

Yom Kippur 5781 – Kol Nidrei drasha

Alice Chipkin – 27th September 2020

It's the 18th of September, 2018 and I am losing light. The highway south of Darwin stretches out before me like a white bellied black snake. I pull into the last servo before I lose reception to download Lara Lubitz's Kol Nidre drash for Shira Hadasha. By the time I get to the bush block it's completely dark. I have not had my pre-fast meal yet and I am still in my teaching clothes. I shower, remove all jewellery, light candles. It is Erev Yom Kippur and I am, for the first time in my life, going to be spending it alone.

Aside from some rusty Hebrew shared with my sister, my siblings and I don't have a great track record with languages. Between French, Spanish, German and Japanese all learnt at school, barely a word remains between the four of us. But perhaps this should not surprise me. Our family has lost languages in almost every generation of women. On my mum's non-Jewish side there is Sotho, my grandma Rhoda's first language that died in our family with her. There is the loss of Portuguese, my living grandmother, Pearl's first language spoken in Mozambique, and lastly the loss of Ladino with Pearl's mother, Ettie.

Ettie spoke Ladino at home with her mother who had grown up in Alexandria, Egypt. It is a language barely alive today. A relic of exile and resilience – a synthesis of Spanish expulsion, ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and the welcoming (or not so much) of host languages to Jews on the move. Today, my great grandmother Ettie's siddurim, which are written in Ladino, sit in a Sephardi shul somewhere in Johannesburg, the name of which my grandma can't recall. If language shapes experience, and I think it does, then the loss of language is nothing less than the loss of memory.

Some interstate friends and I recently began an online webinar about love in the time of lockdown. It's by a contemporary sage, you may have heard of her, Esther Perel, #betheelderyouwanttoseeintheworld. And one thing she said really stuck with me. She said, "resilience requires diversity." You cannot get stuck in one shape and expect it to serve you throughout a long challenge. And this morning Rabbi Barr said something which struck me as connected to this. He said, "the only constant in Judaism in history, is change."

Now I'll admit it. When I first realised that I would spend that Yom Kippur alone in 2018, I cried. I called my mum. Then I cried some more. How would I do it properly? Yom Kippur has this weight, a solemnity, a shape. What about Caulfield park? The way everyone spills out into a spiritually delirious heap after services? The feeling of my dad's tallis as a child? What about the rhythmic rocking that takes over during Neila, as the chazzanim propel us towards gates of night? What about the sound of 500 voices in Habo Hall singing a niggun? What is Yom Kippur if not all of these moments of spiritual connection in relation to others?

I ended up calling on community that year, something else Perel talks about, and of course Kolenu delivered from afar, sending me reflection questions and a machzor ahead of time.

As Yom Kippur lengthened that first year on Larrakia country, as I sweated my soul out in the build-up underneath a canopy of palm trees, I realised that it is actually the perfect chag for isolation. For having to find a way to bring the spiritual into yourself, and not rely on an outside force to bring it for you. That IS Yom Kippur; the exercising of spiritual muscle.

I work as a teacher at a middle school in Darwin, I teach the puberty years as I like to call them. Our school is incredibly culturally diverse, with strong and thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the mix. During NAIDOC day this year I was at the back of a classroom listening to a Larrakia elder, Deb, talking to the students. And she was articulating the importance of keeping your culture alive. How language and culture and ceremony feed her spiritual self, and how connected that is to the physical self. Without the health of one, she said, you compromise health of the other. Even from within a radically different world view, this statement made complete sense to me. For me, being literate in Jewish culture, its calendar for connection, it's words, it's memories – tshuva, tzadaka, vidui, tashlich – they are anchors for me for both the spiritual and physical self.

Where I noticed my understanding diverging from what Deb was talking about, was on the notion of country. She was describing the critical importance of being on her country in order to access full cultural and spiritual connection. This was such a powerful thing to hear from her. But it is a noticeable difference from my relationship with Judaism.

As Jews we have built our homeland into texts. For thousands of years, worlds have been accessible to us through pages and ritual that has come from them. For some of you, this place may have a physicality, perhaps Jerusalem or other parts of Israel. But for me, if anything that placeholder is symbolic. Whether I celebrate Yom Kippur alone, or in an airconditioned donga in Kakadu like last year with my brother, or a shul in Caulfield with 500 others. is irrelevant. It is the language and custom and culture that I carry with me into that chag that will determine if I am able to observe it in full that year. Which means, even in a year of a global pandemic, we have every opportunity to meet Yom Kippur fully in the next 26 hours.

The other thing about Yom Kippur (and the 10 days of repentance we've just had) is that it forces us to face uncomfortable things.

For example, there's this painfully accurate stereotype of white yopros (young professionals like myself and my brother), who build their careers off the back of Blak communities in the Northern Territory and then return to communities down south, with an inflated sense of righteousness, boasting about (often imagined) understandings of Aboriginal culture. It is an uncomfortable picture and one that I will need to reckon with in the hours ahead, especially as I begin the process of relocating south in the year to come, to be closer to community.

What is the uncomfortable thing that you need to wrestle with this year?

The truth is, the longer I spend on Larrakia country, and teach more generally, the more I realise how little I understand about anything at all. Perhaps that is a signpost of getting older. But one thing is increasingly clear to me. And that is our people are a people who understand first-hand the experience of

displacement, the pain of lost access to culture and what it means to lose generations of words and therefore memory. Your family no doubt has its own version of lost Ladino siddurim.

And yet at the same time, we have directly benefited from the violent displacement of Aboriginal people from their country. Our new-found prosperity on this continent is inextricably linked to the dispossession of land, language and culture of indigenous nations. And this legacy of colonisation is something we have to reckon with at a time like Yom Kippur. Because it is ongoing.

To me, this chag forces us to consider whose land each of us is standing upon as we read about tshuva – repentance – and asks, what price has been paid for our presence on it? To me, that answer demands a place in our vidui – confession. So to build on Ilana’s beautiful additions from Rosh Hashanah about the environment, I think I will be adding this line tonight and tomorrow, as we drum on our hearts and turn to hit the mark in the year to come: For the sins which we have committed, knowingly or un-knowingly, by silencing the culture of another, in order to amplify our own.

It is the year 5781. 2020. I am still on Larrakia country. It is still build-up and swelteringly hot at 7pm. But unlike 2018, my brother is sitting next to me tonight, and we sit next to hundreds of you, beaming in from around the country and world. Ironically, this is the most social Yom Kippur we have had in years!

This has been a year of isolation and disruption in place for everyone, but in very different ways. For us? We have not seen the rest of our family in nearly a year. I am homesick and yearning for community. And yet none of that precludes this Yom Kippur’s significance. If anything? It is an opportunity to honour the chag at its essence.

So as you sit tonight, alone in your living room, with a friend or family member, consider this, when the external structures and people you take for granted to be your spiritual muscle fall away, what remains of your Judaism and spiritual self? What do we, each one of us, actually carry from our culture when there is no one there to shape it for us?

What will be the anchors you let go of in the year ahead? Which ones will you keep?

Language, culture, country.

As a community how will we re-enliven language and safeguard our culture? How will we do this while honouring the people and country we sing from and reckoning with our uncomfortable legacies?

May we find diversity in our resilience as this year unfolds.

And be’shana hazot, beyachad – in this year may we be together.

Gmar chatima tova and shana tova.