

Yedid Nefesh & the Soul's Vulnerability

KAREN ERLICHMAN

*Nafshi cholat ahavatecha
Ana El na refa na la
B'har'ot lah no'am ziv'echa
Az titchazeyk v'tit'raypey
V'hay'tah lah simchat olam.*

*My soul aches for your love
Please God, heal her. Heal the other
In showing her your radiant light
Then she will be strengthened and healed
And eternal joy will be hers.*

"Yedid Nefesh" Rabbi Eleazar Azikri of Safed

These lines come from the second stanza of *Yedid Nefesh*, a liturgical love song to God written by 16th-century Kabbalist Rabbi Eleazar Azikri of Safed. *Yedid Nefesh* appears early in Kabbalat Shabbat, and as the community sings this beautiful *piyut* (liturgical poem), all the vulnerable voices longing for God are sung, heard, and prayed collectively.

Notice first the flow and order of these five lines: The first two lines express our vulnerability; I yearn to be loved so intensely that my soul is sick. Then the focus shifts from my soul to the soul of the other. Using images of light and radiance, the language of passionate love, and themes of healing and restoration, *Yedid Nefesh* creates a liturgical landscape of vulnerability by speaking directly to our deeply held longing.

Though the word "*nefesh*" is usually translated as "soul," it can be understood in a biblical context to refer to the body. Thus, *Yedid Nefesh*, the "friend of the soul," or "the One who knows the soul," also knows the body. As we explore these five lines, I hope to engage your soul, mind, and body in the process.

*Nafshi cholat ahavatecha /
My soul aches for your love.*

Cholat in this poem is often translated as "craving," "longing," or "aching for God's love." When our soul yearns for the divine with such intensity that we feel sick, weak, or exposed, we are imbued with vulnerability so powerful that it completely penetrates our first layers of ego protection. In this exposed state of homesickness and brokenheartedness, our very longing is the bridge to healing.

How do you experience vulnerability? Have you ever experienced vulnerability as your soul's homesickness for God's love? What does it look

like, smell like, feel like in your body? Is there a particular embodied feeling of that longing?

*Ana El na refa na la /
Please God, heal her. Heal the other.
Heal the body.*

God is present in the "in-between," the space between yearning for God's love and pleading for divine healing. This often-quoted line comes from Torah (*Parshat Beha'alotecha*, in Numbers 12:13), and in the specific context of this liturgical poem, I am given new questions: Who is the one for whom we are praying for healing? Is it for our own soul, or for the soul of the other?

What would healing be right now? What surprise might you find? Where in your body do you feel these words of prayer?

*B'har'ot lah no'am ziv'echa /
In showing her your radiant light*

Kabbalistic interpretations of the creation story have given us the theology of the hidden divine spark. The divine light here is revealed both within us and around us in every moment; sometimes it is more obscured, other times more luminous. It's not that God needs to be reminded to reveal it to us; it is our work to uncover it, to risk vulnerability in order to allow the light of the divine spark within us to shine.

What veils or masks are you willing to shed in order to allow God's radiant light to shine through you, in you, and to you?

*Az titchazeyk v'tit'raypey /
Then she will be strengthened and healed.*

This particular line expresses unwavering faith and optimism that restoration and healing will happen. There is a dialectical relationship between strength and vulnerability. When your



Karen Erlichman is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in San Francisco, where she provides psychotherapy, spiritual direction, and supervision. She previously served as the Bay Area director of Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity. She can be reached at www.karenerlichman.com.

thoughts and feelings are strong, and when your body feels strong, there is a sturdy resilience that allows for vulnerability to be present as well. When you feel vulnerable, sometimes what sustains you is the belief, or faith, that your strength will be restored. There are many Jewish references to finding strength in community — for example, the requisite ten people to convene a *minyan*, or the expression on completion of a task such as an *aliyah* or giving a *drash* of “*Yasher koach*” “May you be strengthened.”

What does it feel like to feel strong? What thoughts and emotions accompany the physical experience of strength and healing? How do you express gratitude for the healing?

V'hay'tah lah simchat olam. / And eternal joy will be hers.

Perhaps gratitude is most aptly expressed by living fully in the eternal joy that is promised here.

What can you let go of in order to open yourself fully to receive this promise of joy? How does the experience of vulnerability relate to joy? Visualize yourself with your arms wide open as you consider these questions.

These lines from *Yedid Nefesh* shimmer and resonate with the second line of the *Birkat HaKohanim*, the Priestly Benediction, recited to children at the Shabbat and holiday meal, and throughout Jewish liturgy: “May God’s face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you.” 



**Visit Sh'ma
Online for
Tisch Music**

Visit www.shma.com to hear recordings of the Mission Minyan singing several songs as well as the *niggunim* — wordless melodies — of Joey Weisenberg.

This Is the Table

RONNIE SERR

Ezekiel's prophesy: "[T]his is the table that is before HaShem" (Ezekiel 41:22). Our sages expound on this verse, saying that "as long as the Temple existed, the altar would atone for Israel. Now, [after the Temple has been destroyed], a person's table atones for him." (Berakhot 55a)

Here's what we learn: Even without a Temple — its sacrifices, prayers, and ceremony — all Jews can atone for their spiritual debts and connect to the holy dwelling by the way they eat and behave around their family tables every single day.

Imagine if all Jews would host poor and hungry guests at their table: poor in wealth and hungry for food, poor in spirit and hungry for company, poor in connection and hungry for holiness, poor in knowledge and hungry for being close to God.

Consider what would be if we ate food that was kosher; if eating was intrinsically connected to representing godliness in this world. How would our lives be different if every food item was checked for its origin and cleanliness; its combination with other food items; its relation to the earth, the environment, and the local ecology; its concealed sparks from the worlds of mineral, vegetable, and animal? What if all our foods were prepared with industrious love and meticulous attention?

Envision families sharing their table, speaking words of Torah, discussing the secrets of creation, penetrating the depths of joy. What if the family, friends, and guests — men and women, adults and children, close and distant

— could express opinions fully and be heard and respected by all?

Imagine washing our hands before eating, ritually preparing ourselves for ingesting the nourishment that *HaShem* prepared especially for us at this moment and at this place.

What if we blessed the gifts of our sustenance before consuming them, acknowledging the source, the offering of sustenance? What if, on a regular basis, we asked permission to consume what we are served, rather than assume our entitlement to be nourished? Imagine offering a blessing after meals with total intention, with gratitude of the heart rather than taking our sustenance for granted.

Suppose we were satiated by the amount of food we ate — that we did not need endless amounts to satisfy our never-satisfied hunger for love. Consider living a life of great gentleness (*eden*), calm and joy, expressed in everything we do.

This is the table before *HaShem*; this is our table. If our daily bread were always to be an occasion to appreciate more, to understand more, and to love more, we would be rebuilding the Temple around our tables with every bite, every gesture, and every spoken word, spreading the holiness of our spirits into the matter of our everyday lives. 



Ronnie Serr learns and teaches the love of *HaShem*, the love of Torah, and the love of Israel.