Kol Nidre 5772
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By Rabbi Boris Dolin

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a well known physician and author, describes a patient she once had who was recovering from heart disease, and had recently made it through a surgery to relieve her symptoms. This woman had suffered from frequent chest pain for many years, and even though she tried a few alternative methods of healing such as meditating, changing her diet and was starting to exercise, her disease was just too powerful and she decided to have surgery. Interestingly, before the surgery, the woman was surprised to notice that she often felt the pain when she was about to so something that lacked integrity or went against her values. Usually these were little things, like stretching the truth in certain situations, or letting her values slide to go along with others. The woman was even more surprised when she realized that sometimes the pain would come first, and when she would examine her situation, she would see that she was somehow betraying herself or her values, and she knew this *because* of the physical pain that she was feeling. As the woman told Dr. Remen, while she was happy to have less pain after her surgery, she missed having this "inner advisor" to help her do what was right.

There is a great Talmudic teaching that says "we do not see things as they are—we see things as *we* are" (Brachot 55B). Although we don't always—thankfully—have pain that goes along with every action or decision we make, we do each have certain beliefs, sets of values that help us make the decisions in our lives. These beliefs don't only influence how we see the world, they actually change how we experience the world—how we interact with others and go through our daily lives. Luckily, most of us have some sort of inner voice, an *emotional* pull on the heart, which helps up hold on to our beliefs and do what we hope is the right choice. Yom Kippur is the day when we try to strengthen our ties with this constant inner push and pull of our beliefs and values, so that we can make better choices in the year ahead.

We have a useful model of someone who is challenged by his "inner voice" in the story of Jonah that we read as the Haftarah for the Yom Kippur afternoon service. The story of Jonah begins with God's command that Jonah go to the city of Nineveh and "proclaim' judgment upon the people, to let them know that they are sinners and they must repent before God punishes them. Jonah flees and moves lower and lower, both physically and emotionally as the story progresses--he gets on a ship, is thrown overboard, and in the most theatrical part of the entire story is swallowed by a giant fish and then spit out on to dry land.

We can only imagine what Jonah felt when he was first called by God to Niniveh. He was scared of what would happen if he did go—or possibly he was also scared about what would happen if he did not. The people of Niniveh were not his people, they were not an important part of his life in any way until God mentioned their names. In fact, Niniveh was part of Assyria, Israel's enemies who would later destroy the Northern Kingdom and send the Jews into Exile. So

Jonah is caught in a very tough bind—if he warns the people, then there is a chance they will actually listen and repent, and might go on to do things which could hurt Jonah's people. Yet if he warns them and they don't listen, then he becomes the stranger who comes bringing bad news. Either way, he is going to look bad, and there is seemingly no choice that will lead to a positive outcome for Jonah.

Jonah makes the decision to not choose. Somehow he is made numb to the situation, and he flees away from God, thereby believing that he will not have to make a choice at all. Only later, Jonah finally goes to Niniveh and does what he is told, and sure enough, he is made to look like a fool. Jonah says the city will be destroyed, but because the people listen and repent, the city is left intact. He was forced to make a choice, and now he must deal with the outcome.

In Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, Jonah is often seen as representation of the human soul. Like Jonah, there are times when we are called upon to do what is right, whether by God, other people, or our own "inner voice"—and these times are often very challenging. And as we know, the choices do not need to be life and death decisions, since even the smallest situations can often be gut wrenching. For Jonah, his choice to flee from God has brought him to the lowest of the low. He saw the need to make a decision; he puts himself down into the ship and falls asleep. Jonah has made himself numb to the world, blocked off all his ability to make any choices good or bad. If Jonah represents our soul, then I think we could all agree, this is a place where we do not want to be. We read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur in part to remind us of the danger of being numb to the world around us. We don't want to be asleep when we need to make the tough decisions which affect our lives or the lives of others.

This idea of being numb, being inattentive to the world, appears in the prayers of Yom Kippur. The final confession in many versions of the Al Het prayer that we chant says, "Al cheit shchatanu lefanecha betimhon levav." *Timhon levav* is an interesting phrase which has been alternately translated as "confusion of the heart," "dismay of the heart," or even "astonishment of the heart". Yet the Medieval commentator Rashi translates this phrase as something much more physical, he explains it as "otem halev" a *clogging of the heart*. While confusion means that we aren't sure whether or not the life giving blood is making its way to the heart, clogging means that we know something is there, and something is preventing the blood from flowing. In Rashi's mind, *timhon levav* represents a much more dangerous situation—it is something that needs to be fixed quickly for the body to survive. *Timhon ha lev*, means something is blocking life.

Modern medicine has taught us that we can build up physical impurities in our bodies that can cause problems over time—a lifetime of unhealthy eating and little exercise can build up cholesterol and other physical blockages in our bodies. The physical problems associated with this kind of blockage can appear slowly, or all in an instant, in the horrifying event of a heart attack or a stroke. Either way, when the most physical representation of the life force in our bodies, the pumping of our heart and the flowing of our blood, is blocked, there are often dangerous consequences.

Yet what is *Timhon Levav* in the more emotional world of morality, sin and forgiveness that we are thrown into thinking on Yom Kippur? Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Elder of Kelm expands on Rashi's description of *Timhon Levav*, and says that when the heart is closed off, when the heart is blocked, it is as if the person is in a deep sleep—just like Jonah. He says "it is similar to when a person is put to sleep for purposes of an operation on one of his limbs. While he is submerged in a deep sleep, he feels nothing when they cut into his flesh. So too, when a person's heart has been struck with "otem ha lev," clogging of the heart, he is stuck in a deep sleep and doesn't even wake up when his life is in danger.

In essence both Rashi and Rav Simcha, see the danger of *timhon levav* as living a life of numbness. Whether we are in a deep sleep, or something is blocked so our life force has trouble flowing, we are going to lose something vital in our lives. When we sin, or are not fully attentive to our emotional and physical hearts, we can usually still get by each day. But we might end up being a little numb—numb to our own bodies and minds, and numb to the values that we want to hold on to in our actions and our relationships with others.

In our contemporary world, where we are confronted with so many images of pain and suffering, this numbness is a necessary part of our daily struggles. The past year has given us headlines that have strained our hearts, our values and our compassion on so many levels. The economy has continued to be troubled with businesses collapsing and many in our country losing jobs, and more and more people living in poverty. There have been multiple major natural disasters: floods and hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis. There is famine in Somalia, genocide in Sudan and other countries, a seemingly endless war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and suffering and violence on every level in every community and in every country in the world. We react to these instances of suffering with compassion, yet we also know that we can only do so much.

A recent New York Times article (News Analysis, Oct.7th, 2011) mentioned research currently being done into the ways that our minds deal with viewing suffering, and the consequences of our actions. Dr. Paul Slovic, and other researchers' right here at U of O, did an experiment to see how people reacted to seeing suffering, and the ways that we unconsciously make ourselves numb to the "big picture" of human pain. In their experiment they found that participants would donate more money to a hunger charity when they saw an image of a single victim, a 7 year old girl, than when they were simply told that the organization saved millions of lives. When they added statistics to the image, people actually gave less—in essence the bigger the cause, the less personal the image, and the less we can connect to the individual, the less we care. As the article put it—there is a "falling off of concern after people respond to the suffering of a single individual". Dr. Slovic adds: "This is one of those results that when people see it, they recognize it in themselves. But it is one thing to recognize it and another to confront it directly." The researcher calls this *psychic numbing*, and this is what allows us to see suffering in the world, see pain and violence and still go to bed at night. It is a sad reality of our lives as social animals, but it is arguably a necessary part of our evolution and our existence—up to a point.

This same psychological numbing occurs on a daily basis with some of the smaller and more mundane interactions and events of our lives, and has both positive and negative consequences for us as individuals and as a society. It allows us to drive our cars, essentially large hunks of padded metal at high speeds down the highways, putting our full trust and faith in the safety and steering ability of the drivers around us. It allows us to walk through downtown Eugene and not give to every beggar who demands our attention, knowing that we cannot help every person we see. It allows us to eat the flesh of animals on a daily basis while petting our cats and our dogs, and participating in the suffering and death of over 10 billion sentient beings a year in the US alone. It allows us to give to certain charities while ignoring others. It allows us to feel joy, knowing that others are feeling deep sadness. Psychological numbing both works for us, and is our biggest failure.

Numbing is a coping mechanism, and is a necessary and beneficial part of our lives. As individuals with limited time, energy and resources, we cannot give our compassion to every living being that needs compassion in the world. We cannot give up our own personal well being for the needs of others, or fully sacrifice our innate desire to care for those who are closest to us before caring for others in the wider community. This is human nature, and this is a reality of living among others. But the numbing should be a call to do something more.

A doctor or a surgeon must sometimes be numb to the pain of others, since it allows him or her to stay focused and get to the *source* of the problem to promote healing. We too can recognize that when we are numb to suffering, whether to the cries of an individual in pain, or the statistics hidden in a newspaper article, it is *an innate reaction to our need to be compassionate and caring people. This is who we are, and this compassion is the cause of the numbness.* We need to care, and we want to help everyone, we just can't. But this truth should make us pause to recognize that if we are numb to what we see on the surface—the individuals, the numbers—we have to dig deeper, *help* deeper to reach the source of the pain. Sickness involves more than surface diagnoses, whether in people or in society, and the numbness we feel can be a call to go to the source, to fight against and to ultimately heal the *system*. If we feel tempted to drive past someone begging for food, we can go home and work to promote economic equality, and affordable housing. If we care about the wellbeing of animals, and don't want them to feel pain, consider not eating them. If we see suffering in the form of famine or genocide in places far away, give money, but also fight to elect people who will change the failing systems that cause the suffering. Numbness is a reminder to work for the deepest form of change, to not only heal the surface but to repair the core of what needs fixing. This is often much more difficult work, but if we *all* put more of a focus on the core issues in our society, not just the surface problems, this collective healing will be easier and more productive. And, it will be the medicine that can truly change the world.

Our lives would be very different if we felt a little jab of pain every time we encountered something which we needed to do better or that went against our values. Like Dr. Remen's patient, we might all find it easier to hold onto our beliefs, to be a good person, if our bodies would always send us a message when we were doing something wrong. If only before saying an unkind word, we could get a pain in our throats, or before stepping into a tempting situation

our legs would cramp up, making it difficult to move, we would have a hard time *not* making the right choices. Yet, just like the heart patient, we know it is better to have a fully healthy heart, a body and mind where everything flows and works. This just means it takes more practice to pay attention to our values and make the right choices.

While we always have to make decisions based on the individual situations we encounter in life, Judaism asks us to see each choice as fully connected to a wider picture, a flowing system of vessels, arteries and beating hearts all working together to create life. If we let something get blocked, if we let ourselves get a little too numb to the realities that we encounter, our wellbeing and *that of those around us* gets troubled. *Unlike* Jonah, we try our best to not get to such a low point that we are asleep and unable to interact with the world. Our lives, our hearts, are part of a larger community, a larger system, and if part of us is blocked, then we have more trouble taking care of and responding to the needs of those around us. Recognize the numbness. Use the numbness to get to heal the source.

I'd like to leave you with a little story:

One day a Hasid came to the rabbi, he was rich, and a little greedy. The rabbi took him by the hand and led him to the window. "Look out there" he said. And the rich man looked into the street.

"What do you see?" said the rabbi.

"People" the rich man answered. The rabbi again took him by the hand and led him to the mirror.

"Now what do you see" he asks. The rich man smiles and says, "Well now I see myself"

Then the Rabbi says: "Exactly—so in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, and no sooner than silver is added, than you cease to see others, but only see yourself."

Dr. Remen ends her description of the heart patient she met by saying that "what we believe about ourselves can hold us hostage". On this Yom Kippur, may we strengthen our beliefs about who we are so we can more clearly see how our choices affect others, and begin to know when our numbness to suffering is a way of coping or when it can be a call to create a deep and systematic healing of the core problems of our society. Only then will the window be cleaned of its silver lining to see the true needs of others, and our hearts, our minds and our bodies be given the strength to bring more compassion and healing into the world. This is the essence of *teshuvah*, the heart of repentance, and this is what it means to return to our true selves.

G'mar Hatima Tova.