



LeoBaeckTemple

Rabbi Benjamin Ross

“Dark Light”

Yom Kippur Evening/Kol Nidre – September 15, 2021/5782

In honor of the wisdom so generously offered by Dr. Susannah Heschel and Gayle Hoover, z”l

“Whoa dad!” the nurse chided, “keep your shirt on!”

Moments before, Liz had heroically birthed our first child Reuven. It was the singular most courageous act I had ever witnessed. We were in a birth center and the midwife had prepared me for what they call skin-to-skin contact.

Skin-to-skin is a practice where the non-birthing partner places the newborn on their bare chest. It is meant to encourage bonding, increase parental confidence, and create a heightened surge of protectiveness toward the child. Whether embracing an infant or old dear friend, we all know that hugging can be profoundly healing and comforting.

Not surprisingly, I was pretty fired up to do my part, but my enthusiasm drew a chuckle from the seasoned midwife and nurse. I waited my turn, with my shirt half unbuttoned, ready to go. When the moment came it was magical, he was one hot little nugget.

Feeling this living creature pressing into my skin, wow, I was an emotional puddle.

The realm of creation is one of wonder and chaos. In the Jewish tradition, upon hearing someone is pregnant we say, *B’sha’ah tova*, may it happen in the right season or at the right time. I love this. This saying acknowledges we are not in control.

As we are a superstitious people, a Jewish minhag, or custom, is to refrain from saying Mazel tov until that child has been safely birthed into the daylight.

The darkness of the womb is a place of mystery and nourishment, as well as one of loss and heartbreak. The connections forged between parent and child are extraordinary and impossible to fully understand. Both are transformed and transforming throughout the process.

While most of us do not recall the exact moment of our emergence, we have all been that peanut sized human-in-progress, in the womb.

The dark safety and nourishment, the comforting humming and thrumming, that feeling of being securely carried and cared for is a felt sensation that, for many, resides deep in our marrow.

This is a darkness of love, protection, creation, hope and potential even as it holds out the possibility for peril and sorrow.

At times, the events of the past 18 months, cocooned in the horrors and infuriation of Covid, have made me want to crawl back into the safety of the womb.

On Yom Kippur, considered a ritual rehearsal for our own death, and in the face of so much death and personal loss due to Covid, perhaps now is the moment to relive the moments before our collective birth? To experience anew, moments of disconnect, so we might feel its opposite, a moment of deep connection.

One morning I was out walking when Lois called me to say Rick was dying. She awoke with a startle, pulled out of her slumber by a divine call to go to her beloved's bedside.

This was the day Rick was going to die, she felt it in her bones. She called Rabbi Chasen who sang a prayer from his phone, and this seemed to ease and soothe Rick's agitated spirit.

While it had been 18 months after Rick's diagnosis of MDS, a rare blood cancer, the last few months during the height of Covid were especially heartbreaking, negotiating visits and isolation. Doctor's offices and hospitals became hazard zones instead of places of healing.

I desperately wanted to be by Rick's side, hold his hand, kiss him on his keppe, hug Lois and honestly, to be hugged by Lois, as Rick, in his playful curmudgeonly way, had become dear to me over the past number of years.

Instead, worried I'd be a source of Covid transmission, I pastored by phone from a broken sidewalk on Kelton Avenue, as a gardener blew leaves down the road.

Lois asked me to say the Vidui, the final confession before death. *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.*

These ancient words, spoken millions of times over thousands of years, drifted across time and space to arrive at Rick's bedside, to hold and affirm him, to tether him to his ancestors.

Later, Lois shared that as the Shema was said, after the final words of confession were spoken on his behalf, his body softened, his breathing slowed, he had been blessed.

Rick had accomplished everything he needed to do and the natural resistance to let go was calmly released.

Rick was in the darkness of his final days. Lois, courageous and determined, entered that darkness with Rick, to shepherd him on this final stage of his journey.

Today, we conclude the ten days of repentance and reflection bridging Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, urging us into the darkneses, the nooks and crannies of the year past.

Extending that timeline a bit further, these past 18 months have felt part of a whole, an expedition none of us wanted to go on, with multiple journey's embedded within it, one more tumultuous than the next.

We witnessed the heartwrenching murder of George Floyd, watching the very breath being violently squeezed out of him. Floyd's eyes went dark, and a brilliant fury was ignited- the movement to address 400 years of one of our nation's greatest sins and deepest wounds in many ways rebirthed.

With the earth simultaneously ablaze and flooding, we are all living with the chronic fear of environmental doom. The American Psychological Association created an apt term for this, ecological anxiety. Our youngest and brightest, question if it is responsible and viable to bring more kids into this world.

And then, we endured the tumult and toxicity of the 2020 election, and the dangerous and ongoing assault on its legitimacy. Its hallmark was January 6th, the insurrection and storming of the Capital, an attack on our greatest symbol of democracy.

Each event - the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the environment in crisis, the election, the insurrection, are like waves cresting and then crashing upon us, hurling us like a dingy in a tsunami of grief.

There is too much for our brains to process and our hearts to hold. We are desperately being tossed between the pain in front of us, and in us, and existential threats whirling around us, and the back again - a nonlinear traumapalooza.

During the recent Congressional investigation into January 6th, Sergeant Aquilino Gonnell, of the Capitol police testified,

"I was particularly shocked at the scene, the insurrectionists violently attacked us with the very American flag that they claimed to serve to protect...The rioters were vicious and relentless. We found ourselves in a violent battle, desperate to attempt to prevent a breach of the Capitol ...

What we were subjected to that day was like something from a Medieval battle. We fought hand to hand, inch by inch to prevent an invasion of the Capitol by a violent mob intent on subverting our democratic process ...

After order had finally been restored at the Capitol and many hours (passed), I arrived at home at nearly 4:00 AM on January 7th. I had to push my wife away from me because she wanted to hug me. I told her no because of all the chemicals my uniform had on."

After pausing to wipe tears from his eyes Sergeant Gonnell continued, "I couldn't sleep because the chemical reactivated after I took a shower and my skin was burning. I finally fell asleep two hours later, completely physically and mentally exhausted, yet by eight o'clock AM, I was already on my way back to the Capitol. And I continued to work for 15 consecutive days until after the inauguration.

I made sure to work despite my injuries, because I wanted to continue doing my job and help secure the Capitol complex. More than six months later, I'm still trying to recover from my injuries."

Two verses from the Book of Psalms 69 speak to the felt sensation of Sergeant Gonnell's physical description:

Tivati bivain mitzulah, v'ain ma'amad.

I have sunk into a deep mire - there is no standing up;

I have come into the deepest depths-

The current has carried me away. (Psalm 69:3)

Don't let the deeps drown me-

Don't let the cavern close her mouth over me! (Psalm 69:16)

There are so many heroes who courageously stepped forward over the past year. Heroes like Sergeant Gonnell, heroes like health care workers giving dignity to the sick and dying, heroes like those raising their voices after the murder of George Floyd. They call us toward our better angels. And maybe there are ways each of us acted heroically. Showing up for others, in ways that stretched us, and maybe even surprised ourselves.

While I watched January 6th from the comfort and safety of my home, that assault, the physical violence and rage absorbed that day, was, upon reflection, like the psychological assault many have felt over the past five years. It was the physical manifestation of the psychological threat triggered by Neo-nazis and White supremacy groups in Charlottesville and the slaughter of Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

While few of us faced such harrowing and violent encounters, each of us, in our own way has faced loss, some more dramatic and jarring, physically, financially and certainly emotionally. Each of these assaults has felt deeply personal.

Like Sergeant Gonnell there is a residue from this past year that seems to cling to our body, a noxious film coating our spirit, that we so desperately seek to rinse off.

How do we recover from our spiritual, emotional and historic injuries and traumas from the past year? How do we reach out and take hold of one another so we are not alone in the dark spaces?

Resmaa Menakem in his book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, wrote, "In today's America, we tend to think of healing as something binary: either we're broken or we're healed from that brokenness. But that's not how healing operates, and it's almost never how human growth works. More often, healing and growth take place on a continuum, with innumerable points between utter brokenness and total health."

Menakem continued, “Years as a healer and trauma therapist have taught me that trauma isn’t destiny. The body, not the thinking brain, is where we experience most of our pain, pleasure, and joy, and where we process most of what happens to us. It is also where we do most of our healing, including our emotional and psychological healing. And, it is where we experience resilience...”

In one of the mystical strains of Judaism the Lurianic conception of creation emerged in the 16th Century. In this framework, in order for the world to be created, the infinite God contracted in a process called *tzimtzum*, to create space for the finite world.

In this divine absence, in a place of absolute darkness, light burst forth and **life blossomed**.

The 18th Century Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav hits pause on this creation narrative and rewinds to that moment of divine absence. He calls on us to delve into the darkness as a profoundly resonant human experience. In Hebrew, this divine void, is called the hallal hapanui.

No matter our relationship with or belief in the divine, we all know that feeling of being deeply alone. Some might use language of hopelessness, lost in the depth of mourning for a beloved, feeling unloved, maybe even an intimate sense of abandonment.

It is, in that moment of suffering, that sense of helplessly falling into an emptiness, that is the hallal hapanui.

What happens when we are in this hallal hapanui, this place where we feel, in the words of scholar Shaul Magid, the “presence of God’s absence?”

Rabbi Nachman urges the confrontation with our pain through the music of our soul, in the form of a wordless melody, or a wordless scream, a soul cry of sorts. He coaxes and coaches us to release the pain through engagement.

When we are in the darkness of the hallal hapanui, our cry is a creational act. It is not a war cry or cry of defeat.

It is a howl of acceptance, of seeing the truth of pain, and harnessing our internal holiness to overcome, to move out of the darkness, carrying forward the hard-earned wisdom we have gleaned. And with it, a new consciousness is birthed.

Nachman presents the framework of divine absence only to knock it down, and to say God is everywhere. It is only by confronting the darkness and the absence that we can feel its counterpoint -- light and presence.

This is an essential part of the human experience, the ongoing and unfolding process of not knowing, of light and dark moments, of feeling God’s absence and God’s presence.

How do we move in and out of the Hallal hapanui?

In my experience, one way is when a dear friend descends into that darkness to be with us. It is not a space of words, or fixing, it is about lowering ourselves for the sake of rising, even as we risk the darkness as well.

In our own community, over this past year, this immersion to be with another looked like:
A beloved friend showing up to help bathe another in need, an act of deep love.

Or three dear friends, each still grieving the death of their partner, and furious at having to navigate Covid on their own, finding solace and ease in each other's presence and shared experience.

Or when a family drops everything to rally around a child struggling with severe health issues, turning everything upside down to keep the child right side up.

When you allow yourself to see it, to be in the divine absence, to allow its truth to be revealed, something crystallizes, and where once there was only darkness, sparks of light may be revealed.

Kol Nidre, this night is a spiritual wake-up call. It is a time to take stock, to do internal and external teshuva, to return to the person who you aspire to be in the world.

Yom Kippur falls on the day the second set of tablets are received at Mt. Sinai. This second set, the ones Moses must carve by the sweat of his brow alone, having smashed the first ones created by Divine light.

During the next 24 hours each of us is called to carve our own tablets.

What is the darkness you need to be with, the darkness you need to confront?
Who needs you to be with them?
Can you imagine the sparks of light and holiness?

We are called on this holy day to go into the dark places to witness and accompany, and hopefully rise up with another, as we would want others to do with us.

We do not know the end of this story. We are called to put one foot in front of the other. This is a core Jewish task, to take a leap of faith before we understand, na'aseh v'nishmah. We will do and then we will understand. There is no one right act - but there is a call to action.

As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again,

so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

Let us glean all the wisdom from the darkness and ascend together as forces of creation and birth something amazing. Let us get skin-to-skin with the newborn - the world as it is - so fragile and in need of our full attention, and fiercely love it toward justice and compassion, healing and transformation.

Ken y'hi ratzon, may it be so.

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