Humbled

by

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Just recently, a 78-year-old was hospitalized in Jerusalem in need of immediate oxygen therapy. Initially in serious condition, he fortunately recovered. At discharge, he was presented with a $5,000 bill. Looking at the bill, he began to sob. The kind doctor put his hand on the old man’s shoulder and told him not to worry about the money owed. The old man looked at him and shook his head. “I am not crying about the money. I am crying because for 78 years I have been breathing Hashem’s oxygen for free, not once thinking about how much I owe Him or how I could ever repay.”

We have taken so much for granted for so long. And now, at this moment in time, we are truly humbled. There are no words, certainly no words that rise to the moment. At best, we find words of vigilance, of concern, of best wishes. But real comfort? Our only comfort is the Siddur, where we can converse with Hashem and be sure that the conversation makes sense.  There, the words we recite every morning – too often rushed, too often not appreciated – resonate powerfully. Well before Baruch She’amar, we speak the same words we utter during Neilah on Yom Kippur. Meh anu, meh chayeinu? What are we? What are our lives? Mah gevuraseinu? What is our strength? What shall we say before You, Lord our God and God of our ancestors? No amount of schooling, of accomplishment, of creativity or experience is enough. Are not all the mighty like nothing before You?

I tremble at *Neilah*, saying these words, brought nearly to my knees. They capture fully our human condition. We are frail, weak, temporal, foolish. We must understand this truth before the last moments of Yom Kippur ebb away. Yet these powerful words are not reserved for *Neilah*, not reserved for the moments when we are broken down by fasting, by turning away from our comforts. They are words we speak *every day*.

Before we can stand before God and praise Him, we must first acknowledge our own smallness. Not just on Yom Kippur but every day. Sadly, most days these words glide through out lips, lacking the weight of the Yom Kippur liturgy. Not now, not during the Coronavirus. Not these days. These days we are humbled. These days these words seem powerfully relevant, bringing us nearly to our knees not only on Yom Kippur but every day.

What are we? What are our lives?

A pandemic has a way of focusing our thoughts and making “rhetorical” questions real.

“Master of all worlds, not because of our righteousness do we lay our pleas before You, but because of Your great compassion.”  This is the introduction to our humbling admission that we are, “…nothing. For all is but a fleeting breath.”  Every day is now for us Yom Kippur. Every day, a day of judgement. We are in His hands.

Our wisdom is for nothing. Our renown…

We are humbled.

“Master of all worlds, not because of our righteousness do we lay our pleas before You, but because of Your great compassion.”

Our obligation is beyond our ability to repay. We have overdrawn our accounts. We have been living on credit and we have rarely, if ever, paused to bless His name, “…for even one of the thousand thousands and myriad myriads of favors You did for our ancestors and for us.”

We are humbled now, now as we gaze into the abyss. We stand here not knowing its depth, only its darkness. We do not know how far to the other side, how long before we are through this nightmare, how long before things are once again “normal”. Only God, in His great compassion knows. In the meantime, we wait. Anxious. Fearful. Knowing only that we must now retreat into isolation or near isolation.

In our isolation, we wonder, what does God want from us? To reflect? To reflect on the insane world, we have allowed to take hold around us, a world of selfishness and anger; to reflect on the poor souls stricken by this disease, doomed to die far from their families and loved ones, to be buried alone… it’s all too much to bear… and yet, humbled, we must bear it. For we are nothing.

Only God is strong.

Kol Hashem b’Koach – The Lord’s voice breaks cedars.... the Lord’s voice cleaves flames of fire...the Lord sits enthroned as King forever...   Only God can give strength to His people… God’s thunderous voice rattles our world. What is our response?

To cower? To fear?

To perform *teshuva*? To pray? To perform acts of lovingkindness?

To make our relationship with Him more genuine?

What is this genuine relationship? It is first and foremost, to feel deeply the truth found in our daily *Neilah* plea, “What are we? What is our goodness? The renowned are nothing; the learned are illiterates, the wise know nothing...”

We live in a moment of fear and trembling. The daily news is enough.  We do not need more fear, more anxiety, more angst. We need inspiration, encouragement, understanding, empathy, sensitivity. We need authentic religious and spiritual leadership such as the leadership exemplified by *Moreinu HaGaon* Rav Hershel Schachter *Shlita*  whose daily *teshuvos* (responses) to the most difficult, wrenching *sha’ailos*posed to him about the countless implications of our “Corona moment” demonstrate what true expertise in *halacha*, *chesed* and *regesh* is all about.

But what of those of us not called to be leaders? What of those of us who, humbled, must make our lonely way during this frightening time?

We are isolated, yes. But we are not without a dear friend, our Siddur.

Just last week, *Hashkiveinu* leapt out at me, asking God to, “Shield us and ward off from us enemies, epidemics (*dever*) and sorrow”. Before Corona, who gave *dever* even a moment’s thought? Today, we think of little else.

This past *Motzaei Shabbat*, a few minutes after reciting *Hashkiveinu*, I picked up my *kos* to recite Havdalah after another homebound Corona Shabbos and the following words, words I have recited for decades, suddenly brought tears to my eyes. “Behold, God is my salvation, I trust and am **not** ***afraid***; for the Lord is my strength and my song, and He is the source of my liberation.”

This is it. This is the thing itself. God is my *yeshua*. I will trust in Him, and when I trust in Him, lo efchad, I am not afraid.  I trust in Him. I know it is all from Him. I don’t pretend to understand His master plan. I confess it openly and honestly, “I don’t get it.”

I am lost.

I am weak.

I am fragile.

I am merely a man and I am humbled.

So, I trust. I trust because He is God and I, I am merely man. I trust, and I am not afraid.

Yes, we have been humbled. Yes, we are fragile and weak. Our strength, our *only* strength is the ability to trust in God. With trust, we are not afraid. What’s more, as we learn a bit later in the Havdalah liturgy, those who trust are happy.

We are not afraid. And we are happy. *Dayeinu*! But God is even more gracious. Hamelech yaneinu b’yom koreinu – the King will answer us on the day that we call. When we call to God, He will answer. And what will His answer be? L’Yehudim hayesa ora v’simcha ve’sasson v’ikar – light and gladness, joy and honor.

So, may it be with us.

*Shavua tov*.

*Gut voch*.