EIN OD MILVADO Yom Kippur 5778
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Today is called, as you all know, in Hebrew, Yom Ha-Kippurim, literally "the day of atonements." Though properly speaking, the root KUF PEH RESH has nothing to do with atonement. It is the same root as the Hebrew word for frost: K'FOR. The literal meaning is "the day of covering over." Just as the first frost covers the entire earth, blanketing everything with a pure white, so the atonement between us and God brings about an entirely new landscape, as beautiful as that first look out the window when the first snow of the season has fallen. A new ground on which to begin again.

It is important to understand this, if only because we sometimes have the idea that atonement means that the past is totally cancelled. This is one reason why people sometimes have a hard time getting to forgiveness. Because the past does not really go away. The hurts that have been done do not magically disappear, as if someone wiped them clear with a magic wand. But when a relationship can be repaired, both parties agree to "cover over" the hurts of the past, and to move forward onto a new landscape. To put down some new, tenuous steps on a landscape as fresh as the first snow.

By pronouncing "Yom Kippurim" in a slightly different way, you end up with "Yom K'Purim," which means "a day like Purim." When we probe this idea a little bit, we can see that these two Jewish holidays have a deeper relationship than appears on the surface.

Purim is a day on which we are commanded to **eat drink and be merry,** a day of joy and celebration on which we celebrate the redemption of our people from the hands of Haman. While at the other extreme, Yom Kippur is a day on which we are **forbidden to eat or drin**k or have any physical pleasures, a day on which we afflict our souls, a day on which we get in touch with our regret at the sins we have committed and seek to gain forgiveness.

Although even here, there is some kind of symmetry. There is some sadness in the joy we feel on Purim. Sure, it commemorates a victory, in the nick of time, over those who wished to destroy us. But it was not the last time the Jewish people found themselves in danger. As the Yiddish expression goes: "*Ein Purim un a sakh Hamonim:* Only one Purim, but so many Hamans!"

In contrast, even though Yom Kippur is a day of seriousness and regret, there is underneath it a sense of joy in coming clean, in being able to overcome the past and obtain a new start. It is almost palpable beneath the somber exterior.

Then there is the business of the masks. On Purim we wear masks, concealing our true identity. The cynics among us would say that on Yom Kippur, too, many of us only dress up for synagogue, making a pretense of sincere contrition. But that underneath we are not truly ready to make much of a change in our lives.

On Purim, God is totally absent from the Purim story. The redemption comes about through human agency, through the plotting of Mordechai and the bravery and chutzpah of Esther. In fact, God is not mentioned in the Megillah at all. Whereas on Yom Kippur, God is very present. We cry out to god, seek to reach God with our prayers, and imagine that we are standing under God's scrutinizing gaze.

But I think the **most** important connection, has to do with this--it has to do with the role of chance in our lives. The name Purim comes from the Hebrew word PUR, which means "lots" as in "casting lots." It is Haman who throws the dice to decide on what day to carry out his nefarious plan to destroy the Jews. The lots fall on the 14th of Adar. It is remarkable that the name of the whole holiday comes from this word: PURIM. Perhaps to emphasize the precariousness of Jewish life in Exile.

On Yom Kippur, too, chance stands at the center of the ritual. In the description of the ritual of atonement for Yom Kippur, we read about the ritual of choosing the scapegoat, who will bear the sins of the people and be driven out into the wilderness.

Leviticus 16 describes it in detail:

He shall take two goats from the congregation of the children of Israel for a sin-offering, and one ram for a burnt-offering. Aaron shall present the bullock of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and make atonement for himself, and for his house. And he shall take the two goats, and set them before the LORD at the door of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall **cast lots** upon the two goats: **one lot** for the LORD, and **the other lot** for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat upon which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer him for a sin-offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell for Azazel, shall be set alive before the LORD, to make atonement over him, to send him away for Azazel into the wilderness.

This ritual was also at the center of the proceedings in the Temple in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur, where the Mishnah (Yoma 6) describes how it was enacted.

The sacrificial goats of Yom Kippur, they must be equal in appearance, height, value, and they must be bought at the same time….
And the High Priest shook the urn, and brought up the two lots.
On one was inscribed "For God" and on the other "For Azazel."
The deputy high priest stood to his right
and the head of the ministering family stood to his eft.
If the lot "For God" came up in his right hand, the deputy high priest would say to the high priest: "My master, raise your ***righ****t hand!"*
And if the lot "For God' came up in his left hand, the head of the ministering family would say to the high priest: "My master, raise your ***left*** *hand"*

Then they placed the lots on the goats themselves.
*On the one designated "****for God****" they said "****For God.****"*
And the people would all answer: ***Blessed be his glorious Name for ever and ever!***

On the one designated for Azazel, they tied a crimson thread around its horns. Then the high priest would place his two hands on it and say:

Please God, we your people, the house of Israel, have committed wrongdoing, transgressed and sinned before you. Please God, forgive the wrongdoing, transgression and sin that we have sinned against you. As it is written in the Torah of Moses your servant: "For on this day you will be forgiven and cleansed from all your sin—before God you shall be cleansed."

Then the priests, the people standing in the courtyard, when they heard the Name of God from the mouth of the High Priest, would bend their knees, bow and fall upon their faces, and they would say: ***Barukh shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed****/Blessed be God's Glorious Name for ever and ever.'*

And then we are told how the goat was led away, on a special path, until he reached the cliff. And then the goat was pushed off the cliff, a sacrifice which carried off the sins of the people to the wilderness, a place which represents chaos and evil.

CHANCE

I think that even though we show up faithfully each year on this day, there is in our hearts an inner resistance to the whole premise underlying our actions here on Yom Kippur. And I think it has something to do with our wrestling with the seeming capriciousness of God's providence. Yom Kippur presents God as the just arbiter, who sees fairly, who examines our deeds and rewards us accordingly. We formally submit ourselves to the justice of God's decree. But a voice inside us remains restless and even rebellious.

Who among us is complete in our faith in the justice of God? Something in us rebels against this notion. Which is why it is very interesting to me that at the very center of the ritual of atonement we are reminded that a certain arbitrary choice comes into play as well. The two goats are equal—in appearance, in size. Yet one is dedicated to God, and the other to Azazel. A sacrifice to the forces of chaos and evil in the world.

I think for many of us, this arbitrariness, this randomness which is a part of our experience, undermines the justice of God in our eyes. God may write us in the Book of Life. But some part of us knows that our destiny is not all in God's hands. And that our destiny does not corresponds solely to our righteousness. Stuff happens. Sometimes for no reason at all.

There are accidents of place: being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being at the mercy of hurricanes, earthquakes, car accidents.

There are accidents of birth: some are born healthy while others are born with illness that follows them their whole life; some are born into poverty and struggle while others are destined for easy success.

Then there are accidents of nature: being the one who dies from the deadly side-effect of the cancer drug that saves so many others.

Why do some die early, and others live to a ripe old age?
Why do bad things happen to good people?

These issues are so disturbing to the sensitive believer, that our Bible contains an entire book meant to disabuse us of the notion that we **can** understand why the righteous suffer. It is called the book of Job.

It is a pity that the book of Job has not found itself into the core curriculum of Jewish life. Not being in the section of the Prophets, we do not hear excerpts from it on a regular basis, as a haftarah following the reading of Torah on Shabbat. But it is a precious spiritual classic. Perhaps the finest book of our Bible.

The book of Job begins by telling us in no uncertain terms that "there never was a person as righteous as Job, who feared God and acted righteously." And God has blessed Job with everything: family, health, prosperity. Then it immediately takes us, the readers, behind the scenes, to show us what happens "behind the curtain" in the heavenly realm.

And there we see that God takes **a bet, a wager,** for reasons we dare not even try to explain, with a visiting angel: the Satan, it just so happens. In the Bible, Satan is just another member of the heavenly host, one whose special attribute is the spreading of doubt, the one who seeks to turn us off the path. Apparently God is susceptible to his wiles as well. The wager is this: to see whether Job will continue to be righteous and God-fearing even if he loses all the blessings that he has.

God is curious enough to take this bet. And so, in short order, Job's entire family dies. He loses all his wealth. And he is stricken by a terrible and painful disease. And then he sits down, mourning and alone. And three friends show up to comfort him.

The next thirty chapters of the book are structured like this: the friends, one after another and time after time, speak to Job and try to find words of wisdom to get Job to understand his predicament. Each time, Job turns to them and angrily rebukes them. And then, each time, Job turns to God, rebuking God, challenging God, complaining about the injustice of his predicament.

The remarkable thing about the words of comfort, which Job **rejects,** and which we **know** to be absolutely untrue, is that they are mostly paraphrases if not direct quotes of the words that we find in elsewhere in our bible: from the Psalms, and on almost every page of the Book of Deuteronomy, in some ways even from the section which we will soon read from the Torah in a few minutes. The sense of these messages is "if you obey the Lord your God, you shall be rewarded with blessing. And if you disobey, you shall be punished, cursed. "

Job's very predicament is the ultimate refutation of those statements. We **know** that the friends are wrong. Because the author of the book has told us at the outset that Job **is** a righteous person. And we have seen the "cause" of Job's troubles. Job, in his integrity, does not accept these reasons. And challenges God to answer him.

After thirty-seven long and beautiful chapters, God finally speaks. Perhaps stung by Job's rebuke, God does not appear in an armchair with a nice cup of tea to have a one-on-one conversation with his suffering servant. No: God appears in a whirlwind—a cosmic special effect. And God's "answer" turns out to be this: a majestic, terrible, awe-inspiring series of questions, spoken out of the thunder.

Questions like these:

Who is this who speaks without knowledge?

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Who clothed the sea behind doors when it gushed forth…when I made breakers my limit for it and said: Come so far and no further?

Can you tie cords to Pleides, or undo the reigns of Orion?

Can you hunt prey for the lion, and satisfy the appetite of the king of beasts?

Does the eagle soar at your command, building his nest high?
From there he spies out his food, from afar the eyes see it
His young gulp blood: where the slain are, there his is.

At the end of these and many more dramatic challenges, Job clasps his hand over his mouth and humbly replies: *Before I had only heard You with my ears. Now I see with You with my eyes, so I repent and am silent*.

What does Job see? Perhaps he comes to understand that there may be a limit to God's ability to control what goes on in a world that is both beautiful and terrible.

Our rabbis go even further. There is a rabbinic midrash where God himself seems to explicitly acknowledge the capriciousness, the unfairness of life. In fact, in this midrash, God –if we can use this expression--asks for forgiveness and atonement for things that are just not fair in the world. The teaching is based on a verse in the story of creation, where we read (Genesis 1:16) :

*God made the **two grea**t lights: the **great** light for ruling the day and the **small** light for ruling the night, as well as the stars.*

The rabbis are curious about what seems to be a contradiction here. First we are told God made **two great** lights. And then, suddenly, one is **greater** and one is **smaller.** So what

transpired between the beginning of the verse and the end? Why did one become small? The rabbis seek to explain this, and they do so by connecting this story to another anomaly in the Torah, that is to the strange language found in the description of the sacrificial offering for the New Moon, *Rosh Hodesh*. There God says "Bring a sin offering **for me."**

Here is how the Talmud (Hulin 60b) describes it:

R. Simeon b. Pazzi pointed out a contradiction:
First the verse says: *And God made the two great lights,*
But immediately the verse continues: *The greater light...and the lesser light.*

What happened?

The moon spoke up to the Holy One, saying:
"*Sovereign of the Universe! Is it possible for two kings to wear one crow*n?"
God answered, "*Go then and make yourself smalle*r."

The moon protested: *"Sovereign of the Universe!*
Just because I have suggested that which is proper must I then make myself smaller?"
God replied: "OK, then I will make it so that you will rule by day and by night."

[for as we know, the moon can be seen by day as well as by night]

But the moon insisted: "*What is the value of that? Who needs a lamp in broad daylight?"*
So God says: "*OK. So I will ordain it so that the people of Israel will use you, the moon, to count the months and the years and the festivals."*

"But you know it is impossible," said the moon, *"to do that without the sun as well. "*

God tries another few ways to compensate the moon for this injustice. But she is not placated. So finally, upon seeing that the moon would not be consoled, the Holy One, blessed be He said:

"On Rosh Hodesh, on the New Moon of each month, bring an **atonement for Me** for making the moon smaller."

This is why, in the offering for the new moon (Nunbers 28:15) God says: *Se'ir izzim la'hata'at l'adonay*: a he-goat as a sin-offering for God. Because God said: "Let this he-goat be an atonement for Me for/ making the moon smaller."

God asks forgiveness from the moon. for making the one light greater than the other. There is no good reason why the moon should have to be smaller than the sun. It was just chance that she pointed it out first. And God knows that.

I would like to think that this **confession** on God's part that some things are not fair in the world God created refers to more that the moon. In the eyes of the midrash, this is God's

way of saying: *Stuff happens. The world is a complicated place. Nature follows its own laws. Everything cannot always work out right, no matter what I might want.*

Perhaps God, even now, even today, is asking forgiveness of us.

I have decided to accept the apology. And I hope you can too.

I have not decided to accept it because I know I am a sinner and I accept punishment. I have not decided to accept it because I think pain and suffering can be a good teacher. And I have not decided to accept it because I am aware that God is great and mysterious and I am small and ignorant and need to accept my limitations. (Even though that may be true).

I want to accept the apology because I would like to move on. I accept the apology because it allows me to cover up, to leave behind, the anger and the grief and the disappointment that I experience at the hands of this **idea** I have about God. And that closes off the possibility of having a deeper connection. Of seeing more clearly the beauty and mystery and poignancy of the world. By accepting and moving on, it will allow me to get back in touch with another way of relating to God. And to see God on that new terrain.

Ein Od Milvado

It is a way that flows from the expression, found in our Torah: *Ein od mil'vado*.
We find it in the book of Deuteronomy, we sing it in paraphrase in the Aleinu prayer at the end of each service. The traditional way of understanding expression is to translate it: *Ein od mil'vado*: There is no *other God than God*. God is God alone.

But the mystical tradition in Judaism, and the Hasidic tradition, understands it differently: *Ein od mil'vado*: There is nothing *besides* God. From this point of view, all the forces of nature and spirit, of growth and decay, all the permutations of love and limit, compassion and severity, strength and weakness, generosity and scarcity: these are all the ways that the Intelligence and the Unity we call God is expressed in our world, including in my life and the life of every person.

This may sound impersonal at first. But as Jay Michaelson writes:

Ein od mil'vado *has a personal intimacy about it, the power to inspire. No matter how powerful the waves on the ocean toss me back and forth, the ocean is all there is. There is nothing besides God. When I am alone or beloved, sick or well, whether what is in front of me is beautiful or terrible:* ***Ein od milvado****…*

This is not the benevolent God of bedtime stories or even liturgy. But there is nonetheless a sense of personality. Perhaps part of this is my own projection, but nevertheless it is one that provides solace, nearness and embrace.

And when we take this attitude not just towards the world, but towards our fellow men and women, ***ein od milvado*** *is a powerful corrective to our habit of seeing people as enemies, conditions as unsatisfactory, and the world as something that either does or does not cater to our desire.*

A difficult co-worker? ***ein od milvado***
An illness? ***ein od milvado***
And more seriously, in the larger tragedies and heartbreaks of our lives—then again, if the heart can be expanded, then also: ***ein od mil'vado****…*
The lovely, too is empty. The terrible, too, is nothing but God.
The more we can separate the One from the thoughts of what we want, the closer we come to realization.

In the words of Art Green:"God is a verb that has been artificially arrested in motion
And made to function as a noun."

It may seem impossible to reconcile this way of thinking with the words which just poured out of us: *Avinu Malkenu, be gracious to us and save us, for we have no merit."* But not really. These words still express the truths about our lives, what we desire, what we would like to see in our lives. It's only that these words need to be placed in a different envelope, sent to a different address in the world of the divine. With a little work and a little practice, all the words of prayer can be understood through this lens as well.

How to live with faith and even confidence in God and God's ways, if God is not in control? If luck and chance can be so cruel? If God's justice is a fragile concept?

How to see our fellow man as created in the image of God, even as we admit that our human nature can tend to both heartbreaking generosity and unimaginable cruelty?

Just because all is God, does not mean that everything is good. The vitality, the life force, what the tradition calls the "*chiyut*," can be channeled in all directions, towards evil and towards good.

Many of the ills we grapple with are man-made. These we can, and must correct. As for what we cannot change, perhaps we can learn to affirm and even to praise. To accept the apology and move on. Even when our hearts may be breaking. This is the challenge of faith and of life.

I'll close by sharing some words of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, who expresses this sentiment as well as anyone could. His poem is called *Psalm.*

Psalm **Yehudah Amichai**

A psalm on the day
a building contractor cheated me. A psalm of praise.

Plaster falls from the ceiling, the wall is sick, paint
cracking like lips.
The vines I've sat under, the fig tree—
It's all just words. The rustling of the trees
creates an illusion of God and justice.

I dip my dry glance like bread
into the death that softens it
always on the table before me.
Years ago, my life
turned my life into a revolving door.
I think about those who, in joy and success,
have gotten far ahead of me,
carried between two men for all to see
like that bunch of shiny papered grapes
from the Promised Land.
And those who were carried off, also
between two men: wounded or dead. A psalm.

When I was a child I sang in the synagogue choir.
I sang until my voice broke. I sang
first voice and second voice. And I'll go on singing
until my heart breaks; first heart and second heart.
A Psalm