

WWMS?* (*WHAT WOULD MOSES SAY?)

by Rabbi Tom Heyn, Yom Kippur Day sermon 5772/2011
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Imagine this: “Abraham and Sarah go shopping at Costco....” That would make for a great sermon, though it's not my idea. I heard about it on NPR, on a program I heard a month ago about two rabbis in Southern California who organized a workshop for their colleagues on how to write better sermons. They invited as their instructors some of the best writers in Hollywood – the guys who write for *The Simpsons*, *Desperate Housewives* and other popular shows. One technique they recommended is to place biblical characters in a contemporary setting and then see how things play out.

OK, how about this one? “Moses comes to Brattleboro, and when he stops at the farmers' market to ask for directions, no one thinks he looks out of place. He then finds his way here to speak with the Jewish community on Yom Kippur.” I think we could develop the idea, but it begs the question, “What would Moses say if he did come and speak to us?”

It's interesting to note that the Torah portion we just finished reading (Deut 29:9-14; 30:11-20) gives us a pretty good idea to start with. You might have noticed that the entire portion is Moses speaking and he opens by saying, in the present tense, “*Atem nitzavim* – You stand here today – all of you – before Adonai your God....” The way it is worded, he could have been addressing you, even if you're not standing. That was the intention; that he was addressing us, not just our ancestors who were there with him in the wilderness.

Moses actually says that: that the covenant he confirmed with us then and there was not only with those who were present with him but with all future generations, which includes us. So if we're wondering what Moses would say today, it might be exactly what we read in today's Torah portion.

But are we the same as our ancestors? Haven't we changed at all since then? Isn't it likely that we're capable of thinking in ways that our ancestors never could? Isn't it possible that his message for us might be different than it was for them? And isn't it possible that his message for the Jewish community of Brattleboro would be at least a little different from what it might be in Borough Park or Hollywood? If so, what would he say? You're going to find out.

Now it seems a little far-fetched for Moses to walk here, much less drive here. It seems much more likely that he would arrive by way of the spirit world. You've heard of a *dybbuk*, but there's another kind of spirit

possession in Jewish tradition that is entirely voluntary and benevolent. It's called, in Hebrew, *sod ha-ibbur*, which is understood in kabbalistic circles as the mystery of 'impregnation.' That is, when a spirit voluntarily enters the body of a living being to provide help in a time of need.

So imagine this scenario: There is this aging rabbi in Brattleboro who struggles so much with writing his Yom Kippur sermon that his desperate prayers for help were heard in the "*yeshivah shel ma'alah* – the yeshivah on high" by none other than Moses himself. Now keep in mind that Moses learned English a long time ago before there was an American accent. So what would Moses say?

"Oy gevalt! What a nudnik this guy must be. He should have had his sermon done weeks ago, but now he's shrying for help. Oy, I'm too old for this, but if I don't help the poor guy, he'll never give me peace."

So he comes down in spirit form and enters into the body of this poor rabbi, who at this point had completely lost all presence of mind from the fear of having nothing written down for his sermon. Moses takes control of the situation, looks around and says:

"Am I supposed to be here? Why are we in a church? Why are there more Jews over at the farmers' market today than here? And look at this congregation. When I heard this poor rabbi's prayers, I thought he was desperate because he had to address a group of thousands. Is this what I came down here for? For a hundred people?

Well, I'm here. What would you like to know? What did the manna taste like? Why did it take me forty years to get to the Promised Land? Why don't I have an American accent? I get those questions all the time. Well, I'll tell you this: I learned to speak English about a thousand years ago, long before you came over here and took the land from the natives who used to live here. They were here for longer than you've been here, which is what I keep telling the folks at the UN about our homeland where we've been now for at least 4,000 years. Anyway, that's not what I'm here to talk about.

If I recall, the rabbi kept wanting to know what wisdom I would share with you today and if it would be any different from what I shared with your ancestors. And he wanted to know if I had anything to share specifically with this community. Where are we? Yes, Brattleboro.

Well, I suppose I could talk with you about something that I'm not very happy about and never was. The widespread practice of idolatry. That's right. Idolatry! Here in Vermont, and I'm not even talking about cows,

much less a golden one.

Oy (looking up) how am ever I going to explain this to them?

Okay. **#1: Don't be fooled by appearances.** Let me ask you this: Am I standing here in front of you? No! Rabbi Tom is standing here in front of you but I, Moses, am speaking to you through Rabbi Tom. How quickly you forget! I am not this body you see here. Don't let appearances fool you. But that's exactly what you've done.

The truth is, you are not really there sitting in a chair, either. You are really the divine consciousness that finds itself associated with a body, just as I find my consciousness associated with this body here, in Brattleboro of all places. So, you see, we have a lot in common. The only difference may be that I know this is not me; my true identity is much more vast and ancient and rooted ultimately in God, and so is yours.

Your ancestors who knew something about the Kabbalah understood this, and so did their heirs in Eastern Europe, the Hasidim. Rabbi Simcha Bunam used to tell this story:

A king, wanting to punish his son, sends him into exile in a distant land. The prince, suffering from hunger and cold, waits to be recalled. As years go by, he loses the very strength needed to wait for the royal pardon. Finally, many years later, the king sends an emissary with full powers to grant the prince every desire and wish. In response, the prince asks for a piece of bread and a warm coat, nothing else. He has forgotten that he is a prince and that he could return to his father's kingdom.

Like the prince, you too have forgotten who you are, where you are from, and what you are capable of. All these prayers and religious practices we've been saying and doing are simply reminders that the invisible, which we call God, is real. Everything else we see and experience is pretty much like a dream.

I know all about Sigmund Freud. He had a lot to say about me and most of it was rubbish. But he did reiterate one of my ideas; an idea upon which the most significant developments of the twentieth century rest: that the invisible is more important than the visible. Some say you would never have had Einstein's discoveries if Freud hadn't convinced the world of this first. And, consequently, you would never have had nuclear physics.

For all Freud's animus against Judaism, his idea was an extremely Jewish one. In fact it may not be a stretch to say that it is the Jewish idea. Ever since God appeared to me at Sinai, I've been saying that all along – that the invisible is more important than the visible.

Now here is my second point. **#2: Your body and your thoughts are not you; they are objects of your awareness.**

In my day, my people did not possess the introspective capability that you have today. They could never say, "I am aware of my thoughts." But half of you are probably Buddhists, so a statement like that today is fairly common! You all today are capable of noticing that objects are not only tangible things. They can be intangible, like thoughts, which are simply objects of your awareness; contents of your consciousness. One who is wise doesn't get hung up on them and knows how to see them as beautiful manifestations of consciousness itself.

Let me share with you one more Hasidic story that could make this a little clearer. I got to know the Baal Shem Tov pretty well before he died 250 years ago, and he told this story:

A powerful King was grateful to two simple servants for their devotion, and decided to show his gratitude. These poor servants had never been into the palace before, but had only served the King at state occasions. After receiving their invitations to see the King, in trepidation and excitement, they approached the palace. As they entered, they were amazed to behold its magnificence. One servant was so enamored of these riches, that he stopped in the great halls to delight in their beauty. He never progressed beyond these chambers. Meanwhile, the other servant was wiser, and his desire was only to see the King. The beautiful ornaments did not distract him, as he entered the innermost chamber, where he delighted in beholding the King himself.

Now what are these riches that distracted the first servant? Beautiful things, tangible objects? Sure. But they can also be thoughts, insights; things that might make you want to write a book or a poem or become a piously religious person. Yes, even the most beautiful prayers and rituals can become objects of reverence that point to the divine, but are not themselves divine.

Very few people have the capacity to remain focused enough to persist in this inward journey and to turn their awareness in on itself, as the wise servant did. Instead, most of us are constantly fixated on the objects of our awareness. It takes practice to develop that capacity, to see beyond the content of our consciousness and strive to apprehend their source.

They say I was the only one who could see God face-to-face, as they called it, but there have been many mystics

and others who have done this. You don't have a word for it in your everyday vocabulary but the kabbalists, particularly the Hasidim, call it “*devekut*.” You should ask your rabbi about that later.

Lastly, my third point. **#3: Focusing only on the content of your consciousness is a form of idolatry.** Paying attention to the details of daily life is necessary. What becomes problematic is when we believe that this alone will bring us happiness and we consequently spend little if any time engaging in spiritual practice. And if we do engage in spiritual practice, we are prone to become fixated on the form and believe that what we are practicing is the one and only true way. This is a problem, but not one that you have to deal with very much here in Brattleboro. Here, as in most places where people are predominantly secular, the worst form of idolatry is materialism.

I went to this place the other day that I heard about from Abraham and Sarah. It seemed to me like a shrine to materialism. What was the name of that place? Crosscut? Cost-cut? Costco! And I heard about some popular show on TV. What was it called? Sumerian idol? Babylonian idol? No, American idol! What have you been worshipping??

You have people today who can create or comment on everything under the sun. They become experts and connoisseurs, performing and analyzing whatever they choose to focus on with incredible skill. They become masters of the created world, excelling in the arts and sciences. These are all good and important things, but they are still only the content of consciousness. They rarely help us focus our attention on the greatest of all mysteries – on consciousness itself.

Eventually you'll have to let go of all the contents of your consciousness when the angel of death comes along, and it is usually a terrible shock to those who are not prepared to let go. That's why Yom Kippur is a form of rehearsing for your own death. Didn't your rabbi talk about that last night? Maybe he's not such a *nudnik* after all.

To sum it all up, Yom Kippur is a day to practice letting go. Most people are not accustomed to doing this, as you can see from the number of people who are not here today. But I am glad to see those of you who are. This teaching is not only for those of you who are here today, but for everyone else who's not here today. The work you are doing is very important. Keep it up, and remember my three points:

- 1) **Don't be fooled by appearances.**
- 2) **Your body and your thoughts are not you; they are objects of your awareness.**

3) Focusing only on the objects of your awareness is a form of idolatry.

These teachings which I have shared with you today are not too hard for you to understand, nor too difficult for you to practice. They're not part of some abstract theory about which you should say, "who can interpret this for us so that we may understand it." Nor is it something exotic about which you should say, "who can go to India or Thailand to obtain it for us that we may make it our own." No, this teaching is your own. You need only notice that your body, your thoughts, and the other objects of your awareness are not you. Use them wisely and you too may come to see God face-to-face.

I have to go now. I think Rabbi Tom is going to have to make it now on his own, but I think he'll do just fine. Be good congregants and take care....