

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Temple Reyim

Kol Nidrei

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Spiritual Surrender

L'shanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.

Happy New Year, and may this Yom Kippur be meaningful and strengthening.

During these High Holy days, my first as Rabbi at Temple Reyim, I have focused my talks on two core questions: “why am I here?” And “why are you here?”

I am asking these questions at three different levels.

First: Who are the influential people in our lives who have shaped us, guided us, and given us a sense of identity? What experiences have we had that compel us to come together during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

During the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about my grandfather. We found his journal, entitled *ba'sipur shel bachayim sheli*, “my life’s story.” He survived great tragedy and loss, but in writing his autobiography, he told a story about his love for his wife, my grandmother Esther. He taught me to live in the world lovingly. He taught me to see the good in people, and to be forgiving.

I asked us as a community to find our own sources of strength and purpose so that we can judge each other favorably and generously; to try and let go of judgment and critique so that we be kinder, and more patient.

Second, in asking, “why are we here?” I mean “what do we come here for?” Why do we take the time out of our intensely demanding lives to pray and reflect and be together?

What does the community offer us? Which of our needs and desires are fulfilled by coming together? And what do we have to offer the community?

During the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke to you about what I called “radical acceptance.” We’re here to refocus, and reset our expectations so that we can begin to forgive ourselves for not

becoming the person we thought we would be – and to forgive others for not living up to what we want and need from them.

And third, in asking why we are here, I am asking an existential question: “what is the purpose of our lives? Why are we here, living, at all? In these short, sweet lives of ours, what are we meant to be doing?”

During Yom Kippur tonight and tomorrow, I will try to address this last question. I can only gently scratch the surface of this enormous question, but hopefully it will be an opening for us to reflect together in the years to come.

Tomorrow afternoon, before our Yizkor service, I will talk about finding meaning in our lives after suffering the loss of our loved ones.

Tonight, I want to talk to you about faith.

We don't talk much about faith. I think we're a bit embarrassed about it.

For the most part, we are rationalists. Mathematics and science are our resources for truth and for healing. The Judaism we have received has been greatly influenced by the *haskalah*, the Jewish European Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, with its critique of religious thought and focus on rationalist secular studies.

I love this about Judaism. We can live inside the tradition with intellectual integrity and freedom.

The merging of religious and rational thought helped Judaism renew its commitment to social justice work in the broader community; it transformed the concept of *tikkun olam* from a mystical notion to a moral and ethical imperative to repair and heal the brokenness in the world, and to live justly.

In the coming years at Temple Reyim we will grow our own response to this imperative.

I wonder, however: by emphasizing external action, are we, as modern Jewish community, missing the richness of an internal religious and spiritual life?

When I sit with friends, community members, or even other rabbis to reflect on our relationship with God, I find we mostly identify with Jacob, *Yaacov*. While lying awake at night, alone in his camp, waiting in fear for the arrival of his brother Esau whom he tricked out of his blessing and

birthright, *Yaacov* wrestles with God. He is then renamed *Yisrael*, meaning the one who struggles with God.

We're less likely to identify with the story of the *Akedah*, which we read during Rosh Hashanah: without any challenge or objection, Abraham obeys God's command to take his son Isaac to bind and sacrifice him.

We long for the Abraham who challenged God when told of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Don't go," we want to call out to him as he heads up the mountain with his son, his two servants, and wood for the burnt offering.

Thank God there's Jacob, *Yisrael*, wrestling with God, whom we can look up to.

We are God strugglers, thank God. We question and challenge and doubt.

But on this *Kol Nidrei*, as we begin a full day of prayer together in this sanctuary, I wonder, is there a place left for faith?

I want to share two stories to help us reflect on this question.

The first happened nearly 15 years ago.

Prior to starting rabbinical school, I spent several years as a trial attorney in Boston. I was fortunate to be at a law firm that fully supported public interest work and I cut my teeth on one of the more unnerving areas of trial law: political asylum.

Unnerving because there are two possible outcomes for one seeking asylum: stay and become a citizen, or leave. And for many, leaving meant returning to the place of persecution.

I represented a woman who fled her country of origin with her daughter after suffering years of relentless violence.

As we approached the date of the trial, I felt we had a strong case - but I also knew these cases are extremely difficult to prove, particularly because having to retell a story of persecution is so often re-traumatizing, causing applicants for asylum to forget details or get lost in sequencing, all of which becomes exposed in court.

The night before the trial, we sat together in my office, just talking. Sensing my concern for her, she looked into my eyes and said, “I’m going to be ok.”

Those words “I am going to be ok” always bring me into a kind of existential angst. We don’t know that we will be ok. “We don’t know anything,” I thought to myself.

I didn’t know how the judge would respond to her story. I couldn’t promise her we would win. “We’ll do our best,” I said “But asylum cases are very hard to prove. It may not be ok.”

“Dan,” she said, “I didn’t say it’s going to be ok. I said I’m going to be ok.’ I’ve come from a terrible place. I’ve been hurt and I prayed a lot. I know God is with me. I am not afraid. Really, what can happen to me?”

I thought to myself, “does she not know? Have I not gotten across what can happen to her?”

A year or so later, I came to synagogue to celebrate Sukkot with my family. We began to sing *Hallel*, a series of psalms that we add to our morning prayers on holidays and when celebrating the new month. They include some of our tradition’s most harrowing and yet most hopeful cries of prayer.

Towards the end of *Hallel*, I froze as I heard the words chanted: *Min ha’metzar karati Yab/ anani va’merchav Yab. Adonai li lo irab/ mah yaaseh li adam.*

“From a place of despair, I called out to God. God answered me with breadth, with expansiveness.”

“God is with me, I will not fear. What can a person do to me?”

I had an immediate flashback to the words of a woman with whom I spent three and a half years preparing for an asylum case we lost.

The second story is about a friend of Sarah’s and mine, who died tragically 3 years ago.

Sarah and I were attending an engagement party; we didn’t know our friend was going to be there. We hadn’t seen him in months, so we immediately began catching up on our lives. Knowing I had left my legal practice to attend rabbinical school, he started asking me questions about religion.

It's fairly challenging to talk about religion at a party with a swing band playing behind us, and distracted by sushi making its way around the room on platters – so we found a quieter place and talked for a while.

He was one of the smartest, kindest, more compassionate, and more curious people I knew. But from what I remembered, he had little patience for spiritual pursuit. So I asked him why he was so interested.

He danced around my question for a while but then said, “I have been feeling this total void in my life. Something is missing. I feel like I have this space that needs to be filled.” I stayed mostly quiet as he spoke.

“Is there anything in Judaism that might be helpful?” he asked.

“There are some amazing things,” I told him, starting to brainstorm my favorite ancient rabbinic texts and spiritual teachings.

“Send me what you have,” he said. “Anything that doesn't have to do with God.”

I appreciated both his desire to fill that empty, internal space – and his reluctance to turn to God.

I wondered, however, whether he might find meaning in prayer, meditation, Shabbat rest – something that could help him discover a feeling of wholeness and holiness and purpose.

Ultimately I suggested he travel up to the White Mountains, anywhere really, just to let go, live with a little wonder of our natural world. It was only a first small step but I hoped he'd stay open to the mystery that pulsates within the living structures of our earth.

Thinking again about my asylum client and my old friend these last few months helped me to clarify a question I want to ask our community this Yom Kippur:

Are there times we can let go? Can we step back from the struggle and ambivalence a bit and find the courage to trust? Might we even find a way to utter those words of the psalmist: *Adonai li / lo irab*.

God is with me, I will not fear.

Tomorrow afternoon we will be reciting a service called *Seder Ha'Avodah*. It is a story, really, that is included in our *Musaf* service. *Seder Ha'Avodah* refers to the ceremony of the High Priest in ancient Jerusalem during Yom Kippur. This was the one and only time during the year when the High Priest would enter the *kodesh kodashim*, the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum and most sacred and potent space in the Temple.

In the minds of the ancient rabbis composing our liturgy, evoking the service in the Temple on Yom Kippur had the power to recreate the experience of *yirab*, of true fear and reverence when Israel came closest to the Divine.

As the High Priest sought atonement for the people, he would call out God's name: *Yud Heb Vav Heb*, which we now pronounce as *Adonai*, its true sound either unsayable or lost to us over time.

"*Adonai*, we have transgressed, me and my household. I implore you, *Yud heb vav heb*, by your holy name, forgive the iniquities that we have committed against you."

Outside the holiest site, all the priests and the entire community filled the Temple courtyard, and when they heard the glorious and awe-inspiring name of God explicitly enunciated, they would bow and fall on their faces, uttering "*baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va'ed*." Praised is the name of the One whose glory will reign forever and ever." This is the phrase we say quietly after reciting the *shema*.

The High Priest would purposely prolong his utterance of God's Name, while the people called out in praise, and he would then bless them with three words: "you are cleansed." Through this act, the whole community atoned, and was forgiven.

This is an amazing story. When the people heard the High Priest call out the name of God, they threw themselves down on the ground. It was a moment of true *yirab*: fear, trembling, and awe.

Most of us have not had this experience of falling to the ground in response to God's Sacred Presence. When we have fallen, it's most often a response to shock, trauma, sudden terrible loss, or terror. As a chaplain at Mass General Hospital a few years ago, I spent a whole day on the floor of a family visiting room with a mother and a father after they lost their son. But these are the times we are pushed down by an unbearable force that takes our strength away.

The model of the *Avodah* service is different – the people fell low to the ground in complete awe of the greatness and potency of the Divine.

Our later rabbinic tradition didn't end up fully embracing this practice of lowering ourselves to the ground, and today typically only the leaders of a congregation bow completely down to the ground during the *Avodah* service. But that rabbinic decision was a terrible narrowing of the possibility for religious experience.

Physical ritual is different than story or prayer or song. It requires us to fully commit ourselves, to overcome our anxiety about how we appear, and our self-consciousness. Physical ritual, particularly ritual as disorienting and jarring as bowing to the ground, requires us, if even momentarily, to surrender.

This is a huge risk. We're not comfortable with it. We're not trained to drop low in surrender; just the opposite: in almost every context – at home, with our families, at work, in our communities, here in our spiritual congregation – we try to stand and look tall, even when that means disguising an inner sense of vulnerability.

But religious experience asks something different of us: not to stand tall but to bow low, to contract our power and ego. If we can do that, we can more easily experience the greatness of God's sacred presence.

It feels terribly paradoxical, having the courage to diminish our selves, get low to the ground. But this paradox is at the heart of Jewish faith.

The special psalm we say for High Holidays offers us insight into this tension as well: "When I behold your heavens, God, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, what is a person that you have been mindful of him at all, that You have taken note of him."

The psalmist says: look around, see greatness, sense mystery, and experience the staggering truth that you're alive at all.

During this Yom Kippur, there will be occasions to bow. You might try the physical experience of surrender. Even if you bow only slightly: bow meaningfully, not in a rote physical gesture. Meditate on the feelings of awe and humility. The physicality of the ritual may be an opening towards a more lasting sense of awe and humility, leading us in turn, to accept our lives as they are, our world as it is, helping us to endure whatever lies ahead with faith.

My teacher Rabbi Art Green, the founder and rector of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College where I studied, shared with me his own sense of the act of surrender. To make room for faith, he said, we must overcome our own willfulness and egotism. If we can do that, then the discovery of God's presence can be a cause for exaltation and joy.

But even as he personally embraces the depths of religious devotion, he warned that joy can be lost in excessive surrender, leading to self-deprecation or a loss of self-worth. And it can become terribly confused with extreme concern for rigid details of religious performance or pleasing the sources of religious authority.¹

There is much to be careful of. Remember, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, that inner sanctum of the Temple, just once a year. More than that would have been dangerous to his soul.

But the act of letting go plays such a vital role in the spiritual path. When approached with care and rooted in the wisdom of our tradition, and with support of family and community, it can fill a very serious human need.

So when are the moments that we can let go? When do we need faith in our lives?

It might be when we realize, as my asylum client did, that as much as we prepare, and as strong as try to be, there is so much out of our control: our lives and our deaths.

Or when we feel an emptiness that we can't understand, as Sarah's and my friend did. He never found a way to heal.

Or when we experience something phenomenal, as the community of Israel did upon hearing the *koben gadol* utter the name of God.

I imagine for many of us, though, the moments we are open to faith in our lives are different, more subtle:

When we leave the homes we grew up in and we're totally unprepared.

¹ Arthur Green, Seek My Face, p. 127

The second we step outside the hospital walls with our newborn baby staring at us as if we somehow know what to do.

When we head off in different directions to work in the morning, unsure whether our marriage is strong enough to last.

When we witness the grace and beauty of nature – or its destructive force.

When our last parent dies, and, even as we have our spouse and children and grandchildren around us, we realize we're alone for the first time.

When we reflect on questions of faith, we often feel that existential angst I experienced with my asylum client: We don't know that we will be ok. We don't know anything. We don't have any insight into what this coming year will bring, who sitting among us today will live and who will die, whether our lives will turn out the way we want, whether we will be safe and healthy.

But isn't this precisely the point? We'll continue to hope and pray for all good things for us, our families, our community, our country, our world, for what we want and what we need. We will be advocates for justice and social change, for better living conditions and a healthier environment.

But the faith we renew these High Holidays is faith that we can truly let go.

This is the essence of *Kol Nidrei*.

Kol Nidrei is an ancient formula of release; we declare annulment again and again: *shvikin, shvitiin, biteilin, la sha'ri'rin v'la ka'ya'min.*

So what are we letting go of? – and for what are we making space?

May we let go of:

kol nidrei

our need for everything to work out – so we can endure the uncertainty ahead

ve'eh'sa'ray

of self-consciousness, so we can feel real

va'cha'rah'meh

of time – so we can experience awe and wonder

v'ko'na'meh

of expectations – so we and our loved ones can thrive

v'chi'nu'yay

of our insistence that we are correct, so we can seek forgiveness and find reconciliation and healing

v'ki'nu'say

of having to stand tall and appear strong – so we may be honest and true

u'shvuot

All pledges and promises we have made to ourselves and to God from this Yom Kippur to the next,
may we let them go...

so that we can renew our focus and faith in the coming year.

May the essential truth of our lives shine, and

And may we all be sealed for a year of health, happiness and joy. *Gamar chatimah tovah.*