

SERMON FOR SECOND DAY ROSH HASHANAH 5781

“Just Breathe”

“See,” I say to my doctor, “it’s happening right now; exactly what I was telling you about.”

It is a sunny day in late April 1988 and I’m sitting in his Upper East Side examining room.

“*What’s happening?*” he asks me.

“I can’t breathe.” I say. “I...can’t...breathe...” And I begin gasping for air.

Dr. Davidson looks at me. “But Debra,” he says gently, “you *are* breathing. You’re speaking to me. You wouldn’t be able to speak if you weren’t breathing.”

“But...” And now I am not only gasping, I’m beginning to sob. “But...but I *feel* like I can’t breathe. I can’t catch my breath.”

“Slow down your breath,” he tells me gently. “Slow down. Slow down.”

He waits.

“That’s it. Remind me, *when* will you be done with rabbinical school?”

I’ll never forget that moment. How panicked I had been. The relief I felt as my doctor calmed me down, when I realized I could take in the air I needed, that I didn’t need to struggle. I could *just breathe*.

Most of the time, if we’re lucky, we don’t think about our breathing at all. It’s only when something impedes our breathing that we notice it...and become desperate.

And this year, especially during the past six months, breathing has been on my mind a lot.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

It started with COVID-19, a microscopic new virus, which viciously attacked people's respiratory systems and landed them on ventilators for weeks. Even many of those who survive the virus have been left with severely damaged lungs. This week, the death toll in the United States climbed past 200,000 with no clear end in sight.

So breathing has been on my mind.

Then, on May 25th, months into the pandemic, long after we had retreated into our homes to escape its ravages, an African-American man named George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis while being arrested by a white officer who knelt on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, choking the life out of him. Other officers were present and did nothing. During this time, Floyd was handcuffed, lying face down, calling for his mother, and repeatedly crying out: "I can't breathe; please, I can't breathe." We know this because it was captured on a video, which went viral, much like the coronavirus.

This was neither the first time, nor, sadly the last, that a Black person had died at the hands of a police officer screaming the words "I can't breathe!" But this time, lots more of us (including many more white folks) were paying attention. Partly, I suppose, because we were sitting at home. But also, because COVID-19 statistics had thrown into relief some of the terrible inequities in our society, including stark racial disparities in healthcare and deathrates. Black people had died from the virus at such alarmingly higher rates than any other group. George Floyd's death, his cry of "I can't breathe," was a flash point, the beginning of a new reckoning with structural racism, and police brutality.

So yes, breathing has been on my mind.

And then came summer. The hottest summer on record in many parts of the world.

In Siberia, north of the Arctic Circle, temperatures hit a record 100° F by June.

Excessive heat warnings and advisories covered 50 million Americans at one point in July.

Death Valley, California hit 130° F, breaking the world temperature record.

Heat seized the Middle East, from Eilat (111 degrees) to Baghdad (a record-breaking 125 degrees), where people fainted in the street from the heat.

A May climate study found that unlivable hot zones, which now cover 1% of Earth's land...will encompass a fifth of the land by 2070 – a possibly fatal threat to billions of people.

Climate change, too, is a crisis of breath. In many places, people are so hot that even breathing [itself] is a labor. [From: *A Spiritual Reflection on the First of Elul, 5780*, by Hody Nemes, Jewish Climate Action Network NYC]

Breathing has been on my mind.

And now, the American West is in flames. Every day on the news, we hear about the millions of acres that have burned in California, Oregon and Washington, entire towns completely destroyed, tens of thousands of families homeless, wild animals and livestock killed, hundreds missing, and the death toll rising. We hear about people trying to take shelter because the air outside has been deemed the most toxic in the world.

Yes, breathing is on my mind.

These past few months, so many people have been struggling to breathe. The earth itself has been struggling for breath, as it confronts a miasma of pollution and an increasing buildup of greenhouse gases.

It turns out that being able to breathe is a matter of social justice, at least in part. Poor people and people of color tend to live in neighborhoods which are near hazardous pollution sites, like power plants, landfills, and refineries. (There's a long racist history to this, which I won't get into right now, but it's worth learning about if you don't know already. Start by Googling "redlining" after *yontiff*.)

In any case, the temperatures in those neighborhoods can be 10 to 20 degrees hotter than greener neighborhoods just a few miles away. In the poorer neighborhoods, there are vastly higher rates of asthma and other chronic respiratory illnesses. And of course, poor people have far less access to healthcare, let alone *good* healthcare. So breathing, at least breathing *easily*, is a basic right denied to many of our fellow Americans.

That's something that needs to change. *Breathing should not be a luxury*. Let me repeat that. *Breathing should not be a luxury*.

Because breath is life.

Today, on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, we will blow the shofar. We didn't blow it yesterday because it's customary not to blow it on Shabbat. And after hearing the shofar, we will recite the refrain: "*Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the World is born!" In other words, this is the birthday, the anniversary, of Creation itself.

Today, we recall our very beginnings, not simply the beginning of the Jewish people, or even of humanity, but of Creation itself. Today we acknowledge that, for all our power to dominate this planet, to be in charge, we too, are creatures.

Rosh Hashanah is meant to imbue within us a sense of humility. On Rosh Hashanah we accept that we are not the ultimate authorities; we declare that we answer to a Higher Authority. Call that God. *HaMelech* – the Sovereign. Call that the Source of All. The Eternal. Call that a set of ethical demands and moral imperatives. On Rosh Hashanah we declare that there is *Someone* or *Something* Greater that transcends the fragile, short span of our lives.

“*Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the World is born!”

And so today, we turn back to the Book of Genesis, not seeking a scientific explanation of Creation, but in search of religious meaning. And, given where my mind has been these past months, I am immediately drawn to one verse in particular:

וַיִּצְרֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה
וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים
וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

“The Eternal God formed the *adam*, the human, out of the dust of the earth and blew into his nostrils *nishmat hayyim* –the breath of life - and the *adam* became a *nefesh hayah* – a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7)

I love the apparent contradiction in this verse, what it says about us. For on the one hand, what are we made of, we humans? Plain old earth, the most humble of materials. As we read in the very next chapter of Genesis:

כִּי־עֹפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עֹפָר תֵּשׁוּב:

“For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

And yet.

And yet, we are more than that as well. Because, for the brief time we are here, we are animated by *nishmat hayyim*, the breath of life – which enables each of us to become a *nefesh hayah*, a sacred living soul, a spiritual being.

My friend and classmate, the late Rabbi Alan Lew z”l, observed:

God creates human beings by *breathing into their nostrils*. According to Rebbe Nachman, the meaning of this is that the *breath* is not only our connection to God, but our connection to the *realm* of God: that part of our experience that is deeper than language, deeper than speech, deeper than form.

Rabbi Lew is introducing a new idea here. Breath, of course, is life. We begin to breathe when we are born, when we leave the womb, and when we cease breathing, we die. And the right to breathe freely is a basic human right, as I have said.

But breath is also a *spiritual* matter, across many cultures and certainly in Jewish tradition. Spirit and respiration are linked. In Hebrew, as in Latin and Greek, the words for breath and spirit share a common root. *Neshima* means “breath” and *neshama* means “soul.” Another Hebrew word for “breath” is *ruah*, which can also mean “wind” or “spirit.”

The Psalmist writes:

לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָאֲלֵי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נְכוֹן חֲדָשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי :

“Create within me a pure heart, O God; and renew within me *ruah nachon*.” – (Psalms 51:10)

Ruah nachon – which may be translated as “steady breathing” or “a steadfast spirit.” What is the connection between the two, between “steady breathing” and “a steadfast spirit”?

For one thing – and this should be obvious – our bodies and our minds, our physical well-being and our mental and spiritual well-being – are connected. If we literally can’t breathe, nothing else matters. The physical need must be attended to before everything else.

But what if the issue isn’t a problem with our respiratory system, but with our souls?

There have been many times these past few months when I’ve felt that I couldn’t breathe. Maybe some of you have felt the same way. That it has sometimes seemed hard to breathe.

Maybe because you felt frightened and powerless. Maybe because you felt lonely for family and friends, or even imprisoned by this endless quarantine. Maybe you find listening to the news overwhelming. Or maybe wondering about the future leaves you discouraged or hopeless.

Sometimes, in the throes of despair, I find it hard to catch my breath. And then I think of Dr. Davidson. “But Debra,” he said so long ago, “you *are* breathing. Slow down your breath,” he told me gently. “Slow down. Slow down.”

And when I remember to do that, I realize that I can breathe, that in fact, I have been breathing all along.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

This afternoon at 2:00, we will reconvene to hear many, many blasts of the shofar. The shofar itself requires a sustained breath. “It is basically a lifeless, empty shell until the *ba'al tekiah* – the shofar blower - infuses it with breath, spirit, soul, *neshamah*.” (Rabbi Irwin Keller, “To Breathe Free”)

We are like the shofar. For, despite everything, despite the craziness, despite the challenges of the past six months, in the face of whatever uncertainties lie before us, we have been infused with breath, spirit, soul, *neshamah*.

We are still breathing. Even if we sometimes feel breathless. Even if we sometimes need to remind ourselves to slow down, slow down.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev taught:

“We must believe that in each and every moment we receive vitality from the Blessed Creator. This is what the Sages taught about the verse from Psalms: “*Kol Haneshama tehallal Yah*, Let all that has breath praise God!” They said: With each and every breath praise God! Each moment [as we breathe out] the vital force seeks to leave the body, yet each moment the Blessed Holy One sends renewed vigor!”

“Each moment the Blessed Holy One sends renewed vigor.”

My friends, on this holy day, at this sacred season, let’s take this precious opportunity to pause, to go deep.

Let’s slow ourselves down. Let’s take time to breathe.

To fill not only our lungs, but our souls, and not only with oxygen, but with a sense of hope and renewal.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

This is a time for beginning again. Today, on the anniversary of Creation, we acknowledge that we, like the rest of Creation, are fragile and finite. But we also remind ourselves that we have the courage and the capacity to be God's partners in fixing up this broken world. For we are "sustained by God's breath, capable of transcendence." [Hody Nemes, Jewish Climate Action Network NYC]

So now I invite you to take a deep breath. Not too deep. Now release it. Slowly. Take another breath. In. And out. In. And out.

You are alive this day, at the very start of this new year, for God has filled you with the breath of life.

Now imagine you are the shofar. And breathe. In. And out. In. And out. In. And out.

You are no longer just a hollow horn. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, you are transformed, infused with breath – *neshima* – and with spirit – *neshama*.

You are *breathing*.

May the calls of the *shofarot* we hear this day, and the calls *we* send forth – lift our hearts, spur us to action, and strengthen our souls so that we face this new year of 5781 with courage and confidence, with resilience and resolve, with gratitude and joy.

Amen.