

**Erev Yom Kippur**  
**BAIT Tefillah**  
**October 8, 2009**  
**Just Breathe**  
**by**  
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As some of you may know, in my former life, I was a singing teacher. Believe it or not, there are many areas in which being a rabbi overlap with being a singer. I used to tell people if you are afraid of speaking in public, then try singing in public. It will make speaking look easy!

But on a deeper level, there are many similarities between the musical world and the spiritual world. For example, the fuel that keeps everything going with a wind instrument, be it the voice or a reed or a brass instrument, is the breath. Without breath, the instrument cannot begin to make sound. Musicians spend a great deal of time learning about breath, experimenting with different ways to produce breath. We work on producing a consistent flow of breath. We learn about intercostal muscles in this part of our body, about how the tongue the jaw and the lips can help or hurt the flow of air. Singers lie on the floor, we place books on our diaphragm here – we do all of these crazy things we do to activate our breath and get in touch with the muscles which make it all possible to produce sound. We seek to breathe as naturally as children do – to move away from the shallow chest breathing that we subconsciously adopt as adults.

In my thirties, (I am still not sure why), I took up jogging. I found that my metabolism demanded this type of exercise – walking simply didn't do it anymore. While there are many benefits to my jogging at La Cienega Park three times a week, perhaps the best short-term benefit is the reminder to breathe. Around the third lap or so, I find the tension beginning to melt as my body demands the flow of air and I find that I am breathing again.

On a spiritual level, the breath is the *neshama*. *Neshama*, the Hebrew word for soul, is built upon the three-letter root – nun, shin, mem, meaning to breathe. The soul is breath

and without breath, there is not life. It is through God's own breath that human creation begins. *V'ipach b'apav nishmat adam*, says the Torah, "God breathed life into the nostril of the human being to give it soul to give it life. "

And yet, when we feel stress or tension, we hold our breath. At the very moment when we need to open our bodies and reduce stress, we hold it in, failing to absorb enough oxygen and carbon dioxide to maintain energy and pH levels; and failing to expel our breath, to allow toxins to be purged from our body. But instead our breathing is thwarted, interrupted or laborious.

When we cry our breathing becomes uneven. As the emotions well up inside of us, we hold our breath and let it out in between tears. We hold our breath when we are in pain. We hold our breath when we anticipate pain. We hold our breath when we are waiting for something. We hold our breath when we concentrate. There is delay between inhalation and exhalation.

I want you to think about the times this year when you had those moments of pain or anticipated pain that have caused you to hold your breath. Think about it – you, like me, have likely had those moments of pain or anticipated pain that have caused you to hold your breath. Some of us might even be 'holding our breath' as we sit in shul tonight gasping at the pain of a loss of a loved one, the battle of illness or chronic disease, the disappointment of an unfulfilling job or a career that is less than what we wanted it to be; the frustration and loneliness within marriage, or of a failed marriage; the heartache of infertility; the challenge of accepting physical or learning disabilities in our kids; the grief of a premature death of a family member or loved ones, our dreams stopped short.

It is precisely in moments such as these that our bodies most need a relief from stress; yet still we inhale and hold it in, creating even more stress. But, there is another option. According to Rebbe Nachman, that choice is to *krekhtz*. No, I didn't say kvetch – we do that about some things. *Krekhtz* is to sigh, to let out our breath, a bit like moaning.

Breathing, exhaling, according to Rebbe Nachman, is what provides wholeness in place of lack. This is the same Rebbe Nachman who said, “*Mitzvah Gedolah lihiyot b’simcha tamid* – it is a great mitzvah to always be joyous and celebratory. But now he not only gives us permission, but tells us it is essential to moan. We need to breath out our stress, our pain, our uncertainty as a pathway to healing.

He points out that by God’s breath, or *ruach*, the world was created. And the world is also renewed by God’s ruach. Kabbalah teaches us that the words *neshamah*, *nefesh*, and *ruach* can all be used interchangeably when speaking of the human soul, the human breath. Like *neshamah*, this *ruach* is the vital force of human life.

Rebbe Nachman reminds us that breath is the link to God found within our bodies. Through our function of breathing, we are bound to the Creator who breathed life into us. It is our connection to the realm of God: that part of our experience that is beyond language.

When we hold our breath, it is as if we are holding back – from the world, from ourselves, from each other, and from God. We hold back our creative power from the world. When the breath is disrupted, then interaction with God and the world is interrupted.

But it is through the act of exhalation that we let go of the pain, of the CO<sub>2</sub>, of the negativity. When we exhale, when we allow a good *krechtz* to escape from our mouths, we begin our path to wholeness. And as painful as it can be to let go of the bottled-up air, the things that we have been holding on to during this past year, it is essential to our *teshuvah* and as we hope for a good year.

Because after we exhale, we can then inhale and be nourished. This is how we are God’s partner in creation. When we breathe, we imitate God and we, too, breathe life into the world.

Jewish tradition cautions us not to hold our breath. So, as you sit here tonight, I ask you to breathe deeply. Think about what a gift it is that you are breathing. And, sigh. And sigh again. And sigh even more deeply. For, what else can we do? You may begin breathing new life into yourself. Perhaps you will re-energize yourself to face whatever it is pains you.

One of the most powerful ways to sigh, moan or exhale is to sing. Jewish prayer and music can combine to help us breath – to help us breath out the pain and suffering and negativity which we may be holding in.

As we conclude, we are going to exhale together as we sing a *niggun*, a wordless Jewish melody. There are no words to get in the way, no consonants, just the flow of air.

Breathe in, breathe out. Let the old year go, let the new year in. . .