

LIMBIC LAVA  
Kol Nidre 5780, Rabbi Hannah Dresner

In acknowledgment of Cantor Richard Cohen's melody for our verse from Psalm 42, Rabbi Tirza Firestone's book *Wounds into Wisdom* on healing intergenerational Jewish trauma, Aviva Zornberg and Robert Alter's descriptions of *tehom*, and Joy Ladin's insights about our lonely God in *The Soul of the Stranger*.

from Psalm 42:

“Deep calls to deep  
through the voice of Your coursing channels.”

***Tehom, el tehom, kore l'chol tzinorecha***

We pray for open *tzinoring* – channels cleared by our *teshuva*. We pray for pathways free to experience blessing, access love, rejoice in agency, pathways capable of holding and directing the flow of Spirit that is always coursing toward us.

“*Tehom el tehom kore*” – “Deep calls to deep,” the Psalmist says. The Spirit that fills our world calls out in affinity to the depth of our souls. When we're open to it we can connect to the great ineffable Mystery and ride the *tzohar* - the river of light perpetually streaming from the depth of Eden. And that Eden, the Messianic Dream, is not a “World to Come” in some afterlife, it's the world that is *always* coming, *always be-coming* as we participate in creating it. If our channels are open, we experience God's longing for a healed world as our own longing, and we're inspired to serve as the vessels of hope, justice, and love Jews are meant to be. If our channels are open to the Cosmic call, even our wounds can yield new wisdom and pathways.

We are, indeed, a wounded People.

Jews of every ethnicity and nationality have suffering in our family histories. Some of us have, ourselves, been oppressed. Some of us were raised on horrific stories and un-erasable images. And for some of us the terrible pictures are absent because the life events of the adults around us were concealed. But young psyches are permeable, porous to the feeling sense of parents and care takers, and so we, and our children, may carry the emotional charge behind buried images without even knowing what wounds have shaped us and shaped our fears, our suspicions, our reactivity, even our sense of entitlement.

And with all that, our great moral mandate is to mine our victimization for the empathy it yields, asserting that “We were once strangers in a strange land,” and that “Never Again” means never for anyone, anywhere.

I have been worried by collective Jewish behavior in recent months, as Jews have felt need to focus on the differences between the concentration camps incarcerating children at the US/Mexico border and the Concentration Camps that imprisoned us. I've been worried by Jewish insistence that we own a vocabulary of persecution, by Jewish focus on the supremacy

of our suffering, not to be paralleled. Do we really need to control definition of the word “genocide?” Does it diminish the magnitude of our experience to use that same word to describe disappeared indigenous women?

Isn't it our moral legacy to perceive the *similarities* of unthinkable oppressions, all of us joining in an activism motivated by understanding the soul of fellow sufferers? How would we perceive the Palestinian child, the Palestinian village, the Palestinian man who triggers fear of terror, if we were not suffering the reverberations of our own traumas, still erupting with what Rabbi Tirza Firestone calls “limbic lava?”

One reason it was easy to commit atrocities against Eastern European Jews is because ghettoized Jews were not seen, and in their invisibility, became unreal, no longer imagined as human. Is it not the same with Palestinians on the other side of that wall? It's worse than out-of-sight / out-of-mind; it's out of sight / open field day for the paranoid imagination. When people are pushed to the margins to the degree that we never encounter them it's easy to project fear onto them, particularly fear left over from cycles of previous oppression.

This evening's liturgy began with our communal disavowal of certainty; can we let go of *Kol Nidre*, letting our hearts be free of what we think we know, the convictions that cement the old story? Can we soften the defense that has hardened into an armor? Can we open the door to the cage of our victimhood releasing ourselves to evolve into our next blossoming, freer to become the Jewish People of our highest aspiration?

In her new book on healing intergenerational Jewish trauma, Rabbi Tirza Firestone (a Jungian psychotherapist and rabbi emerita of Reb Zalman's home *shul* in Boulder) recalls how unsettling it was for her, as a child, to learn the verse from Deuteronomy: “God remembers the sins of the fathers upon their children even unto the third and fourth generations.” It sounded like a curse. But years later, she says, the verse reveals resonant truth: the mind of the universe observes the wounds of parents as they ripple down to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Violations and heartbreaks can travel through time, creating a legacy of new suffering.

May we have compassion upon our family legacies and upon ourselves.

And may we begin to face our tribal wounds, learn to resist instinctual fear and blame, and shake off our identity of victimhood lest the mechanisms we enact to keep us safe become the very systems that lock our trauma in place, closing us off from the Great Flow, blocking the *tzinorim* – the channels of our receptivity.

I have learned from my friend and teacher Angela MacDougal, director of Battered Women's Support Services here in Vancouver, that healing from trauma is, most importantly, a restoration of identity. Imagine the collective Jewish wound healed such that we see ourselves as privileged, prosperous and empowered, confident in our well-being so that we rejoice in the assets we have to share, in the great toolbox for human flourishing that Judaism is. Imagine the

Jewish wound yielding to a path of inspired political and social engagement serving *any* group suffering injustice or marginalization.

Our injuries can ignite a passion for a new kind of identity, a new kind of life, one that courageously faces the humiliation of our own suffering and places it within the larger context of the *world's* plight. The Universal pulse is knocking, pounding at our hearts' doors in desperation. And our challenge is to pursue Jewish healing so that we can be more fully available to hear the *tehom*, the deep primal voice of the undifferentiated collective.

*Tehom*, with its Hebrew roots *hamah* and *hamam* – hum, murmur, coo, reverberate, roar, growl, groan, stir, rush, tumult, sound of a great throng - *tehom* is the word Torah chooses, in the Book of Genesis, to describe the collective hum of the dark void that existed before Creation, the quality of sound that existed before God's formulated, articulate speech shaped Creation into disparate constructions and concepts with utterances of "Let there be..."

The great translator Robert Alter notes that the "deep" of *tehom* can be an abyss of suffering. Indeed, in Psalm 42, the verse that begins: "Deep unto deep calls out through the voice of your coursing channels," continues: "All your breakers and waves have surged over me," an image of threatened drowning – the same words Jonah utters, almost drown, in the belly of the whale.

Robert Alter teaches that *tehom* is the geologic "deep" of a valleyed landscape conflated with the cosmic "deep" of primordial abyss. When the speaker of the psalm uses *tehom* to express distress, calling out from an anguish experienced as near death, the depth of despair is amplified through its association with a vast pre-Creation chaos in which abyss calls to abyss. Perhaps "*Tehom el tehom kore*" - "Deep calling unto deep," is the misery of others calling out to connect with the empathy Torah tells us is inherent in our own deep pain.

Especially in a time of increasing Antisemitism, we must make a conscious, considered choice to open ourselves *tehom el tehom* – from the depth of our lonely difference to the depth of other sufferers, and in that, to God's own plaintive call. We have been persecuted, imagined as ugly, even subhuman, and are, intrinsically, lonely in our difference. That's what makes this challenge so hard.

This season, I have found insight in a beautiful book by Joy Ladin, poet and professor of English Literature at Stern college, the first openly transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution. In *The Soul of the Stranger* Joy Ladin speaks of her loneliness in her difference, growing up in boy's body, and then a man's body, unlike anyone she encountered or imagined, unlike anyone the people around her had encountered or could imagine. And she writes of the solace she took reading about God in the Torah, unimaginable God, completely unique, and indescribable in the language available to us. She saw that she and God were two of a kind in their utter difference, and this was a sustaining comfort.

It's not just that the depth of God calls out to the depth of our souls, it's that God calls out to us, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has pointed out, from the profundity of God's loneliness. *Mi kamocha?* Who is like unto You? No one; nothing! God is unique and, in that, marginal.

I, too, take comfort in imagining that I am reaching out from my isolation to take God's forlorn hand. And in the solidarity of our Otherness, perhaps God and I, God and *we*, can begin a new hum that calls and resonates with the friendless, the desolate, the unseen, the misunderstood – particularly those I and we have rendered invisible, including them, anew, into the circle of life, as we perceive it.

A river of light streams from Eden and we can free ourselves to bathe in it making a transformative *mikva* of it. The World to Come is always coming, and we can take a forward-looking perspective, dedicating ourselves to its creation. Deep calls to deep and we can we can interrupt our story to and hear the hum of humanity and the groan of global suffering. These are tangible measures for calming of our limbic lava and for healing our inherited trauma.

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I ask you to close your eyes and put your hands over your hearts, to feel it's knocking, and its pain... Later, we'll beat on these hearts recounting our sins. But for now, let's take a minute to message our hearts...

And bend your torso forward, if you will, imagining that you are tipping your heart into your cupped hands. Hold your heart there, gently, letting it rest in your own self-empathy, self-comfort, and self-love...

Feel yourself soften, even a little bit, held and cared for in this way... When you are ready, tip your heart back into your chest and sit up, opening your eyes.

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