

## KOL NIDRE

שלשה הקדוש ברוך הוא שונאן, המדבר אחד בפה ואחד בלב, והיודע עדות בחבירו ואינו מעיד לו,  
והרואה דבר ערוה בחבירו ומעיד בו יחידי... ..

Three the Holy Blessed One hates: one who speaks one thing with his/her mouth and another thing in his/her heart; and one who possesses evidence concerning a neighbor and does not testify for him; and one who sees something indecent in a neighbor and testifies alone against him (Pesahim 113a-b).

Our central focus on these High Holy Days has been re-reading, reinterpreting, the very powerful but very problematic, metaphor of the day of judgment. And we said on Rosh Hashanah, that we shouldn't read this Day of Judgment imagery, or the the accounting of the soul (*heshbon hanefesh*), as some kind of external evaluation of an immutable past, after we're gone. We should understand it, rather, as a constant mid-life assessment, with an eye to the future. We've been re-reading those metaphors as symbolic language, intended to push us to focus on ultimate values, and to do teshuvah (repentance, response, return). Not so that we will receive a reward, but so that life will be more rewarding, more meaningful, holier. And we've been looking at rabbinic texts -- mostly from the Talmud -- which get at these issues, primarily through the metaphor of Day of Judgment.

This evening's text points to the same issues, through a related but slightly different metaphor. What does God love, and what does God hate? Which actions, character traits, ways of being are compatible with God's presence, and which are not?

And it turns out that there are three things that are *incompatible* with God's presence, that God so to speak "hates," all of which relate to the use or misuse of speech.

As does much of the liturgy of Yom Kippur. We began with the solemnity of Kol Nidre, a reminder first, that words are commitments, and second, that there is too often a gap between what we say and what we do. How often words fail; how often we fail our words. Then we came to the *Viddui*, confession. The act of confession, which is itself a form of speech, and the content of the confession:

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְּאֵנוּ לְפִנְיֶיךָ בְּדַבְּרוֹר פָּה.

For the sin we have committed with the words of our mouth.

By my count, fully 25% of the sins in the formal confession relate to speech and words.

Why?

Judaism considers speech to be a sacred act. It's how we serve God, connect to God, and how we partner with God in continually co-creating our world, and ourselves. At the same time, the gift of speech is probably the single most frequently abused human capacity. *Lashon hara* (hurtful, damaging, negative speech) is so common, that it's almost the norm, a rule followed more in the breach than in the observance.

Now, when we think of *lashon hara* we usually think of gossip, saying something false and negative about someone else. And that's obviously wrong; we shouldn't do it. Here, though, the issue of negative speech is framed differently. Let's start with the last two.

What does God hate? . . . one who possesses evidence concerning a neighbor and does not testify for him; and one who sees something indecent in a neighbor and testifies alone against him.

These are very subtle forms of lashon hara. They're not about lying. They're about speaking truth, or staying silent -- but each one at the wrong time

"Testifying alone." What is this about? The Talmud continues with a little story to illustrate the case:

As it once happened that Tobias sinned, and Zigud alone came and testified against him before Rav Papa. [Rav Papa] had Zigud punished. "Tobias sinned and Zigud is punished!" he exclaimed. "Indeed," said [Rav Papa] to him, "for it is written, 'one witness shall not rise up against a man' (Deut. 19:15), whereas you have testified alone against him: you merely bring him into ill repute." . . .

Because the Torah prohibits *convicting* someone on the testimony of one person alone, such testimony has no positive effect -- it does more harm than good.

Now, before we go further, I need to explain the assumptions being made here. The text refers to seeing "something indecent", in Hebrew, *ervah*. In general, *ervah* refers to sexual impropriety, but it's a purity issue, a violation of our obligations to God, rather than an interpersonal, ethical violation. A violation of Jewish law that would shame the perpetrator, but no harm anyone else. The rabbis were *not* speaking of non-consensual or abusive sex. Where someone's behavior -- sexual or otherwise -- *is* directly harmful to others, we may well have an obligation to speak up, even if we are a lone voice. Here, we're talking about the other case -- we're speaking up protects no one.

This stands in tension, obviously, with the second thing God hates: "one who possesses evidence concerning a neighbor and does not testify for him." It's wrong to speak negatively where no benefit will result. And it's equally wrong to stay silent when speaking up could make a difference

And of course, we're not talking only about formal testimony -- each of these are emblematic of broader categories. "Testifying alone" includes all kinds of speech which -- while true, and bearing the patina of righteousness -- is in fact merely negative, doesn't lead to positive action. "Withholding testimony" refers to any time we fail to use the enormous power of speech in healing ways.

Some examples:

- Speaking *about* another's behavior just to point a finger, self-righteously revealing someone's "sin," weakness, or inadequacy, for any reason other than to correct the behavior, to protect someone else from it's consequences, or to instruct, is "testifying alone." Or --
- Speaking directly *to* another person about their own behavior with critique that goes nowhere. Dwelling on someone's mistakes, giving *tokhakhah*, rebuke, where it won't (for whatever reason) be effective in bringing change. Pointing out one-time errors or failings that aren't ongoing behavior -- to what end?
- Generalized kvetching in any community or organization -- work, school, synagogues -- is a form of "testifying alone."

- So is complaining about things that are in the past or aren't going to change; criticizing without a constructive plan to move forward. Or, complaining about things which *might* change but to people who have no power or responsibility to do it, offering critique at a time or in a way that it won't be heard and processed.

All these are "testifying alone." And "failing to testify?"

- Obviously, we're obligated to be the whistleblower when it *will* make a difference, to actively engage in the political process, to speak up in the face of injustice or oppression, to speak out when for example, someone makes comments or jokes that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or reflect religious intolerance.
- We "fail to testify" when we *don't* give constructive criticism when it *would* make a difference -- the moral equivalent of good friends telling each other when they have broccoli between their teeth -- when it's not a kindness to stay silent.
- And beyond that -- when we withhold words of encouragement, support, and praise, when we don't give credit when due, when we don't express our gratitude.

So why do we so often get it wrong? Why do we speak when we shouldn't, stay silent when we are called to "testify"?

Sometimes we reveal truthful but embarrassing things to or about other people so that we can feel better about ourselves in comparison -- either we would never do that, or, maybe we would, but *they* do it too. Sometimes we do it for a concrete personal gain or advantage.

Sometimes we justify truthful but negative speech by telling ourselves that we need to "get it out of our system" -- that it's therapeutic. To a certain extent, that's true. But personally, I find it's often the opposite -- telling the story once doesn't get it out of my system, it just makes me want to tell it again, and again, and again

And sometimes we use speech as a substitute for action. Certainly, as we've said, sometimes speaking out *is* an action, words are a powerful force for social change -- but sometimes it just gives us the *illusion* that we're taking action, when really we're generating more heat than light. As Abraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote in a telegram to President Kennedy about the need for action on civil rights, social justice problems often "threaten to be like the weather -- everyone talks about it, no one does anything about it."

And all the while "testifying alone" carries the added bonus of seeming to be really socially responsible. "I'm the whistle blower! The truth-teller!" I'm going to correct the sins of the world.

There is no better example right now than the press. Speaking as a former First Amendment lawyer who represented the press, and is a great believer in First Amendment rights, nevertheless I must say that much of what passes for news these days falls into this category of "testifying alone." It is reported not to change behavior, not to reveal information that the public needs to know, and not to make a difference. Too often what passes for news is reported solely to gain viewers or readers, in order to make more money, and to feed the public's seemingly insatiable desire for the revelation of embarrassing facts.

Similarly, there are many reasons why we "withhold testimony", why we stay silent when we should speak. Sometimes we yield to a sense of futility and powerlessness, or a false sense of humility (what I say won't make a difference, isn't important enough). Sometimes it's pure laziness, we don't want to take the time; and sometimes it's the fear of unpleasant

consequences, of confrontation. And here too, it's all too easy to delude ourselves -- telling ourselves that we're remaining silent because we're tactful, compassionate, or don't want to provoke a fight.

Which may be why these are particularly "hateful" to God. Because they're especially easy to self-justify, and as likely to bring praise as condemnation from others, they are particularly insidious.

But there's another reason why we so often get it wrong: how do we know? How do we know whether our speech will or won't make a positive difference? How do we really know whether we're speaking *in order* to make a difference, because we are obligated to speak, or for some other less noble reason? How do we really know whether we're keeping our counsel because we want to avoid lashon hara, or just because we're lazy, indifferent, afraid?

The only way to get better at knowing how to use the gift of speech constructively *vis a vis* others, is to get better about speaking truthfully to and about ourselves.

We spoke earlier about one of the main features of the Yom Kippur liturgy: confession. Confession is a form of testimony about one's self.

We all possess "evidence" concerning ourselves: evidence "against" ourselves, *tokhakhah* (self-critique) -- specific things we've done wrong, ways of being that are damaging or limiting. And evidence *for* ourselves -- articulating for ourselves what we do well, how we've grown, how we've made a difference in the world, and what potential we see in ourselves for the future. And we're obligated to testify to both. If we don't call ourselves to task, then how can we ever hope to change? But if we don't also articulate our achievements and our strengths, what will give us the courage to do the work of changing?

At the same time, we're obligated to testify, confess, in a way that is helpful, conducive to change. We're not permitted to "testify alone," even about ourselves. Confession is *not* about beating ourselves up. Continually berating ourselves about past behavior, churning shame and negativity -- internally or aloud -- is no different from testifying alone about something shameful in someone else. It may make us *feel* like we're being righteous, but in fact it goes nowhere; we merely bring ourselves into ill repute in our own eyes.

Now, the confession -- our self-testimony -- must be literally speech; it must be said aloud. Why? One reason is because words engage the will. We all think a lot of good thoughts and have a lot of good intentions. But when we say them aloud, we translate those vague intentions into commitments -- like putting a car's engine into gear. Once we say it, we're much more likely to do it.

But there's another reason, which has to do with how hard it is to testify truthfully about ourselves. Which brings us to the first thing on the list of what God hates: "one who speaks one thing with his/her mouth and another thing in his/her heart."

This too is not the way we usually think of *lashon hara*. We've been talking about misusing truth -- failing to speak it, or speaking it in a harmful way. This one is about falsehood. But not falsehoods that we spread about others (slander, gossip). This is about falsehoods that we speak about -- and to -- ourselves.

"One who speaks one thing with his/her mouth and another thing in his/her heart" is, on one

level, about insincere or false speech, hypocrisy; misleading people by saying things we don't feel or believe. But it isn't only, or even primarily, about what we say to others. It's about how we articulate ourselves *to ourselves*. It's about misrepresenting the self, mis-translating the self -- creating a narrative of who we are, what we're about, that isn't true to our hearts

What does this mean? Of course there are the usual forms of denial -- denying our faults, our mixed motives, whitewashing our behavior. But beyond that, we all tell stories about ourselves, we construct narratives, which in turn construct our identities and self-image. Are they true? Are they authentically who we are? Do we continue to tell ourselves "truths" we were told about ourselves as children -- what we're good at, what we're not good at, who we *are* -- that are no longer, or never were, true? Do we tell ourselves that we don't care about certain things, values, people -- dismiss them as unimportant -- when in fact we care desperately? Do we stay in situations or relationships that aren't good for us because we tell ourselves "we're fine"? Do we continue to say that we really do value whatever it is we're spending our time, our energy, our money on, when in fact, it may not be what we really want out of life at all? Do we dare articulate to ourselves the things that matter most to us, our values, our dreams, our deepest yearnings, our spiritual strivings?

But again, how do we know? Oh, the challenge of truly and accurately articulating what is in the heart! As Rav Josef Soloveitchik says:

Pure thought on its own, no matter how exact and penetrating, is simply not grasped until it is formed into words. We know many truths about ourselves that we do not dare express in public, and even avoid saying them to ourselves.

That is why, Soloveitchik says, we confess aloud. Confession, testifying truthfully about one's self, is practice in speaking one's heart honestly -- it teaches us how to do it, it teaches us about ourselves.

And it's actually one of the main purposes of prayer in general. Prayer is our daily opportunity to spend some time trying to articulate ourselves honestly. True, we begin with a formal liturgy, the prayerbook. But that's to get us going, to focus us on the aspects of ourselves which otherwise might get drowned out in the cacophony of our usual concerns. The liturgy is the starting point of prayer, not the endpoint.

And while we're speaking of prayer, I want to say clearly: What does God hate? One who says one thing with his or her mouth, and another in his or her heart. It applies also to prayer. One of our goals in creating this new Machzor is to help us pray more honestly. We tried to create both a translation and a commentary that uses words to reveal, rather than conceal. Where the Hebrew expresses something that is difficult theologically, that conflicts with our experience of the world, that is, in a sense, broken, we didn't translate it out. We translated it *in*. And we included commentaries to help us reinterpret the prayers so that we not only know what we're saying, but we can find a way to *mean* what we're saying. Honestly. It's one of the reasons why the machzor is called *Lev Shalem* -- a whole heart, all of a piece, a heart that speaks with integrity.

It's a good metaphor for translating the self. Today, standing alone before God, but with the support of everyone else doing it too, we screw up our courage to finally speak our whole truth about ourselves, without whitewashing it. Not, as I've said, to beat ourselves up, but as a way of getting to know ourselves -- of translating our hearts and souls, our histories and experiences, into words: even those parts which shame or embarrass us, which frighten us in their intensity

or power, which humble and awe us in their potential, or which might have significant implications in how we live our lives.

Today we practice testifying both more accurately and more lovingly about ourselves: so that we will become better at using our speech in healthier, more creative ways generally; so we'll be better at knowing, when we speak to and about others, whether we are "testifying alone," or "withholding testimony;" and so that we'll do better at translating our own hearts accurately. This is why speech in general-- and confession in particular -- is so essential to life, to *teshuvah*, the goal of which is to return to the truth of who we are. We translate the heart into words, so that we can better translate the words into action -- so that we can better create the true self we are meant to be.

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטָּאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּדוּרֵי פִּה.

And for the sin which we have sinned against you, by confessing with our mouths,  
and not with our hearts.

## YOM KIPPUR DAY

“Have you seen My alps?” We’ve been looking at Talmudic texts about ultimate values. Last night, three things that God “hates.” On Rosh Hashanah, the six questions that Rava imagines we are asked on the day of judgment. Now we fast-forward about 1500 years, to 1888, where Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, on his deathbed, imagines what God is asking him. One question: “Have you seen My alps.”

It sounds like an ad for a travel agency, not a question intended to get at the meaning of life!

But Rav Hirsch wasn’t drawing this from thin air. There’s an early rabbinic text, from the Jerusalem Talmud, which makes a related, and similarly surprising, point:

ר' חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל מה שראת עינו ולא  
אכל

Rabbi Ḥezekiah and Rabbi Kohen in the name of Rav said: In the future, a person will have to give a judgment and account regarding everything (s)he saw and did not eat. (PT Kiddushin 4:12 (66b))

What is this about? Are the rabbis advocating hedonism, life is short, enjoy it while you can? You might be surprised to learn that we do find that notion expressed in some traditional sources.<sup>1</sup>

But here, I think it’s about something else.

First, this is a polemic against asceticism. These texts combat the misimpression that a religious life is about abstaining from worldly pleasures, that only the soul, and not the body, matters. That’s un-Jewish.

Obviously, there are boundaries. Rav is not suggesting that we eat unkosher or unhealthy things; keeping kosher is a religious obligation, a mitzvah, as is caring for our bodies. But both Rav, and Rav Hirsch remind us that a healthy spiritual life should expand not narrow our horizons, and should never lead us to disdain the created world, or to disdain or be ashamed of our body and our bodily needs. On the contrary, it should deepen our engagement with the world, not remove us from it. It should deepen our appreciation of life’s pleasures, and of the ability of our bodies to partake of them.

Now it may seem odd to be talking about this now, on Yom Kippur, the day when we *do* deny ourselves bodily pleasures. But even today -- our fast is *not* a denial of the religious value of life in this world, and it’s not a denigration of the body. Nor is it the ideal -- “if only we could be this way all the time, that would be best.” On the contrary. The Talmud tells us of a particular sage

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1. See, e.g., [Eruvin 54a](#):

אמר ליה שמואל לרב יהודה: שיננא, חטוף ואכול חטוף ואישתי, דעלמא דאזלינן מינייה כהלולא דמי. אמר ליה רב לרב המנונא: בני, אם יש לך - היטב לך, שאין בשאול תענוג ואין למות התמהמה.

Shmuel [further] said to Rav Yehudah, ‘Shinena, hurry up and eat, hurry up and drink, since the world from which we must depart is like a wedding feast’ [Rashi: i.e., if you have enough money to enjoy yourself, do it now and don’t wait, lest you die without having had any enjoyment from it, because like is like a wedding which goes by in a flash]. Rab said to R. Hamnuna, ‘My son, according to thy ability do good to thyself, for there is no enjoyment in she’ol nor will death be long in coming.

who wanted to spend the whole day before Yom Kippur studying Torah. He was told no. Why? Because on the 9th of Tishrei, the day before Yom Kippur, we're supposed to feast. And one who eats and drinks on the ninth, is considered to have fasted on both the ninth *and* the tenth.<sup>2</sup> In other words, feasting, not fasting, is the higher level. We didn't eat yesterday in order to fast today. We fast today to learn how to really feast at the table of life -- not merely to consume, but to partake fully of life, in a holy way. We fast today to remind ourselves that we have (or can have) mastery over our impulses, so that we are able to fully engage without being out of control, to live life to the fullest, without crossing boundaries.

Now, you may fairly ask, is observance to the point of asceticism really a problem in liberal Judaism? Clearly not, in observance. But in perception, yes. Some of us do have the misconception that Judaism is an ascetic tradition, precisely because Yom Kippur -- when we fast and afflict ourselves -- is our primary or only experience of Judaism. And truly, it breaks my heart. Not because Yom Kippur isn't a magnificent expression of religious striving, and not because of some judgment about what people *should* do. But because it creates the false impression that Judaism is about restriction, contrition, and death. Being accountable for what the eye saw and didn't eat, "seeing God's alps," applies not only to the fullness of life in general, but to the fullness of Jewish life -- the richness and celebration of Sukkot and Simhat Torah, and oneg Shabbat -- the delights of Shabbat. "Have you seen My alps?" Experiencing Judaism only at Yizkor is like choosing to experience nature only when you visit the cemetery. It's meaningful, it's important -- but you're missing out on the beauty and joy.

But why is Judaism so anti-ascetic? One: because it's unhealthy and unrealistic. We need balance. Pleasure and delight are an important part of a religious life because if you're going to have anything to give, you need to replenish, you need to play. One reason we have Shabbat.

But actually, that's again, a common misreading of Shabbat, and of these teachings. We don't rest on Shabbat in order to be able to work more during the week. It's the opposite. We work, in order to have Shabbat. Shabbat is the culmination of creation -- the goal of it all.

And the fact that both these teachings are framed in this way -- that we are *accountable* and judged for everything we failed to eat, and that we are asked, "Have you seen My alps" on the day of judgment -- implies that partaking of the fullness of the world, enjoying and delighting in it, is a religious value in and of itself. It itself is central to our fulfilling our purpose in life.

First, because life is a gift, and fully partaking in life, enjoying life, is an expression of our appreciation of that gift, and therefore of the Giver, God. Narrowing the scope of our experience, not partaking of life's bounty, is like getting a carefully selected and very expensive gift, and never opening it. Imagine the thank you note: "Thank you so much for your thoughtful

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## 2. Berakhot 8b

רב ביבי בר אביי סבר לאשלומיניהו לפרשייתא דכלא שתא במעלי יומא דכפורי. תנא ליה חייא בר רב מדפתי: כתיב (ויקרא כ"ג) ועניתם את נפשתיכם בתשעה לחדש בערב, וכי בתשעה מתענין? והלא בעשרה מתענין אלא לומר לך: כל האוכל והשותה בתשיעי - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתענה תשיעי ועשירי.

Rav Bibi bar Abbaye wanted to finish all the Parashiyot of the whole year on the eve of Yom Kippur [i.e., he wanted to study all that day]. But Hiyya bar Rav of Difti recited to him [the following Baraitha]: It is written: "And you shall afflict your souls, in the ninth day of the month at even" (Lev. 23:32). Now, do we fast on the ninth? Why, we fast on the tenth! But this teaches you that if one eats and drinks on the ninth, Scripture accounts it to him as if he fasted on the ninth and tenth [i.e., therefore he shouldn't devote the whole day to study].



and generous gift. I haven't opened it, but I'm sure it's wonderful. I'll keep it safely in my closet, and make sure the wrapping remains undisturbed." What could be more frustrating to the Giver of the gift?

And, it's not only a way of expressing gratitude, but of engaging with God, creating a relationship. We pray in every Amidah throughout these ten days, *Zokhreinu l'hayim, Melekh hafetz bahayyim* -- Remember us for life, O Sovereign who delights in life. God, too, *delights* in life. Another Talmudic text on ultimate values, asks how God spends God's day.<sup>3</sup> It turns out that God spends a quarter of every day delighting in God's own creation, playing with Leviathan, who was created *solely for that purpose*. But when you love some one or some thing which no one else loves or appreciates, it's lonely. By living and loving life, we love what God loves, share God's delight, and make God less lonely. And by fully engaging in the fullness of life, we get to know God a little better, because we get to know what God loves.

"Have you seen My Alps?" Many of us go through life without *really* seeing. It's possible to be right there in Switzerland, on the mountain, and never really see God's alps. Why was Moshe chosen? Because a bush was burning, without being consumed, and he saw it -- you have to be paying close attention to the world to notice that. What would have happened if Moshe had been multi-tasking that day -- on the phone, checking email, listening to music, watching videos? We'd still be in Egypt. Have you seen My Alps? is about being really present, in both space and time -- it points to inattentiveness, lack of awareness as a kind of cardinal sin. Or in Rav's terms, being called to account for what we failed to eat:

- our eyes see, but we don't ingest -- we don't take it in
- or we ingest, we eat of life, but we don't taste anything, we don't appreciate.
- or we taste, but we don't digest -- we don't incorporate it into ourselves; derive nourishment and energy and inspiration from it. Life doesn't make much of an impression on us.

"Have you seen My Alps?" And having seen them, do you continue to see? "In the future, a person will have to give a judgment and account regarding everything (s)he saw and did not eat." The text goes on to tell us about Rabbi Elazar, who was so scrupulous about this that he used to save up small coins, and use the money to eat every possible food at least once *every year*. One of the key aspects of *teshuvah* is encountering the familiar in a new way -- seeing the old with new eyes. Do you keep your vision fresh? If God is asking, "Have you seen My alps," I'm pretty sure, "been there done that" isn't the best answer.

"Have you seen MY Alps?" When you see the Alps, do you see them as Mine? Where do we find God? In our search for spirituality, we look first *within* the created world. Do we see God

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### 3. Avodah Zarah 3b

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב שתים עשרה שעות היו היום שלש הראשונות הקדוש ברוך הוא יושב ועוסק בתורה שניות יושב ודן את כל העולם כולו כיון שרואה שנתחייב עולם כלייה עומד מכסה הדין ויושב על כסא רחמים שלישיות יושב וזן את כל העולם כולו מקרני ראמים עד ביצי כנים רביעיות יושב ומשחק עם לויטן שנאמר לויתן זה יצרת לשחק בו

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: The day consists of twelve hours. During the first three hours the Holy Blessed One sits and is occupied with the Torah. During the second three God sits in judgment on the whole world, and when God sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, God stands from from the seat of Justice and sits on the seat of Mercy. During the third quarter, God sits and feeds the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin. During the fourth quarter God plays with the Leviathan, as it is said, "There is Leviathan, whom You have formed to play with." (Avodah Zarah 3b)

within the miracle of creation? And do we see with perspective, such that human accomplishment is contextualized, understood relative to God's creation? Do we understand that every created thing is a "hyperlink" of sorts to God?

Now, I've said that the fact that both these texts are framed in this way -- that we are *accountable* for what we failed to see and what we failed to eat -- implies that partaking of the fullness of the world is a religious value. It also implies that, left to our own devices -- we might not do it. Why not?

True, for liberal Jews, anxiety about our "piety" doesn't usually manifest as asceticism per se. But it may emerge as a vague (or not so vague!) feeling of guilt if we're not always working -- either at our jobs, or on ourselves, or in tikkun olam -- or even if we enjoy ourselves too much, as though really loving life, too much joy, is somehow irreligious.

Others of us are afraid of entering the full messiness of life. There's a text in the Talmud that lists three "whose life is not life". What's the third? One is "overly fastidious."<sup>4</sup> If we need to control our environment too much, if we're *too* sensitive, or we're haunted by perfectionism, we miss out on a lot. Some of us put the great gift of life in the closet, unopened, because we're afraid of messing up the wrapping paper, or of getting a paper cut.

Some of us we may be world-travelers with adventuresome palates, but are nevertheless cautious and narrow in other ways, reluctant to venture into territory which may make us uncomfortable, may challenge us -- may awe us. It's true spiritually, culturally, intellectually -- and certainly emotionally. We avoid some foods because they give us indigestion. We avoid other things because they give us emotional indigestion. Witness the expression, "I can't stomach it."

Which takes us to what may be the primary reason why we resist living expansively, really seeing God's alps, really tasting of everything life has to offer: fear. Fear of a depth encounter with the world, with another person, with ourselves. Fear of the depth of our own responses, our own emotions, our own yearnings. Many of us are afraid to explore fully our inner terrain -- we don't actually want to see the mountainous peaks and great gorges of our own hearts, our own feelings. Including -- especially - our capacity to love.

We speak of two ways of serving God, and two kinds of teshuvah. Service, or teshuvah, out of awe or fear, often fear of punishment. And the higher level: service, or teshuvah, out of love. On Yom Kippur, we strive for this higher level. We pray for life, not because we fear death, but because we love life, because God loves life

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ, וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ.

You shall love Adonai your God, with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and every fiber of your being

Most of us afraid to love -- another person, God, life, -- quite that much. Primarily, of course, because we are afraid to lose. Have you seen, *really seen*, My Alps? It's not easy to do. There's an ache that comes with really seeing, in deeply appreciating the world, life -- because it

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4. Pesahim 113a-b

תנו רבנן: שלשה חיהן אינם חיים: הרחמנין, והרתחנין, ואנני הדעת.

Our Rabbis taught: There are three whose life is not life: the [overly] compassionate, the hot-tempered, and the [overly] fastidious.

takes us right up to the border of our finitude. The more we love life, the harder our mortality is to bear.

And it's not only the peaks and valleys of love and loss that we may prefer to leave unexplored. Sometimes we're afraid to completely unwrap the gift of life, better to just leave it there in the closet, lest we open it and be disappointed by what we find. Or worse than disappointed, pained.

Which is where it gets really tough. Partaking of the fullness of life means not only seeing the magnificence of the alps, but the devastation in Haiti, in Pakistan. It means opening ourselves not only to greater depths of love, but also to a lot more pain -- really seeing both the good and bad in the world, in other people, and in ourselves. And even more challenging: it means striving to see *all* of this complicated messy magnificent horrific created world as "Mine," God's -- even the not nice, uncomfortable, or devastating parts. Even -- especially -- all human beings.

Machzor Lev Shalem. A whole heart -- a heart that is one within itself, a heart that is at one with other hearts, a heart that holds the fullness of life's experience, even its brokenness. We tried to really do that in creating this machzor. It's "inclusive" in so many ways that previous prayerbooks were not: with regard to gender; sexual orientation; non-Hebrew readers; non-Jews; loneliness, depression, financial need; those who can't fast, those who are this morning remembering hurtful, not loving, parents. We drew from the fullness of the Jewish community across time and space -- in all the different voices and experiences represented in the commentary, as well as liturgy from outside the Ashkenazic tradition. We welcomed that diversity of experience onto the page, and into the synagogue -- to be heard, to be seen.

But it's easy to point at our tradition, at the prayerbook, even the Torah, and say, "That's exclusionary." What about us? What about our communities, and ourselves as individuals? "Have you seen My alps?" Who do we see and hear, and who do we fail to see or hear? Which life experiences and attitudes do we understand, acknowledge, validate -- and which ones just don't register?

The machzor expanded the liturgical canon. What about our personal canons? Who and what is written in your book of life, and who and what is ignored or excised? What kinds of people and what life experiences are recognized, celebrated, fully included, in our synagogues and other Jewish communities? And what pieces of ourselves, which of our own life experiences, get included in our *Sefer HaHayim*, and which get shut out, unseen, untasted? And what are our investments in keeping those boundaries where we've drawn them?

We open the newspaper, we read some stories, we don't even see others. We see the *suffering* of Israel, as we should. And we see the *violence* of the Palestinians and of many other Arab nations. As we need to; it's real. But, do we also see the *pain* of the Palestinians? And are we willing to see the way in which *our* behavior -- sometimes justified, sometimes not, -- causes others to suffer? To really see it. Or maybe I should put it this way, "Have you *seen* My Palestinians?"

As we said earlier with respect to the halakhah, if our religion leads us to narrow our vision and our experience, so that we can only see our own -- it's a form of ethical asceticism -- and it's too narrow and constricted a religion.

Now, I'm not sure it's possible to live with our eyes truly wide open -- to really experience the fullness of life, all the time. It would be overwhelming, both too beautiful, and too painful,

But we can do better -- we can see and taste, integrate, more of life -- more people, more parts of ourselves, more beauty, more pain.

Now, obviously, not all seeing, and not all eating -- not *all* partaking of life's experience -- is in and of itself of religious significance. What Rav Hirsch, and Rav, are talking about is a *particular* way of seeing the world, of partaking of the world, which leads to delight, which leads to appreciation, which leads to wonder, which leads to awe, which leads to response

"Have you seen My Alps?" If that's the question, what's the answer? We know that "been there done that" is out. But "yes," even "YES!," doesn't really do it either. First, because as we've seen, it's not so easy to say "yes" honestly. And secondly because if we say "yes," we haven't really seen. If we've really seen, if we've really tasted of life, we will feel a need not to answer, but to *respond*, to give back.

"In the future," the Talmud says, "a person will have to give a judgment and account regarding everything (s)he saw and did not eat." But the Talmud also says, that someone who takes pleasure from this world is like someone who steals from God, or who trespasses on, violates, sacred property.

Unless. Unless one recites a blessing. When God asks, "Have you seen My Alps?", the first response is

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית.  
*Blessed are You, Adonai Eloheinu, Sovereign of space-time,  
who creates the work of creation.*

That's the blessing to be recited upon seeing a mountain range. How do we respond, give back to God? First, through blessing, through prayer.

And second? Our second answer, our *teshuvah* (which is the Hebrew word for answer, response) -- is our *teshuvah*. We respond by changing: by allowing what we've seen to have an impact on us, by letting the joy, the pain, the beauty and the ugliness permeate our being, and expand our capacity -- our capacity for appreciation, our capacity for empathy. And, most importantly, we respond by changing our behavior. We respond by taking better care of what we've been given to see.

So.

Have you been down to the beach lately and seen the ocean? Have you *seen* it? Have you seen it as as God's?

Have you walked down the street lately and seen the faces of other people? Have you *seen* them? Have you seen them as God's?

Have you seen My Alps?

## NEILAH

We spoke this morning about really seeing -- “have you seen My Alps?” -- and the need to respond to what we see with blessing, and with action. Now, as the day draws to a close and we begin anticipating Sukkot -- when we build structures to symbolically embody what we’ve learned -- we need to start thinking concretely about what that will look like. What actions do we need to take? What do we need to *do* differently, so that this next year will be more meaningful?

To quote Tevye: I’ll tell you: I don’t know. Throughout these Yamim Noraim we’ve been looking at a variety of rabbinic formulations of ultimate values. From Rava’s list of six questions, to three things God “hates”, to being accountable for what we didn’t eat or see -- different teachers, different views of what’s most important in life.

Now in the text packet you have, which I hope you’ll read after services, there are more: three over whom God makes proclamation, three who God loves, three whose life is not life. Six different sages asked by their students, “what do *you* feel is really worthwhile about how you live?,” giving six very different answers, totalling 20 things -- values, behaviors, character traits -- some ethical, some ritual, some grand, some seemingly very small.

How do we live meaningfully? It’s not just six questions, or three of this and three of that. There are 613 mitzvot in the Torah, regulating and guiding all of life. Some prohibiting or demanding very specific deeds, and some overarching -- you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Taken together, it’s a little like the finale of a fireworks display -- maybe like the fireworks display on Mount Sinai. Beautiful, awe-inspiring, but overwhelming -- but hard to take it all in, hard to focus. Who can fulfill all of this? Where does one even begin?

The Rabbis themselves struggled with the same question. And they dealt with it in two very different ways.

Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were communicated to Moshe. . . .  
But then David came and reduced them to eleven (Makkot 23b-24a).

Looking around for a shorter list than 613, Rabbi Simlai finds Psalm 15, attributed to King David, where there are eleven traits, behaviors, by which a person merits to be in God’s presence. 613 reduced to eleven. And then he went on:

. . . . Isaiah came and reduced them to six [quoting a verse from Isaiah] . . .  
Micah came and reduced them to three [quoting the famous, “do justice, and love mercy and walk humbly before your God”] (Micah 6:8). . . .

Then another verse from Isaiah with only two things. And finally, one essential principle, from the prophet Amos: “For thus says Adonai to the house of Israel, “Seek Me and live” (דרשוני וחי) (Amos 5:4).

What is this about? It’s about the innate human tendency toward essentialism -- to take the complexity of the Torah, of the mitzvot, and distill it down to its essence. “It’s too much, I can’t learn it all, I certainly can’t *do* it all. Tell me what *really* matters.” That impulse is partly at the root of all the texts we’ve been looking at, as well as the famous one in which Hillel is asked to teach the whole Torah on one foot, and responds, “do not do to others what is hateful to you. The rest is commentary.”

It's a natural impulse, and one we're especially inclined to today. "Give me the reader's digest version, tell me the bottom line." We live in a sound-bite culture, and we want our spirituality -- like everything else -- fast, clear, easy. I've given you a minute, now give me the world.

But there are two problems with this. First of all, we won't agree on what the essential values are. We've already seen a wide variety of answers, and even in this one text, they don't agree. Rabbi Simlai says "Seek Me and live." Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak comes and says, no that's not good. People might think that just means you have to observe the whole Torah in order to live. Use a different verse, Habakuk, "But the righteous shall live by his/her faith" (Hab. 2:4).

And second: it just doesn't work that way. You can't simplify spiritual practice. It's not easy, it's hard. And it's complex. You can't reduce the Torah to one or two or eleven principles or values.

So right there, in that very same text (Makkot 23b-24a), there's also a very different answer. The Rabbis are talking about Psalm 15, "who merits to be in God's presence?" And the last verse of the Psalm says that whoever does these things will never be uprooted (i.e., will have eternal life in the world to come). But then the Talmud says, "Whenever Rabban Gamliel would read that verse, he would burst into tears." And he would ask, "Does this mean that you have to do *everything*? If I do one of them, but not *all of them*, my life is worth nothing?"

Rabbi Akiva answers him: not at all. Look, he says, "the Torah says gives a list of things which cause ritual impurity. You don't have to touch them *all* to be impure -- any one on the list will do. It's the same here. The Psalm says *all* these things -- but do any one of them, and it's as if you did them all.

Is this just a compassionate text, to make us feel better about our inability to do everything? Is it about practicality -- keeping us in realm of possibility, so we're not set up for failure from the start? Could be. And you know what -- *dayenu*. How wonderful that we have tradition that is so compassionate, and so attuned to the realities -- the fundamental pain, embarrassment, anxiety -- of the human condition: ultimate responsibility, limited understanding and ability. Rabban Gamliel -- the great sage, head of the Sanhedrin, one of the martyrs we read about in the Eleh Ezkerah -- would burst into tears, "You mean I have to do *everything*?" Even he can't!

But Rabbi Akiva's answer goes beyond that. Of course the totality of the Torah is overwhelming, and we want and need to draw out the essence, to figure out what it's *really* all about it. And yes, there are essential values and principles to be discerned. But that's not enough. Life isn't lived in the general, and there is no one-size fits all spirituality. We need the the specificity of not one but 613 (both a real and symbolic number) concrete ways to serve God and lead a meaningful life. *All* aspects of Torah and Jewish life -- all 613 mitzvot -- matter. Nevertheless, *you* personally aren't expected to do it all -- no one can. Just do your part -- even if it's only one thing -- in the very particular way that you are you.

The Hasidic tradition expresses this beautifully. They teach that each of us has some particular mitzvah -- maybe one, maybe several -- that is "ours" for this lifetime, that we're meant to fulfill and do really well. And you're here in this world to perfect that mitzvah -- to reveal it to the world in all it's glory. It's not about doing everything, it's about REALLY doing something -- meticulously, consistently, beautifully.

Chabad lives this better than anyone I know. Their whole approach to people is that you never know what someone is here to do, and you never know whose soul is on what level. Maybe this

person doesn't observe x,y, and z -- but maybe they're at such a high level that in this life they only need to do this one thing -- and since you don't know, you can't judge

So what do we need to *do* now? I don't know. There is no single path. Which may be why so many of the texts we looked at aren't about particular outward deeds. Mostly they're about building character (not *being* a character, *building* character) -- learning/self-improvement/*tikkun atzmi* -- the repair of the self. Of course it has to translate into action -- the deed is essential. But what we do, and how we do it, will be different for each of us

Which takes us to the famous story about Zusya -- which Aaron spoke about so beautifully on Shabbat Shuvah (it's on our website if you missed it). There are many versions of this story; this the story as it's told in Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*:<sup>5</sup>

Before he died, Rabbi Zusya said: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

It's a beautiful, simple framing of the question we've been asking, "what gives life meaning?" And it sounds like the perfect solution to our essentialist tendencies. What *really* matters, give me the *one* thing do I have to do? Just be you.

And for that reason it's also a little bit dangerous. Especially to our 21st century ears.

Neither the early Rabbis, nor Rav Hirsch, nor Zusya, nor the mystics or Hasidim are advocating individualism in the sense that we think of it today. "Why were you not Zusya" does *not* mean "I gotta be me, to hell with everyone else." It does *not* mean I'm responsible to and for myself alone. It only works -- it's only true -- if the individual is part of a larger whole, part of a community.

In the broad sense, part of *Klal Yisrael* (the People Israel): participating consciously and activity in the shared covenantal destiny of the Jewish people -- feeling the collective pain and joy, accepting the obligation to work for the well-being of the whole. And in the particular: being an active, engaged, committed member of a functioning Jewish community. Not just joining a synagogue in name and paying dues (although that's good). In fact, it needn't necessarily be a synagogue per se. But sharing fully in the life of a community -- giving of one's self, knowing the other people deeply and caring about them, sharing in their *individual* destinies.

Jewish life, Jewish observance, is a system designed to keep us focused on these ultimate issues, to help us find our Zusya-selves -- what we're meant to do. And it's designed to help us build communities that are supportive of that process. Lenore Weitzman coined a wonderful phrase for me this week, "evocative communities" -- communities that evoke the best in us, that evoke generosity and community-mindedness. That's what Judaism is designed to create. It works. It's a magnificent system. But outside the system, outside the context of such a community, not only are we less likely to authentically do all that we've been talking about, our quest to articulate the self, to be more like Zusya -- is at risk of devolving into solipsism and self-indulgence.

And beyond that, "Why were you not Zusya," or the notion of a personal mission of just one mitzvah, is based on a worldview that is similar to what we now call fractals. The part contains the whole. Each individual person contains the whole world. One mitzvah -- properly done --

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5. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, volume I, page 251.

contains all mitzvot. Like the DNA in one cell.

But -- the DNA of one cell only contains the whole person when it's part of the body. When it's disconnected, it dies. And when it starts doing it's own thing unrelated to the needs of the body as a whole, we call that cancer.

One mitzvah isn't *really* equal to all the mitzvot. But when we participate in the life of community, we so to speak benefit from all the mitzvot that everyone else does. On a very practical level (e.g., bikkur holim, making a minyan, political action), I don't do this, but you do; you don't do that, but I do -- and we have a functioning community. And on the spiritual level: we all share in each other's spiritual destiny. All Israel are sureties for one another. We bear responsibility for each other's transgressions, and we get "credit" for each other's mitzvot; we rise and fall together. It's one of the main reasons why we confess publicly, in the plural, all together -- it's safer that way. But we all share in each other's merits.

So that's one danger. There's another. "Why were you not Zusya" -- the idea of finding your one mitzvah -- does *not* mean that we should only do what comes easily. If something doesn't feel good, doesn't appeal to me, doesn't work for me -- it's not "me" and so I'm exempt; it's not my mitzvah. Not at all.

The Talmud (Pesahim 113a)<sup>6</sup> teaches in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan that every day, God makes proclamation over three types of people -- the Divine "yasher ko'ah!" All three involve resisting a temptation that is particular to each person, and each person's situation. What are they?

- (1) "A bachelor who lives in a large town without sinning." Sex in the City. Someone who is alone, with ready access to promiscuous and anonymous sex.
- (2) "A poor person who returns lost property to its owner." When you yourself have nothing, and you find money or property, it's so tempting to make only a minimal effort (or no effort) to return it.
- (3) "A wealthy person who tithes his produce in secret (or modestly)." You're really successful, and boy is your tithe impressive (think of physically bringing massive amounts -- truckloads -- of fruits and grains to the Temple). Who wouldn't be immodest -- making sure everyone sees how much you're giving, or at least feeling pride in your own heart?

Being true to yourself -- being Zusya -- isn't about doing only what comes easily and naturally -- it's more about doing what's hard. It's about *not* yielding to our "special situations," the very particular rationalizations and resistances that life offers to each of us. "Well, I'm lonely, I need this." "Maybe this found money is God's way of helping me in my poverty, and I'm not *supposed* to return it."

Nor is any particular set of life circumstances or personality traits more or less conducive to living life meaningfully -- rich or poor, there are always ethical, spiritual challenges, and there are always opportunities for growth and sanctification. It's about finding them, and rising to the

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אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה מכריז עליהן הקדוש ברוך הוא בכל יום: על רווק הדר בכרך ואינו חוטא, ועל עני המחזיר אבידה לבעליה, ועל עשיר המעשר פירותיו בצינעה.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Concerning three does the Holy Blessed One make proclamation every day: (1) a bachelor who lives in a large town without sinning, (2) a poor person who returns lost property to its owner, and (3) a wealthy person who tithes his produce in secret (or modestly).



occasion. Managing your particular life circumstances, your particular personality traits, your particular strengths and weakness.

And our particular mission, in a particular moment, needn't be on a grand scale -- something that objectively makes a big impact on the world. Because of course, what's a big thing for you -- a major test of your character -- may be insignificant to someone else; they may not even notice. And what's nothing to you, may well be a major piece of growth for someone else. Instead, it's about doing the little things that are nevertheless hard, stretching a little, in ways that only you know, every day. "Three over whom God makes proclamation every day:" it's not the MVP -- there is no most valuable player -- it's God's most improved player award.

"Three over whom God makes proclamation *every day*." Not the end of days, nor the end of life. Not Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Every day*. We don't find our mission, figure out how to live it, learn what we need to learn, once and for all. Each and every day is an effort. And, each and every day, is enough. We don't have to do find it, learn it, live it once and for all. Every day is a challenge, but every day is an opportunity. Every day, EVERY day, counts. What makes for a meaningful life? What makes for a meaningful *day*?

I want to close by looking at one more text (Megillah 27b-28a). This is an exchange between a teacher, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa, and one particular disciple known as Rabbi -- Yehudah haNasi -- one of the greatest sages, in his day head of the Sanhedrin, the primary editor of the Mishnah. So Rabbi asks his teacher, How have you attained such length of days (במה הארכת ימים)? Literally, "with what have you lengthened your days." Length of days -- it's the idiom we use for long life, but it's a very telling idiom. It's not really about more days, but days that are long. Days that cast a long shadow, a life that stretches beyond itself.

And the teacher, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa, doesn't want to say. קצת בחיי? "Do you begrudge me my life?", he responds. Maybe he means, "don't bring the evil eye." Maybe, "don't ask me to be immodest." Or maybe, "do you envy me my life?"

But his student, Rabbi, says, רבי, תורה היא וְלִלְמוּד אֲנִי צָרִיךְ -- "My teacher, it is Torah, and I need to learn it."

We ended on Rosh Hashanah with the idea that each of us is a teacher, a role model. תורה צריך. Not that we should imitate each other (remember Zusya!), but learn from each other. Be inspired to do better at what others do well, certainly. But mostly, be inspired, find guidance, in figuring out what we need to do

How do we know what will give our lives meaning? We learn from our tradition, from text, and from each other. From the people we admire, from our teachers, from the people who seem to lengthen their days -- to live deeply, and to make a difference. That's why it's so important to choose our friends and our communities well. They are our teachers. And it's why we have an obligation to shape our lives well -- we are the teachers of others.

We said on Rosh Hashanah that on the day of judgment -- the end of days, or every day -- our Torah is spoken before God. We teach God Torah. It's a way of saying that each of us has the potential to to advance consciousness in some unique way, to reveal a never-before-seen aspect of the Divine. Some small way, in which we ourselves heal the world. There is a classic rabbinic notion that there are seventy faces of Torah, and that the Torah shows a unique face to each person: you'll see something in the text that I wouldn't see. We are *shown* a unique face

of Torah in order to *show* a unique face of Torah. And maybe that's actually how it happens: we're *shown* a unique face of Torah *by showing* a unique face of Torah. We ourselves learn, and we teach others, through the particular way that we struggle to live our lives in a meaningful way:

- how we deal with joy and with pain
- what we do when we're healthy; how we manage when we're ill
- how we handle our blessings and our adversity
- how we ourselves evaluate our own lives -- what at the end of a year, at the end of a day -- we ourselves feel makes our lives worth living
- our own particular struggle to figure out the essence -- what does it *really* mean -- and also to live the particulars.

Out of the way we ourselves embody the Torah, a new face of the Torah emerges -- *our* face. What is a life well-lived? If God-willing, on the day of judgment -- in the future, or now -- God says:

רבי, תורה היא וְלִלְמוּד אֲנִי צָרִיךְ

My teacher, it is Torah, and I need to learn it.