The Breath of Life Within Us (Genesis 2:7)

CBE Rosh Hashanah Day 2

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May 17th, 2025. 10:13 PM. Mount Sinai Hospital. After months of preparation, and hours of labor, my wife, Lindsey, and I welcomed our daughter, Ida, into this world. We watched as the breath of life entered into her tiny, wrinkly body. And with that breath came a cry…well, lots of crying as she adjusted to her new reality. We were fortunate, thank God, that there were very few complications with our little Ida. Now four months old, she loves rolling around on her play mat, curiously eyeing our dog Ruby, and exploring Brooklyn from the seat of her stroller or strapped into her baby carrier. But for me, the sweetest, most precious pieces of time I get to spend with Ida are in the soft, still, quiet moments of her chest rising and falling, over and over again, as she gently sleeps in my arms. Up and down, in and out, her breathing, her breath, the sustaining, living force of this precious being. It is in these moments that I know that her breath is more than a central biological component of life; it is holy.

We have gathered here this week to mark another day of birth: Rosh Hashana, the birthday of the world. But more specifically, we are celebrating the creation of humanity. According to the Midrash, God began the creation of the world on the 25th of Elul, the final month in the Hebrew calendar.

God created the heavens and the earth, day by day, piece by piece, bringing order and structure to the chaotic nothingness of the universe. But it wasn't until the sixth day of creation, on the 1st of Tishrei, that God collected dust from the four corners of the earth, mixing them all together in order to form *adam*, the very first human being. Having formed the human from earthly elements, God infuses the human with something beyond the new firmament of the world.[1] As we read in Genesis 2:7: "God יהוה formed the Human from the soil's matter, blowing into their nostrils the breath of life: the Human became a living being."[2] Nishmat Chayim, "the breath of life". Neshema means "soul" and chayim is "life." Although these words appear separtely throughout Torah, this verse in Genesis is the only time we see these words together, forming this new entity, this breath of life. This is the only thing that separates human beings from other creatures on this earth. It is this breath of life that causes us to become something more than dust gathered from the far reaches of the world. It allows us to experience life, to live, to grow, to change, to struggle, to connect, to suffer, to love, to do all the things of life. Nishmat Chayim, "the breath of life", the core, fundamental essence of humanity.

The holiness found in the breath of life is present in your breath, and your breath, and your breath, and all of our breaths. This holiness is inherent in every single one of us. We know this from even earlier in Genesis, in which God creates human beings b'tzelem Elohim, "in the image of God."

[1] Bereshit Rabbah 2:7; Yalkut Shimoni 1:13
[2] Genesis 2:7

And, as the Midrash further explains, God collected dust from the four corners of the earth and combined them all to create the first human so that no one, no one, would be able to say that their body or their soul was better than any other person in the world. We are, each and every person in the world, children of God, and the nishmat chayim, the breath of life, flows through us every single moment of every single day, including right now. (Breathe in and out).

But sometimes, we lose track of this eternal truth. I'm sure I wouldn't be alone in saying that in many moments throughout my day, I take my breath for granted. That in rushing from daycare drop off to meetings to eating to checking email to running errands, I get lost in the busyness of life. I fail to acknowledge and appreciate my breath, this miraculous, holy circulation that connects my body and life to other people, the natural world, and to God.

According to the American Lung Association, human beings take approximately 20,000 breaths every day.[3] 20,000 breaths, every single day. Each breath we take, as we are sleeping, when we first wake up, when we eat, when we run, when we rest, every breath you've taken during this sermon, this service, all of today so far, every breath is truly holy. But only if we are present enough to understand it that way. In acknowledging this divine gift, we recognize ourselves as created in the image of God, and as human beings worthy of love, care, and goodness. 20,000 breaths in a day, 20,000 opportunities for us to know our inherent worth, value, and holiness.

[3] American Lung Association. https://www.lung.org/blog/2020-breath

And in a world that constantly tries to make us feel small and alone, or tries to force us to be productive to have worth, or tries to tell us we must succeed to have value, our breath can remind us of who we are, our inherent worth in this world, and our purpose for how we live.

As I reflect further upon the breath of life I witness within Ida every single day, I realize that this holy experience has shifted how I think about the wider world. Headlines and stories of babies starving to death, of children being killed in school, of the youngest members of our community forced to confront climate change. Everything feels closer, more intense. These stories are not of some other peoples' children, they are of my child and our children. In their book, *On Breathing*, the writer Jamieson Webster, artfully notes that "breathing…can be a disruption of the status quo, a means of resistance, affirmation, and a reassertion of community."[4] By understanding the preciousness and power of our breath, and the breath of our loved ones, we propel ourselves to affirm humanity, reassert ourselves in community, and resist the forces of oppression that exist all around us. We breathe not as individuals, but as part of a collective, with billions of other creatures, all at the same time. However, it is clear, and it has been clear for years now, that we are living in a time in which not everyone's breath is treated as a holy gift from God.

We received a visceral reminder of this truth 11 years ago in this city. On July 17, 2014, police officers on Staten Island approached Eric Garner, a 43-year old Black man. The officers accused Mr. Garner of having illegally

[4] Jamieson Webster, *On Breathing*, Pg. 217

sold loose cigarettes, which he denied. When Daniel Pantaleo, one of the officers on the scene, attempted to handcuff Mr. Garner, he pulled his arms away. Officer Pantaleo then placed his arm around Mr. Garner's neck, and dramatically brought him to the ground, laying him on his stomach. Officer Pantaleo then pushed Mr. Garner's face to the ground, pinning him down. It was at this point, amidst a crowd that had gathered, that the tragic, heartbreaking words gasped out of Mr. Garner's mouth: "I can't breathe." Eleven times Mr. Garner repeated this phrase, eleven times of trying, desperately, to alert someone to do something, eleven times crying out to the holy one of blessing, the creator of nishmat chayim, to fill his lungs with this breath of life so that he may live. But that did not happen. Officer Pantaleo took the breath of life away from Eric Garner, depriving him of this holy, precious, fragile gift from God.

The expression that Mr. Garner uttered, "I can't breathe", is more than a desperate cry for help from a man being killed by the system meant to protect him. "I can't breathe" is a theological statement, a declaration of someone or something desecrating the gift that God gives to all of God's children - this gift of nishmat chayim, the breath of life, that is to sustain us throughout our lives. This phrase took on even more significance on May 25, 2020, when Derek Chauvin, an officer with the Minneapolis Police Department, pressed his knee into the neck of George Floyd, a 46-year old Black man. For 9 minutes and 29 seconds Officer Chauvin's knee was on Mr. Floyd's neck, ultimately killing him outside of a grocery store in Minneapolis.

Almost six years after Eric Garner was killed, George Floyd uttered the same words, desperately trying to change his fate: “I can’t breathe.” But Officer Chauvin took the breath of life away from Mr. Floyd, depriving him, just like Mr. Garner, of this holy, precious, fragile gift from God.

If we are to understand our Torah correctly, it would be to see the nishmat chayim, the breath of life, that God endowed to humanity as a divine, holy gift that no one should be able to take away from us. Therefore this phrase, this plea, this cry, “I can’t breathe” must compel us to protect the humanity of each and every person in this world. “I can’t breathe” is the godliness, the holiness within each of us crying out for another, calling us to do what is right and just. For it is not only Black men being killed by the police in this country who can declare “I can’t breathe.”

Because “I can’t breathe” say the civilians of Gaza, under attack from the ground and the skies, suffocating under the rubble of buildings, unsure of where their next meal will come from, or what violence they will encounter tomorrow, or if their people will survive the devastation of this brutal attack.

“I can’t breathe”, say the hostages languishing in Gaza, kept deep below the surface, gasping for any ounce of fresh air, emaciated bodies, unsure of their fate because of the cruelty of Hamas and the belligerency of the Israeli government.

“I can’t breathe”, say the immigrants, the refugees, the asylum seekers, the “huddled masses yearning to breath free” as Emma Lazarus would say[5],

[5] Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus.

hiding in the shadows, terrified they will be placed in concentration camps in this country, or be deported back to the violence of their home country, or be sent to an unknown prison in a foreign place.

“I can’t breathe”, say the inmates on Rikers Island, forced to inhabit an uninhabitable place, choking on the stank smell of too many people within the walls of this place, with little regard for their health and wellbeing, without access to vital resources and legal support, locked up temporarily they say, but for who knows how long.

“I can’t breathe”, say the children and the teachers and the store employees and people of all parts of society whose lives are cut down by gun violence in this country, their breath sniped away with a bullet’s force, with our society choosing the idolatry of guns and the language of the 2nd Amendment over the protection of innocent lives.

“I can’t breathe”, say the impoverished in this country and around the world, forced to beg for necessary sustenance, navigating an unjust housing system, suffocating under the weight of it all, subjected to wandering like the Israelites in the desert, except without a forceful God guiding the way, hoping that someone will take a chance on them.

“I can’t breathe”, say the victims of natural disasters, fires, floods, earthquakes, and more, people made refugees because of a warming planet, kids with worsening asthma, all of society forced to choke our way through orange skies, run from rising sea waters, and confront a bleak future because of our treatment of our planet.

"I can't breathe" is a theological cry deserving of a theological response. For when we know the preciousness and power of our own breath, the cries of another child of God struggling to breathe the breath of life will undoubtedly call us into action, and propel us to ensure the godliness, the holiness of each and every person does not vanish from this earth.

(Breathe in and out) 20,000 breaths every single day. What will we do with them? How will we use them? Each year, as we make our way into this sanctuary, we are called upon to do teshuvah, the practice of returning to the best version of ourselves. In this way, Rosh Hashanah is a call for us to return to this eternal truth - that the nishmat chayim, the breath of life, belongs to us all. It is a call to return to this most fundamental piece of life - our breath. To acknowledge our breath, to appreciate it, to understand that the only thing that separates the living from the dead is our ability to breathe.

The Sochactover Rebbe, preaching in Poland during the early 20th century, perhaps provides us with the wisdom to put our breath into action as we begin this new year. On Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in 1919, he preached: "Behold, Rosh Hashanah is like a new action of creation…the meaning of the shofar is that it is a breathing of new life into the heart of Israel, just as in the beginning of Creation it is written, 'And God breathed into their nostrils the breath of life…"[6] We not only breathe into the shofar to make sound, to wake us up to

[6] Shem MiShmuel, Shabbat Shuvah 5680

the trials and tribulations of the world and remind ourselves of our duty to repair them, but the shofar gives us new breath, a new breath of life, so that we may be renewed in our work of building the world as it should be. Each and every precious breath is an opportunity to notice, to reflect, to seek, to speak, to love, to grow, to connect, to build, to do anything and everything in our power, as far as our lungs will take us, to live a life of purpose and meaning. A life that knows breathing as holiness. A life that responds to cries of “I can’t breathe” with robust care and holy action. A life worthy of our holy breath.

I invite you to breathe in with me…and breathe out. May we always feel the preciousness of the nishmat chayim, of the breath of life. And may that breath of life extend to all of God’s children, in this year and for years to come. Shanah tovah.