

Yom Kippur  
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*Jews believe that to be human means to possess the means to change. Yet often it seems that we don't truly believe that when it comes to the "Jewish" part of our lives. This talk pushes back against that somewhat passive fatalism, suggesting that it is not only possible but important that we take our Jewish lives in our hands, because the Jewish people depend on the social capital of us all. What would it mean for each of us to set Jewish growth goals for ourselves, each and every year? That's what it means to be a citizen of the Jewish people, taking responsibility for the community as well as for oneself, perpetually trying to strengthen ourselves, one another, and our community.*

"Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

So declared Steve Jobs at a commencement address at Stanford in 2005.

We're all talking about Jobs' passing because he became part of our lives through the machines he imagined and created that now organize virtually every aspect of our lives: how we socialize, recreate, work all to the tune of his art and technology. In his own way he echoed the point of *Unetaneh Tokef*: we control only how we live, what we create, not how and when we die.

But I want to talk about—critique actually—his notion of our nakedness, because even though it is true in some obvious sense, it is also deeply untrue in a more subtle sense.

We are all the same in our uniqueness, universal in our particularity. We all come from somewhere, a specific, particular place. That is our gift, and our burden. What is that place? Our family, our name, our people, and the communities, languages, cultures, traditions, and nations that ground that “somewhere.” The global information age complicates our particularity. The machines by which we converse, study, work, connect, often take the place of physical connections: bars or bowling leagues, family mealtimes, families Sunday nights watching the Ed Sullivan show together, the World Series, Presidential debates or election night, or all the other moments large and small that in previous generations we experienced **together** around the family radio, or television, at the dinner table or in the living room. We experience those events now more often on our I-devices, at our desks or on our beds, with ear buds in place, in our own little world.

Heaven forbid that I should speak ill of the dead. But I would dispute the notion of our nakedness. We live and often want to be alone, we want to be radically free to determine our lives, yet we also want to be connected, we somehow have a sense that the good life, the meaningful life, involves others and some vague sense that community is a part of that meaningful life. We want to be part of something bigger than us. So how do we do that? That’s what I want to talk with you about: how can we think about *teshuvah* as a return to our larger selves, the notion of how

we as individuals might live inside of our larger family, the Jewish people, and its culture and religion.

Here I cut across the grain of a me-oriented sense of *teshuvah* as therapy, a self in search of a better self, by oneself. We all feel that and express that, but Yom Kippur makes a different claim. We sin as individuals, we pray as a community. We confess as a people. We atone as a people. Yom Kippur—like Rosh Hashanah in this sense—underneath the strictures of self-denial, also has a joyful quality, because we pray expecting that God, who created us, loves us, loves the Jewish people, and will meet us half way if we walk toward Him halfway.

The Mishna (*Ta'anit* 4.8) quotes Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, who taught that Yom Kippur was one of the most festive days of the year. He explained that on Yom Kippur the maidens of Jerusalem would go dancing in the vineyards, seeking to attract a young man for marriage. He interprets a verse from the Song of Songs (3:11) as calling the women out to dance because Yom Kippur is the “wedding anniversary” of God and the Jewish people, referring to the tradition that on Yom Kippur the second set of tablets were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Years later, after the custom of dancing in the vineyards was lost, the rabbis of the Talmud explained that Yom Kippur is so joyous because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon. (B. Talmud *Ta'anit* 30b)

We see this theme articulated anew in modern times. When Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik first came from Poland to Germany in 1926, he was

shocked when he heard the joyful tunes that were sung there as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy. He then realized that it was quite appropriate because “there is also great joy on the day that our sins are forgiven.” Soloveitchik noted that the community recites the Al Chet prayer “with a sense of confidence and even rejoicing.”

What would it mean for us to think that our individual history and destiny is tied to the history and destiny of the Jewish people? Because that’s what the entire notion of repentance requires: personal change depends on the frames inside which one lives.

So it is with community and culture. If you want to reap its benefits, you must take it seriously, accept its demands. Struggle with it? Yes, absolutely. Rebel? Yes, at times. But those moves presuppose an ongoing, deep engagement with it. One must know a thing, and live in it, if one wants to feel “that thing is mine” and “I am that thing.”

When my family moved to Israel in 2007 we rented an apartment, actually from another rabbi. As I put my things away in the night table by my bedside, I found precious treasure indeed: a 1955 original Sandy Koufax Brooklyn Dodgers baseball card, in mint condition. Since it’s Yom Kippur I don’t mind confessing to you that I doubted for a moment—a long moment—whether I would tell my colleague what he’d forgotten. But I also realized something else, these are our heroes: our athletes, our entertainers, etc. And that’s not good enough, not representative of a culture that’s enjoyed sustained excellence for two and one half millennia.

What would it mean for each of us to place our dreams, our talents, at the disposal of the Jewish people? Remember the mishnah: the world stands on three things: Torah, *avodah*, *gemilut hasadim*. What do you value? What do you want to be really good at? Using your brain to learn, to study, and to teach? Try studying something about Judaism you've always wanted to know. Hebrew language, a classical text, Jewish history. Or you've always been a spiritual person but been afraid to try out Jewish prayer: what it means, how to perform it, how to express your soul's longings through it. We have amazing resources here and I'm happy to volunteer Rabbi Kipley-Ogman to work closely with you, by doing things like coming to minyan and seeing how beautiful, how nurturing, small intimate prayer communities can feel. Or acts of loving-kindness. Jews drive themselves and each other crazy, but we do a lot of **mitzvot** in the world. Hang out with Ruth Messinger and AJWS, work in the homeless shelter, there are so many things that the Jewish community does in the world, for the world, that can make you feel that yours is a life of mitzvah, of holiness, that by serving others you're serving God.

These notions comprise what I'd call good Jewish citizenship. We belong to a religion and to a people; what do those memberships demand of us? To Judaism I think the list above nicely covers the waterfront: it enables us to contribute to *torah* and *mitzvot* and to be nourished by these in turn.

Peoplehood in some ways is harder and easier to express. As

Americans we think like Protestants: we're a religious community, not a separate people, we might say. We are what we confess to, what we believe, that's private and our personal business. We live in a secular republic, not in a Jewish corporate community, much less state. But Jews are a people; they are a nation even if for much of our history we lived in the states of others. We live blessed by the historical fact of the modern state of Israel, a homeland to us all even if we choose to live elsewhere.

Some of us are Zionists. We believe in the right of Jews to govern themselves. We believe in the autonomy of Jewish culture and seek a space where Jews can live and die speaking and reading and writing and creating in a Jewish language, whether they create books of Torah, or argue (unceasingly) in a Jewish parliament, or win Nobel Prizes in chemistry. Some of us wish we lived there and actively lament our circumstances. Some of us don't care to live there. But six million Jews live there, and we need to feel connected to them and their welfare regardless of our politics.

I'm talking about the unity of Jews and Judaism, peoplehood and religion. We all have our own equation for assigning meaning to the elements, but these are the radicals in the equation that we make of our lives. The prophet Jonah believed that justice demanded strict construction and punishment of the Ninevites; he failed to see that communities, like people, could change. But that depends on all the individuals in that group.

Being Jewish is a gift. We receive it. It's fragile; we need to tend it, contribute to it. But make no mistake; unity should not be confused with uniformity. We are conservative and liberal, Likud and Labor, Israel and Diaspora, Orthodox and Reform, the blessings of freedom enable us to figure out how we want to explore and express various ways of being Jewish in the fullest sense, religiously, culturally, nationally.

What we all should agree on is that as citizens of the Jewish people we owe it our allegiance, that notions like torah and *mitzvah*, serving God by doing good, are imperatives that fall on all of us. Judaism, like all traditions, has earned the right to be judged by its own standards of excellence, not by anyone else's. We need to know enough of its ideas and behaviors that we can play in the game, rather than feeling like we're spectators. We need to have heroes drawn from its history, figures like the forefathers and foremothers, whom we will invite into our *sukkahto* to be our guests, along with Koufax and Streisand.

The single most important idea behind the entire notion of *teshuvah* is that you can change things. Your life is not predetermined. And that is true for each of us when it comes to our sense of Jewish vocation, of what our Jewish calling might be. How do you want to grow as a Jew? How do you want a Jewish organization you care about to improve? You can make that happen. Do you want your rabbis to improve? Push them. But don't forget to push yourself to be better too. Personally, I want to go to shul more often: I can change that. I want to study Talmud more

regularly: I can do that. It's in my hands.

When we try to change our Jewish selves, I think we'll discover that both Jewishness and we will change for the better. Jewishness will change us, giving us community, a sense of cultural and spiritual depth, a pride about our history and a sense of mission about our future. And we will change Jewishness. Every team is bigger than its players yet they determine its record. Tradition shapes us and we create as much as receive it.

Steve Jobs dreamed of a world that excellent technology could create and enhance via unprecedented levels of connectivity. But the Jews beat him to it, about fifteen hundred years ago. Already by the high middle ages, while most people lived only in their tiny little villages and hamlets, usually illiterate, with very little in the way of change, Jews travelled, traded, read, lived in a real yet virtual space called the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition, one that connected a Jew living in North Africa with a Jew in Baghdad with a Jew in Italy with a Jew living in the Rhine Valley. Before the I-Phone we lived as the I-Thou people, with multiple interconnections. Jewishness existed in time—connecting Jews to their past and to their future—and in space, the kingdom of a covenantal people, with its own beliefs and practices.

The Torah assumes a basic metaphysical reality—sin pollutes. When the Children of Israel sinned they impurified the Temple. When we sin we pollute our environment, not just ourselves. Our sins that involve

others adversely affect those relationships. If we fail to honor Jewish institutions like Shabbat or holidays, we diminish the sanctity that these times hold for us. *Teshuvah* requires that we cleanse the reality in which we live, for its sake and for ours; self-improvement cannot occur in a vacuum.

*Teshuvah* focused only on the self minimizes what needs to be done to set things right. Communities remain responsible to citizens; citizens need to assess their conduct as it affects the lives of others. All of Israel needs to be concerned that some see fit to destroy mosques. All of Israel needs to be concerned with the sanctity of Jewish lives and the security of the Jewish state, even as we may disagree with governmental policies. *Teshuva* presumes that our relationships matter on every level, in our homes, in our community, in our people and in the Jewish state, in the world. Citizenship carries obligations as well as rights.

I conclude with a teaching of the *Sefat Emet*. The Gerer Rebbe taught that Yom Kippur unites all Jews, since atonement for wrongs done to another requires a re-knitting of all relationships, whereby Israel becomes one, all souls united. Sin's deepest wound is the division that it creates, flouting the most basic rule in the Torah, "You shall love your neighbor as Yourself (Leviticus 19.18). Yom Kippur reunites us; that explains why on this day we received the second set of tablets, and we became one again. Torah, the text concludes, "depends upon this oneness, as Scripture says: "An inheritance of the *community of Jacob*"

(Deuteronomy 33.4). This is the meaning of “the most basic rule of Torah.”

We need to love each other. Without unity Torah cannot exist. In effect we create as well as receive Torah by our commitment to our heritage, to our values and traditions, to our people and its mission in the world. Without this unity no revelation of God’s teachings can come to us. It falls to all of us, to our leaders and to all of Israel, to perform *teshuvah* as and for the Jewish people and for Judaism. What will I do this year to be a better Jew? We may die naked, but we live with and for others; for those who came before us and whose name and tradition we carry, and for those who will come after us. Torah belongs to all of us; it is our inheritance and our obligation.

*Gmar hatimah tovah*