

Kol Nidrei 5782 Forgiving God

We are standing at the threshold of Yom Kippur.

What do we expect from the next 24 hours?

We just completed the formula which annuls all vows, oaths and promises. Perhaps because we hope we will emerge from Yom Kippur somehow changed, that something will have shifted. That the act of making teshuvah will make a difference. The liturgy is full of imagery about this – wash us, clean us, purify us, grant us atonement...and so on.

One of the great teachers of our tradition – the Rambam, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon – teaches us that doing teshuvah without your heart in it is worthless. He uses a startling image for this – he says that going into Yom Kippur without the intention to make teshuvah is like going to the mikveh – the ritual bath – with a cockroach in your hand. The presence of something ritually unclean in a place of ritual purity makes the whole process worthless.

But what if there's really a problem?

What if we can't put our hearts into the process of Yom Kippur, not out of insincerity but because we feel there is a genuine obstacle?

What if something terrible happened to us this year, something we can't move past?

What if we are too angry, or too sad, or too empty, or too lonely, or too exhausted, or too disappointed, or just too full of questions to turn, or return, to the ?

If we can't resolve that central tension, we risk losing the purpose of the day.

We'll be left lonely, frustrated and spiritually isolated, as well as physically starving.

And it's been a year. A pandemic. A hurricane. A storm. And wrenching losses that we have all felt deeply. Any one of those is enough to spin us out of teshuvah, let alone all of them together.

So how are we to address today?

One way is to share a story.

It had been a terrible year in the town of Berdichev. Pogroms, failed harvests and persecutions had haunted the community, along with all the other troubles life brings. On Yom Kippur, when the community came together to pray, Reb Levi of Berdichev turned his face to the heavens and said:

‘Today all your creatures stand before You, O Lord, so that You may pass sentence. But I, Levi Yitzchak, say and proclaim that it is You who shall be judged today by Your children who suffer for You, who die for You and the sanctification of Your name and Your law and Your promise!’

And he called on Berel the tailor, who had suffered a year of appalling illness and affliction, and asked if Berel could declare that he, himself, had been free of sin the whole year. ‘No!’ cried the tailor, tears pouring from his eyes, ‘and I will try to make amends: but God, my sins are minor compared to yours! Look at your world! It is full of hatred, and illness, hunger, sadness and injustice...I say to you...let’s call it a draw. You forgive me – and I will forgive you!’

So here is the first way forward: calling God to account. We put a name to our pain, and then we demand to be recognized. In exactly the same way as the way as when we try to forgive another human being, we get into the conversation, we try to stand back from the mistakes that were made, we acknowledge there is wrong on both sides, and then we try to move forward. That’s how Berl can get to a place of saying that him forgiving God and God forgiving him is a mutual dynamic. We demand an equal place in the conversation. We’re hurting, but we’re not leaving. It’s a draw, not a capitulation. We honor the relationship even as we insist on reframing it. And perhaps that can loosen the knot just a little.

Another way:

Many of you will have heard of ‘The Last Lecture’ given by Randy Pausch. He was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, who conceived it after he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer.¹

Randy Pausch was a handsome, talented father of three who lost his battle to disease during the prime of his life, when he had everything still to live for.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

The Last Lecture is everything you wouldn't expect. It's personal, and upbeat and full of hutzpah, along with being incredibly moving. It's about how to live your life. It's full of gems. The gem I want to pick out for us is this one, which gets mentioned towards the end:

“Find the best in everybody...you might have to wait a long time, sometimes years, but people will show you their good side. Just keep waiting no matter how long it takes. No one is all evil. Everybody has a good side, just keep waiting, it will come out.”

What did he mean by that? I'm struck by what he didn't mention. He didn't use big, loaded words like 'faith'. He didn't say what state of mind you might be waiting in. He just says to wait, because no one is all evil. It's about being patient – something so many of us find so very hard in a world where things move faster and faster. It's about staying put and holding on.

And it turns out that King David might have had this idea, too. Since the beginning of Elul, we have been adding a psalm to our prayers which in the face of disintegration exhorts us to wait for the God: kaveh el Adonai. If we can just keep our minds and our hearts strong and focused for long enough, he's saying, then eventually the God's good side will have to come out.

So that's two options so far. We can slam the ball back over the net, as it were, and call God to account; and we can dig in, hold on and just wait.

But I think there's still a piece missing: the forgiveness piece, the piece that wrings our hearts the most. What if something happened this year that feels unforgivable? What are we supposed to do then?

Our tradition tells us that if we have wronged another person, we are supposed to ask forgiveness, not once, but three times. Okay - but how is that supposed to work when the protagonists are us, and God – and we are waiting for God to show God's good side, and come to us, not once but three times - and God seems to us to be delaying, or – worse – entirely absent from the conversation? How are we supposed to move on from that? Doesn't it leave us totally powerless – paralyzed and stuck?

Well, no. It turns out that forgiveness might not be quite what we imagine it to be. We tend to think of it as a giving in, a moving on, perhaps even as a surrender. But Dr Kenneth Hart, a psychology professor from England, says:

“Forgiveness does not equal forgetting. It is about healing the memory of the harm, not erasing it.”

Healing the memory of the harm. That’s a different sort of model. Because if we really find that for whatever reason we simply can’t ‘forgive’ God right now, this gets us out of the stuck, angry place. It doesn’t require us to erase the disk. Instead, we can have an and-and reality: the truth is that a terrible, ineradicable thing happened - and we can try to find healing.

Indeed, this third way exists elsewhere in the world, too. It is the model of ‘truth and reconciliation’. It was used in South Africa, where the conflicts that occurred under apartheid resulted in violence and human rights which harmed all sides. And it was used in Canada, to deal with the terrible legacy of the Indian Residential Schools there.

A truth and reconciliation process does not seek to prove guilt or innocence. Instead, it wants to heal the memory of the harm, if it can. It wants to do that by finding out what actually took place. It wants to get to the truth.

It’s not a perfect system, by any means – it’s been criticized both in South Africa and in Canada. And as an attorney, I know there is simply no way to restore what we call the *status quo ante* – what was there before.

But it’s a system which offers the possibility of moving on. It seeks to uncover facts. It seeks to distinguish truth from lies. And it starts with saying, “This terrible thing happened. It happened.”

So the third way forward is: the truth. In our prayers tonight and tomorrow, and in our innermost silences, we can tell the truth.

If today can be a forum for truth – then maybe, we can hope for some kind of reconciliation. If we do nothing more complicated in the next 24 hours than fiercely acknowledge and tell the truth, our hearts will be calmer and our minds clearer. And then, maybe, we can walk into the day, and let it cleanse away what we don’t need to be carrying any more, without feeling that we have given up or given in.

Because without the truth, there can be no forgiveness. Without the truth, the process can't even start. Indeed, it says in the Talmud, in words which could have been written just for today – the seal of God is truth.

So tonight and tomorrow, let us dedicate ourselves to being truthful. Let's not evade the difficult places. Let's walk towards them. Because then, something really can begin to shift for us.

G'mar hatimah tovah.