

Kol Nidrei 2021 – Community, COVID-19, and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai

Erev tov, good evening, and *g'mar hatimah tovah* to each of you. Coming together to hear and chant the Kol Nidrei is one of the highlights of the High Holy Days for Jews around the world each year. The melody evokes powerful feelings in many of us, transporting our souls to other times and places. While the melody itself is powerful, so too are the words themselves. Immediately PRIOR to the recitation of Kol Nidrei we said: *Biyeshivah shel malah v'shel matah*, By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of this court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.

Our *machzor* points out the history of this unusual passage and its probable connection to Jews forced into hiding or pretending to have given up their Jewish faith. This is historically interesting. But, its origin can also be seen as a response to a simple truth: All of us have transgressed, made mistakes, dare I say, committed sins. We are a sacred community made up of 100% fallible, imperfect people. Moreover, we know that we are not perfect and will NEVER be perfect. Yet, we keep striving. That's the beauty of our tradition, the aspirational quality of it. Our job isn't to feel guilt because of our imperfection, but to feel motivated to do better each day, no matter how young or old we are! That is important because tonight while we are each praying, each being judged by God, we do so not merely as individuals but as members of a *kehillah kedoshah* - a holy community. We get credit for the observance of each others *mitzvot* - commandments or ways of connecting to God; BUT we also are held to a certain degree culpable for each others *aveirot* - transgressions.

This tension has always existed and will always exist, at least until the time of the messiah. Over Rosh Hashanah I spoke about some of the “big questions” we are confronted with each year during the holidays. Where am I in relation to Judaism, God, prayer, my own soul? Tonight I want to address our relationship with our community. This is always an important concept to reflect on, and even more now as the tension has been exacerbated during the last eighteen months of COVID-19.

In the Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33b there is a story that highlights this tension. There we read about what happened when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai criticized the Roman government and was condemned to be executed. For a time he hid in the study hall. When he deemed that unsafe, he eventually left with his son Rabbi Elazar and they went and hid in a cave. The Talmud tells us that “**A miracle occurred and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water.** In order to preserve the single outfit each had entered the cave with, each day **they would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day** in that manner since you're not allowed to study Torah unclothed. **At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said: Who will inform bar Yohai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated?**

The two heard Elijah and knew they could finally leave the cave. So, **they emerged** from the cave, and **saw people who were plowing and sowing**, also known as living normal life. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai **said:** These people **abandon eternal life** of Torah study **and engage in**

temporal life for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that **every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave.** Chastised, **they again went and sat** in the cave **for an additional twelve months**, this time as a punishment and not to escape execution from the king. After that time, **they said: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months.** They felt sure that their sin was atoned for during that time. **A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged.** Despite having already been punished for judging their fellows harshly for engaging in normal life, **everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would look at, he again would strike;** luckily, **Rabbi Shimon would then heal** what his son had burnt. Rabbi Shimon, trying to moderate his son's behavior, **said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world,** as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah.

As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man who was holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: Why do you have these? He said to them: In honor of Shabbat. They said to him: **And let one suffice.** He answered them: **One is corresponding to: "Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy"** (Exodus 20:8), **and one is corresponding to: "Observe the Shabbat day, to keep it holy"** (Deuteronomy 5:12). **Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the mitzvot are to Israel. Their minds were put at ease** and they were no longer as upset that people were not engaged in Torah study.

It is an incredible story, and I can quickly find many morals in the story. These include the problems that arise when the educated elite feel themselves superior to those who do physical work for a living and in their superiority do damage to everyone; the difficulty that living in isolation from one another causes, resulting in a lack of empathy and no longer knowing HOW to properly live with other people; the danger of believing that YOUR way of doing things is the ONLY way to do things even when it is clear that not everyone has your same experience of the world - that is, being overly judgmental and self-righteous; and the danger that anger resulting from all three of the others can cause, literally destroying the world; and finally, that God's own self asks that we in our self-righteousness don't lash out at others.

As we work our way through our SECOND year in the land of COVID-19, it is easy to see the parallels to our lives - emerging from isolation, not knowing how to do so without comparing other people's behaviors to our own obviously perfect behavior, the anger it causes, being sent BACK into isolation - thanks a lot Delta, the masses at the mercy of an elite, and on and on.

And yet while that is ONE prism through which to view the story, it isn't the only one. The truth of the matter is that even prior to COVID-19 we each lived in our own little bubbles. We just might not have been as aware of it. As Ashkenazi Jews we may have been completely oblivious to the lives of our Sephardic brethren. I've been a rabbi for 23 years and just learned that our Mizrahi brethren don't say mazel tov, but rather *mabruch*. As non-Orthodox Jews we may not truly understand them and they may not understand us. As members of our own synagogues, we may not have reached out to our fellow Jews in the community as much as we could. As a shul we may have been isolated from the non-Jewish community at large. Within our own families and friendship groups too we may have isolated ourselves from those who thought differently about things, who might watch a different news station, who *has v'halil*, God forbid, might be in

a different political party than us, etc. That is not how it is supposed to be. As Jews we are connected to each other, always, and this connection is reflected in our religious behavior.

The Reform Jewish philosopher Rabbi Eugene Borowitz wrote on this subject back in 1977 on the purpose of communal worship. He wrote: "Judaism values communal worship not for its specific Jewish purposes alone, but for all people [men]. Group prayer, by confronting us with others, by asking us to link our prayers to theirs, reminds us immediately and directly that it is never enough to pray for ourselves alone. Speaking as "we", the individual discovers, acknowledges, articulates the needs, desires, hopes, which he/she, though one [person], shares with all [people] because she is not only a private self but a member of humanity. Besides, when we are conscious of those with whom we stand, what we may have wanted to pray by ourselves is generally made less selfish, more humble, and therefore more appropriate for utterance before God. There before us is the newly bereaved young widower with his three small children. Near him stands the white-haired man who, close to the age of retirement, suddenly faces bankruptcy; the beautiful young woman who has just come from the hospital after the removal of a breast; the quiet mother whose consultation with the school psychologist was deeply disturbing.....The joy of others similarly affects our worship. We are buoyed up by the happiness of the new grandparents offering their heartfelt thanks, the engaged couple who will be married this Sunday, the newly appointed vice-president of his firm, the recently honored community worker. Their joy infuses us so that what might have been a nagging, niggling, whine of prayer can as a proper "we" become worthy of God's attention....

.....Social worship is a sharp spur to ethical sensitivity as well as to enthusiasm. To stand together as equals before God with the man we dislike, the woman who has cut us, the boors who repel us, the intellects who snub us, the neighbors we do not trust, the fools we cannot bear, to say with them in some bond of unity, "we," is to shake our self-righteousness and expand the breadth of our conscience.

....Religion for the Jew...is not primarily a personal but a communal matter. The Torah was not given to Moses as an individual possession to share with others of a similar mind, but to the Jewish people as a whole... The Covenant at Sinai was made with Israel, the Jewish people, and thus, each Jew, as a Jew, shares this unique relation to God as an inheritor of his people's Covenant.....The (person) man who prays in the synagogue prays as a participant in a Jewish history which continues into the living present, and his prayers, therefore, express the needs of the community in which he stands."

After eighteen months of living in COVID land, it is hard to emerge from our caves - especially when we are nervous about the world consuming us or us consuming the world. And yet we can do it if we continue to strive together. Rabbi Chayim of Tzanz used to tell this parable: A man, wandering lost in the forest for several days, finally encountered another. He called out: "Brother, show me the way of this forest." The man replied: "Brother, I too am lost. I can only tell you this: The ways I have tried lead nowhere; they have only led me astray. Take my hand, and let us search for the way together.' Rabbi Chayim would add: "So it is with us. When we go our separate ways, we may go astray. Let us join hands and look for the way together."