

Neilah: The 100th Cry

Neilah 5785 (2024), Rabbanit Meira Wolkenfeld, Congregation Beth Israel

According to the midresh Tanchuma, when a woman is in labor she cries 100 cries:

מָאָה פּוּעוֹת הִיא פּוֹעָה קְשָׁהּ יוֹשֶׁבֶת עַל הַמִּשְׁבָּר, תִּשְׁעִים וְתִשְׁעִים וְתִשְׁעִים לְמִיתָה, וְאַחַת לְחַיִּים.

She screams 100 times when she sits on the birthing stool: 99 cries of death, 99 cries of pain, but her last cry, the 100th cry, is the cry of life, a cry of joy and exhilaration for her life and the life of the baby she's birthing.

In his work the Meshech Chachma, Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk connects this teaching to the 100 blasts of the shofar that we sound on Rosh Hashana. He writes that on rosh hashana the world is crouching on its birthing stool, and with the shofar we cry those 100 cries – 99 cries of death, 99 cries of suffering, 99 cries for facing judgment, like the woman fearing for her life as she labors. But the one hundredth blast of the shofar is the cry of life, the cry of hope, the tears of joy for something new emerging.

As we approach Neilah, you might feel like you're all cried out. This year, we've cried the 99 blasts of death and suffering. We've cried for those we've lost this year – we've cried for Hersh, we've cried for Yoav. We've cried for a world that looks different than it did last Yom Kippur. We've cried for our own judgment, knowing, as we do, that the verdict can be unpredictable and harsh. We've cried for the ongoing suffering. And we will have more tears for all of those things.

We might feel depleted, hungry, tired. But as the world sits on its birthing stool, As we enter Neilah, it's time for us to gather our strength, and cry that last cry, the 100th cry, a cry of life.

A few days ago, I was here at the shul when the preschoolers from Gan Shalom came to visit. And they brought with them these plushie stuffed toy Torahs. They had made these beautiful white, very shiny Torah covers so that their toy Torahs could match the big Torahs in the aron kodesh. And they brought their little Torahs to show the little Torahs that they matched their big brother and sister Torahs in the aron. They came here with stars in their eyes, so excited to see and kiss the Torahs.

And when they opened the aron, they began to sing a song with their teachers. Much like we've sung over the past day, they sang, "yie die die di di yadada die die die yadada die die die" (ashamnu tune) but then their words were a little bit different. They sang, "Sometimes we forgot to share. We yelled too loud inside, and, it made, our parents a little mad. Yi di da die die..."

As we come to Neilah, I'm thinking about how to end this day with the exhilarated, energetic cry of life. And I think one thing that could help us, is to end the day thinking about those little voices. I'm thinking about the joy that they feel for Torah. I'm thinking about their honest assessment of their actions. Those are things to emulate. I'm thinking about the goodness that they bring to the world, and about how we can make the world better for them. Maybe you're thinking about one specific child. Maybe you're thinking about how to find that child inside of you, with that sparkly-eyed excitement for Torah, and for discovering a world ripe with possibility.

As we enter Neilah, the gates are closing on the past year. The aron is going to remain open for all of neilah. And I'm going to imagine this beautiful plushie sefer Torah here with the big Torahs, so that as I look into the aron – I can look with those child eyes filled with excitement, and remember that the doors are open for us to find connection, for us to find beauty in judaism, for us to grow, the doors are open for change, for childlike joy in life, and for hope.

It's time for us to find our youthful energy, and end the day with that 100th cry, the cry of life.