

"The Easiest Day to be a Jew"
דרשה (sermon) for Kol Nidre, Yom Kippur 5768
Friday Evening, September 14, 2007

Note: This sermon is slightly reorganized from the way it was presented on Yom Kippur. The content is the same.

I'd like to begin tonight's דרשה (*derasha*, sermon) by inviting everyone to relax a little bit. Take a deep breath. Welcome to the easiest day of the year to be a Jew.

Sometimes, we think of Yom Kippur as a very difficult holiday. After all, the verse in Leviticus which we will read tomorrow says אַתְּ נִפְשֶׁתֶיכֶם אֶתְּ וְעַנִּיתֶם *you shall afflict your souls*,¹ which is why we are not allowed to eat today, and also why we don't wear leather shoes, we don't wash ourselves, nor use oils and lotions, or engage in marital relations. So, today sounds a little bit tough. Plus, we'll spend a lot of time over the next day here in shul praying. Yom Kippur is also described in the same verse of the Torah as שַׁבַּת שַׁבָּתוֹן - *the Sabbath of Sabbaths*², and is therefore the only one of the Jewish holidays where all the restrictions that apply to שבת also apply. So for instance, even if today was not Shabbat, we still would not be permitted to carry items in a public domain nor to transfer a flame like we can on most other Yom Tovs. And so, Yom Kippur seems even tougher.

Yet somehow, of all the Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur is the one people observe most carefully. Many people who may not make it their business to eat a Shabbat dinner on Friday night ate a big meal this afternoon, and will be fasting for the next 25 hours. Many people who are not otherwise observant of Shabbat will keep all the rules today. Some of us will be in synagogue for many hours tonight and tomorrow, even if we don't normally take a couple minutes in the morning and evening to recite the Shema or daily prayers. It seems surprising, but it is true.

Part of the reason why Yom Kippur is so easy is because observing Yom Kippur is an easy choice to make. After all, many of our family and friends are observing Yom Kippur anyway. We can usually take the day off because it's almost expected. Plus, it's only one day a year. No problem, we dive in for a day, and then we're done. It's neat, and its compact.

Yom Kippur is also easy on the spiritual side. Generally, life is, well . . . busy. There's lots to do. There's our job, our chores, looking after our loved ones. There are errands to run, and trips to take. We're all very busy. Sometimes we are so busy with where we have to be physically, that we hardly have time to think about where we need to be spiritually. And so, Yom Kippur is great. We can take one day for prayer and reflection. The job won't miss us, the kids will be with us in shul, and we can clear our social calendar for a day. Heck, living in Long Beach, many of our friends will be in synagogue anyway.

In the grand scheme of life, however, Yom Kippur can be an illusion. It places invisible barriers around us so that the outside world can't come in. But as the shofar sounds tomorrow evening, our protective shield will dissipate, and the rest of the world will start rushing in. And then, Judaism will become a challenge again.

¹ Lev. 23:22.

² *Id.*

There are some who believe that religion is best when every day is like Yom Kippur. They celebrate the life of the monastery, where desires are denied and poverty is lauded. They shun most forms of entertainment, and deny physical enjoyment. But traditional Jewish faith tells us that the Yom Kippur lifestyle is simply too easy. Our challenge is not to live life in a cathedral, but to live a spiritual life while engaging in earthly pursuits. Our goal is not to deny our humanity nor to become angels. Our goal is to be human beings and participate in this world, while maintaining a sense of the divine and an awareness of our obligations to others.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was probably the greatest Jewish theologian of the 20th century, I think summed up this idea most beautifully. He said: "To abstain completely from all enjoyments may be easy. Yet to enjoy life and retain spiritual integrity - there is the challenge."³ That is our challenge. And so, our spirituality, our sense of religion should be judged not by this one day where we "abstain completely from all enjoyments," but instead by how we retain spiritual integrity throughout the rest of our lives.

Judaism does not ask us to abstain from this world. Nor to deny our earthly desires. In fact, Judaism criticizes the person who does not take full advantage of what the world, within the limits of Jewish law, has to offer. At the risk of repeating a text that I probably quote all too often: the great sage Rav says in the Jerusalem Talmud: " עתיד אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל מה שראת " *in the future a person will have to give accounting for everything that his eyes saw that he didn't enjoy.*"⁴ In fact, when it comes to food that is unkosher, a famous piece of Talmud explains how you can experience the taste of every forbidden food by finding a particular kosher equivalent.⁵

There are religions that say that our goal is to shut off our desires. Not so Judaism. Before the first night of selichot (penitential prayers) this year we studied how when God created humanity the Torah says that God saw "וַהֲגִיהָ טוֹב מְאֹד" *and behold, it was very good.*"⁶ According to a Midrash, God's comment was not only about humanity's good inclinations, but also about a person's יצר הרע, which literally means "evil inclination," but in many ways refers to a person's desires. The Midrash explains that our own personal desires are a necessary part of humanity: "אילו לא בנה אדם בית ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד ולא נשא ונתן" *for were it not for the evil inclination, a person would not build a house, and would not marry a woman, and would not have children, and would not do business.*"⁷ Without our personal desires, human development would stop in its tracks. But we also know that our desires can lead us to do things that may hurt ourselves and hurt others. And so, Judaism teaches us to recognize our desires and to seek to make them a part of our holiness, so that we might learn to have the desire to do good.

³ *Passion for Truth*, 4, 1973.

⁴ Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 4:2, page 66b.

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⁶ Gen. 1:31.

⁷ Genesis Rabbah 9:7.

For instance, we all have a desires for food. Food sustains us. Food is also a source of pleasure. And so the Torah invites us to eat, and even requires us to have festive meals on the Shabbat and holidays. But the Torah limits us as well, with the laws of Kashruth (keeping Kosher) and by telling us to say blessings before and after our meals. And so we are reminded that we are not just another animal eating food by instinct. Instead, we are human beings aware that the food on our table is brought to us through God's gifts, whether because God gave us a good crop, or because God gave us the intelligence and ability to have a job. We are aware of our fortune, and we are aware that we are expected to share our good fortune with others.

The same is true of our sexual desires. In some religions, abstaining from physical pleasure is the highest form of spirituality. In Judaism, procreation is considered a *mitzvah* (commandment) and the relationship between husband and wife is considered one of holiness. In Judaism, we do not favor vows of celibacy - we celebrate the holiness of the relationship of marriage. There are laws restricting when we can engage in marital relations, and limitations on whom we can marry. At the same time, there are times where marital relations are encouraged, for instance on Shabbat, as a fulfillment of of עונג שבת, *the enjoyment of Shabbat*, (except when Shabbat is Yom Kippur). We are not asked to, nor do we want to deny our physical desires. However, we know that left unchecked our physical desires can lead us to act wrongly toward the object of our desire or others who are involved. And so we permit, with limitations.

Judaism has the same attitude towards our desire for money. There are those who believe that the truly religious should take a vow of poverty. Jewish law, on the other hand, prohibits any person from giving away any more than 20% of that person's assets, lest they in the future become needy.⁸ Some would like to engage in study of their religion to the exclusion of supporting themselves financially. Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince says in פרקי אבות (*Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers) " יפה תלמוד תורה עם דרך ארץ שיגיעת שניהם משכחת " *Study of Torah is [only] good with a worldly occupation, for toil in both makes one forget sin, and all Torah [study] that does not come with a worldly occupation will in the end be nullified and cause sin.*"⁹

In Judaism we don't take a vow of poverty. We believe in the importance of gainful employment, as we know we are supposed to take care of ourselves. We value our self-responsibility. As the great sage Hillel said: " אם אין אני לי מי לי " *If I am not for myself, who will be for me.*"¹⁰ But he tempered that with the words: " וכשאני לעצמי מה אני " *but if I am [only] for myself, what am I.*"¹¹ And so, we take no vow of poverty. But we execute our worldly employment with honesty and caring toward our coworkers, clients, and customers. We know that all of our prosperity emanates from God, and that therefore we shun misbegotten gains. We also understand that we must set aside a significant portion of our income to do God's work in helping the needy.

⁸ Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 50a and parallels, codified in Mishneh Torah Arachin 8:13 and Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 249:1.

⁹ Avot 2:2.

¹⁰ Avot 1:14.

¹¹ *Id.*

In some religions, the goal is to abstain, to deny our own enjoyment, or perhaps even to eliminate our desires. Compare Rabbi Heschel: "To abstain completely from all enjoyments may be easy. Yet to enjoy life and retain spiritual integrity - there is the challenge." And so, Yom Kippur is easy. The question is: how do we retain our spiritual integrity during the rest of the year?

Judaism teaches that our spiritual integrity is dependent on our ability to meld our physical world with our spiritual world. We have jobs, we have families, we run errands. In each one of those moments, we want to be aware of God's role in our lives, and the obligations we have in this world. And so, each moment of our lives is guided by the Torah and by Jewish law, and even the most mundane of moments has a level of spirituality. We know that there is no facet of our lives in which we can be absolutely saintly. But we also know that there is never a moment in our lives that we are incapable of being holy. We know that although there is much for us to enjoy in this world, the world is not our oyster, and there are limitations on our lives, and expectations on how to live our lives.

Judaism teaches that our religious goal is not to build ourselves a cathedral of spirituality, but to integrate our spirituality into every moment of our lives. We are told in the Shema: "וְהָיָה הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ. וְשִׁנְנָתָם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלַכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. *Let these words which I command you today be in your heart. And teach them to your children and say them when you dwell in your home and when you travel along the way, when you lie down and when you rise up.*"¹² Words of Torah and deeds of *mitzvot* are to be part of our daily routine. In fact, the Rabbis said that a person could recite the Shema even while sitting atop a tree picking fruits!¹³

The key is that thoughts of the Torah, the performance of *mitzvot* and the awareness of God need to be a part of every moment of our lives. And so, we strive to say daily prayers, to recite the Shema and to study Torah in order to fill our mind with thoughts that will carry us through the day with an awareness of our own spiritual integrity. We look to celebrate Shabbat and holidays so that we don't get so caught up with everything that we forget to take some time for peace, relaxation, and reflection.

"To abstain completely from all enjoyments may be easy. Yet to enjoy life and retain spiritual integrity - there is the challenge." Today, Yom Kippur, is easy. The challenge begins tomorrow evening. And so as we begin Yom Kippur we pray that we find inspiration not just today, but for a lifetime. We pray that in the coming year we will affirm our spiritual integrity every day by finding time for the study of Torah and for reciting prayers, and by celebrating the Shabbat and holidays. We pray that the spirituality that we express today permeates every moment of our lives, through our thoughts, through our prayers, and through our deeds. And let us say, Amen.

¹² Deut 6:6-17.

¹³ Mishnah Berachot 2:4, Babylonian Talmud Berachot 16a.