

OUT OF THE DEPTHS
Rabbi Mona Alfi
Congregation B'nai Israel
Kol Nidre 5772 - October 7, 2011

[Introduction on piano]

Shir ha-ma-a-lot...A song of ascents.

[Julie Steinberg sings]

Out of the depths I cry to you, Adonai;

[Julie Steinberg sings]

Adonai, hear my voice.

[Julie Steinberg sings]

Let Your ears be attentive

to my cry for mercy. **(Psalm 130:1-2)**

[Julie Steinberg sings]

Out of the depths I call to you Adonai - out of the depths I call.

All year these words have echoed through my head - over and over. As I sat with members of our community who lost loved ones, parents, spouses, children, or dear friends.

Out of the depths I call to you...

I felt these words as I heard the stories of those suffering from the pain of mental illness, or a sense of isolation because of divorce or estrangement from those they love.

Out of the depths I call to you...

I have thought of these words when I saw the pain of people, both younger and older than I am, insecure and scared of how they would make ends meet, or if they would find a job that would support them both physically and spiritually. I felt these words as I prayed with our members who were spending time in hospitals or who were counting time in hospice care.

Over and over, these words washed over me - out of the depths I call to you. These words have great meaning for me personally as well. These words have given voice to my own feelings of fear and despair, loss and anguish, at different

times in my life; when I struggled with my parents death, when I suffered from depression in my 20's, when I faced the possibility of cancer last summer. And even after I learned that I did *not* have cancer, I *still* feared the idea that my children would have to walk down the same path I did.

Out of the depths I call to you O God, out of the depths I call.

This summer Glenn and the boys and I spent a month in Los Angeles. I know that many wondered why LA? Why not go to Israel?

But for me, going to Southern California was a spiritual pilgrimage I needed to make. I wanted my children to see where I grew up. I wanted to go with them to the places I went with *my* parents. I needed them to begin to know my story, and from this, I hoped, my children would better understand their own story.

I was shocked by the depth of the emotions that I experienced on an almost daily basis when I was down there. So many memories flooding through me as though they happened yesterday - and not 20 years ago or 40 years ago.

One of the places I wanted to take my children was a place called Travel Town, a quaint little play area filled with old trains and vehicles. It's part of Griffith Park, and is a place I went to many times with my parents and my siblings.

So one morning I plugged the address into my GPS, and off we went. As we came close to the park I was rattled by what I saw, something that I had never noticed before. Across the street from Travel Town was a place that I had also been to many times, but never *with* my parents. Rather, it was a place I went *for* my parents. Across the street is Mt. Sinai Cemetery.

Suddenly I was faced with some of my happiest and some of my most painful life moments, literally side by side. It was unnerving to me that the same road could take me to both places.

I was reminded of a lesson that I had thought that I had already learned, life and death are neighbors, living side by side, always on the same road. But except at those times when they touch, we don't notice how close they dwell.

It was a reminder to me that it is important to emotionally revisit the places that I've been, if I am to continue to move forward in my life. I am who I am because of my blessings, but I am equally who I am because of my burdens and my losses.

At the High Holidays we are asked to go on a personal pilgrimage. At Rosh Hashanah we not only celebrate the creation of the world, but our own personal creation as well. For 10 days we travel inward, revisiting the places we have been during the year, hopefully gaining perspective on how to move forward by trying to understand how and why we are on the path that we are on.

On Kol Nidre, we face our mortality, we are reminded of the fragility of life, and how quickly it passes. And at Yizkor, we sit with the memories of those who came before us, and we allow ourselves to feel our pain and our loss.

And then, after Yizkor, with Ne'ila, we begin the journey back into life again, we ascend out of the depths, with a renewed appreciation for the fragility of life, hopefully reminding us not to squander even a single day.

Last summer, I had the pleasure of hearing Rabbi David Wolpe teach. We were celebrating Shabbat outside, at the Ford Amphitheater in Hollywood. He pointed to the stars in the sky, things that appear to us as fixed objects, something tangible and permanent. But, he taught, the light from the stars that we were enjoying that night might have taken millions of years to reach us. And in fact, many of those stars whose light we were seeing on that beautiful night had already died thousands of years before we were even born.

He taught us that each of us has our own personal zodiac, our own constellation of stars that guide us, and light our way. Except that our personal zodiac does not consist of the heavenly stars, but of people, people that we have known, as well as people who lived, and died, before we were even born. It is the light of their lives that guides us, and affects and influences the course we take in life.

The Zionist pioneer, Hannah Szenes was a soldier and a poet. She died at the tender age of 23, after leaving the safety of Palestine to join the Jewish Brigade and parachute into Nazi occupied Yugoslavia to try to save Jews. She was captured, tortured, and finally executed by a Nazi firing squad after she refused to cooperate or give over any information.

She wrote poetry in Hungarian and in Hebrew, and after her death her diary was published and she left for the world her poetry. Poetry so beautiful that they have become prayers that are often sung in synagogues and at memorial services. The most famous of these prayers is "Eli Eli."

But there is another prayer, equally powerful that is in our Shabbat *siddur*, and it speaks to what Rabbi Wolpe taught about. It is called “Yeish Kochavim - There are stars.”

Yeish kochavim - There are stars whose radiance is visible on Earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world even though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for humankind.

The irony of Rabbi Wolpe talking about people as stars in Hollywood was not lost on me. But the type of stars he was talking about were not the type we read about in people magazine or see strolling on Rodeo Drive. The real stars in life are our parents, our teachers, our friends, our ancestors, even our Biblical ancestors.

In each of our lives - *yeish kochavim* - there are stars. If we are lucky, those who bring light into our lives are still with us. But it is inevitable that with time our stars will cease to physically be. But like the stars in the heavens, their light will continue to shine, even as their bodies are no more.

When someone close to us dies, and we return to our homes from the cemetery, we are taught to light a candle. And we light a candle again for them on their yertzeit, and again just before we leave for the synagogue on Kol Nidre, and again, for Yizkor on Sukkot, and Pesach, and Shavuot.

Throughout the year, the light of their memory illuminates our homes.

This practice comes from a teaching from Proverbs that says “the soul of man, is the light of God (Proverbs 20:27).” Our souls, like the stars in the heavens continue to shed light even after we are gone. We light the memorial candles to remind ourselves that the light of those we love continues to shine, even as the world around us seems to have become darker.

Their light becomes a beacon of hope, a sign of faith, and like the lights that light up a runway on a blackened night, their light shines brightly to guide our way, helping us find the right path. And the very memory of their lives can dispel the darkness in our own lives.

Out of the depths I call to you O God, out of the depths I call.

As I was studying Psalm 130 I was surprised to see that it does not begin with the words “Out of the depths I cry to you” - it actually begins with the simple and oft repeated statement - *Shir ha'ma'a'lot* - a song of ascents. These two simple Hebrew words - *shir ha'ma'a'lot* - a song of ascents - is a reminder to us that even as we cry out in pain, our focus should always be upward. Even as we cry out in pain, mourning what we have lost, we should continue to gaze up, towards the heavens, striving to ascend to a higher place than we currently stand.

Psalm 130 is not only a prayer about pain - it is ultimately a prayer for hope and of redemption. It is a reminder that tomorrow can, and should, be better than today. That as low as we might feel, we can, and must, find a way to climb out of our depths.

There is a difference between feeling the loss, or the absence of a person, and feeling as though you have lost yourself. Time, perspective, and faith in a future that is different, can help us make the transition back into life.

It is not our choice about whether or not we will go through periods of despair or pain, it is inevitable that life will present us with those times. What *is* our choice is *how* we respond to it. Will we choose to live forever in our suffering? Or will we learn from it? Will we allow it to change us in a way that makes us more compassionate to ourselves and to others? Will our struggles help make us more ready to appreciate the sweet moments of life and not squander the time we are given?

Recently, I was talking with my husband about a period of depression that I went through many years ago, and I found that I was finally forgiving myself for the self defeating way that I had responded to my pain, realizing that my suffering had been made even worse because I had been so filled with self reproach.

It is easy to look back *now* and see how my response to my pain made it feel as though I would never crawl out of the depths. It is easy *now* to see how patterns of behavior I developed as a child made it difficult for me to even see a different way of being.

But our tradition teaches us that we contain within us endless opportunities for redemption and forgiveness. This period of the High Holidays are not meant to be a period of punishment, but of rehabilitation, and of restoration as well as rejuvenation. It is to remind us that *teshuva* - the act of returning to a time and a

place where our soul can feel whole again - *is* attainable. Teshuva is rarely easy, but it is always possible.

None of us walks through life untouched by pain. And my pain may be different than each of yours. But no ones suffering matters more, or less, than another's. Each of us has a responsibility to honor the struggles that our fellow human beings go through.

On our last day in Los Angeles, I took some time by myself, and I drove south on Highway 1, looking at the Santa Monica pier, looking at the beaches that I had swum in so many times with my parents, and I began to cry uncontrollably, flooded by my feelings of missing them.

But what surprised me, was that what I did *not* feel was utter and profound despair. I was surprised that with the tears came a sense of comfort in knowing that even 35 years later, the love I felt for them, and from them, had not dimmed, they were, and are, still a part of my life. They continue to shine light on my path.

And it was then that I realized what these words from the Psalms “out of the depths I call to you” meant to me, why they kept coming back to me over and over throughout the year.

These words are about loss. The loss of stability. The loss of peace. The loss of security. The loss of being in relationship with people we love.

But, these words are also about hope and faith. They express the belief that tomorrow can be better than today. That all is not lost, that even if we are in the depths, we can still climb out of that pain, out of that despair, out of that sense of loss. And it reminds us that no matter how alone we feel, we are not calling out into a nothingness, we are calling out to God. And in that calling out, we remind ourselves, that as alone as we might feel at times, we are never truly alone.

Out of the depths we cry to you, Adonai;
Adonai, hear our voices.
Let Your ears be attentive
to our cries for mercy. (**adapted from Psalm 130:1-2**)

[Julie Steinberg sings]