

Yom Kippur 5773
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If one were to consider the most important religious news stories of the year, there would be a number of choices. The recent Mohammed video and ensuing riots. Sunnis vs. Alawites in Syria. A Mormon running for president. The Muslim Brotherhood winning the presidency in Egypt. Female Muslim athletes competing in the hijab at the Olympics. Ongoing tensions in Israel over the place of the Haredim within the secular state, including the military draft issue, the shameful harassment of young non-Haredi girls in Beit Shemesh, but also on the positive side the first ever state funding of a non-Orthodox rabbi. They're all interesting, and they're all important. But with all these compelling events to choose from, I've decided that the religious story of the last year I want to reflect on this Yom Kippur is -- Tim Tebow. Yes, on this, our holiest and most solemn day of the year, gathered in our great numbers to pray, reflect, do our most serious *heshbon ha-nefesh* of the year, I want to talk about the NFL football player famous for kneeling in prayer to his saviour on the field after scoring a touchdown. Now I have to confess I'm not a football fan. I don't know a tight end from a cornerback from a nose tackle. For all those of you who are into football, I'm sure you have lots to say about Tebow's actual athletic performance on the field. For me, I have no commentary on that whatsoever. But I am fascinated by the religious dimension of the Tebow story. The phenomenon was talked about so much in the last year that a new verb came into the English language: to "tebow" is defined in dictionary.com as "to express religious faith, gratitude, reverence, or awe, usually in public, by dropping to one knee, head resting on one's fist". Whether this verb will last in the English language remains to be seen; it may turn out to be a "passing" phenomenon. However, the religious impetus behind that kneel is an ancient one and it has I believe two main aspects that I'd like us to consider this Yom Kippur. The first is the attribution of our successes to God, and the second is the issue of doing so in public.

Now our own biblical tradition certainly supports the notion that our successes are properly attributed to God. Moses warns the people who are about to cross over the river Jordan into the Land of Israel where they will prosper in ways that were never possible in the austere life of the desert, that they should never say to themselves *kohi ve-otzem yadi asah li et ha-hayil hazeh* "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" (Deut.8:17). Rather, Moses wants them to remember that the Lord God gives them the power to win their wealth and attain their success just as much as it was God who sent them the manna which sustained them through the desert.

Moses knew that there would be an inevitable tendency to forget that lesson. He knew that the people would begin to attribute their successes to their own hard work and virtue. In our contemporary context, this would be like the guy who wakes up late for a job interview. He jumps out of bed and into his car and races to the address – but upon arrival can't find a parking spot. Desperate, he prays, "God, if you provide me with a parking spot, I promise I'll go to shul every Shabbes, start keeping kosher, put on tefillin every day and give tzedakah." He looks up, and suddenly he sees a spot. Pulling in to the spot, he says to God, "Oh never mind, I found one."

We do have a tendency to want God to intervene on our behalf, and then to either become angry at God when the desired result doesn't happen, or to forget God altogether if it does. Presumably it is that tendency that Tim Tebow is counteracting when he kneels in prayer after a touchdown. He is acknowledging, and I have no reason to believe that this acknowledgement does not come from a very genuine and sincere place in his heart, that his success on the field is not his, but rather comes from God, and that's why he is giving thanks. If we put aside for a moment the specific addressee of his prayer, what could be more Jewish than that?

There is nothing wrong with thanking God when things go well. Those of us who say Baruch Hashem after arriving home safely following a long trip, or after a successful surgery, or after we get accepted into the program that we were hoping for, or after we find someone we love and discover that they love us too – when we say Thank God in these circumstances, we are, in some sense, "tebowing". For some of us, this expression of gratitude comes very naturally, for others less so. We can have interesting theological discussions about whether we think God really helps us find parking spots, score touchdowns, or make it through a difficult round of chemotherapy. For many of us, the words Thank God spring to our lips in these circumstances, and the words come from a very genuine place at that moment, despite what our official theology may be.

But something does bother me about the practice of tebowing. I think it's that tebowing involves acknowledging God only when things go right. As Moses knew, even that isn't easy. But this Yom Kippur I'd like to add another layer of spiritual challenge that I think is even harder, even deeper. Can we learn to tebow when we *don't* score the touchdown? Can we learn to express gratitude when we don't get the job, when we find out our affections are in fact not returned, or most challenging of all, when our chemo *doesn't* work or our loved one doesn't make it through the operation or the baby turns out *not* to be perfect?

It's a paradoxical demand, to thank God when the bad stuff happens. We are trained from a very young age to thank people for presents, for favours, for things they do that benefit us. It is ingrained in us to do that, but the thought of thanking someone for *not* remembering our birthday, *not* serving us dinner, *not* helping us in any way – is laughable. We don't do that with people, so why should we do that with God?

And yet here is where theology can really help us. Because if we think about it seriously, I imagine that few of us believe that God really helped Tim Tebow make that touchdown happen. Does Ribono shel Olam, the Master of the Universe, really favour one team of the National Football League over another, one player over another? As a man of faith, I believe God is present in that stadium just as I believe God is present everywhere. God created us with bodies, and these bodies, when well trained, can sometimes perform extraordinary athletic feats – as we see in football stadiums or at the recent London Olympics and Paralympics, or on local soccer pitches, hockey rinks, or baseball diamonds right here in our own city. But these bodies also sometimes fall short. Our minds too, as smart as we are, sometimes fail us. Our judgement is often flawed. And I believe God is just as present when we stumble and fail as a result of these flaws, as when we succeed. God gives us the strength to get through those failures and disappointments, to learn from them whatever we can, and move on past our anger or our sadness. What an extraordinary spiritual message it would be to see a basketball player tebow after *missing* the game winning shot from the free throw line! Not to thank God for making him miss the shot -- God didn't make him miss the shot. *He* missed the shot. Rather, to acknowledge that even as he missed it, and disappointed himself, his teammates, and all the fans, God is still there with him in his failure. What an example of faith that would be for all of us who are trying to figure out how to hang on in the midst of our disappointment with ourselves.

Which brings me to the public nature of tebowing. It is one thing to thank God for one's successes in one's heart. But the sight of Tim Tebow kneeling in front of thousands at the stadium and probably millions of viewers watching on TV has generated much cynicism. Many of us don't like overt displays of religiosity in the public square. Save it for church on Sunday or shul on Shabbes, we think. We may assume such public displays are all about generating a reaction in others, and that strikes us as being something less than sincere.

I prefer to give Tim Tebow himself the benefit of the doubt. From what I read, he sounds like a genuinely religious fellow, a true believer who has acted on his faith to help underprivileged people, and that is to his credit. And Jewishly of course, there is a long tradition of testifying publicly to our

faith. One way of explaining the drawn out plagues narrative in the Book of Exodus for example is that God wants the Egyptians to come to believe in Him. It wasn't only about bringing the children of Israel out of slavery; that God could have done in one fell swoop. Rather, it was about educating the Egyptians about the nature of their gods vs. the nature of the one true God, and that education had to include a very public aspect. Later in Jewish history, the principle of kiddush hashem came to have great power for our ancestors. Kiddush hashem is the public sanctification of God's name, and its most conspicuous expression was martyrdom, affirming our faith by the most dramatic act possible so that others who live after us will be inspired by our sacrifice and consequently strengthened in their own faith. We will be reading about 10 famous Jewish martyrs a little bit later in the Musaf service in the Eleh Ezkerah martyrology section. We are blessed to live in a time and place when people don't have to face the prospect of dying for their faith as a way to inspire others. But others are still looking for inspiration, they're looking for models. So when Tim Tebow kneels in the sight of millions, publicly affirming his faith, he is doing something which in a very different form has a long Jewish pedigree. Our faith is not only a private matter.

I'm particularly interested in this dynamic between public and private in light of our Yom Kippur davening. After all, on one level coming to shul on Yom Kippur is one of our most public Jewish acts of the year. Everybody's here, in greater numbers than on any other day of the year. We see them, they see us. We catch up with people we haven't seen in a long time. It's all public. Or is it? Isn't the real work of the day private, between us and God? I'm not thinking only of the fast, which we're each feeling in our own individual bellies. I'm thinking about the work of really considering what kind of Jew we've been in the last year, what kind of human being we've been. How seriously we've taken our tradition, how much we've challenged ourselves to do more mitzvot, learn more Jewish texts, act according to the highest ethical standards, connect more strongly to Israel, be more generous to those in need, reflect on and strengthen our faith in God. What kind of children we've been, what kind of parents, siblings, spouses, friends, what kind of citizens we've been. In many of these areas we might conclude we could have done better, been better. These intensely individual reflections can't be seen by anyone else in this very public place, but they are a critical part of what this day is all about.

When Tim Tebow kneels, we learn something about him, but not the most important stuff about the kind of man he is. When we come to shul on Yom Kippur, when we take off work or school in the middle of the week to be here, we are making a public statement and people we know learn something about us, but not the most important stuff about the kind of people we are. We need the public piece, because we learn from each other

when we come together and we derive strength from each other and it is only by gathering that we are able to build communities that honour our people's ancient covenant with God and take us out of our individual isolation.

The problem is not with public demonstrations of faith per se, but rather that we begin to confuse the public and private, we begin to think that coming to shul on Yom Kippur is what observing Yom Kippur consists of, and if we do our public duty we're done. The private work of Yom Kippur is visible not to our neighbours but only to the One who knows us best, Avinu Malkenu – the ruler who judges us, the parent who loves us. God is the One who knows the real truth about us, the one we don't like to tell even ourselves. As human beings, we could teach the ostrich a thing or two about finding ways to avoid the truth that lies before us. That's why we need Yom Kippur. Not to wallow in guilt, although moral guilt is very important and good for the soul. But to confront the pain we have inflicted on others, especially those closest to us, by our insensitivity, our inability to listen, our refusal to care, our arrogant self-righteousness, our flagrant narcissism, our betrayals, and our infidelities. All this God knows, much of it we resist and deny, and the struggle within our souls over coming to terms with the truth about ourselves and hopefully, with God's help, transcending the less attractive pieces we uncover and hopefully winning forgiveness and atonement– that struggle takes place very much in private.

It's easy to mock Tim Tebow, but I'd rather see his particular contribution to the popular culture of 2012 as a learning opportunity for us, as we consider our own religious faith. Do we attribute our successes to God? Where is God in our failures and disappointments? How do we ensure that our public displays of religiosity like coming to shul don't displace the spiritual work we must do that is invisible to our friends and neighbours?

Today is Yom Kippur, Atonement Day, Judgment Day, our annual reality check. We are blessed that God has kept us alive and enabled us to observe the Yamim noraim once again. These holidays are the one time in the year when Jews traditionally kneel -- during Aleinu HaGadol and the Avodah service of Yom Kippur we kneel and prostrate all the way to the ground, a practice otherwise avoided in Judaism because of its associations with the practice of other faiths. Jewish public kneeling of course long predates Tim Tebow. It goes all the way back to the days when Beit HaMikdash stood, to Yom Kippur, when the people would kneel and prostrate themselves each time the Kohen Gadol pronounced HaShem HaMeforash – God's real name which was never otherwise uttered. Kneeling got something of a bad rap when idol worshippers started doing it, and also when Haman famously demanded it of Mordecai. For many centuries now, it hasn't felt particularly

Jewish and I am not promoting its regular return – although I do think that in general, things we can do to bring our bodies into our prayer are good for all kinds of reasons physical and spiritual. The danger with kneeling, and with all other ritual acts, is that we'll forget that the ritual is supposed to get us to a deeper place, not substitute for that deeper place. That's Isaiah's powerful message in the Yom Kippur haftorah regarding the fast – don't wonder why you're fasting and God still isn't answering your prayers. Fasting is only supposed to remind us to share our food with the poor, clothe the naked, loosen the chains of those in bondage, break the yoke of tyranny. Absent action, fasting is just an empty gesture. Which is why our shul's Yom Kippur food drive and Tzedakah appeal are so important. They are two of the ways we respond to Isaiah's call each year as a community, two of the ways we demonstrate our understanding that this day is about ritual, but not only or even mostly about ritual.

My prayer this Yom Kippur is that whatever ritual practices or acts we engage in this Yom Kippur, may they reflect something real, something genuine, going on on the inside – whether that something is positive, a great success or an achievement, something we've done that we feel genuinely and deeply proud of -- or something negative, a failure or disappointment, something we're angry about or something we're ashamed of. Let's let it all come to the surface. Let's allow our coming together as a vast community on this day be not only a wonderful time for community affirmation, as important as that may be, but also a time when we derive strength from each other for the hard, private, work our neshamas are obligated to undertake this day to become true people of conscience. Tim Tebow acknowledged his saviour in a particularly conspicuous way this year. In considering his very public example, whatever we may think of it, let's help each other do the work we need to do this Yom Kippur. Gmar Hatimah Tovah.