

KEREN OR

Keren Or is a publication of Or Shalom Synagogue

Or Shalom – allowing our souls to sing

Rabbi Hannah Dresner

During the Days of Awe we take an accounting of our souls, a *cheshbon hanefesh*, evaluating the health and wellbeing of our essential selves, the core that propels our deeds. We ask: How can I quench my souls' longing? Am I allowing my soul to sing?

Our tradition teaches that before descending into the world, our souls are imperfect. But finding their instruments in our bodies, with our capacities for expression and action, our souls wed their heavenly aspirations with worldly accomplishment. Through our human-ness our souls attain a higher fulfillment. And when they return to the upper realm, the Holy One of Blessing inquires of our souls what they learned from *us* during their sojourn on earth.

In this way, God discovers *our* completion, Her Creation.

How do we bring God's world to her fullest bloom? Our tradition teaches that it is by upholding three pillars of engagement: *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Chasadim* – expansion of our minds, spiritual practice and acts of loving kindness.

Or Shalom is well balanced in these foundational pursuits, and I credit the legacy of our teachers and rabbis, as well as the quality of person attracted to this spiritual community, for Or Shalom's palpable commitment to our human flourishing.

The Torah of Or Shalom is mindful that it is incumbent upon every generation to refine the teachings of our forbearers, so that we can enact our traditions with authenticity, and so that our rituals are affective in uplifting and nourishing us as we are, living the very real lives that we lead, with the unique challenges of our historical moment.

The poignancy of Or Shalom is her immersion in traditional forms, even as the community stretches to ask: what is the Jewish Renewal of 5777? What is the edge of our egalitarianism? What thresholds must we

negotiate as we continue to live into our commitment to fullest inclusion and participation?

Such questions permeate the values of our synagogue, affecting innovation in our dues structure, our educational programming and the evolution of our ritual.

The centrality of prayer in the life of Or Shalom is articulated by the vibrancy of our regular Shabbat morning services. More broadly, *Avodah* at Or Shalom is expressed with a variety that mirrors the breadth of our membership, with points of entry into spiritual practice from heart-centred text study, to engagement in our refugee initiative, to the loving service of maintaining our *Bayit*, our home on Fraser



photo courtesy: Anita Laura Fonseca

Street as a sweet sanctuary from the pressures of life.

Expansive participation in *Gemilut Chasadim* knits us together, allowing us to, quite literally, *be* arms of God holding one another in companionship. There is no greater expression of Godliness than this.

And because acts of kindness elevate our personal dignity even as we elevate the state of the world, we encourage an all-encompassing system of *Gemilut*

Chesed, with the aspiration that every one of us know the quiet gratification of reaching out in attendance of a *shiva minyan*, or in the delivery of soup, or sitting and listening with compassion.

My NewYear's blessing is that we rejoice in the core values of Or Shalom and deepen our critique of how to enact them so that our collective soul sings. I dare say that God will be pleased to learn how it is that we strive to complete her Creation.

From the board: Wealth is only one measure of blessing

Dave Kauffman and Philippe Tortell, co-chairs

Last year the board changed from a fixed membership fee to one that recognizes that some of us are blessed differently from others and that wealth is only one measure of blessing. Despite our worry about how this would affect the shul's revenues, the community continues to contribute membership dues and donate to our annual campaign with a range of financial commitments that sustains our staff and many of our programs. This is a strong testament to our community's ability and willingness to contribute financially according to their specific abilities.

With Rabbi Hannah in her second year as our spiritual leader, our focus has turned to defining and implementing our vision for Or Shalom's future. Toward this goal, we've made a conscious effort to define Or Shalom as an *intergenerational* Jewish community, with deep learning and teaching opportunities for the experienced, and welcoming introductions for the new. We affirm that youth and age are not the determinants of wisdom or humour or naivete, and we celebrate the insights that come from intergenerational activities and discussions. Much of this year's programming will reflect this vision.

As we pay more attention to fulfilling our vision, one challenge has been in recruiting lay leadership to take on committee chair positions. Many people

want to participate, to take action, to accomplish things in the name of Or Shalom, but few want to lead committees in the traditional manner. In the past year, Rabbi Hannah has established several working groups that meet, discuss and take action. This approach signifies a shift from a traditional top-down governance model, to an emerging model of distributed responsibility where leadership is shared and rotated. Over the coming year, we will continue to foster the development of working groups that can move ahead with a flexible decision-making process that results in effective action and implementation strategies.

At present there are three fully functional working groups: *Tikkun Olam*, *Gemilut Chesed* and Ritual. Rich in members with diverse talents, each of these groups is working creatively with a leadership paradigm that is still evolving. The development of these working groups is an experiment that is part of a community level renewal process. Collectively and individually, we must be prepared to break from habits that no longer propel us forward. This idea of re-examination and introspection lies at the heart of the High Holidays. We invite you all to join our process of exploration.

May the New Year bring shalom, health and happiness to you, to those you love and to the world.

SAYINGS OF OUR CHILDREN

Finding balance between the heart and the head

Uri Oberlander: Bar Mitzvah Dvar Torah

From my studies of Parsha Ekev, I discovered a thread that runs throughout: the search for just the right balance. A balance with oneself and God, among fellow humans, and with the world around us.

Ekev can be translated in a number of ways: because, if then, when and if. All of these words require some kind of balance – they bring together two ideas or experiences that are joined – sometimes with ease, sometimes with discomfort.

I learned about a give and take relationship that we are obliged to maintain. Reb Hannah taught me that God wants us close, and we want God to be close as well. She suggests that maybe God was lonely, and in turn created this reciprocal relationship for companionship.

Parsha Ekev tells us of Moses retelling the whole story – from Mitzrayim to Canaan across the Yarden – in order that the people would see anew what lies before them.

At the end of his days, Moses is looking toward the Promised Land, trying to find a balance. He can see it, he can almost taste it. He is so close, but still he remains on the outside, where he continues to teach the Hebrew people because he feels the connection as well as the responsibility to share the word of God. This has not always been easy, as Moses tries to balance his fear of God with his love of God.

Today is a Shabbat of Consolation, one of seven that follows Tisha B'Av, the holiday which marks the destruction of the Second Temple in 72 CE, and a great upheaval to the Jewish people. We are consol-

ing ourselves after the loss of the most important place for Jewish prayer. Not only that, but the Jewish people had been treating each other without respect or compassion. This Shabbat gives us a chance to pause, after a time of mourning, to appreciate our blessings and leads us to the month of Elul which brings the happy holiday of Rosh Hashana.

This is a chance to find balance, between sorrow and joy, mourning and gratitude – moving past hardship toward a new stage.

In modern times, world events continue to pull the balance out from under our feet.

My grandfather, Peter z"l, grew up in a liberal Jewish home in Vienna, and celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in 1935 as the clouds of disaster were gathering across Europe. After fleeing Austria in 1938, and landing in England, he was imprisoned in a series of internment camps in England and then deported to eastern Canada. When he

found himself age 17 in the woods of New Brunswick, away from anybody and anything familiar, he warmed to the Orthodox Jews in the camp. He sought connection with these other men (some rabbis, some yeshiva students, many with *payos*) to bring him a visible and practical connection to his heritage. Out of this lonely and degrading experience grew a commitment to Judaism that eventually brought my mother here, to this community.

The 613 *mitzvot* also give us the chance to find a daily balance: 365 ways to go against good; 248 ways we can form the right opportunities, and create meaningful connections in the world. Commonly, we



translate *mitzvot* as commandments, but it's not only that. It's more like an opportunity to be good and kind, and to soften the heart.

Many times during our day we are reminded to soften our hearts. Reciting the *Shema* twice a day: to love God "with all your heart and all your soul". These familiar words open our individual hearts, and also our collective heart as a community, all around the world. Here is another example of balance – the personal and the collective.

There is one other definition of the word *Ekev* that is really interesting to me: Rashi defines the word as the "heel" of our foot.

One of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's most famous acts was joining Martin Luther King in the Selma Civil Rights March in 1965. He proclaimed "I felt my legs were praying." Here is an example of an

inconspicuous part of the body making a statement, leading toward the "healing" of diverse communities. Herschel demonstrated the passion found in his heart and expressed it with his heel. He healed with his heel (see what I did there?).

The photograph that has etched this event into our minds is a beautiful example of how we seek to balance what is inside, with what is outside: when the personal becomes the political. Digging in your heels when it matters most.

Just prior to the words I read from the *Torah*, Moses instructs the Israelites to "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, stiffen your necks no longer" (Deuteronomy 10:16).

What does this mean?

I think that to "circumcise the foreskin of one's heart" means to soften and open one's heart toward



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, second from right, marches with Martin Luther King, centre, in Selma, Alabama.

God, other people and experiences in this beautiful world.

The 15th century Spanish commentator Abravanel, himself a survivor of the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 (a lot happened in that year), wrote: “A stiff-necked person cannot look behind to see how his actions have led him to where he finds himself.” We need to be flexible and to relax our necks, to reconsider and rethink our path, and to be loving toward ourselves. We need to be sure that we can always turn toward God, because God will always be there for us. I should remind myself as I go through life not to be stiff-necked so that I will look back to the experiences that have shaped me, which include my roots here at Or Shalom.

In the section of this week’s *Haftorah* which I read, Isaiah reminds us to look back at our story: Sarah and Abraham in our past, a wilderness that blooms, and songs that bring us joy and gladness. Here is another balance – the past and the future, the desert and the garden: “The desert [will be] like a paradise and its wastel and like the garden of Hashem; joy and happiness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and a voice of song.”

In my parsha, I chant the *Vehaya Im Shamo’a*. This section asks us to listen, to really listen. This is where connections grow. It also offers a useful example of a daily balance, such as reciting the *Shema* when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and you get up, and when you inscribe it on your gates and on your doorposts. But the most powerful is the balance between the heart and the head, both wrapped in *tefillin*, bound together by words and actions.

You may remember 10 years ago, on this very *bima*, what transpired every Shabbat. To me, the small pink Torah inside the *Aron Kodesh* looked as though it was a faded red cover which made it seem like it was very old. I thought that it had a higher and deeper connection to Judaism and God than the other small scrolls. If I couldn’t hold that special Torah, I would cry, unconsolably, and my mother would carry

me out so not to disturb the service. As the Kotzker Rebbe wrote in the 19th century: “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.” Maybe I had a hint of that when I longed to hold the pink Torah.

No one lives every moment with a softened heart – it is part of the human condition to retreat and to protect oneself. It is also okay to be vulnerable and to tell others how you feel; to live with an open heart, to see and to hear those around you, friends and strangers alike. Living with a flexible neck and loving heart brings us closer to our true selves.

When I feel my heart is hardened, my heel walks without feeling. I don’t notice connections with the world around me.

While when my heart is soft, every step I take I feel as though I could do more good in the world. I know this feeling when I take to the field as a buddy with the Challenger Baseball team. Over the past five years, I have learned that doing and giving brings connections among all sorts of people through our shared love of baseball.

As Reb Nachman wrote:

*Kol Ha’olam kulo gesher Tsar me’od
Veha’ikar veva’ikar lo lefached klal*

“The entire world is a very narrow bridge;
the main thing is to have no fear.”

This is telling me to keep my feet on the ground, with heels grounded, not be stiff-necked and to walk with an open heart.

I am now standing at a threshold of my own, just like Moshe in the Adom Mountains. As I begin my life as an adult, I search for direction to create balances in my life. My doubts might soften with the memory that God, as well as Moses, put up with a lot during the 40 years of wandering. The toolkit I take with me includes an responsive and honest heart, ears open to hearing, a sure and swift heel – and a few baseballs.

May all of your heels and hearts find fruitful connections and peaceful balances throughout your life.

Getting a glimpse of the sheer joy of life

Devon Whyte: Bar Mitzvah Dvar Torah

This Dvar Torah is focused on some hopeful thoughts for the future, just like the Jews when they were hoping just to be dismissed by Egypt long enough to pray to God. In the portion I see the arrogant Pharaoh showing us the consequences of clouded moral decision. I see God impose power through nature, God taking back from the Egyptians the natural beauty and prosperity they had been given. These are the ideas I chose to explore.

This week's Torah portion, Vayera, discusses the final stages of the plagues of Egypt in a way that causes me to question the judgment or teaching of God. In this portion God says, "I have hardened the mind of Pharaoh." I wonder what the point is of painting one who is already evil as even more exaggeratedly flawed, and what the point is of sacrificing firstborn children and animals across Egypt just to teach one guy a lesson.

On first reading, this stupefied me.

But I have come to realize that as sacred myth, the Torah is using Pharaoh as a symbol of immorality. And that what is described as consuming all of Egypt, including its crops and animals, symbolizes and makes viscerally real the fallout of slavery.

It is as if the Torah brings alive the deficit of morality in Egypt and allows us to experience it through a description of nature responding to evil – God's judgments demonstrated by nature. I am reminded of the description of nature's retaliation in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*: The land is given to the characters as beautiful, but through their evil actions it is tainted and destroyed, so that at the height of their evil, after Simon is killed, Golding describes the very air as "ready to explode." It is the

same with the plagues, the rivers running with blood, and hail and locusts leaving nothing green in Egypt.

It's myth, but the myth is not that far from reality today. In the past we can see how the Roman economy was undermined by the presence of slavery, resulting in the destruction of an entire empire and slaughter at the hands of the Germanic tribes.

Later on, in the not-so-distant past, U.S. slavery was abolished and the southern states went into a depression. All the southern states and all levels of society suffered repercussions of slavery and the war to end it. Consequence affected far more than individual plantation owners.

Perhaps the disasters, expressed by nature in the plagues, demonstrate the pervasiveness of consequence.

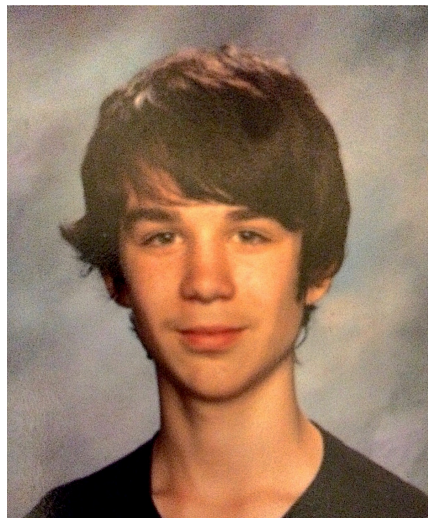
Maybe the learning is that we cannot contain the evil we unleash. Another teaching is that the presence of good does not, necessarily, offset

evil or save us from the consequence of evil action.

On a personal scale, as soon as we accept another human being as a lesser individual, we close our minds from learning, we've "hardened" our minds as Pharaoh did. As soon as we accept that there is such a thing as "human" and "subhuman," we are falling into the steps of Pharaoh and leading ourselves to peril; and who knows how exaggerated the real repercussions will be.

We see Torah as representing our law, not the laws of this country, but law nonetheless. But let me ask you something, why do we follow the guidelines set for us by this book, or scroll?

As a child, reading or being read these fantastical and terrifying stories of the nature of humanity, there have been times when I have felt quite intimidated.



“If you eat leaven during the days of Passover, your soul shall be cut off from Israel.” For a young Jewish boy or girl this is quite scary stuff; and so, as children, or if we never evolve past taking such strong statements literally, we might follow, blindly, out of fear. It is the same with the plagues. An immature reader takes them at face value.

The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg studied moral judgment and created the field of moral development, suggesting six stages in the development of human morality. They seem applicable as a hierarchy of both our personal responses to the Torah and the Israelites’ development as they grew into freedom.

Kohlberg’s stages of moral development begin with moral action stimulated by fear of a punishment and progress to eagerness for reward, as in all the promises of plentiful land and good years of harvest we read about in the Torah. God made such promises to Abraham: Leave your father’s house, and I will make you as plentiful as the stars in the sky!

As the developmental stages unfold, we begin to act to fit in, as in following the guidelines of Torah to fit in with the others who do, to be a part of the social fabric of community.

Next, we might advance to following the Torah out of respect, not because we believe in it, but because it is the law and it must be followed to maintain order. In the final stages of moral development, a person, or the nation as a whole, begins to do things out of a sense of love for others. You respect Torah because you respect other people.

In maturity, we begin to develop our own set of personal guidelines based on the morals of Torah. This is the last and most advanced stage.

The final stage requires critical thinking and creativity in extracting ideas from the laws or the stories and implementing them in ways that match our personal beliefs, since they are right and morally sound. One example of this is our willingness to change some aspects of the guidelines of Jewish law, like the separation of men and women during services.

On a personal level, here I am, becoming Bar

Mitzvah, achieving the fifth stage, in which I care about others. Hopefully, many of my peers and I have reached an age where we have learned how to be respectful members of society.

It is my belief that as soon as one is prepared to see both sides of an argument on equal terms, one has achieved this stage of maturity.

The reason we cannot, no matter how developed, be sent off to the sixth stage is because, at this age, one, in my opinion, does not have the experience to defy rules to match personal moral opinions. Though there are always exceptions.

As I become more and more aware of myself, I slow down; and as I slow down, I have begun to notice the grandeur of nature.

After a while, you start to become more and more amazed by how beautiful our world really is. And I realize that, in those moments when the patterns in the clouds swirl and the distant trees are swayed by a wind we cannot feel, I am, perhaps, as close to God, to our world, as I will ever be.

In such moments, we get a glimpse of the sheer joy of life, and that is almost too much to ever understand. That is what happens when we slow down and appreciate things; life gains newfound meaning. And would we not agree that to appreciate God’s Creation, or whatever caused this universe, is truly a holy thing?

We see God reflected through the artwork that is this world.

It is then that we understand why the Torah states that prosperity comes from the land. When we are immoral in our actions, the land will turn against us.

When the hail and the locusts destroyed everything green in Egypt, it was not a judgment or a punishment, merely a consequence of not listening to what is morally right.

It isn’t a coincidence that the *Shema* gives equal importance to hands, heart and soul. Our bodies, our intellect, our emotions, and moral understanding must be equal to one another for us to be truly human. One who is purely physical will not be able to learn except at a very primal, animalistic level. One

who is merely intelligent will be harsh and uncaring. One who is purely emotional is foolish and ignorant. As the aspects of our beings and the levels on which we function settle into mature equilibrium and we begin to even out, we become more and more capable of being our ideal selves, and we become what I think we were meant to be.

I see that there is the presence of darkness, igno-

rance, in our world. It leads us to chaos and suffering. But there is light, the light of knowledge and the natural beauty of this world, of the moral maturity that comes with this moment. The presence of good is not capable of lighting the way for those in the shadows, but if we shine our lights on them, we light the way for all.

Or Shalom young people create psalms at the retreat

One

1. A white bridge going over a river.
2. A little chapel near a cabin, the mountain, the trees.
3. Surrounded by these things I feel peaceful.
4. I am happy and cold, blessed and calm.
5. God, I'm glad I'm here, now, in existence.

Two

1. Disconnected from the world right now.
2. I feel crowded yet lonely.
3. Far from the knowledge of knowing my purpose.
4. Too far to grasp. Too far to enter. Too close for comfort.
5. The mountains are high and there is fog.

6. God, give me the strength to push through the obstacles in my path.

Three

1. I feel the reunion of the wind on my cheek.
2. The wind is invisible.
3. Thank you, God, for this beautiful day.

Four

1. God, is time an illusion?
2. The trees on top of the mountain are as far away as the time when I was a toddler.
3. Doing my homework is as far away as next year's retreat.

Five

1. I feel close to my home, my family.

2. Thank you for making the world.

3. For the trees from which we breathe
4. And mountains that provide us with challenge.
5. Sorry about the messy stuff.
6. And thank you, God, for making me.

Six

1. Thank you for making scooters.

– Tegan Dulude, Tria Dulude, Erez Harnik, Ben Hawthorne, Zach Hawthorne, Clara Longley, Draedon Longley, Malka Oberlander, Uri Oberlander, Ivy Pomerantz, Esperanza Reyes, Callum Whyte, Louis Wvong

Redaction: Irwin Keller

Or Shalom Synagogue is a Jewish spiritual community affiliated with the ALEPH Alliance for Jewish Renewal. We are creative, egalitarian, traditional and participatory. Please join us any Shabbat morning, from 10 a.m. at our synagogue at 710 E.10th at Fraser, Vancouver. For more information about Or Shalom, see our web page www.orshalom.ca or call the Or Shalom Office 604-872-1614.

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