

## Solemnity and Joy on Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur 5776

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Can you imagine a group of Jews getting together, experiencing a High Holy Day worship service, and coming away feeling too good about themselves? That actually happened! Worshipers said, “The service didn’t emphasize sin enough;” and “It was too joyful.”

The occasion was our congregation’s pilot study for *Mishkan HaNefesh*, the new Reform High Holy Day prayer book. A few years ago, Congregation B’nai Israel was in transition, and therefore was late to the pilot process. The first service we tried was *Neilah*, the concluding service for Yom Kippur. In other words, we began at the end, as if we had been detained throughout the High Holy Days, escaping only in time for Yom Kippur’s final hour.

*Neilah* is intended to serve two, seemingly conflicting, purposes: First, that service provides a final opportunity for confession, one last chance to seek forgiveness of our sins in the last year. *Neilah* means “locking,” the metaphor being that we must atone before the gates of repentance are slammed shut for the year. As that final moment approaches, the mood changes. Our prayers seek to instill joy, as we are relieved of the burden that our sins have laid upon us. Therefore, if *Neilah* were the one and only High Holy Day service, worshipers might come away asking, “Is that day really about sin and repentance? Or is it about renewal and joy?”

Later this afternoon, our entire congregation will have the opportunity to experience a more finalized version of the *Neilah* Service in *Mishkan HaNefesh*, one that seems to have taken our pilot group’s response seriously. I don’t think you will leave feeling that sin has been insufficiently addressed. At the same time, I also hope that you will break the fast with gladness, not only happy to eat and drink once again, but because of the good feeling that comes from faith in a God who is not only judgmental, but also loving and forgiving, even gracious.

Both solemnity and joy are required for our Yom Kippur experience to be complete.

Jewish mystics have longed observed an unusual linguistic similarity between Yom Kippur and Purim. With just a slight change of vowel markings, the Hebrew name of this holy day, *Yom Kippurim*, Day of Atonement, could be read,

*Yom K'Purim*, a day like Purim. At first glance, the likeness seems to be no more than a semantic coincidence. Could two holidays be more dissimilar than Purim, a day of frivolity; and Yom Kippur, a day of fasting?

Purim celebrates a miracle, apparently without God's intervention. The Jewish people is threatened with extinction, at the hands of an evil ruler. Esther, having hidden her Jewish identity in order to rise to royalty, finally unmask herself to her husband, the King, and the plot is foiled. God, according to the rabbis, is present only "behind the curtain," the divine hand evidenced in the righteous acts of the story's heroes, Esther and her cousin Mordechai.

I wonder if Yom Kippur isn't similar.

Once again, we are faced with destruction – only this time, each of us is at stake individually, rather than all of us, collectively. One may say that our misdeeds threaten us "only" spiritually, not with the physical annihilation our people face before the Purim story turns rosy. But sin is real and it is pernicious. Therefore, we began Yom Kippur with solemnity, with *Kol Nidre*.

Last night, we heard the familiar words intoned to that haunting melody. Most of us focus on the moment, not the words. The Torah scrolls before us, we may also see our own reflections in the windows, transformed into mirrors at nightfall. We consider our misdeeds of the past year.

*Kol Nidre* is not a prayer; it's a legal formula, meant to absolve us of vows that we have taken but failed to fulfill. If we read the words, not so literally translated, we may even imagine that we are excused from fulfilling any promise we've ever made, so long as we really have made an effort.

*Kol Nidre* comes from a time when Jews were likely to utter too many vows in God's name, and to take those commitments too seriously. The rabbis felt the need to devise a way to release people from these promises, to grant them a path to a renewed life.

Our own day could not be more different. We take too few vows, and don't take them seriously enough.

Adultery is the most potent example, as evidenced in this year's headlines.

Ashley Madison is the innocent-sounding name of a web site that promises a "discrete" opportunity for one married person to connect with another, with

forbidden romance in mind. Ashley Madison's vile slogan: "Life is short. Have an affair."

The numbers are staggering. Hackers released the names of 37 million men and women who at least contemplated adultery through Ashley Madison. And that's only one portal. People don't often tell researchers, "I have committed adultery." Still, the most conservative studies estimate that, at minimum, one-quarter of married Americans engage in an extra-marital affair at some point during a marriage. That's even more than the Ashley Madison 37 million.

Adultery is not a victimless sin. Marriages are broken. Children are damaged. Hope is lost.

Marriage is hardly the only broken vow we may contemplate this Yom Kippur. Some vowed never to drive after having "just a drink or two," while others swore not to let the cell phone be a distraction behind the wheel. Maybe we got away with it; maybe not. Maybe we didn't cause a serious accident, but our sin led to irreparable harm anyway, since our children will learn from the bad example they witnessed. Still more vows broken: We undertook an obligation to be more charitable. We promised ourselves that we would express gratitude, saying "thank you" with a call, an email, a text, or even an old-fashioned note on stationery. We declared that 5775 would be the year that we would be more patient.

*Kol Nidre* – all these vows, have been broken, perhaps more than one, by each person in this and every congregation. We gather at Yom Kippur for a reason: Our sins are many and varied, and their wages are high. We have caused harm. Our misdeeds threaten to destroy our souls, just as surely as Haman was poised to extinguish Jewish lives.

And just like in Esther's Shushan, God does not seem to intervene.

No, God is not here to save us; only we can turn away from sin. We have work to do – three kinds of work, in fact: repentance, prayer, and acts of righteous giving – a labor-intensive endeavor. Sincere effort isn't sufficient. The adulterer must actually come clean, stop cheating, accept the consequences, whatever they are, and seek to repair all the broken lives. Each driver must stop drinking and put down the phone – and that means me, on the latter account. Now, we must start giving charitably. Now, we must express gratitude whenever thanks are due. Now, we must stop the ego-driven fuming when a line is taking

too long, as though our time were more important than everyone else's. You name it, you're the sinner; we all are. Whatever our sins, we must repent. Change our ways. Make amends. That's why we're so solemn today. That's why our pilot study group wanted all that self-flagellation, even at Yom Kippur's final hour.

Ah, but therein lies the joy. Here, in our repentance, God is present – albeit behind the veil, acting through humans – as on Purim. God has ordained the process by which we may be forgiven, whatever our sin. Before the gates close this Yom Kippur, we have the opportunity to take new vows, to make promises that we must keep this year, so that 5756 really may be a better year.

Loyalty can replace adultery. Attentiveness can replace distracted driving. Generosity can replace stinginess. Gratitude can replace thoughtlessness. Humble kindness can replace the impatient tantrum.

Righteousness can replace sin in the New Year, if we will only make the change. Joy will replace solemnity on Yom Kippur, if we believe in the change.

Rabbi Sharon Brous distinguishes between the joy of Purim and that of Yom Kippur. On Purim, we express joy when we “get dressed up and show the two per cent of us that doesn't necessarily reflect the best of who we are, but instead reveals who we think [other people want] to see.” On Yom Kippur, we experience much deeper joy, if we will unmask ourselves like Esther before the King. We may know gladness that emanates from our true selves, when we have revealed our deepest scars, our most searing flaws, and then turned away from them instead of running away from them.

Later this afternoon, when we hear the shofar's final blast, may we rejoice: Not because we aren't sinners. Not because we've been to a great party. Not even because we're about to eat. No, let us rejoice, because we have confronted our truest selves, and have made way for a better year ahead.

Let that be God's will. Let that be our will. And let us say: Amen.