

Yom HaDin | Day of Judgement

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman Rosh Hashanah 5771

A woman was waiting at an airport one night, with several long hours before her flight. She hunted for a book in the airport shops, bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book but happened to see, that the man sitting beside her, as bold as could be. . .grabbed a cookie or two from the bag in between, which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene.

So she munched the cookies and watched the clock, as the gutsy cookie thief diminished her stock. She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by, thinking, "If I wasn't so nice, I would blacken his eye."

With each cookie she took, he took one too, when only one was left, she wondered what he would do. With a smile on his face, and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half, as he ate the other, she snatched it from him and thought... oooh, brother. This guy has some nerve and he's also rude, why he didn't even show any gratitude!

She had never known when she had been so galled, and sighed with relief when her flight was called. She gathered her belongings and headed to the gate, refusing to look back at the thieving ingrate.

She boarded the plane, and sank in her seat, then she sought her book, which was almost complete. As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise, there was her bag of cookies, in front of her eyes.

If mine are here, she moaned in despair, the others were his, and he tried to share. Too late to apologize, she realized with grief, that she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief. (Valerie Cox)

Rosh Hashanah has many names including: Yom Harat Olam/The day of the Worlds Inception, Yom Hazikaron/The day of Remembrance and Yom HaDin/The Day of Judgment.

I began with Valerie Cox's poem this evening because tonight I want to explore with you the meaning and implications of Yom HaDin/The Day of Judgment as the header for the New Year.

The name comes from the Talmud where it says that on Rosh Hashanah God judges all of Creation. This ancient myth is played out the most explicitly when we pray Unetanatokef...

The imagery is this: God sits on his throne with the heavenly retinue behind him and two big books before him: The Sefer Hamavet/The Book of Death and Sefer Hachayim/The Book of

Life. We, God's subjects, pass before him and are judged; who shall live or who shall die, who by water, who by fire, etc.

For many of us, including me, this is the most challenging aspect of the Holiday Liturgy for lots of reasons. First, the myth of God as king is dead. In the ancient world a king was a good projection screen for God – they were powerful, scary, awe-inspiring figures. But in our age kings are impotent figureheads, not an image we would naturally relate to God!

Even if one can work with king as metaphor for God, the idea that God judges everyone and decides our fate in the year ahead is not only unbelievable to us, it also unbearable given the tragedies big and large that happens every year.

Did God blow up the deep water rig in the gulf and cause the oil to spill? Did God choose the cancer for our loved ones who struggled or maybe died from it in the last year? Does God decide who shall live and who shall die on the battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq? God in history is, for many of us, a mystery we simply cannot grasp.

So, when it comes to Yom Hadin, the Traditional understanding of this day – God as judge sitting on his throne, literally judging us, simply doesn't ring true. What is true however is that some of us won't be here next year. We might change the list of possible calamities – who by fire, who by water to who by cancer, who by financial disaster, and so forth; how ever we characterize it, the scary potent fact of our finitude is a real fact of life.

In fact, the one year that we actually edited unitonatokef out of the prayer book, people were livid! Why? Because we get that as dead as the old myths may be, they still carry a truth that we need to hear: stuff happens, life is precious and precarious, we are finite and have no time to waist, no time to loose.

Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgment. Ok, maybe this is not our favorite characterization of Rosh Hashanah. Nevertheless, we can find away to make it work; a judging God we can wrestle with. Getting control over the way we pass judgment on each other, now that is much harder and frankly more relevant, and why I started with the poem, The Cookie Thief.

It is no literary gem but it does illustrate how off base and distorted the judging mind can be; she's convinced that this guy is eating her cookies. Her mind is overwhelmed with a host of judgments about him – “what chutzpa”, “how greedy”, “what a jerk”, She is thinking. No doubt, her stomach is in knots. She's even ready to punch him out! What she doesn't realize until it is too late is that the cookies in question are not even hers! All the judgment, ill treatment, the whole in her gut; it's all based on a false assumption; her judging mind took her on an unnecessary and painful ride.

Judgments. We make them all the time. In fact, discernment, good judgment is a quality we hope for in our children and strive for in ourselves. But there is another kind of judging that is far less helpful and much more hurtful and that is when we make critical judgments about each other. Raise your hand if, when you arrived at services this evening, you didn't have a moment of judgment about anyone else in the room, no internal comment about some ones hair or their

clothes or their sent or... you name it, the judging mind is relentless in its search for the deprecating in others.

“Don’t be judgmental”, we are told yet it is so hard to shut the judging mind off. Why? What is it about being judgmental that is so attractive?

Jean Paul Sarte in his famous if not flawed work, *Anti-Semite And Jew* offers some insight into the power of the judging mind. In analyzing the Anti-Semite he suggests that the big gain the Anti-Semite gets out of demonizing the Jew is a false and irrational sense of right and wrong. You see, the minute the Anti-Semite labels the Jew as ‘bad’ he, by default becomes ‘good’ and all his behavior no matter how despicable, also becomes justifiable, even ‘good’ in contrast to the ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ Jew.

In other words, judging others give us a false sense of our own goodness, or worth; in putting some one else down, we falsely elevate ourselves. That’s another unfortunate quality of the judging mind, it lies, making assumptions that seem true in the heat of the moment but turn out later to be false.

Jewish Tradition has lots to say about passing judgment on others. Hassidic lore and literature is especially focused on the foibles of judging others and that is where I would like to turn to now – a Hassidic story or two:

This is (supposedly) a true story about Rabbi Shmuel Shtrashun (1794-1872) He was a great scholar devoted to the welfare of the Jewish community of Vilna. He was especially concerned with the poor and even managed a Hebrew Free Loan Society to better their lives. Once, a simple Jew borrowed one hundred rubles for four months, promising to return it on the appointed day. Four months later, when the loan was due, he went to Rabbi Shmuel’s home, but was told the rabbi was in the study hall. The man went there, and found Rabbi Shmuel deeply engrossed in a complex subject in the Talmud. The man laid the money in front of him. Rabbi Shmuel looked up, nodded, and went back to his studying. Certain that the rabbi had acknowledged his receipt of the money, the man went his way.

But Rabbi Shmuel had only nodded reflexively; his mind was totally concentrated on his study. He pored over the talmudic tome for a long time, turning pages back and forth. When he finished, he shut it and put it back on its shelf, oblivious of the money pressed between its pages.

Every week, Rabbi Shmuel would go over the account books to see which loans were paid up and which still had to be collected. When he came to the name of that Jew, he noticed that the loan was still outstanding. He summoned him and asked that he repay the one hundred rubles.

“But I already paid you!”

“You did not. It is written here that you still owe the money.”

“I put the money on the table right in front of you!” the man insisted.

Rabbi Shmuel did not remember anything of the sort; he continued to demand payment. The man kept refusing, insisting that he had already paid. Finally, Rabbi Shmuel summoned him to rabbinical court.

When word of the case spread to the Jews of Vilna, the man fell into public disgrace. How dare he stand up against the famous scholar? He was, in effect, calling him a liar!

The hearing took place. Both sides were heard and the court ruled in favor of the poor man. It was one man's word against another's – there were no witnesses to the loan or the alleged repayment – and according to halakha (Jewish Law), in order to obligate a person to pay money, absolute proof of the obligation is required. The poor person was only instructed to take an oath that he had repaid the loan.

But the poor man had no sympathizers in all of Vilna. He was considered a thief, and a stubborn fool. His good name was ruined. People stopped talking to him. His son could not bear the disgrace and left Vilna altogether. Finally the man was even dismissed from his job. Still, he continued to insist that he had paid back his debt.

Time passed and Rabbi Shmuel needed to research the same tractate he had been studying when the loan was originally made. He pulled the volume down from the shelf and opened it up and discovered a sum of money—one hundred rubles! For a moment he was puzzled, wondering how such a large sum could have been misplaced there. Suddenly, it all came back to him. This was the missing money which the defendant had insisted he had repaid!

Rabbi Shmuel felt terrible. He had wronged a Jew. He had accused him falsely! Shaken to his core, he quickly summoned the man and said, “How can I possibly make amends for the anguish I caused you? I am prepared to make a public confession to clear your name. What else can I do to compensate you for your suffering?!”

The man stood before the rabbi. His face was gaunt, lined with the ravages of his ordeal. He said sadly: “My good name is already ruined. Even if you declare my innocence, people will not forget that I had once been accused of such a terrible thing. They might even think that you simply had pity on me and therefore decided to clear my name—despite my guilt. They will still consider me a liar and a thief. No, not even a public retraction would help me now. Besides, it would not bring my son back. He left Vilna out of shame.” Rabbi Shmuel was thoughtful for a long time. How could he help the broken man before him, the man whose reputation he himself had ruined? Suddenly, he had an idea. “Tell your son to return to Vilna, and I will take him as a husband for my daughter! This will certainly restore your good name!”

Except for the happy ending (which seems contrived to me), the story of Rabbi Sh'muel and the loan illustrates the potential devastating consequences' the judging mind can have on those we unfairly or wrongly past judgment on.

Yes, we can hurt others, but what about ourselves? What does the judging mind do to us, the people harboring the potentially destructive thoughts? The following is one of my favorite Hassidic tales. Some of you, I am sure, have heard it from me before. It's a classic story about

the conflict between the Hassidim and the Mitnagim in the Jewish Community. The Mitnagim saw the Hassidim as flawed upstarts, dangerous innovators who were leading the people astray. The story goes like this:

A mitnaged hears that the Hassidic Rebbe across town dances and celebrates with his disciples on the night of Kol Nidre, the evening of Yom Kippur. "How can this be?" He thinks to himself. "What an outrage!" "What Folly!" "I will go there myself and set them straight!" So he leaves his community and travels across town to where the Hassids worship and, sure enough, there they are dancing in a circle around their rebbe, their rabbi! Outraged the mitnaged rushes up to confront the rebbe who, calmly greets him as if he was expecting him to show up. The mitnaged is, for some reason speechless, it is as if time has slowed down and he is a distant observer. The rebbe, who is no ordinary man, tells him to observe his followers as they dance and whirl around them. "Notice their hearts", he says. "They are glowing", the mitnaged exclaims. "They are big and warm, full of compassion, so alive," he says with astonishment. "Now", the rebbe says, "look at yourself". What does he see, a shriveled up, hard, lifeless lump. His judging mind has squeezed all the life out of his nishamah, his soul. He may be physically alive in the year ahead, but he's dead inside and that inner sickness will eventually break down his physical wellbeing as well.

We don't just hurt others with our judgments, we hurt ourselves as well.

There is a conflict in our community that's felt by many people here tonight as well as some who are purposely absent, that I now want to address and that is the question of where we worship for the Holy Days. This may be uncomfortable for some. Nevertheless, I'd rather risk some discomfort than avoid discussing what is on our communal mind.

A little back ground. Ever since the passage of Prop 8 almost 2 years ago, Shomrei Torah has been struggling with our use of this lovely space which our LDS hosts give to us for free so graciously every year. The issue is that the LDS church took a leading role in funding and promoting Prop. 8, which denied same sex, couples the right to marriage. This is in direct conflict with Shomrei Torah's mission to affirm and welcome all people regardless of sexual orientation amongst other things. A number of us including myself, have also been involved for years in the fight for marriage equality which that adds another layer of tension to the relationship.

We spent six months in deliberation over this question including hiring a consultant who led us through a process that resulted in us being here this year. But in spite of our best efforts, the question is still raw for some here tonight. Others in protest or because that just can't feel comfortable here, refused to come all-together.

The great Talmudic sage Hillel teaches in Perkei Avot that one should not judge another until you have been in their place. Rather than taking sides and judging one way or another lets heed Hillel's call, at least for a moment, and try to contemplate what it is like to be in the others shoes.

Let's start with our Mormon hosts. How do you think they feel to find out that in spite of 13 years of unconditional service to us – the gift of their building with no strings of any kind

attached – we are now questioning the appropriateness of being in their space. After all, they know we are on opposite sides on this issue and they still welcome us here. We can't know for sure what they are feeling but we can assume that it doesn't feel very good.

Now let's stand in the shoes of those who feel we should worship elsewhere. For them our mission of inclusivity trumps the need to foster interfaith relations. They also feel that when it comes to civil rights, there is no other valid view; either you are for Marriage Equality or you are, by definition, a bigot. Some have judged this stance intolerant of those they disagree with; others have called them self centered, narrow minded, and divisive.

Those who argued to stay, besides appreciating the generosity of our Mormon neighbors, felt that it was precisely when we disagree that we should stay in relationship. A big problem in our world today, they argued was that, when groups disagree they disengage. These folks were branded by some as ignorant or insensitive, unprincipled or possibly even homophobic.

As for us, the leadership of the community; we managed to disappoint people on both sides. Some judged us as weak, ineffective or even hypocritical.

And finally, imagine being Gay – by the way, the LGBT folk in our community were not monolithic in their response to this challenge. They, like the rest of the congregation, fell on both sides of this issue. Nevertheless, there is one reality they all shared and that is having their family treated as a political football every election season.

Imagine being in the living room of your home with your kids watching T.V. when an ad comes on suggesting that you and your family were a threat to America, and that your very being, your essence was deviant, perverted and dangerous. Now imagine being asked to celebrate the most Holy time in the Jewish year in a space which sponsored those ads.

It's very difficult to do as Hillel suggests and only judge others when you have been in their position. We can only guess what it is like to be the other. I think Hillel's not so subtle message is to avoid judging others all together, a very tall order for most of us. Nevertheless, we at Shomrei Torah would benefit greatly from Hillel's admonition, in regards to the decision about where we worship for Holy Days and any other challenging problem we confront as a community. What's needed is less judgment and more compassion, less righteous indignation and more openness to truly hear the others perspective.

According to Jewish legend, when God first created the world it was founded under midat din, the attribute of strict justice. But soon after creation God realized that with such a foundation, the world could not be sustained, so God introduced midat rachamin, the attribute of compassion. Only then could the world be sustained. The New Year stands before us. We like God have a choice. We can live in the world with our own sense of – midat din – strict justice or judgment or we can choose to see the world through the lens of midat rachamin, compassion. One road leads to pain and spiritual, if not physical death. The other road is the way of healing and renewed life. The choice is up to us.