

דבר תורה (Sermon) for Yom Kippur Day 2005
"You're Not Chopped Liver"

It was Kol Nidre night - the most hallowed and awesome night of the year. The Jews of the shtetl slowly filed into synagogue, well sated from their meals. In walked the great and revered Rabbi. Slowly, he walked up to the Bimah, a look of fear on his face. As he walked before the holy ark, he hunched himself over and began to beat his chest as he sobbed aloud: "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" The *chazan* (Cantor) seeing the holy Rabbi engage in such an act of humility, followed suit. He walked up to the bimah, stood right next to the Rabbi. Hunched over, he too struck his chest as he recited the words mournfully: "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" *Chayim Yankel* was a poor farmer. He had hardly a penny to his name, and no stature in his community. Seeing his two revered leaders declaring that they were not worthy, he felt all the more doomed by the impending Yom Kippur. Taken by the moment, he rose, and slowly, and with great trepidation, he too walked up to the bimah, standing at the *Chazan's* side. He hunched his back, and beat his chest violently, yelling passionately: "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" The cantor turned to the Rabbi with a sarcastic, yet matter of fact smile. "Look who thinks he's nothing."

Jewish liturgy, and in particular the Yom Kippur Machazor is filled with "I'm nothing" moments. After we finish our confessions with the *Al Chet*, we say "א-להי, עד שלא נוצרתי איני - *My Lord, before I was formed, I was of no value, and now that I am formed, it is as if I was not formed.* I am dust in life, and will be all the more so in death." "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!"

Why do we say we are nothing? We do so because we realize that sometimes we are self-important. We think that our desires - be it for a new car, a fancy restaurant, or a five star hotel on our vacation - are more important than taking care of our responsibilities to God and towards others. We spend so much time entertaining ourselves - with TV, books, movies, athletics . . . that we forget about the important things in life: Family, friends, and community. We treat the world as if it were there just for ourselves to enjoy. We ask what the world will do for us - not what we can do for our world. And then we realize - "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" There are better things that we can do with our lives.

Now, let's be clear. There is nothing wrong with enjoying our lives and taking care of ourselves. That is why the great sage Rav said that if we have an opportunity to enjoy something in this world, and pass it up - we will have to give accounting to God for that failure.

(תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת קידושין פרק ד דף סו טור ב /ה"ב - ר' חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל מה שראת עינו ולא אכל)

It is also why the Rabbis forbade giving away more than 20% of our earthly assets (Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 50a, Maimonides Laws of Arachin 8:13, Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 249:1). Indeed, we have to take care of ourselves. As the sage Hillel taught *if I am not for myself, who will be for me?* (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14) But the pursuit of self enjoyment and material success cannot be our only pursuit. Hillel continues: *but if I am [only] for myself, what am I?* And so we remind ourselves of our goals in life by speaking of our own lack of importance: "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!"

But I have bad news for you. You - You are not nothing. Now you'll say - what do you mean Rabbi? What do you mean I'm not nothing? And Rabbi: Why is that bad news? What do I mean that you are not nothing? I mean, that you **can** be something. When Hillel says *if I am [only] for myself, what am I?* he is giving us a hint. He is saying that **if** you are only for yourself, you are nobody. But **if** you care about others - then you are somebody. Now, here's why this is bad news. Because being something is a burden. It is a responsibility. You see, taken the wrong way, thinking that you **are** nothing is an excuse to **do** nothing. Thus, learning that you are something is a call to action.

Yes, often times rabbinic literature and our prayers tell us that we are nothing. But they also tell us that we are everything. The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (4:5, Babylonian Talmud 37a) asks why the biblical account of Adam tells us of only one person being created. The Mishnah explains that this is to teach us that anyone who saves one person, scripture treats that person as if s/he has saved the whole world. (Note: the text which reads "one who saves/kills one Jew" is in error. The original text refers to killing/saving any person). After talking about how God created countless people, each of them unique, the Mishnah tells us: "Therefore, everyone must say **בשבילי נברא העולם** - *It is for me that the world was created.* A far cry from "I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" You are something. You are a person with great potential.

Too often, we get caught up thinking we are nothing. Thinking that we can't do enough, and therefore we don't even try. Let's face it. We are not likely to become President of the United States. We are not likely to become the next Moses. But the Mishnah teaches that we don't need to save the world. All we need to do is help one person. In a similar vein, Mother Theresa taught that: "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." When we do good, it may be a drop in the ocean. but we should cherish that drop.

In Psalm 147 (v. 4), which we recite every morning, we say that God is **מונה מספר** **לכלם שמות יקרא** **לכוכבים** **לכלם שמות יקרא** *God numbers all the stars, and calls each of them by name.* No person, no act is too small for god to recognize. Each *mitzvah* you do - each commandment you follow, each person you help, God will take note. And every day is an opportunity for you to shine like the stars.

Sometimes when we fail, we comfort ourselves by denying our own potential. Other times, in seeking grandeur - in trying to save the world, we are discouraged by how small we are. "I'm nothing! I'm nothing! I'm nothing!" In trying to do everything, we forget to do that which we are actual capable of doing - we forget to do *something*. Again, Mother Theresa: "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

And now, it is our responsibility to turn our great capacity for love, into deeds. To invigorate ourselves with love of God, and cherishing of *mitzvot* (commandments/good deeds). In doing those commandments, to have them inspire us to love of God's world and to dedicate more of our time to **תיקון עולם** (*tikun olam*), the improvement of that world.

A famous Chasidic teaching teaches that each person should have two pieces of paper in his or her pockets. On one piece of paper should be written בשבילי נברא העולם *the world was created for me*. On the other, the words of Abraham to God as Abraham begged to save Sodom and Gemora - וְאָפָר - אֲנֹכִי עָפָר וְאֵפֶר [*I am dust and dirt* (Gen 18:27). This is not an exercise in confusion. It is an exercise in self purpose. When we truly internalize the message of אֲנֹכִי עָפָר וְאֵפֶר - *I am dust and dirt* -we realize that our time on this earth is fleeting, and that the measure of our time will not be how many sports cars we owned, but how many *mitzvot* we did - how many people we helped, and whether we taught others such as our children to do the same. If we realize that - if we realize that we are small in the grand scheme of things, then we become bigger than we can imagine. then, בשבילי נברא העולם *the world was created for us*. The world was created for those who are dedicated to making the world a better place. The world was created for those whose legacy is improving the earth, rather than improving their own sense of enjoyment.

This year is a year with great potential. Each of us has the potential to do good - both in the ritual sense, and in the social sense. And all the while we are watched by our God, the judge of all, who knows us by name, and who knows our deeds. Who *numbers all the stars, and calls each of them by name*. May each of us become a star. May the light of our deeds shine from here all the way to heaven. Amen.