

## The presence of still water

### *Rosh Hashanah 5781 – Drasha and guided meditation for the Eve of our New Year*

Shana Tovah to each and everyone of you!

I know most of us are participating today from home, and I'm sure all of you are missing at this moment the amazing feeling of seeing the congregation all together in one space. Rosh Hashanah, and more so Yom Kippur,<sup>1</sup> are markers in time that allow us to catch up. Who has grown, who has moved away, who's joined in.

This year, it is like we almost need to add- in the "Ma nishtanah" – in what way is this night different from any other night? In what way is this High Holiday season different from all other HH seasons?

Let us pause for a moment, here in the shul and at home. Can you think back to this moment a year ago? Can you remember who you sat next to? Can you remember what it felt like sitting in the pews {ok, maybe in this respect, this year wins! No one misses the pews}.

Lets try and create together in our minds an image: All of us sitting together in shul – Choose a moment that was especially wonderful for you and brings back good memories, 30 or 20 or 3 years ago, it doesn't matter. We are all imagining together our community in one space. Let us stay with that for a moment. Think of your friends next to you, think of the people around you that you meet only on RH. Go down to details, what are you wearing? Can you smell the cakes in the back? Can you hear *Chavurat Hashir*<sup>1</sup> singing? Are you holding *Mishkan Hanefesh*? What is the lighting like? Is it day or night?

For some of you who have joined us during the past few months and haven't had a chance to sit in our Beit Knesset, imagine yourself in a place where you feel at peace and surrounded by people you feel connected to.

Now, hold this image and feeling in your mind as I speak.

We gather around a poem.

This poem is not is not Jewish liturgy, but we have used it in the past few months as a prayer for Peace, and it has helped me navigate our very strange moment in history:

#### **"The Peace of Wild Things"** (Wendell Berry)

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in **fear** of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with **forethought**  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

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<sup>1</sup> Our lay-led singing group

And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

When reading Wendell Berry's words at this time, it talks to me about my, our, struggles with יצר הרע, and specifically with the יצר הרע of Fear.

First, let's remember what יצר הרע means. The easy translation is "the evil inclination", but of course this is a very flat way to understand a much more complicated concept.

יצר is inclination, or, passion

רע is bad.

But both good and bad are not categories, rather they sit within context.

It is a good inclination to try and create orderly spaces for ourselves, and usually not great when our thoughts or our clothes are strewn all over the place. It is also not great when we need things to be so organized that there is no place for spontaneity, or the joy of some clutter.

The same with Fear.

When despair for the world grows in me / and I wake in the night at the least sound / in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be

Berry's poem opens with fear, and fear is a great disruptor of inner and collective peace.

Fear in its many forms has been in our lives now for months, and in some respect, that makes total sense. Who isn't feeling a deep-seated fear of the way our future is unfolding? Covid and climate change, the fires to the west and the economic crisis lingering all around the province. We are living in a time ripe with real danger and are intitled to every bit of fear we are feeling.

Fear can be a catalyst for action and change which are usually יצר הטוב, or it can bring us into the realms of יצר הרע. This is when fear takes hold of us and brings out chaos and hate.

The poet's words here remind me of one of the more chilling verses in *Tanach* "**For death has climbed through our windows, Has entered our fortresses**" (Jeremiah 9:20). This is the יצר הרע of fear creeping into our souls and bringing down our boundaries. This is when we begin losing our mind.

I stop here for a moment for two things.

- a. Are you still holding the image of our shul full of people celebrating and actively worshiping together?
- b. I want to be very clear in reiterating that being pulled into our יצר הרע does in no way make us bad. Each of us is good at the core, נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, our soul and innermost self is always clean. We are human and constantly move in and out of our place of יצר הטוב, the inclination to do good.

And so, yes, it is natural and understandable for us as humans to fall in fear. And fear can sometimes be good: when a bear is coming close to our children, fear makes sense. When we want to hug our grandparents but are afraid they might contract covid and so keep a distance, fear makes sense.

But “When despair for the world grows in me / and I wake in the night at the least sound / in fear...”

That is when we might want to find ways of reigning fear in.

“I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water”

**I go.**

This movement is the first part of a two-step choreography intended to help us deal with our **יצר הרע**. This is the spiritual practice of **סור מרע** – remove yourself from bad situations. Notice the situation is toxic for you and remove yourself. Observe it from the outside. Notice this is overtaking you, and notice that being in a bad place is not actually part of who you are, but that it is influencing you.

**סור מרע** is step one.

Step two is the spiritual practice of **עשה טוב**, do good.

“I come into the peace of wild things”

The poet calls us to take the next step in action and not just remove ourselves from our thoughts of fear and their paralyzing effect, but rather bring ourselves into a place that heals us. This is not necessarily an inner space, rather, a place of connection and learning.

This reminds me of a wonderful passage in Talmud, when the rabbis have this moment of clarity and say: **Even if the Torah had not been given, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat, and that stealing is objectionable from the ant, and forbidden relations from the dove, which is faithful to its partner, and proper relations from the rooster, which first appeases the hen and then mates with her.** (*Bavli Iruvin 100b*). It’s even funnier in Hebrew.

What does Berry learn from nature around him?

“I come into the presence of **still** water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
**waiting** with their light”

He learns silence from the water – When we speak, even when this is an inner conversation, what good will my words bring? Am I feeding myself hate, and despair and fear?

He learns patience from the stars. There are things we cannot change just now and some situations will not be resolved at the moment. Different forms of illumination will appear, but we might just have to wait.

And he ends: “For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free”

For a time. Not forever, but for now. For this moment, he can be within his **יצר הטוב** of being within the world and at peace.

We all know this is work in progress, and that fear can strike at any moment. Sometimes for good reasons, sometimes taking over our inner conversation and bringing death into our soul.

The idea of סוּר מֵרַע וְעָשָׂה טוֹב (Psalms 34:15) comes to us from a psalm: בְּקִשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרַדְּפָהּ

Swerve from evil and do good, seek peace, and pursue it.

**Checking in** – are you still holding the image of all of us together in shul throughout the years? Are you still actively building in your own mind a sense of connection, even that now we are physically apart?

We are all living in fear and pain. Some of us have lost jobs and are wondering how to feed our kids, some of us are so very lonely and haven't felt human touch in six months. Some of us are juggling kids and work. Many of us are unsure about strange climate patterns and the fear "of what my life and my children's lives may be".

**Checking in** – are you still holding the image of all of us together in shul throughout the years? Are you still actively building in your own mind a sense of connection, even that now we are physically apart?

Take that image and impress it upon your heart,

Impress it upon your children

Go back and look at it when you stay at home and when you are on your way

When you lie down and when you get up

Take this image of a community, of our community

And bind it as a sign on your hand and let it serve as a symbol on your forehead

Let the feeling of our community, of community, of the presence of true peace be with you

On the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

And when we come into the יצר הרע of fear, let us say to ourselves:

My God, The soul you have given me and all those around me is pure

אלהי נשמה שנתת בי ובכל באי עולם טהורה היא

And may we merit a year where we enter the Peace of wild things.

*Rabbi Gila Caine.*