

Know What The Heart Carries
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787
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This past Spring, Will and I had the opportunity to hear historian Jon Meacham speak at Florida Atlantic University. He reflected on the time he spent writing the biography of President George H W Bush. Meacham was given extraordinary access to Bush's diaries, recordings and private correspondence. The process took ten years because for Meacham, it was not enough to know President Bush. He wanted to know George.

In the piles of archival material John came across a letter the president had written to his mother a few years after the death of his young daughter, Robin. This letter lived inside the bedside table of the President's mother until her death. One day, tenderly, John handed George his own words and asked him to read them aloud.

"There is about our house a need. The running, pulsating restlessness of the four boys as they struggle to learn and grow; all this wonder needs a counterpart, we need some starched crisp frocks to go with all our torn-kneed blue jeans. We need some soft blond hair to offset those crew cuts. We need a doll house to stand firm against our forts...We need a girl. We had one once... We need her and yet we have her. We can't touch her and yet we can feel her."

George began to sob.

His aide heard him and came to his side. Seeing what was happening, she turned to John and asked "why would you return him to such profound pain?"

"If you want to know someone's heart..." John began to answer. President Bush interrupted: "You have to know what breaks it."

There is a difference between knowing what happened to someone and understanding what their heart carries, because it happened.

Our mystical tradition defines the heart as far more than the place where we feel emotion. It is a pathway to wisdom, a way of knowing what cannot be understood through the intellect alone. There are truths about another person we can learn from the facts of their life. And there are truths we can only come to know when they entrust us with a piece of their heart.

To know someone deeply is to know what breaks their heart and to know what enlivens it. What matters most to them: the people they love, what they cherish, what they fear losing, what brings them joy, what gives them courage, and what they yearn for. These things are

particular to a person. That is why truly knowing someone requires us to move close enough to listen and remain long enough to understand. To live with soul is to look beyond what is immediately visible. It presents us with a beautiful possibility: that there is still so much for us to discover.

Archaeology offers a beautiful image for this. Across Israel and the Middle East there are excavation sites known as *tels*, they are mounds formed over centuries. From the outside, a *tel* looks like an ordinary hill. Yet, beneath the surface are the remnants of generations who built their lives upon those who came before them. Archaeologists move carefully, sometimes inch by inch, because every layer reveals traces of humanity.

The same is true, of us. Every one of us is a living *tel*, shaped layer upon layer by all that we have lived, loved and lost, inherited and chosen, endured and become. It is the awe and blessing of being human. When we draw close enough to one another we experience not simply the person before us, but something of the world within them and the indelible imprints left upon their hearts.

The work of an archaeologist requires patience, precision, and extraordinary care. They are often lying on the ground, crouched in corners, or squeezed into the smallest of spaces, working with tiny tools—scraping, sifting, brushing—trying to understand what they have discovered and to learn about the people who left it behind. They understand that discovery cannot be rushed.

We need to be more like archaeologists, with one another. Get close. Take our time. Approach what lies beneath the surface with care. Especially with the people we love, the ones we think we already know so well. And with ourselves, too. There is always more to discover, more still unfolding and more of the soul waiting to be revealed.

In the Book of Shemot, Exodus, we read:

וְאַתֶּם יֹדְעֶתֶם אֶת-נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

V'atem y'datem et nefesh hager, "You know the soul of the stranger, Ki gerim heyitem b'eretz Mitzrayim, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

We are all familiar with this idea as it repeats throughout our narrative. But in this verse the addition of the word "*nefesh*", soul, is particularly moving. *V'atem y'datem et nefesh*. You know the soul.

If we are willing to explore the depth and complexity of our own lives then we are more likely to recognize this in others. The more we understand what has shaped us and what we carry, the

more able we are to meet another person where they are. This is part of the spiritual work of the Days of Awe. We turn inward and ask, “What is my soul seeking?” “What is my heart asking of me now?”

The more we examine our own inner lives, the more capacity we have to understand the layers that exist within others. Over the course of Elul many of us have participated in the Mezuzah ritual by offering words of our hearts that will be tucked into the hearts of someone else in our community, at moments when they need them.

We won't know whose hands will eventually hold our words, but they will know they are not alone. This, too, is a way of knowing one another's hearts. From where I stand tonight, I look out and see each of you. One of the greatest privileges of being one of your rabbis is that you have invited me into the chambers of your heart. Those intimate moments have shaped me. You have shaped me.

When people come to meet with me, I often begin with a question: “What's on your heart, today?” The answers are extraordinary.

When someone is carrying heartbreak, uncertainty, or loss, this question allows us to move closer to what they are experiencing. We begin to uncover what hurts most, what they are longing for, what they are afraid may change and what they are still trying to understand.

Sometimes what emerges is unexpected: a memory that brings comfort, a love that is still sustaining them, a strength they did not realize they had, even a glimmer of possibility in the midst of something difficult.

People don't only share with me what hurts their heart, they also share what makes their heart smile and skip a beat! They tell me what they are excited about. What they are dreaming about. A relationship that is bringing them happiness. A new possibility they never expected at this stage of their life. They tell me about what they have discovered about themselves after a meaningful class or something they are finally ready to do.

Some of the deepest Torah I've learned has come from listening to what your heart is carrying.

That is what I want for us in this New Year. To create more space in our lives for this kind of closeness. To know one another beyond the surface and to allow ourselves to be known. We are yearning for that kind of connection.

We are seeking moments where we can be authentic with one another, where we can ask the questions beneath the questions, where we can hold one another during times of grief and celebration. We are looking to share more of what lives within us.

It does not require a dramatic shift in the way we live. Think about the person you sit across from at dinner, or the person you call on your way home. Instead of asking, “How was your day?” ask, “What touched your heart, today?”

Imagine what you’ll hear: something funny, an unexpected kindness, a worry, a beautiful moment, a memory sparked. This question invites someone to reflect rather than report. Listen to where the answer takes you. Sometimes, what we discover in another person turns our attention inward. As we become more interested in the inner lives of others, we may discover parts of ourselves we have not yet explored.

Our tradition teaches that when two people sit together and words of Torah pass between them, the *Shekhinah*, God’s presence, dwells among them. There is holiness in the space between us.

Bryan Stevenson calls this “getting proximate”. His life’s calling involves advocating for people whose lives are judged from a distance. He teaches that when we draw closer to one another, something within us begins to change.

He tells the story of getting close enough to a man on death row to hear him sing. That moment stayed with him because proximity allowed him to hear a soulful voice, in an unexpected place. Another person’s life can expand our own. This is the blessing of an open heart. Our world becomes larger.

There’s a beautiful teaching from the Book of Proverbs:

כַּמִּים הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים

“As water reflects face to face,

כֵּן לֵב־הָאָדָם לָאָדָם:

so the human heart reflects another.” (Proverbs 27:19)

When someone opens their heart to us, we meet them with something of our own.

A few weeks ago, Asher started Kindergarten. While he was at school I spent some time in his room. Memories replayed in my mind. I could hear his little voice uttering his first words mixed in with his belly laughs and the jokes he is attempting to tell now. I could picture him running around the house in diapers and now he insists on picking out his clothes so he looks cool. I found myself moving things around to make room for his newest interests and the things that bring him joy.

I spent time reorganizing because I wanted to make it reflect more of who he is now. At that moment I felt deeply connected to him—my little boy is growing up.

When he came home, he ran into my room and said, “Mom, I love what you did to my room!” Then he placed his hand right here and said, “You really know my heart.”

There is something extraordinary about being known in this way. To have someone notice what brings you joy, what matters to you and have it reflected back to you, even in the smallest of ways; is deeply moving.

Father Mychal Judge, the beloved chaplain of the New York City Fire Department, lived this way.

Over the course of his life, Father Mychal, met thousands of people, yet somehow he made each one feel seen. He paid attention. He remembered what was happening in their lives and what mattered to them. He wrote little notes, sometimes only a line or two, and carried a black satchel filled with letters waiting for his reply.

He literally walked around the streets of NY carrying people’s stories with him.

On September 11th, 2001, without hesitation, Father Mychal ran into the World Trade Center alongside the firefighters he had spent years serving. He wouldn't have been anywhere else. He was in the lobby of the North Tower, ministering to the injured and dying, when the South Tower collapsed. Father Mychal’s body was carried from the rubble and he was declared the first fatality of September 11th.

A man who spent his life carrying the stories of others became the first name in a story our nation will carry in its heart forever.

How do we honor the memory of Father Mychal Judge and all 2,977 people who lost their lives, on this day, 25 years ago?

By drawing closer to one another. Discovering more of what lives within the hearts of those around us, and remembering that within every person is an entire world waiting to be discovered. *Shanah Tovah.*