

## THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU STAND BEFORE “THE ONE”

Erev Yom Kippur / Kol Nidre sermon by Rabbi Moshe Tom Heyn  
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Imagine working as a security guard in the Louvre in Paris, which houses about 35,000 works of art and is visited each year by more than 8 million people. They come to see such masterpieces as the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo. And every day you hear groups of tourists come through, casting their own judgment on them, saying things like, “I like this one,” or “I don't like that one,” “This one is good,” or “That one is not so good.”

There's something ludicrous about their assessment of works that have been there for generations and are likely to remain so. Of course, these tourists are entitled to their opinions, but their comments say more about their own tastes and preferences than about the works of art they are critiquing. Somehow, standing before works which themselves have stood the test of time, lovers of art are more likely to benefit when we allow their smallness to be expanded and enriched by a standard greater than themselves.

So it is when we come, on this day, before the symbols of our tradition; the words, music, images and architecture. There may be other times of the year when we can enjoy measuring and critiquing those things we like or don't like, but we stand a better chance of benefiting from our time here tonight when we allow our smallness to be expanded and enriched by a standard, perhaps even a Presence, greater than ourselves.

The inscription above the ark, “*Da lifnei mi atah omed* – Know before Whom you stand” is here to remind us of that. Whenever we enter this sanctuary, we are reminded that we stand or sit, here or anywhere really, before a Presence greater than ourselves. Whether you believe in God or not, it's not hard to imagine what this can feel like.

If you recall any moment when you experienced a sense of awe, it's **that feeling** of which we are to be reminded. Perhaps it was a beautiful sunrise, or night sky full of stars; an encounter with a miracle of nature, or the birth of a child. It's a feeling that most often corresponds with the word “**Wow!**” That is what this inscription and everything else about this place and time is intended to elicit. That's why we call this period of ten days, which culminates tomorrow, the *Yamim Noraim* – the “Days of **Awe.**”

Abraham Cresques was a 14th-century Jewish cartographer from Palma, Majorca, an island in the Mediterranean off the coast of Spain. In collaboration with his son, Yehuda, he was responsible for the Catalan Atlas of 1375, the most important map of the continents from the medieval period. Several generations of his descendants were also cartographers, but with the rise of Christianity in Spain, they converted to Catholicism. Some renounced their Jewish identity altogether, but others held onto it in secret – putting them in great danger during the Spanish Inquisition, which led to public executions in which they were burned at the stake, and eventually to their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492.

Although the Kol Nidre prayer goes back long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it's quite likely that it was recited in earnest by *conversos*, those Jews who chose to convert to Christianity rather than face expulsion or death, secretly remaining faithful to Judaism. They would gather on Yom Kippur eve in their secret gathering places and tearfully entreat God to forgive them for the public statements they were forced to make which were contrary to their Jewish faith and traditions.

Standing before the Eternal, as they stood, all *our* vows and promises and priorities seem so convoluted. Kol Nidre is our people's response to the awareness that our lives hang in the balance.

"May all vows, obligations, oaths...which we may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby we may be bound, from this Day of Atonement until the next, be absolved, forgiven, and annulled; they shall not bind us as we might have thought, for they too may be for naught."

In 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain, when the lives of our Jewish ancestors were on the line, the "*Yamim Noraim*" were for them a period of great fear and trembling. The word *nora* – the Hebrew word for "awe" – includes a sense of dread; that one's life is literally at stake. Even for us, this heightened emotional response can occur when we come face to face with our vulnerability. Compared to the vastness of that before which we stand, we are as nothing.

In a recent novel, a work of historical fiction entitled *The Mapmaker's Daughter*, author Laurel Corona introduces us to Amalia Cresques, a descendant of this celebrated family of mapmakers. Her life spans most of the 15th century. Her father and sisters had renounced their Jewish identities but her mother and grandmother continued to practice Jewish traditions in secret, hoping she would do the same and thus keep their

family's faith alive.

When her father loses his hearing, Amalia becomes his interpreter, which gives her entrée into the royal courts of Portugal and Spain. She rises to become a language tutor to young Isabella, who later grew up to become the queen of Spain. She is a confidante to Isabella's mother and witness to the royal matchmaking and geo-political scheming of the time. Her reflections provide a fascinating and well-researched glimpse into that period.

Amalia was torn because her father and her sisters were saying, "Give it up. Get over it," but her mother and grandmother were saying that Judaism was their precious inheritance and that they were now depending on her to keep them alive.

Things became more intense during the Inquisition, when they started having auto-dafes, huge day-long public spectacles during which Jews who refused to convert were burned at the stake. This was a terrifying period in our history and we don't have many close up accounts of what it was like.

Amalia ended up witnessing one of these horrifying events in which people she knew were being burned at the stake. At one point, she recites the *Shema* out loud in public, affirming her solidarity with her people and her God at the risk of being heard and executed. In another scene, she stands face-to-face with Tomás de Torquemada, the first "Grand Inquisitor."

The question with which any Jewish reader might be confronted as they imagine themselves in 15th century Spain is, "How far would you go to stay true to yourself?" How would you respond if your life were hanging in the balance?

We are fortunate to live in a time when our lives are not at risk because we are Jews. At least not in this country, but in other places where anti-Semitism is on the rise, the idea that history repeats itself is very frightening. We live in a time and place when and where we can be open about being Jewish, and members of our own community can be open about being gay and not risk being executed. There are still many places in our world where this is not the case, and I talked about that in a very general way on Erev Rosh Hashanah when I spoke about extremism. And on Rosh Hashanah morning, I spoke about Israel, where civilians face the risk every day of being attacked and where Iran's nuclear capabilities will soon be a very real and present danger.

Such moments of truth demand from us a response, as was the case in a story told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. A woman named Sussie, the aunt of a former student of his, lived in Munich as the Nazis were coming to power. A light snow was falling and the streets were crowded with people. Sussie had been riding home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

Sussie watched from her seat in the rear as the soldier systematically worked their way up the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why. "I don't have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They're going to take me."

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. "You stupid wretch," he roared. "I can't stand being near you!" The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. "Damn her," the man shouted angrily. "My wife has forgotten her papers again! I'm so fed up. She always does this!"

The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw the man again. She never even knew his name. But she knew that this man had saved her life. He responded in the moment of truth.

When we stand in that place, we are called upon to respond. We are called to wake up from our slumber, to forgive and be forgiven, to recognize our values and priorities. This is what it means -- what it *feels* like -- to stand before the Eternal, or God, or whatever word or name you might associate with this existential reality which we all must encounter at least once in our lives. Whatever word or name you associate with that moment should be sacred to you, because it signifies that against which all else is measured. It's the very bedrock of our existence; the very essence of life itself; the very mystery of our faith and tradition; the very purpose of our being here tonight; the very force which makes all relationships sacred. And it is our honest and humble encounter with this reality that we are sharing here tonight, and which should elicit in every heart the experience of *nora* – of awe.

The German Jewish theologian and philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929, a close friend of Martin Buber, taught well before the Holocaust that Yom Kippur is the day when the Jew is given the unique opportunity to see his or her life through the eyes of eternity. From the vantage of eternity, we ask, what in life really matters? What is

real? What is important? What is valuable? Seeing life through the eyes of eternity gives us the perspective to reassess our vows, our commitments and our priorities. Kol Nidre brings us, and many generations before us, to this place and this moment of truth.

In addition to the fear and trembling of awe, there is yet another feeling associated with *nora*, one of exhalation and elation; the feeling of gratitude, joy and a reverence for life. These two aspects of *nora* are two sides of the same coin. Ultimately, by opening ourselves up to the recognition of our smallness, we open our souls to the possibility of being expanded, enriched and renewed.

This is what we do here at Temple Israel. Not only on Yom Kippur but every Friday night, though maybe on a slightly smaller scale. But we are here every Friday night standing before the Eternal, here and in many places and in many ways. This is the quality of our connection and the essence of who we are as a congregation. It is only natural then that the feeling of love and gratitude and a reverence for life infuses everything we do.

The philosophies of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber may be a little too abstract for most people to grasp, but anyone can feel it. It is a feeling that gives substance and meaning to our relationships here. People who come, whether for the first time or over the span of many years, often say that they feel comfortable here for a reason that's hard to describe. One person recently said he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Others say they can just feel it in their *kishkas*.

Not only grown-ups but children, as well. This lends an added dimension to our programs for religious education. Our children not only learn about our holidays and traditions, our language and culture. They also learn how relationships can be sacred. It eludes description but I'll use a metaphor from our tradition since I understand the language and am comfortable using it because I know the experience to which it points. ***It feels as though the Divine Presence dwells here with us now. Open hearts, gathered in an inclusive spirit, can allow it to dwell here in a way that is rare to find anywhere else.***

I'll close by sharing with you an image from a YouTube video I came across recently of a woman playing the flute in an international flute competition in Denmark. It was probably recorded by a family member of Japanese flutist, Yukie Ota, who recorded her performance. It would have been just an ordinary video with a few views by her closest family members or friends, but something very unusual happened that caused the

video to be watched by well over two million viewers.

As Yukie was playing a beautiful piece on the flute, a butterfly landed on her forehead then perched itself on the bridge of her nose. It was clear that Yukie felt on her forehead and saw something in her peripheral vision, but she must have figured it was harmless and chose to keep her attention on the piece she was playing. For the next minute, she continued to play while the butterfly sat and flapped its wings quite happily. When Yukie came to the end of her piece, she brushed off whatever it was she was feeling on her forehead and saw something flutter away, but it appeared that wasn't sure what it was. Her focus was on her craft and her participation in the competition. In her experience, there was nothing about it very extraordinary until after she saw the video and saw what 2 million viewers found it to be intriguing.

What did I happen to find so beautiful and intriguing about it? It was extraordinary and reminded me of what is happening here at Temple Israel. With the joyful and beautiful music we are making, and the wonderful vibrations we are creating, we find ourselves graced by something so rare and so extraordinary that it is almost magical. ***Can you feel it descending upon us now?***

This is what we mean by a Divine Presence. This is what we mean by a loving and inclusive congregation. This is what we mean by “*nora*,” the feeling of awe and joy, grace and mercy, that comes from humbling ourselves before the Eternal.

We stand before one another. We stand with one another. We stand for one another -- when together we know the One before Whom we stand.