

Kol Nidrei Sermon – 2014 / 5775

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“Get Real”

Do you ever think about how words and phrases enter our lexicon and our slang vocabulary? I always wonder who starts these trends and how do they *go viral* (to use a contemporary phrase). Some of us probably went to the school dance that was *the cat's meow*, in a *spiffy* outfit with a couple of *swells*, or maybe you were *cookin'* all the way to *Fat City* in your *fliptop*, and you had it *made in the shade*. Some of us were *groovy*, making *bread* and hangin' with the other *cool cats*. That was *outta sight*. Later on everything was *dy-no-mite* when we went to *boogie down* at the *disco* with a *fox*. By the 80's if you didn't like something you'd exclaim, “*Gag me with a spoon,*” or “*Grody to the max,*” but most of the time things were *totally tubular*, *like, I'm SO sure*. In the 90's, What's up? became ‘*sup*, your friend was your *dawg*, something good was *fly* and instead of *cuttin' a rug*, we *got jiggy wid it*. Today we speak *hashtag*, we're *down with it*, and *Crazy, man!* is now *Dude, that's hella cray cray!*

One word that we hear quite often in today's slang is the word “real.” Now “real” is a word I have always enjoyed using both as a descriptor and in its adverbial form. It's so simple. “He is such a real and honest person.” “I like that she is real – not a phony. She doesn't pretend to be someone she's not.” Or... You look really pretty today ... You really got the job? I'm so happy for you! ... He is a really nice guy...

When I consider the word “real,” I always think of one of my favorite children’s books, *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. In this story a young boy receives a stuffed bunny made of velveteen as a gift. The boy mostly plays with his other presents, forgetting about the rabbit. His other presents are modern and mechanical, and they snub the old-fashioned velveteen rabbit. The wisest and oldest toy in the nursery, the Skin Horse, tells the rabbit about toys magically becoming real as they become loved by a child. The rabbit is amazed and wants so desperately to be real; but he doubts that this could ever happen to him. One night the boy's Nana gives the rabbit to the boy to sleep with, in place of a lost toy. The rabbit becomes the boy's favorite toy, and the boy regards the stuffed rabbit as a real rabbit. As time passes, the rabbit becomes shabby. His coat is all worn but he is so happy. One day he gets left out in the garden where he meets some real rabbits who hop all around him, taunting him because he is not real. The velveteen rabbit is devastated and doesn’t understand. One day, the boy becomes sick with scarlet fever, and the rabbit sits with him as he recovers. The doctor orders that the boy should be taken to the seaside, that his room should be disinfected, and that all his books and toys are to be burned – including the velveteen rabbit. The rabbit is bundled into a sack and left out in the garden overnight, where he sadly reflects on his life with his boy. The toy rabbit cries and a real tear drops onto the ground, where a marvelous flower appears.

A fairy steps out of the flower and comforts the velveteen rabbit, introducing herself as the nursery magic fairy. She says that he is old and shabby and real because of the boy's love for him, and that she will take him away with her and "turn [him] into real" – to everyone. The fairy takes the rabbit to the forest, where she gives the velveteen rabbit a kiss. The velveteen rabbit changes into a real rabbit, and joins the other rabbits in the forest. The next spring, the rabbit returns to look at the boy, and the boy remarks how much the rabbit looks like his old toy rabbit. It's such a sweet story, and I have always loved this idea of becoming real through the experience of being loved.

Today we hear the word "real" in a variety of contexts. *I'm keepin' it real. ... I'm on the real ... Fo' reals? Fo' reals! ... It's been real... and Get real.* Have you heard these expressions? I have *fo' real*.

Miriam Webster defines "real" as follows:

: actually existing or happening

: not imaginary

: not fake, false, or artificial

: important and deserving to be regarded or treated in a serious way

Urbandictionary.com defines “keepin’ it real” like this:

Staying true to yourself, your faith, your life and constantly seeking the truth. You are keeping it real as long as you do not harm yourself or anyone around you physically mentally or spiritually.

You try to benefit the environment and society that surrounds you, eventually serving humanity for the greater good.

By keeping it real you are authentic and do not follow the geopolitical or corporate economic norm. You strive to develop a norm that is centered on peace, truth, and unity.

There is even a word “trill” T...R...I...L...L which is defined as an adjective used in hip-hop culture to describe someone who is considered to be well respected, coming from a combination of the words "true" and "real". Interesting...

Out of curiosity, I went to Twitter to search under **#real**. I found some interesting thoughts:

Look around you and see where you can find new opportunities to invest in your life and the lives of others. #real

I'm so thankful I had a childhood before technology took over. #real

To become the person you want to be, you have to first be who you are. #real

If you're a true, real, and loyal person, you don't have to post things and tell people you are. You can be quiet and let your actions speak. #real

I live by this. At the end of the day it all comes down to a person's character. Are you #real?

When you truly put God in His rightful place in your life everything else just seems to fall into its place. #real

Forgiveness is the final act of love. #real

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, or at-ONE-ment. This is the day for “keepin’ it real.” It’s the day to be authentic, to “show up” as the kids say... to be present – not only in the seat, but in the moment, in this moment, and the moments to come in this new year. How can we as Jews keep it real?

Our traditional liturgy gives us three ways to keep it real, to atone – with our fellow human beings, with God, and with ourselves. They are *t’shuvah*, *t’filah*, and *tz’dakah*.

T’shuvah... *T’shuvah* literally means “return” from the Hebrew verb “*lashuv*.” It’s like making a spiritual U-turn. *T’shuvah* is a noun, an act that we perform. One could write an entire sermon, even an entire treatise or book just on the concept of *t’shuvah*. It’s that powerful and that multi-faceted. Let’s explore a few ways that we Jews can achieve *t’shuvah* – not only this day or this season, but every day.

One way is through forgiveness. *T’shuvah* is often translated as “repentance.” Forgiveness is a large component of repentance. And it’s also difficult. It is SO hard for us to admit we were wrong and that we have wronged someone else. And it is SO hard to take that next step, to say I...am... sorry. But it must be done. The burden is so great upon our souls, that burden of carrying around all that guilt. Even if we don’t feel guilty, there are still feelings of discomfort at seeing the other person or even thinking about the other person. If we just take the initiative and seek out the individuals whom we have wronged and make things right, how much better life will be.

Sometimes it is we who have been hurt, and the other person never comes to apologize. That can be hard, too... Really hard... But forgiveness is so much easier than carrying around a grudge, carrying around resentment and anger. It really is. Like the song says, "Let it go... Let it go..." Just let it go. We have to just breathe and move on sometimes in order to bring *t'shuvah* into our lives. Like Twitter said: *Forgiveness is the final act of love. #real*

Sometimes we don't realize that we have been the one to cause hurt or pain in another, and this is why we traditionally say this prayer:

I hereby forgive anyone who annoyed me or mocked me, or who sinned against me whether physically, financially, or hurt my honor or anything else of mine. Whether accidentally, willingly, unintentionally or intentionally; whether in speech or in action, in this life or any other. And no person should be punished because of what they did to me.

In our tradition, keepin' it real is through deed and through action, not through just thought or wishing it to be. We have to show up and work to make *t'shuvah* happen.

Another way to achieve *t'shuvah* is through the lesson we learn from *The Velveteen Rabbit* – to love... to love wholeheartedly, unabashedly, completely, and honestly. Make it real and keep it real. Show your love every day. Just mumbling "Love ya" as you run out the door is not demonstrating your love. Look at your loved ones when they talk to you. Put down the phone, the iPod, the laptop and look at them. Do things with the people you love. Make memories. Take care of your relationships.

As Maya Angelou said, “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” This is so very true. Forgiveness and love make for *t'shuvah*. Just like we learned on Twitter: *Look around you and see where you can find new opportunities to invest in your life and the lives of others. #real*

Next is *T'filah*... *T'fillah* means prayer. It comes from the verb “*l'hitpalel*.” *L'hitpalel* is a reflexive verb which literally means “to judge oneself, to look inside oneself.” The most important part of any Jewish prayer, whether it's a prayer of praise of God, or for forgiveness, of thanksgiving, or of petition, is the opportunity for introspection that it gives us, that precious moment we have look inside ourselves. In this moment we can learn so much about ourselves and how we are to connect to God and to the world around us. And what's wonderful about *T'filah* is that there are so many different ways to do it. We can offer our own private prayers and we can come together as a community to offer our prayers together. We can use words, thoughts, song, Hebrew, English, even meditation, yoga, or dance. Abraham Joshua Heschel, when he marched with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, said that he was praying with his feet. And Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, taught that when two people meet and truly acknowledge the presence of each other and the importance of each other, that God is present.

Connecting with others in a holy way and making relationships – that’s *t’filah*, too. Just like I read on Twitter: *When you truly put God in His rightful place in your life everything else just seems to fall into its place. #real*

And lastly, *tz’dakah*. *Tz’dakah* comes from the word *tzedek*, which means justice or righteousness. Though it’s often translated as “charity,” *tz’dakah* is so much more. There is responsibility involved. It is commanded in the Torah. It is righteous giving, giving from obligation, not just as a good deed. *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*. Justice, justice, shall you pursue. The Torah teaches us that this means in part to care for and plead for the cause of the orphan, the stranger in your midst, and the widow. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read these words over and over. Remember that you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. Do this in remembrance of your slavery in Egypt. We as Jews know what it’s like to be the stranger, to be downtrodden and cast out, so we have the moral obligation to do what we can for others. It’s part of keepin’ it real. Just like the Urban Dictionary said: “You try to benefit the environment and society that surrounds you, eventually serving humanity for the greater good.” This is *tz’dakah*.

U’t’shuvah u’t’filah u’tz’dakah ma’avirin et ro’a ha-g’zeirah. T’shuvah, t’filah, and tz’dakah help the hardship of the decree to pass, help us to achieve at-one-ment, true atonement. In this new year 5775, it is my hope and prayer that *t’shuvah* (return), *t’filah* (prayer) and *tz’dakah* (righteous giving) will be a part of your life. Let’s make our Judaism real and keep it real. *G’mar chatimah tovah*. May you be sealed for a year of goodness. And let us say: Amein.