

Several weeks ago, Sarah Weinberg and I participated in a triathlon up in Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin. It was a supportive place – women from many different backgrounds and fitness levels, cheering each other on. That Sunday morning, after I finished the race, I went to watch the other women cross the finish line. I stood there with my eldest son Matan, who had begged to wake up at 3:30 that morning to accompany me to the race. By this point, he was ready to go home, needed a nap. But I wanted to watch a bit longer, I wanted to drink up more of the positive energy emanating from the finish line.

We stood together and watched several women wearing Team Phoenix jerseys cross the line, and fall into their waiting teammates' arms. There was more than one woman who ran across the line with only one breast. More than one with a bald head. One who completed the entire race with a boot on her foot. Matan asked me who they were, what this Team Phoenix was. I explained to him that they were all women who had recovered from or were recovering from cancer of some kind. And that this race was more than a race for them. I couldn't find the right words to explain their accomplishment to a nine-year-old. I gave him a simple explanation, sensing that as a young child, he couldn't fully understand the import. He looked at me and my wet face, wet from old sweat and fresh tears, and he said "I get it, Mom. I think I really get it." I think he understood, on some visceral level, what I was trying to get at, which is a heavy and difficult truth: that amidst the cheers and smiles at that finish line, there was also a very palpable triumph over death hovering in the air that day. And that that presence of death endowed those miles of swimming, biking, and running with a purifying power, for those women **and** for us, those watching them.

And the presence of death lurks throughout these Yamim Noraim. Admittedly, it is not the most uplifting theme to consider on Rosh Hashanah, But stick with me. Death is around us during these days, and I believe that the ways in which our

texts speak of death during this period have much to teach us as we move into a new year.

Tomorrow our laying retells the Akedah, the famous story of Avraham's test and the near-sacrifice of Yitzchak. The laying on Yom Kippur begins with a by-the-way reference to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who sought to draw close to G-d by offering their own form of sacrifices, but did so outside of the prescribed rules, and were consumed, killed. We recite Yizkor on Yom Kippur and remember those individuals we have lost. Piyut after piyut on these Yamim Noraim confronts our precarious mortality. And then the most vivid of accounts - the Eleh Ezkera – often called the martyrology - a piyut that we will say during Musaf on Yom Kippur that graphically narrates the martyrdoms of ten pious Rabbis.

Encounters with death or near-death experiences populate our communal language at shul throughout these days. The relationship between closeness to G-d, death, and atonement presents itself in powerful but confounding ways.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days marked by fragility. The call to transformation makes the air heavy. It is often said that we should approach Yom Kippur in particular as a simulation of our own death; such a confrontation with our own vulnerabilities allows us to acknowledge our very tenuous connection to life and assume a humble posture, a necessary starting point for the hard personal work we are supposed to be doing.

Alan Lew, in his beautiful book “This is Real and You are Totally Unprepared,” speaks of the period of the Yamim Noraim as a narrow bridge, using Rabbi Nachman's well-known comment as a guide. Today, we taste birth, personal and cosmic; it is a beginning. A day of opening our eyes anew and taking clear,

fresh breaths. And as we travel the ten days separating RH and YK, we traverse this narrow, quaking bridge, experience those days as a compressed lifetime, culminating on YK with a recreation of our death – the denial of physical pursuits and pleasures, the repeated recitation of the Vidui, the wearing of white kittels that are meant to recall burial shrouds.

Yes – simulating our own deaths can attune us to the capricious nature of everyday life, as Lew says so eloquently:

“We need a taste of this emptiness to give us a sense of what will go with us, what will endure as we make this great crossing. What's important? What is at the core of our life? What will live on after we are wind and space? What will be worthy of that endless infinitely powerful silence? And we taste death on Yom Kippur to remind us of what we must hold onto, and what we must let go of, of who we are, and where we come from. We taste death on YK to remind us that death forgives, and that YK is a little death, and they both cover over.” (p.222)

That tenor is powerful and an important engine of self-transformation, but it is lacking when confronted with the Eleh Ezkera. When I come again to this piyut, I am still bothered. Each year I read the words, push through the difficult recitations of the horrors endured by those exalted rabbis, or skip that section entirely, and am unsure what the piyut wants me to feel. Horror? Revulsion? Sadness? Admiration? Guilt? Clarity? What is the purpose of this insertion in our high holiday liturgy? The accounts of the Rabbis' deaths are too vivid, the theology is too troubling, the historical underpinnings too inaccurate.

The Eleh Ezkera is found in various midrashic sources, one being Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchut. Each source depicts these Rabbis' deaths with slight variations, and while these texts are not accurate historical documents – these ten Rabbis did

not all live at the same time – they are a part of our aggadic tradition, and the importance lies in discerning the theology behind their compilation and their insertion here, in our machzor.

This piyut comes right on the heels of the Avodah section of the service, which recounts the Kohen Gadol's YK sacrifices. And with this juxtaposition, it is difficult to ignore the clear parallels in language between the animal sacrifices and the human sacrifices – the flaying and burning of skin in both sections. Is the piyut suggesting that just as the animal sacrifices affected atonement for our sins in the days of the Temple, these rabbi's deaths serve as sacrificial offerings to atone for our sins? The piyut itself says this – the Roman Emperor seeks to justify the killing of these men because of the ancient sins of Joseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery; the Rabbis must die to atone for that wrongdoing, the Emperor suggests.

On its face, it feels like a repellant reading, but the Zohar also agrees – viewing these stories as endorsing the notion that the deaths of the righteous atone for us, these many generations later.

This is a pretty big theological pill to choke down. Really? In what way can we accept this idea of vicarious atonement? Yes, during certain historical periods – the siege at Masada, the persecution of the Crusades, the oppression suffered during the Spanish Inquisition - it may have been a necessary interpretive turn, to see the horrible deaths of Jews as serving a larger purpose and meaning. In Israel, where Israeli soldiers risk their lives for their country, this theology may have a place and application. But for us, as Jews living comfortably and safely in America, what can this possibly mean? What can we do with this piyut without jettisoning it completely?

In some synagogues, this section is omitted, judging its theology unacceptable, the remnant of an outmoded historical worldview. In other shuls, the martyrology presents an opportunity for a broader memorial service to recall other martyrs – both Jewish and non-Jewish – who sacrificed their lives for noble causes throughout history – Holocaust victims, Civil Rights era volunteers. One rabbi even told me that he will use the martyrology to remember the victims of the Sandy Hook tragedy. This current seems to reflect the movement toward reinterpreting old forms, bringing a modern, at times universal lens to older texts and practices. There can be power and meaning found there, but I wonder how far we move away from the original piyut when we do this.

While we were up at Camp Ramah this summer, I sat with Gabi Shetrit, a friend and teacher and we spoke about this section of the machzor. What are we supposed to do with this section, I asked him. To his mind, the Eleh Ezkera stands where it does as “*sih ha’emunah*” – an example of the pinnacle of faith. He views that piyut not as encouraging such martyrdom necessarily, but providing an extreme example of complete faith – the same lens through which many view the Akedah: Avraham’s willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak was the supreme test of his faith in G-d. By remembering these stories of whole faith, we can be moved to aspire towards a similar height and achieve a virtual atonement as we, with these images in mind, work to purify our own actions.

In an abstract sense, perhaps one can accept that view – we can deeply admire the Rabbis’ unflinching faith in and love for G-d, but are we supposed to aspire to do the same? Do modern American Jews really view martyrdom as the pinnacle of faith, as the ultimate religious expression? Is that a view that has any modern resonance? Or are we to view it all metaphorically?

The Akedah narrative, in all of its troubling richness, has become a multivalent motif that pervades our daily davening and our foundational theology – the story of a father, so believing in G-d that he does not hesitate when that G-d asks him to sacrifice his long-awaited and dearly beloved son, Isaac. In his book, “Inheriting Abraham,” Jon Levenson writes of the many levels of meaning to be found in this story by the different monotheistic faiths. He notes that while the Torah does not tell us Isaac’s age at the time of the Akeidah, later midrashic sources offer the ages of 26 or even 37, as Levenson says, these “later Jewish sources were eager to make him an adult and thus a knowing and willing participant in what thereby becomes an act of self-sacrifice” (96). Such a turn reflects the valorization of martyrdom during periods of oppression. Levenson recounts how Fourth Maccabees, tells the story of the priest Eleazar, a Jewish woman, and her seven sons, who choose martyrdom rather than eating pork or bowing to idols of Antiochus. As Eleazar’s death is recounted, the text recalls Isaac’s near-death as the paradigm of willing martyrdom, a choice that is exalted. In a Talmudic text from Rosh Hashanah 16a, Rabbi Abbahu asks: “Why do we blow the horn of a ram? The Holy One blessed be He, said: Blow the horn of a ram before Me so that I may remember for your benefit the Binding of Isaac, and I will account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before me.”

So, our shofar blowing today is a virtual Akeidah. In a sense, it is a reenactment of that climactic moment of faith, of Isaac’s willingness to martyr himself before G-d. We are cleansed, the Talmud suggests, by finding vicarious atonement through the near-sacrifice of Isaac.

But what else can we do with this idea– that death can atone for us? How can we apply it to our lives? And stepping back and taking a broader view, what do we do with old forms, ancient prayers, or obscure practices that confound us or turn us off?

The Sefat Emet, in one of his shiurim for YK, speaks of the Yamim Noraim as, above all, a time of reunification. Throughout the year, our sins and failings lead to separation – separation between us and G-d, between us and others around us, between the divine piece of ourselves and the piece that is often far from holy, between ourselves and those who came before us and who will come after us. These days are intended to be, first, days of cleansing, and ultimately, days of reunification. Days of the collapsing of time, of boundaries, a dissipation of all differentiation in our world. Viewing the martyrology and the Akeidah through this lens, we can read the Rabbis' deaths and Yitzchak's near-death as the experiences of our brothers, even as our own encounter. And the Sefat Emet suggests that as we forge this deep connection between souls and transcend time, we develop the capacity to feel both the Rabbis' and Yitzchak's pain and their tenacious belief in something larger than themselves. We feel their horror, we touch that moment of anguish, and this unification leads us to clarity, empathy, and purity – all elements of atonement.

And Alan Lew adds another layer. He speaks of these Yamim Noraim as moments to acknowledge how we have fallen short, what we have lost of ourselves, the suffering and disappointment that we have encountered. But he offers something else, as he says:

“ There is in fact one human capacity that actually increases, that grows stronger and deeper as we grow older, and that is wisdom. And the reason wisdom increases as we age is that the source of all wisdom is precisely our death. As we approach death, we approach wisdom.”

Sacred attunement – an idea that Sam Klein touched on during his visit with us – is a key ingredient in the attainment of wisdom. When we can fully and genuinely attune ourselves to others' journeys, the veil of separation and the detritus of sin dissolve. This is atonement.

But there is one final lens that I would like to share. And of course, it has to come from the world of poetry. A favorite poet of mine, Christian Wiman – and no, he is not Jewish - recently came out with a prose book of personal theology. Raised in a deeply Christian part of West Texas, he was brought up with a fundamentalist faith, one he never thought to question or doubt. Until he left for college, he never encountered an unbeliever, and he then went through a period of atheism, agnosticism, and embraced a firmly secular life for many years. Then, seven years ago, he was diagnosed with a rare and virulent form of cancer, and he found his way back to G-d and belief. His book, “My Bright Abyss” is one of the most gut-wrenchingly honest and personal explorations of theology that I have read, and since he is a poet, his wrestlings rend your heart with their beauty. And although he does not speak of the Eleh Ezkera or this idea of vicarious atonement through death, I think that he has much to teach on this challenging part of our tefillot.

Wiman struggles with the question of whether, as he says, faith can be consciously constructed or whether there must be a shattering experience, one that trashes the old words or things. A shattering experience. Reading the accounts of the martyred Rabbis, it is one shattering experience after another. And Wiman suggests that these moments of shattered reality, brokenness, encounters with radical abandonment are the building blocks of faith and understanding. If we see these moments from this angle, they can be mined for honest threads of belief.

And as Wiman continually comes face to face with death in his own struggle, he speaks a great deal about that personal encounter:

“How desperately we, the living, want to believe in the possibility: that death could be filled with promise, that the pain of leaving and separation could be, if not a foretaste of joy, then at least not meaningless. No, to die well, is to accept not only our terror and sadness but the terrible holes we leave in the lives of

others; at the same time, to die well is to believe that there is some way of *dying into life*, rather than away from it....Death is the only lens for true transcendence.”

The account of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom is an example of just this – dying into life. As his skin is raked with iron combs, he calls out the Shema, and expresses wonder and near joy that he is finally able to understand the meaning of “bechol nafshecha” - to love G-d with all your soul. A dying into life.

The challenge is to use this ever-present awareness of death – an awareness that we are made to confront in the Eleh Ezkera - to discover personal attunement and thereby atonement. To access empathy, clarity, unification, wisdom. Each year, as we move one year closer to the reality of death, we try to learn to die into life.

And in a strange way, I feel that Matan understood what I struggled to convey, when the words failed me. That those women running across the threshold, embodied an embrace of death – even as they physically trained their bodies and fought against the threat of illness, they accepted the power and clarity of purpose that can be harnessed from one's touch with death. That attunement, I believe, carries you to atonement, and that is where we must be heading during these days.