

Yom Kippur 5783
Temple Emanu-El
Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

This summer, Mike and the kids and I had the glorious opportunity to go camp in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park for six days and five nights. By day, we drove, hiked, sweated, feasted our eyes on the layered blue vastness of those peaks and valleys. We swatted mosquitos and jumped into rivers and slogged behind a waterfall. At night, routinely, rain poured down—those mountain ridges gather thunderstorms with irresistible magnetism. There was just a thin layer of nylon tent between us and the storms. It was exhilarating. We wore our eyeballs out looking at beautiful sights, and we didn't sleep much.

We also didn't shower, for almost a week. The dirt and sweat and sunscreen and bug spray accumulated on my skin, day after day. For the first three days I felt more and more dirty. It was like an itch I couldn't scratch. But after three days, I barely noticed additional accretion. My body adjusted to the extra layers of grime on top of my skin. I dunked in the river every once in a while, and that was that.

Our final day in camp was a Friday, and that afternoon, we transitioned over to a rented cabin, where we'd spend the last few days of vacation. That cabin meant my first shower in six days. When I got into that shower, just before Shabbat ... that feeling of warmth, freshness, and bliss was almost indescribable. Scrubbing off recent layers of myself. Returning. It was like the feeling of prepping for a mikveh, cleaning myself thoroughly, preparing to be held and renewed by living waters of a restful, beautiful, family-centered Shabbat.

Yom Kippur is called "Shabbat shabbaton"—the Shabbat of Shabbats. I see two major themes of Yom Kippur in today's liturgy and practice: the spiritual self-cleaning of t'shuvah or atonement, and rest. I'll own that the imagery of sin dirtying our souls is not especially resonant for me. Personally, I am compelled by the language from our morning liturgy, "Elohai n'shama shenatata bi t'hora hi," God, the soul you put in me is pure. And I also appreciate that the image of sin staining our souls recognizes the impact that our mistakes and experiences have on us. They leave marks.

We began to talk about cleansing our souls seven weeks ago on Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av. Our haftarah for that day, from Isaiah, says

לְכוּ-גַא וְנִזְכָּחַה יֹאמֶר יְהוָה

אִם-יְהִי חֲטָאֵיכֶם כַּשָּׁנִים כְּשֶׁלֶג יִלְבִּינוּ

אִם-יֵאָדְמוּ כְתוֹלָע כְּצֹמֶר יְהִי

“Come, let us reach an understanding,
—says the LORD.

Be your sins like crimson,
They can turn snow-white;
Be they red as dyed wool,
They can become like fleece.”¹

The liturgy of our Kol Nidrei service last night, quoting Torah, made a similar point:

כִּי-בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר אֶתְכֶם

מִכָּל חֲטָאֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ:

For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before יהוה.²

We start from the premise that change is possible.

So. How do we cleanse a soul?

We do it right now, right here, with one another, today. We immerse in our Yom Kippur practices, in connection with the Divine and each other, and emerge ready for a fresh start.

The Mishnah³ talks about just this kind of purifying spiritual immersion, in the context of a discussion of t'shuvah on Yom Kippur. Rabbi Akivah says, “How fortunate are you, Israel—before Whom are you

purified, and Who purifies you? It's God." Rabbi Akivah quotes the prophet Yirmiyahu,⁴ who calls God מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל "Hope of Israel," but by changing one vowel, he alters this proof-text to מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, the Mikveh of Israel. God is our mikveh, our cleansing ritual bath. "Just as a mikveh purifies (m'taheir) the impure (tamei)," says Rabbi Akivah, "so too, the Holy One, Blessed be God, purifies the people Israel."

Yom Kippur is our God-given spiritual mikveh, in which we immerse. For twenty-five hours we are offered the opportunity to narrow our sensory input by fasting, praying, staying in synagogue (or somewhere else that allows for quiet and contemplation), avoiding work and showers and anything that might distract us with pleasant physical sensations. We talk to God the whole time, through our liturgy. We are asked to look intently at ourselves and our relationships. We're asked to find those places of mistake, and to focus our spiritual energy on healing them. We clear our schedules, and we commit to putting every other task down and just being together in this practice.

All of the effort it takes to create our Yom Kippur experience begs the question: Why? What does it mean to be washed in the mikveh of prayer and fasting and repentance when, staying with that metaphor, we are just going to get dirty again? Why do we do this?

We do not observe Yom Kippur to slough off our sins, wipe our hands and say, "Okay, we're done for the year." We do it to become ready for the experience that awaits us in the year to come.

A mikveh is a spiritual technology of transition. Its changes aren't permanent. We use a mikveh to move from a state of being ritually unready (tamei) to ritually ready (tahor).⁵ We heard those words translated earlier as "impure" and "pure," but let's stay now with "unready" and "ready." Torah lists many reasons for which a person might immerse—marking the end of a menstrual cycle or recovery after childbirth, transitioning out of illness, preparing to re-enter the community after handling dead bodies, preparing for ritual duties, and more. Many of these reasons are cyclical. Some Jews have the custom of going to the mikveh every Friday afternoon before Shabbat—I spent a golden Shabbat evening on a town beach this summer and saw two young men with ritual hats, sidelocks, and fringes hanging down from under their shirts stride purposefully across the sand toward the changing rooms. After a very quick dip, they went damp and smiling back toward their cars, ready for shul and the evening service. Ready for Shabbat.

We're not finished working with our souls, after the last hours of Yom Kippur. Today is not the end nor even the apex of our year's spiritual life. Yom Kippur is a mikveh: a regular transition point between one year and the next. On Yom Kippur we pause to appreciate the soul-work we've done, and to let it integrate fully into ourselves. Integrating this learning is also what allows us to be ready to fully experience what comes next. Without Yom Kippur, our treadmill would never stop, our spiritual muscles would be always sore and never growing.

The sensory and physical rest that we enjoy on Yom Kippur, this Shabbat Shabbaton, resting time of resting times, is essential to the transitional process. Yom Kippur is like a wedding after the final weeks of planning. We have prepared as much as we possibly can, from Shabbat Chazon and Tisha b'Av, through an Elul of introspection and apology and forgiveness and prayer and justice work. And now the day has arrived. I feel enormous relief on Yom Kippur, both spiritual and logistical. My anxiety has nowhere left to go. There is nothing more to prepare. We have only to be present, as sincerely and openly as we can, and let the huge, warm hand of our communal prayer hold us as we rest in it.

I took two yoga classes with my sisters this August. I don't have a regular practice of yoga, so I was working pretty hard, and I was grateful when in the first class we reached shivasana—the totally relaxed, supine “corpse pose,” palms up next to our sides. My eyes closed, sweat drying, calming music on the speakers, I heard the teacher, Tara, say, “That openhanded posture of rest is what seals the benefit into the body.” My cantorial ears perked up. I thought, “Yom Kippur.”

I spoke later with a beloved friend and colleague, Cantor Julie Newman of Pittsburgh. Cantor Newman is an accomplished yoga teacher who integrates yoga into her cantorial work. She generously shared with me her insights into the physical and spiritual benefits of shivasana, that resting pose, and its connection to Yom Kippur.

When a person goes into shivasana at the end of a yoga flow, they allow their body to return from the stress and work of the flow, to homeostasis: a neutral state, or a new neutral, incorporating the benefit of the stretching. Heart rate, respiration rate, and blood pressure all subside to lower settings than before.⁶ When we rise up from shivasana, our bodies are better physically prepared to take our next steps. And, as Cantor Newman says, we have grown our capacity to notice what our bodies are doing—to stop and check in with what just happened.

On Yom Kippur we rest, openhanded, letting our bodies and our souls return to a “new neutral” state. We practice awareness as bellies rumble and fold in on themselves, as skin shivers in the breeze, as bare feet pick up every sensation of the floor, as our voices wear thin and scratchy. Yom Kippur lets us practice being exquisitely aware of our selves, our behaviors, and our souls, in order that we may take that awareness into the days and weeks and year to come

We practice for awareness of life by practicing death. Shivasana is called “corpse pose” for a reason—the body curtails activity, the bones bear no weight, the hands and mind embrace rest. Cantor Newman teaches: “We take this one day to live ‘as if’ the body is dead, but we still have reflective capacity: the lev, the heart/mind, is alive.” On Yom Kippur I and others wear the white kittel in which Jews are traditionally married and buried; we hold back from every habit that feeds our bodies’ pleasure, and we withdraw from the outer world into the inner sanctum of communal prayer. We even have a “corpse pose” moment: prone on the floor during the Grand Aleinu, unmoving, totally supported. The only muscles working are the ones that let us breathe.

Very little about Yom Kippur feels what we might call “normal.” We have left day-to-day life on the other side of yesterday’s sunset. But this unusual state guides us home. Cantor Newman says: “We practice the gesture of going away and coming back. Coming back, we begin to create a secure core: a thing to come back to. We can call it equanimity, God, or whatever we want to call it. When we limit our input, we notice that the secure core is internal, not built from external input. ... Shivasana and Yom Kippur let me look under the hood of reality and see what’s already there—what’s been there all along.” I’ve moved several times in my life, from Cambridge to Toronto, the Republic of Georgia, Sunderland, and six years ago, to North Andover. Always, always, a new home doesn’t really feel like home until the first time I go away on a trip and come home to it. The coming back is what makes it home.

This then, I think, is the true gift of Yom Kippur. We leave ordinary life behind in order to experience returning to a new normal, and we build our internal core’s strength and security by returning to it. That is what we’re doing here today, back in our synagogue home for the High Holy Days after so long away. We’re coming back to a new normal and building our community’s core strength and security by returning to it. We go away in order to return home. Our regrets and our mistakes are washed off us by the spiritual mikveh of the holiday, and all of our senses are ready to notice and respond to our next moves in the year-to-come

After Yom Kippur, of course we're going to make more mistakes. When I stepped out of the shower in that Tennessee cabin, after a week's worth of physical experiences sluiced off of me, of course I was going to get dirty again. When I returned to Massachusetts from vacation, of course I was going to work again. But I was returning to a "new normal," and I noticed the world around me with clearer eyes. I felt the wind and the sunlight on my skin, fresh and satisfying. Colors looked brighter. Hugging my kids felt deeper. I thought about the mountains we'd climbed, the water we'd immersed in, the family we'd reconnected with. When we returned, home felt even more precious. And I was ready for more.

We create today's mikveh, friends, we create today's Yom Kippur. Our voices, words, faces, melodies, and ideas let each other immerse and emerge. Notice how your body and your soul are feeling with just the thread of prayer carrying you through this day. Let your mind touch each experience of the past year—let the good and the learning sink in—let the guilt and the harm drift away. When the gates swing shut tonight at N'ilah, I invite you to think of them as the door of your own home, closing behind you—not in front of you—as you too return home, renewed, refreshed, ready to be and to do in 5783. G'mar chatimah tovah.

1. Y'shayahu 1:18
2. Vayikra 16:30
3. Masechet Yoma 8a:9
4. Yirmiyahu 17:13
5. Gratitude to Mayyim Hayyim Community Mikveh, who first introduced me to this conceptual language for the mikveh process.
6. Cantor Newman cites Jules Michell's book *The Biomechanics of Yoga* for these facts.