

***Anu Matirin:***  
**A People and All People**  
**Kol Nidrei/Erev Yom Kippur 5771**  
**September 17, 2010**

It is Yom Kippur, so, naturally we are thinking about food. Imagine a restaurant, some trendy ethnic eatery with exotic and different tasting food, as a group of Jewish patrons finish their dinner. Relieved but exhausted, the waitress approaches them with the following query: “Was anything alright?”

By reputation, we are, we Jews, both analytical... and articulate. This means we like to pick things apart, to think about them, to examine things from every angle... and that we need to share our thoughts with others. There is an alternative, of course, another option we might have chosen. We can keep those thoughts to ourselves. Perhaps there are times that would be a better move. But it’s not the one we often choose. (There is a type of tea I think of as especially Jewish. It is the one called Constant Comment.)

The combination of critical faculties and sufficient...comfort to feel free to share our opinions means that we sometimes... complain. And among the items we comment and complain about... are each other. You know the saying “two Jews, three opinions.” And you also know the story of the first Jew on the moon, who builds there two synagogues, one he prays in... and the other he wouldn’t set foot in.

So we are observant – at least regarding one another. And we share. Do you remember Woody Allen’s remark about how he got kicked out of college for

cheating on his metaphysics exam? He did this, he said, by looking into the soul of the person sitting next to him.

This night, though... this night is somehow set apart from all that. This night sets a different tone. Maybe because of our impulse to label and subdivide and splinter ourselves, maybe because it is so difficult to judge ourselves when we are too busy looking at others, or maybe, simply, because there are so many more of us here than at any other time of year, on Yom Kippur we are called towards a different level of togetherness. The words are strange, compelling, unique to this night. As the sun sets, in a hush of expectation, we recite:

*B'yishiva shel ma'alah, u'v'yishiva she mata,  
al da'at haMakom, v'al da'at hakahal,  
anu matirin l'hitpaleil im ha'avaryanim.*

We render these words in a particular way in our *machzor*, we Reform Jews. The sanitized, interpretive translation in *Gates of Repentance* reads: “In the sight of God and of the congregation, no matter how far some of us may have transgressed by departing from our people and our heritage, we pray as one, on this Night of Repentance.”

Such a translation focuses on one aspect of the experience – the fact that this occasion brings together those of a wide-variety of practice and identification. Perhaps there are some of you here tonight who don't actually make it every single Shabbat. One or two. And these welcoming words, this

affirmation of an open door for wandering souls, this English is a nice sentiment. But it is hardly an accurate translation.

This is what the Hebrew means, and what we miss in our own machzor:

In the heavenly court, and in the earthly one, with the permission of the Almighty and the permission of the community, we are permitted to pray with sinners.

There is a debate – of course – about the exact origin of these words. Many believe this is a formula to welcome back into the congregation – even for one night -- the Conversos, the Marranos... those of Spanish or Portuguese origin who converted to Christianity under duress, and tried to maintain their Jewish identity in secret after that. There is even a theory that the word “*avaryanim*; transgressors,” was meant to be “*Ibaryanim*; Iberians!” These words would be a formal welcome, then, to those who felt forced by circumstances – and an injunction to those who remained loyal to open their doors and their hearts, a ritual of reconciliation between those who stayed and those who strayed.

But is this really some kind of quasi-legal formula? This is a strange prayer in the first place – what, we need a court’s permission to pray with those who have committed a sin? Wouldn’t that be, um... all of us? Maybe the words are simply a spiritual lesson: why would God bother to accept us, if we exclude and make divisions amongst ourselves?

Whatever their origin, **I hear these words as a powerful prayer of hope and inclusion. And I hear in them two lessons, one which I am sure was intended, and the other which is something of a stretch, which serves as a more expansive vision in my mind.**

**The first lesson I hear in these words is that of Jewish unity.**

We come together this night as at no other time. And herein lies a lesson in itself. For here we are, diverse in attitude and opinion, personal practice and self-proclaimed identity. The defining characteristic of this Jewish night is not belief or doctrine but the fact that it *is* a Jewish act, and thus the ties that bind can be characterized best as a core affirmation of commonality.

There is so much that pulls us apart, we Jews. And we should remain engaged – indeed, we should express ourselves with depth and vigor on behalf of the values we believe in, and our understanding of Judaism. But this night I issue a renewed plea, that in the midst of internal Jewish conflict we also remember that we are all in this together.

Internal Jewish conflict. Tisha B'Av, in Jerusalem. The ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, the single saddest day on the Jewish calendar. Like Yom Kippur, it is a day of fasting, but there the purpose is not the purification of the soul but the preservation of memory. On this day, in 586 BCE the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. On the same day, we are told, in 70 CE, the Second Temple met the same fate, this time at the hands of the

Romans. On this day, in 1492, deliberately heaping misery upon well-known woe, the edict of expulsion against the Jews in Spain went into effect. And on this day, this July, we sat with the Conservative movement in Israel at Robinson's Arch, along the southern section of the Western Wall. To chant *Eicha* as the sun sank low, to hear Lamentations for lost Jerusalem while sitting in front of the very tossed and tumbled stones, literally the building blocks of the Temple that had been overturned, what a sense of history and destiny. To hear the words at the very place they were describing... it was something else.

I remembered, that night, what our tradition offers as an explanation for why we suffered such a loss. It was about... internal Jewish conflict. There is a tale in the Talmud which teaches that the Temple was destroyed because of a Kamza and a Bar Kamza:

A certain man had a friend Kamza and an enemy Bar Kamza. He once hosted a party, and he said to his servant, "Go and bring Kamza to my party!" The servant went, but he brought Bar Kamza back instead. When the host found Bar Kamza there he said: "You! You go around gossiping and telling tales about me! What are you doing here? Get out!" But Bar Kamza replied: "Look, I'm, already here. Let me stay! I'll pay you back for whatever I eat and drink." But the host refused. Bar Kamza countered: "Let me give you half the cost of the party!" "No," the host replied. Finally Bar Kamza said: "Look, I'll pay for the whole party!" [This must have been quite the social event. The man really wanted to be there!] But the host still refused, and he took Bar Kamza by the hand... and he threw him out.

[Hurt, ashamed, embarrassed, Bar Kamza said to himself]: "Since all these important Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this must mean that they agreed with his action. [That it is ok to treat someone this way. If that's what they are like,] I will go and inform against them, to the Romans. So Bar Kamza went to the Emperor and said: "The Jews are rebelling against you!" The skeptical Roman responded: "How can I tell?" Bar Kamza said "Send them an offering and see whether they will accept it, and sacrifice it [on the altar]."

So the Emperor sent Bar Kamza to the rabbis in the Temple with a fine calf. But en route, Bar Kamza made a blemish on the animal... in a place which Jews would consider the animal unfit for an offering, but the Romans would not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it anyway, so as not to offend the Government. But Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas said: "What? If we do this, people will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar!" So they refused [the offering, knowing that this would be seen as an insult, and used as a pretext to persecution. They knew what the consequences would be.]

[To save lives and knowing what would happen if the message got back, the rabbis] then proposed to kill Bar Kamza, so that he should not go and inform against them. But Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas argued the narrow point of the law, and said to them, "Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?"

Rabbi Jochanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas, our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land.

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, 55b-56a)

The implication, of course, is that the rabbis *should* have been less strict... and accepted a less-than-ritually perfect animal. It is also clear, by the way, that the final editor of this passage viewed the killing of a traitor in this situation as a justifiable act of self-defense.

This is all very strange. It is, of course, a retroactive reading, a spiritual spin on past events; it is much more homily than history. There are so many bizarre things about this story: like some random Jew with his nose bent out of joint gets to go kvetch to the leader of the not-so-free world? Like this is really the reason the Romans responded to a rebellion?

But the power of the story persists. Because, after all, just how far removed is this tale of pettiness and punctiliousness, backstabbing and betrayal from the reality around us today? How often do we feel insulted, and how often do we hurt the feelings of others? How do we act on our pain, and

how does this impact the people around us? And how broken are we, into our different pieces of a people?

Why, after all, were my family, many Reform colleagues, and the Conservative movement at Robinson's Arch for Tisha B'Av in the first place, and not at the packed main section of the Kotel? Because the Wall itself has been captured all over again, this time by a small segment of the Jewish world, who impose their exclusive interpretation on the norms of everyone around them. Instead of standing as an abiding symbol of Jewish unity, the Wall has been transformed into a *charedi* enclave, an ultra-Orthodox synagogue.

Indeed, just days before, the leader of our Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center, Anat Hoffman, had a Torah ripped out of her arms and was arrested for disturbing the status quo – all while remaining in an area supposedly designated for non-Orthodox observance. Over the course of the days which followed, a legislative proposal which would have placed all matters of conversion in Israel into the hands of the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate came to the attention of Jews around the world. The day of reckoning on this so-called conversion bill was postponed, for now, but for many of us this is a core question of Jewish identity, of reading us out, of throwing us out of a party which we have every right to attend.

In the midst of behavior which boggles the imagination, in the face of rhetoric so hot it burns the face, it is so easy to say: “these are not my people.” Wedge issues work precisely in the way they drive us apart, and make it almost impossible to see what we have in common. What *can* we share with those whose values and world-view are so vastly different from our own?

We could spend all of Yom Kippur asserting our side of the story, seeking our rights, riling ourselves up. The issues are important and the competing visions of Jewish values compelling enough that it deserves our attention.

But I don't want to dwell on the divisions. Because... we have walked this road together, we and they. Somehow it is still the case that we share the same fate with Jews with whom we argue even about breaking bread. Fight against them we must, against the Ovadia Yosefs who publicly pronounce a plague on Palestinians that they should all just vanish from the earth, against the medieval mystics who attribute any misfortune to faded writing on a piece of parchment inside a mezuzah, against the *charedi* militants who place God's law above the Supreme Court and the word of their rabbis above the rule of law, against the messianic monsters let loose by the fanatic fringe of the settler movement. Fight for what we believe in, but never forget that this is a family fight, that it is hard *because we are connected*, that their words hurt because we expect something better.



Personally... I cannot even... imagine... what it is like to be ultra-Orthodox. It is almost impossible to see the common thread between their Judaism, and mine. But that thread... is there. Somewhere. I still believe that I share something in common with a Jew whose dress I would never don, whose shoes I could not imagine filling... but who is part of my past, present around us now, and who will undoubtedly still be standing and staring daggers at us the day after tomorrow. *B'yishiva shel ma'alah, u'v'yishiva shel mateh...* This night... and maybe only on this night... let us imagine standing together as Jews, despite all our differences.

**But I hear in these words we recite... a second lesson as well. Is it possible that this call to unity... is not just about *a* people, but about *all* people? Could this formula contain a prescription not only about Jewish inclusion, but about a connection with all of humanity?**

What if... what if the word "*avaryanim*" does not mean sinner? What if it comes from the very similar word, *avar*, meaning something which is across the way, over and against us. What if it means that on this night, and in this vision, we are to come together... with the "other."

These past weeks have seen religious intolerance on parade all over the world. Fanatics in Florida are matched by crazy crowds in Kabul; rumors have bred riots; people have died in anticipation of something that might have

happened but did not. The memory of 9/11 is marred by shouting and stabbing on the streets of New York, and no one seems to care that the core claim about a “mosque” “at” Ground Zero is simply wrong. Islam is parodied, painted with far too broad a brush, slandered by people who have never read anything about Islam written by a Muslim – much as Judaism has so often been subject to scorn based on the appraisal of outsiders whose hostility was matched only by their ignorance. And in all the argument about one particular imam, everyone seems to forget that whether or how much we agree with his world-view is *not the point*, that freedom of speech and religion are spelled out *precisely to protect* that with which we disagree and are uncomfortable. Speech and practice with which we *already* agree... *doesn't need protection*.

But on this night which is ultimately about the possibility of repair, and restoration, on this sacred occasion with its hint of hope for those who work for change... I am heartened as well. For there are, tucked in the corners of the conflagration, visions of goodness and decency that touch the heart. Witness the work and statements of interfaith conferences around the country, places where the foundation of trust has been laid by years of working together and coming to know one another. Witness the stories often buried underneath the headlines, of Jewish religious leaders standing with Christian and Muslim groups, all representing the better angels of our nature, the impulse to come together rather than tear apart. Dawn will come again, and good things can

emerge – new alliances, deeper understandings, genuine friendships – out of the darkness of this time.

Let us remember that, in our tradition, the creation myth itself is redolent with images of dignity and equality. “*Vayivra Elohim et ha’adam b’tzalmo; b’tzelem Elohim bara otam; zachar u’nekeivah bara otam;* and God created human beings in the divine image; in the divine image God created us, male and female God created them.” The lesson is clear. These words come to us chronologically prior and, I would argue, even in thematic precedence to any of the particular laws of our people: we are made in the image of the highest we can imagine, of infinite worth, all of us, male and female, black and white and yellow and brown, gay and straight, short and tall, thin and... less thin, Muslim, Christian and Jew. We are all ethnic. We are all exotic.

The Talmud asks, why were human beings created from a single person? Why are we all descendants of one being, Adam first, and only *then* Adam and Eve? So that no one can say: my lineage is greater than yours. Unity, dignity, equality... these are bedrock principles, foundations of our faith.

Comment and complain, criticize and analyze: this is part of what we do. We look around and judge, others and ourselves.

But this is a time to put all that aside. This is a day, at least, when we look more inside than out. And what we discover, I hope, is not the ways in

which we are better or worse, but the ways in which we are caught up and connected -- in fate, in nature and in kind – with all Jews, and all human beings.

*Anu matirin... anu muchrachim...* We are permitted – we are required – to come together... *L'hitpalel im ha'avaryanim*. Not to pray with sinners but to unify the sinful and soulful sides of ourselves. We look inside and we look around and we realize, in awe and wonder, that we are, in common humanity, the same.

Let that be the lesson upon which we live our lives – as Jews and as *menschen*, as good and decent human beings. And at the end of the meal of our life, the heavenly waitress will not even have to ask. Because she will already know... that everything *was* alright.

*L'shanah Tovah.*