

## **Kol Nidre 5785**

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There's a famous story, written by the foremost Yiddish author I.L. Peretz, that I've loved for many years. It is set right at this time of year...the season of the High Holy Days...and describes the people of a small town having a fierce debate about the rabbi. It seems that she is disappearing every day...she's not in the synagogue, she's not in the study hall...they can't find her anywhere in town. And the people can't imagine where she might be, right at the time of preparation for the Days of Awe.

One person goes so far as to propose that the rabbi has gone up to heaven to plead on behalf of the people. Ultimately, someone hides and then secretly follows the rabbi. He witnesses her walking out into the forest with a basket full of food, stopping to chop some wood and then going to a poor man who's living in a small decrepit house far from town. She makes him a fire, fixes him something to eat, and then leaves without even waiting for a thank you.

It's a story that urges us to think about how we prepare for the new year and especially for this Day of Atonement. How much are we actually seeing and responding to the needs of the people around us?

In another chasidic story, the wise rabbi sees the young, frantic student trying to get ready for Yom Kippur, obsessively studying the High Holy Day prayer book. She says to the boy, "the pages of the book are the same as they were last year. You are not! You don't need to look at the book, you need to reflect on your behavior, your choices, and your decisions. That's how we prepare to take full advantage of Yom Kippur."

These stories are meant to focus our attention and emotional energy on the essential work of this season, the spiritual practice known as *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul searching.

This year, I had a very special opportunity as part of my High Holy Day preparations. I certainly worked to diligently review the prayerbook, the cues, the choices of readings and texts and other components that help make this season a time of meaning and inspiration.

I also had the opportunity to spend a few days in a very special conversation, at a conference on Jewish-Christian relationships. It was held at Greenville University, a small Christian university in a small town in the cornfields of southern Illinois, east of St. Louis. It's a rural, isolated, and conservative place.

The conference brought together representatives from the Free Methodist universities. Free Methodism is a conservative evangelical movement with five colleges and a number of churches involved. In addition to Greenville, there were participants from Washington state, Michigan, Kansas...and Rochester. Roberts Wesleyan is one of these Free Methodist universities.

The host from Greenville invited a Jewish leader from each of the five locations, to help create a foundation for us to develop meaningful relationships and activities in the coming months. I was lucky to travel to Greenville with the chaplain and a Bible professor from Roberts.

It was a fascinating experience to be in dialogue with these Christian students and professors. The premise of our conversations, which was essential, was that we were together to learn from one another: not to change the other's mind. Our agenda was to create closeness and understanding by celebrating our distinctiveness. Respect was the starting point of these reflective conversations, as it should be anytime we encounter others.

I met one young man who is the fifth generation of his family to live in a small farming town. And when I say small, I mean a total population of 600 people, many of whom are his extended family! He is the first in his family to leave town and go off to college.

Most of the students were from small midwestern towns. Some are theology majors, which is what led them to choose a Christian college, but many were studying a wide range of other subjects...education, engineering, music, and more.

Talking with these students in particular was, for me, a powerful way to prepare for the High Holy Days, because our conversations centered around the meaning and role of faith in their lives. They talk openly and beautifully about their belief in God and how that belief guides their lives.

I was there to help these students learn about Judaism, but it also allowed me to reflect on how we think and talk about religion. It's not often comfortable for us as Jews to talk about God. This was an opportunity for a unique kind of *cheshbon nefesh*...soul searching...as I got ready for the new year to begin.

For each of us, this is a season when we can consider not just the choices we make but whether or not we feel a sense of obligation. Do we feel called or commanded? What role does our Jewish identity play in our lives: not just in terms of participation in rituals like this prayer service, but in terms of all the various commitments we make at home, in the workplace, and in the community?

Kol Nidre is a prayer about our vows. What promises do we make, to ourselves and to others?

The Torah gives us a foundation of mitzvot, so the primary promise we make is, in theory, to uphold the commandments. But Reform Judaism adds an important and challenging element: many in our community don't believe they are commanded and craft a Jewish life by searching out and taking on only those aspects of Judaism that we find to be meaningful.

If I'm being totally honest, I am not entirely comfortable with this premise of total freedom. I do believe that there are certain aspects of Judaism that must be observed...but we need to figure out how to observe them!

Early on in Reform Judaism, there was a distinction drawn between ethical and ritual commandments. If I could turn back time, I would encourage us to avoid making that distinction.

Each year when I take the Confirmation class to Washington, DC, we go up onto Capitol Hill to speak about issues of social justice. And before we begin, we make a blessing about the opportunity to repair the world. It's a ritual moment embedded in an ethical act.

And, when we perform rituals like the fast on this Yom Kippur, we add an ethical component...just as Isaiah urges us to do. The fast is not just a commanded ritual, but an action that can allow us to become more sensitive to the needs of those who are hungry, those who are vulnerable, and those who are suffering. It's a ritual—or if you prefer a spiritual act—that carries significant ethical potential.

My soul searching during this season, during my conversations in Greenville and in more usual places and ways, has inspired me to pose a question. What does our Jewish decision making look like?

How much of our decision making is out of habit or guilt or tradition? And how much of our decision making is a reflection of a serious thought process, considering how we can best honor the heritage that we have inherited and the urgent needs of the world around us?

This isn't a comment offered in the hopes that we boost Shabbat attendance. Rather, I offer these thoughts in a broad, aspirational way. We are living in a time with extraordinary polarization. We are 25 days away from Election Day, and I fear for what will come afterwards, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

And I believe Judaism offers us critically important wisdom. We are told time and again in Torah and Talmud that we should work to create peace.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the remarkably brave and wise mother of Hirsh, who was kidnapped on October 7 and later killed by Hamas, expressed it this way, in a piece she wrote at Passover. “The hatred of the other, whoever we decide that other to be, is seductive and sensuous; and most importantly, hatred is easy. But hatred is not actually helpful nor is it constructive. In a competition of pain, there is never a winner.”

One of the texts we studied in Greenville was a midrash on the book of Exodus, on the moment when revelation occurred at Mt. Sinai. And the midrash teaches us “...not only did all of the prophets receive their prophecy at Sinai, but so to the Sages who arise in each generation, each and every one received his share of the Torah at Sinai...” (Exodus Rabba 28)

It’s a poetic text that tells us that all of the wisdom we need to heal the world is at our fingertips...if only we are able to discern it. If we take our Jewish study, our Jewish practice, and our Jewish decision making seriously, then we have the potential to make a profound difference in a broken world.

In one of our pre High Holy Day study sessions, we looked at the possible meaning behind the sequence of these sacred days...that Rosh HaShana comes first and Yom Kippur comes second. One might argue that it should be the other way around: we should go through the cleanse first and then start the new year fresh and pure.

But, the order given to us in the Torah is deliberate: we start the year and then come to this day of soul searching and reflection. That is because we engage in this work in an ongoing way throughout the year. We’re never done.

Just as the rabbi knew that she couldn't remain isolated and that the best way to prepare for the Holy Days was to respond to the plight of those who are suffering, we too should see this day as a time to open our eyes and consider our obligation to one another. We need to stretch ourselves and push ourselves out of our comfort zones. We need to be in honest and genuine relationships with people who think and believe in different ways.

There are countless ways we can define what we must do this year. My prayer, as we gather on this sacred night, is that we will recognize our potential, first implanted in us at Mt. Sinai, and work with all of our abilities. Let us unite in all of our awesome, holy, messy, and challenging differences. May God bless us, and may we hear God's blessing, leading us to right and good action.

Amen.