

Yom Kippur 5768 2007

Over the summer, David and I had a chance to visit the new exhibit of Ancient Greek and Roman art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of my favorite places. I can't tell you much about the exhibit because David and I didn't really get beyond the first room. Pottery, deities, bowls, amphorae from the first contact between the Greeks and the Ancient Eastern societies, were so exquisite that we walked almost in a dream from one case to the other, staring at tiny little incense holders and fertility pieces, until we both looked at each other and got teary from the magnificence. This is what happens when you get old with someone; you begin to share aesthetics and sentimentalities.

One artifact in particular overwhelmed me. Like something from 300, a soldier's helmet in brass with raised metalwork of elegant gazelles over the forehead and going down over the cheeks. The sculpting was refined, the work delicate and beautiful.

I could not stop thinking about a civilization that would invest so much artistry in implements of war. What the art was telling me was that this society saw beauty and death coexisting together.

I have a similar memory of 9/11: a magnificent September blue sky in the Skokie Lagoon on my way to work where I first heard the news and saw the images of so much random death and destruction.

How can life be so fragile and so beautiful in the same moment?

This is the central motif of Yom Kippur. We afflict our bodies or treat them as if they were dead, and yet experience the beauty of calling God directly by name. We agonize over our spiritual deaths as a result of all our sins and shortcomings, but sing out the 13 Midot of God's compassion. The compression of Kol Nidrei and the release of Neilah all in one totality of 25 hours.

If YK heightens our awareness of beauty and death, what can we take away from the experience for the rest of the year?

Before attempting an answer to that question, I want to draw from Jewish sources to broaden the image. This is the time of year when on the sacred narrative calendar, we live between the shattered luchot of the Golden Calf, and the second set of Luchot which Moshe, brought down to a forgiven nation on this very day of YK.

This forty-day period of tension, when we are hanging in the balance between the luchot is symbolized by the sustained broken voices of the shofar. We are meant to hear the sounds, feel the tension, and then resolve by our actions (teshuva, tefilah utzedaka) to move from brokenness and wholeness within ourselves.

In Baba Batra, Pages 14 a and b, there is a long discussion on the proper size of a Torah scroll. I have included a passage from it for you to read in the break, or at some other time, because to me it sounds just like a shul meeting: I have highlighted for you comments that sound like real Jews whom I know walk and speak among us.

The key point of this sugya comes when we are told that the original ark was big enough to carry both the second set of tablets but the broken ones as well. Part of who we are supposed to be in wholeness and beauty is a person who contains brokenness and death.

In a Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah 7:2 this theme is expanded. I read this in an essay written by a member of Congregation Anshe Chesed in NY. It is the practice of this shul (and I want to propose that we consider adopting it at Kol Sasson) to have members write reflections on teshuva that are posted on the shul website for all to read. The name of this woman is Dianne Cohler-Esses.

“If an ordinary person uses a broken vessel, it is a disgrace for him [her] but the vessels used by the holy one blessed Be He [She] are deliberately broken ones, as it is said

Adonai is near to them that are of a broken heart (Psalms 34:19)

I dwell in the high and holy place, with him [her] also that is of a humble and contrite spirit (Isaiah 57:15);

the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise” (Psalms 51:19)”

God seems to like us better when we are broken, when we possess a *ruah nishb'rah, lev nishbar vnidkeh*. Is this just because when we are really down and broken, that we seem to need God more?

This does not make sense to me because it indicates that God is pretty shallow. Yes, it is good not to be to “full of ourselves” but I think that the condition of being *shavur* urges us on for something bigger than ourselves.

Aviva Zornberg’s brilliant book about Bereshit draws its title from a poem (“Notes from a Supreme Fiction) by Wallace Stevens “**not to have** is the beginning of desire”

Being broken makes you long for something that you may not be able to have, but the longing is an essential for us.

There may be many ways in which we set goals for ourselves in life: run a marathon, study a new language, join a minyan which asks us to learn new davening skills, but this kind of longing is deeper in the gut. The acts we do are in perfect measure with the desperateness of our longing, our missing something or someone and rather than let it immobilize us or depress us, YK and Jewish thought takes our sadness, our brokenness and gets us to reach out in ways we could never have imagined.

I am going to take some examples from my own life as a form of directing some of the Dvar Torah to the people who remain in the room in a few minutes: the Yizkor People. We are the people who live perpetually with broken hearts. Someone is gone whom you can never reclaim, never reconcile with, never repay fully.

But the recognition of that broken heart and that longing makes me do things that I would never do otherwise, like

1. Hug, Kiss and stroke someone who is deathly ill and feel as if it is a gift for me
2. Remember to tell my sons and my husband that I love them before they leave the house for the day and if I have not, to feel bad about it all day until I can make it right.

3. Choose my words wisely online, on the phone and in person.
4. Try very hard to be modest
5. Try very hard to be humble about the gifts I have received as a person.

These are just a few, but my guess is that man of you would have answers as well.

Most of you know that I love poetry. One of the blessings of 5767 is the rekindling of a friendship with an old friend, who shared this poem with me this very week, helping this entire Dvar Torah take shape. It was written by Billy Collins who was poet laureate of the United States from 2001-2003 and now serves in the same position for the State of New York. I am going to read it but now without wishing all of you years of longing and brokenness that only yield beauty and joy for yourselves and your families.

"The Lanyard"?

? The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
 ? off the pale blue walls of this room,
 ? bouncing from typewriter to piano,
 ? from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
 I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
 ?where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.?

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
 ?could send one more suddenly into the past --?
 a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
 by a deep Adirondack lake?
 learning how to braid thin plastic strips?
 into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.? ?

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard?
 or wear one, if that's what you did with them,?
 but that did not keep me from crossing
 strand over strand again and again
 until I had made a boxy?
 red and white lanyard for my mother.?

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
 ?and I gave her a lanyard.?

She nursed me in many a sickroom,?
lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light?
?and taught me to walk and swim,
?and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.?
Here are thousands of meals, she said,?
and here is clothing and a good education.?
And here is your lanyard, I replied,?
which I made with a little help from a counselor.? ?

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,?
strong legs, bones and teeth,?
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,?
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.?
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift--not the archaic truth?

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took?
the two-tone lanyard from my hands, ?
I was as sure as a boy could be?
that this useless, worthless thing I wove?
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.?

Billy Collins