

Kol Nidre - 5776 -- Loss and Redemption

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A Hasidic story: Nine generations ago, the Baal Shem Tov would go to a special place on the evening before Yom Kippur, he would light a fire in a special way, say a special prayer, and as a result the entire world would be blessed.

In the next generation, his successors knew the location of the special place and they knew how to light the fire but they forgot the prayers. So instead, they would pray, "Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here with the fire, we should achieve."

The next generation knew the location but they forgot the rest. So they just stood in the location and said, "Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here, we should achieve."

Today, we have forgotten even the location. So what do we do? We tell the story...

I've never been a devotee of Hasidism, but I love this story. I love it because I think it is our story. It describes us and our Jewish condition. For some of us, either our great-grandparents or grandparents lived in a Jewish

world. Being Jewish wasn't a part of their existence it was their existence. As the father of modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch wrote in the 19th Century, "Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life."¹ Jews were Jews. Their lives revolved around the Jewish calendar. They frequently, but not always, spoke a Jewish language and they lived in primarily Jewish communities. They didn't necessarily live insulated from their non-Jewish neighbors, but their world was Jewish. They may not have been learned, but they were comfortable in the synagogue. They knew the special place, they knew how to light the fire, and they knew the prayer.

Their children, understood the Jewish lives their parents lived, many, but fewer of them, spoke a Jewish language. Many, but fewer, had a Jewish education. But they also had opportunities, whether in America or Europe, to be part of majority society. Opportunities their parents never had and they took them. Maybe they kept kosher out of respect for their parents, maybe they didn't. But their Jewish lives were a nod to the past, a part of their identity but they were looking forward. They still knew the place, and they could light the fire, but they forgot the blessing.

¹ Samson Raphael Hirsch, "Religion Allied to Progress" from *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed by Paul Mendes Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, P. 201

The next generation wanted to assimilate, to become American. Being Jewish was a part of who they were, for some more, for others less. They still knew the place, but they couldn't light the fire.

And what can you say about our generation? Well, we know the story... maybe. And maybe that story is Kol Nidre.

I say this because Kol Nidre has a power over us that is hard to understand. It draws us to synagogue in a way that no other service and no other prayer does. No matter how thin and fragile our connection to our Jewish lives we come back to the synagogue on Kol Nidre. Rabbi Alan Lew (z"l) wrote, "back in 1970... I was about as distant from Judaism as it was possible to be. How distant? It was the evening of Kol Nidre, the advent of Yom Kippur, and I had no idea that it was. But the TV was on in the living room of my house in Gualala, California, and I just happened to be walking through the room when a news broadcast caught my attention. They were doing a feature about Yom Kippur. Someone was playing Kol Nidre on a cello. It went through me like a knife. That melody struck a deep chord. It was all the way in. It went straight to my soul."²

There is something about that melody, so sad, so slow, the way it starts so softly and rises so strongly at the end, the antiquity of it all, that attracts, that pulls us, that draws us in. No matter how far we have drifted from Jewish practice. Whether we are believers or not. We need to hear that

² Rabbi Alan Lew, "This Is Real And Your Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Personal Transformation," Little Brown & Co, NY, NY, P. 178

melody... even more than we need to hear the prayer. The melody is the story. Even if we don't remember how to say the prayer, or light the fire, or find the place... we need to hear Kol Nidre.

As we settle back into other Yom Kippur, soothed and haunted by the beauty of Kol Nidre, before we get too complacent... which is even possible on Yom Kippur. I want to ask this: what is the point of this hassidic story that tells us that all we can do is tell a story about the spiritual life of our ancestors? Is it a story of the power of connection that tells us no matter how far we have drifted we can still reconnect? Or is it a story of loss, that tells us so much of the power of the Jewish spiritual experience has been lost to our generation? Or maybe it is a story about both connection and loss. That despite all we have forgotten Judaism still holds great power, even for us, to influence our lives.

But, at minimum, I think this story begs a question. Why are we here tonight? What is the purpose of all this? I don't ask this in accusatory way, or as a condemnation. I ask it sincerely to you and to me, so that we don't spiritually sleepwalk through this day as we do so many others during the year. This should be a day of spiritual attention and focus. So, why are we here? Why do we do this ritual, in the fall, at the beginning of the new year? Is there a transcendent purpose to all this? I want to pause here for a moment and let those questions sink in. I would ask you to think about them for a moment and see if you can begin to come up with your own answer. Not my answer, not an official answer. But your own.

In the Torah we read that when God spoke at Sinai, in Exodus 20:15, “All the people saw the voices” Commenting on this verse, The Sfat Emet - the great 19th Century Hasidic master - said, each person’s divine soul was awakened within themselves. In other words every Jew’s experience at Sinai was unique and true for them... even within the collective experience. So take a moment now and pause to answer the question, or begin to answer it.

I ask you this because I think it is critical to know whether we are just telling a story, just going through the motions, or that we are still connected to the source. There is another challenge with this story. We are not our great-grandparents. We do not live in their world. Nor do we want to live in their world. We are different. We are fully engaged with life in the United States, professionally, socially, politically, technologically, for all the benefits and all the drawbacks that such a life entails. Our society is great at meeting our material needs. Great that is if you have enough money. If you don’t... well, that’s another story altogether.

But what about our spiritual needs? By this I mean our desire for meaning, for mystery, or awe, for transcendence in our lives. Our society is not able to meet those needs. That is why we have so many people who over eat, or drink too much, or use drugs, or work too much, to fill that need that cannot be met in a material society.

How important is that to you, that need for transcendence or awe? If there is one thing I have learned being a rabbi is that Jews (affiliated or not) want rabbis at birth (for brit milah or baby naming) at bar mitzvah, for weddings, when they are sick and at the time of death. This is no surprise. These are the peak moments in our lives: birth, marriage, children, death. These are the moments when the veil is stripped away and we know - not in our minds, but in our souls and our hearts - that heaven and earth come almost close enough to touch. In those moments we feel the spiritual, we don't just want it, we experience it. Even if they never participate in Jewish life, people want a rabbi in those moments.

Tonight is one of those moments. Kol Nidre has been sung. According to our tradition the Gates of Repentance have swung open for the year. Heaven and Earth have moved closer together. Yes, these are ancient metaphors. Yes they challenge our rational minds. Yes they are clunky. That is the point. We are both rational and spiritual. We can solve problems through logic and yet there are moments when the soul yearns for something greater. This is the fundamental dissonance of being human, of being mortal, of being flesh and blood.

We are, all of us, fully engaged in the secular world. That is why I ask, how engaged do you want to be in your Jewish life? Is this Jewish life we are living sufficient to address our spiritual needs? Do you ever want to do more than just tell the story? Do you ever long to know more? To know the blessing? Or how to build the fire? Or to discover the secret place? Do we

really just want to tell the story, but never experience the experience? Do you ever long for a deeper, more profound connection to the source of meaning, to God, to the Jewish way of approaching God? Or, if that word God, makes you stop listening, then do you want to explore what makes life transcendent, that fills you with awe, that makes you look at the sunset like a child filled with wonder? Do you even long to be more strongly connected, to the Jewish people, to Jewish tradition? I don't mean to be more observant; I mean to be more committed. If you do, then the next question is what will you do to make the desire become real? What would that look like? How might it change the way you live and what you do?

Rabbi Lew's story is a story of return. The part I read is from the start of his story, the point of not knowing. It was not his fault. It is not many our faults either. We grew up in a time when spiritual practice in general was undervalued and when Jewish practice and knowledge were seen as artifacts of an earlier time, with little value. Most of us were never given much of a Jewish education. Most of us grew up in homes where Jewish life was not an organic part of how we lived. We don't have to feel bad about that. But, it's not an excuse either. If something is important, you act, you change.

To be completely transparent, I believe in this Jewish way of being in the world, or being religious in the world. I have committed my life to it. My upbringing was not much different than any of yours. But at some point I fell in love with Judaism. I came to believe that living a committed Jewish life

would make my life better and make the world better. And tonight, these High Holy Days is my shot. So like rabbis all over the world I am looking for the button, the key, with the belief that if these High Holy Day services speak to you in some particular way a spark will be lit and you too will become intoxicated with Jewishness.

So tonight. As the echo of Kol Nidre slowly fades. As we walk through the familiar and strange rituals together, as we experience a moment of mystery and transcendence, can you believe that only a thin gossamer veil, thinner than a single human breath, separates heaven from earth, the spiritual from the physical? And if something here speaks to you, if it moves you, ask yourself what you can do tomorrow and each day after to reclaim what is yours, to return to the secret place and to do something more than just tell the story. Because tonight and tomorrow we are forgiven, all debts are annulled and we begin again.