

(Sermon) for Kol Nidre 2005  
 "The Opportunity Inherent in Sin"

בישיבה של מעלה ובישיבה של מטה, *Beyeshiva shel ma'alah, ubeyishva shel mattah*  
 על דעת המקום ועל דעת הקהל, *Al da'at hamakom v'al da'at hakahal*  
 אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבריינים *Anu matirim lehitpallel in ha'avaryanim*  
 By authority of the heavenly court, and by the authority of the earthy court.  
 With consent of God, and of the congregation.  
 We accept praying with sinners. (not the most literal translation I've ever written).

Quite an auspicious way to begin Yom Kippur services. Even as we prepare for a day in which we beseech God to grant us the gift of another year, we begin with the recognition that we, and those around us, are sinners.

Why do we start Yom Kippur this way? Even as we honor some of the important members of our community, who come to the bimah to hold Torah scrolls during Kol Nidre, rather than recognizing **them**, we recognize, and indeed invite, **sinners**.

Our Birnbaum machazorim suggest that the reason why the 13th century Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg added this prayer to the beginning of our Yom Kippur was to remind us of the importance of sin and sinners. That's right. The **importance** of sins and sinners.

The Talmud states in Keritot (6b) שהרי חלבנה, שיהי תענית, *Any fast which does not have the sinners of Israel, is no fast. For indeed, galbanum has a bad smell, but scripture counts it as an ingredient of the incense offering.*

We all regret, or at least hopefully we all regret, that we are less than perfect. Were it only that we were born as people committed to observing Jewish law and working constantly to help, rather than hurt others. But alas. We are not perfect. But according to the Talmud, even the sweet incense offered before God included an ingredient that smelled bad. Without that ingredient - it would not be incense fit for God. What are all the sweet smelling ingredients missing? After all, they smell sweet. What more could you ask for? In the same vein: Why does a fast day need sinners? What would be wrong with a fast performed only by the righteous?

I would suggest that the fragrant items in incense, for all their wonderful qualities, are missing one thing - the opportunity to change. The opportunity to turn a negative into a positive. After all, they already smell sweet. It is only the galbanum, with its pungent odor that has the opportunity to become useful when put into the incense offering. It is like an onion in a recipe. Have you ever eaten a raw onion? Just taken it out of the fridge and bitten into it. Well, George Costanza did. And it didn't work out well. An onion is strong and pungent. Not much for being eaten alone. But as anyone who has had the misfortune of eating my cooking knows, onion is my favorite ingredient. I doubt you could find many ingredients that are more common to recipes than an onion. Yes, sugar is sweet. But sugar is always sweet. The onion, like the Galbanum, has the power of change.

So too, each of us has good qualities. And we must work hard to keep those qualities up. We celebrate those times that we are able to make it to shul, the times that we give charity or help those in need. But then, there are the things we don't yet do right in life. We might not treat our family and friends as well as we could. Might not yet follow the Kosher laws as well as we could. We have a tendency to want to sweep those shortcomings under the rug. To pretend they

are not there. But in a way, those shortcomings represent our greatest opportunity in life - our opportunity to improve. In fact, some in the Talmud celebrated this opportunity over and above the ability to lead a perfect life. In the Talmud in Berachot, Rabbi Chiya bar Aba opines that צדיקים גמורים (*tsadikim gemurim*) - completely righteous people - are the picture of perfection. Rabbi Abahu disagrees, saying that the בעל תשובה (*ba'al teshuva*), one who improves his or her faulty ways, is more precious:

[ ] *Rabbi Abahu said: מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין - צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין, Where a ba'al teshuva stands, a tsadik gamur cannot stand, as it says in tomorrow morning's Haftorah ולקרוב ולרחוק ולקרוב ולרחוק שלום שלום peace, peace, to those far away and to those who are near. It is the one that is far away who is mentioned first. And so, over the next day, as we say the ודוי (*viduy*, confession) many times, let us not approach those words only with disappointment. Instead, let us approach those words with a sense of opportunity.*

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך באונס וברצון *for those sins which we committed against you whether being forced or willingly* - let us renew our resolve to follow God's ways.

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך באמוץ הלב *and for the sins which we committed against you by acting callously*, presuming that we would not, or could not, follow your *mitzvot*, let us remember that we are capable of changing our ways, of practicing Judaism more and more often.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בבלי דעת *for the sins that we committed against you unintentionally* let us resolve to be more careful, let us make a greater effort to avoid "accidents." Let us to be careful with the feelings of others, and not overlook our opportunities to help. Let us integrate more Jewish observance into our lives, so that it might inspire us to be more careful in other parts of our lives.

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך בבטוי שפתים *and for the sins that we committed against you by idle talk*, let us learn not to speak in a way that hurts others. Instead, let us learn to speak more words of Torah, more words of love, more words of kindness.

ועל כולם א-לוה סליחות, סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר-לנו (Sing) *and for all of them, Lord of forgiveness, selach lanu* forgive us - allow us the this year as an opportunity to change our ways; *mechal lanu* pardon us - when we do improve, allow us to go on with a clear conscience about what we did wrong in the past; *kapper lanu* grant us atonement in finding a better way to live our lives in the future.

The story is told about a Rabbi who asked his student: "If there is a ladder, and one person is on the 49th step, and another on the 1st step, which one is higher?" The student, looking puzzled, responded "the one on the 49th step, of course." "No," said the Rabbi. "Well, what's the answer?" "You see, it all depends. Which one is moving up, and which one is moving down."

Each one of our lives is like a ladder. We are where we are. Some of us higher than others. But it is not where we are that matters. What matters is where we are going. As we look up the ladder of *mitzvot*, of ritual law and of responsibility towards others, let us look at those

higher rungs not so much with a sense of disappointment about where we are, but with a sense of hope and excitement about how much higher we can climb.

I hope that this Yom Kippur you will take a step. Adding intent and fervor to your prayers and meaning to your fast is the first step. And once a meaningful Yom Kippur gets you moving, don't forget to keep climbing. Step regularly, and step surely. The coming year is filled with opportunity. Opportunities for study of Torah, and for prayer. Opportunities to improve our relationship with loved ones, and to serve our community. May this Yom Kippur be a first step on a constant path of traveling up the ladder of opportunities.