

Kol Nidre Sermon

Rabbi Boris Dolin

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Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev told the following story. There was once a beloved king, whose court musicians played beautiful music for him. The king loved the music, and the musicians loved to play together for him. Every day for many years, the musicians played with passion and joy, and the king and the musicians developed a deep love for one another. But eventually, after years of dedicated service, all of the musicians died. Their children were called into the king's court and were asked to take their parents' place. Out of loyalty to their parents, the children came to play each morning. But unlike their parents, the children did not love the music. While they could play the basic tunes, they did not understand the hidden power of their instruments, and played with little enthusiasm. Their resentment grew each day they played. And each day the king also became more and more frustrated - as much by their dismissive attitude as by their cacophony.

But after some time, a few of the children developed a renewed interest in playing for the king. They realized that playing beautiful music was not simply a way to connect with the king and bring him joy, but they found that making music kindled a fire in their own souls they had never before experienced.

So these children set out to remember what their parents had known so well. They began to experiment with sound, composed new melodies, rediscovered harmony, and produced a music inspired by their own sense of devotion and love. The king witnessed their efforts and was deeply moved. Their music was different from their parents', but like them, it came from a place deep within, from a compelling need to give of their spirit to each other and to him.

We each connect to Jewish tradition, Jewish life and history in our own ways. The music that we bring into the symphony of our community may not be the same as our ancestors, and we may be playing for entirely different reasons. Some of us feel the

music of Jewish life deep in our souls, we have been playing for our entire lives and others have just begun listening. In this community we have people whose faith is never failing and their belief in God is strong. We have others for whom culture, history, language or music is the glue that holds their Jewish spirit together. We are all in a different place in our Jewish journey, but hopefully we all have a way to play this music together.

As we gather together on this holy day, we know that our Jewish community, our individual Jewish identities are so vastly different than past generations. Today being Jewish is above all a choice. No matter how you were born or raised, no one is under any obligation to remain Jewish, and where in past generations, Judaism found you, today Jews have to find Judaism. We hold on to so many different identities, and we are often pulled in many different directions and because of this, Judaism and Jewish community has to be compelling enough to hold our attention. Synagogues like ours like to say--rightfully so--that we have doors that are open to all--but we also have to create an interesting enough “product” so that people will want to be involved in the first place. It is such an amazingly different world.

Yet there is an additional challenge that we encounter during this time of year, and we are stuck in the middle of an amazing clash of values; the universal and particular nature of our identity as Jews. In these holy days, we gather together in services and in community to participate in what is seemingly the most universal of acts--to reflect on how we can improve ourselves and the world--yet we do so in the most Jewish of ways. We chant in Hebrew, we read the stories of the Jewish people, and we direct our prayers to the God of Israel. We are caught between the most universal values that we hold as human beings, and the particular connections and needs that we have as members of a Jewish community.

Rabbi Sydney Schwartz who has written extensively on the changes in Jewish community and identity, describes the major division of American Jewish life as between tribal Jews, and covenantal Jews. In this definition, tribal Jews see their identity in political and ethnic terms. They are proud to see themselves as distinct from

other cultures and ethnicities, and often support Israel because “it is the most public manifestation of the Jewish people's existence and survival”(11).

Covenantal Jews on the other hand, still hold a sense of pride in being Jewish, yet connect to Judaism primarily through the ethics and values of Jewish tradition--social justice, compassion and caring for the most vulnerable. As Jews, they feel an obligation to care for all people, and any claims of chosenness or privilege of Jews over others might be seen as problematic. Questions of intermarriage, Jewish continuity or funding Jewish organizations are not as important as the more universal ideas of supporting others.

I would assume that there are times when we all feel that deep tribal connection and others when those universal values, the covenantal values hold sway. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, *zichrono livracha*, one of the greatest Jewish musicians of recent history actually got his start as one of the *shlichim*, emissaries, of the Chabad rebbe. He would spend much of his time travelling and visiting different communities doing outreach to try to get people to connect to Judaism, and often he would visit college campuses. As he was nearing the end of his life he talked about some of these experiences. He said: “When I visited campuses, I asked students what they are. If someone says I’m Catholic. I know that’s a Catholic. If someone says I’m a Protestant. I know that’s a Protestant. If someone says I am just a human being, *I know that’s a Jew*” (119)

When I hear this, I feel unsettled. I know that what Reb Shlomo experienced is still probably true for so many of us. I feel a deep sense of pride that we Jews feel so deeply connected with the needs of others outside our own communities that we often first and foremost see ourselves as members of the human community —that our desire to help and care for all people is not just an obligation, but an inherent part of our identity. But without that particular connection to the Jewish people, to Jewish *peoplehood* I am also worried. Saying “I am Jewish” should be something said easily and with pride, and can mean “I care for everyone, but I know to do this *because* I am Jewish”.

Being a Jew *should mean* also taking on a certain inherent and inherited universal vision. This universal understanding of Judaism has been around since its inception, as Paul Johnson, a Catholic historian says: “It seems to be the role of Jews to focus and dramatize these common experiences of mankind and to turn their particular fate into universal moral”. As Jews, we have made the particulars of Judaism universal--we have seen ourselves as deeply connected to the world community, but still held on with pride and strength our tribal identity, and this is what has allowed us to survive for so long. If we have done it then, why can't we do it now?

These High Holidays are in many ways the epitome of the mix our universal and particular nature. While today we come together as Jews for a very unique and particular set of rituals and prayers, so much of what we do and say is about us as a universal people. The prayers for forgiveness, *Al Chet*, and *Unetaneh Tokef*, are mostly lacking in references to specific Jewish commandments. We recognize where we have missed the mark with hurting others, not using our words wisely, causing pain in our relationships. Yet, there are no *al chets* for breaking Shabbat, eating non-Kosher food or the number of times we forgot to put on tefillin. We sit here re-enacting our experiences through liturgy, song and movement in the most Jewish of ways, but what we are speaking of is actually very universal. As we say these words, we announce the ways that we are meant to be in the world, *but in a very powerful way*, how we live these values *Jewishly* is up to us.

In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, one of the most powerful, and for some the most problematic prayers of our liturgy we are told that on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed--”how many pass on, how many shall thrive, who shall live and who shall die, who by the sword, who by the beast, who in peace who is uprooted”. This can of course be seen as a theological statement that God controls our fate, and that our path and our joy or suffering is determined by someone or something outside ourselves. In so many of our minds, this is a very challenging way to understand the experiences of our lives. Yet beyond the theological issues, this prayer does something possibly better than any other piece of our liturgy—in the most clear and powerful

way--*it says that we are all in this together*. Our fates as individuals and as Jews, all the pain and suffering we may experience in our lives, is bound up with the fates of all people.

We should not think as we say these Hebrew words sitting amongst other Jews, participating in the most Jewish of rituals, that our lives are that different than anyone else's. We have different traditions, different histories and possibly a different way of understanding our lives and relationships with others. Yet when we gather at this time of year to do the deepest of soul searching, those true acts of teshuvah, of returning, this is when we sit primarily as people. We are not all the same, but everyone suffers--everyone lives. This is exactly what we read in the liturgy: "All of humanity is founded on dust, of dust they are made, and dust they shall return; as long as they live, they strive for their bread; like vessels of clay they can break. like grass they can wither, like flowers they fade".

Remember too that Yom Kippur is considered by our tradition and a holiday of the deepest of joy. We didn't start our service tonight with words of dread or fear. Instead we greet the Torahs with words of hope--*Or Zarua Latzadik Uyishreilev Simcha* "Light is sown for the righteous, joy for those upright of heart". The Talmud tells us, "Atonement and joy go well together." And the Zohar, the well known medieval mystical text says this even stronger: "Yom Ha-Kippurim, hu yom k'Purim." Yom Kippur is a day like Purim—a day of joy, celebration and gladness—*although it may not feel like it now!* Even many of the rituals of today, the wearing of white, fasting and confession are duplicated in the Jewish wedding ceremony, an obvious time of happiness. This joy comes on a day when we successfully are able to bring together our whole selves—our Jewish souls, our Jewish identities and our identities as members of the greater human community. When we can be Jewish *and just a person*, particular and universal, then we are in so many ways living the highest of Jewish values. There is then, plenty to celebrate.

There is a poem, a medieval piyyut from the Rosh hashanah liturgy, *V'ye'etayu kol l'ovdechah* "And everyone will serve you..." which in many Reform synagogues used

to end the service with an upbeat melody of these powerful words. It was usually translated into the wonderful King's English which also conveniently makes a nice rhyme:

All the world shall come to serve thee,
And bless thy glorious name
And Thy name triumphant
The Islands shall acclaim
With the coming of thy kingdom
The hills shall break into song,
And the Islands laugh exultant,
That they to God belong.
And all their congregations,
So loud Thy praise shall sing,
That the uttermost peoples hearing,
Shall hail thee crowned King.

Beyond the gendered language and symbolic idea of king, which we cannot separate from the traditional themes of these days, there is something profoundly universal *and profoundly Jewish* about this poem. Yes, on the one hand this is a prayer of hope that all cultures, all faiths, all peoples will serve the one God, the Jewish God. But it is also a prayer that raises up the simple idea that God needs us--the world needs us--we need each other, just as we need God. This fact that we are dependent on each other, not just Jews, but the entire world, is so profound that the hills are singing and even the islands are laughing! This is a prayer of hope, and a prayer that reminds us of our obligations in the world. Even for those who can't fully connect with the ideas of crowning God king--at least in the way that those before us might have envisioned it--we can still do our part to crown God. We crown God when we offer godliness into the world, when we live the highest values of our tradition. When we act in Godly ways, in

holy and ethical ways, we say that these are the values that should rule over the world. Symbolically also, we choose God, we crown God, when we stay connected to our faith and culture, connected to each other. While some may not need God, and some may not even believe in God, in this understanding, God, the world, we, need us.

It must be said that there is no need to believe in the this word “God” to be Jewish. But belief is more than a word. And not believing does not make a life. What inspires you, what compels you to do good in the world? Where are the moments that you feel that deepest sense of connection, that sense of mystery and power? Where do you bring Godliness into the world--even if the idea of God has not found its way to your heart or beliefs?

Mordechai Kaplan wrote” the fact is that God does not have to mean to us an absolute being who has planned and decreed every twinge of pain, every act of cruelty, every human sin. It is sufficient that God should mean to us the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos. This is what we understand by God as the creative life of the universe”.

We need to take ownership of our spirituality, and the ways that we bring Godliness into the world. While there is a place for non-belief in Judaism, there is an even greater place for taking ownership of what we do believe in. This is the Jewish way. “Crowning God” is then a way a recognizing the values and beliefs that we hold and turning them into the actions that “rule” our lives.

The past few months have brought out a new discussion of the role of Jewish identity and the question of whether the Jewish community can any longer have a sense of communal obligation, a tribal identity and still remain a “universal people”. As we were confronted with war in Israel just a few months ago, and now with the renewed fight against ISIS and ever growing anti-semitism in Europe, so many of us are asking ourselves what it means to see ourselves as Jews and members of a Jewish community, and how our identity, beliefs and actions are perceived by others. In a more connected world, all of our identities are more under the microscope and our identities as Jews are often the first to be examined. The conflict in Israel, more than so many other events of

the past few years seemed to inspire people to ask in the deepest of ways, what it meant to be Jewish.

In 1948 as the devastation of Jews in Europe became known, Simon Rawidowicz wrote an essay called *Am Ha Holech Va Met, Israel the Ever Dying People*, an essay which is especially telling today. In it he states what for better or worse was of the powerful connectors for Jewish communities of the past: “The world has many images of Israel, but Israel has only one image of itself; that of an expiring people, forever on the verge of ceasing to be...he who studies his history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the diaspora which did not consider itself the final link in Israel’s chain. Each always saw before it the abyss ready to swallow it up...often it seems as if the overwhelming majority of our people go about driven by the panic of being the last.”

But this cannot be enough reason to remain Jewish. In a previous generation, parents would tell their children when asked why they had to be Jewish, why they had to go to Hebrew School, or have a bar or bat mitzvah, that they needed to stay Jewish otherwise Hitler would have won. And when those memories were still fresh in our minds, when fear of annihilation was still possible this reason still held some sway. Even during the six day war in Israel in 1967, Jews around the world stood riveted around their TVs and radios living in very real fear that Israel and millions of Jews could once again be wiped off the face of the earth. Thankfully Israel not only survived, but it showed its strength and gave Jews a sense of deep pride and reassurance that with Israel on the map, the destruction of the Jewish people would not happen again.

It could be argued that the Jewish people have not faced such a fear since the War of ‘67, and this may be true. But even more importantly, the Jewish community is not connected with a shared voice as much as it was in the past. The recent conflict in Israel brought this truth to light in a very powerful way. No matter where you stood with your views about Israel of the conflict, it was much more difficult to find a single united force *this time*. Yes, the conflict itself was much more challenging to sort through. I think underlying the feeling of many Jews was that people on all sides wanted the conflict to be a uniting force for the Jewish community, for, against, supporting Israel, supporting

peace. But at the risk of oversimplifying the situation, this time around, Israel may have had the military might, but it did not have the power to bring together the Jewish people.

Now that the situation in Israel has died down, what are we left with? We have a Europe with rising anti-Semitism, where once again people are filling the streets saying death to the Jews. We have many Jewish communities being threatened with violence and eventual disappearance. This is in addition to the ethnic violence, wars and sickness which have become commonplace in our world. And for us Jews then, what will it take to hold our community together, what will it take to give us that deep sense of pride--both that tribal pride of roots and ethnic identity and also the universal nature of our covenantal pride where we can still be the light unto the nations by bringing peace not just to us, but to all peoples? This pride can no longer come from fear of the end of the Jewish people, any more than it can come from believing that all Jews are the same.

Today, we have to simply accept some truths about what it means to be Jewish, and what we need to do to build Jewish community. We accept that Jews have many identities, that being Jewish may be only one of many layers of who we are. We accept and celebrate the diversity of our Jewish family, interfaith families, people with different gender identities, political views, cultural backgrounds and histories. And this acceptance should bring us to a place of great joy as we gain strength and pride from the wealth of learning and spirit that takes place when we share our unique stories.

We have to then build communities that give Jews what they need to make Judaism alive, meaningful and connected to all of our different identities which we have the freedom to hold in the contemporary world. We have to see Judaism as a true civilization, as Mordechai Kaplan would have it, where our Jewish selves can be quenched from the deepest wells of Jewish life and culture.

We have to provide opportunities for serious Jewish learning, where those sparks of Jewish knowledge and pride in all of us can grow into flames that can warm the Jewish soul into the future. Programs such as our Melton school, (which there are only a few more days to sign up for by the way) where diverse groups of adults learn and

grow together as they discover the blessings of Jewish community. Or our vision for a revamped Hebrew School program where students can choose which paths to learn about Jewish tradition based on their own interests and passions, instead of only being told by their teachers or a curriculum what and how they are to learn. More social groups and gatherings, more opportunities for leadership, and more programs that promote not just Jewish literacy or practice but that give us all the tools to construct a meaningful Jewish life. Everyone in our community, *and that means each one of you*, should feel a sense of ownership of not only your Jewish community, but of your own Jewish choices.

But I hope that you do not walk away from this task, because no matter how you connect Jewishly, a Jewish connection *means an obligation to be part of, to help build the Jewish future*. We need to talk to each other, to our children and future generations about what it means to be Jewish, even if we are still not quite sure ourselves. What this process of teshuvah that we work towards on this holy day asks us to do, is to turn back--looking beyond ourselves, our own beliefs, practices, fears, and challenges of how we are Jewish, to our ancestors and to the deepest source of our cultural heritage and traditions. If we could ask our great grandparents, and those who came before us why they were Jewish what would they say? Would they say it was because they were inspired by prayer or religious services? Would they say it was their belief, *or their non-belief* in God? Would they say it was because of Israel? I have a feeling they would say above all that being Jewish is simply who they are--it is a way of being, a way of existing in the world, and a way of bringing meaning into their lives. And they knew they could not leave it to others to keep Judaism strong.

Maybe this is what we are moving towards tonight—a way of being Jewish that is beyond identity, beyond history, faith and beyond politics. It is returning to a Jewish self that fills us with pride and with a knowledge *that Judaism, Jewish people, each and every one of us are worth the thousands of years of history that came before today*.

Theodore Bikel the folksinger and actor when asked to describe why he was Jewish answered with a poem by Yosef Papiernikov

Zol zayn az ikh boy in der luft mayne shleser

Zol zayn az mayn Got iz ingantsn nito

In troyim iz mir heler, in troyim iz mir beser

In troyim iz der himl gor bloyer vi blo.

Could be that my whole world is only confusion

Could be what I thought was God's word isn't true

Yet my dream is as bright as the brightest illusion

And the sky in my dream is much bluer than blue.

Could be that I'll not see the fruit of my yearning

Could be that I'll never be rid of my load.

What matters is not the end of the journey

It's the journey itself on a bright sunlit road.

Bikel concludes his essay by saying: I make no claim that Jewish culture is superior to other cultures or that the Jewish song is better than the song of my neighbor. But it is mine. And since it is the song of my people, it is up to me to cultivate it, lest it become desolate and the blooms wither and die.”(189)

It is up to us to keep Judaism alive, to keep the flowers blooming. And this cannot happen without a serious examination of who we are and how we each can do our part to make Judaism relevant, meaningful *and* how we can make it ours. It's in how we choose to learn about our past and traditions, and how we choose to teach others and pass it on to the next generation. It's in the rituals we do, and in the ways we relate to people who are most different than us. It's in what we *do* believe and also in how we act on these beliefs. The world needs us now more than ever, *but so does Judaism.*

May we all stand with pride, along with our ancestors and all Jews around the world knowing that what makes us good people, what makes us the best that we can be as members of the human family, is what makes Jewish. And what makes us Jewish is what makes us strong.