

Powers of One
Kol Nidrei/Erev Yom Kippur 5755
October 3, 2014

It is Kol Nidrei. Erev Yom Kippur, arriving every year, whether we are ready for it or not – and at the same time every year – at least on the Jewish calendar. It is ever and always on the eve of the 10th of Tishrei. It is true that on the calendar we usually use, Yom Kippur is sometimes in September and sometimes in October – although never on Sunday. Actually the whole Jewish calendar is arranged around this one day, this singular event, so that Yom Kippur itself never falls on either a Friday or a Sunday; it might be *on* Shabbat -- as it is this year -- but never next to it.

Still, the fact that this holy day wanders, as it were, on the solar calendar means that there are different levels of intensity, every year, in the inner conflict presented to Jews in cities with competitive baseball teams. One story tells of a fan who approaches a rabbi about the conflict between a major game and the Day of Atonement. “Well,” the rabbi says, “you can always DVR it.” And the congregant responds: “Wow. Really? You can DVR Yom Kippur?”

Fourteen Yom Kippurs ago, during my first High Holy Day season with this congregation, I shared with you religious insights to be gleaned from the game of baseball, something I learned from a book called *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. The book was really about AA, but it had this to say: baseball teaches important life lessons because of the fact that 1) errors are part of the

game, 2) that striking out is expected, and 3) that having success just once every three attempts is considered a sign of greatness.

This year, following the Nationals, I was struck by two more sides of the sport which offer additional... teachable moments. In late August and early September there was an unexpected power surge, a cluster of home runs on a road trip out West against strong pitchers who don't usually yield the long ball. It was great, it was exciting, it won several games. But I remember that... you can't really count on home runs. Greatness, in the long run – success that can be sustained – comes from the patience and skill of stringing together singles. One at-bat at a time. One day at a time. There are times to swing for the fences. But more often, just get a hit. Just contribute, and try to surround yourself with other people who are doing the same thing.

The other aspect I want to mention at the moment is the unending sea of statistics. Every time you listen there is something new! Did you know, for example, that the Nationals are undefeated when a left-handed pitcher starts the game on a Tuesday with 62% or greater cloud cover if the stock market rose the previous day? Alright, that one might not be right. But I mean, come on, who comes up with some of these? It strikes me as a devoted but borderline desperate attempt to make meaning, to find patterns, to wrest some sense of certainty out of what is, at heart, unpredictable. If we just crunch the numbers right, if we have enough information, if we can see the full picture we can figure out the future! We can know what is going to happen.

But we can't know. Not for sure.

The best we can do is chip away, pace ourselves carefully, do the work we need to do. One step at a time.

It is Erev Yom Kippur. It is the eve of the Day of Atonement. Once, long ago, our people had priests, and a cult, a ritual, and a response. To this day the traditional reading for the morning of Yom Kippur and the liturgy of the afternoon service alike claim to recount an ancient ceremony: one goat is slaughtered; another – laden with the sins of the people – is let loose into the wilderness. The high priest enters the holy of holies, utters God's name and then, inevitably, pardon is achieved, atonement attained. If the rite is right, the outcome is automatic. One flows and the other follows, forgiveness granted, 100% guaranteed.

But the Temple is gone, the priests a memory, the ceremony – if it ever actually existed – set aside. Too often God seems more absent and abstract than was that immanent presence, and psychic certainty. Two *piyyutim*, two medieval liturgical poems recited in traditional synagogues on Yom Kippur, reflect the longing, the nostalgia, the sense of what we have lost. *Mar'eh Cohen*, after describing the ritual, ends with the words “*kol eleh b'hiyot haheichal al y'sodotov*; all this occurred when the Temple was on its foundation, and the Holy Sanctuary was on its site, and the High Priest stood and ministered – his generation watched and rejoiced.” *Ashrei HaAyin* carries

the theme further: “*Ashrei HaAyin ra’ata khol eleh,*” it opens, “fortunate is the eye that saw all these.” But then it goes on: “*Halo l’mishma ozen d’ava naf’sheinu.* For the ear to hear of it distresses our soul.”

For us, now, what do we do, where do we turn, to have some sense of confidence that we are on the right track, that we can make a difference in our lives and in the world?

The Bible may, indeed, have been theocentric – God was the main actor, the main player, the most potent presence. But, as many have noted, the Talmud, the rabbinic tradition, focuses less on a God who has gone missing, or at least exited the center stage. Indeed, most of post-Biblical Judaism -- with the exception, perhaps, of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism and Hasidism -- Judaism survived the destruction of the Temple and dealt with the loss of an intimate and immediate connection with the divine... by emphasizing the *human role* in our partnership with God. It was, then, anthropocentric. “Praise the Lord, but...[pass the ammunition.]”

Thus, Yom Kippur becomes not a magical act of cleansing and purification, an act the priest performs while we stand in the back as spectators, but, rather, a process in which our participation is essential. Thus, Mishna Yoma teaches: “If one says ‘I shall sin and repent, then sins and repents, no opportunity will be given for repentance. If one says ‘I shall sin and the Day of Atonement shall procure atonement for me,’ the Day of Atonement

procures no atonement. And: for transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement procures atonement. But for transgressions between human beings, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement – until they have made peace with one another.”

This, then, this kind of purification... this is in our hands. It is up to us, to begin, to move, to take those first small steps in the right direction.

Earlier tonight, again tomorrow morning, and finally tomorrow afternoon and evening, we encounter the *Vidui*, the confessional prayers of Yom Kippur. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu...* an alphabetical acrostic of sin. *Al Chet Shechatanu L'fanecha...* For the sin we have sinned before You...

Each year I wonder at the list. On the one hand, it's the same list every year. Can't we... look, can't we get some of those sins off the list? Can't we avoid some of these errors, move on to new and different things we have done wrong? Can't we improve and make progress, even if it is just a little bit?

And, on the other hand, if these are sins we have been committing for much of our lives... how do we know we were forgiven last year? In the words of another one of my teachers,ⁱ how do we know that this list is just the things we've messed up, from last Yom Kippur to this one?

Think of a married couple who fight in a way which is not fair. Every time they get into an argument, any time *any* issue or conflict comes up, *every* issue comes up. Every hurt and harm and insult and shortcoming and complaint they have ever fought about comes rumbling, tumbling back with every new dispute. Look, sometimes even healthy couples do this. But the problem is that when this happens no argument is ever over, no past grievance forgotten – or forgiven. How do we... get past the past?

One way, I think, is to remember our limits. I think, frankly, we can't do everything at once. And maybe we shouldn't try, to take it all on. We can't always... swing for the fences, hoping – and praying – to connect. Sure, sometimes we'll get lucky. But other times it is a recipe for frustration and tension and stress. To try for everything at once puts the weight of the world on our shoulders. To focus on what is at hand, a manageable task, is a formula for success.

We read in *Pirkei Avot*, a tractate of the Talmud which consists almost solely of ethical maxims: “*Lo aleicha ham'lacha lig'mor*. It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. *V'lo atta ben chorin lihivateil mimena*. Neither, however, are you free to desist from it.”

So I have a proposal. Let's make a conscious effort that has a chance of really working. Let's remember the power of one. Let's swing for singles, and try to surround ourselves with others who are doing the same thing.

The priests of sport who announce games and arrange all those facts for us often divide statistics into two distinct realms. One is for home games. Another is for being away. Of all the things you want to change, of all the ways we can do better, let's pick one for each direction. Inside and outside. Let's take on one thing about ourselves, and commit to working on it. And let's take on, each of us, one thing about the world, and try to make a difference there as well.

One thing about ourselves. Are you tired of making the same New Year's resolutions, year after year? Is it possible it's because we make too many of them? Yes, we have to work on all of it. But if there was one thing about yourself you were going to focus on, one area where you would want make a major push, a real effort, what would it be? What would give you the greatest sense of accomplishment and satisfaction if next Yom Kippur you stood up, peeked into the heavens, peered over God's metaphorical shoulder as God was writing out a list of all possible woes and transgressions, and you could say with a clear conscience: "excuse me, God, hold on a second. In sincerity and humility... you can cross that one off!" Let's take it on. Let's try!

And one thing about the world. Our own lives are hard enough to change. But what can we do, in the face of ISIS and immigration, global warming and the financial crisis, forces that are bigger than us and beyond control?

You know the answer, though. In the right place, at the right time, one person really can make a difference. One tired woman who refused to get up and go to the back of the bus. One jailed activist against the Apartheid regime who refused to let his spirit be broken. It's not a secret. Just the right image on a Facebook group you create, just the right initiative to teach others about the status of women or girls around the world, just the right spark on the right tinder... There are so many ways to communicate, now, and though we are drowning in data and information overload, somebody's care, and somebody's cause breaks through. Why not yours? Why can't it be you? The tools are there, the heart is willing, it just takes...the pieces falling into place. We can never give up, we can never give in; it is in our hands to change the world. One focused effort at a time.

As the Torah portion we read tomorrow morning promises: "this mitzvah is not too far from you, nor is it impossible. It is not in the heavens, that you might say, who will climb up into the heavens, and bring it back for us, and do it for us. Nor is it over the sea, that you would say, who will cross the sea for us, and get it for us. No, it is in your hands, and your heart, to do it."

And then there is this. Change one thing... and you will change the world. Because everything is connected. And one change effects, and infects, all that is around it.

Think about, if you will, a single cell. Take it from a particular organ. Let's make it the liver. Just one little liver cell. Just one. But it is also

everything. Something inside that cell makes it do... liver stuff. It separates, it differentiates, it individuates. But at the same time... inside that cell remains the code... for the entire organism. And you. One person. One individual. But inside you is the key to the entire species. And in one species, the secrets of the universe. Everything is connected. The power of one. One change, and the whole world is different.

To know when their prayers had been answered, when their sins had been purged, our ancestors relied on a form of magic. They used what was the equivalent of a red string – a thread of crimson wool. Dependent upon the exile into the wilderness of the goat upon which they had laden all of their sins – the goat that escaped, the scapegoat – the people would tie this red thread onto the entrance to the Sanctuary. Once the he-goat reached the wilderness, they believed, the thread would turn white! It was a literal staging, acting out what I assume was meant as a metaphorical verse: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall become as white wool.”

My friends, how will you know? Do better, and you’ll know. And so, too, will everyone else.

Let us do what we can. As to the rest: let it be. At least, until next year.

L’shanah Tovah.

ⁱ Yehuda Kurtzer, “Teshuva and Heshbon HaNefesh in a Time of Darkness,” September 4, 2014; http://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1444&Cat_Id=439&Cat_Type=Blogs