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Erev Rosh Hashanah

Flowing In and Flowing Out, Our Hearts Open and Pure

Earlier this summer, I asked a question at Shabbat services. Now when you ask a question, you need to be prepared for the answers – and I admit I was nervous. I asked, “What do you need to hear at the High Holy Days this year?” Unsurprisingly, responses dealt with a range of topics from Zionism and the American elections to stories of personal transformation and communal growth. But one answer stayed with me, not only for the idea itself but also because of who said it.

We have a new member who just joined us a few months ago. Jonathan Bloom found his way to KAM Isaiah Israel when his wife died; and though he hadn’t been part of a synagogue for more than 30 years, he’s now made our congregation his home-away-from-home for weekly study and prayer. Jonathan gave me permission to share that he came to temple because his heart was broken. But he didn’t come here to fix it or put it back together. Instead, he told me, he had realized that a **broken** heart is an **open** heart; and only with an open heart can he find connection, comfort, and God.

“I’d like to hear a little more about that, Rabbi,” he said. “About opening up our hearts.”

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In Jewish tradition the heart is a source of both feeling and thought – like the mind, it swirls with emotions and ideas. A **closed** heart is scabbed over or stopped up, “plugged and covered,”¹ as Rashi puts it. It can take in no new information, come to no new conclusions, and experience no new emotions. An **open** heart, in contrast, is like an open door. It allows the ideas and possibilities we experience in the world and with other people to enter us and change how we think, feel, and understand; and it also allows our own authentic selves better to come out. Being closed means being still and stuck; to be open is to be flexible and free.

Rabbi Debra Robbins reminds us that hearts open in two directions. In her book on Psalm 27 [*Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*], a prayer central to the High Holy Days, Rabbi Robbins teaches, “We want to be more open-hearted at this time of year because the sense of *tikkun middot*, that sense of repairing myself, is a partner with *tikkun olam*,

¹ Rashi uses the terms אָטָם (“closure”) and כְּסוּיָו (“covering”) as synonyms for עָרְלָה (“foreskin”) in the context of עָרְלַת לִבְבְּכֶם (“the foreskin of your heart”) in his commentary to Deuteronomy 10:16. In his commentary on Exodus 6:12, he teaches similarly that to be עָרְלֵי שִׁפְתַּיִם (“of uncircumcised lips”) that עָרְלָה refers to stoppage or closure. There, he cites Jeremiah 6:10, 9:25, and Habakkuk 2:16).

repairing the world. They have to go hand-in-hand.”² In other words, “Being open-hearted means things not only get in; things also get out.”³

What gets in, and what comes out. These are the flows of the open heart, and they mirror the opening and the closing of our tradition’s most central prayer.

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These days, when I begin the Amidah, I hear the voice of our friend, Jonathan Bloom. The Amidah is the collection of blessings at the core of every Jewish service, and it starts with the familiar line:

אֲדֹנָי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יגִיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ:

O Lord, open my lips that my mouth may declare your praise (Ps. 51:19).

Beginning our prayers with this petition is an acknowledgement that we cannot pray alone. We confess to God that we need help even to get started.

This line comes from Psalm 51, which continues: “You [God] do not want me to bring sacrifices; / You do not desire burnt offerings” (v. 20, JPS translation). Instead, the Psalm continues, true devotion comes from רִוּחַ נִשְׁבָּרָה [וְ]לֵב-נִשְׁבָּר, “a broken spirit and a broken heart” (v. 21). The speaker is in anguish, confronting his sins and hoping desperately to be forgiven. The psalm as a whole is attributed to King David and described as his supplication after his catastrophic affair with Bathsheba (see v. 2). In this state of absolute guilt, David begs to be received. And if it could work for him, the psalm implies, how much more can it work for you.

² These sentences are adapted from a verbal exchange in Episode 51 of the Jewish Institute for Spirituality’s podcast, “Open My Heart: Living Jewish Prayer” (transcript available here: <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transcript-Debra-Robbins-Book-Talk.pdf>). I believe my adaptation genuinely reflects the intent of the speaker, edited for clarity.

Question: “And then this practice, coming **at this time of year**, which is beginning in Elul, leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and through Sukkot: Why would we want to be more **open hearted** then, as opposed to any other time?”

Answer: “I always thought that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the whole season was about, like, repairing ourselves. Like we had to do all the work on ourselves in relationship with other people and with God. And what I didn’t understand is that **that sense of tikkun middot, that sense of repairing myself, was a partner with these ideas about tikkun olam, that they had to go hand in hand.** And that these meditative practices, these reflective practices, what makes them unique for us as Jews is that they sustain us and they nurture us and they open us up to be able to go out, not to retreat further in. And I think that that’s so important at the High Holidays time: That we have to be focused inward, but only – like Shabbat every week – in order to strengthen ourselves that we can go back out.”

³ *Ibid.* This is another adaptation of the following exchange, edited for clarity:

Question: “So being open-hearted sometimes feels like being receptive. That is, **things get in.** But it sounds if you’re also saying that **being open hearted is that things get out.**”

Answer: “Yes, very much so. Very much so. I mean, it’s very much that teaching about the V’ahavta: That the words are ‘on your heart’ so that when your heart opens, they can fall in. But if we think about the V’ahavta, that brings us out into the world, you know -- when you go on your way, and when you walk about, when you go outside... you bring it with you. So I think it’s absolutely both. **It has to be both. It’s too selfish if it’s just about what comes in.**”

Sometimes, like King David, we are forced to reckon with our own actions, or, like our friend Jonathan, outside events come crashing down. In such critical moments, we cannot maintain the veneer of wholeness, and we must deal somehow with broken shards. Most of the time, though, nothing external breaks into our hearts. Most of the time, the work is up to us; and there's no better time to get started than the first day of a new year. As Rabbi Alan Lew wrote, "Every heart needs to crack itself open ... in the great journey ... between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur."⁴

It's easy to close off our hearts, to bury our pain, overlook our faults, forget our past—to respond every day, no matter what, with "It's OK" or "Thanks, I'm fine." This is the hubris of self-sufficiency, the unshakable myth that pervades our culture that being works-in-progress is something of which we should be ashamed. We dread humiliation, failure, and being wrong. But keeping open our hearts means accepting these experiences and holding a posture of humility and imperfection. While King David prayed for the forgiveness of God, we might pray instead for forgiveness of the self and a readiness to grow and change.

To open our hearts at this season of return is to allow ourselves to be forgiven, to see ourselves anew, to find sacredness in a world that seems beyond repair. With an open heart I seek not to become healthy or whole, refreshed or restored, though that, of course, would be nice. Rather, I accept the truth of my inadequacies and also acknowledge the value of my contributions. Only with an open heart can my inner life and my outward presentation be aligned; and so my sincere efforts to repent and improve require receptivity to ways of thinking and feeling about the world and about myself.

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This is in the in-flow of an open heart, the self-actualization repentance strives for. And there is an out-flow as well, a benefit not to me but to the rest of the world when my heart remains open to change.

The Amidah begins with a psalm that evokes the open heart. And it also concludes with a prayer for keeping it open after we pray. The first part of the prayer is very satisfying. It asks God to thwart the counsel and frustrate the plans of all who plot against me. But then, more provocatively, the prayer turns inward:

Let me be silent to those who curse me,
and may my soul be like dust to all.
Open my heart with your Torah
that I may pursue your *mitzvot*.⁵

⁴ *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* (Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 2003), p. 9. Quoted in *Mishkan haNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur* (CCAR Press: New York, 2015), p. 5.

⁵ This is my translation. The Hebrew as it appears in *Mishkan haNefesh* and other Reform siddurim is: לִמְקַלְלֵי נַפְשִׁי תִדְּם וְנַפְשִׁי כְעָפָר לְכָל תְּהִיָּה. פֶּתַח לִבִּי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדּוּף נַפְשִׁי. This text is based on the prayer of Mar, son of Ravina in BT Berachot 17a.

Even in the face of those who wish me direct harm, I pray for forbearance and calm. For my soul to be like dust is to assert over and over again, and to believe in some way it must be true that “You’re right” even when my instincts blare with the warning that you’re wrong. For my heart to be open with Torah is to commit myself to the constant quest for wisdom and understanding, which must, we confess, come from outside ourselves. And to pursue *mitzvot* is to seek to help the world even when my pride distracts me to help myself, to value being good over being right.

I don’t think this is a prayer of surrender or conceit. Rather, it is one of radical humility. And it is only with a posture of humility that I can meaningfully and effectively connect with others, especially those with whom I most vigorously disagree. This is the out-flow of an open heart, the ability to assume the best in others and to acknowledge not only our failings but also their values and strengths.

Rosh Hashanah, let’s remember, is not about waiting for other people to repent. It’s about embracing the certainty that I *am* wrong about very many things and opening myself to change who I am and what I do. This benefits not only me but also those around me, for an open heart is essential to being part of sacred community and contributing to the world at large.

Humility leads to generosity, both generosity of spirit and generosity of deed. “Judge **all** people with the scale weighted in their favor” our Sages teach.⁶ Not some people, not the people you like or are inclined to agree with — *all* people. Even those you know are wrong. “Let go of expectations,” teaches Rabbi Rami Shapiro, “and you will relinquish anger. In their place, love and compassion will blossom. And then the clenched fist of your heart will open and you will forgive.”⁷ Forgiveness and understanding bring us closer to peace, which is all we can offer in this divided world in need of repair.

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The Psalm with which we opened, which affirms the power of a broken heart, also prays for the heart to be restored. לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי אֱלֹהִים, “Create a pure heart in me, O God” (Ps. 51:12). May we pray in this new year for hearts pristine in their flaws and perfectly ready to change. לֹא־גָבַהּ לִבִּי וְלֹא־רָמוּ עֵינַי, “May my heart be not proud nor my eyes too high” (Ps. 131:1), the Psalmist says. And, “Let me confess: With all my heart

⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:6: וְהָיוּ דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זָכוּת, וְהָיוּ לֵךְ חֵבֵר, וְהָיוּ לֵךְ רֵב, וְהָיוּ לֵךְ אֱמֶת, וְהָיוּ לֵךְ אֱלֹהִים, “Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person with the scale weighted in their favor.”

⁷ In *Mishkan haNefesh, Yom Kippur*, p. 314. Attributed to Rami Shapiro, and perhaps drawing from this passage: “When you are open to all feelings, you realize that you feel all that another feels. A whole heart is a heart open to and welcoming of the full range of human emotion. This does not mean that you are free to act on your feelings. It only means that you are free to feel them, and when you do so, you have compassion for neighbor and stranger alike, for you know their heart as your own. In Judaism this knowing without limits is called the compassion of God, and, since you are God manifest in your time and place, this compassion is potentially yours as well” (Shapiro, Rami, *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice* (Skylight Paths Publishing: 2006), p. 22-23).

facing God, I will sing to you” (Ps. 138:1). As we strive to pause, to reflect, and to open ourselves up, we can uncover and unplug, declutter and expand. Flowing in and flowing out, our hearts open and pure.