

To Open Our Clenched Fist

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Temple Shalom Emeth

The holiest night of the year. The culmination of 10 days of repentance. The night when God judges us. The moment when God determines who will be written and sealed in the Book of Life for the coming year. This is the time when we stand and are judged and anxiously await the divine decree. We begin our day long fast to feel the pain and empty ourselves of sins.

If we took the imagery of God judging us over the past ten days of repentance and on this night deciding who will be sealed for good on this holiest of days, as a wellness test, our congregation would be in big trouble. Three days ago Ben Silver let me know that his Covid recovery was not going as quickly as he had hoped and he would be unable to sing on this holy day. His wife Meg and son Sam are recovering as well. Our entire top leadership team is down for the count. Val, our Religious and Ritual Chair and her husband Mark have Covid. Jeremy, our first VP is recovering from Covid. Shelley Rosenbaum Lipman, our immediate past president, finished her Covid recovery period last week. Andy Feit, our temple president, is home recovering from Achilles tendon surgery. I have been waiting for the evil decree of Covid all week. Somehow I miraculously avoided getting sick, but it psychologically threw me back to the paranoia of the pandemic. I now feel like I have once again closed myself off from the rest of the world, which I had just begun to reenter.

Never in my entire career have I suggested to some people that they not come to services on Yom Kippur.

Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled?

Who shall be secure and who shall be driven?

Who shall be humbled and who exalted?

Our temple community is right now asking these questions and they are not theoretical. We are tense. We are wringing our hands. Hoping that all recover easily and more members don't fall ill. Fear is not a metaphor this year. We are truly worried about the health of our temple friends.

Our tradition tells us that God is equal parts judgment and mercy. On this night we seek solace, comfort and support as we examine our moral compass.

Tonight the part of this service that for me symbolizes where we are at this moment, is the clenched fist we use to beat on our chest as we repeat the whole litany of sins we have committed in the Ashamnu prayer. The rabbis tell us that we hit ourselves in order to awaken our heart to the sins we have committed and feel the need to change our ways. For me, the making of a fist feels like the tension, the anxiety, the stress of this night this year, combined with the ways in which we regularly beat ourselves up, are closed, stubbornly hang on to our opinions, our anger at others and at the world, the ways in which we are closed off from each other.

It is the fist which for me is the most visceral symbol of those parts of ourselves which need healing and changing in the year ahead, to enable us to feel as if we are being written in the Book of Life.

In the 1980's a renewal rabbi named Reb Zalman Schacter-Shlomi, decided to change the ritual of hitting ourselves with a closed fist, to gently placing our hand over our heart as we recite each sin.

He taught that the symbol of the closed fist was problematic for all these reasons. But by placing an open hand over our heart we are showing ourselves much-needed compassion, understanding, calming, self-love. It's a physical sign of God's mercy.

Tonight what we need is to open ourselves up to healing, not further beat ourselves up - to show compassion for the wounds and hurts which cause us to be defensive, to accept ourselves for who we are when we don't live up to our own expectations,

to calm our nerves and tell ourselves that everything will be OK. On this night we need to focus on all the ways we need to heal ourselves and find peace of mind, so that we can bring compassion and peace to others.

1. We think about the ways in which we have virtually shaken our fists at others, instead of examining the internal reasons for our anger. My rabbi growing up would say, don't beat me up because you are mad at your father. I remember a time, over 20 years ago, when someone kept complaining about one of our religious school teachers. Every single week that mother would be calling me up: she did this wrong, she did that wrong, the kids shouldn't have been studying this, they should have been doing that. At that time we didn't have caller ID or even voicemail, so I never knew when I answered the phone when the next complaint would be. Months later I learned that this person was having terrible problems in her marriage and there was a lot of tension in the house. I came to realize that it wasn't the religious school teacher she was so upset with, but that's where she was parking her anger. It was easier for her to be angry at someone else than to deal with her own anger about her situation.

We all know, I myself am keenly aware, that when we're upset about one thing, we can often take it out on someone else. Anyone who is a parent knows that if our child is angry about something not going their way, they will yell at us, not that I have any personal knowledge of this.

On this night we put our hand over our heart, take a deep breath and give ourselves permission to examine what's really bothering us, why certain people or situations press our buttons, how knowing and accepting our own issues can help us do a better job of being kinder to others.

2. On this night we think about the ways in which we beat ourselves up for not living up to our own standards. For me, every day is a little like Yom Kippur. I am constantly second guessing every interaction. Was I compassionate enough? Did I say the right thing? Did I say too much? Did I say too little? Why isn't this sermon better? Not only do I often feel like I am walking around with a clenched fist, but clenched teeth as well. Tonight we put our hand on our heart and say it's OK to be

the imperfect, fallible, flawed human beings that we all are. No one judges us more harshly than ourselves.

The famous Jewish philosopher Martin Buber tells the story of the great Hasidic Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol. On his deathbed he began to cry uncontrollably and his students and disciples tried hard to comfort him. They asked him, “Rabbi, why do you weep? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are almost as hospitable as Abraham, and surely heaven will judge you favorably.”

Zusya answered them: “It is true. When I get to heaven, I won’t worry so much if God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Abraham?’ or ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?’ I know I would be able to answer these questions. After all, I was not given the righteousness of Abraham or the faith of Moses but I tried to be both hospitable and thoughtful. But what will I say when God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?’

[Tonight we open ourselves to all the goodness within us and all of the uniqueness we bring to each other and the world. We forgive ourselves for missing whatever mark we set for ourselves and comfort ourselves by focusing on the many positive ways we demonstrate our love and goodness, and thoughtfulness.]

3. Finally, we think about the many reasons we clench our fists out of fear of what is happening in our lives and the world. Every day we are bombarded with horrible news. People being murdered. Natural disasters. Unending wars. Climate change. So many mass murders that many of them don’t even make it to the news. Judicial decisions removing women’s rights. The sharp rise in anti-Semitism. Continued incidents of racism. The rising tension in Israel over threatened changes to the country’s judicial system. The beginning of another contentious campaign season in this country which has already become antagonistic. As I was writing these very words, I received a text from a political candidate warning that bad things will happen if I don’t donate to his campaign.

We fear the challenges in our own lives. Will we recover from Covid? Will we be the next to come down with it? Difficult conversations we need to have with

others. Upcoming medical appointments or surgeries. Tests at work or school. Who will live and who will die this year? Who by fire and who by water? Who by hunger and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague?

We place our hand on our chest and feel the beating of our own heart. We feel the power of our own breath. We bring ourselves back to this moment. We have been through so much over the past year, over the past years. So much is out of our control. What we have is the security of knowing that we are here, at this moment, safe, surrounded by the support of our community. We reach out our hands to each other and know that whatever life throws our way, we support each other through it together. Though we fear for those of us struggling with the virus right now, we open ourselves to the knowledge that this moment will pass.

If ever there was a time to walk around with a clenched fist, it would be right now. And for all those reasons, there has never been a time when we've needed to work more on relaxing our grip. If ever there was a time for self-love and compassion, it is this moment. If ever there was a time we need to reach out our hand to one another, it would be now. We need to heal our internal wounds, accept ourselves for who we are, and know that we have each other to face whatever obstacles we may face in the year ahead.

On Yom Kippur, there is a ritual among traditional Jews that the descendants of the Kohanim would come onto the bima, hold up their open hands and bless the congregation with the priestly benediction, asking God to bless us and keep us, look kindly upon us and grant us peace..

On this holy night, may we extend our open hands to ourselves, and grant ourselves this same blessing.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God look kindly upon you and be gracious to you.

May God bless all of us with peace.