

# Yom Kippur Morning -- Answer the Call

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Our Torah service begins with these words, אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם, לְפָנַי יְהוָה, “You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God.” A few verses later, לְמַעַן הִקִּים-אֶתְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא לְעַם, וְהוּא יְהִי-לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים, “to establish you as God’s people and to be your God.” Finally this, “And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us this day in the presence of Adonai our God, and with each one who is not here among us this day.”

Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell wrote, “The opening has the urgency of an invitation that’s almost impossible to refuse.” She goes on to write, “Thirty years ago, Rabbi Chaim Stern, z”l, and the Liturgy Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis decided that this challenge to the community should not be read solely on Shabbat Nitzavim. These editors of *The Gates of Repentance*, the High Holiday prayerbook used in Reform congregations, introduced this portion as the Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning.”<sup>1</sup> This is why we read this selection from Deuteronomy, rather than the traditional story of the scapegoat ritual from Leviticus 16.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, Ravblog: Reform Rabbis Speak:  
<http://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2013/09/reading-nitzavim-on-yom-kippur/>

This Torah portion was chosen intentionally for our *mahzor*, because it is the call by God to the Jewish people to join with God in a sacred mission. Not just at Sinai and not just for the Jews present at that moment, but equally imminent right now, to us and, if we take these words seriously, at every second, always and for all time. Rabbi Elwell described the opening lines as “an invitation that’s *almost* impossible to refuse.” I think the key word is the qualifier, almost. If we take these words seriously, when Allan reads them, we should feel we are standing in God’s presence and God is calling us to relationship, to sacred service, to a holy task. These words could fill us with awe, with *pahad*, with holy fear. But I don’t think they do. I don’t think we - any of us - feel truly called. Or to put it this way, if we took the words of the Torah portion we are about to read seriously, would we act any differently than we do now?

I feel a certain desperation this year. I can’t explain why. Feelings, after all, are not rational. But I feel desperation, anxiety, *pahad* and that is real enough for me. Last night I talked about our engagement in Jewish life and I asked all of us, myself included, how seriously we take our task? I think the question is this, do the Jews really care? Does any of this really matter? Is it a play, or is it real life? And not just life on the physical level, but on the cosmic level as well.

So let me speak a little about what is at stake. I want to begin by talking about something I have done for the past few years and have really come to love. On the afternoon of the second day of Rosh Hashanah I go to the

El Cerrito Royale senior residence where Clara Rae Genser lives and give a presentation about the High Holy Days. I give a talk about their purpose. I show the *mahzor*. I blow shofar and I always bring apples, challah and honey to share. It's a great gig for me. First of all, I have a captive audience. I'm the best show in town for that afternoon. But more importantly some amazing things happen. First of all, you have to understand that of the twenty people who attend, only two are Jewish: Clara Rae and Francis. Everyone else is Christian or something. As I explain the scriptural basis of the High Holy Days I ask, "How many of you know your Bible?" and at least two-thirds of the group do. When I explain the holidays and cite the verses from the Torah on which they are based, I see lots of knowing, nodding heads. These people really do know their bible and it gives us a common language. Then, when I begin to talk about human imperfection, and failure, and the need to keep trying, and how Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur represent a religious ritual that enables us to keep trying to grow and change no matter how old we are, I see smiles of recognition and I think that this religion of ours, this ancient, strange, spiritual practice really does speak to the human condition, it really does contain profound insight into the human soul. Even for people who know their time left is short. I think to myself, there is truth here.

We all know religion has been profoundly debased over the last, I don't know, 2,000 years. Certainly, in our lifetimes we have seen it degraded by charlatans and hucksters who use it to hustle money from the gullible and the unwitting. We have seen and are seeing it being used to justify

wholesale murder, enslavement, rape, and human degradation... all in the name of one God or another. No religion is exempt from its murderous extremists, certainly not Judaism. And yet, before you think I am making a case for rejecting religion altogether, remember that most soup kitchens in the world and most of the work done to help the poor, the sick, and the forgotten are done by religious people... of every faith. Because if no religion is exempt from extremists, every religion has people of deep faith and commitment who dedicate their lives to making other people's lives better, because they feel called by God (remember our Torah portion) to do so.

Also, just to lay one canard to rest once and for all - more murder has been committed in the world by two belief systems that explicitly reject God than all the religious killings of all history combined, that is Nazism and Communism. Between them we can probably figure at least 80 million people were murdered. So if human experience teaches us anything it is that human beings like to kill and will find a way to kill, whether in the name of God, or the Aryan race, or the proletarian utopia. But, the difference when you set up man, or the state, or an economic system as God, then the angel of death is let loose on mankind in the most horrible ways imaginable. So I would ask you to suspend your cynicism for a moment and open your hearts to these questions. Is there a God? Is there a way to be in relationship with that God? What would it mean to be in relationship? This is the challenge of this morning's Torah portion. Can we be in relationship with God? Do we want to be in relationship with God?

If God exists, God is not easily comprehensible to us. Nor is God easy to get along with. This world and this human existence has sickness, suffering and death built into it. So we see human suffering and we ask ourselves is this what God intended? Which is a legitimate question. Or we say, if there is suffering surely there can't be a God. But what is that conclusion based on? Our own vision of how the world should work? That seems to me to be the height of arrogance, that God should confirm to our vision of what God should be. After all, what do we know? And yet... despite the things that make us question God we also sense something more. Believer or not, we seek something more: in relationships, in love, in connection to others, in community, in service. We sense in our lives more than just physical existence. We sense an echo of eternity, an intimation of mystery

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a man, you have to be more than a man; that in order to be a people, we have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a 'holy people.' This is the essence of its dignity and the essence of its merit. Judaism is a link to eternity, kinship with ultimate reality."<sup>2</sup> This is what our Torah portion is saying this morning. We are called, all of us as Jews, into a relationship with eternity, with God, the source of all meaning, of all existence. On this Day of Atonement we are reminded of our relationship with Eternity. There is more at stake today than our physical comfort.

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "To Be a Jew: What is it?" from *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux (NY, NY: 1996) P. 7

If this is true, then we are not here just for ourselves, or our own psycho/spiritual process of atonement. We are not even here just with ourselves in this room. We are here with every Jew that has ever come before us and also present in this room is every Jew who will come after us. We are inheritors of Israel's collective mission and history from generations past and transmitters of that collective calling and destiny to the generations that come after. Our personal experience is important, but not exclusively so.

Last week I chanted the Rosh Hashanah evening kiddush, using the holiday *nusach*, the holiday melody, and Sam Genirberg said, "That sounds just like the way we did it in Dubnow." Of course, it is. That melody, that chant, like these prayers and rituals takes us across space and time and links us to generations that have come before and hopefully to generations in the future. We are a moment in time, a blink of an eye, in the history of the collective that is called Israel or the Jewish people.

I share this with you today, to invite you to open your eyes and listen to this Torah portion with new ears, and to hear the call that was given to us 3,500 years ago and is being given to us right now. We can answer it, as we read in verse 11, "For this mitzvah which I command you this day is neither beyond you nor far away... No this is very near to you -- in your mouth and in your heart -- that you can surely do it." We have within us the capacity to answer the call. It means leaving here today with a new openness to our Jewish lives.

In Pirkei Avot it says, “The world is sustained by three things: Torah (Study), Avodah (Prayer) and Gemilut Chasadim (Acts of Loving Kindness.)” Torah is the study of Jewish tradition and text. Prayer is cultivating, within us, a language of spiritual sensitive and seeking a sacred connection. Acts of loving kindness is going out into the world and trying to ease the suffering of others. This is and has been the Jewish calling. Then and now, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, it does not matter. This is our collective calling.

Here is a potential new year's resolution. If you already are called to do one of the these three, whether it's prayer or study, or social justice work keep it up, and... commit to doing another one this year. Slowly exercise a new Jewish muscle. Make being Jewish an action statement, rather than a noun. If you want to become more informed, commit yourself to Jewish study. If you already study regularly, then commit yourself to a year of Jewish prayer or community service. If you pray... you get the idea. Try a new Jewish behavior for one year... consistently. Practice it like when you are learning a musical instrument or a foreign language and see what kind of an impact it has on your life.

I began on Rosh Hashanah talking about reconciliation, renewal and repairing relationships. Today I conclude with the sacred call to be Jewish. To be in relationship with Eternity, as Heschel put it. To me they are connected, I feel that one of the relationships we need to attend to most

closely is our relationship to Jewish tradition and the Jewish future. I suppose I am desperate because I believe this task is essential. Not for our children, not for future generations, but for the world itself. Heschel, wrote, “We are the most challenged people under the sun. Our existence is either superfluous or indispensable to the world; it is either tragic or holy to be a Jew.”<sup>3</sup> We know the tragedy. Can we aspire to the holy? Can we answer the call? Can we reconcile this most profound and eternal of relationships? Can we leave this synagogue today intoxicated with the idea of being Jewish and inspired to continue our sacred task? The world needs the Jews. We are all standing at this moment, and at every moment, in the presence of the Divine.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 4