

Kol Nidre: Threats More or Less Real, & Their Antidotes

- Basil Herring

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Threats More or Less Real, & Their Antidotes

As you will surely have noticed, over these High Holidays our synagogue, as have most others, secured the services of additional security personnel, in light of the recent incidents that have made us all aware of the unwelcome activities and proclivities of certain unbalanced individuals as well as racist fringe groups, as directed against Jews, among others. We have done so, entirely correctly, as a precaution, the better to be safe than sorry. But necessary as such steps are, we should also be aware of a very real cost, and I do not mean a financial one, that we pay as a community, on a more long-term basis, as to what in fact are the real dangers that we face as a minority group in the great, and quilted, fabric of American life.

For many years, indeed generations, antisemitism in America has been a potent, and recognized threat to Jews. Over the past century, God knows, there has been no shortage of bigoted rabble-rousers, hooded Klansmen, America-First right-wing isolationists, WASP clubs and corporations honoring so-called Gentlemen's Agreements, and the usual elitist, and exclusionary, upperclass social circles. In more recent years we have even heard xenophobic anti-Jewish sound-bites and epithets emanating from some African-American quarters, and Buchanan-like politicians. All of this, when placed in juxtaposition to the intense awareness of the Holocaust and threats to the survival of Israel, have had the consequence of producing generations of American Jews who are very sensitive to every antisemitic threat to Jews and Jewish life. And for many American Jews, that awareness of vulnerability to attack from such enemies became the primary component of their Jewish identity. Indeed, all surveys of American Jews place the Holocaust way ahead of any other factor in Jewish self identity, with between 75% and 85% of the Jews rating the Holocaust as an important factor in their sense of themselves as Jews, far higher than their belief in God, Torah, or Israel.

As a result there arose a whole growth-industry and complex of so-called Jewish defense agencies --- not just the now defunct JDL, but those such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, and various Jewish Community Relations Committees. In addition to these organizational defense agencies, have been the many Holocaust-oriented organizations, responsible for monuments, museums, publications, research institutes, and conferences. One more layer of awareness of antisemitism in the Jewish mind has been the large number of popular movies, TV mini-series and documentaries related to the Holocaust. Together the effect has been to repeatedly and consistently reinforce the awareness among American Jews that we have to be on constant watch, because Ait,@ or something like Ait,@ could very well happen here, and thereby pose a real threat to ourselves, our children, and our property.

There is only one problem with all of the above: it fundamentally mis-states the reality of antisemitism in America, and the supposed threat it poses to us. As Leonard Dinerstein wrote in his 1994 book *Antisemitism in America*, Atoday antisemitism in the United States is neither virulent nor growing. It is not a powerful social or political force. It has declined in potency, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. @ For the fact is that the numbers of antisemitic acts being committed around the country is in sharp decline; membership in antisemitic organizations are down; none of us can or should deny that (with a few exceptions here and there) Jews are fully, and finally, in the American mainstream, experiencing little overt discrimination, whether it be in the worlds of business, corporate, academic, political or artistic endeavor. A telling litmus test is the rise in intermarriage, which reflects the fact of widespread acceptance and embrace of Jews by non-Jews and their families. Or the fact the current White House staff itself is blessed with many Jews in any number of prominent positions.

And yet, in the face of these realities, a recent survey by the American Jewish Committee found that American Jews, by a margin of 57% to 38% feel that antisemitism is a greater threat than intermarriage. Jews, amazingly, and in spite of reality, continue to believe that antisemitism is a clear and present danger, ready to rear its ugly head in one form or another. And TV images of Jewish children being led under police protection out of California JCC=s, or occasional local TV news portraying hated swastikas on synagogue walls or parking lots, or scare-mongering fund-raising letters from defense agencies, only serve to reinforce the stereotype and the misconception that we are a people and a minority under imminent attack.

But what, you might say, is so terrible about such misinformation or watchfulness? So what if Jews feel a lot less comfortable in America? As a matter of fact I must admit that for many years I was of the opinion that a heightened awareness of our outsider status, and exposure to antisemitic activity did in fact serve a positive end, by reminding American Jews that we are a people apart, that we should stick together, be proud of our identity, and strengthen Jewish community life. But more recently I have come to believe otherwise, for I now believe that there is an even greater danger: that most Jews, confronted with exaggerated reports of widespread antisemitism, constantly bombarded with Holocaust images and messages, will seek to put even further distance between themselves and the organized Jewish community; will try to blend more and more into the American landscape, and obliterate whatever remaining identifying markers or behaviors would set them apart. Especially if their Jewishness and Judaism are seen as burdensome to start with, a hassle or outdated, in current terms. If Jewish history is largely co-extensive in the popular Jewish mind with persecutions and pogroms, holocaust and war, exclusion and bigotry C why fight it, when you can get rid of the ethnic, spiritual, and sociological headaches, and join the non-sectarian mainstream, where Jews are so much more welcome today in society at large than than they have ever been before?

Take for instance, as an example of Judaism experienced as a headache, the common perception of Yom Kippur in the mind of many Jews. Here is a day which is central, and formative, to the experience of Judaism of millions of American Jews. In many ways it epitomizes the popular misconception as to what Judaism and Torah living is all about: they likely experience it as a day of long, noisy services in an incomprehensible foreign language; vows and guilt-trips, fasting

and headaches, tears and prayers for the dead, obsessing with a judgmental God and the Jewish martyrs of the ages. Indeed, if I were to pick the single worst day on which to come to synagogue in the entire year, a day through whose exclusive prism Judaism should definitively not be seen, this would be it. I would much rather go for an upbeat processional on Sukkot, a leibedik Ahakafah@ celebration on Simchat Torah, an entertaining and uproarious Purim megillah reading, or perhaps most of all a full-press 25 hour Shabbas experience to delight the body and uplift the spirit. But those days, for whatever reasons, have no mass appeal, and therefore impose no need for us to issue tickets and assigned seating, while melancholy, oppressive, Yom Kippur packs them in, in droves. And now, of course, we incorporate in the Yom Kippur experience the presence of security guards, giving additional feelings of physical danger and exposure to antisemitic attack. No wonder that what we used to call AThree time a year Jews@ are a disappearing breed among younger American Jews. If it=s hassle, and maybe even dangerous, then who needs it? Why come to the synagogue even 3 times a year, when all that negative energy is generated?

But the biggest problem with the preoccupation with antisemitism in America, and the perception of Jewish religion as a Adowner,@ is that they hide and exacerbate the real threat to Jews in America, the one against which no defense agency, no Jewish Federation, no community relations outfit, important as they are, using the conventional strategies at their disposal, has the necessary tools or adequate response. For the real threat is not fringe group antisemitism, real as they undoubtedly are; nor is it a near term prospect of our exclusion from American life, or discrimination against Jews in the marketplace. The real problem is our inability, I would say our failure, yours and mine, to give reason positive to our children and our young adults to be committed Jews, to live serious Jewish lives, to establish and maintain truly Jewish homes, to enrich their lives, and inspire their spirits with Jewish learning and wisdom through positive Jewish experiences, regular Torah study, and uplifting mitzvah observance. This B not a crazed gunman or militia group B is the real, perduring, and essential challenge to Jews, and Jewish life, in America. The real problem we have to face up to is not how to keep our enemies out of our synagogues and schools by posting guards or video cameras, but rather how to keep our children and teenagers in our sanctuaries and yeshivot, motivated to be involved and committed, day after day, year after year.

It is in this context that, for the next few minutes, on this Kol Nidre evening, I would like to articulate, in broad terms, one way in which we might respond, as individuals and as a community, to this primary peril to American Jews and Jewish life. And moreover, to do so by way of explaining what the real, mostly misunderstood, essence of Yom Kippur is, and why it should be the key to the Jewish future in America and the world, although not in the way that it is commonly misconstrued and misunderstood.

In 1979, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Ha-Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik delivered his annual Teshuvah drosha in Yiddish, at Yeshiva University, before many hundreds of rapt students and disciples. That lecture was filmed, and a few days ago, I had the rare privilege of seeing and hearing the video version, uncut and unexpurgated, as they say. Needless to say, the lecture was filled with countless insights, explanations, and chiddushim, all related to Yom Kippur. One of them, to my mind, comes closest to explaining the singular power and driving force of this day.

There is a well known Mishnah in Masechet Taanit 26b that states: ASaid R. Shimon ben Gamliel: >There were no days of celebration as great for Israel as the 15th day of Av and Yom Kippur.=@ One of the scriptural proofs for this statement, regarding these two days, adduced by the Mishnah, is the verse in Shir ha-Shirim AO daughters of Zion, go out and see King Solomon wearing the crown made for him by his mother on his wedding day, and on the day of his heart=s rejoicing.@ The Mishnah goes on to explain: >his wedding day= refers to matan Torah, the giving of the Torah, while >the day of his heart=s rejoicing= refers to the day the Temple was dedicated. The two days of this verse, therefore, correspond to the two days mentioned in the Mishnah, with Yom Kippur represented as a >wedding day,= the day the Torah was given. Now the Rav asks a most essential question: why is Yom Kippur characterized as a day of extreme rejoicing because it was the day on which the Torah was given? First of all, the Torah was given not on Yom Kippur, but as everyone knows, on Shevuot! And secondly, if one were to give a reason for rejoicing on Yom Kippur, surely it should be because it was the day on which God forgave the sins, especially the worship of the Golden Calf, on that day, as is clear from the sequence of events in Exodus in the Torah? The answer, said the Rav, is hinted at by Rashi on that Mishnah, who says Aon Yom Kippur the second set of tablets, the luchot shniyot, were given@ to Moshe Rabbeinu. In other words, it was on that day, after Moshe had spent 40 days up on the mountain imploring God to forgive the people, that God finally granted them clemency and atonement, and immediately inscribed the new tablets to replace the ones that Moshe had earlier destroyed.

But what is essential to understand, said the Rav, quoting his great-grandfather (the Beit Halevi,) is what those two replacement tablets, given on Yom Kippur to the people of Israel, in fact symbolize, and therefore what Yom Kippur essentially represents. The first tablets, given on Shevuot, incorporated both Torah she-Bichtav, the written scripture of Torah, and as well as Torah she-be=al Peh, the Oral interpretation supplied by God to Moshe Rabbeinu. But when the Israelites worshiped the Golden Calf, these two dimensions of Torah separated, the letters reflecting the oral tradition flying off into thin air. When the second tablets were finally given to Moshe some 80 days later on Yom Kippur, they contained only the written law, while the Oral Law remained unwritten, uninscribed in stone, committed only to the spoken word and to memory, a verbal embodiment of Torah she-be=al Peh, a faithful mesorah, given by word of mouth from God to Moshe, as the essential commentary and authoritative interpretation, and handed on by him to Joshua and the Elders, and thereafter from one generation to the next, representing an unbroken legacy of Torah teaching, elucidation, and interpretation, mi-dor le=dor, the indispensable flip side of the coin of Torah, that was eventually incorporated as the corpus of Talmudic and rabbinic literature. That is why (I would add) in the case of the second tablets, God Moshe >pesol lecha,@ you cut and quarry the tablets upon which I will inscribe the commandments, i.e., unlike the first set, in this instance Moshe has to be an active partner in the presentation and formulation of God=s will. And that is the very nature of Torah she-be=al Peh: a creative partnership between God and man, man imbued with ruach ha-kodesh, or divine spirit and inspiration, and thereby qualified to interpret, expand, apply, and develop, God=s will and word, generation after generation, adapting to fluctuations in time and place, but also remaining faithful and true to the interpretative rules and authoritative laws of Moses and of Sinai.

Hence, the Rav explained, Yom Kippur is a day of incomparable rejoicing for the people of Israel, because it first and foremost celebrates, and is the anniversary of, the key to both the continuity as well as the vitality of Klal Yisrael, the Jewish people and the Jewish faith, the key being the extraordinary, unparalleled, and indispensable, gift to the Jews of the Oral Law and its mesorah, or tradition. For as a people, we have always known, certainly until modern times, that it was that Oral Law, or Talmudic tradition, that was the sine qua non, the indispensable growth engine, that drove Jewish life generation after generation. It was the unique power of sustained Talmud study, of scriptural analysis, of intellectual engagement with level upon level of rabbinic enactment. It was the study of inspirational legends, saintly stories, tales of ethical brilliance, as well as laser like-precision in logical analysis of the laws and patriarchal narrative in the written Torah, that taken together engaged, challenged, and sharpened Jewish minds from the tenderest till their most advanced ages. That formed Jewish values and attitudes, and garnered and ensured young Jews= life-long fidelity to Jewish life. And that led to flourishing Jewish communities whether in poverty or wealth, adversity or civic tranquillity, in Israel or the Diaspora. All of this symbolized by, and celebrated on, Yom Kippur.

It is this perspective on Yom Kippur, then, that explains so much about the day, its focus on self-discipline of body and spirit, its concentration on Talmudic as well as rabbinic custom, prayer and literature. And also, as the Rav explained at great length, the detailed presentation in the Mussaf repetition of the Temple sacrificial order (the AAvodah@) as performed by the Kohen Gadol, which in many ways differs from the written rules found in the Torah itself, but which fully conform to the oral laws and traditions, the Torah she-be=al Peh, or mesorah. But it is also this Torah she-be=al Peh perspective of Yom Kippur that reveals the real and transgenerational power of this day to maintain, strengthen, and propagate all of Jewish life, a law and a tradition not frozen in time, not inscribed in stone, but rather a living, growing, dynamic embodiment of tradition.

Of course some might question whether what worked centuries or generations ago to ensure Jewish vitality and continuity has any relevance to the dramatically different post-modern world in which the Jewish people finds itself today. Can sustained Talmudic study have any mass impact in the age of MTV and America on Line? The answer, I believe, is clear: it is quite possible that most Jews are too far removed from serious Jewish living to be sufficiently motivated and inspired to Jewish commitment by Torah she-be=al Peh C but there is no alternative solution or methodology that comes even remotely close to the effectiveness of the sustained study and practice of Torah she-be=al Peh in successfully attracting, motivating, and inspiring contemporary Jews to remain faithful to Judaism. Not Holocaust remembrance, not fear of antisemitism, not Yiddishism, not humanist Judaism, and --- most significantly -- not even secular Zionism, nor, I for one believe, gimmicky subsidized trips to Israel.

Yom Kippur, therefore, in spite of everything, represents a truly unique opportunity to return and recommit ourselves, our families, and our community, to Torah in all its dimensions, written and oral, ancient and modern, pure and applied, as practiced and lived, studied and interpreted, preserved and enhanced, received and handed on, from one generation to the next. As such, it presents each of us with the abiding challenge go beyond the superficialities and stereotypes of

Jewish life, with the Torah's help to connect to the ultimate source of our own deepest consciousness as Jews and as proud members of our state and society, secure in an unshakeable attachment to our forefathers and our descendants, whose memories we will recall in solemn salute tomorrow during Yizkor, recalling through their sacred memory our past roots even as we cultivate our present and future fruits, from this moment on, faithfully and with utmost seriousness. Whether we be rabbis or retailers, physicians or teachers, students or corporate executives, single or married, male or female, city dwellers or suburbanites. In so doing to discover the sublime and transcendent joy and simchah not just of Yom Kippur, in accordance with R. Shimon ben Gamliel in the Mishnah, but of authentic Jewish life in all its singular, and undiminished, glory.

May this Yom Kippur be that, for us, and for all Israel --- amen.