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Reflections on Breath and Spirit in Multiple Dimensions: From Personal to Cosmic
Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

Shanah tovah. Our life begins with breath. Our life ends with breath. Breath is the universal substance of life. Yet, it is invisible. Breath is in the present moment. Breath is mostly soundless. Except of course, on Rosh Hashanah, when breath becomes the cry of the shofar.

When I first started teaching meditation in a Jewish idiom, I went to the Hebrew words for breath. Meditation can be a way to develop concentration so that we can see more clearly and make wiser choices based on freedom rather than reactivity. A primary way to develop concentration is to pay attention to the breath. But, of course, the breath is invisible and soundless. So, we are instructed to feel the breath in the body. Feel the breath enter the nostrils or feel the breath as the belly or the chest expand.

It struck me then and continues to strike me many years later that the Hebrew words for breath are essentially the same as the Hebrew words for soul or spirit. *Neshamah, neshimah, ru'akh, nefesh*, soul or spirit, also invisible. Soul or spirit, mostly soundless. Soul or spirit, how and when are they known, felt, touched? Prayer, rituals, sacred occasions are the times when we seek to touch the soul, both the personal soul and the collective soul.

Neshamah, in particular, shows up a number of times in the liturgy. Right at the beginning of the service we say, *Elohai*, Eternal One, the soul that you have given me, the breath that you have given me, this life, this *neshamah*, this incredible mystery, *tehorah hi*, it is pure." When we touch the soul, the breath, we touch something that is perfect and whole. We claim wholeness amidst the confusion and brokenness of daily life. On Shabbat we say, *nishmat kol hai*, the breath, the soul of every living thing will praise your name. What does that mean? We are not separate from every living thing. We all share an invisible perfect nature that knows the ultimate. It is not obvious. It is not that easy to discern in daily life. It doesn't show up that often at the dinner table, or in the daily news. But we say it anyway. Some part of us affirms and knows the infinite, pure radiance that inhabits each being. It is easier to access on Shabbat, when we have more time and space for the invisible.

A beautiful prayer within the Rosh Hashanah morning *amidah* invites a deeper awareness into our minds and hearts. It invites an awareness that all beings have more value than just what we do. Our very existence is a miracle. Every being with a soul, *kol asher nishmato be'apo*, everything that can breathe, proclaims this truth. It is humbling. It is connecting. It is a comfort to know we are not alone, and it is not all up to us!

This is expressed beautifully by David Radin in a book called, *A Temporary Affair*, which is a great title for Rosh Hashanah. He writes:

This universe that we live in has done something inconceivably miraculous. It has created out of itself an incredibly complicated structure- a human being that takes fire, earth, air and water, and becomes a form that can experience what created it. This is the glory of human existence. You were not created to fulfill yourself as an individual. You were created by the universe producing an organism that could experience what had produced the organism. This world gave rise to you, this world is your source appearing to you, this world is yourself. You may think, “No, I live inside this form.” But if you look deeply into this body breathing, walking, thinking, it is just this world becoming this form.... This may be called being born from God.

Let's go back to the beginning. Our beginning story. Torah. It is common to consider Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the first day of creation. In fact, our tradition says that it is a memory of the first day, as it says in the liturgy, because it is the first day we humans can remember. It is the day human beings were created, became conscious and could remember.

And how were we created? In Genesis it says, “Then God fashioned this human – dust from the soil – and breathed into the nostrils the Breath of Life – *Nishmat Hayyim*– so that the human became a living being.” The human being is infused with divine breath. The breath is the soul. It is the life force.

Meditation

So now would be a good time to sit together and bring awareness to this breath.

I invite you to settle into your seat. Settle into the earth. The soil, the ground upon which we all reside.

Take a moment to feel the pressure on your body. To soften your shoulders, your jaw, your eyes. Perhaps even close them. Let's take three deep breaths into the belly. Letting the belly expand and feeling the sensations of the belly filling with the inhale and slowly emptying with the exhale. Remaining in an upright position, allow your attention to follow the sensations in your body to whatever extent you can.

Now allow yourself to be breathed. To be breathed by the Breath of Life like Adam on the first day of creation. Allow the first inhale to arise on its own. Just receive it. You might want to softly and silently say nishmat. Then just wait for the exhale. You might notice impatience, or anxiety or desire to control. See if you can just allow, allow the exhale to return to its source. You might say hayyim as the breath leaves your body.

And then wait. Wait.

Just attend to the sensations in your body as the next breath arises. Arises on its own. Nishmat. And then allowing the breath to return to its source. Hayyim.

We will take a short period of silence for you to allow yourself to be Adam on that first Rosh Hashanah. Allowing yourself to be filled by the Breath of Life filled by Nishmat Hayyim. And empty it returning to its source.

If you want a longer period of breath meditation, feel free to pause the video and enjoy!

So it is no surprise that the only ritual we must perform on Rosh Hashanah is blowing the shofar. In the Torah this day is called *Yom Teru'ah*, the Day of the Horn Blowing. Blowing. Breathing. Human creation. Our life begins with a breath. Our life ends with a breath. The shofar must be an instrument in its natural form, not constructed by human hands. It must be naturally hollow so that breath can flow through it and produce pure sound. There is no mouthpiece on a shofar. Nothing impedes or controls the breath.

The shofar must be naturally bent or bowed. It cannot be linear. The process of returning to our soul is certainly not a straight line. The process of waking up in this life is certainly, certainly not easily mapped. We bend and bow to that truth. Again in David Radin's words:

A mind that bows knows that its appearance in this human world is temporary, that aggression is ridiculous, worry is ridiculous, stress is ridiculous, and thinking that your personal life is what the universe is about is ridiculous. When the mind comes home and rests in the light of that which sees it. It realizes that the true being is awareness.

A mind that bows, knows that we are not separate from the eternal breath. We are indeed a temporary affair. An arising from the dust of the universe. This attitude of humility brings great compassion for the challenges and pains in a human life and in the life of this earth we inhabit. We call this day, the Day of Judgment. Indeed, there is a sense of being judged for our errors and actions that have hurt ourselves and others. However, the essence of the day is to move from judgment to mercy. Judgment is self-centered. It is necessary, of course and yet, alone, it doesn't help us expand and grow. It is mercy and compassion that transform. Feeling held, nurtured and loved. Knowing that the pain we feel is not personal. Allowing our personal pain to be a gateway to the pain of others, the pain of *Shekchinah*. The shofar sound begins in the narrow place of the mouthpiece and expands into the wide space. So, on this day we learn in the Talmud: "When the Jewish people blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, God rises from the throne of judgment and sits down on a throne of mercy."

The blessing we recite before the shofar is blown is to hear the voice of the shofar. *Lishmo'a kol shofar*. *Lishmo'a*, the same word as *shema Yisra'el*. Pay attention! Listen! Wake Up! This is really important! It is odd that there are no words to hear. We are listening to pure sound. Sound that comes before words. The shofar is especially associated with two occasions: Sinai

and the Messiah. These are both times beyond words. There is a unified and unifying arising of awareness and connection.

How do I listen in my life? How can I be a better listener to what is truly important? Can I hear beyond the words? We have no Temple these days to offer the sacrifice. We offer ourselves. We offer our practice, our deep listening to ourselves and each other. We offer our feelings and our tears. The sounds of the shofar parallel the tears of our mothers and grandmothers.

I remember as a young child attending Rosh Hashanah with my grandmother at the Orthodox *shul* in the Bronx. We were up in the balcony with the other women. There were women crying during the prayers; during the shofar blowing. I couldn't understand what they were crying about. Now I understand. The *shevarim* is the broken cry. That is the cry of Hannah. The beloved wife of Eli. She cannot conceive a child. She is crying out of her infertility. She is grieving for what is absent in her life. The *teru'ah* is the overall alarm. It is the cry of fear and danger. It is Hagar's cry. It is staccato. Her baby Ishmael is in trouble. Our dreams and hopes are in danger. There is panic. There is fear. *Shevarim teru'ah* are the cries of Rachel. She is weeping as her children go into exile. She is separated. She is in quarantine, on her own in Bethlehem. The loneliness is so painful. Then we hear *tekiyah*. This is a whole note. It represents tears of joy, happiness, security, and hope.

We cry 100 different sounds. 100 different breaths on Rosh Hashanah. The tradition includes the tears of the unnamed mother of Sisera, Israel's enemy, in these wails of emotion, when she discovered her beloved child was murdered. Rabbi Edward Feld explains this:

Sisera was a Canaanite general who oppressed Israel. Devorah, the prophetess, gathers an army to oppose him; he is defeated, runs away and is killed by a woman, Yael, as he seeks refuge. The Bible celebrates this moment in the wonderful song of Devorah, Debra. One of the verses of that song describes Sisera's mother watching from the window, waiting for her son's return, crying as she realizes that he will not come back. The rabbis argue that what we should hear in the sound of the *teru'ah* is the crying of the mother of Sisera. Some say that it should be sounded like the *shevarim*, like gasping. Some say that it should be a wailing a constantly broken cry. But all agree that what we are to hear is the pain and suffering of the mother of Sisera. ...If the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to signal the final redemption. If we hear in it a taste of messianic longing, we should realize that the moment of redemption can only arrive when we are able to incorporate the pain of our enemy within our own longing.

The mother of the child of our enemies is heard in the shofar on this day. It doesn't matter if these mothers are friends or enemies. Their pain knows no borders. It is the pain of the mother of us all, the Earth, as the glaciers melt into her tears.

It is a feeling of compassion, for the mother knows no division and no judgments and no politics. We are not asked to resolve anything. We are asked to open to hear the pain whether it

is the pain of our own lives or the pain of the other, the pain of our enemy or friend, the pain of our tribe or the pain of the world. No matter. It is all pain; it is as wordless as the shofar and as raw. It is a series of oscillating cries, whole, broken, shattered, and whole again. It is our practice. Being with the pain, the sound, only this sound, as it reverberates in our own skin and the skin of the world. This is the healing work that engages us. It takes everything from us, and what does it ask? Most of all it asks us just to be near, to be quiet, to stand, to sit, to walk, to eat, to sleep, in kindness, faithfulness, and peace. We dedicate our practice to all who suffer in this world of endless beauty and glory. May the shofar blast of all the cries of all the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers awaken itself to the Source of Compassion that awakens the world to compassion.

Yes, let's take a nice deep breath. If you like bringing one hand to your heart and one hand to your belly. Settle and feel. Rest in this moment of care. Listen to a poem, a poem by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel called "I Can Breathe"

May you come back to your breath,
May you come to know your body as the earth itself. May you breathe
yourself back home.
May you once again be introduced to this great life.
Where there is hatred may the great light of this Earth surround you,
May you be released from past harm and imposed hatred.
May you come to recognize your existence in the true nature of life.
May you come back to the breath,
To the body, as the sacred place in which you remain awake to the
fragrance and taste of freedom
When there is harm may you remain visible on the path of spirit, and be
seen and heard,
Let the love you give, be returned tenfold, May awakening be known in
your body at this time.
And when you can't breathe,
May you breathe in the next moment,
May you say, I-can-breathe.

The author of this poem is an African American woman and a Zen Buddhist priest. It is not surprising that she refers to the now iconic line, "I can't breathe," that has emerged in our culture and connotes the confluence of racism, police brutality and absence of accountability. It goes back to July 17, 2014, in Staten Island, New York. Video footage of Eric Garner's murder by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo, who put him in a prohibited chokehold. Eric was suspected of selling individual cigarettes from packs without stamps. With multiple officers pinning him down, Garner repeated the words "I can't breathe" 11 times while lying face down on the sidewalk. Garner remained lying face down on the sidewalk after losing consciousness. An hour later he was pronounced dead at an area hospital.

Officer Pantaleo was not prosecuted. He was fired in August 2019. Most recently on May 26, 2020, Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd. Floyd was suspected of using a counterfeit bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for eight minutes 46 seconds while Floyd was handcuffed, lying face down and crying out, "I can't breathe."

I'm not going to repeat 100 similar incidents or 100 times 100 examples of violence for every blast of the shofar. But the crying out "I can't breathe" is, in my mind, connected to the shofar and to this day. We know about these incidents because they were filmed by bystanders. We know about these incidents because in the midst of the pandemic people took to the streets. Kneeling for eight minutes and 46 seconds, crying out "I can't breathe."

Imagine that the breath of the shofar, the call, that must hear the sound of the breath, really wakes us up. And to what must we awaken? Yes, to the history and reality of our country. To really hear the shofar crying, "I can't breathe," is to wake up to the systemic oppression in which we live and prosper. We are opening our eyes. Can we open them wider? "I can't breathe" means knowing that the Black poverty rate in 2017 stood at 20%, nearly triple the white poverty rate. "I can't breathe" means being willing to investigate the relationship between colonialism, slavery, capitalism and racism. "I can't breathe" means knowing that white households own 86 times more wealth than Black households and 68 times more than Latinx households. "I can't breathe" means knowing the prison industrial complex for what it is in relation to the military industrial complex. It is seeing the relationship between mass incarceration, chain gangs, lynching and slavery. "I can't breathe" means knowing that our system of incarceration is racist, violent and does not rehabilitate but actually increases violence and mental illness. "I can't breathe" means knowing the relationship between sexism, homophobia, transphobia and racism. Yes, and knowing the relationship of all of these choking, institutionalized practices with antisemitism.

Let's take another deep breath. And a slow exhale. We need our spiritual tools to support us in opening our eyes to systemic injustice and finding our voices. We need to connect to the breath of life that brings us into existence every moment, sustains us and inspires us. Yes, breathes into us.

These last months of living through the pandemic are also about breathing. One of the major symptoms of COVID-19 is shortness of breath. One of the early interventions which later on was questioned was the ventilator. And, yes, we had a shortage of ventilators. The virus is transmitted through breathing. That is why we can't even sing together on Rosh Hashanah. Such a limitation. We are masked. We cover the organs of breath, nose and mouth. We are all in a state of "I can't breathe." And miraculously enough, we are gathering together in some form. Perhaps we are listening more deeply than ever to the sounds of the shofar; more deeply to the sound of breath that enlivens, sustains, heals and transforms.

The breath. There seems to be emerging some new understanding of what it means for the earth to breathe. As we face the disasters of climate change and the proliferation of global

pandemics, eyes are being opened, and new stories are being told. I was inspired by the writing of Sonia Shah and others who are writing about pandemics in history and into the future. Shah writes about the paradigm of microbial invasion which coincides with the germ theory that emerged in the 19th century. This theory, more than advances in sanitary reform, was credited with the plummeting rate of infectious diseases.

Recently this theory has been challenged. Sonia Shah writes:

The majority of pathogens that have emerged since 1940 originated in the bodies of animals and entered human populations not because they invaded us but because we invaded their habitats. By encroaching on wetlands and cutting down forests [I can't breathe], we've forced wild animals to crowd into ever smaller fragments of habitat, drawing them into intimate contact with human populations. It's that proximity, which we force through our destruction of wildlife habitats, that allows many animal microbes to find their way to human bodies.

Shah suggests that the biomedical establishment is more interested in finding magic bullet cures than in listening to the deeper issues. She argues that a new story is needed. This story would, "...instead of reflexively demanding that killing chemicals be slathered across the landscape...we could restore the lost biodiversity...We could protect the forests [let them breathe] so that the viruses stay in them."

How does this sound?

Frightening? Confusing? Naive? Overly ambitious?

Can we allow the sound of the shofar to inspire us to imagine more breath? Can we envision ways of being human that allow more humans, more animals and forests and rivers, birds and butterflies to breathe?

Maimonides writes in the Mishneh Torah:

Notwithstanding that the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Scriptural statute, its blast is symbolic, as if saying: "Ye that sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and ye slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator! They that forget the truth because of the vanities of the times, who err all of their years by pursuing vanity and idleness, which are of neither benefit nor of salvation, care for your souls, improve your ways and your tendencies..."

And do not think we are not invited to envision a better world, a kinder, more just, more breath-filled relationship with earth and with each other. Listen to what the prophet Isaiah says, "And in that day, a great shofar shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of

Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain.” We are invited to envision the holy mountain. We are encouraged to trust that it is waiting for us.

I would like to close with a part of a poem by Lynn Ungar, written this past March, 2020, followed by a closing meditation. She writes:

...And how do you live?
With grief. With fear. With laughter.
With boredom, With glee. With contentment.
With fury with hope.
With the firm conviction that no thing
cancels any thing out.
Death does not cancel life.
Grief does not cancel joy.
Fear does not cancel conviction.
Nor any of those statements in reverse.
Make your heart a bowl
that is large enough to hold it all.
Imagine that you are the potter.
Stretch the clay. Cherish the turning wheel.
Accept that the bowl
is never going to be done.

Meditation #2

Now may I ask you to meditate with me:

Find your seat. Find your tall spine. Find your soft shoulders.

Allow the length of your body to grow. Grow tall from tail to crown of head.

Allow the width of your body to expand, growing wide from side to side, from right to left, touching each other without touching.

Feel the front of your body. As we inhale, notice how much you can contain. When you exhale, notice the depth to which the breath can go and the freedom in the release.

Feel the exhale as the tekiyah gedolah. The expanded note.

Feel into your back. The unseen. The unknown. The place of support. The place of refuge.

Breathe into your back. Now feel the expansiveness of your bowl. Your breath.



Feel the expansiveness of your compassion. Your healing energy. Your love. Your strength. Your goodness. Your courage.

Just breathe into your heart.

We are holding our hearts and each other's hearts.

The great bowl is holding us all. The great shofar is breathing us all.

Just breathing. Right here.

Tekiyah gedolah.