

Introduction to Yizkor
September 16, 2021 – 10 Tishri, 5782
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
Rabbi Daniel Levin

For the last year and a half, I have had the joy of studying with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. The learning has been deep and meaningful, and a major part of the work is to focus on mindfulness. And part of that work has been to create a meditation practice.

I have ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder – and so meditation has been hard. Especially because they ask you to focus on the breath. Root yourself. Make yourself calm. Center yourself. Set an intention and focus on the breath. And I can do that ... for, like, a minute. And I have to admit: I find my breath pretty boring. I don't know – maybe it's because I'm ADD, maybe it's because meditation is a discipline and you have to practice. And then my attention wanders and I think about this thing or that thing, so then they say you have to do Teshuva – you have to lovingly and without judgment, return to your intention, to your breath.

So later we tried a different technique called walking meditation. We were in a beautiful setting – a camp near Simi Valley, California called the Brandeis Bardin Institute – it's a magnificent space. It's actually where they filmed the television show M.A.S.H. for those who remember 1970's television. And so as I walked I tried setting a different intention, and I'm looking at the ground. And I observed that with every single step, there was new growth and decay. In every step there were crunching leaves under my feet and new growth coming up from underneath. And I'm realizing that it is the decay above that's feeding the new growth below. And as I'm walking and noticing this cycle of new growth and decay I'm thinking about my breath. This is what it means to respire. It's regeneration and degeneration. Regeneration and degeneration. And it's this cycle that makes for life.

And in this period of horror, where this pernicious virus attacks the respiratory system – that it kills you by making it impossible to breathe. That simple act of a *Neshima*, a simple breath, is something we can no longer take for granted because COVID-19 attacks exactly this very basic function of life.

But that give and take – the cycle of respiration is really the building block of the world. We inhale oxygen which feeds and fuels our bodies and we exhale the pollutants, carbon dioxide. But it's that pollutant, carbon dioxide, that is breathed in by all the plant life in the world, which in turn produces oxygen which regenerates us. There are cycles.

Every moment we are participating in the cycle of life simply by taking a single unique individual breath. Regeneration – Degeneration.

But I want us to think about something else. The word inspire can be thought of in a somewhat different way. I've always believed, and the reason why I'm here with you in a Reform synagogue is because I believe that the authentic commanding voice of God doesn't come from outside of us nearly as often as it often wells up from inside of us. It's the commanding voice that comes from within where God speaks to us from the depth of our being that is the most authentic commanding voice we can hear. But how do we activate that voice? How do we learn to listen to the God that dwells within us?

We do that through Inspiration – by breathing in, by bringing into ourselves that which will inspire. And that word “inspire” – can be thought of us as “in-spirit”. I take things that touch my spirit and then bring them into myself, that will enliven the holy within me.

And then once I've been inspired, what I have left is to release and express – gratitude.

A friend recently discovered a mass. And the worst thing about discovering a mass is that it takes forever to find out what the mass is. So he went to the doctor and they said we need to do a biopsy. He did the biopsy and then of course you have to wait an agonizing amount of time to find out the results. And he called to tell me that they discovered that the mass is benign and they don't need to do anything. And I found myself sighing: “Oh, thank God!”

Gratitude is always a release. Always an expression.

What I realized is that what is the spiritual respiration of life – it's a constant interchange and cycle of bringing in inspiration and releasing gratitude. If we stop physically breathing, we will die. And if we stop spiritually breathing we will also die. If we don't constantly breathe inspiration and that sense of spiritual resonance and nourishment and constantly express gratitude and appreciation, then we may still be able to navigate the planet physically, but spiritually we will suffer a death.

Need to draw constantly and deliberately on inspiration, and that's why the gift of memory is so holy and present. When we close our eyes and think about those who have touched our lives but no longer touch our hands, we realize how deeply embedded they are in us, and how they are in many ways that internal source of inspiration we have already breathed in. They are already in us to continue to mesmerize and touch our spirits.

They have given us, and implanted within us, life, love, understanding, and wisdom, laughter and grace. And every time we draw on that inspiration we release an expression of gratitude. But what we do with that gratitude? How do we best express that gratitude? How do we best participate in a spiritual exhale? By how we live. By how we make our lives, individually and collectively, *Matzevot*, markers that mark their memory and the honor they place in the holds of our heart. How we live – how we express our inspiration, how we participate in spiritual respiration is how we honor them.

And so as we embark on these moments of *Yizkor*, these moments of sanctification of memory and our own lives through memory, take a moment. Center yourself. Set for yourself an intention on your breath. Breathe in and out. Breathe in regeneration and exhale degeneration, and breathe in inspiration, and exhale gratitude, so that together we might allow the souls that breathe within us to help us continue to breathe the breath of life.