

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787
The Palace of Tears and The Palace of Song
In Memory of Mark Edinberg

Shanah Tovah.

I'd like tonight to offer a teaching in memory of our dear friend, Mark Edinberg, of blessed memory. Mark attended this service every year, and he composed so much of our High Holy Day music, I felt it would be quite meaningful to offer an Erev Rosh Hashanah teaching in his memory.

A rabbi once told me that one of the greatest ways we can honor someone who has died in the Jewish tradition is to study a Jewish text and dedicate it to their memory. So I'd like to do that here tonight with a teaching about song, tears, and shofar.

The text I chose to share here tonight is from a book called the Tikkunei Zohar. The Tikkunei Zohar was a major work of the kabbalists, or Jewish mystics, written some time between 1100 and 1400 CE in Spain. The book is written mainly in Aramaic, and quite appropriately for tonight, it is a collection of seventy commentaries focused solely on the first word of the Torah, B'reisheet.

Of course on Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the birth, or re-creation of the world, hearkening back to B'reisheet, those first moments of creation as God painted the universe into being. Some Reform communities read the opening chapters of B'reisheet on Rosh Hashanah, and in just a few short weeks we will gather for the festival of Simchat Torah, when we return to the opening sentences of the book of Genesis.

The text I've chosen in the Tikkunei Zohar so beautifully links the two human acts of crying and singing. "Singing encourages us to experience the full range of the human emotional and spiritual spectrum," writes composer and author Joey Weisenberg. "from brokenheartedness to elation. Music makes us cry," he writes, "the shows us joy; it breaks open our hearts and then rebuilds our happiness."

The Tikkunei Zohar teaches about two palaces, or heavenly abodes, that can be entered through either of these twin processes of crying and singing:

"There is a palace of tears," teaches the Tikkunei Zohar, "to which no one can gain entrance except through crying, and there is a palace of melody that can be entered only through song."

In other words, the Tikkunei Zohar teaches us that there is a profound connection between crying and singing. When we cry, something within us bubbles up and flows from our hearts as tears. And in many ways, singing is the same. It's also a process of some internal feeling that flows from our hearts, whether they be feelings of sadness, joy, or deep yearning, all expressed through the medium of song.

And when we think about the connection between the two in this way, song and tears are not only both keys that open up our hearts, and, returning to the words of the Tikkunei Zohar, crying and singing transport us to some kind of metaphorical or spiritual palace whose doors unlock when we sing and when we cry.

For me, that song is the Hashkiveinu melody written by the band Mah Tovv. I first heard the melody years ago. I was working at Central Synagogue as a full-time educator and Angela Buchdahl had just been hired as the new Senior Cantor (she would later be named Senior Rabbi of the congregation).

I was immediately drawn to her angelic voice and inviting spirit. On Friday afternoons I'd hang around at the synagogue just to listen to Angela lead services. Talk about singing and crying, Angela evoked that within me, and so many of us, especially when she would sing this version of the Hashkiveinu prayer.

I was a twenty six year old preparing to apply to rabbinical school, and that melody would transport me to the mystical palace described in the Tikkunei Zohar text. Praying for divine shelter. For peace in the darkness of the night. For shalom in Jerusalem, where I would live the following year as a first year HUC rabbinical student in Israel.

It was just a few years later that Koby was born. Let's just say Koby cried. A lot. So I'd sing. Many nights I'd take out my guitar as that scrawny little baby looked up at me, his eyes a bit puffy from crying so much, and I'd begin to sing the words, "Hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu, I'shalom, I'shalom..." Singing that song to him made me cry. And some nights it would even inspire him to stop crying for a while as well. And every time I hear that melody or sing it, I am transported back to that magical palace of memory and song.

Throughout Jewish scholarship, our sages have continued to connect the acts of crying and singing. Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz taught us that when we pray, to express our deepest prayers, we must try to cry when we sing. "One must awaken oneself and see that one's prayers are tearful," he teaches. "Even if sometimes one cannot truly bring oneself to tears, one's voice during prayer, in vocalizing the words, should still be humble and broken, as though one were crying."

It is not just about accessing the pain, however. Crying and tears, when paired with song, could allow us to find joy, to find moments where we can appreciate the fullness of life. And that's so much where I think of Mark. "Through brokenness we find wholeness," writes Joey Weisenberg.

Such, in a way, is the essence of the shofar that we sound on Rosh Hashaah. "The shofar's song, with its broken notes, called shevarim, is designed to break us open," he teaches. "Once broken, we're ready to rebuild, and collect ourselves into the tekiyah g'dolah: the long, sustained, whole note that we're trying to become, the note that also symbolizes the completeness that we dream the world could permanently achieve

before the end of time. Of course, even the greatest shofar blower's final note comes to an end eventually, and then we have to restart the cycle of breaking and rebuilding."

Some of you may remember that Mark was one of our regular shofar blowers during the High Holy Days. I remember he would come into my office months before the High Holy Days to begin his process of warming up both his lungs and his spirit. I was in awe of his regimen, practicing almost every morning, to the joy of his neighbors, his t'kiyahs, shevarims, and t'ruah's. A few years ago he decided to step away from blowing shofar on the High Holy Days. Even the greatest shofar blower's final note comes to an end eventually.

Tonight we begin the Jewish New Year 5787. On this Rosh Hashanah I plan to keep a copy of the text that I dedicated to Mark in my pocket. "There is a palace of tears, to which no one can gain entrance except through crying, and there is a palace of melody, that can be entered only through song."

A new shofar blower prepares her spirit to awaken ours with the mighty blasts tomorrow morning. The brokenness of the shevarim song may bring us to tears as we remember old friends. With strength and song we will open our ears to hear the notes, as our tradition commands us to. And godwilling, as we enter the New Year, may we find our way to the palace of melody and the palace of tears. There a familiar song and a comforting voice will open its doors, and welcome us lovingly, inside.

Shanah Tovah.