

## Yom Kippur - 2007

Allow me to share a very personal thought one more time: I sometimes feel the whole of what I am doing go cold and empty. Specifically, the flow of Jewish life and ritual that composes so much of my life, every now and again, out of the blue, strikes me as not only meaningless but as an insult to the very notion of meaning. In my first book, Seeking The Path to Life, I called those moments: moments of death-in-life. But that was too simple. Only someone as young as I was when I wrote that book could imagine that there were moments in life when he (me) might experience moments of his (my) own death in life. I have since learned that the source of moments of death in life is not my own, but the deaths of others. And for me that experience has unfolded in the shadow of the deaths of a generation, of a civilization, pulled out of time, orphaned from history, set on the shore as infinite refugees that casts a pall upon the words and gestures of Jewish life as I practice them.

I always recover.

I want to explore that recovery with you

There have been two major sources to my choice of a Jewish life: Song and Shoa. The song was and is the songs of the synagogue that I learned as a young boy in junior congregation, which caused my soul to soar inexplicably and continue still to do so. The Shoa came in the form of literature: Last of the Just, Night, Dawn; and then history and then people. People as survivors and people as rarely mentioned missing pieces of an otherwise ordinary family – a family in which the family tree was unaccountably dotted with fallen leaves.

The fusing of song and Shoa can only be accomplished, if at all, in poetry. Let me share two poems with you through which I want to negotiate recovery from the shadow of meaninglessness. And it is through these poems and that recovery that I want

to address the relationship between each of us as individuals and this community and the breath of God breathing down our backs in regard to both.

The first is a poem by Paul Celan:

Thread-suns

over the gray-black waste-  
land.

A tree-  
high thought  
strikes the note of light: there  
are  
still songs to sing beyond  
mankind (*der Menschen*)

For those of you unfamiliar, Paul Celan was born in Bukovina as Paul Antschell in 1920. He took the name Celan after the second World War when he began to publish poems in German. Both his parents were killed in concentration camps; his father of typhus, his mother shot when she could no longer work. He spent the war being sent from one labor camp to the next. He returned to what was then Rumania after the war and lived briefly under the Communists as a translator, eventually escaping to Austria and then to France where he lived the rest of his life writing in what was for him the mother tongue, a tortured mother tongue, German. He never lived in Germany. Visited there only briefly, but was recognized as the greatest German poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To characterize his poetry is exceedingly difficult, but let this suffice. He had no choice but to wring the German language until it both confronted and transcended its guilt and emerged as what language could only sound like after the collapse of language. He committed suicide in 1970.

The second poem is my own: it is psalm 149, the last psalm in my book Sketches For A Book Of Psalms:

Psalm CXLVIX  
A Psalm of Praise  
A Song of Joy

Song calling  
on the ever

hills the moved  
mountain of  
people flowing  
back into blood  
calling to one  
another you  
and you and  
you there love  
there work there  
spell the letters  
of our rescued  
name there  
our children there  
our ever wary  
fire there our  
bellowing burn of  
you praise remembered  
and now named  
Our name your name  
world called  
love called  
called name praised  
your name praised  
אֲדֹנָי (Adonai)

What I want to say is not as complicated as the poems that say it better than I will here and now. I am inspired by how we as a people and we as individual Jews have recovered from Hell. The Hell of oppression touches us all. Whether our families' survived the Shoa or did not; whether our families' fled the pogroms and left what had been their ancestral homelands for centuries; the traumas of the past two centuries flow in all of our blood. Each year we become more normal. Each year we appear less traumatized. For some of us that means that each year we, or our children, fit more and more into the contemporary world with no conscious memory of the traumas that produced us and them. For others of us each year we take on more and more the trappings of the lost civilization that gave birth to us, often in ways that would declare that nothing has changed, nothing has been undergone. In either case we are deeply in that most common characteristic of trauma: denial. And every once in awhile, the hollowness of that denial creeps into my consciousness: perhaps in a moment of prayer; perhaps in a

moment of play; but inevitably bringing with it the still hidden shadow of the trauma it is denying and whatever I'm doing, whoever I am, goes cold and empty.

For me recovery comes on a song. For me it is always the song of the synagogue, most often the songs we sing together before the opened Ark either taking out or returning the Torah. It isn't the words exactly, though it helps that I understand them. It isn't the music; there is much greater music in the world. It must be something, some shadow that dances between the words and the music. There must be some connection between that shadow and a world before trauma, beyond trauma; some "tree high thought over the grey-black waste land that strikes a note of light." For Celan that "tree high note" is "beyond Mankind." I am inspired that out of the darkness Celan could even imagine a "tree high thought" let alone "a note of light." I sense the double entendre of this note of light needing to emanate from beyond Mankind. On the one hand how could a Mankind that perpetrated the Shoa contain any light; on the other hand despite the debasement of that Mankind the poet still suggests the possibility of redemption beyond the reach of Man's debased hands. But for me that note of light emerges in the form of song from "the moved mountain of people flowing back into blood" that is, the orphans of history turning again and: "calling to one another you and you and you there love there work there" and in doing so: "spell the letters of our rescued name there." Our rescued name is, of course, in part, "our children there." Armed, as it were with the support of each other, the love of each other and the shared responsibility for each other and each other's children we remain understandably "ever wary" of our old forms of worship, our: "fire there our bellowing burn of you praise remembered." But out of our renewed fellowship we have begun to understand and sing again that: "Our name your name world called love called name praised your name praised Adonai." We begin to realize that God's name is our name "calling to one another you and you." The place beyond the trauma that Celan envisioned is precisely the mountain of people, our people, us, flowing back into blood, back into that sense of connection and belonging that in turn becomes the name of God. We are not God. But our care and concern, our taking responsibility one for the other is. Celan could not deny the trauma, but could not experience the feeling of a mountain of people flowing back into the blood," neither in Israel where he visited,

nor in the Jewish community in which he lived, nor in the synagogue that I don't know he frequented. But I have been more fortunate. I have lived and worked among a people trying to return to its own blood and I have heard the voices of that people singing before the Holy Ark; weekdays weakly; on Shabbat more strongly; and on these Holy Days with a consummate voice. That is why I have invested my energy in introducing last year the notion of what I called Institutional Mussar. That is why I asked our leadership to consider undertaking a process of synagogue-wide self scrutiny. Not because we are an organization and all organizations need to be occasionally evaluated so that they work better. But because we are part of a people who comprise together by the tenor of our shared responsibility for one another and the timbre of our voices singing together, the Presence of God in the world, a Presence otherwise blacked out by the evil potential and real that afflicts the world. Because we have been called upon from of old to model a different way, a Godly way, and that Godly way must begin by our seeing in our own community the opportunity to step forward and call the Name of God by Calling the name of our fellow congregant, our neighbor, our partner in the shared blood of our past. I believe we must make this community, this congregation the song that we have all been waiting to sing again, even when the shadow of denial has hidden that desire from us.

Bob Fleischman has already told you that we are embarking on this process of evaluation. It is intended to build on the fact that we are strong and ready to take ourselves on and do the work that change may require. I will not revisit or review the nuts and bolts of that operation. You will hear more about that in the coming months. I have only shared with you why I believe it is necessary. Why it too has been for me the sensation of the breath of God breathing down my back, and my prayer that it will feel that way to you also and you will respond: Hineni, I am here.