

Yom Kippur Talk 5777/2016
Arteries of Life
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During Rosh Hashana last week I talked about the kabbalistic idea of there being tznurim (pipes) through which divine abundance, known as Shefa flows into our world. I described how two actions, saying amen or affirming the blessings in our lives, and expressing gratitude have the special quality of working like pipe cleaners back up through the tznurim to keep them open so that shefa continues to flow from its divine source. I now want to offer a theory about the way this shefa actually flows into us.

Imagine now that each of us has our own unique tznur (pipe) through which this shefa flows into our lives. I'll call this our personal tznur chai, or life artery. When our tznur chai / life artery is clear and unrestricted life affirming energy flows unimpeded into us as we move through life with harmonious resonance. We are filled to the brim with integrity, compassion for ourselves and others, receiving from and sharing with others with sincerity and love. We move through life encompassed by honesty, comfortably in the light of our own unique personal truths. We are

confident and powerful while at the same time empowering to those around us. We dance gracefully with all that life presents us.

Alas, this simple state of elegance and grace that exists when our tznur chai is completely without any restrictions is elusive. The bumps, bruises and scars of life resulting from unfulfilled wants, hurtful relationships, neglected dreams, injustice, prejudices, wrongful acts slowly clog our tznur chai. Like the unwanted plaque that builds up on the arteries of our heart impeding life sustaining blood from flowing freely, so too these emotional and psychic wounds slowly constrict our tznur chai limiting the flow of life affirming abundance.

This detritus that obstructs our tznur chai does more than diminish the volume of shefa available to us. It also exerts unwanted control over how we move through life. Imagine that at some point in your past you endured a painful, difficult and perhaps ugly break up of what was once an important and powerful relationship. This might have been a romantic relationship or business partnership. The wounds have healed but scars remain. These scars reside within your tznur chai and restrict the flow of

shefa. These “relationship scars” don’t just block the flow of shefa, they actually exert control over you. They remind you of the potential pain and hurt that that can result from deep relationships and they try to keep you from forming new relationships where there is a perceived risk of hurt.

Bear with me as I evoke a new metaphor. Imagine that “relationship scar” is like an invisible person standing behind you with his hands on your shoulders. You're walking along and you see someone with whom you sense you might like to connect. You sense the potential of a meaningful relationship. You think you might want to move more into that relationship but you don't. Why? Because “invisible scar” is standing behind you with her hands on your shoulders and turns you away: no more pain from relationships for you. This is what happens when our tznur chai becomes clogged. The more stuff there is constricting our tznur chai the less we are truly in control of our lives, the less fulfilled we are, the less we feel a zest for living until we feel as if we are virtually depleted of energy for living our life. This “turning” away from what we want has another name: chet, which as you know by now is mistranslated as sin but really means missing the mark or in keeping with my metaphor “turning away” from the mark.

The good news is that just as there are ways to ensure the steady flow shefa into the world, there are also ways to keep our tznur chai open to the divine abundance available to ourselves. Indeed, this is the essence of what we are striving to do here today. If, and I want to say that is a big if, we are willing to open our hearts and reflect deeply and honestly on the life we lived the past year; if we internalize the words of the prayers and poetry of the day, then teshuva, “turning” towards sources of fulfillment and meaning is possible.

There are many, many times during these days of awe that the liturgy, poetry and music invite us to turn inward and take a long, hard look at our lives. For me it is the ritual of tapping the chest as we recite the words of the al chet and ashamnu prayer that I most fully embodied the essence of this season of reflection and teshuvah. As we chant “ashamnu”, “we have transgressed” or “al chet shechatanu”, “for the sin of ...” and I tap my chest I am bring together my intellect/mind, body and soul. All parts of my self are participating in this process. Sometimes as I tap my chest I imagine I am knocking on the door of my inner self while calling out in the form of the

words of the prayers “hello, anybody home?” Other times, when I tap on my chest I imagine I am trying to dislodge stuff, yucky stuff, that is clogging my tznur chai, artery of life.

Another part of the service that really helps me loosen the shmutz obstructing my tznur chai is when I hear the blowing of the shofar. Unless you’ve either slept through every shofar blowing service or never experienced one you’ll know that the shofar is nothing if not a metaphorical wake up call for our soul, shouting, “Hey you, this is about your life, don’t waste it, live it fully”. But here is the cool thing. When we wake up and embrace the potential of our lives it invigorates those around us. Forgive me for employing yet another metaphor, but this awakening is like the wave energy that undulates out from a stone dropped into water. This expanding effect is implicit in the very shape of the shofar. Starting with carefully blowing the breath of life through the narrow end it quickly gains strength and power as it pours out of the wide open end. Symbolically, the blowing of the shofar with the air moving from the narrow and local mouth piece to the wide opening at the opposite end, I suggest represents starting with the self and moving to we of our communities and indeed the wider world. In

other words, when we take the time to do the work of opening ourselves up to love, gratitude, compassion, forgiveness, humility, and to honor others, to do what this season calls us to do, it has a powerful impact on the world around us.

In the frum (orthodox) world there is a popular expression, mitzvah goreret mitzvah, averah goreret averah, which means "one good deed will bring another good deed, one transgression will bring another transgression. This principle of reciprocity is also at the heart and soul of the personal work Yom Kippur asks us to do. Unclog your tznur chai, your artery of life and so that not only will you be more full of life, so too will all those whom you touch. G'mar hatimah tovah