

Erev Yom Kippur 2008
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Did you ever wonder why synagogues around the world are filled to capacity on Yom Kippur? People seem to come out of the woodwork. Neighbors who never set foot in a temple on any other occasion suddenly appear on this holiest of days. People who we wish would join our congregation don't want to be involved all year, but on this day, they feel the need to come. There is something special about Yom Kippur that draws people, calls to them, and touches their souls.

Judaism is a culture and religion of community. No one even thinks about observing the High Holy Days alone. Not only would it not be the same experience, I don't even think it could be done. What people come for then, is connection: connection with ourselves, connection with community and connection with God.

Why is connection with ourselves so important? The essence of Yom Kippur is about forgiveness. But how can we know what sins need to be forgiven until we search deep into our souls? In order to do that, we need to be honest with ourselves. Telling the truth can be hard – we don't want to admit our weaknesses. But that is precisely what we must do. It requires integrity and the willingness to take responsibility for our feelings and behavior. Only then will we be able to soften the hardness locked away inside and open our hearts to the possibility of forgiving and being forgiven by others. Forgiveness mends our psyche and restores wholeness. When we know ourselves and what we are capable of, then we can change our behavior. We can become kinder, gentler, more loving to ourselves. We can learn to honor that we were made in the image of God.

Why is connection with community important? According to the Talmud, all Jews are responsible one for another. Community provides us with social interaction and shapes our world. It gives us friendships, companionship, people with whom to share our *simchas* and *tzuris* – our joys and sorrows. Building a community means reaching out to people in our congregation, welcoming them, sharing a meal, being there in times of trouble. It gives us a sense of belonging and makes us feel less alone. Community also gives us the power to engage in *tikkun olam*, righting the wrongs we see around us, and making the world a better place. From the rabbinic perspective, individual acts potentially influence the whole world's fate. And so we engage in projects of social justice, like feeding those who are hungry, providing safe places for victims of domestic violence, and making medical care available to those who cannot afford it. Community is the fabric that weaves our individual selves into a multi-colored cloth with a strength that is greater than the sum of its parts. Community is what you can rely on when you alone are not enough.

Our connection with God is the manifestation of the covenant that was made with Abraham so long ago. We praise God for the wonders in the world all around us; the magnificence of creation. We thank God for the numberless blessings that fill our days. We petition God to remove our faults and to give us that which we lack in our lives, praying for strength and hope and love. On Yom Kippur there is a fourth kind of prayer, that of confession and introspection. God is present in every act of kindness; every good deed. How do we connect with God? I can't give you the answer to that. We each find our own way. It doesn't matter what your level of Hebrew or Jewish knowledge is; this is not about skill. What is important is your intent and the unique expression of your

spirituality. The following story is particularly inspiring for all of us who struggle with finding God.

There once was a villager who, during the Days of Awe, used to pray in the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue. This man had a son who was such a simpleton that he could not even recognize the shapes of the letters nor recite a single prayer. Each year the man left his son home when he went to the synagogue, for he told himself, "What good will it do to bring such a fool to pray?"

But when the boy became thirteen, the age of bar mitzvah, his father decided to take him to synagogue on Yom Kippur, for he feared that the boy would eat out of ignorance on the fast day.

Now the boy always carried a flute with him, because he spent his days tending sheep on the mountain. This day, too, as he and his father traveled to Medzibozh, he carried the little flute in his pocket. That evening during Kol Nidre, he resisted many times the urge to take out the flute and play it. And all the next morning, during the long morning service, he tried to put the flute out of mind and instead concentrate on the strange black letters swimming before his eyes in the prayerbook. But when it finally came time for the *musaf* prayer, he tugged on his father's sleeve and asked if he might play a tune on his flute.

"Heaven forbid!" cried his father in alarm. "Not now." So the boy restrained himself. But when the time for *minhah* came, he again asked his father if he might play the flute. Again his father forbade him.

"If only I could take it away from you," said his father, "and so remove from you the temptation to sin, but I am forbidden even to touch such things today." Still, as a precaution, he held onto the boy's pocket so that the boy could not take out the flute and play.

As the service drew to a close, the boy could no longer restrain himself. Just before the start of the concluding Neilah prayers, he threw off his father's hand, grabbed the flute, and blew a single powerful note upon it. In horror the father looked toward the Baal Shem Tov, expecting to see fierce anger blazing in his eyes. But to his great surprise, the Baal Shem Tov's face was calm, and his voice betrayed no agitation as he swiftly chanted the Neilah prayers. Listening more closely, the father heard in the rabbi's voice a marvelous sweetness he had never heard before.

At last the service was over. As soon as the final shofar blast was blown, the father rushed forward to apologize for his son's improper behavior. But before he had a chance to say a word, the Baal Shem Tov smiled at him and said, "Do not be angry with your son, for the voice of his flute eased my burden. In his heart burned such purity of purpose that his prayer lifted up all the others, carrying them straight up to the gates of heaven."

Like the boy in the story, each of us has to find our own way to talk with God. What is important is that you be who you are, at what ever point you are at in your Jewish journey; that you find your own voice. What is meaningful to one person may not be meaningful to another. It could be prayer, music, helping humanity or saving the planet. Each of us has something to say and something to contribute.

We have all come here tonight searching for meaning and some kind of connection. The gates are still open. There is yet time to look deeply into our souls and find that for which we desire to be forgiven. Usually we think of Yom Kippur as a

somber, sad day. But the Talmud actually classifies it as a happy day in keeping with its intended spirit, for it is a day of reconciliation between people and God and between one person and another. Let this holiday be one of connection for you, that you may come to know yourself and the changes you desire, that you find it in your heart to forgive, that you reach out to someone in need and help build community, and that you strengthen your relationship with God.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with this poem.

A woman doesn't meet her God every day,
A man doesn't always feel his prayers,
Not every hour is one of grace.
We fall, we fail,
To the end of our road.
We turn back only to lose our way yet again,
To wander in search of forgotten paths.
But God holding a candle
Looks for all who wander, all who search.

Shanah tovah.