

Embracing our true selves

So, how is your heart?

I have a friend who posts this question every week on her Facebook page. “How is your heart?” Sometimes I see her post and it is merely the thing that reminds me we’ve reached another Monday. Many times I have read her question and felt a physical ache in my chest.

This has been a rough year for those of us with hearts. Well, I mean, all of us have hearts. Right? We may think that some people have smaller ones or larger ones, yet that isn’t really the point. Maybe some of us have hearts that are more open. It seems to me that even if you have the kind of heart that is usually coated in a hard shell and locked tightly, something surely cracked it open in recent months. We all know people who have lost loved ones this year. Whether it was directly related to the virus or complicated by it. We could not follow our commandment to visit the sick or comfort the mourner; at least, not in person the way our hearts long to do. We have made do with our family zoom calls and online shiva minyanim. We have tried our best to comfort our loved ones (and ourselves) and

most of the time we have done a heckuva job. Still, the losses are tremendous and they weigh on our hearts.

Even as we miss the days when we could hug each other and hold the hand of a person in pain, all of this zooming and magically transporting ourselves into each others' houses has clarified a core truth: We are not alone. YOU are not alone. Some of you may be physically the only person in your room right now. (Some of you may wish that would happen more often!) All of us are wishing we could spend more time with the people we love who are not part of our household or "pod" as some call this new experience. Even while we long for 3-dimensional connection, I want you to know that you are part of a community that cares about you. I am here for you. Kol Nefesh is here for you. On days when we are lucky enough to gather outside with masks and lots of space, and on days when we are all logging in from our homes. We may be physically distanced yet we are socially connected.

We come together as a community at this season for our annual opportunity to atone. Maybe I've shared this with you before? - when I look at our English translation for Yom Kippur, "Day of Atonement," I see the words "At-One-ment." This is the day for us to be At One. At one with our G!d, whatever your concept of

the Divine looks like. And remember that the Jewish way of being with G!d is not necessarily sitting in meditation on a soft cushion, but rather, wrestling. (In the book of Genesis we read that after wrestling all night with an angel, Jacob is renamed Israel - meaning G!d wrestler.) We are also At One with our family, friends, colleagues, classmates, and neighbors. We have spent the past 10 days, or month and a half, or possibly six months *this* year, accounting for our actions and asking for forgiveness when we missed the mark. We are also striving to be At One with ourselves. To return to the most authentic version of ourselves. (Ok, so what does that even mean? Most authentic version of ourselves?? Do you know the old story about the Chassidic rabbi named Zusha? In the story, this great Chassidic master is at the end of his life and his students find him crying. They asked him, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvahs and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!" "I'm afraid!" said Zusha. "Because when I get to heaven, I know G!d's not going to ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' But I'm afraid that G!d will ask 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say?!" ) What will we say, indeed!

I hope that we will be able to say that we kept our focus on what really matters. Caring for our families, raising kind and ethical children, supporting our friends,

reaching out to those in need, sharing our blessings, expressing our emotions and welcoming the comfort offered to us, striving to do better with each day we are given.

Yom Kippur is just one day and the challenges of 2020 won't be left behind even as we have entered this new Jewish year of 5781. We are going to need to create space for ourselves, our families, and our communities to get in touch with our feelings again and again. Let's find a way to regularly untie the knots we carry inside ourselves and spend a few moments in prayer or contemplation while our hearts are open. We can use this opportunity to check in on our progress, reconcile our actions, and refuel for the important work ahead. Our Jewish tradition teaches that we are personally responsible. There is no invisible hand guiding what happens in our lives. Think back to the stories in Torah or the history books you have studied. We do not assign blame to the Egyptians for our slavery, the Romans for destroying our Temple, or the Germans for the Holocaust. We weep over the pain and loss and then move on to do the work of repairing our broken world. Rather than moan that our people were once slaves, we vow to fight slavery in all forms and for all people. We reserve one day a year (Tisha B'Av) to mourn the loss of the Temple and spend the rest of the year ensuring that everyone is free to practice their chosen religion. We honor the memory of the 6

million Jews whose lives were stolen in the Holocaust by declaring “Never Again” and speaking out against injustice to marginalized people everywhere.

We are a people with a weighty history, yet we use that to spur us toward action rather than justifying our missteps. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg lost her mother as a teenager and faced repeated discrimination as a woman yet she built an amazing career in spite of these obstacles. You can probably think of someone in your own family who could have blamed their circumstances for a life of misfortune but chose to surmount those challenges and write a better story for themselves. Let those stories of our ancestors inspire you to rise above this wild and crazy year to work toward a better world.

May 5781 be the year that brings you closer to the person you were always meant to be. Our world needs each of you. There is no time to waste.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May you be sealed for good in the Book of Life.

*(Ended with Hashiveini by Micah Shapiro)*