

8 Ellul 5777, August 30, 2017

Ve-taher libenu le-ovedekha be-emet

Purify our hearts so we may serve You---and serve our communities and serve our planet--in truth

In this age of jangled nerves and clashing narratives, how do we reach out to the other Other? How do we keep both our eyes and hearts open, finding moments of connection? I find myself juggling layered realities, *ha-kol be-vat ahat*, all at once: I may rejoice in the intimate moments in my life, yet find myself by turns astonished and enraged, gobsmacked silly and despairing, as I absorb the daily news. As hearts break (think of justice obstructed, here and in the Middle East), how do we maintain a stance of resolve and hope, of greater caring even in those moments when we cannot summon love? (I say this knowing that we have come into this world to learn how to better love.)

This year's theme, taken from the Amidah prayer, calls us to an abiding practice: one of continually purifying ourselves from the toxins and disdain that too often occupy our being, to find a path of truthful service. Each successive phrase in this the prayer matters here, and may be the subject of multi-tiered contemplation. To wit:

(1) What does it mean to “*taher libenu*—purify our hearts,” to refine our intentions (our kavvan-aah!) and attune our embodied heart-mind? Does it mean to let go of unnecessary (or surplus) suffering, to leach out the toxins that threaten to undo us? Is it a washing clean, a dissolving of problematic, or does it mean reframing or transforming of *what is present*, like the bioneer agronomist who used a fungus to turn poisoned, oil-slicked earth into arable land? How, I ask, to re-new the land where our hearts reside? The kabbalistic tradition speaks of the 40 days between Rosh Hodesh Ellul and Yom Kippur as a *Mikveh* in Time—the 40 cubits of a mikveh's healing water likened to these 40 days of spiritual immersion. This period is an invitation to melt into God, the Mother and matrix of Possibility, who is likened to the Sea, to healing waters, and via a second meaning of the word *mikveh*, to the renewal of Hope itself. As the prophet Jeremiah says, *Mikveh Yisrael YHWH* (Jer. 17:13): the One who Is-Was-Will Be is the *mikveh*—the healing waters and hope---of the People Israel. How might we use the 40 days of deep cleansing—*taharah*—to do the work of re-alignment in body and soul. How might we both refine the ego, attune our *middot* (spiritual-ethical qualities), and at the same time, move *beyond* the small ego of the atomized self? How do we transition from the shattered heart, or the scattered heart, or the complaining heart, to renewed *shelemut*, a wholeness that nurtures possibility and hope? Through what media (air, water, earth and fire)—and through what orders of time (waking and dreamtime)—might we pass in order to bring about this renewal?

How much of the practice of *taharah* is one of becoming fluid, of letting go, of dissolving the clenched heart? And how much of it is a matter of holding oneself accountable, of loving but unwavering self-examination and conversation with one's friends (who also wish to support and serve).

(2) “Purify our hearts that **we may serve you**”: As the Kotzker teaches, we begin with the self but do not aim at the self. We ask, how may we best discern and offer our gifts, our energy, our longing, even our imperfections, to afford a larger tikkun or healing? How might we stretch our vessel/our *kli*/our heart-and-awareness to hold diversity, to hold multiple narratives? Again, it's a matter of resilience, of keeping one's eyes AND heart open. Of reminding ourselves of what really matters and how, accordingly, we might serve. For some of us that means to step forward and make our presence felt (to not be invisible);

for others it means to step back a bit, to afford space to others, to act as a mentor. For some of us it means to work and play in ways that heal the earth (in acts small and large), to consciously share resources and work systemically to create greater structural equity among peoples. Or maybe it means, less grandly: to show up, to be there for a friend or stranger in need. To count. So: How do we balance our bliss, our own gifts—the small and the large—with what the world needs? To quote our beloved Reb Zalman, how are we to be deployed?

Here too reframing can play a role. I remember Reb Zalman once saying that when one finds oneself bored stiff at shul, instead of falling into a funk of other-directed criticism, it is helpful to ask: how can I serve? What does this hour need? And: How can we be partners with the One so that the divine *shefa* (flow of energy) may course unimpeded through our world?

(3) And finally, “to serve you **in truth**.” Truth (not, heaven forbid truthiness)—this most precious and contested word, that is often degraded daily by those at the pinnacle of power, “fake fake news.” We ask: What is **a** truth, **the** truth, **our** truth? To what extent is “truth” absolute and unimpeachable, to what extent is it always situated? How do we balance the gift of holy *chutzpah* (to say what must be said, to pray with our feet in sites of danger)—how do we balance that *chutzpadik* speaking-**out** with deep humility, knowing that often the most we can give over is *our* imperfect love, our *nook* perspective? To serve in truth may mean: showing up, not hiding; practicing (in Buber’s phrase) being not *seeming*; acting with integrity, openness, self-reflection, and gratitude. Moving beyond complaint. (In ways too complex to limn here, EMeT is both an epistemological term and a moral-affective one.)

As one who loves words, I wish to offer two word-plays in Hebrew: Truth, (Hebrew, EMeT/תמא), is composed of the first, the middle and the last of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, suggesting a continual balancing of perspectives, a commitment to *multi-tiered consciousness*. (We who are both particle—a self—and waves in the divine Ocean.) Secondly, in the mystical tradition, there is a teaching that if one remove the first letter, the Aleph/א (the deep sense of One, the Mysterious Breathing Spirit) from EMeT/תמא, it becomes MeT/מת—dead, lifeless. How do we animate and embody truth? How do we purify our hearts, continually peeling off the film of misprision, removing the plaque of harshness...that we may serve with an opened heart? *Lev Shome’a*, (IK3:9) the heart that *listens*.

So here we are in deep Ellul, looking forward with anticipation/not-knowing and gazing back at the year that was. This is the perfect time of year to cultivate curiosity about our work in the world, our play and our prayers, our eating and our fasts, our loving and our indifference. It is the time par excellence to examine our deep patterns and to gain release from reactivity and ways that do not serve. So: ***Ve-taher libenu***, purify our hearts, O God! May we continually remove the obstacles and the distortions, the pettiness and the pinchedness from our hearts, ***le-ovdekha be-emet***: that we may serve You and the Planet, with humility and courage, love and radical awe, with verve, vitality and humor. Ours is a commitment to **waking anew**, to daily “removing the sleep from our eyes and the slumber from our eyelids, *ma’avir sheinah me-einai u-t’numah me-af’apai*.

Shanah tovah umetukah: may this be a year of good health and sweetness. May we davven and celebrate life’s moments together, with heightened awareness, good humor, and a purified heart.

Reb Elliot

Two songs to guide our chants this year are available on our website: www.pardeshannah.org