

We are a remarkable and strange people. No other people I know sit for an entire day in a religious setting, fasting, and reading through an entire volume of liturgy. We are expected to pray to a God, in Whose capacity to respond we have much doubt. The liturgy of this day repeatedly uses words like sin, repentance, atonement, the full meanings of which eludes us. What can any of these words mean to us to whom the notion of repentance maybe as far fetched as Rev. Moon's assertion that he is the Messiah?

What are we doing here? Most of our grandparents came to Shul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in faith. When they beat their chests and said, "Al chayt – for the sins..." begging forgiveness for sins, seeking atonement, their prayers were directed to a God, who they believed existed, heard their prayers, knew their actions, and responded to their needs. They could admit their guilt, seek atonement, and leave the synagogue feeling relieved, cleansed, and refreshed. Atonement worked for them!

On the other hand, we, their grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, come not in faith but in search. We search to become whole again. Searching is the characteristic of our age. We look for some way, some technique, some "gimmick" to restore us to ourselves. We try everything: TM, EST, Ecstasy – either naturally or chemically induced, evangelism, even witchcraft. We have embraced Moon, gurus, total sexual freedom. Name it; somewhere in American we have a cult and a publication for it! We have never been more frantically in search because we have never been so terrifyingly unsure of who we are and

where we are going. Jews are so desperate, that Jews are even willing to try Judaism – at least for a day.

Our attitude seems to be: “Let’s give it a shot. Let’s see what it can do for us.” “Maybe we can walk out of here feeling a little better.” And so, instead of Yom Kippur challenging people, people challenge Yom Kippur. “Go ahead, show me. I dare you!” Can Yom Kippur respond to the challenge? I believe so.

First, however, a definition of terms. “What is sin?” Yom Kippur responds: Sin is neither a permanent condition of humanity nor a fatal disease. Yom Kippur teaches: Humanity can extricate itself from sin. The word for sin in Hebrew is “Chayt.” It comes from the word “Chatah.” It means “to miss,” as in missing the bull’s eye. To sin, Jewishly, is to miss the bull’s eye which is life itself. Sin is an action which detracts from or negates life. To sin is normal, human, and above all correctable.

In the Jewish process, immediately after recognizing our sin, we move to repentance – “Teshuvah.” “Teshuvah” comes from the Hebrew word, “Shuv” – return. A person who repents is one who returns to the right way, who returns to life.

A crucial Jewish axiom is this: We are free and independent to shape our lives. The rabbis put these thoughts very simply: “Everything is in the hands of God except the fear of God.” The word, fear, is to be understood here as meaning “awe,” or respect.

When we commit a sin, it is our will, not God’s will. Our turning from sin is equally depended on our will, not God’s will. A Baal Teshuvah, the repentant sinner, is one who is not enmeshed in obsessive guilt, but is moved from guilt to

turning toward self-cleansing. Return is not a passive submission to our guilt but an active release from it. A step beyond guilt to self-purification.

There is nothing mournful about Yom Kippur's process of recognizing sin and turning to repentance. Yom Kippur, while a day of fasting and decision making, is not a day of sadness. It is a day of seriousness and self-examination, but it is also a day filled with expectations and a mood of joy.

The mood of Yom Kippur to coin a child's cliché is: "I know I can, I know I can – if only I want to." We rejoice in the possibility and hopefulness of this day. Nothing like it exists. Yom Kippur leads the individual to the road of life reclaimed and challenges him to go forward! Yom Kippur does not browbeat the individual. It does not deride or blame, denounce or disparage. "Be better," Yom Kippur says to us: "You know you can."

Yom Kippur, in this way, exposes us to an untamed frontier: the self and its disciplines. Science and technology can solve only some human dilemmas, but they do not respond to the realm of the self. In this secret empire, only canons of morality can rule imperially. Given our contemporary world of total personal freedom, we cannot survive without self-discipline. When we are completely self-indulgent, totally undisciplined, the result is spiritual anarchy and moral chaos.

How does one form a moral identity? What makes someone a force for good or evil in society? Environment? Yes. That plays a large part. This truth need not be elaborated upon. A child growing up in the slums or with out a decent education, or where there is no love, will certainly have a more difficult time becoming a force for positive social good.

However, a good environment does not automatically make angels. We all know, or know about, well educated, affluent, cultured homes which have produced “proper no-goodnicks.” Moral capability does not grow from how to use appropriate manners. Manners reflect aesthetic taste; morality reflects God’s will.

Jewish morality evolved as a system of ethics founded on the sure confidence that this world is governed by an orderly process. Nothing can disrupt this process. Not even God. A medieval Jewish philosopher, Crescas, admitted that “God Himself cannot alter the laws of a priori truth.” If we could not depend on an immutable morality, we would have neither the courage nor the ability to survive life’s constant insecurity and turmoil.

The purpose of Judaism is not to explain gravity or the ways of the fish and the eagles. It is to inform us of God’s moral will.

Our fathers and mothers couched their response to life in the language of the world they witnessed. Their world is not our world. What they witnessed is not what we witness. What frightened them is not what frightens us.

But their yearnings are ours. The yearning to live a better life. The yearning for worth and dignity, and purpose and decency. The yearning for love. The yearning for peace.

That is what our morality is all about. Not an explication of suns and moons and stars – Judaism is involved with values, and where to find them within our life. To be Jews we must live our values and find them within our relationships to one another.

Let us turn again to the words of ancient days:

“Honor thy father and thy mother.”

“Thou shall love thy neighbor as thy self.”

“Seek peace and pursue it.”

“Let justice well up as waters.”

“Hate the evil and love the good and establish justice in the gate.”

“Beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.”

“Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with thy God.

The only way to bring our lives into harmony with this world is to imitate the truth of God in our lives. The Torah states it very simply:

“ You shall be holy for I the Lord, am holy.”

What does it mean “to be holy?” It means to separate oneself – not to separate oneself from society; but to separate oneself from the false, from the transient, from the momentarily seductive. To be holy means to align oneself with the power that makes for righteousness, enlist oneself on the side of those who, through the ages, have found meaning and purpose through working for the betterment of our society. Holiness is a prism through which we see life as good, as joyous, as full of opportunities for the expression of love. Then we are the co-workers, the partners of God. God’s partners feel within them the stirrings of conscience, beholding the stars by night and the seas and the forests by day, God’s co-workers recognize the good and the true and unite themselves with them.

What is the challenge of Yom Kippur? Make better choices. For one brief moment, in the mad rushing of time. Become aware of your sins – the missed mark; repent of them – change the nature of your actions. To seek change. Evening “

The challenge is why we are here tonight! Amen.