

Kol Nidre 5780: A Joyous Yom Kippur

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If I told you that Yom Kippur is one of the most joyous days on the Jewish calendar, would you believe me?

OK. I suppose it's gotten a reputation for being solemn, but I promise I didn't make that up. One of the most revered Sages in Jewish history, Rabban Gamliel, who lived in the land of Israel in the first century, asserted¹ that Yom Kippur was as joyous as an *actual* joyous day, Tu b'Av, also known as Jewish Sadie Hawkins Day. Tu b'Av, or the 15th day of the month of Av, late in the summer, was a day for matchmaking, and today continues to celebrate love. But Yom Kippur?!

Rabban Gamliel's assertion builds on the premise that, after a day of soul-searching, fasting, and prayer, we are 100% guaranteed forgiveness for our sins. And that is certainly cause for celebration.

But there's a great distance between where we sit right now, at the start of this sacred convocation, and where we plan to arrive tomorrow night--and I don't just mean the lox and bagels! We are hopeful--we have chosen to abstain from all of our daily pleasures; many of us are wearing white, the traditional color of purity--and yet we bear the burden of a year's worth of mistakes, missteps, shameful behavior, perhaps even true sins. When we removed the Sifrei Torah from the ark a short while ago, we asked permission to pray *im ha'avaryanim*, in the presence of sinners. Lest any of us is unsure--*we* are the sinners. Each of us. We can't get away with it any longer. Not this evening. Not on Yom Kippur.

Around this time of the year, I like to ask groups of people I'm with--at a Shabbat service, sitting together over coffee--how their process of *teshuvah*/repentance is going. Maybe it's

¹ Mishnah Taanit Chapter 4 Mishnah 8

the setting, but I usually find that we're hesitant to talk about *teshuvah*. Maybe it's too private. Maybe we're not that interested. Or maybe we're too afraid of looking in the mirror, too afraid of the self we'll see reflected back, too afraid of the person we've become.

This evening, I'd like to consider with you what we can do throughout this day in order to make the most of Yom Kippur. How shall we make this a *good Yom Kippur*?

Now, you likely know our tradition overflows with teachings about how to ask forgiveness from someone we've wronged. Specifically, we've got 3 chances to fess up to a person we've hurt, and if they don't forgive, we're off the hook. You may also know that our tradition is quite specific about what it means to achieve complete repentance: If you find yourself in the exact situation where you sinned, and this time you don't, you know you've changed. And you may have also come across the teaching² that Yom Kippur itself atones only for sins between human beings and God; the relationship repair must happen outside of this space, outside of this day, outside the words of these prayers.

All of these are good. They are also focused on our external behavior--how many times we approach someone for reconciliation, whether or not we can refrain from giving in to prior temptations, and which sins Yom Kippur handles. Our mainstream tradition is less articulate about what happens inside a person's heart on Yom Kippur.

But here it is, in one word: vulnerability.

That's right. In the presence of hundreds of people, while reciting thousands of words in a language not our own, we must find a way to peel back the protective layer around our

² Babylonian Talmud Yome 87b

egos, take our pride and place it elsewhere. Those things are there precisely to prevent us from acknowledging that we've made mistakes, that we've hurt others. And they prevent us from repairing with those we respect and love; they prevent us from growing, from improving our own selves.

You may have read or watched Dr. Brene Brown, a wildly popular researcher in the field of shame and vulnerability--perfect for Yom Kippur. She set out to uncover what makes some people, what she calls, "whole-hearted"--satisfied with themselves. She discovered that there's a fundamental difference between "whole-hearted" individuals and those who struggle with self-worth. "Whole-hearted" people, she says in her TED Talk³,

fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating...They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say "I love you" first ... the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees ... the willingness to breathe through waiting for the doctor to call after your mammogram. They're willing to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental.

As someone who doesn't naturally relate to vulnerability this way, I find it remarkable that there are people in the world--maybe some of them are here in this room this evening--who don't freeze up when considering putting themselves out there. What a gift to be able to do that naturally; what an inspiration for all of us.

If being vulnerable means saying "I love you" first, perhaps it also means the willingness to say "I'm sorry I hurt you" first. Perhaps it also includes admitting to ourselves, "I should have made a different choice" or "I should have kept my mouth shut" or "I could have said that without the biting tone".

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability/transcript?language=en

These are the first steps that Yom Kippur invites us to take. Vulnerably, but without adding an extra layer of judgment or shame, we are called to review interactions we had over the last year. As we note instances we want to examine on this sacred day, let us also be gentle with ourselves. Like the whole-hearted in Dr. Brown's study, Yom Kippur encourages us to be vulnerable, but not judgmental; contrite, but not ashamed. It does not require self-flagellation; just an honest look at who we have been and a soft beating of our chest, a physical manifestation of the pain we caused.

While we're talking vulnerability, and feeling a little vulnerable ourselves, I'd like to suggest we take it a step further. You see, each high holiday season we talk about reviewing the past year, working to right the wrongs. And I think there might be an even more meaningful approach to this season and this day. Rather than *reacting* to our mistakes, we could use this day of Yom Kippur to consider the stumbling blocks we each carry within ourselves--you know, the parts of us that allow us to get frustrated easily, to lash out, to tell ourselves we're right and everyone else is wrong. We could try to get to the root cause of our sins, and if we succeed, we might emerge from this day fundamentally changed.

Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, a professor of Jewish Thought and Spiritual Practice in Jerusalem, teaches⁴ that Yom Kippur is a day of letting go. He notes that so much of our ritual practice today models that letting go, and we are invited to follow that same path in our hearts. Just look around and see what we've let go. We've set aside food and drink, and by sometime tomorrow, our bodies won't be urging us as usual to take a break. We abstain from the normal comforts and pleasures of our daily lives for these 25 hours.

We enumerate the behaviors we regret, whether we performed them ourselves or they were enacted elsewhere in our community, and we commit to let them go. And we spend not an insignificant portion of the day recalling the ancient practices in the Torah and later in the Temple, as the high priest would walk deeper and deeper into the Temple precinct, letting go of his entourage, letting go of the ornate decorations of the Temple, and finally

⁴ <https://elmad.pardes.org/2015/09/yom-kippur-letting-go/>

entering alone into the holy of holies, the *kodesh hakodashim*. That's what we, too, aim for today, says Rabbi Jacobson-Maisels--the holy of holies, where we are simply at one with our Creator.

We have before us this wonderful gift of Yom Kippur. We've taken the day off of work, we are already planning to be here. If you need permission to lose yourself in the machzor or even in your own thoughts, you have it. Our task today is to let ourselves be vulnerable, to find our true selves, and to start down the path of transformation. *This is teshuvah*--turning toward the holiest version of ourselves and choosing this year to live that version.

Most of us will not accomplish a full transformation by tomorrow night, and that's ok. We need to remember the encouraging words of Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot⁵, Teachings of the Sages: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."

I want to bring us back to where we began. Yom Kippur was once considered to be a joyous day, for on this day, our sins are guaranteed to be forgiven. How do we know this? There are two short teachings in the Talmud, Tractate Rosh HaShanah, about God's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, Adonai Adonai.

First: Rabbi Yochanan noted the verse in the Torah where it says that God physically passed before Moshe, which we would have thought impossible, since God doesn't have a physical manifestation. But it says it, so it must teach us something. Rabbi Yochanan suggested it teaches us that the Holy Blessed One put on a tallit like the prayer leader and showed Moses the order of prayer. God said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.

⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:21

Second: Rav Yehudah said: A covenant has been made with the thirteen attributes, that when they recite them, Israel will not be turned away empty-handed.”

It’s no wonder, then, that these words form the core of our penitential prayers throughout this day. They are some of the most poignant in the entire machzor. We recite them as a community, standing, often before the open ark, voices united in longing. And they work.

Let’s try, individually and as a community, to aim for that joy. We have quite a bit of internal work cut out for us over the next 20-something hours, but we’re in it together, and we’ve got a 100% satisfaction guarantee.

G’mar Chatimah Tovah, I wish each one of us a meaningful and a joyous Yom Kippur.