Rabbi Gail Swedroe  
Rosh Hashanah 5780  
“I Want to See You be Brave”

Shana tovah. In a moment, I am going to read Psalm 27, a psalm which has been included in Jewish daily prayers for a month, since the beginning of Elul. The author of this psalm is traditionally recognized as King David. As I read it and as you feel comfortable, please close your eyes or let your gaze soften to a place on the floor in front of you. How would you describe his state of being? Is this way of experiencing the world one that you aspire to or personally experience?

A Song of David. God is my light and my help; whom should I fear? God is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread?
When evil doers assail me to devour my flesh—it is they, my foes and my enemies, who stumble and fall.
Should an army besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should war beset me, still would I be confident.
One thing I ask of God, only that do I seek: to live in the house of God all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of God, to frequent God’s temple.
God will shelter me in God’s pavilion on an evil day, grant me the protection of God’s tent, raise me high upon a rock.
Now is my head high over my enemies roundabout; I sacrifice in God’s tent with shouts of joy, singing and chanting a hymn to God.
Hear, O God, when I cry aloud; have mercy on me, answer me.
On Your behalf my heart says: “Seek My face!” O God, I seek Your face.
Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger; You have ever been my help. Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer.
Though my father and mother abandon me, God will take me in.
Show me Your way, O God, and lead me on a level path because of my watchful foes.
Do not subject me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses and unjust accusers have appeared against me.
Had I not the assurance that I would enjoy the goodness of the God in the land of the living…
Look to God; be strong and of good courage! O look to God!

It seems to me, in this moment, that King David is someone who either has steadfast courage and faith or is striving towards achieving this way of being in the world, reciting an affirmation or intention for how he wants to be to help make his thoughts and goals a reality.

And while trying to reach a place of serenity, King David acknowledges that even when his go-to support structure (his parents) are not available as a source of strength and comfort, that he has other resources available to help ground him in difficult times.

While this year has been filled with many blessings, it has also been filled with many challenges: perhaps personally, certainly as a Jewish people. And regardless of one’s
opinion on any myriad of current challenges our society faces, my sense is that many people are feeling frustrated, burned out or hopeless: either because we don’t see how things are going to get better, and we’re tired of trying to explain ourselves to those who don’t get it, or because we don’t understand how others around us can’t see that things are finally improving, and we’re tired of trying to explain ourselves to those who don’t get it.

With the number of challenges in today’s world, it seems that many of us regularly find ourselves in a state of trying to determine what and who poses a threat to our safety – physically and/or emotionally; from which foes we need God’s protection. It is exhausting to consistently lament, ask who we should fear or who we should blame.

As we enter the new world of possibilities that comes with 5780, what if, instead, we were to focus on the last two verses of psalm 27? How can we, chazek v’ya’ametz libecha, be strong and of good courage? How can we be brave?

Native-Texan Brené Brown’s research on shame and resilience in her book, Rising Strong, discusses how the ability to reset transforms the way we live. The ability to reset… transforms the way we live. That is what teshuvah is all about – resetting ourselves so that when we are faced with the same situation that we have faced previously, we respond differently. We bring a level of kavannah, of intention to the situation, responding rather than reacting.

If this were something that came easily to humans, then we probably wouldn’t have a need for an entire season, nine weeks long – from Tisha B’Av seven weeks ago through Hoshanah Rabbah in the middle of Sukkot, just under two weeks from today - dedicated to the process of reflecting on our brokenness, on the relationships in our lives in need of repair, on how we can reconnect with the Divine. It is hard to be brave, as Brown’s research indicates, when one feels shame, because then the reason we tell ourselves that our lives are not ideal is because there is something inherently wrong or broken within us rather than that we made a mistake or a wrong decision. Judaism reminds us that while we must take responsibility for our actions, we are created in God’s image. Therefore, while we may have MADE mistakes, we ARE NOT our mistakes.

The Likutei Moharan, the magnum opus of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, published in the early 1800s is his reflection on how to live one’s life in such a way that one is worthy of honor from God at the end of one’s life. He writes that “it is impossible to attain this kavod (honor) except by means of teshuvah. And the essence of repentance is that when a person hears himself being insulted, he remains quiet and silent (Likutei Moharan 6:2). How does Rebbe Nachman come to this understanding? By essentially creating a kabbalistic proof. There can be no “kavod” (no honor) without a kaf, the first letter of the word kavod. The kabbalistic understanding of God includes the idea that God is made up of 10 qualities. Rebbe Nachman teaches that the letter kaf from kavod, also corresponds to an aspect of God known as Keter, meaning “Crown.” Each of the 10 qualities of God is associated with a particular name of God. The quality of Keter, is associated with the name “Ehyeh asher Ehyeh,” often translated as “I am what I am” and sometimes as,
Rebbe Nachman understands it, as “I will be what I will be.” Rebbe Nachman writes that the meaning of *ehyeh* is “I am prepared to be.”

I am prepared to be. This is an aspirational statement. It is not where we are. It is where we hope to arrive. And the path to arriving there is to engage in *teshuvah*, in examining our lives and determining how we are going to live in such a way that makes us worthy of honor. And when we arrive there, we will connect with the highest element of God.

So how do we do that? How do we continually examine our lives and make decisions to live in particular ways that make us worthy of honor? It requires hard work. It means being aware or mindful of everything we do, of not just trying to get through each day and all of the tasks we need to accomplish. And, ultimately, we will miss the mark, we will come up short. This is where the importance of being strong, of having courage comes in. For if we think that we are missing the mark, that we are living our lives in ways that we don’t know how we got from point A to point B (whether over the course of years or over the course of a few exits on Mopac) because of some inherent flaw within us, then we will not be able to engage in *teshuvah*, to return to our lives with a sense of mindfulness. What would be the point? If we are failing because we are lacking something, then why bother trying? If, however, we are able to be brave, to see our shortcomings as a result of decisions we made, separate from who we are at our core, then we can engage with those decisions, we can reflect, and when we find our minds wandering or our actions not lining up with our values, we can engage in *teshuvah*, we can return to who we are striving to be. In continually striving to be the best and brightest versions of ourselves, we are engaged with the possibility of what we could be – *ehyeh asher ehyeh* – and in that sense come into relationship with the Divine Presence.

Living life in the present moment and being aware of how we are existing in the moment can be difficult. It certainly is for me. It’s why I appreciate various tools that connect my time to something greater than my own internal clock: the rhythm of daily tefillah, the rhythm of the Jewish calendar with its appreciation for making time holy by recognizing the blessings inherent in that moment, even yoga - which has been described as meditation in motion. And there are many other acts: running, swimming, walking a labyrinth, meditating, journaling to name a few which can help us not only direct our attention in a particular moment. They are spiritual practices designed to help us engage in *teshuvah*, of returning our attention back to our lives so that we can experience the holiness of each moment. I, like many, find my go-to way of being in the world as one focused on doing things, rather than of being. Some of you may recall that as recently as four years ago, I still had a Blackberry. I’m not in the corporate world and I was in my early 30s, and I LOVED my Blackberry for its ability to keep me focused on my task lists. And while I do appreciate my ability to get things done and can recognize this as a strength, I don’t appreciate its corollary: the challenges I face to be fully present, particularly with those nearest and dearest to me. One way that I am very much looking forward to and am grateful for the opportunity to hone this ability is by participating in the fourth Clergy Leadership Program cohort through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality over the next two years to learn more about the wisdom Judaism has to offer each of us.
Weaning on this. I look forward to sharing more of this aspect of our tradition in the months to come.

One thought I’ve had recently, in reflecting on my own relationship with time and why Judaism emphasizes the calendar and our relationship to the particular hours of each day, perhaps it is tapping into an anxiety about time so many of us have and encouraging us to see time not as something that is slipping away but as multiple moments to be present and recognize the blessings in our lives.

Going back to Rebbe Nachman’s Likutei Moharan, we learn about another element to being present. In 6:11, he says that whoever wants to go in the ways of teshuva must prepare bravely, and strengthen themselves constantly in the ways of God. Engaging in teshuva is not something that happens when we feel like it. In order to truly engage in teshuva, we must be present in each moment. And lest one think that the path of teshuva is linear, only ascending, we are reminded in Psalm 139:8 - If I ascend to Heaven, You are there; If I descend to Sheol, You are there too.” Rebbe Nachman challenges us that even if we manage to ascend to a better way of being, that we do not remain complacent and stay there, but rather that we continue to stretch ourselves and find new heights to attain. And lest we think that just because we have succeeded in bettering ourselves that we cannot attain new lows, we are taught that God is present even in our falls, even when we hit rock bottom, and so we must not despair, but rather seek God out there too, so that we can strengthen ourselves and move forward bravely.

When we understand teshuva as the courage to return to our lives fully present and open to experiencing possibilities to which we may not have been aware while we were so engrossed on the past mistakes we made or worrying about the future, we realize that teshuva is not only something we are to engage in when we have missed the mark, but also a resource when we feel good about how we were in a particular moment and might want to experience other future moments in similar ways of being.

So as we reflect on 5779 and that which we hope to leave behind, we recognize that it is not enough to only note that which we no longer want to carry with us. We must also cultivate an awareness for that which we consciously want to bring into 5780 – not only today, but in each and every moment of this new year. In our own ways, each of us is like King David, influencing and leading a particular sphere: whether it be within our family, friend group, community, school or work. Psalm 27 reminds us of the importance for each of us to set an intention for how we want to be present in the world. And when we forget to focus on that intention, when we find our minds racing and not concentrating on a particular thing, and we hear ourselves reacting to that which is said and we forget to be still and quiet and open to possibilities (as we ultimately will, because we are only human), will we have the strength and courage to engage in teshuva, to try again? If so, then we may merit truly living in the house of God all the days of our life, and gazing upon the beauty of God, frequenting God’s temple.

Achat she’alti...