

I had always defined myself through my work. Yes, I was Shane's wife and Sheila and Norman's daughter, and under it all Renee Beth Goldberg Edelman--- but somehow for the past several years, I had become only Rabbi Edelman- the professional. And Rabbi Edelman did not hesitate when asked to perform her rabbinic duties, even at the expense of her own health or personal relationships. She was available day or night and worked over 60 hours a week, never taking days off and missing the naming ceremonies and brit milah of most of her friend's children. But she officiated at two, sometimes three B'nai Mitzvah a Shabbat morning, performed countless funeral services a week, and knew by face, name and circumstance all the members of her 1100 family congregation. She could tell you how old their children were- and, if they were teenagers, their deepest insights and desires. Rabbi Edelman even knew their most painful fears. She seemed to be the quintessential rabbi but in reality, she was a one dimensional, paper doll soul. She forgot how she used to love to write poetry and play guitar on the front stoop during the summer, a sweaty beer bottle leaning into her leg. She forgot about laughing over the newest gossip and fashion trends with her college friends by phone and trying new and exciting restaurants with her husband of the iron clad stomach. She forgot the feel of the wind in her hair as she flowed straight down a mountain and the fear thick in her throat crossing a narrow knife edge of terrain. She forgot many things about truly living.

And then miraculously, one day, the woman who stands before you became a mother and her priorities changed because of the tiny new life. Work became work and life became the legacy. As she watched Bailey learn from the earth, she re-learned the awe and wonder of it all herself. And understood that she needed to grow her own soul for her daughter's to grow. That excitement and fear and unmitigated joy and boundless laughter and great passion are all qualities that adults should see and feel in their lives.

Life changes often force us to re-prioritize our lives and look closely at who and what we have become. Sometimes we realize that we have lived in ways that are too narrow and places that focus only on one section of our being. The other parts squeezed into shapes not their own, slowly beginning to atrophy without air or attention. They shrink into uselessness, until they find the nourishment they need and the whole is able to become whole again. After September 11th, I had allowed my child-like laughter to become quieted. It was time to alloy joy back into my life.

As children we are not specialists. Go into any early childhood classroom and you will see that every kid colors and sings and plays. The most unimpressive, crooked glued, not in the lines, wrinkled paper shofar hangs beside the one that looks real enough to blow. And even the boy with the thick foghorn voice, unable to hit the correct note is encouraged to sing as loudly as he can.

As adults, we taught to focus our attention on what we are good at, not what has the potential to renew our spirit and essence.

Traditionally parasha Nitzavim is read on the High Holydays. It speaks of the most holy covenant made with the people Israel at Sinai and begins with the words *Atem Nitzavim hayom kolchem* - You are all standing here, each and every one together. We were at Sinai- not as bankers and lawyers and doctors- but as Israelites and children of God. Each individual soul participated in the collective moment of revelation. *Atem Nitzavim hayom kolchem*, we are standing here today, before the moment of our redemption and its time to examine carefully who we have become. How do we define our lives?

If I were to ask each of us what is most important in our lives, what would our answer be? Do our actions reflect this value? If someone were to look at our date book would they see what we treasure and find important or would they see something other.

Our experience in life reflects the experience of our souls- we live in a state of constant change. Modern science tells us that the world consists of patterns of unending transformation of energy and matter. We observe these changes in ourselves, and in others in the form of physical and emotional growth, the learning of bodily skills, and the acquisition of knowledge. We grow up... we grow old... we are always growing and our lives unfold in multiple interweaving of cycles punctuated by major transitions. These major transitions often cause a transformation of the soul, a radical restructuring of the psyche. We refer to these moments in spiritual and mystical ways, often attached to a connection with God.

Our forefather Jacob, at the nadir of his life, spent a night alone by the Jabbock River. There he wrestled with an unnamed being and although his thigh was wrenched in the process, Jacob was given a new name: one who wrestles with God- Israel. We too go through this period soul searching. Although our names may not change, although we may seem the same on the outside, a fundamental change has occurred in the deepest part of our being. And we are forever irretrievably different.

Within Biblical texts, the concept of soul has a very concrete definition, finding foundation in the Book of Genesis where the soul is no less than an extension of God. In creating Adam, the Torah in Genesis 2:7 notes that "God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and Adam became a living creature. Soul is our Divine essence.

We learn in the Tanach that there are three seemingly interchangeable words for soul *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*.

The Kabbalistic authors of the Zohar see the synonymous Nefesh, Ruach and Neshamah as three separate levels of soul, unfolding over the course of a person's lifetime. The three levels of soul, carefully understood, express the stages of a person's spiritual growth from the material being we are given at birth, to animating the Divine, which exists within each of us to actualizing our Divine individual purpose in life.

I would like to share with you the kabbalistic levels of soul; Madonna does know how crucial they are to Jewish thought and focuses her own body/soul work on allowing them to define her days.

Stage one: Nefesh, conquering our physical desires.

Stage 2: Ruach, discerning our purpose.

Stage 3: Neshamah, Realizing and Carrying out our intension

Stage one: Nefesh: Meeting our physical desires.

Genesis: 2:7 And God formed man of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils and the man became a *nefesh hayah* - a living being.

Leviticus 5:1 *V'nefesh ki techchetah: And if a person sin.*

The first soul stage is called nefesh and represents the beginning of life, the growth process of infancy through childhood. At this basic level the biophysical organism needs to be satisfied before all else. Our bodies are the foundation of our being. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, in his 1943 influential paper, "A theory of human motivation" the primary needs are physiological and need to be fulfilled before all else." On the level of Nefesh, we act in the world defined by our basic needs: food, sleep, shelter and human comfort. As a child the needs of nefesh are simple, but as we grow into adulthood what we perceive as "need"- personally and in relationship with other, becomes much more complex, and much

more expensive. Faster cars, bigger homes, two-hundred dollar creams that fight aging - so much stuff. And yet we have learned that more stuff does not necessarily mean greater personal fulfillment. Likewise, many acquaintances without true friends or deep intimate connections do not provide a sense of belonging to the world. If our children were to tell us that their lifelong goal was to live, like Thoreau, alone in a cabin in the woods, without people, without things, we would have serious concerns. Not only because of their lack of what we perceive as having a "normal life" but more importantly their lack of need for connection to other souls. After all, Ted Kozinsky the Unabomber lived alone in the woods. As adults, living at the Nefesh level is not reaching our true potential as creations of God. It is living with superficial goals, fulfilling superficial needs. As Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living.

When our physical and emotional nefesh needs are met, we reach for a higher level of soul, questioning who we are, and why we exist.

Stage 2: Ruach, Discovering our purpose

There was once a disgruntled stonecutter. All his life he spent toiling at the rock face, the sun beating upon his back as he chipped slowly away in the quarry. He hated his job and he hated his life, and more than anything he hated his foreman. His foreman never paid him wages on time while forcing him to work un-godly hours. But most of all he hated his foreman because he made him feel so envious. The foreman would strut, handing out orders, left right and center with not a care in the world, venturing no where near a hammer and a chisel. What a life! If only thought the stonecutter, if only I could be the foreman. Well, strangely enough, some power was listening to the unhappy stonecutter and before he could say I wish, he was suddenly transformed into the foreman. What joy. No more work on the rock face. He could walk around all day giving orders to everyone. He was happy- until one day when the King came to visit. The foreman had to give all of his profits to the King and had to serve him hand and foot, and laugh at his stupid jokes. If only, he thought, if only I could be the king. Shazam, suddenly he was the king. He was carried everywhere around the kingdom, with servants to cater to his every need and with worshipping crowds in every town. Life as a king was great. Of course, it was a little hot to be moving outside because the sun was very strong- indeed the sun was very bright. And his robes were hot and confining. Ah, to be the sun. In a flash there he was, up in the sky, beaming and shining all around. It was fun being the sun. See that green field, one little extra beam and the grass became yellow. That white nose? Red in an instant. And then he felt the wind and saw people stopping to feel the breeze

on their skin. He saw flowers and grasses whipped by the wind's power. Without a thought he became the wind, sweeping here and there, down into the valley until a mountain stood in his way. He could go over it, he could go around it but the mountain stood its ground. If only I could be a mountain he thought, it's been here for ages. Going to be here forever. Rock solid, steady. But then he heard a knocking sound at his base, and slowly he felt himself being chipped away. Looking down he could see a little man in a quarry, chipping away at his sides with a hammer and a chisel. Ah, if only, he thought, if only I could be a stonecutter. And there he was, a stonecutter once more, at last at peace.

Genesis 1:2 "And a *ruach eloheim*, a spirit of God, moved over the surface of the water.

Genesis 41:38 "Can we find such a man as this, a man in whom is *ruach Adonai*, the spirit of God."

The second level of soul is *ruach*, the spirit of humanness, the qualities of uniqueness- of place, of presence, of self; our potential and our growth. *Ruach* is the part of our being that is stirred by majestic sights and sounds; the part of our being that is stirred by the pain of others. It is our affect, our emotion, and our intelligence. Physical satisfaction is no longer enough to make us happy. We feel, often subconsciously, an ache for cosmic specialness, a need to feel unique.

Deep inside all of us we know that there is someone we are meant to be. And we can feel when we are becoming that person, when we are being true to our soul. The reverse is also true. We know when we are heading in the wrong direction and we are becoming something other than self. Wanting to "fit in", to be like another can motivate this something other; but when we try to be like another, we lose ourselves.

We are put on this earth to learn our own lessons. Each soul has a series of reasons that are its alone. There is no repetition of souls or of soul purpose. When we begin the journey of finding our purpose, we are experiencing our *ruach*, the part of our soul, which are Divine and uniquely ours alone.

The journey begins with one question, "Who am I?"

We have all asked it- consciously or subconsciously, whether we have heard the answer or not, whether we have responded to the answer or not.

The Israeli poet Zelda writes that we are given names by the different experiences and people we encounter, but the most difficult name to find and the truest, is the one we give ourselves.

This summer, I was privileged to serve as clergy for the first nursery school camp Shabbat of the season. The children sat before me with wide eyes as I told a story and as they were filing out, I began to ask the children what their names were. One of the little boys came to the front of the room with three little girls in tow. He asked me what my name was and then introduced me to his friends. It was a very special moment for me. This young boy was giving me a sense of his ruach- a sense of his being. Every day of the summer, this three year old would ask me how I was and if I was still Rabbi Renee.

When we ask who we are, we begin to remember that we are created in the Divine image and that our purpose is to become clear mirrors for that Divinity. Sometimes we see glimpses of our true inner selves, our Divine self, but most of the time we create layers upon layers of delusion about our lives. We live how others want us to live. We become who others want us to become. This falsehood comes from trying to fit a soul into an ego. And we forget our truest self. The only way to scrape away the layers of illusion is to keep asking the question. And to try different things until the answer seems louder than anything else in your life. And then to respond to the call.

There once was a Shepard. This man had not always been a Shepard. He had been raised as the child of a king. But one day, he acted from a place inside his soul and disappointed the king, leaving no option but to flee the kingdom. And so he became Moses the Shepard and a husband and found a community. And he forgot what he had left behind, but he never forgot the feeling of acting from his soul. One day, while he was out with the herd, his soul was engaged in the same way again, through the asking of a question. And although he pretended at first not to hear what was being asked of him, after the seventh repetition, he returned to Egypt and worked with God and his siblings to free the people Israel from slavery.

The question is there for us all. We can choose to ignore it. Or to listen and act.

Stage three: Neshamah, fulfilling our purpose.

Genesis 2:7 "God blew the *nishmat hayyim*, the breath of life, in Adam."

Proverbs 20:27 "The *nishmat Adam*, the life breathe of man in the lamp of the Lord."

When we listen to the call of our soul, and find our Divine purpose, we access our neshamah, the holiest part of self. There is both risk and reward in this endeavor. For Moses, the

Shepard, the work was not always satisfying and the rewards seemed to be few and far between. Moses knew loneliness, he felt the sting of jealousy and most importantly, he was not able to reach the Promised Land. But by accessing his soul and pursuing his Divine purpose, Moses was able to see God, panim el panim, face to face. He was able to learn just how holy he was and just how human he was. When we do what we are meant to do, we find the part of ourselves that is created in the Divine Image. Fulfillment is the by-product of honoring neshamah. It comes from being ourselves in the most profound way possible, responding to our soul.

Two weeks ago, one of my past confirmation students and Bat Mitzvah, a young girl of 17 went into the hospital for cosmetic surgery. Something went terribly wrong on the operating table and several hours later, her parents had to make the painful the decision whether or not to take her off life support and donate her organs. The morning after her death, I received tens of phone calls from her friends, wanting to talk and cry together. One young man called for a different reason. He wanted to create an annual community wide mitzvah or learning project that would honor this young woman's love for Judaism and her community. He accessed his unique talent to try to help others. There was a need; his soul reacted to the cry.

Shlomo Carlbach, z'l told this story: One of the greatest masters of modern Hasidic times was Kalonimus Kalman, the master of Piezenchza, who was killed in Treblinka. He would say that at five years old children already needed a master to connect their souls to heaven. So he gathered around him a Kingdom of children and created a school for thousands. To these children, Kalman was their father, their mother and their best friend. In 1940, he was moved to the Warsaw Ghetto where he wrote a most precious book published posthumously. This book called The Holy Fire was a collection of the sermons he gave in the dark of the Ghetto. Carlbach was so moved by the teachings that he sought to find some of Kalman's disciples, his children. But he was told over and over again that there was no one left. That the Nazis had killed them all. One day, while Shlomo Carlbach was walking down Yarkon, a street near the beach of Tel Aviv, he saw a hunchback who was so broken. The man's face was beautiful, but his body was completely turned in upon itself. The man was sweeping the streets and Carlbach greeted him with a Shalom. The man replied in the heaviest of Polish accents. And they began a conversation. Carlbach excitedly asked if the man knew of Piazencha. "What do you mean," replied the man, "I am from Piazencha." Carlbach asked if the man had ever studied with the holy Kalonimus Kalman. The reply, "I was a student at his school from the age of five until eleven. When I was eleven, I went to Auschwitz. I was so strong they though I

was seventeen. I was whipped and hit and kicked and never healed- that is why I look like I do now. I have no one in the world. I'm all alone." And the man continued sweeping the ground. Shlomo Carlbach, with tears in his eyes said, "My sweetest friend, do you know that my whole life, I have been waiting to see you, a person who studied with the master. Please give me one of his teachings." The hunchback glared back, "do you think that you could be in Auschwitz for five years and still remember teachings." The man went to the water fountain and washed his hands. He fixed his tie and put down his broom and then he began, "there was never such a Sabbath as this one. We danced, hundreds maybe thousands of children and the master was singing a sweet song to greet the holy angels, and at the meal, he would teach a story between every course. And after each teaching the master would say, "*Kinderlach, der goyseh zach in de velt iz tuen emetzen a tovah*- the greatest thing in the world is to do someone else a favor. After telling the story the hunchback sighed, "You know my parents are gone, my family, and I was in Auschwitz- hell on earth. And in the moments of my greatest despair, I could hear the master, "kinderlach"... Do you know how many favors you can do in Auschwitz at night? I would walk from person to person and say, 'why are you crying?' They would tell me about their families, people they would never see again. I would hold their hands, and cry with them. And I would walk to the next person. It would give me strength for another day. Now I'm in Tel Aviv, and I have no one in the world. When I feel despair, I hear my Rebbe's voice, "the greatest thing in the world is to do someone else a favor." You know how many favors you can do on the streets of the world. And with those final words, the hunchback picked up his broom and continued sweeping the streets.

The holy hunchback cleaned the streets of the world by reminding everyone of his master's lesson. That was his call. He was the only one who could keep the lesson alive. And with his sweeping, his soul came alive.

May we find the strength during this time of introspection to listen to what our soul is telling us and to respond to our unique call. May we reach out to those around us with our gifts. For when we fulfill our Divine purpose, the world is repaired, and we are filled with the essence of holiness. Redemption can occur when we make it possible. We are all meant for something great- if we but open our minds and our eyes to the message.

