

Lessons (I'm Struggling to Internalize) after Yonim's Passing from this World

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A few months ago, on Purim, just days before sheltering in place began, Yonim Schweig z"l and I took selfies. It was completely out of character. So Purim. We even ended up shooting a very short video with each other. A precious video.

In the video Yonim said to me: "As a child growing up in Beth Israel, I thought our shul was the Beit Hamikdash" (the Holy Temple in Jerusalem).

Yonim said one other thing to me that at the time completely overwhelmed me. It made both of us cry and we embraced each other with deep love and affection.

Late this summer, as the High Holidays approached, Yonim's words began to haunt me.

Yonim said: "CBI was Beit Hamikdash and you were the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest)."

Ever since I joined CBI as the rabbi, I have always kept one mission above any other. I want children growing up in our shul to feel and sense that what we're doing is for real.

In truth, I don't know if they do. Only time will. Talk to me in a generation from now and we can evaluate then.

But on that Purim, in that brief exchange, Yonim let me know that at least one child who grew up in our shul felt, and sensed, and knew that we're for real.

Personally, I never felt like a Kohen Gadol. I'm happy being a Kohein Katan, just a minor Kohen. But these High Holidays, as God invites the High Priest as a messenger of the Jewish people back into the Holy of Holies, I can't help but feel like a Kohein Tameh, a priest who has become contaminated by death's impurity, and who therefore cannot partake in any temple ritual. Like a contaminated priest, I feel barred from entry into God's presence.

Yonim's passing, the shock, the trauma, the unfathomable pain, is overwhelming. But let me be clear: Our own experience with grief is but a shadow of the darkness that engulfs Yonim's family. So tonight permit me to speak merely of the shadow in which I, and many of you, find ourselves in, and let us never confuse shadows for real darkness.

The shadows that accompany me since Yonim's passing have filled me with questions and doubts about God's presence and hiddenness, anger at God's absence and feelings of distance from what once felt so holy to me. Every day is burdened by deep pain and grief.

How do I, how do we, enter again into God's presence? Especially this year, especially now, how do we do this for real?

Allow me to share three insights: *Achat, Achat ve'achat, achat u'shtayim*. Three small spiritual steps that I've tried to take in the days and weeks leading up to this Yom Kippur. Steps forward in my own journey back to God's Holy of Holies.

Achat. First: A reflection about anger and the nature of faith.

In the days and weeks after Yonim's passing, I found myself writing poetry that was filled with anger at God. Over the past few weeks, I shared some of my writings with you.

Here's an example:

The King is in the Field

The king is in the field
The beloved knocks on the door

I am not in the field
I am not behind the door

The book is open
The gates are unlocked

I am not in the book
I am not at the threshold

The ironsmith is melding
The potter spins the wheel

I am not made of metal
I am not spun on a wheel

The master summons the servant
The father calls his son

I am not the servant
I am not the son

A pardon is issued
Atonement is bestowed

I am not pleading for a pardon
I am not to be absolved

Two goats are sent forth
Two lots are cast

I am not for the Lord
I am not

Yonim's passing opened the floodgates of anger. Anger that was somewhat dormant, but there all along, as we confronted a global pandemic, seven months of sheltering in place, racial tensions throughout America, heat waves caused by global warming, wild fires, smokey air, the threat of evacuations, living through dark days, literally.

Please understand – I know and recognize intellectually that so much of our world's *tzuris* – troubles and tribulations – are completely manmade. And yet, my heart and soul turn to God. And even as I don't blame God for any of this, I do blame God for what feels to me, deep in my soul, like God's spiritual abandonment.

At one point during the month of Elul, I felt like Moses who famously asked God to remove him from the Torah. It led me to write this reflection:

This Year

Do not seal us in your book
Conceal us instead

Like buried treasure
Between its heavy pages
Until we are lost
In your book

This year

Hide us
From the plot
Take pity
Spare us from pathos

Whatever you do
Do not seal
But

Conceal and
Cancel and condemn and

Please God
Remove us from your book

Soon after writing these poems, along with a few others, I came to realize that each poem was a prayer, a very personal prayer that affirmed much more about faith and my relationship with God than it seems at first blush. Despite my questions, it is to God that I turned to for answers. Despite my feelings of alienation, it is God's presence that I continue to seek to draw near. Yes, I am angry at God, but deep down, I know that God can handle it.

Years ago, when I was in High School, after participating in the March of the Living, a life changing educational visit to Poland's ghettos and concentration camps, I wrote very similar poems. In looking back at my life at that time, I know that the poetic and deeply angry dialogue I began with God then, ultimately led me to become religiously observant.

Now, fourteen years into my rabbinate, I find myself back at a very familiar place and surprisingly my questions, my anger, and my feelings of alienation have only reaffirmed my faith in God.

This is my *Achat* – my first step. This may not work on your own path. But one thing I do know for sure: If you want it to be real, then keep it real.

If you're angry, this year pray with anger.

If you have questions for God, bring them on with you.

If you're feeling far from God, name it.

When we keep it real, real deep things can happen.

Achat ve'achat. Second: A reflection about pain and the nature of love (of *Chesed*).

During the month of Elul, as I reflected on the anger and pain I was feeling, a feeling that was palpable in our community, I sought ways to quell it. As I made my way through this feeling, I wrote this reflection:

How to hold back the anger

In a tight fist

Like an underhanded covert secret
In the hand of a beggar
Who would never hand over
A scrap that was grabbed

In me
Anger is
Repulsing chaos
Forcing everything
From within
Out

But not like
A blossoming flower
Only like a
Mischievous brat
A true rot
With no returns
Or absolution

How to embalm the anger
In regret
In burial shrouds
Like the holy burial society
Who reciprocate the insult
With love and kindness

It is astounding to me the level of comfort that acts of *Chesed* can provide a grieving person, a family, or a community, even in the darkest of hours, even at the very moment of burial.

Over the past fourteen years as a shul rabbi, I have always known one thing to be absolutely true: *Chesed*, the love we bestow upon each other through good and compassionate deeds is a real force.

Sometimes when God seems far away, knowing that we're here for each other, eases some of our pain and brings us a much-needed measure of comfort.

Your response and your actions during these past seven months of sheltering in place, and your response and actions in the days, weeks, and months that followed Yonim's passing from this world, powerfully confirmed this belief.

A few days after Yonim's passing, many members of the shul, feeling overwhelmed and even helpless, contacted me to ask what they could do for me, for my family. These individuals knew that close friends of the Schweigs were taking care of them, but who, they wondered was taking care of CBI's clergy families during this crisis.

Frayda and I shared perhaps a natural instinct: We wanted to say no. Ultimately, we came to realize that it would be good for us to say yes, and it would also be good for the community that we say yes.

I know that Maharat Sutton came to the very same conclusion.

Chesed is not only helpful for the recipient. It is just as critical for those who provide it.

This is my *Achat ve'Achat*, my second step.

If anger and grief overwhelm us, then *Chesed* can comfort those who receive it.

As importantly, *Chesed* gives agency to those who provide it. When things seem helpless, *Chesed* challenges us to become a source of help. When things seem desperate, *Chesed* prevents us from wallowing in the paralysis of our own grief and pain by forcing us to move beyond ourselves.

In anger, we focus on our feelings. Through *Chesed*, we focus on the feelings and needs of others.

Shortly after I shared my poem, "The King is in the Field", I received a powerful poetic reply from Paul Panish, an elder in our community and a true poet. I share it with his permission:

Elul Poem by Paul Panish

You are the king and the field,
the loved and the door;

You are both singer and song,
the text and the gate.

You are both potter and smith,
the craft and the clay,

and father and child,
and master and humble slave.

Your pardon, your absolution
preceded your plea,

and there's nothing to be for
or against except the One

Whose face is plain
though hid by the dust in our eyes.

Paul's poem was nothing but *Chesed* in its truest and simplest forms. Paul recognized my pain and reached out to me in the gentlest of ways. The poem made me feel like God Himself had responded to me. I felt seen by God.

When we see each through *Chesed*, it helps remove the dust from our eyes, we can then begin to perceive God again in this world.

Achat u'shtayim. Third: A reflection about death and the nature of time.

About a week before the Shloshim gathering for Yonim z"l, I had a conversation with Muni and Tania Schweig that shook me to the core. I share part of that conversation with you tonight with their permission.

In my conversation with Muni and Tania, I reflected on Yonim's life and described Yonim as an unripe fruit picked before its time. Tania forcefully pushed back against this metaphor. This was the time that Yonim was given. Yonim, exactly as he was at the time of his passing, was the fruit that we were given to taste. This was his time. He was whole. He was ripe.

Tania's words stayed with me. Not for hours, not for days. *They stayed with me.*

When a grieving parent speaks, you listen. When a grieving parent speaks, the heart must open up, and sometimes, sometimes when the heart opens up, the mind opens up as well.

We are obsessed with the quantitative aspect of time. We are trained to believe that a long life is better than a short life and that more time is always better than less time.

Time however has a qualitative aspect to it that is too often masked by the quantitative aspect of time. Despite being objective, time can stand still. Time can move slow or fast. Time can be holy or not.

For a moment, think about Yonim's memorial. Remember the countless individuals who spoke of Yonim and the impact that Yonim made in his time in this world. If someone didn't know that the memorial was being held for a young man, on the eve of his 21st birthday, a person could have mistaken Yonim's life for a person with a much longer life. Thankfully, Baruch Hashem, Yonim knew something profound about the nature of time.

In one of his journal entries Yonim wrote in Hebrew: "*Yoter tov dakah achat shel davar bikdushah m'chayim shlemim shel televizia ve'muach genay*" – "A single moment of holiness is better than a lifetime spent watching television and a head filled with diminishing thoughts."

Yonim went on to share how he thought that any experience could be holy, even watching television could be as holy as studying torah, you just need to seize the moment, you just need to fill it with sacred intention.

"Yoter tov dakah achat shel davar bikdushah m'chayim shlemim" – A single moment of holiness is better than an entire life wasted on unimportant matters and things.

Over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we ask God to remember us for life. As we do so, we owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to Yonim, to remember the qualitative aspect of time. Let's not ask for more time, let's commit to make much more with our time, whatever time is allotted to each one of us.

This is my *achat u'shtayim*, my third step. This Yom Kippur, I am seeking merely a "*dakah achat shel davar bikdushah*" – just a single moment of holiness. God is eternal and any time with God is eternal too.

The moment I shared with Yonim during Purim will stay with me forever, for all time. It was "*dakah achat shel davar bikdushah*" – a single moment of holiness. A single moment in eternity.

In retrospect, the moment we shared didn't take place on Purim after all. It was Kipurim. It was the Day of Atonement.

And in retrospect, I wasn't the High Priest at all. Yonim was. And in that moment, Yonim brought me into the Holy of Holies with him.

Three steps. *Achat. Achat ve'achat. Achat u'shatayim.*

Achat. Be real, even if being real means being angry, or frustrated, or distant from God.

Achat ve'achat. Be for others, because *Chesed* is for real. *Chesed* will draw you closer to God through others.

Achat u'shatayim. Be in the moment, because one moment in time is sometimes worth a lifetime.

This Yom Kippur, may Yonim be our heavenly High Priest and our advocate in the heavenly realms.

This Yom Kippur, may God seal us in the Book of Life, for real, for each other, for all time.