

Change is in the Air

Kol Nidrei
The Jewish Center
Yom Kippur 2021
Rabbi Yosie Levine

One morning this past summer at our daily minyan, there was a Chassidish gentleman wearing a long beckshe. After davening, I went over to him and introduced myself. He said his name was Meir. I asked where he was visiting from and what brought him to our shul.

He told me he was from Williamsburg. His wife had just given birth to a baby boy at Mt. Sinai. He found our address on a minyan app and he was all too happy to have a place to daven.

I wished him mazel tov and told him that he's of course welcome to join us again.

And then – with a little hesitation – he says to me, “Rabbi, could you do me a favor.” He takes out his wallet and hands me an American Express card. He says, “Take a picture of my credit card on your phone.”

This was a first for me, but I was happy to take the picture.

“If you think it's possible,” he says, “I'd like to make a donation of \$10,000 to the shul. I don't want to create more work for you – if it's too much tircha – but if you're open to it could I make a suggestion?”

I said, “Suggestions are always welcome. And they're particularly welcome when they come with \$10,000 gifts to the shul.”

He said, “I'm happy to give you \$10,000 if you can just raise the mechitza.”

I said, “Meir, thank you much for your generous offer. I'll be happy to ask the members of the board. But tell me – if someone gave you \$10,000 not to wear a beckshe, would you do it?”

“Think about it,” he said.

In the end, we parted friends...

He kept his beckshe.

We kept our mechitza.

And I kept his credit card information....

Putting aside the architecture of our sanctuary, I think it's a provocative question. Just what would it take for us to seriously consider changing one of the constants in our lives?

Contained within this day is an underappreciated irony.

So much of our tefillah is taken up with petitions requesting some kind of reversal.

Time and again, we ask Hashem to change.

- קרע רוע גזר דיננו – there's a decree against us. We ask Hashem to tear it up;
- שלח רפואה שלימה לחולי עמך – there are people who are suffering. We ask Hashem to heal them;
- מנע מגיפה מנחלתך – there's a raging pandemic. We ask Hashem to bring it to an end.

And yet for all of our desire for Hashem to make changes in our lives, how willing are we to do the same? How open are we to the idea of making even minor adjustments to the patterns that govern the way we behave?

What's fascinating to notice is that the day itself is a kind of ongoing testament to the plasticity of human will. Yes – on a cosmic level – we confess that we're like clay in the hands of the potter. If we sin, it's because we're all too human. Denizens of this terrestrial world, we're bound to make material mistakes.

But even more poignantly, Yom Kippur reminds us skeptics time and again that teshuva is not only possible, it's woven into the fabric of our national identity.

Think of the day itself. Today is the anniversary of Moshe's second descent from Sinai on the 10th of Tishrei. The first time he came down the mountain was nothing less than calamitous. And yet the same nation that raced to worship a pagan icon was equally capable of renouncing idolatry and embracing the call of ethical monotheism just a short time later. That's today! That was the first Yom Kippur.

And then there's the hero of the day – the character of Yonah. To say nothing of the people of Ninveh who turned themselves around in a heartbeat, think for a moment of Yonah himself. On his first call, he preferred to jump into the sea rather than perform his mission. On his second, he becomes the most successful prophet in the history of prophecy. With a pronouncement of five words, he saves an entire civilization.

And so it goes for the Temple Service that serves as the centerpiece of our liturgy.

Our parsha for the day is the Torah's description of how Aaron functioned in the בית המקדש on Yom Kippur. But why does it begin with the words:

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, אֶתְּרֵי מוֹת, שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן--בְּקָרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי-יְהוָה, וַיָּמָתוּ

Nadav and Avihu died in Nissan – six months earlier. What does the death of Aaron's sons have to do with the Yom Kippur service?

The answer – as Rashi already tells us – is everything!

That's the whole point.

It's all about the reversal of fortune.

For Aaron, his family's first foray into the Temple caused otherwise guiltless people to perish by fire.

Now Aaron is meant to take fire to the Temple and save the lives of those who would otherwise perish because of their guilt.

The whole essence of the day radiates the sense that even what appears hard and fast and settled and utterly unalterable – can ultimately be altered.

R. Sacks always used to say that teshuvah functions as a kind of polemic against three of the great deterministic philosophies of modern times. Marx said that our lives are determined by economics and class. Darwin said that human beings are determined by their genes. And Freud argued that we're products of our childhood experiences. Teshuvah offers a radical alternative to all of these. As Margaret Thatcher said to Yehuda Avner, we should never forget the past, but we should never let it determine the future.

What's happened the first time around is no indication at all of what will happen the next time around....

If today we remember the death of R. Akiva, it's worth remembering too the lesson that was his life: An illiterate shepherd could raise himself up to become one of the greatest sages in Jewish history.

As we embark together on the penitential path of these next 24 hours, let's pause to consider just what might be possible. In the midst of asking Hashem to change the world, let's ask ourselves: What are we willing to change? To the extent the words of our tefillot double as our own aspirations for the year ahead, the answer might be hiding in plain sight.

Do Me a Favor

Yizkor

The Jewish Center

Yom Kippur 2021

Rabbi Yosie Levine

My late uncle was the chaplain at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Many years ago, he organized a minyan in the hospital on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The idea was to provide a service for patients and their families at times when circumstances prevented them from going to shul.

Over time, former patients started returning for the service long after they had been discharged. Staff from the hospital would attend.

It was so moving and so inspirational to be with people who really had something to daven for. It wasn't uncommon for people to come in with their IVs. Sometimes a patient would be wheeled in on a gurney. There were always outstanding baalei tefillah. People developed relationships with my uncle. They were attracted to his easygoing style. And it didn't hurt that the services were streamlined and very much abridged.

Every year the hospital had to find a bigger venue for the service. Sometimes there were as many as 1000 people.

I want to share with you a letter my uncle received from a guest at his high holiday services in 1997.

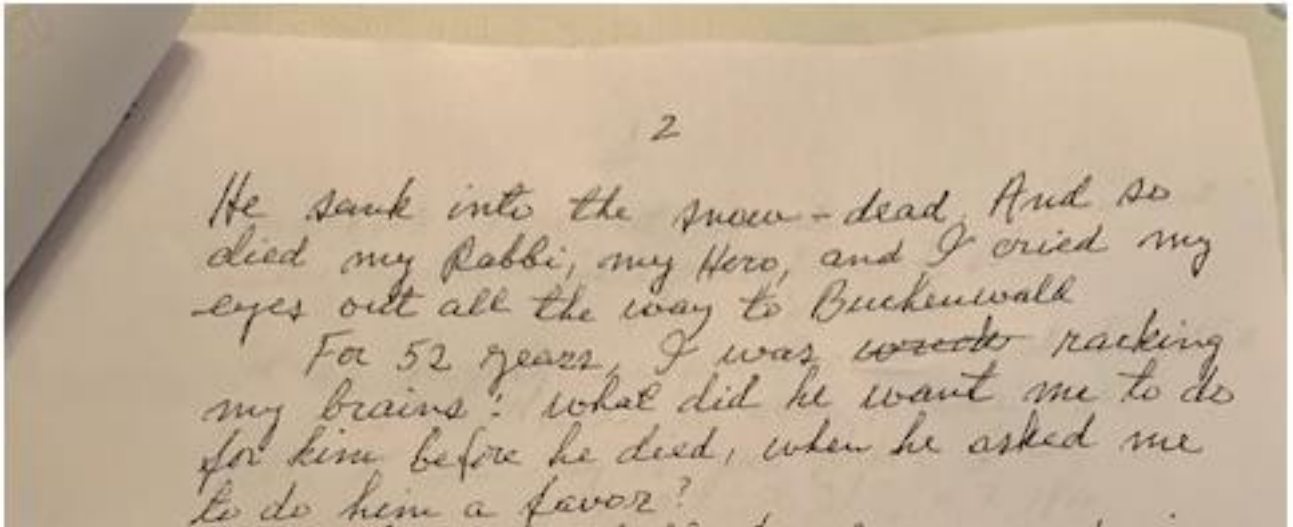
Dear Rabbi Levi Meier

I am a Holocaust survivor, and have attended your "Yomim Noraim" services, and had the pleasure to sing along with the Cantor. I hope you remember me.

I have been burdened with a problem due to a dream I had a short time ago, in which Rabbi David Shapiro wants me to chant Kol Nidrei and the Yaalot. Who is this Rabbi?

He was a prisoner, like me, in Auschwitz, and we worked together in the coal mines, in Jawischowitz, a satellite of Auschwitz. He was my mentor and teacher, well steeped in Jewish lore, and I considered him the *דוד שלי* *דוד שלי*.

It was January 1945, when the Russian army was on the attack, and nearing the vicinity of Auschwitz. The S.S. decided to evacuate the camps, and had us march, in frosty, snowy weather for many miles, to a railroad station on the way to Buchenwald, inside Germany. Needless to say that lots of our people perished during that infamous march. Rabbi David, his fingers and toes perilously frozen, couldn't continue marching. He turned to me, and said: *Yankel, דוד שלי* *דוד שלי*.



The Torah has a special moniker for Yom Kippur. Like Shabbos, it's referred to in the Torah as Shabbat Shabbaton. We know what Shabbat means, but what does Shabbat Shabbaton mean?

It's possible that the formulation connotes special emphasis. Mot Yumat – he will surely die. Shabbat Shabbaton: You will surely rest.

Or halakhically, maybe it means that Yom Kippur is different from all other Chagim. Normally if it's not Shabbat, one can cook. Shabbat Shabbaton. Yom Kippur is different.

But R. Menachem Kasher offers up a slightly different possibility. He suggests that Shabbaton is an adjective. You will have a restful rest. On other days there's a restful element, but it often competes with something else about the holiday. You can rest, but you also need to blow shofar. You can rest but you also need to have a Pesach Seder. And so on.

Not so on Yom Kippur. It's a rest without exception – a rest without distraction.

Of course we appreciate this intuitively.

- We don't eat and drink
- We don't socialize
- We don't pay attention to our appearance – everyone wears the same uniform

Today, we strip away all potential distractions.

It's amazing to notice that it's easier said than done.

So much of the day is about the Kohen Gadol and his service in the Temple. I'll just share with you one observation. On his head, the Kohen Gadol wore a Tzitz, which looked almost like a tiara. And inscribed on it were the words קודש לה'.

Daven that our vows and our promises be forgiven.
Don't forget to say the יעלות.
I will be listening from my grave.

Rabbi, Jack continued in his letter to my uncle, I would like to honor his request.
Would you allow me to chant Kol Nidrei?

For many years, Jack Zimmerman led Kol Nidrei at Cedars Sinai Hospital.

My friends: Life has a funny way of pulling us in lots of directions.

On a macro level, we start down a path – a job, an opportunity, a relationship – we snap our fingers and all of a sudden – we notice that there's some part of us – some part of a dream – that we've left behind.

And on a micro level – this is the age of distraction. There's always another alert or text message or notification.

We're so busy – often with wonderful things – that we allow a hope or ambition or aspiration to lay dormant. There's was something we wanted to do, but we didn't know quite what it was. We didn't know quite how to do it. It wasn't the right time. And so we set about living our lives.

Sometimes we're blessed with a dream that wakes us from our slumber.
But usually, we're not so lucky.

So once a year, we strip away anything that could possibly be a distraction.
Shabbat shabbaton: A restful rest – not a care in the world to divert our attention away from our inner thoughts.

In a moment we're going to recite Yizkor. We'll remember R. Dovid Shapiro and the martyrs of the Holocaust. We'll remember Jack Zimmerman. We'll conjure up images of our parents and grandparents. And we'll remind ourselves of their unfulfilled dreams that live on in us.

Let's not squander this day of uninterrupted rest by resting. Let's instead use it wisely to elevate the rest of our year.

A Few Words

Neilah

It's not often that I disagree with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

But in the way he interprets Yonah's reluctance to accept his mission, I have a different view.

Rabbi Sacks argues that Yonah didn't want to go to Ninveh because he didn't want to be made to look like a fool. He would offer a prophecy and that prophecy would never come to pass.

But if you take a closer look at Yonah's words, they *do* come to pass.

עוד ארבעים יום ויניוה נהפכת

In forty days, Ninveh will be overturned.

And that's exactly what happened!

A city that was once wicked became righteous.

Oppressors of the weak became penitents.

The city was overturned!

Which is why I think it's no accident that we read Yonah right before Neilah. Because both the book and the prayer preach a message about the power of just a few words. You never know how they might turn the world on its head.

Rabbi Yaakov Nagen is an educator in Israel. And he recently told the following story.

A few years back on Rosh Hashana, he and his family came home from shul to find that the circuit breaker for their home had failed. No refrigerator, no air conditioning, no lights. The little town of Otniel where they lived is exclusively Jewish. No doormen. No non-Jewish neighbor to help out in a pinch.

Here's how he described what happened:

A friend, he wrote, suggested I might find a non-Jewish soldier at the nearby army base who could help....

I found a Bedouin soldier on base and began, hesitatingly, to explain my problem. Fortunately for me, it took him only a few seconds to understand what I needed, and he immediately smiled and agreed to help...

As we walked to my house, the soldier greeted everyone he saw with a smile and peppered his speech with the expression, "Everything is from Heaven." I was struck by his deep faith and his essential humanity.

The soldier flipped the switch... and light returned to our home. When we tried to prevail upon him to eat and rest, he politely declined; he needed to return to base to finish his work. I joined him for the walk back to base.

On our way, the soldier told me that my children were cute, and I wished him cute children in return. His face fell, he sighed, and he began to tell me his story. For seven years, he had loved a

girl from his village, but she died of an illness before he was able to marry her. At the time of her death, he vowed to remain faithful to her forever and never marry. Even now, the idea of marriage seemed impossible to him, after his tragic experience. I asked him, “How do you manage to smile all the time?” “I smile on the outside,” he answered, “but inside is sadness.”

I found his fidelity to his beloved moving, but privately I was concerned that fulfilling his vow would only aggravate an already tragic story. Finding appropriate words to encourage him felt beyond me. And yet, I thought, perhaps the events of the day conspired to put me in the right place and time to tell him what he might need to hear. I took a deep breath and told him about a guest who had joined us for the holiday, a widow whose husband had been murdered in a terrorist attack shortly after their wedding. She underwent a painful process of recovery, developed insights that enabled her to rejoin life and find love, and had recently remarried.

I shared with the soldier the lessons she had taught me. “You came to us to return the light into our home, but perhaps this can also return the light into your life?”

Four years later, a call came in from an unrecognized number, and I heard, “Do you remember me?” Eventually, I remembered where I knew the voice from; it was that Bedouin soldier. “You should know,” he began, “every day I reread that letter you sent me after the holiday. It gave me a renewed sense of hope.” As he spoke, I summoned the memory of writing him a letter a few days after we met. I had given the letter to another soldier who had been in Otniel and asked him to deliver it to the Bedouin soldier — and then I promptly forgot about my letter. The soldier continued, “I want to tell you that I got engaged. I’m calling to invite you to my wedding.

The gates of shamayim are closing.

There’s time only for a few last words.

Before us is a tefillah that’s never part our routine – crafted especially for this moment – designed to give us one last chance.

With a few sincere words in these last moments of Yom Kippur, we can transform the whole day.

And with a few sincere words on any day, we can transform the whole world.