

Yom Kippur An Orientation In A Drunken World

Welcome

The Yamim Noraim exist as a unit. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment that reads like the early part of the megillah, as a sense of doom sets in; Yom Kippur reads like a later stage when the drinking has taken the edge off. By Yom Kippur, those of us who needed an extension on our *teshuvah* journeys are further along and somewhat caught up. The moon is fuller now—almost full even—a much more reassuring image in the night sky than that sharp sliver of a crescent was on those dark nights of the new moon, Rosh Hashanah. There is some solace in the way God’s light is bathing the world at night, more and more since Rosh Hashanah. But our lives still hang in the balance. And before we even dare hope for relief, on Yom Kippur, we get really, really real.

We wear our burial shrouds. We don’t wear leather or gold because we are reminded of our own failings and we don’t want to remind God that we kill other creatures and once worshipped an idol of one, made of melted jewelry. We refrain from eating *even when hunger returns*, even when ravenousness overwhelms the sense of appetite we lost when we contemplated that we might day in the days ahead and not make it to another Yom Kippur

A beloved teacher once taught me, the test of Shabbat isn’t can you rest for 25 hours; the essence of Shabbat is “can you rest for one minute?” But on this Shabbat Shabbaton, this holiday, we give ourselves 25 hours of the complete experience to let it sink in... because death is not optional.

We forego making love, and anointing ourselves with perfume. We gather here tomorrow, in various stages of hunger, thirst, unadorned Alicia-Keys-on-the-voice authenticity, no-animal-products-adorning us or satiating our bellies... as almost ethereal bodies that will rise above our earthly needs and miraculously survive the deprivation of creature comforts... to be reminded that our daily pursuit of food, drink, sex, soap, and indulgences, tend to distract us from the existential fact of our life—the miracle of it... from our human experience of creativity and spirituality that perhaps brings us closer to the experience of angels than the animals... and can make us less afraid to die.

We rise above our preoccupation with comfort and even with survival. On Yom Kippur, we rehearse our own death. But we also hope for life, and we recommit to doing our part to making this world holy, every day. We choose what kind of world we would want to live in, and we channel our pure potential to act from holiness, with all the light we bring with us from our original source, all the light that this bath of light from the waxing moon summons in us.

We confront death not to diminish hope, but to revive it. As the great Shimon Peres z”l, who so recently passed from this world, famously said—evoking the lessons of Yom Kippur, “Optimists and pessimists die the exact same death. But they live very different lives.”

Yom Kippur An Orientation In A Drunken World

And so we begin tonight with a look to the right and the left of us, knowing we will survive an apology, and offer one, asking forgiveness for forgetting each other's name, not saying hello yet, anything else you might recall from the year, and settling in...

Kol Nidrei Drash

In Tikkunei HaZohar, a late book of the Kabbalistic texts, and in earlier midrash and Hassidic texts, Yom Kippur is rendered Yom k'Purim, the holiday that is like Purim. On the surface, the comparison is boggling. What two holidays could be more different? But this year, the world appears to be closing in on the Rabbinic parallel of Yom HaKippurim to Purim. Everything is upside down and inside out... falling apart around us. *We can't help but feel it acutely, even in the intimacy of our sanctuary.*

The sense of irony in the world resembles what we laugh about on Purim—the drunken idiot is the would-be king, and the righteous and wise, are—instead of being in charge—the ones most persecuted by the reckless and feckless officials. A woman selected as queen *neither* for her intellect nor her leadership-potential is the savviest politician in the palace. And God seems to be hidden when we need God most.

Does our world today not resemble Shushan? The daily news reads like a megillah—and I dare say it could lead some people to drink to drown out the noise.

- Daily, in this country, we are confronted by images of politicians as powerbrokers who are “powerless” to legislate.
- News stations report Innocent lives lost to **police cynicism** about black Americans, alternating with reports on **public cynicism about police** that costs yet more lives.
- Desperate refugees pour out of Syria in search of refuge, yet since terrorists disguise themselves among these millions of **innocents** in order to injure other innocents, *good* countries feel compelled to **deny relief** to those in *genuine* need.
- The income gap between rich and poor is growing wider than ever before, **even in Democratic countries** including the U.S. and Israel, where people have a voice in legislative processes. And social media connects as to one another more than ever before, yet the same screens that bring us into each other's lives keep us further apart than we have ever been from each other.
- We could go on...

Meanwhile, in politics, the equation of notoriety with celebrity seemingly translates the “*ad d'lo yada*” standard of Purim—that level of drunken revelry that we are meant to aim for, i.e. so severe that where we can't discern between opposites so “blessed be mordechai” = “cursed be haman” simply because

Yom Kippur An Orientation In A Drunken World

there *gematria* are equivalent. Like making moral equivalence out of equal media attention or coverage in the megillah among characters who are each other's literary foil, even though if we were sober and they were real, confusing these personae would seem obviously perilous.

Closer to home, perhaps, is the irony that as extremist fringes coopt religion itself, profound traditions of wisdom, healing, and moral clarity are being rendered suspect... so that those ancient legacies and sources of communal well-being and collective healing are losing ground when we need them most. And in the Jewish community, arguably more powerful than ever before in terms of our ability to preserve our tradition, defend our homeland, and connect our people together in the richness of our creative and pluralistic heritage, we are apologizing for our power, relinquishing our claim to wisdom that people still seek from us, and letting divisive arguments polarize us.

Here, at least, in the safety of this sanctuary, *teshuvah* and *tefillah*—coming clean and changing our ways, self-reflection and discernment, asking our Source for help—are still current and they remediate the ironies that plague us. This shul is an incubator for self-improvement and world repair. Here, *tzeddakah* too is not token, but part of a larger vision of manifesting our power to do good in the world, together.

Both Purim and Yom Kippur compel us to stare into the face of what haunts us, to come together and confront what threatens to draw us into despair when we glimpse it alone: the probability of our own end. The truth that I could die tomorrow. Both holidays turn our attention to the randomness that holds sway in the world that could rescue us when all hope is lost and not forgiveness is deserved or that could taek us out at any moment, because uncertainty fills the universe.

Even Spellcheck: yesterday, I was typing a quick note to someone on my phone “shanah tovah umetukah,” I typed. My phone corrected it, “shanah tovah imperiled” it wrote. (Yikes!)

Yet both Purim and Yom Kippur, even as they bring us to gaze into the abyss of our imminent annihilation (puh, puh, puh)—and this year, as world events enhance the effect (even our deep brain, where our system kicks into high gear when our survival seems threatened), bring us together to attune to redemptive responses to despair.

Teshuvah - We turn a litany of missteps that could fracture our relationships with one another and with God into recitals of humbling honesty, to effect atonement, or at-one-ment. *Tefillah* - We turn our attention away from the overwhelming world of cosmic explosions and random collisions of superpowers, cars, and political agendas—that frightening world beyond our discernment—to the internal one, where we can discern our true nature, refine our intentions, sort out our conflicts of

Yom Kippur An Orientation In A Drunken World

interest and the fights that archetypal characters wage within us, and redeem our competing inclinations so that we can be more true to the infinite light within us. *Tzeddakah* - We turn frightening randomness and a fear of karma into random acts of kindness, senseless acts of beauty, and generosity beyond counting.

If Purim is a day of putting on masks, Yom Kippur is a day of taking them off, to the same effect: coming to know ourselves more deeply. Answering that first and persistent biblical question, *Ayeka—where are you? Who are you and how far is that from who you want to be?*

If Purim is a day of reckless “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we [may] die,” then Yom Kippur is a day of playing dead, refraining from eating or drinking until we sense our craving to hold onto life in our *kishkes*... and go past it. Both approaches reconnect with the juice coursing through the Tree of Life, from its roots deep in the ground to the budding tips of its branches ... so we can find ourselves aligned in the middle—that precious middle, between hopelessness and hubris, in *humble* gratitude for life *in this moment* so rich with blessings.

If Purim is about letting go through drunkenness, Yom Kippur is about sobering up and letting go. Yet to the same end: releasing the coil inside of us of worry—both existential and inconsequential, a vital component of a tradition that urges us to “choose life” every day to redeem the world. Jewish tradition recognizes the role of worry in protecting life (so it prescribes a Day of Alarm, Yom Tru’ah, Rosh Hashanah and reminds us of evil that arises in every generation), but also of the role of worry in compromising life—when we get caught up in worry as an m.o or start worrying about minutiae, not essence.

The paradoxes of Purim and the pairing up of Yom HaDin (Rosh Hashanah) with Yom HaKippurim are redemptive. Ultimately, the *megillah* teaches us, taught the Ba’al Shem Tov, that the depth to which we descend defines the potential to which we can rise out of it. That the deeper our despair, the greater can be our redemption, wisdom, and righteousness when we emerge (49 rungs down, proves and renders possible 49 rungs up).

Purim and Yom Kippur play the storyteller’s or the therapist’s role of helping us ease our grip on what is beyond our control and returning us to a sense of connection to eternity, that vast net out of which we cannot fall, no matter how we mess up, how alien we feel, how unfair the hand we’ve been dealt. And gazing directly into the darkness, in the right framework, until the contrasts, ironies, tragedies, and possibilities emerge to our view, can reveal the light.

If we are being treated to an uncensored view of how broken our world is, or how crazy, this will help us bring even more healing than we knew was needed or perhaps imagined possible. Coming

Yom Kippur An Orientation In A Drunken World

together to feel alarm enhances our existential anxiety, yet also relieves it. And honestly confessing faults that divide and embarrass us, atoning and repairing relationship, teaches the Sfat Emet, renders us whole rather than fractured selves, and brings us into at-one-ment even with God.

The mystics teach that at the end of days, there will only be these two holidays, Purim and Yom Kippur. Their proof text comes from verses that refer to these holidays as being for the Jews for all time, and this similarity of the Hebrew words for “lottery” and “atonement”.

Yet the passionate argument for what seems at first ludicrous as a comparison draws from some deeper truth, about these holidays that will be here as long as there are Jews: that we need them. We, a nation of meaning-seekers, who pursue justice in the world yet fear strict justice (for who would survive?), we who are urged, *choose life*, stand before death rather than live in denial. We need this day.

So we walk through the valley of truth together, and we take comfort in our being here together today. The sins that divide us all year long now bring us together. Our human frailty becomes a source of shared connection, our litany of failures becomes a map for improvement. We sweep up our shattered ego like the tablets Moses smashed on the first of Elul, 40 days ago, and we come before God who helped Moses carve a new set of tablets on Yom Kippur. Our fragments remind us of at-one-ment. We recall God’s anger and forgiveness.

Finite, tonight we touch both ends of the spectrum; temporal beings, tonight we touch eternity. May we be written and sealed by tomorrow, in the Book of Life. *G’mar hatimah tovah*.