

Kol Nidrei Sermon, 5780/2019, Temple Beth Torah, Ventura, CA

Student Rabbi Noah Diamondstein,

Today, Yom Kippur, is the culmination of a long period of *t'shuvah*. We just finished the Hebrew month of Elul, which is traditionally the time in which Jews ought to engage in the work of self-reflection and evaluation and begin the work of *t'shuvah*, repentance, which accompanies our High Holy Day season. Then, we had Rosh HaShanah, a day on which we reminded ourselves of the incredible potential of our species and this world, and our failures to realize that potential, let alone exceed it. If one utilizes this run-up time well, then the work of the individual Jew on Yom Kippur is not all that scary and much less daunting. You've done the critical work, and today is just a day for evaluation and one last chance to stand before God and our community and be honest with ourselves. You know the simplified version of the mission: starting in Elul and until the end of Yom Kippur every Jew has to "say their sorries" to the people they've wronged face to face.

If I didn't think that what I've said thus far was totally obvious, then I'd keep talking about it and make this whole sermon about personal *t'shuvah*. But it is obvious, isn't it? Improving ourselves is hard, and takes a long time and a lot of focus and will-power. If it was easy, we'd all do it. You all knew that already. Instead I'd like to help us explore *t'shuvah* from a different angle. What if we try to imagine what *t'shuvah* would look like as a communal endeavor. After all, the

entirety of the Jewish community who observes the holidays of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, is theoretically already at work engaging with the *t'shuvah* process. So it is not just the isolated work of many individuals; rather it may also be the work of a community at large. The Jewish calendar it seems has set aside time not only for us to examine our own lives, but also for the Jewish community to look at itself and explore the possibility that it has failed to live up to its own standards.

What does communal failure look and sound like, though? It is easy to name behaviors that we individuals often disappointingly engage in—the kinds of things that we apologize for in the confession on Yom Kippur: “*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu,*” and so on. The “nu” ending is the Hebrew 1st person plural, and so we often say that our confessions on Yom Kippur are communal. It could be argued, however, that even though we are confessing as a community, the message is not that we have all lied or we have all spoken ill of another or we have all conspired, but rather that we acknowledge that there are individuals among our community who have engaged in such behaviors and we are collectively apologizing on their behalf. If we wanted to do communal *t'shuvah* in order to elucidate the growth edges for us as a Jewish community, then we must look not to the **behaviors** of **individuals** within our community, but instead to the **values** of our community and whether or not we have lived up to those values.

Normally, any conversation about values gets derailed from the outset, or else it requires a “conversation before the conversation.” What are our values? What if my Jewish values are different from your Jewish values? How do we decide whose get to weigh more? Prove to me that X, Y, or Z value that you want to add to our list is Jewish! I can find a proof text for a value that directly contradicts that one! The issue gets muddled, we get frustrated, we throw up our hands, and we pat ourselves on the back for making some progress.

Luckily, though, I’ve noticed that in the couple of months that I was absent from this place, this congregation has had this conversation in earnest! The proof is right out there, painted on the walls! You looked at yourselves and did an inventory of your values and came up with a short-list that you can all be proud of. If you don’t have it memorized, that’s alright, I’ll list them for you:

***bracha* Be a Blessing**

***chochma* Seek Wisdom**

*tzedek* Pursue Justice

*rachamim* Act with Compassion

*shalom* Create Peace

***torah* Study Judaism**

*simcha* Live with Joy

*kehillah* Participate in Community

*tikkun olam* Heal the world

***l’dor v’dor* Teach each Generation**

Many of these values I think our Jewish community has done well this past year, and has been doing well for a long long time. We have certainly shared many blessings with one another, we’ve continued to study Torah both in the academies and seminaries and in temple libraries, we have sought out wisdom behind every

curtain and we have shared that wisdom with the ones who will come after us. We're really good at living up to these values. It's sort of baked into us. Our Jewish DNA moves us toward Torah, tradition, learning, and teaching, and EATING.

But as I look back on the past year, it has become so easy to slide into abject shame, as I remember those other values, and key moments over the past year where powerful members of our Jewish community have ignored their guidance. We were appalled to learn the extent to which the Sackler family, who own Purdue Pharmaceuticals, contributed to our nation's opioid epidemic. We felt the fear and loathing of the many victims of Harvey Weinstein's intimidation. We felt the utter disgust at the actions of Jeffrey Epstein. We cringed at the footage of children being ripped from their parents arms at the Southern border and shuddered as we realized that it was a Jew, Stephen Miller, who convinced this country to stoop that low. Again we threw our arms up in utter frustration as the Prime Minister of the only Jewish nation in the world spent yet another year stymieing the growth of liberal Judaism in Israel, damaging our hopes for peace with continued annexation, and attempting to defraud the nation by committing various electoral violations in this most recent Israeli election. Powerful Jews went off the derekh this year. The impact of their failures to live up to the values of our community will be felt for

generations. In addition to our own small failures to follow these values, we must remind ourselves of these monumental transgressions.

This day, THE DAY, *YOMA*, as our tradition refers to it, is the container for our anger, our disbelief, our tears. It is the culmination of our grand first step into the promise of a better year. As we remind ourselves of this pain, we need to put our best foot forward. But where do we go from here? How should we take our first step?

Kol Nidrei!? Hmm... Kol Nidrei is a strange text to use as the start of Yom Kippur services. Have you ever actually read the words?

All vows — resolves and commitments, vows of abstinence and terms of obligation, sworn promises and oaths of dedication — that we promise and swear to God, and take upon ourselves from this Day of Atonement until next Day of Atonement, may it find us well: we regret them and for all of them we repent. Let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone; they are not valid and they are not binding. Our vows shall not be vows; our resolves shall not be resolves; and our oaths — they shall not be oaths.<sup>1</sup>

This prayer is us trying to get ourselves off the hook for all the promises we've made to God! We tell God to ignore the ones we'll make from this Yom Kippur to the next! We're basically admitting that we weren't trustworthy in the first place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur: Machzor for the Days of Awe (Page 18). CCAR Press. Kindle Edition.

Not to mention it flies in the face of just about everything Jewish Law has to say about how vows actually work.

In almost every era and version of Judaism since this prayer was penned, there have been rabbis that have tried to get it removed from the liturgy, and Reform Judaism is no exception. Its melody's sheer popularity is the only reason it remained in the Reform Machzor. I do think though, that seen through a certain lens, it has a particular value. It levels the playing field. We start off this draining, difficult, and utterly sacred day with a communal acknowledgement that all of this might be for naught. Many of us will fail to live up to the covenant we've made with God this year.

Maimonides, the preeminent medieval Jewish scholar and physician, is more optimistic. He is skeptical of Kol Nidrei's classification of us as untrustworthy, and points us instead to the incredible power of our will. In his introduction to the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides suggests that we should always be striving toward the golden mean, and that it is within our power to achieve it. We should seek balance and to avoid extremes in any given aspect of our lives or personalities. In the areas in which you feel an imbalance, Maimonides teaches us to perform the equal and opposite reaction. If this can be true for a person, could it not be so for our people?

Our value system itself provides us the roadmap for a better 5780. Those values which have perhaps become deficient in the life of our people must be sought after with renewed determination:

This has been a year of injustice, in the social arena, in our own criminal justice system, and in our economy. But it is also the beginning of election season in this country, and we are only just now beginning to see how Israel's newly elected leadership will unfold. We have immense power within our grasp to make change on these issues. Talk to your rabbi and your friends and family and find new ways to make your voice heard and to make your dollars count! VOTE in the next election for a candidate that lives up to your own community's high standards.

This has been a year in which we have been desperate for our world to have a little more compassion. But this is also our season of harvest and of remembrance! Take an active step to learn about those different from you in your community and to help make this community even more inclusive. Keep a box of granola bars or a few spare blankets in your car so that you don't have to pretend you don't see that person standing with a sign on the side of the road. Try to be a better ally for friends, family and neighbors who are feeling like they have been pushed to the margins, or who feel like their rights and personhood are under attack.

This has been a year in which we certainly have not achieved peace, as wars rage across the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians have continued to clash, and racially and ethnically motivated violence has spread around the world. We may not be able to effect peace around the world, but we can surely highlight the pathways toward increased peace at home! Continue to interact with your non-Jewish neighbors. Find the middle ground in dialogue with family around the thanksgiving table. Always find a way to **first** honor the humanity of the person sitting across from you before debating the issues.

This has been a year in which our communities have been under attack, and in which simchas have been destroyed by violence. The community that has gathered at this Temple knows well that Ventura is not immune to bigotry. So respond by engaging with community more than you have before! Remind yourself that the way to ensure the failure of the shooters of Pittsburgh and Poway and of the vandal who desecrated this very place with a symbol of hate is to add your voice to the chorus and make your Jewish community as vibrant as it can be!

This has been a year in which the Earth has been ravaged. So this year follow the lead of the world's brave youth! If our almost cliched commitment to tikkun olam is to be anything more than a bunch of hot air, then the Jewish community must take active measures to curb some of these terrifying trends. Eat less meat, reuse as much as possible before we decide to mindlessly recycle, spend

our tzedakah money in ways that will help the organizations fighting back against climate criminals.

This is our communal teshuvah, a path we can walk to help lift the Jewish community up to meet the lofty standards it sets for itself. We might disagree on which active steps are the right ones to take at any given moment, but we can certainly agree on the values that guide us, whatever steps we take. We've done our values assessment, and now we'll spend one last High Holy Day together, doing our level best to talk the talk. We'll remind ourselves of our deficiencies, and the ways we've missed the mark as a community. We'll sit with our frustration and hunger, and we'll make a plan to improve this year. We hopefully won't be overly brutal, recognizing our own normal limitations and treating ourselves with compassion. Tomorrow night we'll celebrate with one another, and if we really put in the work and get focused for this one day, perhaps our community will put its best foot forward. Perhaps there will be fewer values on our list that feel deficient next year. *Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha, v'nashuva. Chadeish yameinu k'kedem.* Return us to You, God, O let us return. Renew our days as they were new in the Garden.