

Today is Yom Kippur.

How should we feel, think and act?

Are we hung up on talismanic incantations and formulaic rituals? (That brings to mind the Torah reading and much of today's liturgy.)

How tempting to transcend the merely ritual, to concern ourselves with lofty ideals and values! (That brings to mind the Haftorah reading from Isaiah.) We need both of them; they work together beautifully. Consider this Yom Kippur poem by Marcia Falk. Called "Nothing."

Nothing. You began as nothing and you will end as nothing. And in between –everything, and nothing. In between--joy and sorrow, beauty and decay. Everything yours to partake of, yours to bear. Yours to see, to know, to give birth to—and to let go. None of it is yours to have.

Not even you are yours to have. You belong to a wholeness so great you cannot even conceive of it.

No, it is not a belonging; nothing owns you. You are simply part of it. You came out of it and you will return to it. You do not ever leave it, you are part of it forever.

And this is your moment to be alive.¹

We must make this our moment to be alive. According to the Talmudic Rabbis, the righteous even in death are called "living" and the wicked even in life are

¹Marcia Falk, *The Days Between*

called “dead.” Rabbi Nathan Lopez Cardozo, a contemporary Rabbi,² frets that “The great tragedy of our generation is that for many of us, even as we enter Yom Kippur and observe its laws, there is no longer a feeling of *pachad* (fear) or of trembling before God. We have lost the art of grasping the greatness of the day. It becomes more and more difficult each year. Even when we fast and say the prayers, we are not haunted by the question of having been created versus not having been created. In secular society, there is no longer a feeling of shame regarding what we do with our lives. Anything goes. We have been deadened by daily needs, occupations and pleasures. (We are 'alrightniks' – neither contrite nor even embarrassed.”)³

Today we have a chance to aim truly upward, for complete teshuvah. How? In *Orot HaTeshuvah*, (Lights of Penitence)⁴ Rav Kook advocated an elevated outlook on life and the world:

“Teshuvah that is truly complete requires a lofty perception, an ascent to the rarefied world that is replete with truth and holiness. This is only possible by delving into the depths of Torah and Divine wisdom.... (Only the higher Torah can break down the iron barriers that divide the individual and society as a whole from their heavenly Father.”)^{5 6}

Let's follow Rav Kook's exhortation to delve into the depths of Torah. Today's Torah reading opens right after the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Abihu. They died, suddenly and mysteriously. We know (so) little about the community and time in which our ancestors offered their sacrifices. I myself have trouble

²See cardozoacademy.org for more about and by Rabbi Cardozo

³Dropped in delivery

⁴Included in a volume of writings by Rav Kook that I received from Max Ticktin's library

⁵Dropped in delivery

⁶ **Source: Rav Kook: Silver from the Land of Israel**, pp. 72-73. Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah, p.

sometimes getting a common match to ignite. However, no matter our differences there is no doubt that our ancestors had similar emotions and basic human needs. Aaron was speechless when his sons died. Our teacher Max Ticktin, z"l, always pointed out that sentence, wondering what kind of father would not have said something for the record. I wonder whether Aaron was so upset that perhaps what he had to say could not be recorded in a family publication. Meanwhile, Aaron was still the High Priest and had to continue serving God and the Israelites. My mother died at the end of Pesach. I am no high priest, but I still have to observe Yom Kippur despite grief. The notion that one could make a mistake with fatal consequences while trying wholeheartedly to serve God and the Jewish people by carrying out a prescribed ritual, is very scary. We read a detailed description of the annual cleansing and atoning rituals. We read along twice, first in the Torah service, and then during the Avodah, with a more detailed Mishnaic rendition, as the high priest conducted the rituals that would first atone for his own sins, then the sins of his household, the priests, and finally, the sins of the entire people Israel. Two goats play an important part in the day's happenings. At the end of the day one goat was sacrificed to God and one goat carried all the sins of Israel to Azazel. This Yom Kippur ritual did not happen often enough to become a habit. Just once a year. One chance to get it right. Only on this day does the high priest enter into the holy of holies, four times during the one day. First to bring the incense spoon and pan, bringing to our minds the importance attached to detail. Possibly our ancient ancestors also found at least some aspects of the ritual bizarre. We simply do not know.

In 2016, we no longer sacrifice animals. Many of us have little contact with animals. We would indeed be scared witless even to begin to consider how this ancient ritual might unfold. We know academically that back in the day each

animal offering meant a genuine sacrifice, as it reduced the means of the giver, sometimes very substantially. We know that the process was messy and smelly and unsanitary. It was most likely a hot day, and not comfortable to be part of a crowd of fasting penitents. All the actors were men. One became Kohen or Kohen Gadol through accident of birth, an arbitrary form of fairness. My research uncovered some interesting facts. Before Yom Kippur there was Kohen Gadol prep class, using the ancient equivalent of flash cards, live animals, so that the Priest would be able to identify the sacrificial animals. Bulls, ram, goats. Not the same. They also practiced their prayers. Today we all share in the ancient ritual by reading about it, reacting to what we read, and undertaking our own process of seeking atonement. We don't have the priestly prep class, but we have our Mahzor. We use our sacrificial time to reflect upon the year, aspiring to be closer to our best selves in the year to come. We hope that God will accept our prayers in lieu of the sacrifices. We know that in baking and bridge building, precision is very important, so why not elevate our attention to spiritual matters with similar respect? By the way, our grandmothers' recipes that may have confounded us by asking for a handful of sugar and two handfuls of flour—those come straight from the Torah, which considered the priest's handful a measure; and, for example instructed the priest to place two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense on the altar.⁷ Commentary lists this as one of the three most difficult rituals in the Temple. Rashi said the high priest would practice the

⁷(The Torah-itic commandments about Yom Kippur occur twice in Leviticus and once in Numbers. In Vayikra, Leviticus, chapter 16, we read: “In the seventh month on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self denial. You shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on that day, expiation shall made for you to purify you of all your sins. You shall be pure before the Lord. It shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self denial. It is a law for all time.”)

night before so he would not spill any incense during the delicate maneuver.⁸

So Yom Kippur is not exactly the model of a vacation or a day off. Rather this is a day that is extremely “on.” What keeps us busy on this special day? Yehuda HaLevi observed in the *Kuzari* that pious Jews on Yom Kippur resemble angels. Maybe this is true. Yom Kippur is a major holy day but we don't dress up in finery. The high priest dressed in white linen. Many of us dress in white. We are commanded to abstain from food, drink, bathing, anointing, wearing leather and sexual activity. Aspiring toward the ethereal. Eschewing normal bodily functions. (Also) imitating beginning and end of life. We enter naked and traditionally we are buried in white shrouds. One interpretation of the custom to wear white is that we are indeed imitating angels. Their job is to serve God. Their uniform is plain white. Dead people have no more work to do so also wear white. Yom Kippur is indeed a matter of life and death. Coming up soon in Musaf is one of the most well known prayers, *unetaneh tokef*, which casts God as a shepherd reviewing the flock, simple meaning, military or business style, to count and account for the resources at hand. Still simplistic but a bit deeper, reviewing for selection. Who shall live and who shall die, followed by a chilling list of grim possible ends paired with a soothing set of counterpoints for survival. You probably all know at least one melody of the refrain though we sing it but thrice yearly, on Rosh Hashanah and today. *B'rosb Hashanah ykatavun. U vYom tsom Kippur yehateymun.*⁹ On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. But whether or not we believe in the classic image of a judging God reviewing us and determining our fate, we Jews (unlike our Presbyterian

⁸Yoma (47b) lists *kemitzah*, taking a handful of flour for a meal offering, *melikah*, slaughtering a bird with the priest's fingernail, and *chafinah*, taking the handful of incense, as the three most difficult rituals in the Temple. For this reason, the High Priest spends some time on the night of Yom Kippur practicing the *chafinah*. (Rashi, in Koren Sacks Mahzor)

⁹Sing first line once, then hum a bit

landlords) do not accept pre-destination. On the contrary we do not even take a written verdict--should there be a negative one-- as the last word. We believe instead that teshuvah, tefilah utzedakah maavirin et roah hagzerah. Repentance, prayer, and charity (or good deeds) may avert the severity of the decree. Note, we take this process seriously, but aim for attenuation, or improvement, not cancellation of decrees.

We started the season with shofar **blasts** during the month of Elul. To wake us up gradually. Perhaps some of you use more than one alarm clock to wake up on weekday mornings? My phone alarm grows **louder**, more insistent, until dismissed. We had Selihot, prayers of penitence, starting on Saturday night a week and a half ago. Last week we observed Rosh HaShanah. What have we been doing? Of course, we know this is the season for introspection, reflection, and resolve. We, pardon the expression, vow to do better in the future once we have cleaned our slate. We know that we can atone here only for sins between us and God, that in order to attain peace and wholeness, we have to make personal amends for interpersonal transgressions. And yet, the words above recall, first in the Torah, cleansing and expiation, then in the ancient prayers, ritual--the priestly series of atonements and sacrifice and kappara, where we delivered the collective sins of our kin on the head of the goat destined for azazel, the wilderness. We are careful to prepare for our annual rituals, as we should be, even absent the animal sacrifices. We attend to the sights and sounds of the holiday. Tefilah, the prayers. Teshuvah, the turning away from sin. Tzedakah, giving. We might feel pretty good now, but, after the Torah reading comes the Haftarah. Isaiah. Not a cheery lofty prophetic message, thanks for all the pretty white garments and beautiful decorations in your shul, good job on the fasting, nice chanting, service leaders? NO!!! Isaiah reads us the riot act: if you

think you can dress up and fast together this one day but continue with business as usual outside, forget it. That won't work. We need to direct that careful energy and focus to building a world of hesed, loving-kindness. Rav Kook,¹⁰ whom I quoted above, wrote an entire book about teshuvah, so concerned was he with our souls.

“We should value even partial efforts to change and improve. The Sages praised even *hirburei teshuvah*, the mere desire to improve. Perhaps we are unable to fulfill our spiritual ambitions to the extent we like. Nonetheless, we should view our desire to change¹¹ and improve as tools that purify and sanctify, leading us on our way to attaining complete spiritual elevation.”¹²

Rav Kook observed further: “Whatever a person can correct it is well for him¹³ to concentrate on, and not neglect correcting it. But whatever he cannot correct, let him not continue to dwell on and let him apply the principles: “worry in a person's heart—let him put it out of his mind.”¹⁴ Let him always concern himself with improving himself and with improving the world with the clear guidance of a higher intelligence, to the extent of his ability.”

Teshuvah is hard work. Michael Walzer wrote in *Spheres of Justice* about the difficulty of enjoying a vacation without having first worked hard. At the same time, he suggests that Shabbat is truly egalitarian because the kind of rest it posits cannot be purchased. Yom Kippur--the Sabbath of Sabbaths --is a day

¹⁰ The first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

¹¹ *Pesikta Rabbati* 44.

¹² From *Gold from the Land of Israel*.

¹³ In delivery edited male pronouns to second person singular, i.e., “you”

¹⁴ From Yoma 75a, interpreting Proverbs 12:25

for reflecting on life and death, not so much in the physical sense as in the spiritual sense. Taking a day away from the noisy demands of secular society can indeed be both cleansing and awakening, but it is not easy.

I believe that reading and delving into the ritual expiation of the High Priest and considering the fate of the two matching goats, identical in everything except the ultimate destiny can inspire us to higher energy and true teshuva and pachad.

Rabbi Cardozo again, adds: "But with a little more thought, we Jews can realize how privileged we are to have one day in the year to be jealous of our forefathers' religious authenticity.... Their great secret was trembling in awe of the Master of the World, while fully cognizant that they could actually turn their lives around and say, 'Yes, I was created, and I am worthy.' Just reminding ourselves of this dream makes Yom Kippur a day filled with meaning. We should (at least) dream bold dreams, and we should dream harder."

This is our moment to be alive.

Shana tova and gimru l'hatima tovah.