

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Temple Reyim

Kol Nidrei 2018/5779

Ayekah: How is Your Neshama?

\

Shavuah tov and g'mar chatimah tovah.

One of my dearest friends is a Rabbi who was my *hevruta*, my learning partner, for our first year of rabbinic school at Hebrew College.

The rabbinic seminary is a place of constant confusion.

I don't mean that there is so much to learn, though of course that is true.

I mean that when it comes to religious and spiritual questions, there is no such thing as *knowing*.

There is only wondering and wandering.

The more you take this insight to heart, the deeper you seek.

Wandering is an essential part of rabbinic training; when others find life bewildering, they need to know you, too, have been traveling *ba'midbar*, in the wilderness.

The wilderness, however, can be an unsettling and lonely place.

That's where my friend came in.

He was already a teacher of meditation and studied Jewish mysticism and Hasidism; he had traveled the world, even living with monks and lamas in Tibet.

I, at best, could recite the U.S. Constitutional amendments, though probably not in order.

When it came to readiness for rabbinical training from an intensive spiritual posture, he was a bit ahead of me.

Together we studied ancient rabbinic text and theology and experimented with forms of prayer. But he taught most of what I know about spiritual leadership by asking a single question, every single morning as we sat down to begin our study.

"How's your *neshama*?"

Neshama means soul, the reflection of the Divine within each human life.

I loved this question.

It was different than 'how are you?' to which I would have replied, "good" and either started analyzing our assigned text, or quickly moving into conversation about politics or some public interest story.

How is your *neshama* is not "*how are you*", but "*where are you*"? Where is your heart? Where are you in relationship to me, your friend? To our study together this morning? To this process of immersion in a brand new life? To your family, your wife Sarah and your children, Elie and Mica? To God?

Instead of jumping into the page before us, we'd pause, breathe, tell a story.

Studying Jewish text is the heart of the experience of training for the rabbinate.

But the question, "how is your *neshama*?" made it sacred.

It was in response to this question that he told me of the trauma of a loss in his life when he was young, and its impact on his ability to speak.

It was in response to this question - after he noticed me shaking in class one afternoon - that I told him I experienced panic attacks, which would continue for another two years of our rabbinic training before healing.

Answering this question can be excruciating; to acknowledge vulnerability, to stop pretending, if even for a moment, how *strong* we are all the time.

And - living meaningfully depends on it.

I have this rare privilege of being with people in the closing moments of their lives. When they're able to talk and reflect, they almost never tell me about how resilient they were; though that is often how we try to remember them. They almost always tell me about times they felt broken, and how they wished they'd been able to share this more.

And so I wonder, does our ability to live honestly depend on how we ask the simplest questions?

Last year, I spent an evening with a friend who recently lost her husband. I had been at the funeral and shiva, but we didn't have an opportunity to connect more personally. I wrote her a card. When we finally got together, after a few minutes, I asked her, "how are you?"

"I don't know how to respond to that question," she said.

I knew the moment I said it.

If I could cycle back in time, I'd have asked a different question: how's your *neshama*, an invitation to share the genuine reality of her life.

This Yom Kippur, can we ask our families, friends, members of our Reyim community this question; and when asked, can you respond honestly, putting down the mirage and holding up what's hidden?

It turns out, “how is your *neshama*?” is the very first question that God asks in Torah.

In the opening story of creation, God takes the dust of the earth, and blows the *nishmat chayim*, the breath of life, into it, activating and animating a human being called Adam. You know this story: God places Adam in the Garden of Eden and instructs Adam that if he eats from the tree of knowledge of good and bad, he will immediately die. Apparently noting the existential crisis of being alone, God soon after forms another human, a woman, named Chavah, or Eve. Enter the *nachash*, the serpent, the antagonist of the unfolding drama, who challenges God’s command not to eat of this tree. Trusting the serpent, Chavah picks the fruit of the tree, eats, and gives some to the Adam. Their eyes are opened, their consciousness awakened, and they see they are naked.

They hear the sound of God rustling, and they hide.

God called to Adam and said, “Ayeka? “where are you?”

Adam responded to God, I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, so I hid.

God’s questions to Adam, *ayeka*, is typically translated as “*where are you?*”

But where are you *physically*, of course, is not God’s question. God knows where Adam is. God is God. God is asking a different question, and Adam seems to understand.

Adam doesn’t reply, “here I am,” a statement of physical location, but rather, he shares where he is psychologically, emotionally and spiritually: “*I heard your voice, I was afraid.*”

This question, *ayeka*, means “where is your heart right now?”

Ayeka is the biblical language for my friend’s question, “how is your *neshama*?” It is an inquiry into one’s being.

Ayeka has a central place in Hasidic folklore as well. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was the founder and first Rebbe of Chabad, living in what is now Belarus in the 18th century. Just before the turn of the century, leaders of the Vilna Jewish community, who were adversaries of the new spiritual renewal movement called Hasidism, accused Shneur Zalman of supporting the Ottoman Empire. He was arrested on suspicion of treason and brought to St. Petersburg where he was held in the infamously brutal Petro-pavlovski fortress for 53 days. He was awaiting trial when an officer entered his cell.

The officer began to challenge the rebbe, asking question after question, raising apparent contradictions in Torah, trying to expose as fraudulent the rebbe's belief that Torah was the word of God.

"Why would God say to Adam: '*Ayeka*,' 'Where are you?'" he asked. "If this God of yours knows everything, how would God not know where Adam is?"

Instead of explaining the meaning of the word *ayeka* in its context, resolving the contradiction, the rabbi began asking the officer about his spiritual life:

"Tell me," the rabbi said to the officer. "How old are you?"

"I'm 46. Why are you asking me?"

"You are now 46 years old. Do you have a family and friends?"

"No."

"What have you been doing all these years? *Ayeka?* Where are *you*?"

When the officer heard this, he laid his hand on the rabbi's shoulder, and his heart trembled.

Commenting on this story in his book *The Way of Man*, the great scholar and theologian Martin Buber writes: The question, *ayeka*, was designed to *to show the officer his own life*. The content and character of a person's life depends on whether he faces the question. If he hears it, if he listens to it, his heart will tremble.

The point for us is not to tremble all the time, but rather, to be able to answer this question with honesty at the most important moments in our lives.

The truth is that we need hiding places! This is true even for God.

Remember, after God has chooses Moses to lead the people of Israel from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael, Moses pleads with God, *hareini na et k'vodecha*, Show Me Who You are and what You look like! The people will ask me. I need to know You.

What does God do?

God places Moses in the cleft of a rock, and passes by so that only God's back could be seen.

We tend to interpret this passage in Torah as a reflection of the God's power - if Moses saw all of God, Moses would have died, overwhelmed by the intensity of God's illuminating presence.

We might also interpret it, however, to show God's vulnerability; God is protecting God's full Self from having to be revealed, unveiled, exposed, known by another.

Oh how we need our hiding spots, our places of protection. If only we could place other people in clefts of rocks and offer them just our backs ; how much easier life would be! Hiding spots are priceless.

And they are illusory.

Martin Buber writes: When we try to hide from others, we are actually hiding from *ourselves*. Our system of hideouts prevents us from hearing the question “where are you?” The question will not come in a thunderstorm; it is a ‘*still small voice*.’ A person won’t hear it if he is hiding. Whatever success and enjoyment a person may achieve, whatever power he may attain and whatever deeds he may do, he will only have purpose and direction if he faces this question.

Like most spiritual matters, the goal is some measure of balance between hiding and revealing, leaning into one or the other at different moments in our lives.

On Yom Kippur, we are taught to lean *heavily* into revelation.

Yom Kippur calls us out from our hiding places, encouraging us - demanding us! - to stand vulnerably before one another and before God.

Tonight we are completely together in this.

You feel worried;

You beat yourself up about not being able to meet personal goals you set for your health and well-being;

You’ve felt humiliated that you failed in your job;

You’re confused in your sense of purpose as your children grow apart and move away;

You’re brokenhearted as you begin to imagine the ending of your own life, or the lives of your loving partners and siblings and friends;

Yes, we all say. Me, too.

It’s *exactly* this moment of anger, embarrassment, sadness, and confusion when Judaism says: *ok, go, stand before God.*

*Vulnerability is what makes standing there **worthwhile**.*

Only in this spiritual stance can it pierce your heart that on this day, it is *sealed*, who will live and who will die, who in the fullness of years, and who before. Look around you at people you love, whom you can't imagine living without, and hold them as close as you can; tonight and tomorrow you are asked to acknowledge today that *everything breaks*.

What a devastating day.

Yom Kippur forces us to face this tension between the angst and fear of *not knowing anything* and the insight that every moment is a gift to us. This tension is practically impossible to hold. As much as we may keep telling ourselves, life is delicate and fleeting, and for all these miracles we are so grateful, this understanding offers us no protection for the terrifying fear of losing the people we love.

I had an experience recently that threw me into the heart of this tension. We were in California this summer, at a birthday party for Sarah's sister Deborah in a pizza parlor in a tiny town in the mountains. There was a small enclosed room for birthday parties. Typically this room is set up for parties for 3 or 4 years olds, not 40 year olds, but we took what we could get. The Meyers side of the family was there, all the young cousins ages 5 to 16, having an 1980s-themed dance party with neon wigs and a small portable microphone hooked up to a broken karaoke machine that only seemed to play two songs. That didn't stop the cousins from dancing for more than three hours, each new cupcake providing an additional half hour of energy.

I am pretty committed to not taking pictures or videos. I like unmediated space. With a camera, I tend to focus more on the medium than the experience. Is the light right? Do I need to zoom in? Is the sound coming out ok? By the time I have it right, I've missed the moment.

But the party was going on and on and on ... so I started to videotape, imagining it would be so much fun to look back at it and laugh at how outrageous we were.

As I start to film Elie and Mica and their cousins, I start to shake. "What is happening?" I think to myself. "We're in a ridiculous back room of a pizza parlor in a rural town in the mountains."

Of course, you know, that's exactly where we encounter tear-your-heart-out moments.

I'm not shaking because it's so beautiful or funny and I'm overjoyed, but rather because these are the kinds of videos you make so you can *remember people who are no longer with you*. Suddenly it was like I was trying to capture them as they *once* were, as if they weren't immediately before me, but rather a memory, and this video that I'm making is all I have. I begin *desperately* missing and mourning my children who are right before me. Time collapses, and I go for a walk outside to buy some iced tea at the local twenty-four hour market and breathe.

I must have been in some kind of existential vertigo because I came back to the restaurant with four gallons of sweet tea, which I don't even drink.

How I would have loved to be sitting with my friend, about to jump into a page of Talmud and be asked instead, *How is your neshama? Put the camera away already and tell me where are you.*

This day, Yom Kippur is asking us this question. The challenge is that we need to be able to *receive* the question, and that's not a small matter. Sitting in a large Sanctuary with narrow seats, surrounded

by 500 people, is not necessarily the right setting to feel open-hearted. We might prefer a mountaintop or the ocean's edge, in solitude or with one person we love.

But here we are.

Not eating, not drinking, wearing uncomfortable shoes.

Wearing ourselves down.

For the next 24 hours, we intentionally diminish our strength so we can feel more vulnerable.

So, how is your *neshama*? Where are you? Where is your heart?

This is the time to reflect on this question.

If, even for a moment you can answer genuinely, you will have found a way to stand humbly and honestly before God.

As we begin this day together, consider this question.

It doesn't just live in the prayerbook. It comes from you.

This is a rare opportunity to peer inwards.

And ask this question to your family and friends. It is an amazing gift to offer to those you love.

May the *truth* of your lives shine.

And may you be sealed for a year of happiness, health, honesty and love.

G'mar chatimah tovah.