

**YOM KIPPUR – A JOURNEY TO FAITH; A JOURNEY TO SELF**  
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**SEPTEMBER 18-19, 2018/TISHREI 10, 5779**

A few weeks ago, I got an email from the *Rebbe of Dupont Circle*. He planned to visit me, but got lost crossing the 14<sup>th</sup> Street bridge - twice! I wrote back thanking him for the effort. He confessed that he forgot to let me know when he got back from vacation. He grumbled, just like my friends: "I was exhausted when I got home. I needed a vacation from my vacation."

Many Rabbis take vacation during the month of July. Even the beloved *Rebbe Tzvi of Ottawa* retreats to the beach during July! Even he didn't respond to emails or voice mails, which I can usually count on.

Since I no longer work, I no longer take vacations. Except for today.

Yom Kippur is a great annual vacation. We leave our daily world behind. We do not work, we do not eat. We do not have sex. We ignore our phones and social media. Like every *Shabbat* should be, this *Shabbat of Shabbats* should be a vacation from the ordinary.

When I was a little girl we were taught that Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. I don't remember being taught why it was the holiest of days, but it was certainly holy enough to warrant a new dress, great grandma's china and the sterling.

We entered the sanctuary and were absolutely silent. The ark opened and I was awe-struck. G-d seemed to live in the ark. G-d seemed to belong only to men; to fathers and grandfathers.

I am no longer a little girl. In the decades since, I have searched for meaning in the words of liturgy, poetry and in the silence of my heart. I touch the Torah scroll; I dance with it. Yet turning inward is difficult. Women, if not all of us, are taught to focus on the needs of

others first. Our spouse, our children, our patients, our students. The environment, the political universe.

So today, this holiest day of the year is frightening to some because we are challenged to look inward. Today we stand before Adonai our G-d hoping that the sincerity of our heart will be enough.

So, on this holy morning, let me tell you a story:

When Chayim of Ganz was a young man, he set about trying to reform his country from its evil ways. But when he reached the age of thirty, he looked around and saw that evil remained. So, he said "Perhaps I was too ambitious. I will begin with my Province."

But at the age of forty his province too remained mired in evil. So, he said, "I was still too ambitious. From now on I will only try to lift up my community."

At fifty he saw that his community had still not changed. So, he decided only to reform his own family. But when he looked around, he saw that his family had grown and moved away, and that he now remained alone. "Now I understand that I needed to begin with myself" So he spent the rest of his life perfecting his own soul.

When I first read this story a few years ago it felt like the story of my life. In my teens and twenties, I was an activist. So much so I remember an ex yelling "when will you stop being a gay activist and start being a gay woman?" By my mid-thirties I had stopped trying to change the world. I moved through teaching to social work, hoping to impact individuals. I worked on county programs, then state-wide programs before moving here to work on national programs. By fifty I was married. By 60 I was focusing on myself. Or so I thought.

But now I wonder, is this past year not a year when I moved through every one of these experiences? Within the past twelve months I have cried out, I have written checks, I have hoped to change everything from the macro to the micro.

The current external, political situation surrounds us. We do, after all, live in the Greater Washington area. We can barely move, barely breath, without someone or something reminding us of recent developments in our country.

People are being killed in our country. They are being killed by strangers, or even by loved ones. There is violence and rape in our country. People are dying through addiction, through self-harm; through suicide. Echoes of the Holocaust are on the evening news, as our government separates parents and children, jailing them, caging some, deporting others. Records have been inadequate; making family reunification appear impossible.

And yet for this one day, we sit here for one 24-hour period, when we are to focus inwards, to strive towards the perfection of a relationship between ourselves and G-d.

One day out of the year, if not any other day, to not watch the news, to not turn on the phone or the TV. Perhaps not even the oven or the microwave.

While many of us are familiar with the *Tikkun Olam*; our responsibility to partner with Adonai to repair the world, today we pray with focus and mindfulness. *Tikkun Middot* helps us balance the external and internal. Helps us achieve *shleimut*, wholeness.

For today is a day to bridge that which separates us from G-d; a day to focus on and reinforce our relationship with Adonai. Like Chayim discovered, this is a day to begin the journey towards perfecting our soul.

Today, throughout the day, we try our best to heal the wounds that have damaged relationships through word or deed. A day to heal the

wounds we have created or experienced with people as well as with Adonai. A day we are called to practice forgiveness. To ask for forgiveness; to offer forgiveness when asked for it.

We are not asked to ignore the external worries of the world. We are not asked to ignore our responsibility to work towards *Tikkun Olam*.

Rather, we are asked to spend one day on an internal, personal journey. In the words of Rabbi Ilana Schacter, this is a day to reconcile our internal and external selves. To *declutter* our souls, keeping and cherishing the parts that serve us well. Discarding that which does not serve us well. And as we do this difficult work of turning inward, what we ask for is renewal. In the words of the *Hashiveinu* prayer, turn us to you, O G-d, and we shall return; renew our days as of old. We place the Eternal before us as help and inspiration.

I encourage you to take the rest of this day, this *Yom Kippur* to focus on your internal life. This is a day to consider your soul, your heart. Whether you spent other days demonstrating or not. Whether you made donations to groups to do that on your behalf. Whether your prayers were lifted to the heavens in song or in silence, let your prayers rise up today, along with the prayers of others.

Communicating with G-d is called for today. This can be intimidating to some of us. Whether we know the liturgy or not, whether we have a deep faith or not. Whether we have been distanced from G-d or not. Even if we are filled with anger at G-d; today we are called to communicate with G-d.

Rabbi Alan Lew writes that *Yom Kippur* is the day when we are covered over by a consciousness of G-d. Consider that – an entire day spent communicating with G-d; when we can accept this gift of a day to ourselves.

When we choose to be *here*; praying, hoping the year ahead will be a good one, that we will find a path to wholeness, to *shleimut*.

A year when our relationship with G-d is central to our life. And conscious that all our prayers today will mean nothing, nothing, if our hearts are elsewhere.

I encourage you to embrace this day as the respite it can be. How often do we yearn for a day of true peace? Today is a day to experience that. To communicate with passion and faith.

Yet I have known people whose fear of the *U-n'taneh Tokef* prayer, with its powerful imagery of predetermination kept them from participating in Yom Kippur services; allowing fear of liturgy to keep them away.

I chose another route. Reading *The Days Between* by Marcia Falk helped me open myself to a new vision of Yom Kippur. *U-n'taneh Tokef k'dushat hayom, ki hu nora v'ayom.*

*We declare the utter sanctity of this day, for it is an awe-filled day. A great shofar is sounded and a small, quiet voice is heard.*

Is it, I ask you, is this small, quiet voice G-d or your own heart? This day is full of power, a day to hold G-d so close that the boundaries between you are blurred.

This day of retreat, one day set aside out of the year, can awaken us to the power we have to fully commit to a heartfelt and authentic relationship with G-d. We may claim liturgy as a path to that or simply speak from the depths of our internal self. Remember also, the words in the white spaces of the prayerbook are filled with prayer.

Judaism is both a personal and communal experience. It is more than a religion, it is a way of life. It is more than the recitation of words, the reading of liturgy. This is the day to say to G-d what you would not want to die without having said. This is the day to say to people what you want them to know before that is no longer possible

I have grown into the community and come to believe that Yom Kippur is the holiest of days because G-d is no longer separate from me; no longer belonging to men of a generation or two above me. I no longer need my father to point out the words to me in the Machzor.

Yom Kippur is the holiest of days because the liturgy is our path to a vibrant and ever evolving relationship with G-d. It is up to each of us to find or define or develop the path to that relationship.

All of us here today were part of the covenant made on that day at Sinai. All of us are part of the ongoing covenant that exists now, and will continue to exist for those that follow us as members of K'lal Israel.

Like all relationships, our relationship with G-d thrives with attention and communication. Grasp onto this opportunity, and create your holiest day.