

## Kol Nidre Sermon

5777

Many years ago when I was in Israel for a summer study program, I had an interesting encounter on my way to the Old City in Jerusalem. For months, and since my first visit to Israel many years before, I had been visiting the old city and making my way through the cobblestoned alleys of the Jewish quarter to the Kotel, the wailing wall. I had my usual path, I'd cross the busy street outside the large towering walls and make my way through the steps to the Jaffa gate--and if I was in the mood, I would get one of the giant long bagels from one of the street vendors, and would usually pay for it later with a stomach ache. Once inside, I'd walk past David's Tower and through the wonderful colors and smells of the Muslim quarter and then turn to wind my way down to a balcony overlooking the kotel plaza. From this vantage point, I could see the gleaming gold of the dome of the rock, the sprawling kotel plaza and Mt Zion in the distance. When I was lucky enough to feel one of those warm Jerusalem breezes, I could not help but feel a sense of calm and connection with this place. For me it wasn't as much about the history of the site, and definitely was not about the politics--it was the symbolism as a gathering place for Jewish from around the world, and the beauty and the sounds which always filled the space. It simply filled me with a special spirit, a special sense of connection when I was there.

But as sometimes happens with moments such as these, that deep feeling of connection began to slowly fade. After many more visits, the kotel had somehow just

become for me just another place to visit, another stop on my walk—until that August day when I met the man asking for directions.

There I was on my usual path to the kotel when I saw a young Black Hat Hasidic man waving to me from across the street. He was standing there with a long black beard and holding in one hand a siddur and in the other a bottle of water.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?” he asked.

“Yes, of course I do” I said resisting the temptation to fake an Israeli accent.

“Good, do you happen to know the way to the kotel?”

I was caught off guard, and frankly didn’t expect to hear those words, addressed to me from a man who looked at first glance to be someone who should already know his way to this holy site. I’ll admit the mixture of the clothes, the beard, the black hat and the calm midwestern accent left me not knowing what to expect.

I said “yes” and invited the man to follow me. As we talked, the man told me the basics of his story, that he had just made aliyah and had flown into Israel the day before. His family would be joining him the next day, but he wanted to make sure to first visit the kotel—amazingly, he had never been to Israel or Jerusalem before. On our walk, we talked about Israel, American music and our favorite Bob Dylan albums, falafel, and then before we knew it, there we were at the balcony overlooking the kotel plaza.

“There it is” I said, pointing down to the kotel plaza with the same ambivalence I had been feeling for weeks now. I glanced back at the man. He had stopped mid sentence and was now looking down at the kotel plaza. Pausing, he put both hands on the cold metal rail in front of him. As I looked up at him, his eyes were beginning to tear

up, and I could see the familiar glow fill his face. He turned to me said simply “thank you”, and without another word, I left him to continue on his own. At that moment, I knew that the kotel had in some way held its power for me, even if it was for me just the old familiar wall. As I had guided this man to what had become a place all too familiar, I was guided back to a place of connection, of remembering the experience, where I was able to see this holy site through his eyes. Two people who started on different paths, ending up at the common place of connection. Through helping this man find his way, I, if only a little, was helped find my own.

Seeing the world through the eyes of others can open up an entirely new way of understanding not only different viewpoints, but can also deeply open up our own inner conversations and choices. As is often repeated this time of year, Yom Kippur and the Days of Awe are times when we are reminded of the communal responsibility to each other. Through the plural nature of the prayers and the simple physical presence of all the people around us as we sit here tonight, we are reminded that not only our sins, our mistakes and missteps are part of the communal process of teshuva, but that our experiences and interactions each and every day are all inherently tied together.

As we stand and say Al Chet, for the sins we have committed--we each say the same words, we pound our chest in collective recognition of the pain we have caused. Yet, each time we also connect each sin, each example, with our own experiences. For the sin we have committed inadvertently, through speech, through thoughts--we are not saying only that we worked together to create these problems. It is not collective punishment, it is collective recognition of our individual mistakes. Without even

looking each other in the eyes, doing this kind of group acknowledgement puts us in direct contact, direct interaction with each other. As we say these words together, we have no choice but to recognize each other's unique experiences, not just the mistakes, but also their unique perspective on life. Even if the person standing next to you might have a wholly different set of values, politics or worldview, this communal acknowledgment puts us all back on the same level. Yes, Yom Kippur is about Teshuva, repentance and fixing our mistakes, but it is also simply about acknowledging each other's differences, and through this deep acceptance of difference we move ourselves to a place of communal healing and action.

There is a growing practice in Judaism of spiritual direction, a sort of spiritual therapy and deep listening which has been a popular part of the Christian faith for generations. Jewish tradition too has a long history of spiritual guides, and it is possible to see even the Temple priests and prophets as the original leaders providing spiritual guidance to members of their community. The rabbinic tradition talks of these guides calling them, *morei derech*, teachers of the way, yet they also said that the greatest spiritual guides are not necessarily the great teachers or those with more knowledge or experience than us. Another word they use to describe these guides is *haver*, the same word used in modern Hebrew for a friend. For the rabbis, the people who are the best to guide us on our journey need not be the priests, the rabbis, or the spiritual leaders of the community, but instead the people we encounter every day, our friends *and* those who sit next to us on our life journeys.

Hevruta, the traditional Jewish experience of deep study and partnership with another is based on this kinds of friendship and guidance. On its most basic level, a hevruta is a study partner, but it is so much more. A hevruta is not necessarily someone at the same level or even with the same values or outlook as you, but they are someone who becomes a true equal by opening themselves as much to being a guide through the learning as they are a receiver of the other's unique perspective.

For those who have experienced hevruta study, they often report that while they have powerful learning and achieved some great insights with those who would be considered intellectual and emotional peers, the most inspiring learning often comes from those who are most different. Stepping into these relationships may seem at first like an unequal partnership, but when done right, true hevruta study leads to deep learning, and through challenging each other each partner ends up strengthening his or her own values and viewpoints, while leaving **real space** for change and movement.

For many months, in my rabbinical studies I studied Talmud with an orthodox man far more advanced in his scholarship than I was. When I first began our time together, I was confident I would learn from *him*, but frankly I was unsure of what he would gain from studying with me. He had studied Talmud for so many more years than I had, and I was just beginning. It turns out that I did learn much, but through my questioning and my viewpoints, my hevruta partner was made to teach in a way that made sense to me, connected to me and my values, and he in turn--and these are his words-- learned just as much Talmud as I did. My perspective gave him insights which he might not have had with an intellectual peer who shared his knowledge and views. If

one steps into a hevruta relationship, or any relationship, with the right kavanna, the right intention, then differences become points of connection and listening becomes the best teaching. We have no choice but to accept each other for where we are and who we are. This according to Jewish tradition is the holiest kind of study.

But the idea of hevruta is not just about study. The Mishnah tells us that "One who learns from one's friend a single chapter, or a single Halachah, or a single verse, or a single expression, or even a single letter, must show him or her honor." (Avot 6:3). This important concept is both a lesson for how we should learn together, but also is a lesson for how we should interact with those who are most different than us.

Imagine for a moment that you encounter someone who shares the most opposing view than you on a value or belief system that you hold dear--something that you have always felt you simply knew was right. You have done the learning, you know the issues, and have had enough conversations to know where you stand. We have all had this experience, those clashes of opinions that often times lead to more arguing and point-making than listening and accepting. Just look at the political situation in the country down south is a reminder that far too often, this path is the more common path when the difference of opinions and values is strong.

Yet what if we really had to live by the words of this mishnah? If we learn even a single expressions, a single letter then we have to show the other honor. If the other make even one minute point, asks us one challenging question, then even if we still think we are right, they deserve our respect and honor. **Since we know that we will always receive at least the smallest new insight even from the most heated**

**argument, we should then I think have to *start* every interaction from this place of honoring and acceptance.** Those that frustrate us the most, those who seem most different than give us that letter of learning just by being different and challenging us to look at ourselves and our beliefs. And this deserves respect.

The ideas of hevruta, of deep self reflection and acceptance of others and our own inherent inner strength is an important part of the Jewish spiritual practice of mussar. This movement begun by Rabbi Israel Salanter many centuries ago, is often translated as moral discipline. Mussar focuses on exploring and cultivating middot, inner traits, to guide us down the path of living a more ethical and balanced life. While much of Mussar is about personal reflection and inner work, a core part of the practices and a necessary part of the personal spiritual growth is an exploration of our relationships. We are asked to look deeply at our own inner qualities and explore and accept the difference found in the others we encounter in our lives.

Mussar sees each person as having a collection of “soul traits”, middot, or parts or essences of their inner self which make up their personality and soul. These include traits such as *rachamin*, compassion, *sefer*, order, *bitachon*, trust, *shevil ha’zahov*, moderation, *nedivut*, generosity and more. Each person has all of these traits in them, but each person, and at different times has different amounts of each of these traits. Someone who is more trusting might have more of this trait than others, although even the least trusting person still has the ability to be in relationships with another. Someone who is good at moderating their behavior, might be at a place in their life where they hold on to this trait, but at other times might find it the greatest challenge.

We are asked to walk our spiritual paths, knowing that we not only we have all of these traits, in different levels at different times, but that everyone else does too. When it is difficult to recognize the positive traits in others, we must remind ourselves that they are there and accept them and learn from them the best that we can. While this does not and should not mean would should force ourselves to learn from or interact with those who hurt us most or cause the most pain, it at least allows to put others actions and emotions in perspective and move to a place a greater healing from these toughest of relationships. Like *Teshuva*, the often repeated notion of returning which we reflect upon on Yom Kippur, this kind of perspective allows to focus on what is important and return to the inner soul we were meant to be. It is a reminder that everyone is on their own unique path.

It is interesting to note that in mussar, the teachers were called Mashgiach, often translated as “supervisors”, giving us the sense that this person, leads and guides others through teaching and making sure that the process is done correctly. (Interestingly the same term is used for someone or supervises the kashrut of a factory or restaurant). Yet looking at the root of this word Mashgiach, gives us a hint about the true role of these spiritual guides-the word is derived from the root “to pay attention”. Thus, the leaders of these spiritual communities were not just teachers or people who found problems and helped people solve them, they above all were listeners who paid attention to the needs of those around them.

My teacher Barbara Breitman describes this holy listening as something which is part of the process of bringing out people’s stories, experiencing them and holding onto

the presence which hearing the stories create through that holy process of listening. The mystery found in these stories, in these journeys, become as she puts it “the sacred texts, the Torah of our lives”. The stories become sacred because as she says “our narratives like those of our ancestors, chronicled difficult, inspired journeys of Jews coming into the fullness of being, responding to the mysterious call both within our individual souls and within an inspired ever-expanding community (74). Through holy listening and the most accepting of relationships we are able to bring out the Torah from each other, and strengthen not only ourselves but our community.

Rabbi Simcha Zissel, the great mussar teacher and scholar, puts the power of these relationships even more clearly and says that true “meeting” the other is not just about acceptance, but is “bearing the burden of the other”. As he interprets it, the best way to encounter others, is when we “diligently seek the benefit of the other in every possible way”, which not only is good social behavior as we help others, but also can bring us to profound insights and growth for ourselves.

But Simcha Zissel, didn't just teach about this absolute devotion to others, he also lived this in his work and life. It was said in the yeshivas he created, all of the upkeep was done by the teachers and students. There were no staff or caretakers, and the most menial tasks were the most desired--people lined up to mop the floors, to wash the dishes, and to clean the toilets. Everyone pitched in, and everyone was equal when it came to helping others. His students would say “Don't let a single day go by without doing something for someone”. (Morinis 205)

We can learn from this concept. We can try to put ourselves in positions where we will have opportunities to help others, and *also* not to fear putting ourselves in those tough conversations that let our inner selves, the values and ideas that we hold dear with be challenged. By challenging ourselves in this way and allowing ourselves to rethink or reconfigure our values every day, we often end up not weakening our beliefs but strengthening them. Because it is through this deepest kind of nurturing that only the process of learning from those most different than us can bring. And based on the model of Simcha Zissel's yeshiva, it might also be a suggestion to bring back potlucks for our Shabbat Kiddish where everyone will stay to do dishes because it is the deepest of spiritual work!

Now I'd like to bring us back for a moment to the experience of this evening together. We just heard the Kol Nidre prayer, one of the most mysterious and powerful prayers in all of Jewish liturgy. The prayer has obscure origins, but is usually considered to be a rabbinic legal formula based on an even more ancient magical incantation of releasing us from unfulfilled vows. This meaning, which many see as weakening the entire power of keeping our word bothers some, but for many of us, in these moments of great reflection, Kol Nidre hits us deeply on a much more emotional level. Whether or not we connect to the meaning of the words being sung, we connect to the music, to the sounds of the words and to the memories. The power of Kol Nidre it's often said, is simply magical.

Kol Nidre is a reminder of how we are often inspired and taught by what is most mysterious in our lives. It is the things that we can't so easily explain, the questions, the

challenges, the encounters with others are often what give us strength to move on and start fresh with a new vision of what lies ahead in our journeys. What we thought was once right, **is now turned on its side** to give us even greater insights. What was once a mistake is now an opportunity.

The mystery of Kol Nidre, allows us to dive into the mystery of existence and start the next year, not with answers, but with acceptance of our place in the world, and to see the ultimate beauty in ourselves and those we encounter in our lives. As Rabbi Elie Kaunfer says, that magic of Kol Nidre reminds us that we must “confront our inability to always understand everything we say” he says. “First we recognize that in a world so focused on articulation and expression, deep relationships defy linguistics boundaries. Who could express in words the love of a parent for a child? Or the pain of a husband losing a wife? Stepping into the intensity of Yom Kippur through words that don’t “mean” reminds us of the futility of language to capture our emotions.”

As we sit here, this evening of Kol Nidre, we can be at peace with the knowledge that much of why we are here might always remain mysterious. We all might have different reasons for coming together this time of year, some for prayer, some for simple reflection, others simply for community. But above all, we come together because we are searching in some way for relationship and connection with our inner selves and with others. We gather and sit both utterly alone, and deeply connected to each other, in acceptance of the mystery of existence.

Yet once we step out of these doors tonight, once we head out of this community and into the more familiar places of our homes, families and relationships, how do we get to this place where we can truly create encounters with others that provide the powerful opportunities for spiritual learning and guidance? I think the answer comes from one of the often repeated lessons of this day. Teshuva, returning.

As we turn, return to our true selves, we must understand that we do not suddenly arrive back at where we want to or need to be. We appeal to God through both words and actions, knowing that no matter how hard we try, we never turn fully to a place of perfection--only to a place of our imperfect true selves. We must understand what turning really entails, to turn means to once again encounter the experiences, and the people around us, to see and connect with those who are in our lives. The people that seem the most different than us, that challenge us the most, **whether we like it or not, they are still there** as we turn around as we make our way back to our true selves. We can't deny them. Some, like a friend, a study partner or even a tourist on the streets of Jerusalem can be the greatest guides, while others we accept have caused too much pain and we can simply acknowledge them and continue our turning.

Yet, it is the entirety of what we encounter on this dance of turning to our true selves that can inspire us to grow and change, and lead us down new and exciting paths of the deepest spiritual learning. On this Yom Kippur, may we be truly present to those whom we encounter in our lives, to work to gain from both what we share and how we are different. It does not need to be difficult, but may we always remember that as we

help guide others through the mystery of existence, we end up guiding ourselves. All we need to do is show the way.

Gmar Hatima Tova