

Yom Kippur 5781 Humankind

On a deserted island somewhere in the Pacific, a plane goes down. Some British schoolboys are the only survivors of the crash. It's paradise for them - a huge adventure just waiting to begin. On the first day they set up their society, which has three rules: have fun, survive and make smoke signals for passing ships. But it doesn't work. The group disintegrates, becomes aggressive, becomes brutal. When a British naval officer comes ashore, three of the boys are dead and the island is a wasteland.

This, of course, is the plot of *Lord of the Flies*, written by English schoolmaster William Golding in 1951. To call the book a bestseller is an understatement - it has exerted a powerful pull on its readership ever since it was first published. It portrays humanity at its worst. It confirms our most deep-seated assumptions that human beings are essentially savage in nature, with civilized behavior just a thin veneer that can easily be stripped away at any time. All this feels so obvious to us that we often don't even notice it's there, buried in our personalities and built into the way we see the world.

But the thing is, *The Lord of the Flies* is a novel. It's not real.

In his book *Humankind*, the Dutch author Rutger Bregman set himself to question the basic premise of *Lord of the Flies*. He wondered: had a group of children ever been shipwrecked on an island? What happened? It turned out that in 1966, six boys were discovered by Australian sea captain Peter Warner. They had run away from their school in Tonga and had been marooned on the rocky little island of 'Ata for more than a year. They had been given up for dead. Funerals had been held for them. But there they were, alive and well, having set up a food garden, rain barrels, a gymnasium, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire. They began and ended their days with song and prayer. If they quarreled, they took time out and the two boys went to opposite ends of the island to cool down until they reconciled. One of them had slipped off a cliff and broken his leg: the others climbed down after him, brought him back up and set his leg using sticks and leaves. They had survived a drought, a storm and the destruction of the raft they had tried to build.

And they were fine, all of them. They were so fine that the owner of the boat they'd "borrowed" to escape a year before reported them to the police, and

they were welcomed home with a trip straight to jail (they were freed soon after).

It would appear that in real life, human nature isn't what it's often assumed to be.

On this day of the Jewish year, we spend a lot of time with our human nature. Ten times over the course of today we will be reciting a comprehensive list of confessions, covering body and soul. It looks as though there is no part of us that is whole, no part of us that isn't wrong, somehow. Maybe we are just badly wired? Maybe we should all be sent back to the factory?

But if we look more closely at the actual language of our confessions, it tells a different story.

hatanu. avinu. pashanu.

Hatanu, so often translated as 'we sinned,' doesn't mean exactly that. The image evoked by the Hebrew is more of a veering off course, a kind of misdirecting, like an arrow that's been shot crookedly. While the Torah provides that we should bring a sacrifice - a *hatat* - if we have done something like this, so clearly something does need correcting, the wrongdoing feels more like an external phenomenon than a manifestation of our nature.

The same is true of *ivinu*. The Hebrew word - often rendered as "iniquity," evokes being twisted or distorted - literally, bent out of shape.

And *pashanu* shares with many, many other Hebrew verbs that begin with *peh shin*, or *peh ayin*, or *peh tzadeh*, the sense of being broken, or exploded, or shattered.

What links all three of these terms - *hatanu*, *avinu*, *pashanu* - is that they aren't innate. They are external forces that have consequences. But they are not built in. Rather, they are what happens when something is acted upon.

What is the something?

I suggest it's our true nature.

And perhaps our true nature is good.

Over the past six months I have often thought of the Pieseczner Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro, rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto all through the darkest part of the mid-20th century. His wisdom is as relevant today as it was then. He writes:

Consider a smoldering ember. Because it is covered in ash, we don't know whether there is a flame before us, but when we pour on water, it suddenly steams and hisses. It is the same with all the holy energies that are found in every single thing and person in this world. They are only covered up with ash and dirt...

We can think of his teaching this way: Yom Kippur is the day we pour on the water. In fact, Yom Kippur - envisaged by Rabbi Akiva as a *mikveh* - might be the water itself. Our true natures are the holy energies - pure and good. But they are covered up by what my havruta Rabbi Yael Saidoff calls the "shmutz."

So what is today for? If we are not in ourselves sinful and iniquitous and criminal, what happens to teshuvah, and how are we supposed to practice it? I suggest - and it's very apt, in the middle of a pandemic when hygiene and cleanliness have taken on new importance - that our task is to clean ourselves up - to get rid of the shmutz so our true natures once again shine clearly.

It isn't an accident, I think, that today we read about the High Priest. His everyday work, once the pomp of Yom Kippur was over, was to keep the sacred Menorah burning clear and bright, while his juniors cleared away the ashes from the altar so that every sacrifice could be made perfectly.

This Yom Kippur, let us pour on the water.

Let us clear away the ashes.

Let us remember those boys from Tonga and the good society they built.

And once we have reminded ourselves that we shine, let us build one of our own.

Gmar hatimah tovah.

Sources:

Humankind, Rutger Bregman

Derekh Hamelekh, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro (*Esh Kodesh*)