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The Holiday for Human Beings

Here is a riddle that I learned from my children:

What is black and white with a long blue tail and giant yellow wings?

A penguin with delusions of grandeur.

Well, if that is a penguin with delusions of grandeur, what are human beings? Are we sinners with delusions of grandeur? Weak and mortal beings with delusions of grandeur? Narcissists with delusions of grandeur? Bipedes pretending to be angels?

Or, perhaps, humans are the most noble creation, and what we should strive for, is to be human beings, flaws included. Today is a day for leaving behind delusions of all kinds. And, through that honesty, attain some insights into ourselves that evade us on other days.

Yom Kippur is a holiday for human beings.

So many aspects of our prayer lives entail imitating angels. We stand with our feet together when we recite the amidah or recite Kaddish in order to imitate the angels, who are described as having a single foot. When we recite the Kedushah prayer as a congregation, we are imitating the heavenly chorus of angels who praise God with those very words, according to the prophetic visions of Yehezkel. But, on Yom Kippur, when we are at our most angelic, having temporarily shed even our need for food and drink, we take a step back from our imitation of the angels and draw attention to our humanity. Nine years ago, at my first Yom Kippur in Lakeview, I spoke about two of my favorite Yom Kippur piyutim, one liturgical poem recited before Kedushah of Shacharit, and one which we will recite before kedushah of Mussaf.

“Asher Ometz T’hilatecha” – was said at Shacharit – “Even though Your mighty praise is among the angels of heaven, the beings that flash divine light, the hosts on high, and the still small voice – “U-Kedushat’cha B’Fihem – Your sanctity – and the recitation of “kedushah” is in their mouths. “Ve’Ratzitah Shevach” – Yet, you desire praise from mere mortals, with their numbered days...for this is Your glory – V’Hi Kevodecha”

Stanza after stanza of this piyut, describes the choruses praising God in heaven. And stanza after stanza of this piyut, expresses God’s preference for human prayer.

And then, in Mussaf, we will recite: “Asher Eimatecha – even though Your dread is upon the faithful angels, the mighty heavenly hosts, created of ice mixed with fire...” “Ve-Avita T’hilah” – Yet you desire praise from those formed from earth, denizens of the valleys below, whose actions are meager, and good deeds few in number V’Hi T’hilatecha – and this is Your praise!”

Here too, God’s heavenly congregation is depicted in striking language, and the poet declares that our kedushah is better. We aren’t imitating the angels out of some delusion of grandeur. We are doing something more precious than what they can do.

This helps us understand a curious phrase that introduces the Vidu’i the confession that is included in all of the prayers for Yom Kippur:

תבא לפניך הפלתנו, ואל תתעלם מהחנתנו שאין אנחנו עזי פנים וקשי ערף לומר לפניך ... צדיקים
אנחנו ולא חטאנו אבל אנחנו ואבותינו חטאנו:

“Let our prayer come before you and do not ignore our supplication. For we are not so brazen-faced and stiff-necked to say to you...“We are righteous and have not sinned.” For, indeed, we and our fathers have sinned.”

And, you may recall, we then launch into the Vidu'i itself and confess our sins according to an alphabetical acrostic so that we don't forget any. But until this year, I never realized that this was such a curious introduction to the confession. Rav Hutner, in his collection of essays Pahad Yitzhak, points out the absurdity of the moment. Of all the people who need to say “I am not without sin” the one person who does NOT need to make that declaration is the person who is about to confess! Obviously you aren't so brazen as to claim you are without sin, you're standing with an open machzor about to confess. If you thought you were without sin you wouldn't be there.

Rav Hutner explains that the brazen claim to be without sin is a distinct and particularly problematic form of denial, akin to idolatry. Someone who thinks that he or she is perfect and beyond reproach is not capable of acknowledging God; such people worship only their delusional image of themselves. And so, when we interrupt our lives to confess, we need to clarify why we are confessing now. Have we thought that we are without sin, up until this moment? If so, we have more work to do and the standard vidu'i may not suffice. In contrast, if we were aware, in a general way, that we are flawed and sinning human beings, then we can enter our “guilty plea” by saying אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאוּ and then move on to vidu'i and our requests for forgiveness and atonement.

Alternatively, when we declare אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאוּ we are declaring “I'm a human being who does not have delusions of grandeur and this day was made for people like me who have sinned and who need this day.”

The Unetane Tokf prayer, recited at Mussaf, describes God opening a book of memories and reading from it.
וְתַפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְכוּרוֹת וּמֵאֲלֵיו יִקְרָא

Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel wrote that here, in our shuls we too open that book of memories. We open our machzorim to the pages of Yizkor and recall our deceased relatives.

On this Holiday for Human Beings, when we acknowledge that we are flawed, we recall our deceased family from a unique perspective. Our flaws can galvanize us to recognize our capacity to do good in the world. In the famous words of Rav Nahman of Breslov: if you believe in the capacity to cause damage, you must logically believe in the capacity to repair damage. Acknowledging our sins is therefore a prologue to acts of repair and fixing that we can do in the world. Yizkor, a pledge to tzedakah, allows us to direct the emotions we feel today into a positive impact on the world.

But, Yizkor is also about memory, and the memories of our deceased family on this day take on a special hue. Is our sense of guilt deeper because we know the ways we failed to live up to the standards of those who taught us to tell right from wrong? Or, does our awareness of our own flaws allow us to be more forgiving to those among our deceased relatives who let us down or disappointed us in small or large ways? Both forms of memory seem so very human, and therefore seem so very appropriate to this Holiday for Human Beings.

Yizkor is a pledge to tzedakah that allows our deceased ancestors to reach back into the world, through our own generosity, undertaken in their memory, and bring more goodness to the world, and burnish their own reputations as their impact continues to grow.

Yizkor is a dialogue with ourselves in which the memories of our deceased relatives goads us into living our lives more closely in alignment with their noble examples.

Yizkor is a dialogue with the dead themselves, undertaken in the shadow of our public acknowledgment that we are flawed and sinful human beings. Yes we are, and so were they, and that's how God made us. And that's how God made them. And all of us can find forgiveness on Yom Kippur.

Please prepare for Yizkor...

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