

Kol Nidre 5767  
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Congregation Sha'ar Zahav

Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, whose gonna be the prettiest synagogue on 16<sup>th</sup> and Dolores of them all?

Sha'ar Zahav is getting a paint job. It's been due for awhile and thanks to the tremendous work of our Building and Grounds Committee, it's finally underway. If you've been to shul lately or driven by in the last week or so you've noticed the scaffolding and the black covering draped all around our building. It has quite an ominous look to it. Like a dark veil has been cast upon her. And yet, we know that the drapery while gloomy is actually a hopeful sign that something new, beautiful, and inviting will soon be revealed. Anticipation grows ....

The timing for this renovation seems quite fitting. For within these Days of Awe, we too are undergoing a makeover of sorts. In this limninal period between the old paint job and the new, we are standing in the corridor between the past year and our old ways and the coming year and our new, improved selves. But in our case, it's not as much our outsides as our insides that are under repair. On this evening of *Kol Nidre*, we make what's called *Heshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our soul; we look into the Mirror -- not to see our bodies, but to look inside, at the truth in our hearts.

The truth in our hearts.... Hearing and speaking the truth that is in our heart -- This is our calling, our yearning, our prayer. Dear Heart, Help me open my heart to hear that still small voice and speak words of truth.

A story, from the Talmud, about truth (Sanhedrin 97a) adapted and redeemed by Rabbi Judith Halevy.

There was once a town called Kushta. The people who lived there always told the truth and they never seemed to grow old. Not many of the inhabitants of Kushta knew why they never seem to grow old. But, since they were happy, and always kept their word, they never bothered their heads much about it.

One day a king's messenger happened to lose his way and he wandered into the little town of Kushta. When he returned to the king, he told the most wonderful tale of a town where no one ever grows old. "Find out why" said the king. The messenger returned and walking up and down the streets of Kushta, he saw beautiful apricots hanging from all the trees. Aha! he thought. That must be the reason that no one in Kushta ever grows old! He picked a bountiful basket of the ripe fruit, and returned to the king. The king saw the fruit and was pleased. "I will reward you," he said, to the messenger. But he certainly didn't want the messenger to know the secret of never growing old. So, the king had the poor man locked up, and then sat down and ate all of the fruit in one sitting. Then he anxiously looked in the mirror, but alas, the apricots only made him look greener. He smashed the mirror and ordered the faithful counselor put to death.

Soon, the king sent a new messenger to Kushta to discover the secret. It was now the rainy season, and everywhere the messenger looked, there were barrels of rainwater. The women washed their hair with it, the children bathed in it, and men splashed it on their faces. Aha! he thought, the secret must be in this special rainwater. Quickly he filled a barrel and brought it to the king.

The king was pleased and promised to reward the messenger, but before he could enter his large tiled tub, he had this messenger locked up as well. The king stepped into the rainwater bath with great anticipation but alas, when he stepped out, he was clean but no younger. Shaking with anger, he ordered the second counselor put to death.

“This time I will go myself to the place where no one ever grows old,” said the king. He ordered his carriage and traveled to Kushta, carrying with him a sack of gold.

When the king reached the town square, he held the bag aloft, and said, “A handsome reward for anyone who will tell me why the people of Kushta never grow old.” The people looked at each other wide eyed. No one had ever asked them this question before. The king held up the gold again and said “I am a king and you can take my word for it. I swear that I will reward you handsomely if you tell me your secret.”

“It’s no secret,” someone said. “This is a town of trust. In our language, Aramaic, ‘kushta’ means truth. As long as we live, we tell the truth.” Everyone nodded. Someone reached out for the bag of gold. But the king pushed him away roughly. “I’m no fool,” said the king. “Why should I give you my gold for nothing?” The townspeople were shocked. No one had ever lied to them before. No one had ever broken their trust.

Clutching his gold, the king jumped into the carriage and sped home. But strangely, when the carriage reached the gates, the king who had broken his word in a place called Kushta was dead. Something even stranger began to happen in Kushta.

The people of Kushta, once lied to, were no longer so trusting. They began to doubt each other- perhaps their friend was not telling the truth? And, too, a few of them began to go back on their word.

The townspeople, who had never grown old before, suddenly began to show signs of aging. When the king broke his promise in the town of truth, it was as if the spell was broken. And today, the story has it, if a traveler should happen to stop at the town called Kushta, he would not find it different from any other place.

The legend of Kushta, illustrates the connection between telling the truth and the quality, if not the quantity of our life. Every lie is like a small death. We have the power to expand and diminish our lives on account of our words.

This is the night of *Kol Nidre*, when we ask, as a community, to be forgiven for breaking our vows, for going back on our word, for not telling the truth. On this night, we are held accountable for every word that has come out of our mouths. Hundreds of years ago, the rabbis instituted this opening prayer of *Kol Nidre* to beg forgiveness for our transgressions of speech. We acknowledge those vows we made to God but were unable to complete and we are absolved/exonerated.

The promises that we uttered to another human being - that's another story. The hurtful words we said, and the difficult words we didn't have the fortitude to say –for the lies we told and the truths we withheld – it is not God, who can forgive us, we have to speak with one another directly. On Yom Kippur, we are given this special opportunity to speak the truth that is in our hearts to another, to “do *tshuvah*” before the gates of *Neilah* close at sundown tomorrow. This day, we are given the chance to prolong our lives by telling and hearing the truth.

According to the RaMBaM, also known as Maimonides, in his famous medieval text, *Hilchot Ha'tshuvah*, The Laws of Repentance:

When we commit a sin, whether intentional or unintentional, and then we make repentance, we are obliged to make confession (*vidui*) before God, and with the people we have hurt; and this confession must be in words.

We repent of the past, and proclaim before the Knower Of All Purposes that we won't return to this kind of behavior again. And we need to make this confession with our lips moving; to say these words aloud that we have resolved in our hearts.

But the RaMBaM makes clear that these must not be empty words. If we make verbal confessions without sincerely resolving to change in our hearts, he insists that we are like someone who goes into the *mikvah*, the purifying waters, with a *sheretz*, an impure insect in his hand.

God help us. As we hold up the mirror of truth, the most tightly guarded place, and the one most difficult to see into, is the mirror of the human heart.

Among our litany of *Al Chets*, of sins we confess, we say, "*Al Chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha b'emutz halev. For the wrong we have done before you, in the closing of the heart.*" The Torah tells us over and over again to

"circumcise the foreskin of your heart – *U'Maltem et Arlat L'vav-chem.*"

How can we approach this peculiar idea of the heart's foreskin? I think our tradition offers us a deep insight into the risks attached with intimacy

The metaphor of cutting away at the thickness around our heart gets to the core of what living in truth demands. The naked heart is tender, delicate and new. "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart," suggests Nachmanides, "so that your hearts will be open to know the truth."

In the Torah, the circumcision warning is bracketed with commandments to fear God. Be afraid; make yourself vulnerable. Cut from the flesh of your soul whatever stands between you and God and your relationship with God will protect you; it will wrap itself around you. It's a paradox the way all love is a paradox. Be bold and love... yet remain naked.

What would happen if we were able to swallow a cardio-scope mirror, and look inside the chambers of our heart? Webbed with scar tissue, the heart occludes. We would see only a small part of our inner heart chambers, barricaded inside so that we do not have to face the truth of our fears and inadequacies. We are so afraid to slice open our hearts, for fear that we will find pain and suffering inside.

What is clogging the flow of lifeblood through our arteries? Is this scar tissue from childhood? Is it a story of a parent who did not live up to expectations? Is it the blockage and hurt around a failed love relationship? Is it the hardening that comes from being told lies by a king-like authority figure? What hurt or resentment could possibly be worth holding on to with such passion and resistance that our very life force is stifled? That our *neshamah* is suffocated?

The Days of Awe teach us that there are moments of "*tshuvah*" that are possible. Imagine. We don't have to wait. We can allow the vessels of our heart to open, right now!

Time is always running out, which is an essential message of Yom Kippur. Outside of Kushta, our bodies do continue to age. If we do not search for the truth "*b'seter u'vagalui*" in the hidden and secret recesses of the heart, we have no hope of healing into a long and peaceful life; of being sealed into the Book of Life.

The people of Kushta live “long upon the land” because they are guided by truth and honor. The king in our story turns to apricots and rainwater rinses for the secret to a youthful long life. He doesn’t value honor and truth, and does not understand that in Kushta, people face each day anew, unburdened by doubt and the anxiety and stress caused by lack of trust. Their youthful appearance comes from living each day in wholeness and trust.

“Life shrinks or expands according to one’s courage,” wrote Anais Nin. And to this I would add, one’s life shrinks or expands according to one’s courage to hear and to speak the truth of the heart.

I had some experiences this year of people telling me how they truly felt about something I had done or said that had hurt them. In one case it was two years after the event had occurred, in another case a year. In both cases we had met on many cordial occasions in the intervening time, and I had no idea anything was amiss. I was astounded and truly regretted that they were carrying around such a hurt that I had unwittingly and unintentionally caused them. It was hard to hear, but I was grateful for their courage, and their willingness to be truthful with me. It was this sharing of truth, difficult as it was, that testified to the strength and depth of our relationships, and allowed us the opportunity to repair and keep alive a relationship which otherwise might have died before its time.

Just as in the mythic town of Kushta, where truth telling kept people from dying before their time, so too, here in this real community of ours, telling the truth keeps us fully alive. Truthfulness is what keeps our relationships vibrant and real as opposed to mere empty shells, which to me is a kind of living death.

When we share our truths, we feel known, we feel loved.  
When we keep things to ourselves, we can't be known, we can't feel loved.  
When I "close my heart" it means- I won't let anyone in to know me, I don't trust people to behave honorably towards me; I don't believe that my own truth is good enough. I believe if I tell the truth, I'll get into trouble; I'll be judged. I'll hurt people I love, I'll get rejected; I'll be alone.

To hear the truth your heart has to be open. The other half of the equation is being able to hear the truth with openness, honesty and respect for where the other person is coming from.

To tell your truth, is harder because – there are often many compelling reasons not to. Rabbi Laura Geller writes of "certain values that seem to be more urgent than truth telling--peace in the home, making peace between people, humility, and modesty" to name a few.

For me, it sometimes seems that telling the truth is likely to make things more complicated and with my busy, too life, I want to keep things simple. I want to stay in control! I want to avoid difficult feelings. Don't you?

Many are the sentinels who guard the heart: our fears, our anger, our arrogance, and others. When our heart are closed, in some ways its conscious, in others, its unconscious. Some of our fears are so ingrained they operate at an almost cellular level. But despite these challenges, we still need to strengthen our truth-telling muscles.

When we finally summon the courage to examine our own hearts, it is clear that the first thing that we must do is forgive ourselves. There can be no forgiveness of others until we forgive our own mistakes. This is where we most desperately need God's help.

Someone recently remarked that Erev Yom Kippur reminded her of waiting for the results of a CAT scan to come back. Tonight we are suspended in that difficult, disorienting waiting period, when we have taken a peek at what lies inside, but do not yet have a plan of action.

Let us take a few moments now – in silence – to listen to our inner voice. What heartfelt truths do you need to tell . . . . your loved ones, your colleagues, your community leaders? What do you most need/want to hear?

(A minute of silence)

Like the scaffolding and drapery suggest, we are works in progress. In time, with patience and tenderness, with intention and due consideration of the truths in our hearts, we can renew our life and love.

Teach us to number our days, God, that we may get ourselves a heart full of truth. *El Rachum, V'Chanum, God of Compassion and Loving kindness, God of Justice and Truth- You, who forgive transgressions to the thousandth generation, forgive us. Help us to forgive ourselves -- for the hurts we have caused our loved ones by closing our hearts. Open up our hearts to know and be known; to love and be loved. May this be Your will, Ken Y'hi Ratzon. Amen.*