

YOM KIPPUR MOURNING, 2021, KAWAI

Yom Kippur in an American synagogue is a dramatic day, full of serious purpose and religious meaning. We respect whatever impels us to come here; we take seriously our reasons for attending. Yom Kippur in ancient Jerusalem, back when the Temple stood, must have been incomparably more dramatic. Not just one community, but the entire nation gathered into the Temple court. They believed that the prospects of God's forgiving them and granting them a good year depended on the proper carrying out of the Yom Kippur ritual.

The highlight of the ancient Yom Kippur service came early in the afternoon, when the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest would enter the sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies, to pray for his people, the only time during the year when anyone was permitted to enter. Then he would emerge, he would pronounce the Name of God, the Name that was considered too sacred to be used by any other person in any other context, the Name which had been revealed to Moses at Sinai, but which people could never use in ordinary conversation or even in their prayers. And by the power of that Name, he would tell the people that they were forgiven. They could start the New Year clean.

And when the people heard the Name uttered by the High Priest, they would fall on their knees in a mixture of awe and thanksgiving and say: " שׁוּבָה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי כִּי גָדוֹל אֱלֹהֵינוּ " Blessed be that glorious Name forever" – which is why Yom Kippur is the only time when we say

those words aloud after Sh'ma Y'srael. All other days, we say them in an undertone.

There is much about that ancient ritual which fascinates me, but I'm especially drawn to the role that God's Name plays, – that the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and emerge to pronounce the authentic, mysterious Name of God. You see, in the ancient world, your name was your essence. It described what you were all about. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence, and even though it was filled with smoke and incense, by being there, by coming that close to God, he would understand what God stood for, what He was all about, - that God stood for forgiveness and repentance, for helping people grow and change and giving them another chance. He would know God's name and then he would go out and pronounce that Name, and the people would know that they had been forgiven.

To know God's name is to know who GOD is, what GOD is all about. And in the same way, to know your own name is to know who you are – where you come from, what you stand for, what is expected of you. Your name ties you to your parents and grandparents. When a woman takes her husband's name in marriage, it says something about a transfer of primary family loyalties being affected. When you name a child after a deceased relative, you are proclaiming that that child is not a totally new beginning, but a continuation of a story that reaches back for generations.

The *New York Times* sometime ago carried a review of a book about a man whose search for his real name symbolized his search for himself. When World War II ended, an eight-year-old French Catholic boy learned that he was eight years old and French, but not Catholic. He was Jewish and had been placed with a French Christian family to save his life when his parents were deported to the death camps. His original family name was not Cojot, as it had been for as long as he could remember, but Goldberg.

He grew up confused about who he was and to whom he belonged, and the confusion of names symbolized this. Some days he was angry at his biological parents for giving him away. And some days he felt guilty for having survived while they had died. As a teenager, he hated the Jewish part of himself, because Jews were victims, Jews were weak, Jews were unpopular. And he developed a very remarkable symptom born of this hatred of a part of himself. His right hand became painfully swollen, and no doctor could treat it or even explain it. It was as if he had pulled down on himself the Biblical curse _____ “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, that my right hand forgets its cunning”.

Like many a confused, split, self-hating person, he drove himself to become a success, in this case, in banking and international finance. He made a fortune, but it was never enough. He needed one success after another to fill the emptiness inside him where his identity should have been.

Then one year, he found himself living in La Paz, Bolivia, managing the Bolivian branch of the French banking network he worked for. He discovered

that living openly as a semi-celebrity in Bolivia was Klaus Barbie, the former head of the Nazi operation in France, the man who had sent his parents to Auschwitz. He decided to avenge his parents by killing Barbie. He bought a gun and despite the pain in his hand, taught himself to fire it accurately. Pretending to be a reporter, he interviewed Barbie, to make sure there was no mistake. Then one day, sitting in the park with his gun loaded and, in his pocket, he saw Barbie sitting just a few yards away, his back to him. On the verge of realizing the fulfillment of his plan of redemptive vengeance, he reached into his pocket for the gun, and decided he couldn't do it. He could not bring himself to shoot an unarmed, pathetic old man in the back, even if the man was a Nazi war criminal. He went back to his room, expecting that he would feel ashamed of himself for his cowardice and lack of resolve. But amazingly he didn't. He felt strangely calm and serene. And he realized why.

He had killed a Nazi that day, but not the one he had set out to kill. He had killed the Nazi in himself, the part of himself that hated Jews and was ashamed of Jewish weakness, the part of himself that was so angry it wanted to shoot, to kill, to destroy in an effort to solve its own problems, to fill its own emotional emptiness. Had he killed Klaus Barbie, he would have been a murderer, an apostle of violence and revenge. By not killing him, he had destroyed the Nazi in himself, that had almost taken over his soul like a Dybbuk and he became a Jew. And his right hand stopped hurting.

There is more to this story. In 1976, as part of his effort to trace his Jewish roots, he took his son on a visit to Israel. On their way home, they

were on the Air France jet that was hijacked to Entebbe. Speaking French, German, and Hebrew, bearing a French passport with a non-Jewish name, he played an important role in getting the sick, the elderly and many of the other passengers set free before the Israeli rescue. He writes that he never worried about his own death in Entebbe. All that mattered was that with his son and so many French and Jewish hostages looking on, he would do the right thing. He would act with integrity. He would triumph over the Jew-haters and the terrorists, as his parents had not been able to do, because he had triumphed over the Jew-hater and the terrorist in himself.

After the rescue, back in Paris and feeling that he had, in fact, acted with integrity, he had his name and his son's name legally changed to Goldberg. He had come home to himself and to his true identity.

This is a Yom Kippur story. Because what he did was, in more dramatic form, was what all of us are called on to do. Repentance on the threshold of the New Year does not mean apologizing. Repentance does not mean regretting, feeling bad for things that happened and wishing that we were different. Repentance means changing. It means identifying the parts of our behavior which are not us, the things we do which are inconsistent with what we really are, and getting rid of them, purging them in the fire of Yom Kippur until only the authentic us remains.

Michael Cojot tried at first to heal himself by hurting others, the way many of us try to solve our problems by taking our anger out on other people. For years, he told himself that other people were the source of his problems, -

parents, competitors, Nazis. If not for them, he could say to himself, he would be happy. He got rid of all those enemies from his life, but the split, the dissatisfaction, was still there. He finally cured himself when he realized that his problem was not out there, with other people, but inside himself, that his better self was ashamed of what another part of him was doing. And not until he rid himself of that other part could he feel at one and at peace with himself.

Eric Erickson, the great psychoanalyst who has taught us so much about the issue of identity and who coined the phrase “identity crisis”, has written that identity crises are not limited to adolescents. Adults have them, too. For Erickson, the identity issues of adults are intimacy, letting another person share your life without losing sight of who you are; creativity, feeling that you are giving something back to the world; and integrity, being true to yourself, feeling that you have become the person you want and need to be. Integrity is what cured Michael Cojot and made him whole, let him stop hurting, stop hating. And integrity, wholeness, is what you and I yearn for, and pray for, on Yom Kippur.

The very first line we recite on Yom Kippur, immediately after Kol Nidre reads _____

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“May God forgive all of us, including the stranger in our midst, for we have sinned unwittingly.” And the rabbis interpret that reference to the stranger in our midst to refer not only to tourists and foreigners who might be here temporarily, but to the stranger, the alien, within every one of us, the part of us that is not

truly us and makes us do things we don't believe in. Often, we, too, have a dangerous, destructive, stranger inside us, and we cannot be at peace until we are rid of him. But we don't get rid of him by hating ourselves or by hating people who remind us of what we don't like in ourselves. You eliminate that stranger by coming to understand who you are, bringing your true identity into focus, and cleansing yourself of everything that is not authentically you.

My friends, some years ago, C.S. Lewis wrote an enchanting novel called *Till We Have Faces*. The narrator of the book, the queen of the mythical country, did something shameful once as a young girl and ever after that, kept her face veiled, that no one might see her face. Her book is a complaint against the gods for all the suffering and unfairness she had to endure. Finally, at the end, she says, "Now I know why the gods have never answered me. How can we come face-to-face with them until we have faces?" In other words, if we are hiding from ourselves, if we cannot face ourselves, if we don't know who we really are, how can we face God?

It was on Yom Kippur that the HIGH PRIEST _____, as representative of the people would enter the Holy of Holies and come face-to-face with God. As a result of that experience, he would understand who God was clearly enough that he could utter God's name. If we, his descendents, would do the same on Yom Kippur, there are two things we need. We need to know who God is, and that's hard, but that is the easier part. The hard part is to know who we are. We cannot stand face-to-face with God until we have faces,

till we unmask ourselves. When we have spoken our own names and recognized our own faces, when we have chased out the stranger inside us and purged ourselves of everything that is not us in the fire of repentance, only when we know who we are can we stand face-to-face with God and feel forgiven. AMEN!