

The Aleph Bet of Consolation

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share a few words with you. I feel deeply honored to stand here before you.

This week begins the seven weeks of consolation. We move away from the three weeks of *bein ha metzatrim* (retribution) and the intense day of mourning, Tisha B'Av, toward the most profound and momentous days of the year -- beginning with Rosh Hashana and moving through the ten days of repentance to Yom Kippur. I want to offer you some thoughts I have on using the **Aleph Bet** to frame this time.

I have been thinking a lot about the word Nachamu, which opened the Haftorah today. Nachamu, consolation or comfort, and what it means to me and what it could mean to us, as a Jewish people. How do we wrap our minds around this word as we move through the next 7 weeks? To console, to embrace a friend, to hold his hand as he cries, to soothe. Sometimes feeling consoled, consolation, comes from witnessing or acting. For instance, standing by a rushing river can feel like an act of consolation – taking in a thing of natural beauty, breathing clear, fresh air, letting your eyes rest where they will, on wildflowers, on sun glinting on water, on wet rocks, on a bird in the reeds. Or standing with a group of women, their arms around each other and around you, each one raising her voice, singing from her heart, *May you be blessed*. Or, standing reciting the Amidah, saying the familiar words, silently or audibly.

I don't think there is one definition of consolation. And I think it can change for us as we move through different moments in our lives. For the past seven years or so, I have been turning to the Otiyot, the Hebrew Letters, to find meaning and comfort in my journey. It may seem strange to some of you, it's just an alphabet, you might say. But as I have spent time exploring the letters, I've learned that they can offer spiritual insight and connection. I've drawn most of my understanding about the letters from four sources, ***The Book of Letters: A Mystical Alef-bait*** by Lawrence Kushner, ***The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet***, by Rabbi Michael Munk (an Artscroll book), ***The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey*** by Edward Hoffman and Karen Silver and from the teachings of Harav Yitzhak Ginsburgh on inner.org.

Some of the most compelling ideas about the Aleph Bet, for me, are

- We are told that one of the things God did before resting on the seventh day was to determine the exact shape of the letters.
- We are also told that when Moshe shattered the first set of tablets, the letters rushed up to the heavens to be with the one who gave them.
- In the Torah, if even one letter is missing, the scroll is invalid. It is also invalid if two letters touch one another.
- If the letters were to remove themselves for an instant and return to their source, the entire heaven would become an absolute vacuum.
- Every Jew has a letter in the Torah that is uniquely hers or his.
- The Hebrew Alef-Beit (alphabet), despite its apparent simplicity, contains within it the deepest secrets of Creation.

- The Kabbalistic classic Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Formation) teaches that creative consciousness exists in three states (space, time, and soul), which are reflected in the form, name and numerical equivalent of each letter. In the only extant piece of writing from the Ba'al Shem Tov (founder of the Chassidic movement), he taught that each letter also exists in each of the three dimensions of Worlds, Souls, and Divinity.

I could go into much more detail, but for the moment, I will turn to my own poems, to share with you how I've used the Otiyot to dig deeper in my own spiritual understanding and to find some sort of comfort, solace and a place to express my own questions and ambivalences. I am not going to read a poem for each letter, just a few to give you a taste of the project and hopefully to model some access points you could use in your own life. I will begin with a more general poem about the Otiyot.

Searching for the Otiyot

א, ב I search for you

in the soup I ladle into bowls for my children,

while scrubbing the burnt spices and potato on the pan

above the whining *Moosooooooooommmmmmm*, *he hit me.*

ג, ד, are you zooming down marble runs,

climbing Lego structures, flying in space crafts to the cheese moon?

ה I know you are somewhere

hidden with the bouncy balls and math dice under the red chair,

ו, ז, if I reach my hand between the pillows of the couch

will I pull one of you out along with the broken pieces of the castle gate?

ח, ט, י, have you seeped into the milk

spilled on the dining room table?

יא, יב, יג, are you crunching under my feet

with the crackers spilled at the base of the stairs?

יד, יו, יז, do you lie dangling with the one sock left on the bench?

יח, יט, do you hide with the puzzle piece

crouched in the corner of the closet?

Otiyot, I want to take a flashlight

swallow it whole, let it shine

on the glittering, humming pile of letters.

Hidden treasure, I seek the gifts you offer.

Come out, show yourselves.

I need your light to guide me

to the black fire written on the white fire

to the great unraveling scroll.

I wrote that poem a few years into the project. For me, as you can see from the "Searching" poem, the letters have come alive from me. They have become an entryway into a conversation with God, with the Jewish people, with my own family.

Moving into the next poem, ה: ה represents the number five. The Artscroll introduces ה as the letter that represents divinity, gentility and specificity. Think of the sound – ha – a breath. Think of the shape: A dalet and a yud. The rabbis believe the world was created with the letter ה. אלה תולדות השמים והארץ (these are the things or products of the heaven and the earth when they were created). If you take apart bhitbaram it becomes b"hey" baram – he created them with the letter hey. ה for me represents the breath of life and also a moment of encounter with god, Avram becomes Avraham, god renames Avraham by adding in the hey. Sarai, Avraham's wife becomes Sarah. Hey holds this transformative, creative power. It represents moments when key ancestors have had a deeply personal moment connecting with god. Here is my ה poem:

ה Hey: HaMakom: When We Meet God

5, giving of oneself to another, five openings, breath, some letters are interchangeable under certain conditions

My four brothers and I

travel a snake-like path.

To arrive at Hamakom, the place

where the bush bursts into flame.

Unconsumed. Consuming.

We circle the fire

our hands raised

five Kohanim we

five times five apertures

lacing our fingers

an uneven framework.

One falls to his knees.

Two bares his backside to you.
Three gazes as if at a passing leaf
I spin like a dreidel
closer away closer away from your heat.
Five spits and stomps at the flames.

In a breath we are born.

Unconsumed. Consuming.

We step into the fire

to join you.

My own imaginings, dreamings of an encounter with god. The letters also help me to sort out the way families, my own family of origin, connects more broadly with the Jewish people. As you can see from the poem above, I have four siblings, brothers. And while we were brought up in a very connected and observant Jewish household, we have each taken divergent paths in our spiritual journeys. As with many families and individuals, the path to a connection with god and our heritage has not been consistent and straight. It's been a struggle for me to see how the spiritual journey can separate people who love each other. ך represents transcendence, divine grace and life. It is two zions (the letter of spirit, sustenance and struggle) side by side with a roof over their heads. It is the number 8. Here is a poem that dreams of a re-union with a brother of mine who has been estranged from everyone in the family except for me for many years. I have only seen him once just after Moshe was born. I wrote this poem imagining what that moment of seeing him could look.

ך Chet: I Dream A Re-Union

8, transcendence, divine grace, two spear-shaped zions side by side with a roof over their heads, chametz, chait (sin), chai

We will start talking

our words,

fermented fruit falling out of our mouths

each letter, as the rabbis say, light, a bleeding star.

We will pull back the doors of the ark,

sister and brother side by side.

We will start rummaging through

the tiny little scrolls

until we find a way through the sacrifices, the torrential floods,

the babbling mountain, the betrayals and dreams,
through the sound of a belt against skin,
the bellowing anger of a parental God who shames us.

We will untie, tie, untie, tie until
the chash, the silence between us,
becomes mal, a sweet homecoming
and finally I can easily open the ark
adding a new prayer to the pile.

Chashmal is a fiery radiance identified in the vision of Ezekiel as surrounding the Divine countenance seated upon the heavenly chariot; interpreted in Chassidic thought as the dynamic of "silent speech." The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that every rectified process follows three stages, as hinted at in the mystical word chashmal from the Workings of the Chariot in the first chapter of Ezekiel. I was thinking about these stages and thinking about the letter Chet as I wrote that poem.

- The first stage, chash ("silence"), is submission and inner silence when faced with a given reality.
- The second stage, mal ("circumcision") is separation of the good from the bad.
- The third stage, mal ("speaking") is sweetening, when the Divine essence is revealed in reality. This leads to "speaking" to all about the revelation of the Divine reality.

I am going to share two more poems with you. They are both very much set in the domestic. The first one is about the letter ך, the symbol of crowning accomplishment. ך has dual meanings: it stands for the palm of the hand serving as a container and also the measure of what it holds. Also, many objects of a bent shape are called ך, like a spoon, the sole of a foot, palm branches, a hip socket. ך is the number eleven. It is also a modifier, expressing equality in number, size or appearance. I was sitting one day in the evening trying to brainstorm about chof and what it could possibly mean to me when the boys started on a project that inspired this poem.

ך Caf -- Kavanah

20, crown, spoon, palm, head bowed in humility, container

During the hottest day in 2011

the boys took sheets, wool blankets, duvet covers

dragged dining room chairs to the couch

and built themselves a temple.

Several hours labor

just right with an entrance, side rooms, and inner sanctum.

They quietly brought their pillows

favorite soft blankets and stuffed critters
headlamps and water bottles
set fans to low
and announced *we want to sleep here tonight.*

The rabbis of old ask us
to pray as if we were meeting god
that very moment.

The boys' fort will be knocked down tomorrow
each blanket folded up
and each pillow fluffed and in its place.

Night has arrived and I sit quietly
not even six feet away from them
at the dining room table
thinking of words like
palm, to hold, to work

spoon a body curving up and open

sole of foot naked upon the ground

cup can I fill it without spilling?

hip socket stretched wide to allow

these two access to our world.

Wondering about structures
and prayer.

The boys, like Kohanim,
dedicating, blessing
on the hard floor of the living room
all night long.

I want to take us back, for a moment, to today's parsha. It opens with Vaetchanan el-Hashem, and I beseeched, I pled, I begged God. I often go to that moment when Moshe understands he cannot go with the Jewish people into the promised land. It resonates with me deeply, because sometimes I feel the same way, that I am forbidden from entering something – the kehila, the community, Israel, my people's collective promise. I am not

sure if you ever feel that way. But even being part of a wonderful, rich community, being embraced by all of you, I sometimes feel that I will never really understand/enter the promise held out to me. The Otiyot are one tool I use to help me find the door to that place/moment. In our parsha, we read the Shema and the ten commandments. And I want to end with a poem about the Shema that I wrote when Ezra was just a little guy. This poem was really the precursor to my entire project. It explores the letter נ, the symbol of faithfulness, of soul and emergence. Here it is:

נ Nun: The Vigil

50, vast sea of human consciousness, soul, light song, spark

Are you ready for the שמנה?

He nods his head. His blanket,
a toddler tallis, covers him from neck to toe.

שמנה 'שראל יי אלוהנו יי אחד

Hear O Israel, Our Creator is One Our People are One.

I hold each word in my mouth
as long as a breath.

Ezra's words tumble inside mine
over and below:

Ma Is Ael Ado Echod
Hear Creator People One

He stares out through the bars
of the crib into his darkening room.

He arches his back, lifts his head
watches the Shechinah
ushering in our ancestors
as they quietly fill the room each night.

They watch him sing his two-year-old rendition
of words that remind us
to open our hearts to each other
to feel the holiness in every scent, touch, cell around us.

The נשמות sing with us softly
tossing the letters into his crib

ש מ ה
י ש ר א ל
י י
א ל ן ה נ ן
י י
א ח ד

so he can sleep among them.

His words, half-formed, search

for the right notes.

We will keep singing each evening

The נשמות will come make their vigil.

Breath to breath,

word to word,

we will sing,

until this child comes to know the taste of each letter

and the sustenance each provides.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this dvar, our rabbis believe that each person has a letter that is uniquely his or hers. I hope you too, will come to know the taste of each letter, your own very special letter, in your own way. And that the Otiyot will bring you to a new sense of comfort and sustenance as you move through the next seven weeks and beyond.