

September 19, 2007

D'rasha for Kol Nidrei *Larry Neff*

I. Introduction

It's been a hard year. In fact, for some of us, it's been a very hard year. Too much death around us, too much illness. Too much war for far too long. Too much time spent being tired and rushed and overwhelmed. Too little rest, too little quiet. Too little time to read, to listen to music, to be outdoors, to relax, to spend with family and friends. Too little support, too little affection. Too little joy, too little peace.

Isn't life supposed to get easier at some point? Why does it seem sometimes that life just gets more and more challenging? Those images presented to us as children of what life would be like for us when we grew up – could they have omitted so much?

We're Jews, so we always have more questions: Why are other people so hard to deal with at times? Why are organizations so difficult to lead, develop and maintain? Why are close relationships so hard to nurture and sustain? My cousin and her partner have been together for 31 years and they've been in therapy the entire time – when is it going to get easier for them? And when is life going to get easier for us?

So – with life so challenging at times, at this turning of the year where can we go to look for comfort? For reassurance? For guidance?

First and foremost, we turn to our family and our closest friends, many of them in this community and in this very room with us tonight. And G-d bless them for being there for us when we needed them most, for listening to our troubles and our lives, for gently guiding us, for loving us for who we are, and for accepting us as human with all our faults and limitations.

And for those of us here tonight at this *Kol Nidrei* service, like Jews in synagogues all around the world on this Holy Day, we turn to Jewish teachings and our Jewish community for comfort, for reassurance, and for a sacred time and place where we can stop, think quietly, try to make sense of it all, and try to find a better and more ethical path and direction for our lives in the New Year.

II. Guidance from Jewish Observances and Texts

Judaism offers us wonderfully human and humane traditions to help us pause, to reflect, and, most importantly, to turn and redirect our lives. Taken together, we call these acts of pausing, reflecting, turning and redirecting: “*t’shuva*.”

- The *S’lichot* service on the Saturday night before *Rosh ha-Shana* starts us on the path of recognizing our misdeeds and asking those we have hurt for forgiveness. At the *S’lichot* service we change the Torah mantles and the *parochet*, the curtain in front of the Ark, from their colorful everyday covers to special white High Holy Day covers, symbolizing purity. This change serves as a physical reminder that we are entering a sacred period, Ten Days of Awe – an intense effort to strengthen and advance what is most pure and good in our lives.
- The round shape of the challah on *Rosh ha-Shana* gives us a tangible reminder of the need for wholeness and completeness in our lives. And the sweetness of the apples and honey we eat on *Rosh ha-Shana* remind us that it is good to be joyful, and that we should seek out what is sweetest and best in Creation and in life.
- The *Tashlich* ceremony has us cast breadcrumbs out of our pockets and into a rushing stream that will carry them far away. Though often downplayed by the rabbis, this physical act of casting out helps to prepare us for the difficult emotional and spiritual work of casting away and releasing hurtful and self-destructive habits.

- The haunting *Kol Nidrei* prayer, sung so beautifully and spiritually tonight by our wonderful Choir, implores G-d to help us as we struggle to maintain our integrity in a deceitful world. And – in what are its most important words to me – it expresses our heart-felt hope that the New Year now started may be filled with all good things, and with goodness itself.

- The challenging *U-n'taneh Tokef* prayer we will chant tomorrow morning makes explicit what the *Kol Nidrei* implies – that our lives are subject to all manner of catastrophes, defeats and failings – despite our yearnings for all that is good and life-giving.
 - Sometimes we like to think that the *U-n'taneh Tokef* is only symbolic, just a metaphor. But some rabbis emphasize that the *U-n'taneh Tokef* is real life – people will be born in the New Year and people will die, both those we love and those we don't.

 - Regardless of how we approach it, the *U-n'taneh Tokef* reminds us that we can mitigate the effects of the bad things we know will happen in the New Year in 3 ways:
 1. **Through *t'shuva*** – turning and refocusing our lives,
 2. **Through *t'fila*** – prayer and introspection, and
 3. **Through *tz'daka*** – recognizing the inherent humanity in all people by doing compassionate deeds of justice and loving-kindness.

- The Torah reading tomorrow morning for *Yom Kippur* Day – *Nitzavim* – also reminds us through its central commandment – “*U-vacharta b'chayim*” – “therefore choose life” – that all our decisions should be guided by the goal of achieving a good life for ourselves, our family, our friends, our community and the world around us.

- Finally, the principle image of the *Ne'ila* service at the end of the *Yom Kippur* day is a series of gates closing behind us and propelling us forward and out into the New Year refreshed and renewed, having strengthened ourselves once again to follow a more ethical, considerate path in life and to keep our lives whole and focused on our best values throughout the New Year.

These High Holy Day images, symbols and texts are clear, direct, even lyrical. If we let them, they can speak to our hearts and help guide us through the work of *t'shuva* that it is our job to complete during the 24 hours of this *Yom Kippur* day.

III. Guidance from Jewish Folk Wisdom

Beyond the ritual observances and the Biblical and rabbinic texts for the High Holy Days, Judaism has a rich treasure trove of folk wisdom, often in Yiddish, the *Mama-Loshen*, that can also help us to focus and refocus our lives at this turning of the year.

One example is the following simple poem, which probably was intended for our parents and grandparents, but I think it also speaks words of High Holy Day truths to us. It's called "All I Got Was Words." Here are 3 verses from it:

All I Got Was Words

When I was young and fancy free,
My folks had no fine clothes for me.
All I got was **words**:

Gott tzu danken – You should thank G-d.

Gott vet geben – G-d will provide.

Lomir leben un zeï gezunt – Live and let live, you should only be well.

I wanted to increase my knowledge,
But they couldn't send me to college.
All I got was **words**:

Hub saychel – Have common sense.
Zeï nischt kein narr – Don't be a fool.
Toyreh iz de beste s'choyreh – Torah is the best enrichment.

The years have flown, the world has turned,
 Things I've gained, things I've learned.
 Still I remember:

Zog dem emes – Tell the truth,
Geb tzedakeh – Give tz'daka,
Hub rachmones – Have compassion for other people,
Zeï a mensch – Be a mensch.

All I got was **words**.

Simple words, simple yet profound. As Keats wrote: “That is all you know, and all you need to know.”

IV. What Are We Seeking? Which Way Should We Turn?

We have symbols, we have Biblical and liturgical texts, we have folk wisdom to guide us along the path. Our next question is: What are we seeking? When we know that, we'll know toward which direction to turn and refocus our lives.

But in your heart of hearts, you already know the answers to “What are we seeking?”

- We're seeking **Wholeness** – *sh'leimut* – the sense that our lives are not composed of separate, conflicting parts but are unified and integrated in a way that gives us a rock-solid foundation for living a good, ethical life.
- We're seeking **Sense of Purpose** – the knowledge that we are working toward worthwhile goals that can help those around us and the wider world, not merely give us temporary pleasure.

- We're seeking **Joy** – the spiritual happiness that comes from sensing the awe and wonder of Creation and all the positive potentialities it offers.
- We're seeking **Connection** – the release from isolation that comes from recognizing our mutual interdependence, and from feeling part of something greater than our individual selves.
- We're seeking **Love & Belonging** – the comforting affection of those around us who love and support us and make life worthwhile.

During the Passover Seder, which represents a different New Year in the Jewish calendar, we read from the *Hagadah* that “whosoever does not explain 3 key elements – *matza*, *marror*, *pesach* – has not fulfilled the *mitzva* of recounting the Exodus from Egypt.” Applying that concept idea to *Kol Nidrei*, what 3 key elements should we focus on, on this night of refocusing? I suggest we look at Forgiveness, Hope and Resolve.

The first of the 3 key High Holy Day elements is Forgiveness.

- In William Bridges’s book, *Transitions*, he wrote: “Even though it sounds backwards, endings always come first. The first task is to let go.” [p. 80]
- This need to let go in order to move forward is why we need to forgive others before we can seek forgiveness for our own deeds. That is why we begin the High Holy Day season with *S’lichot* – to get us ready to seek forgiveness for our own deeds by first forgiving others.
- For ourselves, we need forgiveness for our bad actions and words, which affected those around us, and for our motivations, which affect our souls, our deepest essence.

- Before we can ask for forgiveness, we have to go through an inward-facing process that we call “Repentance,” another word for *t’shuva* or turning. This inward process requires us to recognize and admit what we have done and why we have done it, to feel sorry for our actions and determine to change.
- After inward reflection and repentance for our deeds and motivations, we can turn outward and ask others for forgiveness. The humbling act of saying what we have done face to face to the person we have wronged and asking them out loud for their forgiveness – that can release us so we can move our lives forward to a better place.
- To paraphrase Bridges: We need the “letting go” of forgiveness to move forward, to begin anew at this turning of the year.
- Here is an example from our Tradition of the effects of repentance, of *t’shuva*:
 - The Talmud tells a story about Korach, who led a violent uprising against Moses and was put to death. But his 3 sons were saved.
 - The Talmud, perhaps the originator of the FAQ format – Frequently Asked Questions – asks: “What was the merit of the sons of Korach that caused them to be saved?”
 - The Talmud answers: “When Moses came to visit Korach to try to persuade him not to rebel, the sons of Korach found themselves in a dilemma. They said to each other, ‘If we rise to honor Moses when he enters, we will offend our father, who opposes him. But if we remain seated when Moses enters, we will fail to perform the *mitzvah* of honoring a scholar.’”
 - It’s interesting to note that for the rabbis creating the Talmud, the highest reason they could give for honoring Moses was that he was a scholar. Not that he was the leader who guided the Children of Israel out of slavery

in Egypt, not that he was a Prophet who spoke directly with G-d and gave us the Ten Commandments, but that he was “a scholar.” I guess we all see the world from our own point of view.

- So as the 3 sons of Korach faced their dilemma, what did they decide to do? They decided to stand and honor Moses. The Talmud says that when they decided this and stood to honor Moses, “their hearts stirred and they repented” for previously siding with their father against Moses.... The Talmud goes on to say: “And at that time, they started to sing.”
- Elsewhere the Talmud [Bava Bathra 15a] tells us that David and 10 other elders wrote the book of Psalms, and that among these 10 were none other than *the 3 sons of Korach!*
- From this we learn that the act of repenting can help us refocus our lives away from bad goals. We also learn that, paradoxically, the act of repenting can be joyous. After we review and repent, we can find that turning back to the path we know is right for us is so life-affirming that it can make us sing out loud.

The second of the 3 key High Holy Day elements is Hope.

- After the work of repentance and forgiveness, we can face the future. And we need to face the future with hope.
- Hope is the human response that G-d wants us to have when we look forward to the future. When we look around at the order and beauty of Creation, despite its imperfections, we are intended to feel hope. Hope that things can get better, hope that our efforts will succeed, hope that we will move ourselves and the world forward in the New Year toward *Tikun Olam*, the repair of our imperfect world.

- It is not our responsibility to complete the task of *Tikun Olam*, but neither are we absolved from working toward it.
- Not having hope is, in effect, a sin against G-d. It is wrong for us to refuse to see the potential for good, regardless of the obstacles we know are in the way.
- One intention of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years was to give people hope, to restore the idea that things can get better, that no matter how low they may have fallen they can rest and start again.
 - It's an astonishing idea to give everyone in the whole Nation a "do-over" every 50 years where they start back at their original position with their original land, for them their original livelihood. Knowing that the Jubilee year was there for them and seeing the potential for good in the future gave the people hope.
- Remember that when we chanted the *Kol Nidrei* with the Choir, it was only intended to atone for our sins against G-d, not for our sins against other people. In a way, not having hope encompasses all our sins against G-d. Tonight we ask forgiveness for all of them, and especially for not having enough hope that we can make ourselves and the world better.
- But the hope that *Kol Nidrei* wants us to renew in our hearts is not the generic, warm and fuzzy, unstructured hope of a Hallmark greeting card.
- *Kol Nidrei* wants us to have a more specific hope – hope about specific steps and actions that we have thought about in a serious way through these Ten Days of Awe and on this *Yom Kippur* day and that we are equally serious about resolving to take in the New Year.

The third key element of the High Holy Days is Resolve.

- In the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, we cry out for the ability to be ourselves without pretense, to be fully who we are and who we can be, as it is written: “For You, O G-d, know our innermost heart.”
- To do this, to be fully who we are and who we can be, we must know our innermost heart and understand who we have the ability to be and to become.
- Knowing who we can become, knowing the best we can become, and knowing it with certainty gives us the resolve and the courage to act on our hopes and plans for the New Year and not to let them grow dusty on the shelf of good intentions.
- And so I remind you: Each of us is created in the divine image, each of us is but little lower than the angels, each of us can lead an ethical, compassionate and good life. Each of us can be a mensch.
- You know this about yourself already. Recognize what you know about yourself, and let it be the foundation for truly resolving to turn, to change, and to make yourself and the world around you better in the New Year.

V. Conclusion

Throughout the year and even today, we so often pretend to be righteous on the outside, in our public personas – even when we know we are not quite so righteous on the inside.

This disconnect between our outer and our inner selves is reflected in the Hebrew wordplay that suggests we act as if *Yom ha-Kippurim* – the Day of Atonements – is really *Yom K’Purim* – a day like the holiday of Purim, when we deliberately wear masks to hide our truest identities.

- At this *Kol Nidrei* service on this *Yom ha-Kippurim* – this Day of Atonements:
 - ***Kol Nidrei* calls us** to end the discrepancy between our outward actions and words, and the eternal values we hold true in our hearts.
 - ***Kol Nidrei* calls us** to become whole, integrated, unified people who both espouse and consistently put into action our highest virtues.
 - ***Kol Nidrei* calls us** to become our best and truest selves in the New Year.

I'd like to conclude with a short poem written by Kent M. Keith when he was a college student in 1968. It's a poem about being and becoming our best and truest selves, slightly adapted for the High Holy Days:

Anyway

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spent years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, others may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

VI. Benediction for the New Year

- And when we do become our best selves – whole, unified human beings who are walking on a path to a good, ethical, compassionate and fulfilling life – then we will embody the *Birkat ha-Cohanim*, the blessings chanted by the Priests in the Temple in Jerusalem for all the people and that we repeat 2,000 years later in every Jewish community:
 - *Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yish'm'recha* – May the Holy One bless you and guard you from harm.
 - *Ya'eir Adonai panav eilecha vi-y'chuneka* – May the Holy One enlighten you and be gracious unto you.
 - *Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yaseim l'cha shalom* – May the Holy One inspire you and grant you peace.

- I wish all of you a *Shana Tova u-M'tuka* and a *Tzom kal* – May you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a good and sweet New Year, filled with many blessings and all good things, and may you have an easy fast.

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