

Return (the Favor)  
Temple Beth Eloheim  
Kol Nidre  
10 Tishrei 5779 ~ 20 September 2018  
Student Rabbi Elana Nemitoff

At the beginning of the summer, my friends had a little girl and I couldn't wait to see her tiny hands. But I knew better than to show up empty handed. A friend and I worked to make sure that they had a full dinner complete with challot, to celebrate their first Shabbat as a family of three. Every week, when I selfishly go to visit to see their little girl, I bring something with me for the new parents. And I think of the lesson my mom taught me over and over: Don't show up with your hands empty. She told me repeatedly that bringing something with you shows people that you care. It demonstrates love for them and respect that they are giving you of their time and space. It means showing up with an open heart and open hands, ready to show them love. I think of this lesson every week when I approach my friend's door.

The Talmud teaches a similar message - about showing up with an open heart. It teaches that in order to remove the ashes from the altar after sacrifices, the priests needed to show up without a light in their hand.<sup>1</sup> They had to show up prepared to do their job, although physically empty handed. Rabbi David Stern, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, reminded the Reform Jewish world of this message as he spoke in May at the funeral of the president of HUC, Rabbi Aaron Panken, tz"l.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Panken showed up to everything with his hands open. Not in an un-gracious way (Rabbi Panken always brought flowers, according to Rabbi Stern), but in a way that spoke of humility, of a willingness to learn from everyone. Aaron had a way of making every person feel like he or she had something to offer. He showed up figuratively empty handed - but with open hands and an open heart.

Rabbi Stern's story is one way to show up with open hands. Let me share with you a way that doesn't initially work. The 2016 movie *Col-*

---

<sup>1</sup> (Tamid 28a)

<sup>2</sup> <http://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2018/05/eulogy-rabbi-aaron-david-panken/>

*lateral Beauty*, starring Will Smith essentially begins with the question, “What is your why?” Smith’s character, Howard Inlet, addresses his marketing firm at the culmination of a huge sale. He continues on to say that life is about connecting people. “How do we do that,” he asks? “Love. Time. Death.” He continues: “These three abstractions connect every single human being on earth. Everything that we covet, everything that we fear not having. Because at the end of the day: we long for love (hold up one finger). We wish we had more time (hold up the second finger). We fear death (hold up the third finger). Love. Time. Death.” Immediately afterwards, the viewer sees Smith looking forlorn, eaten up over the death of his daughter. He stands bent over a table, adding the final domino to 10 large tables worth of a domino structure. As soon as he places that final domino, he heaves a sigh and pushes it over. Smith is overcome by the death of his daughter and cannot fathom how to move on in the world - he feels stuck. He shows up empty to his own life. Not the way that Aaron Panken did, but rather empty-hearted, with nothing else to offer the world. Yet (spoiler alert), through conversations with the

characters of Love, Time, and Death, which only he can see, Smith realizes that beauty can be found in many moments in the world. He learns to show up with his hands empty, but open-handed and open-hearted for what is to come.

So what do I, Rabbis David Stern, Aaron Panken and the character Howard Inlet have in common? Each learned to show up empty. That is our lesson, as well. All of us realize our mortality, feel death's presence in our lives, even when we celebrate joy. All of us know the trifecta of love, time and death. We learn to show up - in a way - empty handed. ready to receive what others have to offer.

Our High Holiday season also represents this confluence of concepts. In effect, the entirety of this season, beginning with the month of Elul, is about three things. Love. Time. Death. Love challenges us to experience the month of Elul differently, to use time to reflect - to consider our own selves as we approach the concept of death. In fact, tradition teaches that

Elul is actually an acronym for אני לדודי ודודי לי, *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*. It is the month of explicitly taking time to connect in love to ourselves and to God. We see the new moon, representing the possibility of new life, a new month, more time. But that month shows up in a dark sky, the “death” of another month. Love. Time. Death.

The takeaway of our high holiday season, felt through love, time, and death, is that we become the best version of ourselves at this time of year. The message that Will Smith offers, right before falling his domino creation, represents the power that a domino effect can have - that one thing always impacts another. At this time of year, the sheer weight and impact that love offers us can become our salvation, especially with the culmination of our experience on this most holy of days, combining all three elements of love, time and death. He reminds us, in a way, to show up open handed and open hearted, prepared to hear and experience what the day has to offer. Smith becomes our rabbi, learning from first hand experience the lesson Rabbi Stern offered: that we still have to show up

empty handed in our grief.

Jewish tradition teaches that Yom Kippur is the most holy day in our calendar. It is a day when we experience grief more profoundly, as Yom Kippur is conceived of as if it is a rehearsal for our death. Hence, why we traditionally wear white and abstain from the things that most indicate our humanity: food, drink, sexual relations, wearing leather and perfuming ourselves. It is a day when we both stand outside of time and feel ourselves firmly situated within time, entranced by the buoyancy offered by the liminal space. And Yom Kippur is ultimately about love. It is about surrounding ourselves with love, feeling ourselves embraced by love, allowing the traditional words to awaken in us the power of God's love for us and our love for ourselves and the world. It is about showing up empty handed, prepared to be present.

It is this combination of the elements of death and time that allows us to feel such love, to show up with our hands open, empty. We feel closer to

death and time, as we intone *Unetaneh tokef* and recognize that our decree will be sealed in a few short hours. *Unetaneh tokef* reminds us that we are not in control of either time or death, as God determines who shall live and who shall die. In addition, we have the time leading up to Yom Kippur to effect atonement and ask for forgiveness. Because we reflect on who we have been, we are better able to allow ourselves to be held buoyant by the liturgy, encircled in the love of the congregation. Through recalling death, as we formally do at *Yizkor* tomorrow afternoon, we are faced with our own mortality. But by facing that mortality, we come to realize that love is at the heart of our redemption, for although the prayerbook argues that *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* impact our lot in the year to come, isn't it love that encapsulates all three ideas and truly roots us in this world? The epitome of Yom Kippur is love. It is showing up empty handed, but learning that empty handed means actually showing up with our heart open and willing to engage.

A medieval ethical text, called *Orchot Tzadikim*, The Ways of the Righteous, writes of love as the most important of all the *middot*, the personal qualities we should strive to possess. Why? Because love, when used in an evil way, is more evil than all of the other *middot*. But when used for good, the quality of love involves more deeds than all other qualities. The author brings in the beginning of *v'ahavta* as proof, articulating “And you shall love Adonai your God.”<sup>3</sup> That is the first mitzvah, the rest flow from there.

The love being discussed here isn't the kind of love we have for our parents, our partners, our children. Rather, the love being upheld is the love we have for our world. It is the love we bring into the world through our deeds. *V'ahavta* articulates the many ways we *show* our love for God, how we demonstrate love in the world. It is the physical embodiment of that love. *V'ahavta* tells us how to show up with our hands empty: Place these words on your heart, speak of them often, from morning to

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/Orchot\\_Tzadikim.5.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Orchot_Tzadikim.5.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)



evening. In fact, we are told to make the love of *v'ahavta* a symbol before our eyes. *V'ahavta* tells us what it means to show up in love, with open hands and hearts. We can learn that the love of *v'ahavta* is our balm for dealing with time and death. We fear death, so we act in this world. We wish we had more time, so we try to demonstrate our love with the time we have. Love. Time. Death.

The 10 days of repentance and in fact this entire season are often seen as 10 days for reflection, for fixing the wrongs we've done in the world. We spend this time focusing on how to use our time better and how to cheat death. But what if we've been looking at this period of time in the wrong way for our whole lives? What if, instead of focusing exclusively on the wrongs we've done to others, ourselves, and God, we shift to look at how to bring more love into the world, through being present in time and not fearing death. What if we reframe it to see the time as a way to show up open handed.

Another name for this time of year is the period of תשובה. Teshuvah is usually translated as repentance, but I want to offer a radical reframing of the word. The word stems from the root word “return.” So, instead of it meaning we return to ourselves and our actions, I propose that Teshuvah means returning the favor. It means enacting the values of the *v’ahavta* - with love, with a realization of the impact of both time and death. It means showing up empty handed - with open hands and hearts of gratitude. Allow me to offer an example, as illustration.

Gidi Zilberstein was a 5 year old boy full of life. In the words of his mother "Gidi was all of the wonder and joy of life wrapped up in a small bouncy body."<sup>4</sup> Gidi was a little boy who brought love, colorful dresses, and sparkling happiness to the world. He loved to giggle, talk to strangers, and make other people happy.”

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://gidimagic.com/>

Gidi died in a boating accident on September 4, 2016. Each year in memory of his death, his parents and siblings invite people to engage in random acts of kindness. They invite people to show up empty handed in the world, with nothing more than a ready smile or grateful heart. Gidi brought smiles to people's faces in the most unexpected of ways. He showed up empty handed every day. Yes, he often showed up to the people in his life with fun colored socks and a multi-colored card. But those objects, his way of being, represent what it means to show up empty handed. Gidi showed up with an open heart and open hands, ready to give freely to the world. His family asks that we do that for others. They invite people to do acts of love in the world and leave a card that says: This Random Act of Kindness was done in memory of Gidi Zilberstein, always 5 years old. The card, like Gidi, is colorful, filled with various shades of pink, orange, and yellow, sharing Gidi's magic with others.

This little boy knew the power of a smile, of connection, of love. He knew the power of returning the favor. He talked to people wherever he

went and brought a smile to their face. He brought color to the world, literally through huge amounts of glitter and crayon covered cards for his mother. And he brought color through his actions, his confidence, his excitement. Gidi showed others that there are multiple ways to be in the world and give love: through colorful tutus, through a different kind of gender expression, through a radiant smile. Sadly he cannot do that anymore. Now it is our turn. We cannot necessarily fix the pain of the Zilberstein family. That will take time and so much love. But we can bring more love into the world. We can show up for others with an open heart and open hands. And we can see the impact of the chain reaction of these acts of kindness.

As we sit here tonight on *Kol Nidrei*, it is 15 days past the anniversary of Gidi's death. I invite each of you to take a Kindness Card as you leave tonight and do a random act of kindness. When you do that act, leave the kindness card with the person. Find a way to do your teshuvah in the coming days. Pick up trash on the street. Keep granola bars in your car

for when you pass a homeless person on the street. Bring a baked good to a friend in need. Simply offer someone looking forlorn a warm smile or a loving embrace.

Our liturgy suggests that the gates of teshuvah close at *Neilah* on Yom Kippur, but teshuvah is always possible. Time does not end. It and we continue, as does our ability to do teshuvah, to return the favor. Yet our tradition teaches that we have until *Simchat Torah* to effect change in our decree, to impact the world. Take the card of kindness. Go out into the world. Bring more love into the world. Use your time powerfully. Recognize death as present and painful, yet powerful. But more powerful than any of these individually, the favor of love must be enacted. I invite you to go out and return the favor. And when we reach *Simchat Torah* in two brief weeks, may we celebrate with joy that we have fulfilled our mission: we have returned the favor, just a little bit. We have shown up empty handed. We have shown up with an open heart and open hands. We have shown up with love.