

Yom Kippur Day 5779

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A Heart of Wisdom

How I admire the jack pine tree that stands in its integrity, as described by Douglas Wood (in Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 3):

“Jack pines...are not lumber trees
and they won't win any beauty contests either.
But to me this valiant old tree,
solitary on its own rocky point, is as beautiful as a living thing can be...
In the calligraphy of its shape against the sky is written strength of
character and perseverance,
survival of wind, drought, cold, heat, disease...
In its silence it speaks of...wholeness...an integrity that comes from being
who you are.

Yom Kippur comes to help us face those aspects of ourselves that start out as pure impulses and somehow get twisted. The journey of *t'shuva* starts with recognition that we are motivated by needs and desires rooted in the holiness of being alive, and the acknowledgement that we misinterpret or draw the wrong conclusions about what we want and need and stray off course. The goal of today is to see the truth of our lives more clearly so that we are moved to transform ourselves.

The psalmist teaches us to number our days so that we can obtain a heart of wisdom. In a few minutes we will read those words in the Yizkor liturgy: *Limnot yameinu kein hodah v'navi l'vav chochma*--Teach us to number, or to count our days, and then surely we will know and bring to ourselves a wise heart. (Psalm 90:12). I have always been intrigued by that verse. Yet

lately I have wondered what it means to number my days, and what a wise heart, or a heart of wisdom, is, and how one leads to the other.

This sermon has two parts--and we should all consider ourselves lucky because it's down from four--and in the first part I'd like to share with you how I have unpacked that verse and tried to make sense of it. In the second part we will explore how reciting the Vidui on Yom Kippur can help us heed the lessons of this verse.

"V'navi l'vav chochma"--we will bring to ourselves a wise heart"(Psalm 90:12): What does this mean?

First, one must know that when the Hebrew Bible speaks of a wise heart, usually if not always it is talking about a wise mind. The biblical author does not separate mind from heart. The locus of thought in biblical writing is the heart. That does not mean, necessarily, that one thinks with emotion. It simply means that the heart is where thinking was believed to happen. Yet there is something powerful in the idea of thinking from the heart, the idea that thought and emotion can be unified toward a shared purpose.

I discovered that the Talmud (Bava Batra 12a), too, is interested in this verse. The rabbis notice that the verse is a little bit strange. It uses odd words instead of more straightforward ones, begging interpretation. Rather than saying we will acquire a heart of wisdom, the verse says that "we will bring" a heart of wisdom. The Hebrew word "we will bring," "navi," also is the word for "prophet." That pun generates another reading of the verse: a prophet has a heart of wisdom." That, in itself, is not so interesting, but it is interesting where they take it. If a prophet has a heart of wisdom--if wisdom is something that a prophet can attain--then wisdom must be greater than prophecy. That idea is reinforced by the linguistic principle that when relating two entities one to the other, the lesser one typically is brought first. Thus, a prophet is less to be admired than a person who has acquired wisdom.

A commentator on the Talmud (Ein Yaakov, Glick Edition, Bava Batra 1:25) expounds on this idea, noting that since the destruction of the Temple, prophecy has been withheld from the prophets and given over to the wise people. Divine insight is not gone, and it is, in fact, available to people like you and me, if we make ourselves wise. And our wisdom can be better than prophecy. Another commentator (the RaN, in (Derashot HaR'an 12:7) weighs in, based on Talmudic teaching that it is the province of the sages of each generation to explain Torah according to their understanding. Their judgement, and not the actual facts of what they decide, is the critical factor. In other words, the exercise of coming to wisdom is more important and more valuable than what is learned or what decision is rendered. The RaN picks up that notion and adds that prophets can only say what God directs them to say. There is no learning or innovation there, whereas a wise person has learned from developing their own understanding, and that person's wisdom, ultimately, is more authoritative and more widely followed among the people than the words of a prophet, which come directly from God.

Other commentators (Torah Temimah on Psalms 90:12, Steinstaltz on Bava Batra 12a:14) go on to affirm that wisdom outweighs prophecy, and it really is a profound statement. Think about it: the wisdom we gain from striving to figure out the best way to live our lives with integrity has the potential weigh heavier than the word of God transmitted through prophecy. I would submit that the work of surrendering ourselves here, today, on Yom Kippur, and then building ourselves back up with more integrity, is, indeed, a powerful pursuit of wisdom, and one that makes God more present in our world.

Ideally, we strive for self-improvement throughout the year. Opportunities to bring ourselves closer to our purpose with integrity are built into our daily prayers and the mitzvot that we perform on a regular basis. But we are here today because we know that Yom Kippur kicks it up a big notch, and that happens most through the recitation of the *Vidui*.

Before we explore how to work the *Vidui*, though, we should revisit the notion that the heart is where we think. Our biblical ancestors seemed to believe that when we make a decision, we are aligned internally with the integrity of that jack pine tree, with no tension between our yearnings and the ways in which we obscure them by the things we say and do. That was a bronze age idea. Today, we know a bit more about the complexities of the mind, and we draw more of a separation between logical reasoning and emotion. An indie folk band I like calls itself The Head and the Heart. The name of the band implies that they are two entities, not always aligned. Many of us experience that to be true. The head gives advice, but the heart wants what it wants. The heart breaks, and the head wags its finger, like the graphic on a tee shirt our past president, Matt Banks, wore to our Annual Meeting last week, on which a brain says to a wounded heart, “you just don’t learn, do you?” Our experience is that we are often navigating tensions between what we feel and what logical reasoning or common sense would have us do. We fall out of alignment. Something breaks. And sometimes what breaks is a bit of our integrity.

Yom Kippur brings our awareness to those breakages through the *Vidui*, the prayer that we often call the “Confessional” in English. In fact, it is not so much a confessional as an acknowledgement of what God and perhaps the rest of the world already know about us: that we have fallen out of alignment, that we have broken. We are acknowledging to ourselves that that we see it, and we want to turn ourselves around and return to a better version of ourselves. Reciting *Vidui* privately and communally for a total of 10 rounds over these 25 hours injects a sense of urgency that pushes us to work more systemically on ourselves, to get to the root causes of our brokenness so that we can reshape our struggles into meaningful, purposeful living. That’s what *t’shuvah* means. It’s not self-flagellation, but a much deeper process.

So what is the model for using *Vidui* to help us do *t’shuva*?

Vidui is not a purging of what was, but a conscious effort to understand what is in our hearts and with honest, loving, mindful intention. *Vidui* is an exercise of striving to unpack the space between our head and our hearts. It is holding our hearts' yearnings together with our mindful strivings and stepping toward a new vision of how to be in the world.

In his Laws of Repentance, the great medieval scholar Maimonides writes, "A person should not think that repentance is only necessary for those sins that involve deed such as promiscuity, robbery, or theft. Rather, just one we are obligated to repent from these, similarly, we must search after the evil character traits we have. We must repent from anger, hatred, envy, frivolity, the pursuit of money and honor, the pursuit of gluttony, and the like...Those sins are more difficult than those that involve deed. If a person is attached to them, it is more difficult for him to separate themselves (Hilchot T'shuvah 7:3).

Some of the verses in *Vidui* do refer to specific acts, some major, such as forbidden trysts or taking bribes, but much of what we beat our chests over in *Vidui* are the sorts of choices we often fail to notice ourselves making, because they spring so quickly from our most basic yearnings and urges. Those are the places most of us should focus our attention today. For example, take "we have sinned by the way we talk"--"*dibbur peh*." Why do we talk the way we do? What motivates us to hold back, or to upstage the speaker? Why do we speak softly when we want to shout? Why do we shout when we wish we could say the same thing gently? By probing our deeper yearnings, we learn about who we are and what we really need. Sometimes we learn things about ourselves that surprise us. When we see where we misdirected our need, we can begin to think about how to serve it more constructively.

Here is another example: When we say, "we have sinned against you by mistake," or "unknowingly," what are we saying? Is it really so terrible to do

something bad if we do it without malice aforethought, or if we don't even know it's wrong? The question we need to ask ourselves is why we did not know. How do we limit our awareness to avoid responsibility? How do we close our ears and lower our eyes so that we avoid the call to action, or the warnings others are trying to give us? And once we see how we limit our awareness, can we identify why? What is it we are trying to protect, or avoid, or express? And what can we do about that, so that we can, in fact, bring the full expression of our deepest selves to the surface, heart and mind working together?

When we lean into those verses of *Vidui* that catch our attention and really ask ourselves how we have done those things, and what yearning we started with before we lost our way, we can attempt to bring our hearts and minds closer together. We can build our integrity. The *Vidui* becomes a mantra, and as we repeat it over and over, the emotions that often trap us in fear, anger, or desire fall away from our internal view. We stand, beating our hearts, and catch a glimpse of ourselves a bit different, a bit truer to a better version of who we can be. When we choose to stand in that place, holding our brokenness and our desire together, and pushing past all the static to a clearer vision and purpose, we exercise our most human faculty: the ability to make conscientious choices about how we will live our lives from today forward.

Vidui helps us decide that we want to try to figure out more life-sustaining, compassionate, and productive ways to give expression to our fullest selves. I want to suggest that at some point today you allow yourself to linger on the verses of *Vidui* that call out to you. You will recognize them; I know I do. Those are the places where you begin to ask the questions of "how?" and "Why?" and "What if...?" And it's okay if just one of them takes all of your energy. That's what we're here for. In the moments of choosing and enacting a more compassionate and pure course, we become wiser, and when we make it real, that is when our wisdom rises above prophecy.

One of the beautiful aspects of doing this work is that we do it together, standing as a community, each of us becoming woke to who we are, holding up our own broken souls to the light, each of us striving to overcome our own demons. Standing together, we give each other hope. I am broken where you are whole, and you are broken where I am whole. We serves as examples for one another of what is possible despite our imperfections.

“Teach us to number our days, so that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” Heart and mind can become wise and our words can become the words of the living God when they are sincere and if we act on them, if we make our wisdom manifest.

The pre-eminent commentator, Rashi, asks a different question on the verse: What does it mean to number, or count, our days? He and others after him (RaDaK, Metzudat David on Psalms 90:12, Malbim Beur Hamilot on Psalms 90:12) point out how differently we would behave if we knew exactly how many days were ours to live. If we knew its place in the totality of our days on earth, we would invest each day with intention and meaning. I suspect that they are right.

As a teacher, sometimes I went to school as “someone else.” One of my alter egos was an elderly woman called Bubbie Ziesel. Inevitably, a student would act silly to try to push Bubbie Ziesel’s buttons, to make her crack and reveal that it was I underneath the costume. And I would raise my cane over my head and say, “don’t waste mein minutes! I don’t know how many I got... And neither do you.” And that would be a very sobering thought, and, of course, the point of that lesson. We don’t know how many we’ve got, and too often our days run out before we have brought it all together.

This lovely poem by Mario de Andrade (San Paolo 1893-1945), one of the founders of Brazilian modernism, puts it well:

MY SOUL HAS A HAT

I counted my years
& realized that I have
Less time to live by,
Than I have lived so far.

I feel like a child who won a pack of candies: at first he ate them with
pleasure,
But when he realized that there was little left, he began to taste them
intensely.

I have no time for endless meetings where the statutes, rules, procedures
& internal regulations are discussed,
knowing that nothing will be done.

I no longer have the patience
To stand absurd people who,
despite their chronological age,
have not grown up.

My time is too short:
I want the essence,
my spirit is in a hurry.
I do not have much candy
In the package anymore.

I want to live next to humans,

very realistic people who know
How to laugh at their mistakes,
Who are not inflated by their own triumphs
& who take responsibility for their actions.
In this way, human dignity is defended
and we live in truth and honesty.

It is the essentials that make life useful. *[and yes, this is still the poem!]*
I want to surround myself with people
who know how to touch the hearts of those whom hard strokes of life
have learned to grow, with sweet touches of the soul.

Yes, I'm in a hurry.
I'm in a hurry to live with the intensity that only maturity can give.
I do not intend to waste any of the remaining desserts.

I am sure they will be exquisite,
much more than those eaten so far.
My goal is to reach the end satisfied
and at peace with my loved ones and my conscience.

We have two lives
& the second begins when you realize you only have one.

The Sfat Emet, commenting on a Talmudic dispute over when the world was created and when it will be redeemed (Bavli Rosh Hashanah 10), teaches that human beings redeem ourselves at this time, if we can understand that this is the time of year when we are called to see the pure point of freedom that lies within us. The point of freedom is where we choose to live with integrity and make our days count because we understand that the time we are given on earth to maximize our potential and serve with all of our passion is finite.

A friend of mine recently compared her life to a maple tree. I think it's a good compliment to the image of the pine tree. The maple tree greens and ripens, drops seeds for the future, and offers sweetness through its sap. And then, just before before it goes bare and dormant, it show its most brilliant colors. That is how she wants her life to be.

Here's what I think: When the maple's leaves of deep red flutter to the ground, there is so much experience there, so much growth and change that led up to her magnificent pigmentation. And a child comes along, and picks up one incredible leaf, and brings it home, and puts it on a shelf, and keeps it for years, not quite knowing why, but sensing that it represents something about the mystery of life, about how much work it takes to find our greatness. It represents, I would suggest, the holy process of *becoming* that happens when we make our days count and learn to build our lives with the wisdom of head and heart.

And so I want to close with the hope that we use our yearnings for good, that we see the holiness in our strivings, and that we will support each other in hopes of bringing our hearts closer to our mindful intentions in the coming year. I offer the following touching composition by Netanel Goldberg that I hope will linger in our hearts (it can be heard by the artist here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1SuqX3VKOU>).

Fly like a river
Flow with the ocean
Fly on the wind that blows through the winter
Dream about love
Believe in your dreams
Live in the ocean of love
Close your eyes and fill the wind that is blowing
Open up your hands and sing
I am holy
I am holy

I am here to live this life

Dance in not knowing

Know your perfect power

Dance like a lion...in the wild

Laugh like a child

Sing in full presence

Sing with the lion in the wild

Close your eyes and fill the wind that is blowing

Open up your hearts and sing

I am holy

I am holy

I am here to live this life

[Sing it with me]

I am holy

I am holy

I am here to live this life