

Kol Nidrei 5776

It has been an understanding among Jews that the part can be considered the equal of the whole. When we recite the last 6 Psalms in the morning, it is as if we had recited the whole thing, for example. So it was an early practice on Shabbat morning to read a bit from the Torah, read a bit from one of the prophetic books, and recite a Psalm with its special melody. In this way, every week the people “read” through the entire TaNaKH.

I would like to take a few moments tonight and expand on the interesting connections made between the two texts. Our first set of texts refer to the reading we will do tomorrow morning.

“Is this the fast”

Torah: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you all shall practice self-denial ... It shall be a day of complete rest for you –

Rabbi: Wait a minute. What about all the animals slaughtered? What kind of self-denial is that? How is bringing my animals whom I would have slaughtered anyway any kind of self-denial?

Prophet: So the wicked are like the restless sea, incapable of rest.

Rabbi: I asked about the dead animals, and you give me words about rest? If the wicked are incapable of rest, then they can't keep any of the

important days anyway, and are you saying they should be punished for what they can't help?

Prophet: We practiced self-denial, and You did not know. ... What kind of self-denial did you practice? Was it one where you denied the self, or was it one where you hoped everyone noticed how much self-denial you were practicing? This is self-denial: remove limitations which are evil, free the fettered, share the wealth you think is yours with those who lack it, notice the freezing and warm them, never ignore your children. When you make the day of rest a day of rest, and not just another business day, you will have begun to remove wickedness from yourselves and can regain the heights of goodness.

Rabbi: The wicked cannot rest, according to Isaiah. The wicked are not able to tolerate or handle Shabbat. Shabbat is a day of acknowledging that God is in control, which means that we are not. The wicked have the most amount of trouble with the thought that they are not in control. Each of us sometimes has trouble remembering that Shabbat is different. It is only when we act differently on Shabbat than during the rest of the week that we are able to realize that we can rest, since we cannot do it all. From there, it is a comparatively simple step to start noticing the people around you, and see their needs.

The Torah text indicates that atonement is a vicarious act performed by the High Priest. As long as you have not cut yourself off from the people you are included. If this continued, then people could behave badly and presume that Yom Kippur took care of it for them. The text from Isaiah reminds us that atonement is not enough. Atonement must be combined with Teshuvah, repentance, for it to have any true meaning. As Isaiah put it - Personal avoidance of wickedness and personal action befitting God's partner is also required in order for God to approve of what you did in preparation for this day.

God is a pretty self-reliant entity. Sometimes, we forget that. In the texts being explored a little bit next, a couple of people in different eras of time took it upon themselves to act as God's arms. Let's take a listen to how that worked out for them.

Elijah's end

Torah: Pinchas and his descendants will have my eternal peace covenant because he acted jealously on my behalf.

Rabbi: Is Pinchas the only one who acted out of jealousy for God? What about Elijah? When we compare what Elijah did with what Pinchas did, why should Pinchas get such a big reward?

Prophet: Elijah said, "I have been quite zealous on your behalf, despite the fact that the people are destroying your altars and prophets are being completely destroyed, and the only thing I have to show for it is that I am the only one left – and they want to kill me as well."

Rabbi: Really? You are the only one left? For those who might not remember, just a tiny bit before Elijah spoke those words he was told that there were a number of the faithful who had run away to the caves and had been kept alive by some of Ahab's servants. Elijah, I think you either need to take a nap or wake up!

Prophet: Stand near the mountain and God will pass by. A wind came which broke tree limbs, yet God was not there. After the wind passed, there was a noisy shaking and God was not there either. Then fire sprang up without God being present. When these all died down, there was quiet you could hear, and within the quiet God passed by.

Rabbi: So, Elijah, are you awake yet?

Prophet: Elijah repeated, “I have been quite zealous on your behalf, despite the fact that the people are destroying your altars and prophets are being completely destroyed, and the only thing I have to show for it is that I am the only one left – and they want to kill me as well.”

Rabbi: We can be pushed too far. Elijah was. He knew about the true believers in the cave. He also heard with his own ears how the people professed their faithfulness to God after Ba'al couldn't arrange for an animal to be burned. God could arrange for a lightning strike to render a damp critter crispy. Still, the Queen wanted Elijah dead, so even after experiencing God pretty directly, Elijah was ready for retirement. He couldn't see any good coming out of the newer generation, and he really didn't want to expend the effort it would take to last long enough to see it happen.

Often it happens that both the new and the old think they are abandoned and left to muddle along on their own, but the song from “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolored Dreamcoat” says it best: “Children of Israel are never alone.”

Imagining that what we do has no effect on the other people around us is the height of arrogance. Only an Elijah at the end of his term can be excused for being a bit arrogant. The rest of us would do well to remember that we matter. The details we can leave up to God.

Korach and Saul

Two transition times are placed together. Soon after the story of the spies, we have Korach's rebellion. If everyone was going to die before leaving the wilderness, why leave things as they are? The book of Samuel describes another transition era – between being rescued by God through military leaders called Judges, and being rescued by a King.

Torah: All of the people are holy since God is in their midst, so why do you act so high and mighty?

Rabbi: When nobody leads, then those who would like to follow get lost. When leaders make fairly large mistakes, then everyone seems to take advantage of the opportunity to make a change. Sometimes that happens even when the leaders have not been making any major mistake.

Prophet: Did I not tell you earlier that the people said to Samuel, "Look, you have gotten old and your children are nothing like you. It is time to give us a King like everyone else has!"

Rabbi: Being reasonable is always possible. Moses tried to act reasonably, and given everything going on, Samuel did as well. Having people react to that reasonableness reasonably is something else entirely.

Torah: We will not meet you. Do you think it is a tiny thing to promise a land flowing with milk and honey and deliver death in the wilderness

instead? Your tongue ensnares all these other men, for you are far too high and mighty! We will not meet you!

Prophet: Did not the people earlier reply to Samuel, “No! We will have a King! We will be like everybody else, and our King will judge us, and lead us, and fight our battles!”

Rabbi: You know, I knew that it did not take being a bad guy for people to give you a bad time. If I didn’t, the following refrain separated by centuries would let me know exactly how disappointing people sometimes are.

Torah: I have not taken a single donkey from them, neither have I made life worse for any one of them!

Prophet: Answer me this in front of God and the anointed King – Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Have I treated anyone unethically, improperly, or simply with greed?

Rabbi: Now, in case you forgot, Korach and the gang back in the days of Moses were swallowed up by the earth, as a fairly graphic indication that God wasn’t pleased with them. The folks in Samuel’s time were treated to a different pointed lesson involving the earth. The rainy season was finished for the year, and Samuel made it rain, ruining the crops. Naturally enough, there was a reaction.

Torah: So all the people complained the next day, declaring, “You are killing God’s people!”

Prophet: Pray for your servants to God, since we have added to our list of mistakes the mistake of wanting a King.

Rabbi: There is growth. Just remember that, when things seem to be overwhelmingly oppressing. If the Israelites can learn a little bit over time, then so can we. The concept of responsibility was slowly becoming part of the Israelite psyche. As responsible people, they know they can do wrong. Now they actually get the point. The Judge of that era was the link between them and what God wanted from them. When they decided to forgo having Judges, then they were required to actually pay attention to what God wants.

So do we. At least, from this end of history, it isn’t as difficult to figure out what our tasks are. I have mentioned a few tonight.

We have to avoid choosing to act wickedly. We should act in such a way that people can easily state that we are a fitting partner for God. What is hardest is to remember that we matter. Sometimes we can forget that, especially if the rest of the world seems to be ignoring us. God doesn’t. All the other relevant details I will leave in God’s capable control.