

## KOL NIDRE EREV YOM KIPPUR 2021, KAWAI.

Once a woman came to Rabbi Israel, the maggid of Koznitz and told him with many tears that she had been married a dozen years and still had not born a son. "What are you willing to do about it?" the Rabbi asked her. She did not know what to say and fell silent. So, the Rabbi told her: "Once my mother was aging and still had no child then she heard that the holy Baal Shem was stopping over in her town in the course of a journey. She hurried to his inn and begged him to pray that she might bear a son. "What are you willing to do about it?" the Baal Shem asked. "My husband is a poor book- binder," she answered, "but I do have one fine thing that I shall give to the Rabbi." She went home as fast as she could and fetched her good cape, her "katinka" which was carefully stowed away in a chest. But by the time she had returned to the inn with it, she heard that the Baal Shem had already left for Mezbish. She immediately set out after him and since she had no money to ride, she walked from town to town with her "katinka," until she came to Mezbish. The Baal Shem took the cape and hung it on the wall. "It is well," he said. "And my mother walked all the way back from town to town until she was home. A year later I was born."

"I, too," the woman burst out crying, "I, too, will bring you a good cape of mine, so that I may get a son." "That would not work," said the Rabbi. "You heard the story; my mother had no story to go by."

A story for Yom Kippur. A story which suggests every human being must somehow create out of the substance of his life, his own tale, personalized, unique, one that no other can relate or fashion. The story about the work of becoming...ourselves. A Yom Kippur story.

Yom Kippur; our great white fast. Austere. A day for abstinence and self-restriction, on which even the most innocence indulgences are forbidden. Long

ago the philosopher poet Yehuda ma-Levi tried to explain the nature of this day to the King of the khazars who was considering conversion to Judaism. He told the King: The Jews “fast on this day to approach a resemblance to the angels, in as much as the fast is consummated by humbling themselves, lowering their heads, standing, bending their knees, singing hymns of praise. Then all the physical powers abandon their natural functions, and engage in spiritual functions, as though having no animal natures.”

That’s part of the grand drama we act out on this day, the great “let’s pretend” in which we engage. Let’s pretend that we are not animals just this one day of a year. We would not eat, or drink, or engage in the pleasures of the flesh.

We will come to synagogue, and we’ll pray, or we’ll try to pray and we’ll “fess-up.” Along with everyone else, we’ll become a great chorus of confession, declaring as one voice our sins and errors of transgressions.

And in the long silences of the day, we’ll deliver our most important lines. We’ll speak inwardly of our deepest pain and most hidden shame. In the quiet of the Day of Atonement, we’ll tell ourselves our loneliest, saddest stories, about what we have done to others and what others and fate have done to us. About love fulfilled and love denied; about dreams and nightmares, some of them real because we have made them happen. Stories about regrets and passions, those we have enjoyed legitimately, and those we have conquered and those that have conquered us. Old stories we have rehearsed many times and new ones, too. Stories we tell only to ourselves and perhaps to God. Yom Kippur stories.

Does Yom Kippur work? Of course not, if by that, you mean, do we manage to fool God into thinking that we are really angels, that all this humbling

and contrition and self-flagellation is real, and that we, His fumbling little children, have at long last grown up. And of course, we do not fool ourselves either, do we? We know that there will be no dramatic revolutions here today. The world will not be saved because of what we say or resolve, and we will not be saved either. Our limitations will remain pretty much as they were before Kol Nidre. And although our consciousness may have become heightened, and our ethical sensitivities provoked, at the end of the day, at Neilah after Havdalah we will be largely what we have always been: unredeemed; weak in will and even weaker in understanding: creatures of desire and passion and longing; prisoners of our bodies subject to decay and rust; dimly aware that a human life, the only kind we have been granted, is not a circle or an endless spiral, but a line that has a fixed beginning and one day, not yet determined, a fixed ending.

Yet, Yom Kippur does work, not as a charade, but in another way. The poet, Rilke, wrote: You have not grown cold, and it is not too late to dive into your increasing depths, where life calmly gives out its own secret. That's why we gather here tonight. To dive into our own swelling depths, there to find in the hushed calm of Yom Kippur, the secrets of our own lives. Secrets which become accessible only when we understand that we must, each of us, fashion our destiny without benefit of recipes or rules, only when we realize that we never have a story to go by.

What do we find in those depths? In that "vast and fruitful loneliness" (Etty Hillesum) which opens up before us today? To put it mildly, some pretty scary stuff. James Agge, wrote in one of his many moments of deep depression that

his thoughts ran rampant “like wild beasts of assorted sizes and ferocities, not devouring each other but in the process tearing the zoo to parts.” That’s all there inside of us, is it not? The lions, and tigers, and bears, and wolves of our inner life, not to mention serpents, lots of them. All that is there, and it does not go away when we close our eyes or when we come to the Temple on Yom Kippur. Especially not when we come here tonight, each of us to inspect our personal exotic, snarling menagerie.

What do we do with all of that? How do we deal with it? One morning, after driving a carpool, I had some time on my hands and I took a walk, an urban pleasure in the Old Market. I found myself standing in front of a shop of Tee Shirts. You’ve probably seen it, or one like it: a window full of tee shirts, a window which was inadvertently a mirror of our culture.

What was in the window? It was truly a mixed bag. Some shirts I loved and could even see myself wearing them. There was a Picasso in multi-color showing a bouquet of flowers. There was the first page of the score of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. There was a wonderful quote from Albert Einstein: it read, “Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.” Some were sarcastic, and moodishly irreverent like: “Life, liberty and pursuit of chocolate,” or “when the going gets tough the tough go shopping,” or this long one on an exceptionally large shirt: “I don’t have an eating problem, I eat, I get fat, I buy new clothes, no problem.” Some were pugnacious like: “My lawyer can beat up your lawyer.” Some were blunt like: “No boozos” or “One slightly fantastic woman.” One was even quasi-theological. It said: “I used to be God, but it was too much responsibility” – which, if taken seriously as a theological statement, is truly terrifying and evokes associations with

Dostoevsky. If God were to wear a tee shirt like that, we would all be in very deep trouble. [Indeed, it may well be that because God is wearing a tee shirt like that, we have some of the problems we do these days, but that is a sermon for another day.]

But consider very carefully these last four Tee Shirts from the window. They demonstrate, I believe, that the words of the Prophets are written not only on the tenement walls, but also on the overpriced cotton attire of America. They read: "Just when you thought you were winning the rat race, along came faster rats." "I am easy to please as long as I get my way." "He who dies with the most toys, wins." And last, under a picture of a nuclear mushroom cloud, these words were written: "And Now, It's Miller Time."

What are we to make of this graffiti on cloth? What perception of reality is revealed by them? Is it not the vision of a clever, rather worldly, and highly cynical society? Yes, there is a degree of rye humor and something a Jew can especially appreciate – there is a good bit of self-mockery and ironic self-deprecation. But what are we to make of that tone of resignation and the intimations of despair, even of deep hopelessness? Fat or thin – that doesn't matter. What does matter? Toys, chocolate, shopping and shimmering in the background, ominously overshadowing the whole scene, is that mushroom cloud, which evokes at the tee shirt shop– what? A storm of protest? A posture of dissent? A defiant gesture on behalf of life and sanity? None of the above; only the coldly gloomy, mindlessness of a TV commercial for a beer, presumably for a light beer, so one might look reasonably good in a tee shirt.

To look into that store window, at those shirts, is to look into a mirror. And what do we see? The worst nightmares and ugliest moods of our culture: despair, apathy, narcissism, death. A vision of a world that no matter how fast

you run, there are always more and swifter rats crowding your heels. Where years of work and effort yield only various kinds of fancy adult toys, toys bearing designer labels and brand names, but still toys. Where the most burning question is: "What's in it for me?"

Is that what we are? Is that the model we hold up to our children? Is that what we do with the teeming stuff of our inner life, our yearnings, and our pain, with our hopes and our fears, our serpents? Put on a happy face and a snappy tee shirt, and tell everyone we meet, "to have a nice day."? How does that help us to live as human beings, vulnerable, limited sinners? Is there not another way? Not easier, but more ennobling. A way for those who on Yom Kippur struggle to put together each of us, our own story.

Elie Wiesel tells a story about a certain rabbi who concluded that human suffering was beyond endurance. So, he went up to heaven and knocked at the Messiah's gate. "Why are You taking so long?" he asked Him. "Don't you know the human race is expecting You?" "It's not Me they are expecting," answered the Messiah, in anger. "Some are waiting for good health and riches, others for serenity and knowledge, peace in the home or happiness. No, it's not Me they are awaiting."

At that point, they say, the rabbi lost patience, and cried, "So be it! If You have but one face, may it remain in shadow. If You cannot help people, all people resolve, all their problems, even the most insignificant, then stay where You are, as You are.

If You still have not guessed that You are bread for the hungry, a voice of the old man without hairs, sleep for those who dread the night; if You have not

understood all these and more, that every await is a wait for You, then You are telling the truth. Indeed, it is not You that humans are waiting for.”

Then the rabbi came back to earth, gathered his disciples, and forbade them to despair. “And now,” he said, “the true waiting begins.”

That’s where we are: in the “true waiting.” The message has been delivered to the Messiah, and there is no more we can tell him, or God. And while we wait we are not permitted even for a moment to give up or to abandon hope.

Hope for what? Happiness? Goethe once said that: “In seventy-five years he had experienced barely four weeks of being truly at ease. And Bruno Bettelheim comments, “An inescapable sadness is part of the life of any reflective person, and we must never rob life of what makes every moment of it uniquely significant -- the fact that it might be our last one.”

What is happiness? And, how much of it, honestly, can we expect to enjoy in our lives? Yes, if we are lucky there will be moments of joy and triumph, even those of ecstasy, perhaps, with special fortune, more than just a few.

But however, many we are granted, they are never enough. Why? Because when we choose to take life seriously, we must also accept as the price of that decision, an awareness that the body is transient and that we and all we love are exceeding fragile. If we refuse to be mindless, if we believe that life is not about “Miller’s Time”, but a waiting, then we must accept with resignation and dignity, and a measure of courage that “inescapable sadness.”

What do we do while we wait? We know that already, do we not? That secret has already been revealed to us, in our deepest soul, a truth we have always known we must have trust, and out of that trust we must reach,

hesitantly, but surely toward those we love, forgiving them, healing their wounds, kissing away their tears, holding them close to us for warmth and for support.

And perhaps some of us will even reach another rung, and we will take our broken hearts and our shaken spirits, and we will make them sing! Sing because others, still here with us, especially those we have betrayed and those we have hurt need us desperately. Sing in affirmation, and in deep, deep harmony with the Nameless Compassionate One at the heart of things, who sustains us and nourishes us and keeps us alive and gives us the power to trust and to love, to wait and sometimes even to sing.

A few hours from now at the conclusion of Neilah, as this Yom Kippur draws to a close, we will make Havdalah here together, the service of separation marking the boundary between the Day of Atonement and the weekdays. Between the holy and the profane. We will sing together of the Messiah, and of our hopeful waiting, that he may come speedily, in our days. And, at the end, we will extinguish the braided candle in the wine, and when we do that the darkness will become deeper.

But there is a custom among some of the Hasidic Jews in Jerusalem, that for Havdalah, instead of wine, brandy is used. When it comes time to extinguish the braided candle, some of the brandy is poured into a dish and as the candle is snuffed out the brandy catches fire and soft blue flames dance in the darkness of the room creating a lingering melancholy glow.

Yom Kippur ends, and the weekday begins, but for a little while the flames continue to burn, warming, dancing, dying, bringing comfort to all who behold them.

And then, the Jews of Jerusalem, wherever they are, sit in the dark and wait and tell their stories. Amen.