

Kol Nidre — 5779: Power

“Yes or No”

Yom Kippur – Kol Nidrei
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All of us assembling this evening are like angels, expectant and hopeful that we have been redeemed from our transgressions of this past year – and we enter into this Yom Kippur refreshed and eager that we can interrupt and rehabilitate the unhelpful patterns that cause us innate pain and alienation past some momentary pleasure. Without judgment, and with deep discernment, we are meant to mend that which is torn – to live fully in this sacred time – entering now into the 50th gate – what our mystics describe as *Sha’ar Binah* – or the Gate of Understanding – and as we pass through this gate, we are to recognize the true freedom and profundity that our soul possesses, detached and apart from any mortal servitude.

In this time, we practice self-restraint most notably by fasting — not to afflict ourselves, but rather as a gesture to gain a greater perspective of the world and our place in the world. We earnestly encounter our impermanence in this world, not to freak us out and cause us heavy feelings of morbidity – but rather to appreciate this moment as a powerful moment – a moment into which we can pour our essentiality, and feel enlightened and wholly alive – come what may inevitably, tomorrow. We are to power through our distractions, we are to sidestep our looming agendas, and we are to revel in the moments of quality that are suddenly, surprisingly made manifest amid our internal chatter and conditioned expectation.

So, welcome – it is good and sweet to walk in these hours together. May each of us find what we seek – may we enlarge our capacity for spiritual challenge as we rewire our neurological receptors for what we think of as recognized and established. May we dare to see the world from other vantage points – and may we venture into the more impenetrable wilderness of our interior spaces, reassured that we are not alone – as we take a chance on this holy day of atonement.

In fifth grade, I got into a fight during recess. Well, this isn’t exactly true – to be more accurate, I was called out by a particular bruiser, as he pushed me into his sphere of domination and taunted me to throw a punch at him on the playground. I don’t remember the exact genesis of the altercation. I do remember that suddenly we were surrounded by the other kids, who I think were frantically chanting, “fight, fight, fight,” and I was hauled off to the principal’s office, where I indignantly claimed injustice because I was the victim. I was the aggressor – I didn’t do anything – I didn’t throw a punch — and I meekly protested. No matter. I got detention.

A few years ago, one of my children, then in middle school, had someone come up to them and provoke them, spewing something vile and negative about Jews and about being a Jew. Without hesitation, and with no words spoken, he (or she!) turned and punched the bully in the face. That ended that, and the school authorities were never summoned, that heckler was silenced, and my child has not suffered any similar indignities to this day. What’s the moral of this story? It’s complicated.

On this holiest day of the year, I ask us to consider our relationship to power. Who are the role models that populate and confirm our sense of self? As Jews – interconnected and diverse, how do we relate to and abide each other? What cues do we take from culture about our positions in the larger society? On Yom Kippur, we play both ends against the middle – offering a sacrifice to both God and Azazel – hedging our bets, giving protection money and obeisance to the aggressor. We stand over and over again, reminding God of the Divine attributes of mercy, compassion, graciousness, truth, kindness and pardon, as we plead for our lives. We are, each of us, possessed with considerable power. When is the time for us to act with force and when is the time for us to act with restraint? Inspired by the Book of Ecclesiastes as it asks us next week during Sukkot – is there a time of humiliation and a time of respect? What is the measure of our response to the difficulties and challenges that are pitted, all around us?

It is now that we feature and privilege the various forms of *teshuvah* – *selicha*, *mechilah*, and *kapparah* – stances and stages of pardon. According to the 16th-century mystical work, *Tomer Devorah*, written by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero about the 13 Attributes of God, the first step is *selicha* – or general forgiveness. This is to say that I am sorry for what I have done – I sincerely regret it, and I will intend to never do it again – this level cracks open the door of possibility. The next level is *mechila* – which can translate as “wiping away.” This level is the aspiration that a relationship can be restored to a place it was before the treachery or bad behavior. The deepest level is *kapparah* – what is known as atonement. This level comes into play when an individual states that their conscience will not let them live with themselves, because of what they have done to assail a person and poison a relationship. Our tradition teaches that no human can respond adequately to this – rather, it is up to God who can reach the depths of a person and say, be comforted. It is this comfort that is hopefully gained today, on Yom Kippur.

And yet, no matter how high we ascend and how angelic we may present on this day, it is hard to release ourselves from our material world predominantly into the ethereal realm. Yes, now we are in precious, sanctified space – and yet, our thoughts wander, we are preoccupied, some of us have had first responder training leading up to tonight, and each of us has already passed through a gauntlet of scrutiny and the various security checkpoints, ticket in hand, so we can be here, at peace – as the grim words attributed to George Orwell resound – *people sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf*.

To be candid, as we settle in, I assume like many of you, my thoughts are absorbed by the current state of our world. To give myself over to these three stages of pardon could be construed as a quaint parlor game – an entertainment or a pastime that doesn’t adequately address the built-in pain, suffering, bigotry, inequality, and maltreatment in our world. In reflecting upon this, it seems that I’m back in the principal’s office in 5th grade, fruitlessly advocating for my position, when I don’t even know the rules of the game. Why can’t I be more like my kid, and punch hatred square in the face? For those of you who were here on Rosh haShanah – this is our Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Bereditchev moment – as we argue with God and attempt to set new parameters of engagement away from unjust punishment and scorn. Even with all of the considerable spiritual preparations that I have made in advance of this time, can I sit and access comfort from God, can I be granted *kapparah*, when everything around me burns?

I stand before you this Kol Nidre and I attempt to offer each of us inspiration – a way through this present-day morass. Many of us are frustrated, on edge, and anxious – and I would like nothing better than to clear the road now for the sweet vehicle of comfort to arrive here, unimpeded. I’d like nothing more than to have this d’var Torah suddenly be interrupted by the Divine Voice booming at us – “Alright, alright, alright – be comforted! — and, go home!”

We are beseeched on Yom Kippur, with more than a knowing stare from the prophet Isaiah – *because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist – your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high*. We are counseled not to raise our fist – on Yom Kippur, Isaiah challenges us to manage our problems with a modicum of self-control and with a theology of nonviolence.

And yet, I am grappling at this time with our relationship to power – both our subjection to it, and the ways that we dominate others with what power we possess. I am concerned about the increase of natural disaster declarations in our world, I am troubled by the seeming dissolution of democracy in America and around the world, I lose sleep over what it means to be Jewish this year, and who gets to define it as I grapple with the quandary of intermarriage and assimilation the work to improve the financial stability of our community, and the ever-vanishing American Jew, I am distressed by the rise of antisemitism, as it is rendered routine in organizations like the Labour Party in Britain, and also, the pervading bias against Israel in places like the United Nations – I am distressed by the fire balloons launched this summer into Israel that have caused great damage, and the continued sabotaging of any efforts for peace and normalizing relationships between Israel and her neighbors, and at the same time, I am disturbed by the increased suspicion and scrutiny of people by security representing Israel’s government as they look to

enter into Israel – and I am very troubled by the pre-dawn detention and questioning of a colleague of mine – a Conservative rabbi in Haifa who performed a wedding that was neither sanctioned by nor registered with the Chief Rabbinate.

I, like you, could go on – as we see our world in these beginning days of 5779. In the last several months, I have read books written by friends and teachers. I recommend them to you, as well – books that include *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* by Yossi Klein Halevi, *Catch-67*, by Micah Goodman, and *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*, by Ronen Bergman – all of which I have spoken about in this sanctuary. (We're open every Saturday!). I have reread the remarkably thoughtful book by Ruth Wisse called *Jews and Power*, and I have read *Just Mercy*, the memoir of Bryan Stephenson – who is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama – the organization that has recently opened both the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, more commonly known as the United States Lynching Memorial – I had a chance to meet him this summer, as part of my road trip with Rev. Daryl Horton, and I have also just finished the last work by Martin Luther King, Jr., called *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, which was published in the months before his assassination.

The good news is that it seems that we have been here before. The bad news is that in many ways, we are still struggling to get off the mark to maximize goodness in this world and to tamp down our most base instincts as the disconnection among us grows, and as we continue to be corrupted, even unwittingly, by the politics of fear and anger.

Our prophets give us a pathway forward. As we sing, especially on Hanukah, as Zechariah writes – *lo v'chayil, v'lo v'choach, ki im b'ruchi — not by might, and not by power, but by My spirit, says the God of Hosts*. This is inspirational – and yet this anthem is challenged by the existential fear of being in the presence of one who wants to harm you. What then? Wouldn't it be more helpful to say *with might and with power, and with awe of God's spirit*, as we assert our right for survival – and we'll rely on whatever helps? As Napoleon taught, it is crucial at all times to have an iron hand in a velvet glove.

Deeply encoded in our Jewish psyche is this sense of helplessness, or distress. Ruth Wisse speaks persuasively about this – this sense of powerlessness engrained in our rabbinic literature for generation to generation, as Jews were a targeted and vulnerable minority in this world, moving to a muscular Judaism as the state of Israel was advocated for by Max Nordau at the Second Zionist Congress in 1898 – where Jews were encouraged to cultivate strong and healthy bodies as well as strong minds – to give us a *rugged sense of somebody-ness*. This stereotype is at the core of the fissure between Diaspora Judaism, which is perceived as weak, and Israeli-ness, which is perceived as strong — something that we as a people are vigorously trying to work out and reconcile.

Think of the stereotypes of each place – in the Diaspora we have Jerry Seinfeld, and Woody Allen, and many other *nebbishy* figures – and in Israel? There is the heroic Netflix series of Fauda, the hyper masculine Col. Erran Morad, portrayed by Sacha Baron Cohen, and the wondrous superhero, Gal Gadot.

Do you know this one — one of my favorite jokes is about the American who is traveling to Israel on El Al – and it's time for breakfast. The Israeli flight attendant comes and offer a meal. "Great, what are my choices?" asks the American. "Yes or no," curtly answers the flight attendant.

A recent *New Republic* issue features twelve perspectives from leading American-Jewish writers, including Yehuda Kurtzer, the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, who will be speaking at Agudas Achim on 24 February, thanks in large part to the dedicated efforts of our Sharon Jayson. These essays highlight the shifting relationship between the Jewish Diaspora in American and Israel. Kurtzer claims that at root, virtually all of those living and working in the Jewish world — those who have power in America — are trying to prevent the process of distancing of the Diaspora and Israel from taking hold. We are trying to hold us together. Beyond different priorities and variant cultural norms and practices, past colliding political positions, and differing perspectives concerning identity, is the need to

teach confidence, curiosity, knowledge, and nuance in handling complicated subjects and uncertain outcomes.

Kurtzer ends his essay with a challenge – *a serious American Jewish Zionism would also articulate twin meanings of home for American Jews (here) and homeland (there), unconvinced by the arguments that the one invalidates the other. The contemporary moment offers unparalleled possibilities for a rich Jewish future offered by two thriving Jewish civilizations, as well as the unique opportunity to improve on the legacy of the Jewish past. Neither abandoning the project of Israel, nor slavish loyalty to it, does service to who we are as morally, historically, or politically serious Jews...The simultaneous births of the state of Israel and a thriving Diaspora may be the most interesting, possibly the most valuable transformation in Jewish history. Israel changes the very meaning of Judaism...and presents an opportunity to the Jewish people, not to be squandered to shape that meaning.*

Despite the absurdity and the potential malpractice of the principal's office, do we still believe in the authority and power that it wields, or do we rely more on playground justice – a belief that might makes right, and everything and everyone should fall in line from there – as the fittest and most wily survive? I didn't reprimand my kid. Nevertheless, let us resist Maslow's law of the instrument which states that everything looks like a nail, when all you have is a hammer. As both Superman and Spiderman say — with great power comes great responsibility. We need additional tools. We need moral power along with military power. We must work towards moral progress as well as technological progress. Beyond our technological abundance we must address the poverty of the spirit.

As Martin Luther King writes, *power is not a specific birthright. It will not be legislated and delivered in neat packages. It is a social force that any group can utilize by accumulating its elements in a planned deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control.* Tonight, as we move more deeply into Yom Kippur, let us rescue the words of President George HW Bush – words that he said as he accepted his path towards power – words that seem downright adorable and so precious thirty years later – let us be a kinder, gentler community. Let us listen well so we can hear God's voice proclaiming, "be comforted" – so we can get *kapparah* — and if we don't hear it, let us proclaim this comfort in God's stead. Let us gather power by together being a social force, each of us granting each other comfort. If we can't hear God say it, let us say it ourselves – Be Comforted!

Towards this end, I would like us to offer a meditation about power and comfort for us to consider – as we struggle past our own expectations of this time, and our own image of ourselves. To me, *Ana beKoach*, this mystical prayer regarding power speaks about love and the truth and reconciliation work that is open to us in this time of atonement, as we navigate our way. It is a perfect partner to the 13 Attributes of God as we go on our journey. We can take our instinct to punch someone and instead, channel it differently — possessed by both strength and boundaries — as expressed when praying God's name. Let us hold this prayer as we venture forth into Yom Kippur and as we pray the 13 Attributes over and over. Together, we can move from slavery to freedom – we can enact *teshuvah* – we can do *selicha* and *mechilah* and thus, hear the Divine voice from within our own murmuring deep – *kapparah* – Yom Kippur — Be Comforted. And as we receive this comfort, each of us in this journey, we can unravel our internal emotional and spiritual knots and find our place tonight, each of us as angels among angels.

Ana b'choach g'dulat yeh'mincha, tatir tz'rurah – if you would God, may your powerful hand undo the knots that tie us up. Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto l'Olam va'Ed – through time and space, Your glory shines, Majestic One.

May our power be respected, may our soul be comforted and may our bodies be refreshed, as Yom Kippur begins.

Yasher Ko'ach! Ketivah va'Hatimah Tovah — G'mar Hatimah Tovah.