

Kol Nidrei

Sermon Part 1

There is a tale told about the last days of Moses, although there are those who claim that this happened during one of the forty days Moses spent with God on the mountain during the revelation process. It seems he really did not want to die before achieving his dream, and he kept on arguing with God. He finally asked God, "So, how can I die if I don't know whether what I did made any difference?" He might have thought that that would stump God, and then Moses could stay alive for a long time. God, surprisingly, told him to turn around and Moses then found himself in the back row of what we might recognize as a classroom. In the front of the classroom a teacher was discussing something to do with, well, numbers and shadows, letters within letters and crowns upon the letters. Moses couldn't figure out what any of this had to do with him, and his puzzlement was not unique in that room. Another student got up and asked the teacher, "Where are you getting all of this?" The teacher answered, "It is Jewish law as given to Moses on Sinai." Moses was content, presuming that people would not forget him. In that Midrash, Moses is shown how Akiba dies, and God reminds Moses that he is not God.

I would like to extend this tale a bit, and relate what else Moses was shown on the day that God convinced him enough was enough.

Unlike the previous trips, this next one was dreamlike. God explained it, telling Moses, "These people you are about to meet do not live near each other, and some of them do not even know about each other. Still, I think you will find what they have to say to each other, if they happened to meet, rather interesting."

Each of the people standing in the circle loom larger than life, and Moses pays close attention, for while stature is not the most important aspect of a person, he has always found that it gives a person's words a bit of extra weight.

Person 1: "Observing the seventh day has not been a problem for us. From the time our ancestors arrived here everything we do is simply recognized as a thing that Israelites do."

Person 2: "What I wouldn't give for such a nice reaction to the tradition! We have always tried to keep Shabbat, sometimes even to suicidal lengths. There was a time when people wouldn't even defend themselves!"

Person 3: "Most of the people are still not defending themselves. The issue isn't when destruction arrives on Shabbat. The issue is the lack of reaction to the ongoing destruction by those who should not be here."

Person 4: “Defense is not the issue. The problem is that nobody respects the traditions, not really, since people keep on paying attention to all the rabble rousers at the gates.”

Person 5: “I have always thought that the tradition was the main thing keeping you all together. Everyone else seems to agree that some of us are more a part of the group than others of us. Ever since Ezra.”

Person 6: “How could you all have lost the glory that you worked for and was also handed to you on a golden platter? Where is the inner strength, the accolades given to the purveyors of pageantry?”

Person 7: “How come I’ve never seen anyone like you before? You look more like me than these pale others. Our families must have left about the same time, for I hear the wonderful word glory.”

Moses notices that one of the figures is not participating in the conversation and is the only one who doesn’t appear anxious for another opportunity to speak. He interjects – “What about you? What have you to say?”

Person 8: “This is all a sideshow. The main point is to prepare for the end.”
“The end?”

Person 8: “It will all end soon, and good will win if enough of us mindfully join together on its side.”

“And Shabbat? The Tabernacle? What of those?”

Person 8: “A soldier in the fight is not concerned with those things outside of the local community. We do as we do, and let all others choose their wrong paths with hard won equanimity.”

Person 9: “When you give up being connected to others, you lose part of the means of connecting with God. Through this dream God has shown me the fragmentations of my own soul. May it be his will that I use the memories from this dream sequence to find the right teaching that will keep us as a people from further fragmentation.”

Moses turned to God. “I am so confused. You have informed me that these individuals do not know about each other or live near each other. Where is the unity of purpose you had me try to develop?”

“Moses, will you believe me when I tell you that there is a unity of purpose?”

“I’m not a Joseph, so I hope you don’t imagine that I will be able to figure it out on my own.”

“Moses, if you haven’t figured it out by end of our time together, I’ll give you some hints.”

Sermon Part 2

“Moses, I need to set the stage for the next group you will witness. For the most part, the Israelites you lead wear the same garb, which is why I went into so much detail concerning the clothing for Aaron and family. In this later age, people are not always dressed exactly the same as other people unless they choose to do so. Once a group has made a garment choice, especially one which differentiates them from other people, the individuals who belong to that group will continue to make that same choice. This creates a visual shorthand. Just as you would correctly assume that the person wearing Aaron or Eliezer’s clothes is the Kohen Gadol, when people see different kinds of clothing on a person they assume that person has particular viewpoints.

“On this day, a group of people who are not from the same group have wound up in a place where they are all dressed alike. There are no visual shortcuts.”

Person 1: “The ancients would have reached the same conclusions, had they the same concepts we have learned. There is no newness to be argued against – it is merely relearning what some have already known.”

Person 2: “The problem is not newness. Not really. I’m not in favor of newness, actually, but the issue is somewhat different. The issue is that most people seem to rely on others for their understandings of plain text. Words have meaning, and that meaning is what the words themselves say – not what some “expert” claims to have uncovered.”

Person 3: “Yet is it not obvious that the ancients did not reach the same conclusions these others would have you believe they did? If they knew these things as is being claimed, isn’t the fact that we act the way we do proof enough that the knowledge is not sufficient to change traditional actions?”

Person 4: “I don’t understand why you are arguing about the minimal effect of knowledge, whether new or not. Actions and choices make for drastic change. Choosing survival is the utmost value, and in a hostile environment much has needed to be jettisoned.”

Person 5: “The stuff you threw out should never have been there in the first place.”

Person 6: “How can you claim that knowledge is minimal? Say rather that our knowledge is minimal, and we need to work hard on learning what our texts have always said, and not rely on those who are not even part of the community to try and tell us how outdated our texts are as opposed to theirs.”

Person 7: “What do we care what their opinions are of our texts? The texts are there, to be studied appropriately with the proper teachers. If any other conclusions are obvious, we will reach them with the help of generations of teachers.”

Person 8: “Listen, friends, I don’t know why you worry about this. The text is not the essence. The essence is our joy, despite what life might bring.”

Person 1: “Joy? Joy doesn’t train future generations. Only increased knowledge will help our children know what is important from the past and what to do in the future.”

Person 6: “Yes, but your type of knowledge diminishes our children’s inheritance. They will spend time learning the new knowledge, and they will no longer have time to remember that which they have been taught.”

Person 2: “And I tell you yet again, it is not their learning which is to be guarded against, but the teaching that has been shoved down their throats.”

“God,” Moses said, “I am really confused. How can learning be a good thing, a bad thing, and a threat if certain people are teaching? Doesn’t all learning come from You in the first place?”

“I thank you for the vote of confidence. Did this conversation help you figure things out yet?”

“I’m not sure I heard a conversation – merely a bunch of words meant to convince, not to communicate.”

“You’re getting warmer.”

Sermon part 3

“Moses.”

“Yes, God?”

“You remember how some people joined you when the group left Egypt? Did you notice how it seemed that some of them fit in right away, and others took a little bit longer?”

“Well, I was a bit busy, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“By the time of this next conversation, people only sometimes fit in well together, and time doesn’t seem to be making it any easier.”

Person 1: “It has come around again, like it does every year. Why do people feel that they need to be commanded in order to take advantage of an opportunity to become better?”

Person 2: “My question is why worry about the day in the first place. Any good time management system will get you the same results, without eating into the workweek or weekend.”

Person 3: “That would seem to keep the day from uniting us.”

Person 4: “How can you say we are united? Which we do you mean?”

Person 3: “Obviously, the “we” that take advantage of the special day.”

Person 5: “I don’t see how most of you can declare yourselves to take advantage of the day. There’s no appreciation for tradition, and without tradition, what do you have? Simply one person’s idea of what should be, and that person might be wrong.”

Person 6: “What always disturbs us is how you all think you are different, when from the outside you are the same. You all think you know the best way to accomplish anything, when my people have seen that what you think is the best way is simply the way that works for you.”

Person 1: “But we invite everyone in to our celebration, and that seems to work for all of them.”

Person 7: “And do you accept them in the place where they are?”

Person 1: “Of course. At least for some things.”

Person 3: “Yet don’t our traditions tell us what to do on this special day? We should also look at our traditions to see who should be involved?”

Person 8: “Yet you are all on the outside, looking in. There is a cohesion when you are on the inside, and the only way to be on the inside is to actually be on the inside.”

Person 2: “It feels like your inside is wrapped around yourself so much that everyone else, who is also inside, just seems like they are outside.”

Person 8: “How can they be inside when they don’t have traditions?”

Person 6: “That’s what I have been telling you. They all do have traditions. Some of them are a bit newer than others, but from the actual outside (which my group prides itself on) they are all equally traditionally based on newfangled concepts.”

Person 2: “I don’t see how that makes any sense at all. We should be figuring out how the celebration of this day will communicate the specialness of our traditions (no matter how old) to the next generation, and convince them that specialness is ok.”

Person 1: “But we aren’t special. Only our message is special, and most people seem to have picked up on a lot of it already.”

Person 9: “So the point of it all is ...?”

Each member of the group started thinking up an answer to this question, and it seemed to Moses that every time a member would begin to

speaking, they thought better of it, finding a way for those who disagreed to shoot the idea down.

“God?”

“Yes, Moses?”

“Can you explain a bit of what I heard? I’m afraid it isn’t sinking in as quickly as I would like it to.”

“Well, I will summarize what you heard so far. The first group were quite briefly discussing their relationship to law and tradition. Each group has a tradition to which it relates, and every tradition is based on Torah. The traditions are different, which makes that era much more enjoyable from my perspective. The second group, as you remember, was concerned with education. It was another difficult age when everything seemed to be changing. Some liked the changes, some hated the changes, but in the end (eventually) everything changed, in slightly different ways. See how brilliant the people are?”

“I am afraid that the last set of conversations is more murky. You might remember Akiba and the crowns? By this time, so much had been hung on those crowns that they were starting to bend, almost breaking. Every group has a different idea of what to do about it, and sometimes the answer arrived at involves ignoring all other options.

“I once was going to start over again with you, if you remember, and you talked me out of it. Many of these groups imagine themselves to be you, and anticipate that I am starting over with them.”

“Why do you let them think that?” asked Moses.

God replied, “Because it is much more interesting that way. Just think of how many right answers our Torah has helped them find!”

It is quite likely that Moses experienced more conversations, enough of them that he was satisfied that this ideal he and God had been promoting was going to last, in one version or another, for quite some time. These conversations are beyond our reach until we get there the old fashioned way, one moment at a time.

The message I hope to have imparted tonight through the medium of Midrash is simple. It’s all Jewish. The people you agree with, the people you disagree with, and the people you just don’t understand. All of them, anyone who continues to struggle in order to figure out what needs to be done so that our job as God’s partners can be best accomplished, and anyone who is already working to leave this world better than they found it. We don’t do this Jewish thing the same way. Maybe, in the end, we will all realize how good a thing it is that the Judaism we live can be as unique as the aspect of the Divine Image that we individually reflect.

As we continue through this Yom Kippur and beyond, let's resolve to remember that the struggle with and about God is what unites us in this Jewish adventure, which I firmly believe is nowhere near completed.