

Kol Nidre 5778
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Guilt Guts Us

L'Shana Tova.

Thanks.

Our teachers are not always who we think they are. Yes, we can all recall those who taught us in school, those who gave us grades, even those who mentored us. Often, though, the best, the most profound teachers are not those with whom we shared a structured learning environment. Sometimes we encounter our greatest teachers for a brief time, but the lessons they teach us continue long afterwards.

So it is with one of my most treasured teachers. I encountered Rabbi Naomi Levy about 20 years ago when I was a young rabbinical student in Los Angeles. She taught a few informal lessons. I never had a class with her, never earned a grade with her. But she opened my eyes, and as I have read her books in the years since, she continues to teach me, challenge me, inspire me.

In her latest book, Einstein and the Rabbi, available in our temple library, Rabbi Levy offers a wonderful teaching. She explains that angels are everywhere, in all shapes and sizes. They are with us, with animals, plants, everything. And constantly, they whisper, "Grow! Grow!"

I have never been one to fully believe in angels, but I love the idea that someone or something exists beyond us whose sole job is to encourage us to grow. I imagine that some angels have an easy time with that assignment, while others struggle. Encouraging grass or trees to grow in Central New York seems to me to be much easier than, say, in the Arizona desert.

Encouraging humans to grow represents an entirely different challenge. Those poor angels tasked with encouraging us must have an awfully high threshold for frustration. We all know that growth is hard, staying put is much easier. Yet day in and day out, those angels trudge ahead, pushing us to grow. It must feel like talking to a wall for some of them.

And then comes Yom Kippur, and the words we have uttered tonight. Tradition teaches that the angels cower in dread on this day. I think some might secretly love it—for once, someone else or something else is at least attempting to push people to grow.

Yom Kippur is all about growth. Kol Nidre moves the process of growing into focus, and for the full day of the holiday, we turn inward, looking at ourselves, looking to grow. In confronting our past, focusing intently on our present, and dreaming of our future, this day calls us to consider and reconsider, to see where we have grown and where we have stood still.

If Yom Kippur works as it usually does, sooner or later we all arrive at the same stop along the highway—the rest stop of guilt. All of us carry guilt. Hardwired, part of being chosen, something else—I do not know its origins. But I do know that guilt has been, is, and will likely continue to be a close intimate friend of the Jewish people. We are not the only ones so blessed. But we are unique in our guilt, and tonight we have a special opportunity to understand it anew. In exploring guilt, and the power it possesses we can help ourselves in the pursuit of growth. To begin, let us consider our scars.

I used to think that scars were something we all have, something we all endure, something simply to be accepted. But the more time I spend with all of you, the more time we spend together in hospital rooms and rehab centers and at the cemetery, the more my view has changed. Today I see scars as something different. Scars are marks of success.

None of us gets through life without scars. I have yet to officiate a funeral for one lacking scars. But I also have yet to officiate a wedding or a bat mitzvah or a bar mitzvah for one who did not have at least a scar or two. Those scars remind us of falling, of failing, of missing the mark. But the fact that we can talk about them, that we are moving forward after earning them, means that they are also signs of success. We have overcome those challenges.

Each week at Shabbat services this past year we have taken time to look back. We spend a few moments every Friday night in meditation, considering the events of the week just ended. In those brief quiet moments we take a moment to contextualize, to recognize that the past is just that—behind us. We see the scars, and more often than not, we see the successes that have come from those marks.

In time, I have come to realize that our brief moments of meditation also provide a remarkable gift: they provide time to say thanks. When I look back on the week that was, I find myself feeling grateful for survival, for learning, for moving forward. And in finding thankfulness the scar heals, and the successes which sprout forth from the scar are more vivid, more appreciated, more blessed.

Meditation and gratitude have become antidotes to guilt. Not that guilt doesn't still work its magic on me from time to time—but just by looking backward and saying thank you, the power of guilt diminishes. Acceptance becomes ever so slightly more attainable. And blessings abound.

Guilt, alas, works beyond just our thoughts of the past. Guilt can be a guide in the present, pushing us toward or away from each other. Nowhere else is this more noticeable than in the words we use.

In the creation story we read last week at Rosh Hashanah, we are reminded that God created our world by speaking. Words have the power to create worlds. And words have the power to destroy worlds, too.

Our words flow so easily from our lips. Words of greeting, words of kindness, but also words of disdain, words of frustration. Words of calm, words of worry—all come bubbling forth at breakneck pace. Sometimes the words are so fast we surprise even ourselves. It seems we have little to no control. But that's the moment of truth—for we all have the ability to control

words, even if it seems impossible for some of our leaders. On Kol Nidre, we pause to consider that ability and our need to sharpen our skills so that we can use words for good creative purposes rather than to divide or cause hatred.

Each of us here this evening, can, I hope, recall a moment when we used the best of our powers when offering words to another. And I suspect we can all recall moments when that power failed us. Either we left something unsaid, or worse yet, said something painful to another. We share this struggle as humans, yet as Jews, our prayers this evening give us a wonderful gift.

Early in the service we uttered the Kol Nidre prayer. We heard it on an instrument, I read it, and Cantor Kari sang it with beauty and passion. Those words seem to be some sort of magical formula—say this and it will get you out of a jam.

The magic is not in the words themselves. They are just words. The magic comes when we use those words to do better, to let go of guilt, to really grow. The words do not get us out of anything at all. But they do bring us into a new understanding. Kol Nidre teaches us that we can improve, that we can try, and that even in failing we can continue moving forward.

This past year we have seen the power of words abused in too many ways to count. From our highest levels of leadership to thugs marching in the streets, the year just ended overflowed with a lack of human control over words. For me, the most painful part is not the words themselves. For me, sadness comes because we know better, we are capable of better, we can demand better. Too easily we accepted the drivel and dare I say it, dreck! We allowed our civilization to become uncivilized.

Our words give us the power to heal, to build, to nurture. They also allow us to hate, denigrate, and destroy. Ours this past year was an unforced error—we could have done better and we can do better. No one forced us into elevating hate speech—we as a nation accepted it freely. We are all responsible for it. Tonight we acknowledge our mistakes. We accept the scars we have created. And by looking back we also look ahead to living closer to our highest selves.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher teaches us the lesson we need tonight. He wrote, “Life can only be understood looking backward, but it must be lived moving forward.” We will understand more as we look back, but we can only live fully if we look to the future.

So let us look forward this Yom Kippur, let us manufacture the hope we will need to make this year more productive than the last. What words will we offer our loved ones? What can we say to our friends in this community tonight that will make this year new, different, better? What can we do for others, so that in the act of reaching out to another soul our own souls are enriched, enlivened, elevated?

The guilt we brought here tonight concerning our words and actions from the past year need not return home with us. We can leave it here. We can feel it lift from our shoulders when we pray together, when we listen to one another, when we explore and learn, when we give food to the hungry or shelter to the needy. And as we do for others, we serve as models for each other—creating a community not built on guilt or hate or even familial obligation but rather on faith, on caring, on sharing, on being together.

I do not think the great French writer Albert Camus ever visited Syracuse. But if he did, then his famous words found in his Lyrical and Critical Essays might make even more sense. In an essay in that volume, Camus wrote, "In the depths of winter I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

Each of us has the ability to overcome the guilt, the shortcomings, the errors of our past. Even in the dead of winter here in Syracuse, snow piled higher and higher, we know, We Know, that summer will come. A brighter, more free, less beleaguered version of our souls exists. We can find that part of us, even if it seems it is hidden in the permafrost.

When I was 17 I was in a car accident on my way home from Hebrew High School one Wednesday night. The other driver was hurt, though he healed. I was not hurt, thankfully, but I was more scared than I have ever been. My father came to pick me up, and as we were finally getting ready to go home, he pointed at the driver's door and said, 'go ahead, get in, you are driving home.'

I was in no mood to drive. But my father taught me that when I fall off the horse, after dusting myself off, I had to climb right back on. It was not an easy drive home, but it was an important drive home. I learned that I can be persistent. I learned that I can be resilient. And I learned that life keeps moving.

When guilt gets the better of us, we still have choices. We can be frozen in it, or we can learn from it. We can carry it or we can let it be fertilizer for new growth. We can use our most powerful weapons, our words, to create new worlds or to destroy the worlds of others.

In her wonderful book *Option B*, which heavily influenced my words this evening, Sheryl Sandberg explores our ability to move beyond our past hurts and pain. She wrote the book after finishing the year of mourning for her husband who died suddenly at age 48. In her book she describes her deliberate path from pain and guilt and grief to a new place of hope and gratitude. She notes that her current path was not her first choice, but that beauty and goodness can be found on alternative routes as well.

We gathered here this evening face this same reality. Our journeys usually include detours. And they also include needed moments of rest and reflection. Kol Nidre represents one of those welcome and necessary rest stops. Like a national monument along the highway, Kol Nidre beckons, pushing us to pull over, breathe, see, reflect.

Kol Nidre overwhelms the senses. Look around this holy space and see it. Torahs shining in white. Rabbi and Cantor sharing that purity of white. Faces smiling, greeting old friends and family, returning to a high place of comfort and awe. We are surrounded by our past, living in the gift that is our present, and together dreaming of a better tomorrow.

But the beauty masks something deeper. The white, so clean and pure, reminds us of a new clean slate. But it also reminds us of the death we experience when we allow guilt to consume us. The pure white reminds us of the stains we created, the splotches we have allowed to fester.

Our prayers, filled with joy and awe, celebration and trembling, call to us. Will we stay with the guilt with which we entered, or will we exit with hopeful trepidation, knowing that we are jumping into a new place, not sure if we have the requisite net?

Kol Nidre carries power like no other night. Kol Nidre provides an opportunity to move beyond the guilt we all carry, to let the past remain behind us. On this night, in this moment, we can choose to move forward, to loosen the fetters that hold us, to leap, with faith in ourselves and each other, into an unknowable abyss. And all the while our angels are with us whispering, 'grow!' 'Grow!' 'Grow!'