

## **Drawing Near**

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The first words printed for Kol Nidrei in Mahzor Lev Shalem are this line from tomorrow morning's Haftarah, from Isaiah:

שלום, שלום, לרחוק ולקרוב אמר יי'.

Shalom, Shalom, l'rahok v'lakarov amar HaShem. (Isaiah 57:19).

Shalom, shalom, to the far and to the near, said God. The translation for this year might be, "Shalom, shalom, to those on Zoom, to those in the tent." It's good to be together with you all tonight.

Tonight we enter Yom Kippur, the day when our prayer service and study recall the High Priest's atonement service. Only on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, did the holiest person, the High Priest, enter the holiest of places, the Holy of Holies, the inner chamber. There he would open the curtain and pronounce the holiest of words, the Divine Name.

Tonight, with no High Priest, with no Holy of Holies, and with no practice of pronouncing the Divine Name, we bring our community and our prayers and our yearnings together with this service, and we begin the process of drawing near. On Yom Kippur we come closer than we do on any other day of the year to pulling aside the curtain between ourselves and that which is most sacred: we strip away our ordinary life-sustaining activities; many of us wear white in reflection of the High Priest's plain linen robe on Yom Kippur, his own stripping away of the colors and elaborate costume of the priesthood; we bare ourselves and all of our flaws in this holy encounter.

Although Isaiah recounts the Divine greeting to both the near and the far, tonight I want to focus on the near. I want to talk about drawing near, about how we might use the next 24 or 25 precious hours to bring ourselves closer to the Divine, the Source of sacred connection, and to each other. It's not easy. That's why we're here. How do we get close? How do we build intimacy into our prayer experience? How do we draw aside the curtain and open ourselves to that which we are searching for?

The beautiful davening led by Deborah and Christina has helped gather all of us in this prayer space, and I hope that space sets us each on the path of drawing near. I've structured this talk around tools we can find in the liturgy or Torah or other texts that illuminate ways to draw near. The wisdom of our tradition includes tangible ways to do this.

## 1. Embodied prayer

One of the first blessings we say upon waking up in the morning, miraculously waking up with our souls still connected to our bodies, is:

אֱלֹקֵי נְשָמָה שְׁנַתָּה בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא אֶתָּה בְּרָאָתָה אֶתָּה יִצְרָתָה אֶתָּה נִפְחָתָה בִּי

"God, the soul You gave me is pure. You created it, You shaped it, You breathed it into me." It's such a beautiful affirmation to begin the day, and I've found the words meaningful for a long time.

But at the beginning of the pandemic, right when everything had shut down and everything was uncertain and I'd stopped seeing anybody in person except the people living in my house, my experience of this blessing shifted radically. Like many of us, I was hyper-conscious of the need to avoid the breath of other people. Despite my good health and lack of risk factors, I had a real fear that COVID could harm me or my family. Every morning this blessing brought me into a palpable intimacy with God, because the only breath I could allow into my lungs was the breath that the Divine breathes into me. As Rabbi Everett Gendler teaches, "In truth, we do not breathe; we are breathed." (Kol HaNeshamah Shabbat v'Hagim, 235). The intense boundaries we were placing around breath itself, combined with media reports about respirator shortages and images of hospitalized COVID patients, brought me to an immense gratitude each morning for the ease with which I am breathed.

The breath in our lungs is as near as any encounter could be.

**The first lesson about building intimacy into prayer is inviting ourselves to perceive the embodied experience of prayer.** Our breath, our feet on the ground, our posture, whether our eyes are open or closed, whether we sway or remain still, whether we sit or stand, how our clothes feel draped against our skin, the sounds we hear. Bringing our attention to the physical experience of prayer

connects directly to the spiritual work we are doing, because, thank God, our bodies are still connected to our souls.

In the next day we will read, chant, sing, and sometimes skip tens of thousands of words in the mahzor, the prayerbook. The words can blur into each other, especially when our energy flags. If, or when, that happens for you, I invite you to return to your embodied experience: check in with your feet and the sleeves of your clothing and the breath in your lungs.

אַתָּה בְּרָאתָ אֶתָּה יִצְרָתָה אֶתָּה נִפְחָתָה בִּי

You created it, You shaped it, You breathed it into me.

## 2. Praying together

Before we say the Sh'ma in the morning, we say the blessing Ahavah Rabah, the blessing about God's great love for us and the gift of Torah.

As we say the blessing, it is traditional to gather the four corners of our tallit before these lines:

וְהִבֵּיאֵנוּ לְשִׁלּוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ וְתוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמָמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ: כִּי אֵל פּוֹעֵל יְשׁוּעוֹת אֶתָּה  
וְקִרְבָּתֵנוּ לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל סֶלָה בְּאֵמֶת

“May You reunite our people from the four corners of the earth, leading us upright to our land; You are the redeeming God, constantly **drawing us near** to Your great name, forever in truth.”

When we gather the four corners of the tallit we symbolize unity, gathering disparate parts of our selves together, but we also symbolize what the text says – the gathering of our people from all corners of the earth. Part of acknowledging the greatness of God's love is acknowledging the holiness inherent in our gathering itself. That is the image we hold in our hands (in an embodied prayer experience) as we cover our eyes to say the Sh'ma, a moment of prayer that requires great concentration. We don't picture ourselves praying alone on a mountaintop; our image of Ahavah Rabah, of Divine love, is our people gathered together, from near and from far. This is what, we pray, can draw us near: *V'keravtanu*.

**The lesson here is that drawing near in prayer requires gathering together with our people.** After the past year and a half, and the ongoing public health crisis,

we know that gathering together in physical presence is not a sure thing all the time, but virtual gathering can also give us this gift.

The paradox of gathering to pray on Yom Kippur, of course, is that our atonement is deeply internal. We gather in groups, because we cannot imagine entering into this process alone. We need the support of a community. The connection to other pray-ers allows us to peer deep inside ourselves.

So let's each take a deep breath and hold in mind one other person who is with our minyan tonight -- and if you're alone, I am happy to be your person – whose presence supports your prayer right now. [inhale]. We'll exhale in gratitude to that person. [exhale]. And we'll take one more deep breath and offer our own presence to that person, because we know they need support too. [Inhale/exhale].

### 3. Authentic prayer

קָרוֹב י' לְכָל-קוֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֵמֶת

God is close to all who call, to all who call with integrity. (Psalm 145:18).

This line from Ashrei, from Psalm 145, gives us another way to come close to God: we pray *v'emet*, pray the truth that is in our hearts. **Ashrei's lesson for us is: the prayer that can bring us closer to the Divine is authentic prayer.** We must permit ourselves to share, authentically, our struggles and our fears and our yearning. Not because the Universe is not already aware we are imperfect (It is!), but because acknowledging a mistake is the only way we can hope we won't continue making it in the same way. Remember, the mahzor, the prayerbook, is just a guide. Of all the words in the mahzor that we can pray, some of them may be truly what is in your heart. Focus on those. Or maybe the one word or phrase you need to lift up is not in there. So add it.

Over the hours of prayer tomorrow I invite you to begin your own process of drawing near by praying *v'emet*, sharing your most authentic prayer, the words or ideas or sensations that can open you to coming closer on Yom Kippur.

קָרוֹב י' לְכָל-קוֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֵמֶת

God is close to all who call, to all who call with integrity. (Psalm 145:18).

#### 4. The power of proximity

Moving to a contemporary text, I am going to share some words about closeness, about proximity, from Bryan Stevenson. Bryan Stevenson is a civil rights lawyer based in Montgomery, Alabama. He is, as far as I'm concerned, one of our country's leading secular prophetic voices about racial justice. I'm going to read for you excerpts from a talk he gave called "The Power of Proximity," which for me resonates with tomorrow morning's Haftarah reading. If you're interested in thinking more about this, I invite you to tomorrow afternoon's Bregman hevruta program, when we will have an opportunity to look at this text again, studying in pairs. Bryan Stevenson:

"I believe that to make a difference we've got to find ways to get proximate to the poor and the vulnerable. I believe that when we isolate ourselves from those who are vulnerable and disfavored, we sustain and contribute to these problems. . . . I went to the jail to see this little boy [a fourteen-year-old boy, only five feet tall, charged as an adult with murdering his mother's abusive boyfriend]. . . I got up and I moved my chair close to him and . . . I put my arm around him and I said, 'C'mon, you've got to talk to me. I can't help you if you don't talk to me,' and that's when this little boy started to cry. And through his tears, he began talking to me, not about what happened with the man, not about what happened with his mom, but he started talking to me about what had happened at the jail. . . . He told me on the night before I got there, so many people had hurt him he couldn't remember how many there had been, and I held him, this little boy, while he cried hysterically for almost an hour. . . . When I left the jail, the question I had in my mind was, 'Who is responsible for this?' And the answer is, we are. We've allowed this distance to be created from some of the most vulnerable people in our society. On any given day in this country there are 10,000 children housed in adult jails and prisons, at great risk. We've allowed narratives to emerge that separate us from some of these children. I believe proximity is the solution, because you, in that space, would have reacted just like I did. . . . We need to get close enough to wrap our arms around [those who suffer] and affirm their humanity."

Bryan Stevenson, "The Power of Proximity," Fortune CEO Initiative, June 25, 2018.

He is not talking about prayer, but we know our work for justice is also sacred, and I find so much that resonates and also so many questions in his words. What I want to share tonight is that part of our work for justice, part of our work for

teshuva, part of our prayer is the sacred process of getting close to another person who needs us. Stevenson's story brings to mind for me a well-known teaching from Mishnah Sanhedrin, from the ancient rabbis: "One who saves a single life, it is as if they saved an entire world." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). What Bryan Stevenson is teaching here about the power of his work, and it applies to teshuva too, is that we do this one person at a time, and it requires proximity. **His lesson for our prayer is that there is power—there is a whole world—in getting close to one person and affirming their humanity.**

Rabbi Zeff spoke on S'lichot about Psalm 27, the psalm we sing during this season, and the line we set to music: "Ahat Sha'alti" – One thing I ask. He suggested that in our teshuva this season, in order to make it less overwhelming, we focus on one thing. Tonight I want to suggest that in your prayers, in your embodied and communal and authentic prayers, you focus on one relationship you want to repair. One person you want to embrace. As the ancient rabbis teach, that one person contains an entire world.

"We need to get close enough to wrap our arms around [those who suffer] and affirm their humanity."

## 5. Boundaries

The first verse of tomorrow morning's Torah reading is:

וַיְדַבֵּר י' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֹהֶלן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי-י' וַיָּמָתוּ:

God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who **came too close** before God and died. Leviticus 16:1.

The deaths of Aaron's sons Nadav and Abihu happened at the consecration of the Mishkan. They were apparently so moved by the Divine fire that appeared when the altar was first used that they wanted to try it for themselves. They approached the altar with a sacrifice that was not prescribed, and they were consumed. Nadav and Abihu came too close to God, and they died.

As I said in the Charry service on Rosh Hashanah, I believe the ancient rabbis were intentional in selecting the first lines of our Torah readings on the High Holidays. There must be a reason why the Yom Kippur Torah reading begins here, with this dire warning. **The lesson for our prayer on Yom Kippur is that it is possible to**

**come too close—it is possible to endanger ourselves with our ritual—and we need to guard against that.**

It is possible to go too far with self-criticism. It is possible to see only our flaws and not our beauty. It is possible to reflect only on our mistakes but not on our growth. It is possible that the prayers and martyrology and Yizkor can drown us in grief—not the kind of grief that can help us move through pain, but the kind that paralyzes us. But Yom Kippur is not rooted in despair; it is rooted in hope. We are here because we believe we can make teshuva. We believe we can return to our best selves. For all of us, I pray that we can support each other in being gentle with our own souls. It is true we've made mistakes. It is also true that God already knows about them. And where we began is also true: the soul inside each of us is pure.

אֱלֹהֵי נִשְׁמָה שְׁנָתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

God, the soul You gave me is pure.

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The five tools we've talked about for drawing near in our prayer are:

1. Embodied prayer—prayer open to the experience of our breath & our bodies;
2. Authentic prayer—praying *v'emet*;
3. Communal prayer—prayer among people gathered together;
4. Prayer that builds proximity to one person or prayer about repairing one relationship;
5. Prayer that does not come too close to boundaries—remembering that the goal of atonement is not despair, but moving forward.

As we continue to pray together during Yom Kippur, I hope some of these tools will bring us closer, closer as a community and closer as individuals to drawing aside the curtain. Over the next day, we have the luxury of spending plenty of time exploring these practices. May we all find ways to draw near.

We're going to close with my dear friend Andrea Jacobs leading us in [Batya Levine's song Karov](#), her setting of the line from Ashrei:

קָרוֹב יי לְכָל-קָרְבָּאִין לְכָל אִשָּׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֵמֶת