

Good Yom Tov and a Good Year to everyone. G'mar Chasima Tova!

I want to thank the drasha sponsors:

- Anonymous
- Howard and Shirley Blumenfeld, "in memory of our beloved parents and grandparents."
- Mendy and Peshie Vim, in memory of Mendy's mother, Miriam bas Meir Mattisyahu HaLevi, whose yahrtzeit is on Yom Kippur.

May the neshamos have an aliya and may the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with good health, happiness, bracha and hatzlacha.

We sit here today on this intense and holy day of Yom Kippur, many of us dressed in white. Why do we dress in white on Yom Kippur? The **Shulchan Aruch** writes that white is the color of angels.

שולחן ערוך או"ח סי' תר"י סעי' ד: יש שכתבו שנהגו ללבוש בגדים לבנים נקיים ביום כפור, דוגמת מלאכי השרת;

Is this some kind of make believe? Today, are we really angels?

And if we are indeed angels, we certainly have a lot of explaining to do--because we sin, and we fall, and we mess up, something angels do not do. Just the opposite, וואנהנו בשר ודם is a justification we use. We are flesh and blood, with physical shortcomings and temptations and very much NOT angels!

But look at this text of **Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer**...the Jewish people are indeed like angels on Yom Kippur!

פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק מו

יש לה עם אחד בארץ כמלאכי השרת בשמים. מה מלאכי השרת אין להם קפיצין, כך הם ישראל עומדים על רגליהם ביום הכפורים. מה מלאכי השרת אין להם אכילה ושתייה, כך ישראל אין להם אכילה ושתייה ביום הכפורים. מה מלאכי השרת נקים מכל חטא, כך ישראל נקים מכל חטא ביום הכפורים.

Does the clothing we wear magically transform us into malachim?

The answer is that it isn't about the way we stand, the way we dress, or our fasting. These externals are to remind us of something much deeper inside, a reality we forget, an identity that is easy to lose track of.

The famous Maggid, **Rav Yaakov Galinsky**, relates his own experiences in Siberia during World War II. He was imprisoned with other Yeshiva bachurim, as well as high-ranking Lithuanian government officials and military officers. In addition to the severe cold and brutality they experienced, the prisoners were humiliated by the Russians daily. And the greater the prisoner's rank, the greater his humiliation. The greater the person, the worse his living conditions were. For example, the former Minister of Education, who was conversant in fifteen languages, was assigned to clean the showers. Former generals were assigned to clean the toilets. Rav Galinsky was given a bed that accommodated his whole body. In contrast, a high-ranking officer had to sleep while crouched over in one-third of the space required for a human being. This was all meant to humiliate the prisoners and break them...

On one occasion, in the early hours of the morning, when it was still pitch-black outside, Rav Galinsky noticed the prisoner who was given the tiniest bed get up, look over his shoulder, open his pack, reach inside a hidden pocket and remove a wrinkled uniform shirt. He put it on, stood completely straight at attention, and saluted, waving his arms as if he were at an army parade. Then, he looked over his shoulder again, quickly stuffed the uniform shirt back into his bag, and—as if nothing had happened--returned to his tiny bed, so the guards would not notice.

The next morning, Rav Galinsky went over to the man and asked him to explain himself. By putting on that shirt, he said, you took a great risk. What were you doing? The man told him "I used to be a general, the assistant chief of staff of the Lithuanian Army. I was captured, stripped of my title, my job, my previous life. They are now humiliating me and trying to break me as a person. They are trying to make me forget who I really am. Every once in a while, I take this risk. I put on my old uniform and remind myself who I really am."

to Him and live. This means that, no matter how painfully we recognize our own moral and spiritual shortcomings, there is really something substantial in us that is worthy and deserving and redeemable.

When a banker decides to grant a loan to a client who has few financial resources, he does not usually do so on blind faith, but as an expression of an intelligent and enlightened faith. The banker acts on the basis of confidence in his client's talent, his business ability, his integrity, his initiative. Similarly, if despite all our shortcomings and our failures, God has faith in us, it is not a blind faith. It means that, as our Creator, He knows us better than we know ourselves, and that we possess resources we ourselves are unaware of, that we have power and strength and talent for self-transcendence that make His faith in us a risk worth taking.

This also means that our failure to live up to His demands and goals for us is not just sin, but something far worse: it is betrayal, treachery! It means *ashamnu*, that we have acted guiltily, and that therefore *bagadnu* — we have betrayed God, we have let Him down! A sin, a violation of Torah and Jewish law, is therefore more than disobedience; it is a double-cross, treason. And on Yom Kippur, we must summon ourselves either to *teshuvah* or to *begidah*, to repentance or to betrayal: if we do not turn to Him, then in effect we have turned against Him.

And it also means that if God has confidence and faith in us, so must we -- in imitation of Him—have faith in ourselves. We must not be cynical, pessimistic, or too "realistic" — certainly not more than God Who knows the world. It means that we have no right to give up on any human being, including ourselves. We have no right to despair of any Jew and to abandon him forever. No one is beyond redemption. All that is needed to begin is a *hirhur*, a single thought, a solitary motion, the beginning of a gesture, and a man may well be on the road to recapturing his original integrity, on the way to becoming a *tzaddik* of sorts. If, indeed, *וכל מאמינים שהוא קל אמונה* we all believe that God has faith in us, then we must practice the great Jewish ethical principal of imitating God, and we, too, must have faith in ourselves and in our fellow men.

Unfortunately, at many points in our lives, we feel like we have lost our identity...

One of the more memorable parts of the Yom Kippur davening is the Book of Yonah, which we will read this afternoon. We read that Yonah boarded a ship bound for Tarshish and that ship was being lashed by a storm so severely that it was on the verge of breaking apart. The passengers and crew cast lots to ascertain who was responsible for their predicament. When the lots singled out Yonah as the culprit, they asked him, "What is your trade? And from where do you come? What is your land? And from what people are you?" Yonah's reply directly answers only some of their questions, but not others. All he says is "עברי אנכי ואת ה' אלקי השמים אני ירא", I am a Jew, and I fear God".

On a deeper level, however, Yonah's response really does answer all of their questions. The people on the ship wanted Yonah to define himself, to describe who he was – and so he did. He said he was a God-fearing Jew. That was his identity.

We, too, must remember: We are Jews! We must be proud to be B'nei Yisrael: We are the sons and daughters of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. We are the children of Hashem. We are members of the *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש* "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We were freed from Egypt and stood at Sinai. We have survived countless attempts on our lives and our faith. We have withstood thousands of years of persecution and, nevertheless, we stand strong today... We possess pure *neshamos* like angels...

This is the secret of Yom Kippur, a day to define and understand who we really are...and to evaluate our actions in that context, and live up to that image of ourselves. Elie Wiesel writes, in *Night*, that on Yom Kippur, September 27, 1944, the Jews of Auschwitz debated whether or not to fast. They were, after all, starving, each of them near death. Among the prisoners was a teenage boy, just three days shy of his 16th birthday. He would later write of that debate: "The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. . .In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who said

we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. *We needed to show God that, even here..., we were capable of singing His praises. . .*” That is the action not of a human being, but of an angel.

Yom Kippur is the day we remember our true identity.

Throughout our history, we have held onto this day of Jewish identity...realizing that God understands who we are and what we are capable of, and today we, too, must come to that realization....That is why we stand before God and say to Him: despite all our sins, despite all our evil deeds--deeds that embarrass us--nevertheless You, God, penetrate this sordid veil, and You can see what the psychologists cannot see: that precious seed of holiness that lies within us .

God knows about that, but sometimes we need something to raise our own awareness of our inherent good and spirituality. We need to recognize who we really are, and who we can become.

Last night, after we ushered in the holy day with the Kol Nidre, we recited two verses that are most significant. They are part of the dialogue between God and Moses. First, we repeat Moses' request: " — כגודל חסדיך please forgive this people with Your great compassion." And then we recite God's answer, which is as relevant today as ever, "ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברייך, and Hashem said, “I will forgive, according to your words." I will grant you "according to your words” כדברייך no more and no less. If you ask for crumbs, if you desire little — that is what I shall give you. But if you ask for a true and sublime reconciliation with God, which will give you a sense of purpose in life — that is what will be granted to you ! כדברייך :

In that case, we dare not appear before God on this sacred day with trivial goals, with petty dreams, with puny wishes — because there is the danger that God will grant them—but that’s all! Low goals make a person small. High goals let him grow tall. The spirit is like the mind, and the mind is like the stomach: use it, and it stretches; starve it, and it shrinks. No wonder that, on Yom Kippur, we fast and we pray. By denying ourselves food, we learn to want less of the trivial, material things in life. And by spending the day in prayer, we learn to expand our spiritual horizons—to act like angels.

We must expect more of ourselves this year. The choice is ours...

We must also remember on this holy day that no man is an island. Our self-perception does not affect only ourselves. We are members of society, and especially that most important of all societies, a family. Each of us was born to parents who had expectations and dreams for us. These are not only goals for us to strive for, they are also a faith for us to vindicate. When Yosef Hatzadik, as a young man in slavery in Mitzrayim, was tempted by sin, he restrained himself by visualizing the face of his father, Yaakov. He knew that his father had faith in him, and he could not bring himself to break faith with his old father, to invalidate his confidence, to pervert his trust. What do parents and grandparents ask of us, from the great beyond? Of course, they want simply to be remembered – but, ultimately, they really expect much more. They expect us to become a certain kind of person, a certain kind of Jew, possessing a certain kind of inner dignity and nobility. They had faith in us. It is now up to us to determine that we must not betray them, that we must not invalidate their lives and their confidence. The Jewish tradition maintains, as part of the explanation for the Yizkor service, that this is an instance of החיים פודים את המתים the living redeem the dead. What does it mean to redeem the dead? It means that, by the way we live, we redeem—or, God forbid, fail to redeem--our ancestors’ faith in us. We are called upon at a time of this sort to justify their confidence, to vindicate their faith.

These, then, are the consequences of our belief in Kel emunah, a God Who believes in us. It means that we must vindicate the faith in ourselves by our own children, by our spouses, and most of all, by our parents and past generations. It is this last point that is the meaning of Yizkor, which we shall recite soon. This year, may we learn to rally all the forces of Jewish creativity within us, to vindicate His faith in us, and the faith of past generations in ourselves. May He grant us all a year of good health, happiness, and peace.