

Yizkor: Living in the Two Worlds of Yom Kippur

- Basil Herring

Rabbi Basil Herring
The Jewish Center of Atlantic Beach
Yom Kippur, Yizkor 5760

Living in the Two Worlds of Yom Kippur

It was, by any measure, an extraordinary feature article to appear on the front page of the New York Times (9/16/99), side by side with news about East Coast hurricanes and Russian terror bombs. But there it was, entitled "A Young Orthodox Jew's Quest is to Blend Word and World." Its dateline: Cedarhurst, NY. And this is what some of its opening paragraphs said:

This is the holiest time of the year for Jews, as they prepare for the Yom Kippur holiday Sunday night, and these 20- and 30-somethings are their parents' equals or betters in piety. But for this age group of observant Jews, whose influx from communities like Forest Hills and Faltbush has swelled synagogues, sent real estate soaring and inspired a spate of new businesses, religion has become an intriguing mix of the sacred and the mundane. For more than a century (the article continued) Judaism has struggled to find its place in modern America, looking for balance between participation and isolation. That dilemma has been especially intense for Orthodox Jews, some of whom have tried to meld Orthodox ritual with modern life, and some of whom have seen any accommodation as a betrayal of Jewish tradition. So while sectarian Jews might find this hybrid lifestyle hopelessly inconsistent, other Jewish leaders see it as the flowering of Modern Orthodoxy, which asks its followers to abide by God's word, while living in God's world.

The article then went on to portray and analyze in significant detail, just how these young Jews are seeking, with varying degrees of success, to integrate those two worlds, Jewish and general, sacred and profane, insular and inclusive, in the course of their daily lives, while in the process turning the Five Towns into a fascinating, if controversial, testing ground for new forms of Jewish revitalization on the cusp of the 21st Century. For most of us here today, of course, this is far from an academic or merely theoretical matter, and I am certain that most of us have well-defined opinions, one way or other, discussed at least once a month around the dining room table. My own view, for what it is worth, fully agrees with those who argue that, all things considered, as a community we have benefitted enormously in many ways from this phenomenon, spiritually, materially, and communally. My purpose today, however, is not to discuss Central Avenue or changing neighborhoods in particular, but rather to address a fundamental question, and challenge, posed to Jews and Judaism by modernity, highlighted by the timely appearance of this Times article, namely: what, as far as Torah tradition is concerned, is the preferred, optimum relationship between Jews and the larger non-Jewish world in which we find ourselves.

As our people faces the future, with secular culture ascendant, science and technology invading every aspect of our lives, capitalist democracy triumphant, and Jews assimilating into the

surrounding society at a rapid and accelerating pace, what ought to be our attitude and stance toward that larger cultural matrix? And more specifically, should the culturally open models of Jewish life and community that worked in America 20, 30, 40, or 50 years ago, still be pursued, now that we are afflicted with a 52% and higher intermarriage rates? Or ought we to defer to the more insular ghetto or shtetl-like models of pre-war Poland or Russia C which some have claimed are more likely to survive and produce wide-ranging fruit over the long term in the soil of 21st century America, fenced off as they are from the thorns and thistles of secular society?

My point of departure in addressing this complex issue, is a Teshuvah address of the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, in which he took up this very issue, through a comparison and analysis of two key Scriptural texts highlighted on Yom Kippur, notably the Torah and Haftorah readings of Yom Kippur afternoon at Mincha. The Torah reading is Leviticus 18, known as parshat arayot, containing a detailed litany of forbidden relationships that the Torah consider anathema. But the key verses are the opening ones that summarize the Torah=s underlying concern: God spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God, you shall not act as do the Egyptians in whose land you have lived, neither shall you act in accordance with the ways of the Canaanites to which I will bring you. Do not follow their behavior, but rather perform my laws and keep my statutes, and go in their ways. I am the Lord your God. Vayikra 18

Clearly, these verses are a forceful declaration Jewish separatism, a demand to shun the licentious and corrupt ways of the Egypt and Canaan, past and future. It constitutes ideological and behavioral separation of the Jew, to follow a separate path that is categorically opposed to acculturation and assimilation. We are, and must always be seen to be, a people apart, separated from the moral and spiritual decay that we encounter, both as individuals and as a faith community covenanted to God.

Further, said the Rav, Egypt and Canaan represent two ends of the spectrum of civilization. The allure of Egypt was that of the most cultured and technologically advanced society of that day, a glorious empire of pyramidal dimensions, pharaonic grandeur, and sophisticated priestly paganism. Canaan, on the other hand, represented the seductive pastoral charms of a relaxed and primitive agrarian civilization, replete with nature worship and the simple indulgence of elemental instinct and desire. These two societies represent two kinds of allure, two ever-recurring types of cultural temptation: There are those who are mesmerized by the technological marvels of highly developed civilizations with their culture and art. Others are more attracted to the allure of a relaxed and less impersonal, less rapacious society of libertinism and closeness to nature. The Torah here insists that both be rejected as alien to the Jewish spirit, as violating the spiritual nature of man. We are to have no truck with either idolizing human creativity or the worship of animalistic instincts: both are a form of decadence that end up degrading and dehumanizing man, symbolized in this chapter by the various sexual perversions so widespread in both Egypt and Canaan.

And indeed this separatist impulse and imperative is amply reflected throughout the prayers of Yom Kippur, in which our focus is again and again on our own people, to the exclusion of other nations: e.g., ki Atah salchan le=Yisrael (You forgive Israel); selach na la=avon ha-am hazeh (forgive the transgression of this people); ke anu amecha ve=ata Elokeinu (for we are Your

people, and You are our God).

How significant therefore, that after almost 24 hours of prayer for Jews and Israel, the focus of our attention and tefilah changes, in the longest single text and segment of the entire day, via the haftorah that immediately follows that very Torah reading: Maftir Yonah. In a remarkable counterpoint to the exclusionary ethos of Vayikra 18, Chazal saw fit, by choosing this prophetic reading, to inject a powerful and passionate statement of Jewish universalism. Lest we misconstrue our separateness and distinctiveness as a license for callous indifference to other people, along comes the astounding story of the initial depravity, subsequent repentance, and then ultimate salvation of the people of Nineveh, and thereby the Haftorah enhances and enlarges our vision of our place in the larger world.

But here too, note well. Nineveh was the pagan city of Assyria, today known as Iraq. It was the country that would a few short years later, under King Sennacherib, in 722 BCE, besiege Jerusalem and exile the 10 tribes of Israel, decimating God's people of Israel, a punishment for their failure to repent their evil ways. Yet, in spite of what was to come, God rescinds His decree of death and destruction upon this nation, because they sincerely turned to God. As the haftorah puts it, A God saw their deeds, that they had repented from their evil ways, therefore He relented regarding the evil decree that had been pronounced over them. @ Even so corrupt and pagan a city could and did, through genuine penitence, find favor in God's eyes, and thereby become a model of moral and spiritual rectitude, on its own level, and in its own way, no matter that in a subsequent age its descendants might become pernicious and destructive agents of suffering for a sinful majority of the Jewish people. Perhaps, I would add, it was this very ability to repent their ways that accounts for God's choosing them as His instrument to punish His chosen people for their failure to do the same. Surely, one can conclude, had the 10 tribes learned the virtues of true repentance from the model and example of the people of Nineveh, they would surely have avoided their bitter fate of exile and dispersion, decreed by God for their own waywardness.

This then, is the bi-polar lesson of the Torah and Haftorah reading of the minchah service of Yom Kippur. On the one hand a Jew is to establish a clear and unambiguous boundary between himself and the adjacent non-Jewish world, whether it be Silicon Valley USA (as opposed to the Nile Valley, 15th Century BCE,) or the sex and drug culture of our time (that is so analogous to ancient Canaanite behavior.) To carefully recognize essential differences in values, attitudes, outlook, and behavior C not just in the realm of faith and spirit, but also when it comes moral standards that must fully conform with Jewish law and tradition. To guard assiduously against any dilution of Torah values and Jewish principle, adhering strictly to the highest possible standards when serving the Almighty, observing the Torah's mitzvot, and cultivating ethical sensitivity. To insist, for instance, on punctilious adherence to Shabbas, kashrus and mikveh as the essential and defining cornerstones of Jewish life; to strive for the highest standards of truth and integrity in all things, at home as well as in the campus or corporate dining room, and moreover to be respected by Jew and Gentile for such principled adherence to one's faith and one's forefathers; to build synagogues and schools that conform fully to Jewish law and custom no matter that some might persist in scoffing at what they in their ignorance deem unnecessary relics unsuited for modern times; to persist in setting aside time and resources for talmudic study and ritual excellence, even when to do so goes against the tenor of one's time. In these and other

ways, it is the Yom Kippur exhortation from Leviticus to set oneself apart from the majority, and to go against the stream, that must inform Jewish both our communal life and our personal standards.

But on the other hand, a Jew must internalize and follow the clear lesson of the Atonement Haftarot of Yom Kippur: to walk humbly in this world, to recognize (where necessary) the faults of oneself and the strengths of one's neighbors, no matter their faith or their affiliation; to heed the social and governmental norms and practices of one's place and time (unless of course they are in conflict with Torah or rabbinic law); to practice the same tolerance and forbearance toward others that one expects for oneself; to be sensitive in both language and behavior toward those whom one sincerely believes to be wrong or misguided; and finally to be prepared to say *AI was wrong, @ AI apologise, @ AI will not happen again, @* whether those words be directed to God or to man, Jew or Gentile, Orthodox or Reform, Modern or Chasidic, in the genuine repentance and remorse, that is the motif of this sacred day.

But perhaps most importantly of all: to learn from Maftir Yonah that with all that is wrong and debased in the world, we can, and should, learn from both the mistakes and the positive acts of those among whom we find ourselves. That not just in the world of business, science, or technology, but even when it comes to philosophy, ethics, art, and culture, there is much for us to learn, and to benefit from, albeit with appropriate caution and selectivity. That indeed, in the memorable words of our Sages, there is to be found *Achochmah ba-goyim, @* wisdom among the nations, a wisdom and a goodness which we do well to examine, and from which we should learn.

Without any doubt, the challenge of living up to the goals of this two-sided coin of the Jewish realm, is far from simple or easy. Our task as Jews living in two worlds, Jewish and Gentile, sacred and profane, demand constant care, a willingness to adjust, a readiness to learn and grow. To be prepared, where necessary, to make difficult choices, and, if called for, painful sacrifice and personal loss. Not for us are the pat answers and easy paths of conformity and the herd. How could it be otherwise when Jews are but 2.5% of the total population, and we Orthodox are only 6% of those, and the Modern Orthodox fewer yet? But, difficult or not, ours is the challenge from which we dare not shrink, bearing as we do on our privileged shoulders, both the burden and the glory of an unmatched legacy of spiritual and moral excellence, a brilliant beacon of light, calibrated and balanced in an exquisite synthesis that blends the best, and rejects the worst, of two worlds, no less needed and desirable today in urban and suburban America, than it was in ancient Israel and Babylonia, or Medieval Spain and France, Renaissance Italy or 19th Century Germany.

I would like to conclude my remarks today in a different key, albeit while playing the same melody, one that, I believe, illustrates my thesis admirably. I recently received, via the Internet, an anonymous tongue-in-cheek composition of Jewish prayer for recital on Yom Kippur, one that was obviously written by a young Jew very much connected with, hooked up to, and part of, the two worlds of which I have spoken. It was titled, *AA Prayer For 5760, @* and this what it said:

May you get a clean bill of health from your dentist, your cardiologist, your gastro-enterologist,

your podiatrist, your psychiatrist, your plumber, and the I.R.S. May your hair, your teeth, your face lift, your abs and your stocks not fall; and may your blood pressure, your tri glycerides, your cholesterol, your white blood count and your mortgage interest not rise. May you find a way to travel from anywhere to anywhere in the rush hour in less than an hour, and when you get there may you find a parking space. May Friday evening, December 31, find you seated around the Shabbat table, together with your beloved family and cherished friends, ushering in the Sabbath day. You will find the food better, the environment quieter, the cost much cheaper, and the pleasure much more fulfilling than anything else you might ordinarily do that night. May you wake up on January 1st, finding that the world has not come to an end, the lights work, the water faucets flow, and the sky has not fallen. May you go to the bank on Monday morning, January 3rd and find your account is in order, your money is still there, and any mistakes are in your favor. May you ponder on January 4th; How did this ultra modern civilization of ours manage to get itself traumatized by a possible slip of a blip on a chip made out of sand. May we relax about the Third Millennium of the Common Era and realize that we still have 240 years until the dawn of the Sixth Millennium of the Jewish Calendar by which time the computer is long since obsolete and so are we. May God give you the strength to go through a year of presidential campaigning, and may some of the promises made be kept. May you believe at least half of what the candidates propose, and may those elected fulfill at least half of what they promise, and the miracles of reducing taxes and balancing budgets happen. May you be awestruck by God's sense of humor as you wrestle with the possibility that a professional wrestler could become president of the United States. May what you see in the mirror delight you, and what others see in you delight them. May someone love you enough to forgive your faults, be blind to your blemishes, and tell the world about your virtues. May the tele-marketers wait to make their sales calls until you finish dinner, and may your checkbook and your budget balance, and may they include generous amounts for charity. May you remember to say "I love you" at least once a day to your spouse, your children, your parents; BUT NOT to your secretary, your nurse, your masseuse, your hairdresser, or your tennis instructor. And may the Messiah come this year, and if he does not may we live as if he has, in a world at peace and the awareness of God's love in every sunset, every flower's unfolding petals, every baby's smile, every lover's kiss, and every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous beat of our heart.

To which, I would add but one word: amen!