



LeoBaeckTemple

**Assistant Rabbi Benjamin Ross**

“Untie our Tangles”

Kol Nidre 5780    October 9, 2019

*(In honor of Rabbi Sheila Weinberg and Rabbi Larry Hoffman)*

Today is a holy day, a day of truth telling about our lives and the world in which we live. This applies to the land under our very feet.

I’ve recently been introduced to the practice called “land acknowledgement” the purpose of which is to open a gathering by naming the lands history as it relates to the displacement of native people.

I want to begin by respectfully acknowledging the Gabrielino/Tongva People, the indigenous tribe that has stewarded this land throughout the generations and pay my respect to their elders both past and present.

Shana tova!

Last year my son Zeke completed his third year at LBT’s excellent Early Childhood Center. The small classes allowed each toddler to be carefully and lovingly supported. This year, Zeke entered kindergarten at our local public school, one of 23 kids in his class.

This school has a quirky morning routine, after the pledge of allegiance and announcements they break into a rotating series of choreographed dance routines with all 449 students busting a move in unison.

Classics such as “I got this feeling” “Who let the dogs out,” and “Baby Shark,” pump and pulse through the speakers while the kids pop and lock, do the Harlem shake and just have fun.

I seek out Zeke who is on the far side of the bustle. I catch a glimpse of his head, like a tiny boat bobbing in a sea of students, waves of limbs crashing all around him.

While at home he is a silly goose, a force of resistance who rejects sedentary play, at school his focus is extraordinary to observe.

I imagine him harnessing all his internal resources to track the dance moves, avoid the flailing arms of classmates and keep his head above water. I feel my heart ache and strain.

I want to help him, make more space for him, assure him that the flawless execution of the electric slide is only achievable by a gifted few, and that he will be ok.

And I'm overcome, I'm a puddle. He seems so far away, so vulnerable.

And, he is ok. I am the one who is struggling with this transition, not him. I am the one feeling like I'm out at sea without a paddle. I surrender. I acknowledge that he is ok without me. That he is safe and resilient.

And, it is time for me to adjust my notion of Zeke. He is no longer a toddler in a pre-k class. He can make friends on his own. He can even write his name. Zeke is a little boy, with a deep well of inner strength.

And, he needs me less than he did the year before, or at least differently, and that will be ever so.

As parents head toward the exit they wave and kids wave back. Zeke's eyes find mine, and we wave to each other, and I feel tendrils of love connecting us.

My surrender is rewarded with a sense of a love reborn- reflective of what is true in the moment.

During these Days of Awe we are challenged to excavate the nooks and crannies of our soul; question everything to which we hold fast and surrender.

Jack Kornfield writes of this practice, "Letting go does not mean losing the knowledge we have gained from the past. The knowledge of the past stays with us.

To let go is simply to release any images and emotions, grudges and fears, clingings and disappointments that bind our spirit.

Like emptying a cup, letting go leaves us free to receive, refreshed, sensitive, and awake."

A core part of our work today is to let go. Yom Kippur is, in part, an enactment of our own death; the ultimate surrender and submission.

While we so yearn to be in control, to plan, to calendar, to map out our next hour, day, week, month...to know the future, we cannot. We are not in control.

As the old yiddish saying goes “Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht” Man plans, and God laughs.

You do not have to believe in God to know the feeling of being laughed at by the divine force of the universe!

Part of our Friday night liturgy from the kabbalists, Ana B’koach, starts, Ana b’koach, Gedulat Yemin-echa, Tatir Zerua.

Rabbi Zalman Schacter Shalomi translates this as “Source of Mercy, With loving strength Untie our tangles.”

This is our work today. To beg and plead. To let the tears flow to lubricate and loosen the ties that bind us - to untie our tangles.

As you come into consciousness each morning, what narratives do you choose to wrap yourself in?

What are the stories you select, like so many garments, to define you and others, for better and worse?

What if you could take them off, freely as an old stained t-shirt and hold it in your hands at a distance.

Seeing them with fresh eyes, you see they are threadbare, and no longer fit who you are today.

You toss them into the rag pile to be cut up into pieces - released and transformed.

That which was painful becomes material for the cleansing and purification of the soul.

Does sound like some magic act? Well, the Kol Nidre prayer which translates as “May all the vows be broken” does not come from the Torah or the rabbis of the Talmud.

It is believed to have come from an ancient Babylonian tradition in the 3rd-6th century of burying bowls, with incantations scratched into them and then placing them upside down under your home.

These incantation bowls had copious verses in Aramaic, the vernacular of the time, and the language of the Talmud, with quotes from the Torah and mishnah and attributions to various rabbis.

One such bowl read: "Overturned are [Kol Nidre] all the vows and curses and spells and sorceries and evil knocks that may lodge in this man."

Against the desires of the great rabbis of the time who saw it as some form of wizardry, by the 10th Century, Kol Nidre prayers were incorporated into our Yom Kippur liturgy.

Something powerful and potent about them affixed itself to our tradition.

Sadly, we will not be handing out incantation bowls when you leave this evening. Abigail said it was not in my budget.

Blessedly, we do have the gift of Kol Nidre, of the wizardry of untying our tangles.

And, we all have what to untangle.

On any given day at Leo Baeck I meet with you and hear stories of resistance, of holding tight to narratives and frameworks causing us pain.

We are not alone in our suffering. Here is a snapshot of the agita we all carry:

Can I truly be forgiven for those who I have hurt?

Can I forgive my parents or beloveds who have caused me so much pain and suffering?

What if they are dead? What do I do then?

I am unable to care for myself as I once could and feel horrible about the burden I've placed on my partner.

My partner died years ago and I'm unable to let go - and I really want to.

I wonder if I am enough?

Am I worthy of God's love and forgiveness?

Am I worthy of my own love?

One congregant recently wrote to me about his struggle with a failed marriage: "Given the fact that the past is "dead" in the sense that it cannot be modified, I don't think that I can ever resolve my sense of failure and of profound loss."

While it is true we do not have the ability to change the past, we do have the ability to transform how we hold it and allow it to hold us.

Why do we resist letting go, surrendering? Why do we want to stay bound?

Counterintuitively, some of us cling to, even venerate painful memories.

We wield them like righteous whips, reopening old wounds through self-flagellation or slashing away at others, never finding solace, comfort or compassion.

A part of us actually relishes retaining our suffering, lest our relinquishment be taken as some sort of absolution for the wrong done to us.

Others worry letting go of one facet of a relationship which has caused our deepest wounds will somehow taint the entirety of the relationship and connection.

In practice, naming what is painful may liberate us and deepen our ties of love.

Last year I shared the story of a loving daughter, with a complicated and at times painful relationship with her mother, sitting at her dying elderly mom's bedside.

She said, "I love you Mom. And though you weren't able to express it, I believe you loved me too. May God be with you and bless you with peace."

After one beat, fighting its way through labored breath, her mom whispered, "I love you."

Naming the painful truth that was always palpable, but never voiced, did not create distance, rather it brought them closer together.

Sometimes we don't let go and surrender - because in order to truly let something go you have to hold it tight and look right at it.

Most agonizing, may be when we cleave to what shames us, the stories or actions which cause us to question our very worth.

Brene Brown writes, "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change..."

If you put shame in a Petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment.

If you put the same amount of shame in a Petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive."

Yom Kippur, our day of Atonement, could also be called Yom Rachamim - Day of Compassion. Or Yom Kavod. Day of your Worthiness or Honor.

Yom Kippur is meant to be uncomfortable. There are no saints among us. Yom Kippur challenges each of us to look into the mirror of our souls and surrender.

To touch the emergent and deepening wrinkles on our face, the tired narratives of who we have become. And then, gently, and with love, to discern where we aspire to go, who we aspire to be.

In Spring Giddiness, the poet Rumi writes :

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.

Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love, be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Yes - there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground... and sometimes, we are lucky enough to encounter someone who actually shows us how.

In my mid-thirties I was on a Jewish silent meditation retreat with the renowned Jewish Buddhist, Sylvia Boorstein.

I was having an amazing retreat. I was sinking into a rhythm of practice that is hard to achieve in the muck of everyday life. Everything was slowing down.

I was dialing into the rising and falling of my breath and awakening to memories and emotions previously in hiding.

During my 15 minutes of 1 to 1 time with Sylvia, a spiritual check in of sorts, I shared a powerful holy moment from the day before.

She looked at me with kind eyes, smiled and said, "Well, that is grace. Lovely that you had it, you may never have it again. A gift you cannot ask for but can receive with immense gratitude."

And then, noting I still had five minutes left, and eager to make the most of my time with such a renowned teacher, I asked her one more question.

I said, "You know, I've always struggled with my weight. Always wanting to be thinner. I work out regularly and enjoy it, but enjoy eating even more.

I am always wanting to have some sort of epiphany about my eating that will make it all easier to have the body I want."

Sylvia's head tilted ever so slightly and her eyebrows rose a tich and then settled. Her features softened and a slight smile emerged.

With her hands resting on her lap she kind of gave me a gentle once-over from head to toe.

"Well," she said, "are your parents built like you?"

"More or less," I responded.

"Well," Sylvia said, " I think you look pretty good!."

Something shifted, or melted away, and I surrendered and released the old narrative and embraced a new one, "I look pretty good."

It just felt right and true. I felt instantly lighter.

And now, every morning when I wake up, one of the garments I unconsciously wrap myself in is Sylvia's loving and sincere voice, "I think you look pretty good."

What is the Sylvia sentence you need to hear? Take a moment.

What do you need to hear and who needs to say it?

What is your equivalent of "I think you look pretty good."

As, no sermon of mine is complete without creating an awkward experience, I want to invite you to close your eyes or rest them a couple feet in front of you.

There are no magic bowls here - just the power of our tradition.

This practice is no stranger than Tashlich, where we transpose our sins from the past year into stale bread and toss them into the frothy undulating Pacific Ocean to release our sins.

Sometimes we feel it, and sometimes we don't. On Yom Kippur we are asked to give it a go with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might.

With eyes closed or gaze softened, resting a couple feet in front of you, I want to give you the opportunity to release something, to untangle a tie that binds you, informed by a Jack Kornfield teaching.

On this Yom Rachamim, this day of Ultimate Compassion, there is no vow, act, thought or deed that is beyond being untangled and released.

Invite the object of your tangling before you. You can even hold it in cupped hands.

Look at it anew. In your mind you can investigate the tangling as if you just stumbled across it on the beach.

Really look at it for what it is. Now soften your grip, holding it lightly. And, prepare to let it go.

As you open your hands, you are invited to whisper or say to yourself, repeating after me:

I let you go.

I let you go.

I let you go.

In your mind's eye, watch it float away like white tufts of dandelions on a summer breeze. They are gone. Take a deep breath.

Scan your body to explore if anything feels different.

Notice if the feeling returns, often they will.

As Kornfield teaches, say kindly when they do, "I've let you go. I've returned you to the earth, I do not need to carry you any further, I'm moving on. I've let you go."

If you haven't already, you are invited to gently open your eyes.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Most of the shadows of this life are caused by our standing in our own sunshine."

This applies equally to ourselves internally as how we live and act in the world.

Our fears as a nation also have the ability to debilitate and enslave us. Kol Nidre is not just about personal transformation and atonement, it is also about collective atonement.

I want to take a closer look at a shadow that looms over our community. And ultimately, I want to us to find a path moving us out of the shadow into the sunshine.

This past August, during my weekly meeting with the three co-chairs of LBT's Community Organizing Leadership Team we reflected on the first stage of our outreach into the broader LBT community.

In order to inform the next cycle of our justice work we spoke with 50 congregants about the issues in Los Angeles and our country on your heart and to uncover the stories, people and experiences informing your concerns.

While no one issue predominated, you shared in raw emotion about divisive and hateful rhetoric, a feeling that there is a war on immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, a rise in violent white supremacy movements in the US and around the globe, an attack on the free press, and the dire state of global warming.

While LBT has a strong social justice track record, and we are part of some powerful Jewish and interfaith coalitions, we would need a Dodger Stadium size loaf of stale bread and Gulliver like arms to toss these al cheits into the Pacific.

What stood out to us, more than one issue, was a deep sense of despair.

This was captured in something we heard stirring in the troubled waters of your spirit.

All three co-chairs reported hearing our members questioning whether their adult children should be birthing babies at this time, into *this* world, this country.

Aspirational and current Bubbies and Zeyde's sincerely and lovingly questioning the wisdom of bringing grandkids into this chapter of the human project?

We stopped the meeting. I was stunned and then sadly, not so stunned as my surprise softened into a knowing. How do we as a community hold the truth of this feeling in our cupped hands? This one is not about the internal emotional turmoil of our souls but the tumultuous and suffering time in which we live.

How many of you have asked yourself similar questions?

You are not alone.

There is an emergent movement led by teens who doubt the viability of the earth's future, as global warming devastates hundreds of thousands and as our federal government rolls back regulations and policies.

One Canadian teen, Emma Lim launched a website and created the hashtag NoFutureNoChildren where teens pledge not to have kids.

The founder, Emma Lin writes, "I am giving up my chance of having a family because I will only have children if I know I can keep them safe.

It breaks my heart, but I created this pledge because I know I am not alone.

I am not the only young person giving up lifelong dreams because they are unsure of what the future will hold.

We've read the science, and now we're pleading with our government."

As of end of September 3,208 teens had taken the pledge, as of today, one week later, 5,058.

What will you say...

When the next generation looks you in the eyes and asks what you did in this moment.

When they ask, what you did with your time, energy, and wealth.

When they ask you to justify holding back for a rainy dark day when the storm was already pounding outside.

What will you say?

The Sikh leader Valerie Kaur has preached about this moment in America:

She said, "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born?"

I love the hope embedded in that vision. And it is true, we are all midwives for the America that will be birthed in this moment.

The process of surrender on the internal plane is not dissimilar to the external. Let us not be bound and debilitated by the ugliness and severity of the problems we face.

All change happens slowly, with small steps, and expands.

Looking back, many of the most inspiring movements for change in America started in church basements, from the abolitionist to civil rights movements.

We all long, or at least some of us do, to be in the mythical church basement, planning the first civil rights sit-in, to be at the forefront of a great movement for justice.

Ok, we are not a church, and we live in LA, so ixnay on the basement, but we cannot let that hold us back!

In the spirit of these days of awe and agitation, let us ask ourselves: how are we bystanders to a country in crisis.

What will we do, what will we sacrifice, to transform the shadows into sunshine?

On Sunday evening, November 3rd, exactly one year before the 2020 election LBT's Community Organizing Leadership Team will facilitate a gathering to explore the hope and passion to make our city and our world better.

We will also explore the pain and despair over the state of our nation and a future that can appear bleak.

We hope to build an LBT that is a beacon of light and hope amidst the darkness and despair.

We are seeking to surrender our blind spots and our debilitating narratives about intractable problems.

We all know, deep in our kishkes, if we invested half the time we spend kvetching about the brokenness, actually working to fix it, we'd be in a lot better shape.

As I tell myself, when I'm feeling hopeless, "We made this mess, and that means we can clean it up."

Unfortunately, what is true of the internal and external work is that making the mess is a whole lot easier than cleaning it up.

If you've ever accidentally knocked over a bin of tiny Legos you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Ana B'koach - "Source of Mercy, With loving strength Untie our tangles." At a more surface level this verse has also been translated as, "By the might of your great right hand, set free the captive."

We are the captives, entangled by our suffering, by our sincere stumblings and bumbings, by the missteps and misdeeds of those we love, and by a world crueler than need be. And we are the ones who are called to untangle - that is our work.

May the next 25 precious hours be rich with loving agitation and compassion.

May our tangles be untied.

May we look into the mirror this evening and greet our image with the expansive love and compassion we are all worthy of receiving - as promised by a God of strength and mercy.

And may we all commit to descend into the proverbial church basement, to join hands and hearts, and march out into the world to free the captives. Ken y'hi ratzon.