God is within us. God is a part of us. God is our *Ma'ayan*, our Wellspring, the source of our strength and our hope.

A final thought.

If *U'netaneh Tokef* is the most challenging prayer in our liturgy, then for me the most uplifting text is one we recite every morning:

Elohai, neshamah she-natata bi tehorah hi—

The soul you have placed with me, God, is pure.

Tehorah. Pure. Good. Sacred. And this divine center that makes us who we are is God's gift to us. It is the very essence of our life-force. It is God's nourishment, it is God's water, the source from which we draw to face the desert winds of life. And it's not merely *in* me, it *is* me.

And for what it's worth, the Ark of the Covenant was built from the wood of the *aytz shittah*—the acacia tree. Strong wood. Able to withstand the most hostile of environments. And the Ark's sole purpose was to carry the words of God. Well that's our role, too. We are *vessels* of the divine. God doesn't carry us as much as we carry God.