

KOL NIDRE 2023**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley****Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein**

Erev tov, g'mar tov, and gut yuntif to everybody here
and watching at home.//

The pilgrimage into our hearts & souls
continues tonight, on this Kol Nidre.//

I hope that these Days of Awe, & this New Year, 5784,
have been meaningful & renewing.//

As a number of you know,

I had a mini-sabbatical earlier this summer in London,
where I taught at Leo Baeck College,

the UK's Reform & Liberal rabbinical school,
as well as at two large congregations in the city.//

For two weeks,

I was immersed in London's Jewish community,
and it was clear that Jews there stick together—
they have their own institutions,
their own schools, their own camps—
just like us Jews here in North America.//

Historically, that's always been one of the strengths
in Jewish life—our gift for social cohesion.//

But what about gentiles?

What is, or what should be, *their* role in our lives?//

After all, with the exception of the state of Israel,

most Jews around the world interact on a daily basis
with non-Jews,
with people from other faiths & cultures—
they are our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers,
sometimes even our spouses.//

On this Yom Kippur,
this sacred time of both self- and communal-reflection,
it is a question well worth asking ourselves.//

It turns out, our tradition offers us ample evidence
about how non-Jews have greatly impacted,
often *favorably*, Jewish lives and practices,
in transformative ways that continue to this day.//

The Torah portion *Yitro*, from the book of Exodus,
offers an important example about the key role
that a non-Jew has played in Jewish life.//

Moses & the people of Israel are finally free
from bondage in Egypt.//

They've successfully crossed the Sea of Reeds,
and they are about to embark on a 40-year journey
through the desert in search of the Promised Land.//

Moses has led them the entire time, & he is exhausted.//

Jethro, a Midianite priest and Moses's father-in-law,
approaches the great prophet

at the beginning of the *parsha* & observes that Moses
is making decisions, unilaterally,
over every single dispute between his people
“from morning until evening.”//

Jethro questions Moses: “Why do you act alone?”//

Then Moses’s father-in-law offers him advice:

“The thing you are doing is not right;
you will surely wear yourself out, & these people as well.
For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.”//

This is not only practical advice; it is moral counsel.//

Jethro has the courage to tell Moses, the supreme leader,
that autocratic governance is problematic *holistically*.//

It will wear Moses out, but it will also, eventually,
alienate Moses from the very people he is trying to lead.//

In the next scene, Jethro advises Moses
on how to delegate authority and establish a judiciary
for the Jewish people.//

He tells Moses to choose capable & God-fearing people,
those who are trustworthy and beyond reproach,
to serve as judges and help him to resolve conflicts.//

The revelation at Mount Sinai occurs
in the very next chapter.//

Think about that for a moment.//

Before Moses receives the Ten Commandments

from God, before the most significant

and seminal moment in the history of the Jewish people—

the very birth of the Jewish religion—

it is a *non-Jew* who plays the lead,

pivotal role in the creation of a legal, social

and moral framework that will guide Jewish society

for generations.//

To me, that is very noteworthy.//

So, what is the lesson for us today?//

If you study the corpus of Jewish Scriptures,
it becomes clear
that there are many other important non-Jews
who play key roles in the narratives & literature
that define our people and our faith.//
Without these gentiles, Jews and Judaism
would look different, even diminished.//

Early in the book of Genesis,
long before Abraham and Sarah are called
to become the world's first Jews,
the world *itself* is in danger.//
God, enraged by humanity's lawless & sinful behavior,

decides to destroy all of creation

with rains that last forty days and forty nights.//

Only Noah, a righteous gentile, is spared,

along with his family and two of every animal.//

After the rains end and the flood starts to recede,

Noah, his family, and all of the creatures inside the ark

that Noah built exit onto dry land.//

The world can now start from scratch.//

Existence is renewed.//

God makes a covenant with humanity

to never again take such a dire action.//

In the very next Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*,
Abraham receives God's call and he and his wife Sarah
give birth, literally & figuratively, to the Jewish people.//

One could argue that without Noah
there would be no world, and without Noah
there would be no Jews nor, eventually, Judaism.//

One additional example of an important gentile
who has positively impacted Jewish life is Job.//

The Book of Job is one of the cornerstones
of biblical wisdom literature.//

Job himself, a non-Jew,
is a classic figure in Western thought

and resonates today even in popular culture.//

Job is a prosperous and happy man,

distinguished by his upright character and piety.//

Yet because of Satan's challenge to God

to test Job's faith,

he suffers a series of catastrophes,

from losing his wealth, to physical afflictions,

to the death of his children.//

Job curses the day he was born,

but he does not abandon God.//

As Job ponders why he has been made to suffer,

God appears to him in a whirlwind.//

While God does not answer Job's existential questions,

Job accepts that the mystery of his situation

will be forever unanswerable

and that his suffering is God's will.//

Job appears faithful, even without direct knowledge

of God or God's ways,

nor with an understanding of the justice of his plight.//

The rabbis call Job "the prophet of the gentiles."//

And the book named after him

remains one of the pillars of biblical wisdom.//

Without Job, the Hebrew Scriptures

would lack a key voice of that wisdom,
and a moving personal illustration of faithfulness—
even in the face of intellectual mystery & human misery.//

Despite all these examples
of the positive impact by non-Jews on Jewish life
and spirituality,
the Jewish community has been, at best, *ambivalent*
in the way that we see gentiles.//

We've been concerned
about the negative role that intermarriage can play
in the perpetuation of Jewish identity

in our children and grandchildren.//

We've worried

that the influence of non-Jewish faith traditions

can lead to syncretism and/or assimilation.//

And, of course, we are & have always been cognizant

of the long and bloody history of anti-Semitism

perpetrated by the gentile world.//

Still, it's complicated.//

Jews and Judaism have also benefited from,

and been greatly enriched by,

our interactions with non-Jews

and with different cultures and religions.//

This has been especially true

after we left the land of Israel.//

While the Diaspora was frequently an inhospitable

and dangerous place for Jews, it also produced

a number of amazing creative achievements:

the Babylonian Talmud,

the Golden Age in Spain,

Hasidism,

the Musar movement,

a flowering of art (Chagall),

music (Klezmer),

and Yiddish literature & theater.//

All these contributions to the world

were the direct result of the interplay with,

and response to,

the Jews' gentile neighbors

and their cultures that surrounded us.//

This is not just ancient history—

we've seen this dynamic play out in our own time.//

In many ways, Judaism in the United States today

reflects and embodies

important, modern, Western values

that are not specifically embedded or identifiable

in the classical Jewish tradition.//

Our embrace of pluralism;

our focus on egalitarianism;

the priority we place on inclusivity—

all these aspects of contemporary liberal Judaism

owe a great debt

to the impact of the social & cultural American zeitgeist,

which continues to shape our faith, and our community,

in positive & productive ways.//

Now, as we contemplate our lives and our community

during Yom Kippur,

is not the time for ambivalence.//

In societies that are ever more diverse & intercultural,
Jews need to move beyond our silos & parochialism
and learn to embrace non-Jewish ideas
without fear or prejudice—
they have much to offer us.//

Let's stay grounded in the values & practices
of our Jewish heritage,
but let's also affirm the gifts
of the other traditions around us.//

Let's step forward into this brave new world
as boldly as our forbearers stepped into the old one.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon