

**ROSH HASHANAH 5780 SERMON, DAY 2
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2019
BY RABBI AVIVA GOLDBERG**

Yesterday, before introducing Steven Logan, I explained that each of this year's high holy day sermons relate to three new themes for us to reflect upon. Themes that are applicable to these days of inner reflection and reconnection to our finer selves and to the world around us. These themes are what I have named the triad of tikkun – tikkun tevel the repair of the planet about which Steven spoke so passionately yesterday, tikkun olam, the repair of the world about which Lorne Gould will be sharing his thoughts on Yom Kippur day and Tikun Halev – repair and opening of our hearts, what I shall be speaking about today.

As this is the second day of Rosh Hashanah where we incorporate a healing meditative focus to all parts of the service, tikun halev is, I think, an essential element to more fully experience what this healing means. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the famous rebbe of the 19th century who I mentioned on erev Rosh, a man who suffered from melancholy and depression throughout his quite short life, understood that living is most difficult, illness and death are random, and finding hope in a world that appears to many of us, to use the words of the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, void of the full presence of the Divine, often leaves us with the need to close our hearts lest any more pain enter. As Reb Nachman noted “when you peel back the many layers of a human being's soul you lay bare what is left, tears.”

What then, how then are we to proceed, to move forward without becoming cynical and harsh, when a loved one is chronically ill, when a friend, a lover,

a child, a father, a mother dies of a terminal illness? What is our role? How can we keep our hearts whole in such a fractured world?

For me, the answers are at once simple and complex. As this is my last high holy days leading these services, I perhaps am feeling freer to open my heart to you, to reveal my own not quite yet finished healing journey.

As some of you may know when I was 9 years old my mother contracted Multiple Sclerosis – I watched her 18-year battle with this chronic disease until her death at age 57.

There is no question that that experience profoundly affected me. I acted out as an adolescent and teenager. I was expelled, kicked out from high school for shall we say less than stellar behaviour. Now ironically sharing this with you this may give you hope for your own wayward child. As I have kept that report card from over fifty years ago which stated in black and white “Aviva Burke is ineligible to continue in school” and I have placed that report card with those oh so prophetic words, I have placed it lovingly and gently in the front cover of my PhD dissertation.

Over the years I had great difficulty, again perhaps because of my mum’s illness, visiting people who were ill. To be honest, I did my best to avoid hospital visits and even shiva calls, because no matter how much I cared for the person, I would literally sweat and feel physically weak and could hardly propel my body forward to be with them. And when I did manage to go into the chronic care hospital where my mum spent several of her final years or in fact any hospital, or house of mourning, I would have to, as Job said, gird my loins, grit my teeth and close my heart.

And yet, to visit the ill and dying, what is called bikur cholim is a tenet of Judaism – it is understood to be an obligation of all members of a community. To our rabbis, the mitzvah of bikur cholim fulfills the obligation to ‘love our neighbours as our self’ and to our sages, to comfort mourners, to perform acts of loving kindness brings goodness and healing to this world.

Again, as some of you may know, for the past twenty years, I have tried sometimes successfully, sometimes not so successfully, to fulfill this obligation, hopefully doing so in a respectful, honest and most importantly empathetic way. What then changed? What enabled me to, rather than close my heart, open it? What allowed me to begin the process of tikkun libi, repairing my heart?

I can only answer that by referring back to the letter I sent out to our community, before these high holy days – I wrote that it has been an incredible experience and honour to have been a part of your lives as your spiritual leader. And that I have grown as a person and gained so much from the many gifts you have given me.

From the day I became a part of a healing circle, a group that actively took on a day or a night to be with Shelly Shira Duke in the last months of her life, my heart slowly cracked open. She and many of you over the years have allowed me into your homes and lives and have given me the opportunity to, in silence or in laughter, or in tears, accompany you a little way in the journey you are on.

Your trust, your confidence, your example, has given me strength, and I hope insight and forgiveness. Forgiveness in that I am able to forgive myself for the more than 20 years when I was unable, when my heart was too armored

to actively assist others. I know however, that we cannot nor should we expect that we can cure all illness, rid others of their addictions, their depression, their negativity - and I know too that there are times when it is too much, when we need as friends as family as lovers as caregivers as human beings to take time out – to put a balm on our beings, a salve on our souls, so that we can perhaps another time, maybe even years later, have the strength not to close our hearts but as I have learned these past twenty years to follow a more difficult but a so much more worthwhile yet vulnerable path to open our hearts. For as another Hasidic rabbi wrote, “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.”

I would like to conclude this talk with the beginning sentences and ending sentences of a book that I have by my bedside, a book I reread at least once every year or so, *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwartz Bart. Schwartz Bart shares with us at the beginning of his novel, the legend of the Lamed Vav. “The world reposes,” he writes, “upon thirty six just people, the lamed vav, indistinguishable from simple mortals, often unaware of their own station – these Lamed Vav are the hearts of the world multiplied, and into them, as into one receptacle pour all our griefs. When an unknown Just rises to heaven, the Hassidic story goes, they are so frozen that the Divine must warm them for a thousand years between its fingers before their soul can open itself to Paradise.” And Schwartz Bart ends his novel on Ernie Levy the last of the Just, with the following “yes, at times one’s heart could break in sorrow. Yesterday, as I stood in the street trembling with despair rooted to the spot a drop of pity fell from above upon my face. There was no breeze in the air, no cloud in the sky – there was only a presence.”

May this new year bring to us all tikkun halev, repair of our hearts.