

THE PAIN AND PLEASURE OF TRANSCENDENCE – Kol Nidre Sermon, 2013 / 5774

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A story is told in the name of the Baal Shem Tov: Once there was this guy who saw a beautiful bird, nesting high in the top of a tree. No one else could see it. A great longing came over him to reach this bird, capture and tame it. But the tree was too high and there was no ladder. So he devised a plan. He persuaded people on the street below to form a human ladder even though they knew nothing of the bird and were unable to see it. Nonetheless, they assembled themselves long enough to stand on one another's shoulders until they could reach the nest. It took them a long time to build this living ladder, but when the person at the top reached with her fingertips and was just about to capture the bird, those who stood near the ground grew impatient, shook themselves free and caused everyone else to collapse.

After my sermons on Rosh Hashanah, you might have been hoping for a funny story, or at least one with a happy ending, but tonight calls for something different. On this eve of Yom Kippur, we're mostly happy to be here and to see everyone. Many of us had a good dinner together and there's been pleasant music and afterwards, most of us will return to comfortable homes and beds. However, there's also an entirely different reality with which we must now come to terms.

We are like those people who formed the human ladder. We are connected in so many ways; ways that are inextricably linked and interdependent. Together we might have accomplished something great, but we have failed.

Yes, there are many good things for which we can take credit but from a broader perspective – yes, we have failed and I'm not alone in telling you this. Our liturgy conveys this same message in the pages we just read: "We have all committed offenses: under duress and by choice, consciously and unconsciously, openly and in secret, in our thought and with our words..." Can we hear this message now any clearer? Can we let down our defenses and allow these words to penetrate our hearts?

The scope of human suffering is as vast as an ocean. We try to shield ourselves and our families from the horrific images from Syria of civilians –many of them children – struggling to breathe, writhing in pain or lying dead in rows. We turn away from the images of other children, suffering from malnutrition, millions of them around the globe; victims of poverty and, in many cases, violence, many with no hope and no future.

Yes, as fellow members of this human family, we have failed them. There is even terrible suffering in our own backyards – in our state, our community and, in some cases, our own families. We have tried to protect our own sanity by deflecting responsibility for most if not all of this suffering, but tonight we have come here to be honest about our failings. Some here might assert that they are not responsible. “Of what use is it to blame ourselves?” they ask. But I need only remember the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who said, “Some are guilty; but all are responsible.”

What we seek tonight is not an empty ritual designed to make us feel better, so that we can return to our comfortable homes and habits. Tonight is more than a brief interruption in our busy schedule of activities that create for us a happy state of complacent, self-satisfaction. No. Instead what we seek tonight is something altogether different; something that can cause us to see beyond ourselves and catch a glimpse of what’s possible.

In preparing my thoughts for tonight, I compiled pages of statistics that highlight our failings – particularly the inequalities that exist in our country. I won’t go into the details now but they indicate that there is an enormous task before us which demands our collective attention and energies. Even if we can’t accomplish everything the situation requires of us, we cannot excuse ourselves from doing everything we possibly can. This is as true now as it was 2,000 years ago when Rabbi Tarfon said that “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:21)

So where does this get us; this recognition of our failings? Are we supposed to go home tonight depressed? No; to the contrary. Remorse signals an opening of the heart, which can be initially painful, but the words in our prayer book will have no healing power unless your heart is open enough to receive them. Our ancestors knew this when, eons ago, they developed these rituals and traditions. They knew that eliciting contrition is more than just laying a guilt trip on people. They knew that it is the doorway through which we must pass on the path to transcendence.

The purpose of our confessions is not to dwell on our own failings but to bring into our awareness those we have harmed or neglected. The purpose of our prayers is not to plead for the satisfaction of our own needs but to open our hearts to the needs of others. And the purpose of fasting is not to focus on our own hunger but to focus, for a day, on the hunger of parents and children for whom most days are days without food. In this way, our rituals and traditions set us on the path to transcendence, pointing us toward the connection we share with those around us.

Allow me to make this idea even clearer by way of story from a *midrash* on the book of Leviticus (*Vayikra Rabbah* 4:6). There was once a group of people traveling in a boat. One passenger takes out a drill and begins to drill a hole under his seat. The other passengers, quite understandably, complain that this action could cause the boat to sink. He indignantly responded by saying, "Why should this bother you? I am only drilling under my own seat."

The meaning of this story is clear: transcendence is the necessary shift in perspective from the personal to the collective; from the illusion of separateness to the truth that anything and everything you do has an effect on the rest of us.

We all carry within us an awareness of this truth. During this season of *teshuvah* through tomorrow, the final day of Yom Kippur, the fasting, the prayers and the sound of the shofar are all intended to bring us back to that awareness. Their sole purpose is to open our hearts, our eyes and ears; to lift us up and help us to reach beyond ourselves toward that beacon of transcendence we call God.

This experience is nothing new to any of us. We all have moments when the individual self seems to just melt away and when this happens, it feels good. We search for ways to constantly renew this feeling. Some find it in work while others, in play. You don't need religion to experience transcendence. Lots of people discover it in nature or in the company of others in gatherings such as rallies, concerts and sporting events.

What all these pleasurable moments share in common is what we can pursue most effectively through a conscious and coordinated practice of transcendence. In our ordinary lives we get by as individuals; we try to satisfy our individual desires; we pursue our individual goals. But then something happens that causes a shift when individuals unite as a team, a movement or a congregation such as ours.

The painful part of this process is the initial recognition that we have failed to realize our potential. The good news comes in the recognition that together we can achieve our highest good; we can become that human ladder.

Ten days ago, on the morning of Rosh Hashanah, I presented you with ten "suggestions." How'd you do with that? Good, but what I share with you tonight is too important and too urgent to be conveyed by mere "suggestions". We cannot achieve our highest good without each one of us taking our place in this human ladder.

To quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel again, speaking for both men and women but in the language of his day, he said that “what makes a man human is his openness to transcendence, which lifts him to a level higher than himself (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 251)

Even our beloved rabbi of thirty years, Rabbi Joseph Narot, *alav hashalom*, spoke about the transcendence of our personal differences in a High Holy Day sermon in 1974 he titled, “What is a Congregation?” Some of you here probably heard him deliver that sermon, in which he said that “the differences that divide us on the surface are not nearly as great or as real as the sameness of the life we share.... If only for a brief moment tonight,” he said, “we catch a brief glimpse of the truth that what we call life...is what we represent here in our togetherness.... Life is one and we are one because of it.” (The Sermons of Joseph R. Narot, pp. 314-315)

So if we can't literally stand on each other's shoulders, how, then, shall we organize ourselves? We do know that each and everything we do is part of this process. If you decide to drill a hole in the floor, even if it's under your own seat, it will affect us all. Everything we do contributes to, or detracts from, this journey we're on together.

While there are many other organizations that do good work, what is unique about Temple Israel is that we are conscious of the spiritual and historical significance of what we're doing. Here we rest upon a remarkably firm foundation, built over these past 90+ years by the founders and benefactors, rabbis, staff and lay leaders of this great Temple. And this foundation rests upon the bedrock of our faith tradition which links us to our people down all the way down through the ages and across the globe. This is a rare congregation that is uniquely able to connect heaven and earth, past and future – with the help of a vibrant coalition drawn from many segments of our community, with some who are religious and many who are not religious. Yet we can all agree that our aim transcends the ordinary; our aim is a beacon whose light draws us toward our higher selves. One need not be religious to understand and appreciate this truth.

On this Day of Atonement, we recognize that up until now we have failed. But this can also be a day of At-one-ment, when we recommit ourselves in earnest to reach for something higher than ourselves. We are like those people who formed the human ladder. Together and only together we can accomplish something great. It doesn't matter who's at the top; we all benefit when any one of us reaches upward.

As I lift up my eyes, I can see that bird, nesting high in the top of the tree; and I can see the God who,

for me, is that symbol of transcendence. As I lift up my eyes, I pray for our renewed ability to reach and to rise above what we have been.

Eloheinu veilohei avoteinu - Our God, God of all generations, may the light of Your Presence never seem too distant. Enable us to join ourselves together as we reach for You. Open our hearts in love so that we might see beyond ourselves in this New Year and come to know and fulfill our highest good.

And together let us say – *Amen*.