

Al Chet Reflections, from Nancy Abraham Talo

That day, the High Priest carefully stepped into his white linen breeches. The other white linen garments followed, with help from his sons. He then approached the altar.

“And there shall be one goat for a purification offering, in addition to the purification offering of expiation and the regular burnt offering with the grain offering, each with a libation.”

(Parashat Pinchas, 29:11)

That day was Yom HaKippurim.

Did the Israelite’s burdens lift with the smoke from the altar?
Did the High Priest sing while offering the purification sacrifice?
A wordless melody, perhaps, that swirled in his soul?

(CHANT A FEW NOTES OF THE AL CHET MELODY)

Did their eyes meet in mutual understanding through the veil of smoke? Did they experience the “ray-ach nee-cho-ach” in their bones?

We are inextricably connected to Israelite and to High Priest.
We are both Israelite and High Priest.

We, too, in our intention to reconnect with the Eternal beyond and within ourselves, wrap up in white linen; encircle ourselves

in prayer shawls. Even the waxing moon is garbed in gauzy white.

This day, Yom HaKippurim

We, nation of priests, bring our “Chataim” to the altar of this time, this place. We chant our offerings. Each chanting of “Al Chet” seeps into our communal soul. Chanting, gently tapping our heart, tapping to the rhythm of return, tapping into what matters most: that we choose life, once again.

Chet and Chai seemingly so far from each other; yet they walk arm in arm: Chet and Chai share the value of 18. Both signifying life, in their own tone. Without our Chataim-our mistakes- we would have no need for Teshuvah. There would be a kind of perfection in our outlook and behavior. But, perfection is not what we most value. Rather, Teshuvah is the prominent value. So, we require our Chataim to live fully. They provide us with opportunities to stretch, grow, confront our shadow selves, overcome and return.

Impassioned, Ezekiel taught (18:28), “When the sinner is contrite and turns away from his transgressions, he shall surely live.....”

With every repetition “Al Chet” pierces through narrow doorways of the mind, through layers of congealed matter. We

dive into its mystery. Implicitly, we understand the desire of the Divine Source to welcome us home. We know that the route, like Yetziat Mitzrayim, is a route we must walk together. For it liberates us to walk hand in hand, a people seeking Oneness, leaning on and into one another; leaning toward the light. “Al Chet” not only reminds us of our inherent connection to one another, to our collective voice and communal conscience. It also exacts from us recognition of our ancient name: Yisrael.

Like Jacob, we struggle in the darkness

Caught up in the tangles

Of our minds, hearts, hands,

We have faltered, defeated

Have not lived up to our good name

“Al Chet” appears, a mighty rope

We grasp in the dark,

Sense the rope’s power to aid us.

At first ashamed that we need it.

Yet the strength of that rope, taut and true,

holds us steady as we

Clutch tightly.

For, we must choose life.

Our path illumined by the force of the rope.

“Al Chet”, life-line winding through brambles

Takes us to a clearing.

there a rushing river,

we let loose the line, skip into these living waters

Together we submerge

Together we emerge

Unified within and beyond

Home once again

Together, as a community, we step through TWENTY-TWO gates formed by each Hebrew letter of the “Al Chet” acrostic; TWENTY-TWO entry points toward return.

The words are charged through the vehicle of the song, through the scent - “ray-ach nee-cho-ach” - we know in our bones, in our historic memory. “Al Chet”, the infallible prescription to remedy our wrongs, to bring us back into balance, align us with our innate goodness. We are meant to err, to experience

exile—we recall the Garden of Eden. We are meant to heal, to return home---“Al Chet” provides a rope to get us there. We stretch to reach Atonement, to receive it into the silken sheath of our struggling heart, chanting our way to Oneness, leaving behind the illusion of duality. As the sky turns sapphire once again, we and our fringes float through open gates, into the Light..... grateful to and for the mysterious vehicle of “Al Chet”.

(CHANT A FEW NOTES)