

**Is That Your Final Answer?**  
***Kol Nidrei 5765***  
**September 24, 2004**

*L'shanah Tovah.* My friends, on this solemn and sacred occasion, on this night of repentance and Day of Atonement, I have a somewhat unusual question. I want to ask you: what's your favorite fantasy?

Now, you don't have to tell. You don't have to stand up and announce it. But I am going to share with you one of my fantasies, one that I remember having for a long time.

My fantasy is that all of a sudden, the world just sort of... stops. Everything is frozen... except for me. I can keep it this way as long as I like, as long as I need, as long as it will take... to get all my errands done. My desk cleared, my email read, my house fixed, my checks paid, while I'm at it a few books read. All my errands done, and then the world can start again! Now, maybe it's not all that exciting. But that's one of my favorite fantasies.

News flash: in case you hadn't heard, it's an election year in this country. (Not that we would know that from any obvious television advertisements in Maryland...) In the run-up to this year's Presidential election, I remember something I saw four years ago. I mean, besides the button that said "Gore-Lieberman 5761." I remember taking a moment out of my daily schedule and checking out a web site called [issues2000.org](http://issues2000.org), with detailed information about the positions of all the candidates on important issues. But what grabbed

my attention was the “quiz.” Describe your own positions, then rate how important these issues are to you, and, presto, they would match you with the candidate you *should* be voting for. And rank them all, by percentage of agreement with your views.

I was hooked. It took five minutes. Seconds after I clicked the “submit” button, the results came in, listing our would-be leaders by the candidates’ correlation with my own views. The result didn’t change my vote. But it certainly opened my eyes.

So I had my fun. I was about to shut off the computer and do something useful when, at the corner of the screen, I saw something I *really* couldn’t resist. It was called “Religion Selector.”

Turns out that the people who clarified your political positions were interested in your eternal soul as well. Same approach as the first quiz, but this time, you filled out a questionnaire about a range of spiritual issues, and the kind people behind issues2000.org matched your deepest held beliefs with the faith that fits you best.

I knew I was in trouble.

Sure enough...

Now, I’m not going to reveal what faith the web site selected for me, with a score of 100. I *can* tell you know that I am clearly not Hindu. And I will tell you

as well that, with a score of 77, Reform Judaism ranked, um, well, eighth. Out of twenty-five.

Now, I'm quite clear about how and why this happened. Even in answering the questions I got a sense that something wasn't completely kosher. It had to do with the method and the message. Presumably, whoever put this clever quiz together looked up the positions of different faith traditions in an encyclopedia, and designed a mix and match exercise *based on beliefs alone*. There was *not a single question* about the importance of community. Nothing about our duty to others, nothing about hostility or hospitality, nothing about history, nothing about talking with our hands, nothing about chicken soup. And to do that, to rank belief alone, in a faith that grants great intellectual freedom but emphasizes the social experience of being together, is an obvious misunderstanding of who we are as Jews. To do that will *consistently* under match Jews to Judaism.

I *was* troubled by the whole thing: worried that young or marginally connected Jews, not noticing the flaw in the process, would use these results and look elsewhere in their spiritual quest, ignoring, forgetting, never realizing the premium we put on community, never learning the fact that older Jews know all too well: where there are two Jews, there are three opinions. So I did think there was some danger in this web-site. But I didn't feel threatened at any level myself. Despite my personal results, I didn't plan any immediate career change.

I was, however, fascinated by the process. My God, I thought. We live in a world where a computer can actually pick our gods for us.

I don't know if the Religion Selector is somewhere out there, in cyberspace still. In case it is, however, in case you find it, and take the quiz yourselves, and you find that *you* don't like the results, well, there was an interesting escape clause. There was... a backwards button. If you don't like the outcome, you can always go back... and change your answers.

This whole mix in my mind of fantasy and reality, of choosing gods, and playing God, of going back, and changing answers... reminds me, for some reason... of Regis Philbin.

Now, Regis Philbin may seem like an odd and unlikely god. On the one hand, he is calm, he is reassuring, and, having just set a world endurance record with his 15,000<sup>th</sup> hour of on-screen television time, he's certainly been around long enough. Plus, he seems to need a sidekick to bring out his full potential, and I think of God like that, as needing us, as partners, to get the best ratings possible. On the other hand, he's neutral on important issues, and it used to be you could only get him on one station.

But let's suspend our disbelief. Let's ask "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" Let's take a look at how Regis Philbin – in his role as evening game-show host, holds up to a traditional Jewish notion of the Master of the Universe.

Regis gives out the goods. He determines who comes, and who goes, and how long you stick around. Regis asks questions, including the question of this season in Jewish life, who shall be rich, and who shall be poor? These are words first uttered centuries ago, in the dark days of the Crusades, whispered, it is said, by the great sage Rabbi Amnon after his tormentors had cut out his tongue.

**And Regis Philbin asks the hardest, the most difficult, the most profound question of all. When you sit in the hot seat, when the chips are down and the lights are on, Regis looks you in the eye and asks... “Is that your final answer?”**

**“Is that your final answer?” It is a question for all of us, at all the most critical moments, in the game of life. These are words we ask of the world around us. Words we should ask of ourselves. And words of hope, for one more chance, to get it right.**

**Words we ask of the world.** This night, as Jews gather together in sacred assembly, vicious violence continues in every corner of Iraq, a cycle of revenge, retaliation and grim determination prevails in Palestine and Israel, sobs still stir the soul from the ashes of a school in Russia. Color-codes take on new meaning with warnings from Washington. And out of Africa comes news of the world's

latest, and ongoing, genocide. What fragile hopes for peace we held just a few years ago lay lifeless on the ground, shattered by a relentless barrage of bombs and barbaric stupidity. Were we wrong, to even hope?

At home, and abroad: In the world's richest country, the poverty rate lurches higher. The gap between the rich and the poor is wider here than in any other country in the Western world. Young soldiers are out far from home and dying, today, sent by our leaders, today, and our politicians and pundits can't get past events of thirty years ago.

A Quassam kills a kindergartener out of clear-blue sky. A helicopter fires on a four-year old. Children turn into hate-mongers by the lessons they learn in school. Smoke in the forests you and I planted, smoldering hatred in the heart. Holy books and sacred sites torched, by partners we were supposed to trust.

There is something I want to say, to those who send forth the young to fight their age-old battles, to those who hide the reasons for war from those they send to war, to the stone-throwing street thugs and the fist-waving politicians alike.

*Is that your final answer?* Bombs and bloodshed, rage and revenge, conflict and catastrophe, sticks without carrots, superficial steadfastness without a coherent inner direction, is that all you have to give? Is that all you have to offer? Is that all we have to look forward to?

We scratch our heads, and wonder how we got here. In Israel and Iraq, in Russia and in Africa, in all the wars of the world, in all the pain on our own streets, we can look backwards and ask who is to blame, and why this happened. We can debate, and we can argue, and we might be right, and we might be wrong, but, you know, in the end it may matter less “why?” than “what now?”

And that’s the way it is, whenever we face a problem head on. Causes are important, understanding essential, but what we need more is the will to move ahead. Hunger or homelessness, prejudice or bigotry, oppression or injustice: we may begin with “how did we get here?” but it *has to move on*, to: “is this the way it should be?” Not description, but prescription. Not is, but ought. Is the die cast? Is this the world you want? Is that your final answer?

And if you dare say no, if you have the vision, if you have the values, if you have the drive and determination, then, my friends, you can make a difference. In the words of an Israeli folksong: “*Ani v’attah nishaneh et haolam.*” You and I can change the world. If only we can look at the world and ask: is this the way we want it to be?

**And then. And then it is time to look at ourselves.**

Dreams, and fantasy. The appeal of “Who Wants to Be A Millionaire” was so great when it first came on that not only did some of us watch it. Some of

fantasized about having the chance to be there ourselves. And some of us: well, some of us actually made it. As did our own Rabbi Daniel Swartz, in his television debut with Regis just a couple of years ago.

So: what if you had the chance? What if it *could* be you?

My friends, I ask you this Kol Nidrei night, to picture yourselves sitting in “the chair.” It is *you* in the Hot Seat, upon *you* the lights are focused. I ask you this night to picture yourself being asked, not be Regis, but by God, and by the people in your life: “Is that your final answer?”

Go ahead. Use your lifeline. But this audience is not a random group of strangers. It is the people you are connected with, the people you love. And the people you have hurt in the past. It is the people you have wronged. Look them in the eye. Will they help you? Did you help them? Is that your final answer?

Remember. Remember harsh words in a fit of anger. Remember the grand promises, and the parade of tiny disappointments. Remember tales told of others, and the shame of stories told about you. Remember the time you meant one thing, and said something else. Remember the bruised ego, and the broken heart. Remember friendships that have ended, love lost or left behind. Is this the way you want to leave it? Is that the way you want it to be? Is that your final answer?



And remember. Remember the times you chose convenience over conviction. Remember the times you chose freedom over commitment. Remember the times when turning to God, when turning to Judaism, when returning to your people would have made you a better person, would have made us a better community, but you were just too busy to bother? After all, sports are *important*. Hebrew school can wait. Torah can wait. Inner growth can wait. The life of the spirit can *always* wait until we have the time. Is that your final answer?

**This night, this day, it does not have to be this way. This night we have another chance. This night we can make another choice.**

One of the strangest laws in the Torah, perhaps one of the most bizarre injunctions in all of Jewish life, comes from the middle of the book of Leviticus. It concerns a new mother, a woman who has just given birth. She is in a state of ritual impurity, we are told, for a certain number of days. After that time, she is to come forward, and bring... a sin offering.

A sin offering! Why on earth did she have to bring a sin offering? No one knows. No one can say. We don't know the answer. It's not as if we have any kind of notion of Original Sin in our tradition. The concept just isn't there for us.

But the Talmud offers an explanation. It's just a theory. Just speculation. It might not be right. But it's brilliant.

A woman in the midst of labor, the Talmud says, is struggling so much that she might cry out, in the midst of pain: "By God, I swear, I'll never let my husband touch me again!" Then the baby is brought to her, and she forgets ever having said *any* such words.

But she did say them, so the theory goes. She swore them! Through clenched teeth, in dire straits, but still she swore a binding oath. And maybe, well, maybe to the male writers of the Talmud there was *nothing* more important than getting her out of this oath she *might* have sworn. But whatever the reason, *that* is what they said the sin offering was for. For an oath sworn, and then forgotten. Because words count, because what we say matters, the woman needed to do *something* to release her from her vow.

We bring offerings of animals no more. We bring the offerings of our heart. But still we need *something*, to get us out of the trouble we ourselves have caused. That is why we have *Kol Nidrei*. And that is what Yom Kippur is about. A time to say that oaths matter, that promises are important, but, that we can be *released* from the bond of our word, if we are unable to carry it out. That we can clean up the mess we caused. That we can have another chance.

This is one time; this is one day we can say: well, you know. I've thought about it a bit. I've had some time to reflect. I've spoken with everyone I know. You know, God. That's *not* my final answer. I'd like to change my mind.

And then the moment transforms, from the choice we make, to the world we create. From a distant dream, to the reality of a new life. Words of hope. For one more chance.

What would it take, to change your life? What if you could go back, to a critical moment? What if it worked like the "undo" function on a computer? One key, to undo just the last thing you have done. What if it was thirty minutes? What if it was thirty seconds? Is there one thing you have done, that you would take back if you could, that would change your life forever?

I had heard – Rabbi Swartz confirmed this -- that the only part of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" that is edited is the space before the answer. When you're on the show, you can take all the time you want. Between the question and the answer, you can take all day.

My friends, take all the time you want. Between the questions asked, and the response of the heart. This one time, this one *yuntif*, this Yom Kippur, you can even take all day.

My favorite fantasy is that I can stop time, to do what I need to do. To do what I want to do. To get things done.

What if you had the chance to untangle the web we weave. To match up the kind of person you *wanted* to be, with the kind of person you are? To make “is” and “ought” the same? To live out your own ideals? What is your response to the question of the night? You don’t have to share the answer with me. Only with yourself. With yourself, and with the people who matter the most in your life.

Is that your final answer?

*L’shanah Tovah.*