

KN-5773

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

The simplest sermon for Kol Nidrei is “you messed up, do better”.

Wow! A real time saver.

But no Rabbi can leave it at that. The purpose of Yom Kippur is so simple yet, as we all know, afflicting our souls for 25 hours will not be enough time to re-assess how we are living our lives. Yom Kippur is ritually the culmination of a 40 days period of *teshuva* but it really is the commencement - the starting points of this *kheshbon hanefesh*- this inquiry of the soul. It is a never ending- the process of getting to know ourselves is endless and it can be enervating, energizing, as well as excruciating.

This is one of the spiritual challenges of Yom Kippur: its rituals humble us all and provides the backdrop for our self-examination. What we will find within will both delight and dismay us. Self-reflection has its boons and its busts. But this is not the self- reflection of the therapeutic process –not necessarily in the world of psychoanalysis or other psychological methods.

Our self-reflection, our knowing ourselves on Yom Kippur is cast on the background of our connection both to the infinite Divine Essence, that some call God, and to being a link in a chain of Jewish tradition. We recall its ancient echoes and we retell ancient stories. Today we re-assess our commitments to both of these realities –the Transcendent that motivates our capacity to transcend ourselves and to the immanent that nurtures our capacity to go inward and to address our core-identity as Jews.

Even those of us who seem to doing ok need time for reassessment and those who aren't certainly do.

So here's what I want to do to help us with this process of transformation from what we are beginning today as we walk into what we want to be in the days, weeks and months that are ahead of us in this New Year.

Everything is transitory- nothing is permanent- the wheel of life turns with all of ascents and descents. Sometimes we enjoy the view from the top and the pleasure of seeing in the distance- we revel in the wide perspective and grand vista. We embrace these as we ascend and are filled with powerful feelings that all is possible. We descend to face realities that are closer to the ground. But even when were on top of the wheel there are echoes of fear that invade us- especially when we realize that we aren't in control of the wheel.

An Eastern image articulates this as well. a wave that rises up and casts itself bravely at the shore to disappear returns to its source and rises again.

These are known images and you can conjure up your own to deal with the changing circumstances of your existence.

To be a Jew is to be pessimistic in the short run and optimistic in the long run. To be a Jew in the 21st century challenges us to lift our heads from the mundane and to venture into a realm that is sometimes both awesome and awful at the same time- the encounter with ourselves as we really are, to encounter ourselves in our successes and in our failures.

Know thyself, the Delphic oracle proclaimed –and “nothing to excess” was its second proclamation.

Ernest Kurtz in “The Spirituality of Imperfection”, that

“The question “Who am I?” really asks, “Where do I belong or fit?” We get the sense of that “direction” -- the sense of moving toward the place where we fit, or of shaping the place toward which we are moving so that it will fit us -- from hearing how others have handled or are attempting to handle similar (but never exactly the same) situations. We learn by listening to their stories, by hearing how they came (or failed) to belong or fit.”

We are a people of stories. Our Torah offers the most challenging of stories. Our history is filled with stories, both tragic and triumphal.. Each of our lives is filled with stories. The challenge of Torah is for you to find yourself in the story. The basis of human empathy is our capacity to see ourselves in the stories of others.

When we say that we are celebrating the year 5773 since creation -what we are really saying is that about 6000 years ago homo sapiens learned to express our humanity through sophisticated languages based on new levels of conceptual thinking and telling stories. This was indeed the creation of the world as we know it. This why our greatest contribution to human civilization –the Torah continues to resonate – It is precisely the imperfections we find in our ancestors that provides the grist for our imaginations and interpretations throughout the ages.

Our traditions swim in a stream of consciousness that goes back to the beginning of humanity as we know it. We seem to find our entire emotional package portrayed with great candor in these stories.

I am grateful that one of our shul family recommended that I take a look at Ernest Kurtz’s book, “The Spirituality of Imperfection”. While I do not accept his entire thesis he does provide some insights that I will share with you.

Kurtz tells us that the spirituality of imperfection is a “spirituality” of not having all of the answers: For those who have come to expect an answer to every question, a solution to every problem, an end to every beginning, such an approach may be disconcerting at first.

Kurtz proposes that *“the core paradox that underlies spirituality is the haunting sense of incompleteness. Of being somehow unfinished that comes from the reality of living on this earth, as part and yet also not-part of it of it. For to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken ,yet crave for wholeness. These yearnings remain necessarily unsatisfied, for perfection, completion, certainty, and wholeness are impossible precisely because we are imperfectly human – or better, because we are perfectly human, which is to say humanly imperfect,*

This is the essential paradox of human life....paradox is the way it is meant to be.

Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem” also talks of the imperfect nature of our endeavors:

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The *Yamim Noraim* were established for us to overcome self-denial and the self-perception that this essential paradox is what makes us human.

On Yom Kippur especially one cannot flee what one is, in Jean Paul Sartre’s formulation. To do this is to have, as he coined it, ‘bad faith’.

What a powerful term for us to consider as we sit together tonight to help each other to examine ourselves –our true selves- .

The beauty of Judaism is that we believe that this self-examination is best supported by doing it in community. Our being here re-enacting the ancient rituals of our people, afflicting ourselves doesn’t free us of our ongoing efforts to overcome self-denial. I often use the term core-identity to express this notion- there is so much that distracts us from this practice. This is the challenge of being a Jewish human being.

On Yom Kippur we attempt, within our own tradition, to come to terms with our human imperfection in light of Divine perfection. We project a deep hope and aspiration that there will someday be a time when our imperfections will somehow be mended- this is our messianic yearning –but it is not our reality as we live it now.

This is the paradox rearing its complicated head again –we see what is and we, as Jews, have the nagging habit of seeing how things ought to be. This is our deeply held prophetic stance; that we are capable of change in spite of our frailties and that ultimately our being imperfect is not an excuse for ending our striving for a more just and compassionate world.

A contemporary philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, who began his own journey toward spirituality from within Marxism, suggests that “the Sacred is revealed to us in the experience of our failures,”

And again Kurtz tells us *“in a perfect world, there would be no spirituality at all. The perfected is the completed, that which is finished, ended. But because we are human, we are not and cannot be finished or ended while we are still alive. Imperfection is related to limits, as humans, we do not “have” limits; we are limited”*

The realization of our imperfections provides the necessary suppression of our egos. Our ego does whatever it can to rationalize and deflect our weaknesses. When we are only ego driven it is often a way to fend off our being threatened by our fears and vulnerabilities. Yet healthy ego formation is admirable for the discoveries and accomplishments it has prompted and supported throughout human history.

As Jews we are able to live in these paradoxes. Our history leaves us with a sense that our fate has been in other hands As Jews who live in the shadow of the Shoah and we are understandingly adamant in exhibiting our power. But we have to be aware of the responsibilities of power. We have to be aware that true power lies in our capacity to see ourselves as we really are. Whether here or Israel true security is only available through introspection – through inner security.

That’s what Yom Kippur is all about- to give us a place to moor our lives in the harbor of Eternity ; to find a resting place for our anxiety, fear, self-denial in the bosom of Divine acceptance –despite our infirmities- to be loved so deeply that we are able to open our hearts and souls to the sense of darkness and loss we all experience in this world- To be in the process of *teshuva* is to be held in the hand of compassion- *khemla rabah ahavta otanu* –we sing in the paragraph before the *Shma*. With great compassion have You loved us. It is this Divine embrace that soothes our pain and it bolsters our capacity to face our true selves.

To be a Jew is to embrace not only our core-identities –but to embrace a tradition that makes demands of us- a tradition that doesn’t see smug self-referential aphorisms as the goal of our self-examination today. Our future as a distinct people rather than an extinct people is dependent on the commitments that we make in your very act of living as a Jewish human being.

Kurtz says it well:

“Spirituality is, above all, a way of life. We don’t just think about or feel it or sense it around us- we live it. Spirituality permeates to the very core of our being human be-ing, affecting the way we perceive the world around us, the way we feel about that world, and the choices we make based on our perceptions and sensations –in the experience of spirituality, three essential elements are always at play –what we see- how we feel and why we choose”

TBZ is dedicated to creating a robust spiritual life grounded in Jewish thought and practice. I am talking to you because you have bought into this quest by being here. Many of you have taken your involvement in helping us in the ongoing process of perpetuating our style of Judaism as a harbinger of what is possible.

But we need a stronger buy in. If we are indeed committed to a Jewish future you must use your reassessment, your return to your core-identity to commit yourself to our efforts at supporting a flourishing future for our descendants. This is a future that doesn't shut out the world or reduces it to only extreme interpretations of Torah and mitzvot. Yes, mitzvot. Here's the challenge of Judaism and Jewish tradition, and they not synonyms, extends to us, the opportunity of having a sense of obligation in forming our destiny. Yes, obligation- , one that arises from our deep inner life –that imbues our everyday life with meaning. We believe that only through obligations are we set truly free.

It is precisely in the rituals of Yom Kippur: abstaining from our comfortable routines; practicing physical self-denial to challenge our spiritual self-denial; refraining from the distractions of everyday life gather here to sit together to in this present moment-in community that serves as a link to our past as well as to our future as Jewish human beings .

It is important for unorthodox Jews like us to show our spiritual creativity. It has never been more important for us to become more literate about ourselves to we can accomplish two things at the same time to help fight the domination of extremism within our own people and have the resources to pass on a vital Jewish life to our descendants.

We have no excuse, Yom Kippur teaches us but to re-examine where we need to bolster our spiritual life and there are excuses for enhancing our intellectual part of our minds through learning. Our emotional life can be truly enhanced by taking on Jewish ritual commitments in your home and in your workplace. We must endeavor not to perpetuate Jewish stereotypes that are often used by alienated Jews as a rationale for their alienation. You've heard all the clichés.

We must be proud of our efforts to offer an alternative to the backwardness exhibited by our own extremists. We must practice a Judaism of inclusion. We must take on the task of becoming Jewishly literate. There is no excuse for abject ignorance of Jewish history and philosophy, customs and observances in the Boston community. Whether is through synagogues classes, the me-ah program and so many other places there is simply no excuse that many of us and our children remain 12 years old Jews for the rest of our lives.

When we look deeply at ourselves we will certainly find imperfections, some may lie beyond our capacity to correct, but this certainly not the case in enhancing our lives and yes our neighbors lives by being anchored in an ancient wisdom tradition that maintains the spiritual ecology of the planet.

I ask you to take on, in your way, the commitment to promote and foster Jewish lives of distinction rather than to sit back and contribute to our extinction. I know that is a difficult project but we are here to help you. A Jew never does it alone.

We need all of you here to help maintain a competitive edge in the battle for the heart of Judaism. If we lose there will be disastrous consequences both here and in Israel. Extreme forces within the broad Jewish community are dedicated to ostensibly confronting modernity as the enemy of Jewish continuity. We must deny them the ammunition by committing ourselves to become knowledgeable Jews so that we can compete in the marketplace of ideas. What is it that we are selling? – that one can be an enlightened worldly Jew who has more than adequate knowledge of her tradition and is a seeker for more and more connection to, as said earlier-to deep introspection and recovery of our core-identities leading to a deeper connection to the Divine Essence of Creation and the deep compassion of our community. Our commitment to Torah and mitzvot, within a non-doctrinaire framework, will help us maintain a competitive edge for the hearts and minds of our children and our friend's children in the decades to come.

The fissures within our lives can either be mourned and get us into a depressed state or they can rather lift us up to new possibilities. We aren't perfect and we will all make mistakes. By being true to ourselves we can bring ourselves to the path of *teshuva*- return. , so

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