

Yom Kippur Kol Nidre Drash
Avodat HaLev
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Who are we and what are we doing here?

We come together this evening from many places. For some this is our first time in this shul, for others, this is a place we've come to often over the years. We are from out of town visiting family, we are from the other side of the river, or we are from right down the road here in JP. Some of us are checking out a new kind of prayer, for others, these services are home.

Each of us here in this room has our own journey of how we got here and we each carry with us our own stories accumulated over this past year, and throughout our lifetime. The communal liturgy of Yom Kippur speaks of what is true for each of us in our own particular way. We've lost. We've harmed. We've come up short. We've been unfulfilled. We've been disappointed and we've disappointed. We've struggled to understand and to be understood.

We have made this pilgrimage of many miles or a few short blocks to gather in this room filled with friends and strangers. We've taken off from work and school to recite ancient prayers and enact primal rituals, to move through sound and silence together.

So why do we come and what is it that we hope will be waiting for us on the other side of these 24 sacred and challenging hours?

We come for different reasons: to be in community, to hear melodies that remind us of our childhood, to feel cleansed, to belong, to struggle with God, to be inspired to live our lives differently, to let the Hebrew wash over us even when we don't know what it means, to check in with ourselves, because we feel guilty otherwise, because our partner, child, friend, sister asked us to come with them, because this is just what Jews do, to honor our grandparents, to affirm our Judaism, to challenge the tradition to offer us something of meaning, to be healed, to be opened, to be changed.

We enter into this sacred space, packed in next to one another, to engage in this intensely personal, yet very public day of prayer and reflection alone, together. We inhabit a communal space and take part in a shared experience even as we each sit with our own thoughts and stories. As we move the prayers and rituals of the Yom Kippur service we collectively create this Day of Awe, and it is from the richness of this group experience that we can each find the sustenance, courage and strength to engage in our own journey.

We come together because there is an overarching narrative that links us all. We are born, we live, and we die. We suffer and love, we celebrate and grieve, as we move our way through this challenging, beautiful, fleeting life. The communal story that we tell on Yom Kippur compels us because it is true for each and every one of us. On some level of

awareness we are conscious that in this moment we are alive, and that one day, we won't be. **And we want these days that we have here to mean something.** This reality is one that is so hard to hold, so impossible to keep in our minds day in and day out, that we reserve a full day in the calendar for it. We gather together so we don't have to face it alone, and so we know that it is the reality that touches each one of us. On some level, we are each here to remind ourselves what a brief and beautiful moment we have on this earth, and, in light of this, to rediscover how we can live life to the fullest while we're here.

(Pause)

Joining together in this shared project, we must be able to bring our full selves to community; to recognize that each of us here in this room has our own journey and we are each carrying with us our own stories accumulated over this past year.

What do we do with these stories we carry?

For the past two summers I have worked with college-age students from around the world at a Jewish summer arts program with an emphasis on personal transformation, community building and self-discovery.

The program is dedicated to cultivating an environment that fosters change and growth. This commitment can be seen in what is perhaps the most unique, impactful and terrifying aspect of the program. Throughout the summer every morning and evening 2 participants stand before the community in a sacred gathering called Avodat ha Lev, Offering of the Heart. In front of their staff and peers they are asked to speak for 3-5 minutes and to share something they don't normally share with people; something that they feel, once shared, will allow them to be more fully a part of the community and will help others understand them on a deeper level.

Each year I am astounded—by the courage these students are able to muster to share such profoundly personal stories, and by seeing what a deep impact this process has on the speakers themselves. I am consistently awed by the openness of the community—made up a diverse group of 19-24 year-olds—to hear these stories.

My heart is often closed before this process begins a few days into the program: I have already formed opinions of the participants, created stories about them in my head. And then, as soon as the first person begins to share his or her story I am broken open by the realization that we actually have no idea what is going on for someone else. My heart softens and throbs for humanity with the recognition that each and every one of us carries a unique and heavy load.

Each evening and morning the entire community gathers as the two students sharing with the group make their way to the front to prepare to speak. Given the open-ended nature of the prompt, people choose to share a variety of stories of events that have carved deep

grooves, casting an enduring shadow of the past over the future. They are stories of the challenges and losses that continue to nag at the heart, asking to be looked at.

These are the stories that we don't usually bring to community. They are the ones we keep locked away in a drawer so that no one will ever see, yet somehow hope might be revealed. These are the experiences in our lives that we fight so hard to keep from defining us, yet, paradoxically help to incubate their power over us.

Speaking our personal darkness into the light is perhaps the greatest challenge that exists. We need to share the stories that have shaped us, the events that we are still struggling to understand, the circumstances that cause us to wrestle with God. **We need to tell our stories in order to see them change.**

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The stories I've heard over the past few summers are those that give a window into the current struggles in a person's soul. They are stories of failing out of school, of coming out of the closet, of battling addiction, of the loss of a best friend to a biking accident, of a genetic disease that keeps them going back to doctors year after year with no cure in sight, of being put in the middle of parent's divorce, of betrayal by friends who were supposed to keep them safe, of rape, of being fired, of letting down a parent, of mental illness, of becoming more religiously observant than their family, of leaving the world of orthodoxy they were brought up in, of hating their mother, of burying a beloved grandparent without having taken the opportunity to say goodbye, of not knowing what comes next, of being brought to death's door by an eating disorder, of growing up too quickly while nursing a parent through cancer.

These are the stories we bear, day after day that we often don't share even with our closest friends. It can be hard enough to articulate these things to ourselves, let alone to speak them out loud to someone else. But the invitation to unburden our soul is the sacred gift of Yom Kippur.

Reflecting on the spiritual work of this process, Rabbi Alan Lew writes, "Somewhere in the twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur, we must speak [our] shadow. We must speak it in private [or] speak it in public. We must speak it to a friend or speak it to a stranger. We must speak it to a husband or a wife. We must speak it in the shadow language of our own heart, or speak it through the liturgy" (197). We're not in a summer program, but are in the midst of our real lives, we live with the fact that there's no set structure for us to do this. But, as Rabbi Lew offers, whether through the words of the prayer book, the silent thoughts of our heart, or the actual speaking out loud to another person, Yom Kippur offers us a chance to speak darkness into light.

For it is the unspoken nature of our stories that can cast a shadow over our lives, giving shape to how we act and the choices we make, separating us from ourselves and from one another. On Yom Kippur we are invited, to the extent that we can, to release the feelings that imprison us and to thereby become free. On this day of intense introspection and reflection, we are asked to feel our struggles in the moment so that we can watch them

give way to what comes next. This, I believe is the purpose of Avodat ha Lev, and this is why we come together for these awe-filled, twenty-four hours.

“Kol Nidre is calling us,” Rabbi Lew writes, “It is saying, Speak. Speak the shadow, as much as you know is spread around you midnight to midday to midnight. Speak and let go. Speak and be human. Speak and be healed.” Each of us has a way of speaking that is authentic to us. Our task is to find our way to answer the call.

So, who are we?

We are brave and tattered beings who have ventured out of the safety of our homes, the daily in and out of our lives and routines to find a way to speak the language of our soul. We are truth-seekers who have come to let the ritual of this day guide us on a healing path. We are excavators of our lives, embarking on a trek into the depths in order to find a great expanse of freedom yawning inside of us. We are tender and compassionate, brimming with love, who have come to allow our hearts to open to one another with the realization that we—all of us—are fighting our own hard battles. We are courageous creatures who have come to become truly alive once again.

And what are we doing here?

We come here to be together, because none of us can do this work alone. Kol Nidre beckons us to join one another in community, with all the shiny and tarnished pieces of ourselves. We come together to become whole in all of our brokenness. We bring our full selves, with all of our doubts, our diverse and winding paths, because on some level we want to know that we are a part of something greater than ourselves. We join together to feel a connection that permeates beyond the boundaries of our individual being, to remind ourselves that we are all part of one family, one story, one great being. We come here to hold the flashlight for one another to navigate through the darkness, to help each other find the place in our soul where the light is breaking forth as radiant as dawn.

In the Yom Kippur liturgy we say:

Darashti kirvatechah

B'chol libi k'raticah

U'vetzeiti l'krat'chah

Likrati m'tza'tichah

I sought Your closeness, I called to you with all my heart, And going out to meet You I found you coming toward me (Lev Shalem 231).

This Yom Kippur may we find the courage to seek the closeness we desire and the strength to call from the depths of our soul with all our heart, and, in this place, in all of our beautiful aliveness, may we meet.