

Rabbi Chai Levy, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Kol Nidre drasha 2025  
*V'initem et nafshoteichem*: Soul Responses when Everything Falls Apart  
 (or What is the Meaning of this Hour?)

I don't like to avoid the elephant in the room.  
 Or, in this case, the elephant in *the world*.  
 So, let's be honest:  
 A lot is falling apart - democracy, humanity, decency;  
 our world feels unstable and frightening.

In our country, authoritarianism is rising before our eyes:  
 the militarization of American cities,  
 The attacks on free speech, immigrants, transgender people, journalism,  
 universities, and the dismantling of the institutions  
 that we have relied on to feel safe.

And for us Jews, it's been a time of moral reckoning with Israel.  
 Many of us have been anguished as the devastation, hunger, and humanitarian  
 crisis has unfolded in Gaza,  
 plus settler violence in the West Bank and talk of annexation.  
 Israel has come to be viewed by much of the world as a pariah state, while  
 antisemitism and violence against Jews have increased.

What I want to think about with you this Kol Nidre night is  
 What do we do when things fall apart?  
 How do we respond, spiritually, religiously,  
 as inheritors of our Jewish tradition?  
 As souls seeking to be good people on this Yom Kippur?

I think of the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,  
 In a speech called "The Meaning of This Hour"  
 That he gave at a conference of Quaker leaders  
 in Germany in March 1938,  
 shortly before he was arrested and deported to Poland.  
 The following year, he was able to get out of Europe and get to  
 the United States, where he became one of the most important Jewish thinkers  
 of our time.

In that speech in that perilous moment, he said:

“We have trifled with the name of God...

There can be no neutrality.

Either we are ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil.

Our world seems not unlike a pit of snakes...

The greatest task of our time is to take the souls of men out of the pit.

God is waiting for us to redeem the world.”

Heschel’s prophetic voice from 1938 hits like a ton of bricks

At our time in world history, and we must ask ourselves,

What is the meaning of *this* hour?

This Kol Nidre night, as we enter this day of introspection and teshuva,

I want to speak to this question for our time.

In addition to taking action and donating and protesting and fighting like hell to save our country and Israel and the planet from tyranny,

What is our spiritual grounding in this unstable time?

As our world becomes more unreliable, what do we hold onto?

Let me share some Torah to frame the question.

Do you know why we fast on Yom Kippur?

Five times in the books of Leviticus and Numbers,

the Torah says *v’initem et nafshoteichem*, Afflict your souls.

And in the Talmud ([Yoma 76a](#)), the rabbis explain that these five appearances of the phrase *v’initem et nafshoteichem*, “afflict your souls” correspond to five things prohibited on Yom Kippur:

1. Eating and drinking
2. Bathing
3. Anointing with oil
4. Wearing leather shoes
5. Having sex

Ok, that’s the traditional understanding of *v’initem et nafshoteichem*.

But my teacher, Rabbi Art Green,

offers a creative reading of this phrase. (see [p. 137](#))

He explains that *v’initem* means not only “to afflict” but

**to answer or to respond.**

It's the same word, with the same root: *Ayin, Nun, Heh*.

And for you grammar lovers out there,

It's actually the Pi'el form of the verb, which is emphatic.

So it's more than *la-'anot*, to answer or respond,

But *le-'annot*, which Rabbi Green translates as **to be responsive**.

In other words, when the Torah tells us five times

*v'initem et nafshoteichem* on Yom Kippur,

We can read it not as "afflict your souls," but

"make your souls responsive."

I think most of us are already feeling afflicted.

If we're paying attention to our world,

We're probably horrified, terrified. Maybe feeling grief or despair.

But if we hear our instructions for today, *v'initem et nafshoteichem*,

Not as to further afflict ourselves,

but to make our souls responsive to this reality,

how might our souls respond? What might God want of us?

What is the meaning of this hour?

Parenthetically, I want to note that I'm lucky to have access to a world class Bible translator in our very own member, Robert Alter,

so I did check this interpretation of *v'initem* with him,

And he said: they seem to be homonyms -

a word with two different meanings - to afflict and to respond -

but, he said:

I think you can make a good drash by connecting them.

So, thank you, Uri, and with your blessing and Art Green's inspiration,

I want to invite us this Yom Kippur to think of the Torah's five-fold instruction

*v'initem et nafshoteichem* as:

How are we to make our souls responsive in this mad world?

It's not that we should abandon the other meaning of the five prohibitions of Yom Kippur, so don't run out and grab a burrito,

but I find this a powerful and positive reframing of the work we are meant to do this day, especially in these difficult times.

And indeed some of our commentators have offered similar takes:

The [Rambam](#) explained that the five prohibitions are meant to be not afflictions that cause discomfort, but rather five abstentions from the physical world that allow us to focus on our souls.

So, I'm inviting us today to consider how our souls might respond to this perilous world. I have five answers to the five occurrences of *v'initem et nafshoteichem* that I'd like to offer, but before I say mine, I invite you think about your answer: What is your soul's response to this moment in history? Take a moment to consider the question. You don't need to have five answers. It could be one or two.

Need some help? Well, here are five common but *unhelpful* responses that I'm guessing many of us turn to at times, especially when we are not attending to how our *souls* want us to respond:

1. Feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed
2. Feeling overwhelmed and indifferent
3. Doomscrolling and then maybe sharing a post on social media that feels good for a moment until people start arguing in the comments and you realize you've now lost a few friends and added to the polarization.
4. getting violent, or maybe just taking out your rage and despair by yelling at your loved ones.
5. getting depressed and/or eating a pint of ice cream or numbing out with another thing that makes you feel worse later.

Yeah? Me too. So, what are five better, wiser ways our souls might be responsive instead? I'll say my five and then elaborate on each:

1. When there is a lack of humanity, hold on to our own humanity.
2. When there is a moral crisis, hold fast to Judaism's highest ethical values
3. When the world gets crueler, hold on to each other.
4. When the news gets uglier, hold on to beauty.
5. When things fall apart, hold on to faith and practice active hope.

Allow me to elaborate:

Soul response #1:

When there is dehumanization, hold on to our own humanity.

Over the last year, you may have noticed

I've been quoting repeatedly Pirkei Avot (2:5) where it says:

וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ

Where there is a lack of humanity, try to be human.

It's been my motto, my mantra.

Our Torah teaches us that the human is created in the divine image,

and when that Divine image is desecrated,

desecrated by leaders at the highest levels of power,

It is an act of spiritual resistance to hold on to our own humanity and to see, respect, and stand up for the humanity of others.

We have a US president who spews hate, who vilifies and scapegoats,

Who publicly said just last week -

in response to a grieving widow expressing forgiveness

that he disagrees and prefers to *hate* his opponents.

We have an Israeli prime minister who has been callous to the humanity of

innocent Palestinian civilians, to hungry children,

to the suffering of the hostages and their families.

Where there is a lack of humanity, try to be human.

Our world is becoming more cruel and ruthless,

Discourse is becoming more polarized and debased,

But can we respond from our souls -

*v'initem et nafshoteichem*

by not being dragged down into revenge and hate but rather to

הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ?

Can we respond, from the best of our human selves, not from the

reptilian part of our brain that perceives threat and then attacks?

Can we keep our hearts open, sensitive, compassionate

By staying connected to our own humanity and

seeing the humanity in others, even the humanity of our enemies and those with whom we disagree?

Soul response #2:

In times of moral crisis, hold fast to Judaism's highest ethical values.

For what I'm about to say, I'll clarify for those who don't know me or haven't heard what I've been saying for the last two years.

I speak as someone who loves and cares deeply about Israel and about the future of the Jewish people.

After the horrific attacks of October 7,

Israel had the right to defend itself from the brutal terror of Hamas. Yes.

But the destruction, blockade, and deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza went far beyond self-defense and

has become a moral stain on Jewish history.

On this day of truth telling and confession,

let us acknowledge this and hold fast to our Jewish ethical tradition

that goes back to our biblical prophets and

Let us save Judaism from the extremists

Who want to shape the course of Jewish history.

It is not anti-Israel to say this.

If you don't believe me, listen to Ismar Schorch.

He was the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary and head of

Conservative Judaism for 20 years and is a world renowned scholar of Jewish history. In his [words](#) :

Our immediate challenge as Jews is.... to make sure that Judaism (as) religion is not submerged and shredded by the power of the Jewish state. The ... violence against ... Palestinians in Gaza ...and the West Bank will saddle Jews with a repulsive religion riddled with hypocrisy... The messianism driving the current government of Israel is sadly out of kilter with traditional Judaism -- and an utter moral abomination.

*V'initem et nafshoteichem.*

This has been a time of moral crisis for our people,

and we must make our souls responsive to that reality

by holding fast to Judaism's ethical values and vision:

That every human being is created in the divine image,

That we are meant to pursue justice and care for the vulnerable.

That's straight out of the Torah.

The Jewish people and Jewish future need us to hold onto our ethical tradition, and doing so isn't anti-Israel.

No, it comes from a place of  
*Kol Yisrael Arevim Ze bazeh* - כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה  
 All of the Jewish people are responsible for each other.  
 We take care of each other,  
 And we hold each other accountable too.  
 On Yom Kippur, we take collective responsibility for our actions.

In tomorrow's haftarah, we read from the prophet Isaiah, who said:  
 "THIS is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords  
 of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free... to share your bread with the  
 hungry..." (Isaiah 58:6-7)  
 How can we hear these words and stand before the Holy One  
 if we do not take collective responsibility,  
 and uphold the ethical values of our tradition?

So, (1) Hold on to our humanity, (2) hold on to Judaism's ethical values, and (3)  
 hold on to each other.  
 We can't do this alone, and thank God we have community to strengthen us.

I certainly felt that when many of us joined together after kiddush lunch this  
 summer to walk to the "No Kings" demonstration,  
 singing *Ozi V'zimrat Yah* as we did when we crossed the Sea of Reeds.  
 Or when many of us stood together in Oakland  
 at an interfaith vigil against ICE raids and  
 to show support for immigrant communities being targeted.  
 We held signs that said "Resisting Tyrants Since Pharaoh,"  
 And stood not only with each other  
 But also in solidarity that went all the way back to the Torah,  
 to Moshe and Miriam, Yocheved, Shifra, and Puah,  
 And continued our enduring tradition of standing up to tyrants.  
 And surviving them, I might add!

Just being together on Shabbat and holidays,  
 is an act of strengthening; we create a refuge and sanctuary for  
 kindness, love, care, empathy, and respectful dialogue and listening, even if we  
 don't agree about everything.  
*V'initem et nafshoteichem* is in the plural:

We create an oasis of goodness to support each other and strengthen our resilience in this difficult time.

Hold on to Humanity (1), hold on to Judaism's ethical tradition (2), hold on to each other (3), and #4: Hold on to Beauty.

As things get uglier,

it is spiritual resistance to hold on to beauty and create it.

This is an essential part of making our souls responsive to this time.

Make art. Make music. Write poetry. Bake bread.

Listen to songs that open your heart and remind you of the best of humanity.

Dance. Pay attention to birds and butterflies.

Put down your device and pick up some art materials.

A few months ago when we were reading about the building of the mishkan, the tabernacle we carried through the wilderness,

that is so full of colors, craftsmanship and creativity,

Women spinning yarn and doing embroidery,

People doing carving, weaving, and carpentry.

I spoke about how the Torah describes the mishkan's priestly garments as *L'khavod u'letifaret*, meaning, for dignity and beauty, (Exodus 28:2)

All this creativity is to create a Divine dwelling place in the world, and this too is spiritual resistance when ugliness threatens to prevail.

Making and noticing beauty is holding on to our humanity and creating resilience, joy, strength, mental health, and healing when we might otherwise be consumed by fear and rage and have those reign over our nervous systems, our psyches, and our world.

*V'initem et nafshoteichem* - how does *our soul* want to respond?

You don't have to be an artist. Just make something beautiful.

Work in your garden. Sing in the shower. *L'khavod u'letifaret*.

Hold on to dignity and beauty as a practice of spiritual resistance against the ugliness that might otherwise consume us.

And I've got one more.

Remember, these are mine, some suggestions to get you going in finding *your* response to *V'initem et nafshoteichem*.

My fifth one is: hold on to faith.

When I say faith, I mean the Jewish sense of “faith,”  
 Which doesn’t mean certainty or a belief in a certain dogma, but rather:  
*Emunah* means “steadfastness,” as in perseverance,  
 It means not giving up in despair, as Rebbe Nachman taught.  
 It means feeling uncertain or afraid about the future  
 but courageously going forward anyway,  
 like Avram in Lecha Lecha or Queen Esther in the Megillah.

It means having “active hope,” as Joanna Macy called it,  
 The environmental activist who recently passed away here in Berkeley.  
 She taught us to honor the grief and despair we might feel about the  
 overwhelming problems in our world, and then also to take action,  
 as a spiritual practice, an active hope that is the antidote to despair.

Jewish faith is the kind of active hope that Rebecca Solnit writes about in her book  
[Hope in the Dark](#):

That despite great uncertainty, we engage our imagination  
 and take action believing that what we do matters,  
 because it plants seeds of possibility.  
 We never know what kind of impact our actions might have,  
 especially as we join together with others  
 And maybe even change the course of history.  
 You never know what’s possible.

These are Jewish approaches to faith/*Emunah* -  
 Not certainty about the outcome, but taking action anyway,  
 and not giving up no matter how huge the task.  
 As our sages said in Pirkei Avot (2:21),  
 לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אֲתָה בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה  
 You aren’t expected to do complete the work;  
 you can’t fix all of the world’s problems,  
 but you’re also not free to give up and not even try.  
*V’initem et nafshoteichem* - how might our souls respond  
 In this active hope kind of faith?

So, these are my five answers to the five occurrences of  
*V’initem et nafshoteichem* on Yom Kippur, my answers

to the question of what we might hold onto when things fall apart.  
 Hold on to our humanity, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ as our rabbis taught  
 Hold on to Judaism's ethical vision as our prophets taught,  
 Hold on to each other and strengthen each other as we have since Miriam and  
 Moshe.  
 Hold on to Beauty *lekavod u'letifaret*, creating dignity in the face of ugliness,  
 Hold on to active Hope, in the tradition of the faith of Avraham Avinu, of Queen  
 Esther, of Rebbe Nachman.

These are mine to get you started; I invite you to find your own.  
 You'll have plenty of time during the many hours of prayer to listen  
 for how your soul wants to respond.  
 We are going to stand up many times and beat our chests in confession.  
 Certainly, the Jewish people collectively  
 does have what to atone for this year.  
 But I believe that beyond beating ourselves,  
 We can dedicate this time to making our souls responsive.  
 Our mystics have taught that it's not a gesture of beating ourselves up, but a  
 softening, a tenderizing, a waking up of the heart.

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great 16th century Kabbalist,  
 invites us to consider the five fingers of the hand  
 five channels of Chesed, letting love flow  
 and breaking through the obstacles in our hearts.

I offer this as a practice for *V'initem et nafshoteichem* on this day.  
 You may feel grief, fear, despair about all that is broken in our world,  
 But perhaps that heartbreak can open us to  
 how we can make our souls responsive in this difficult moment.  
 Hear the prophetic voice of Heschel echoing from 1938:  
 The world is a pit of snakes.  
 What can we do to bring the soul of humanity out of the pit?  
 What is the meaning of *this* hour?

Gmar Chatima Tova.