

**Dvar Torah Sermon 5777 2016 YK Kol Nidre**  
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In a column in the Forward newspaper, Jay Michaelson suggests that if you are going to observe just one Jewish holiday this year, don't make it Yom Kippur. Try another holiday.

The other holidays are a lot more fun, less demanding, the theology is a lot less problematic. Yom Kippur isn't really a holiday celebration at all. It's more like a retreat, we break out of routine and put ourselves into a very different kind of space. If you're doing just one this year, try something else.

Is he right? The pioneering Swiss psychologist Carl Jung pondered the fact that psychology was the last of the modern disciplines to emerge in the humanities, and he tied it to the decline of religion. With the emergence of modernity, the emergence of secularism, individualism and the industrial economy, we lost the master stories and the local communities that rooted people, that gave people a sense of who they are, that provided moral direction and a scheme of purpose and meaning. Into that vacuum came psychology.

So for Jung, effective psychology should not only be about treating disorders. Psychology should be about meaning-making and even metaphysics. He spoke of the soul and its search for purpose and meaning, and how critical that is to a healthy psyche.

I think Jung is right and for me, he explains why religion is as relevant as ever. The problem with psychology today is that in practice, we only really engage in it when we're in therapy, when we are facing some kind of dysfunction, usually something specific. Unlike Jung, psychologists today rarely deal with the big picture. They make a point of staying morally non-judgmental and avoiding metaphysical belief.

So where do we go to do what I call soul maintenance, where do we discuss purpose and meaning and reflect on our lives when we're not in crisis? Where do we go to calibrate our moral compasses, to explore what it means to be a loving partner, a good friend, a compassionate citizen, a good parent, a responsible child? Where do we go to soak in the wisdom of the elders and explore our purpose on this planet? Where do we go to find community, to find people to support us the way extended families do, when we live far from family?

The suicide rate among veterans in America is appalling and tragic. It's often linked to PTSD. The suicide rate among Israeli soldiers who have suffered PTSD is almost non-existent. For better or worse, and as someone who lived in Israel for fifteen years and served in the army, I can tell you that it sometimes can be for worse, but one thing you are never in Israel is isolated and alone in a sea of indifferent people.

In America, our national society does not have the sense of solidarity and mission that Israelis share. We need to find it elsewhere. Between the individual and the nuclear family on the one hand, and our vast, diverse nation on the other, we need local communities, and we need places to nurture our souls.

Religious practice, spiritual practice, is a powerful way of doing soul maintenance, so that we stay emotionally healthy and mature as we grow older. Soul maintenance helps to prevent us from becoming dysfunctional by giving us a healthy sense of who we are and what's important, and mechanisms to self-correct. It helps us to become the kind of people who take the time to listen to their hearts, the kind of people who know the true happiness comes from loving relationships, the kind of people who leave this world better than they found it. It helps us to deal with loss and suffering without falling apart. And when done in the context of a tradition like Judaism, it gives us access to the wisdom of elders, and the support of a community in good times and bad.

And so, with apology to Jay Michaelson, yes the High Holidays are the most serious of our holidays, but that's a good thing, because we need the opportunity that Yom Kippur offers us to take care of our souls. Yom Kippur is central because this is the day that, potentially, can help us and change us more than any other holiday.

Yom Kippur does this by doing what a relevant tradition does, it invites us to look at things that we generally don't take the time and space to deal with, but we ought to. On Yom Kippur, we confront our mortality. We are taken out of our comfort zones, and forced to think about Who Shall Live, and Who Shall Die.

Confronting one's mortality, confronting the preciousness and the precariousness of life, not just thinking about it, but confronting it, is the goal of Yom Kippur, and it can be a powerful change agent.

Here are three of the many reasons. First, we make better decisions. How do I deal with a difficult situation in the family, or choose between career options, or relate to a boss or an employee with integrity? If we think in the short term, we might take the easy way out, or do something less than our best. But we can take the long view. I can take the perspective of the person who will eulogize me at my funeral, I can think to myself, what would I like that person to say about me.

If you take the long view, the perspective of a whole life, you will likely live up to your values, and do the thing that you know is right, the thing that demonstrates your integrity and your compassion and love for others, whatever the short term cost. As I've often heard from spiritual teachers, if you're having trouble making a decision and you want to get it right, ask your death.

A second, related aspect is that confronting one's mortality changes one's awareness.

When you read the writings of survivors of accidents or natural disasters or serious disease, common themes emerge. People say that their priorities have changed, they take nothing for granted, they express their love to others more frequently, and generally, they try to make every day worthwhile rather than put things off for later. They counsel others to live every day as if it might be your last, because they know that that's the truth.

My question is: Didn't they know this already? Doesn't everyone already know this? Of course we do, in our heads. But knowing it in our thoughts and really knowing, knowing in our bodies and sub-conscious, knowing where things are deeply imprinted, that's a different story. People who have nearly died or suffered a life threatening disease testify that they are profoundly changed.

And lastly, pain or trauma or loss shake us to our core. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. When a serious loss or illness or injury happens, so many things that we took for granted no longer work. Our relationships, our self-image, our idea of who we are in the world—they all change in a moment, and not by choice. It's shocking. In the end, it all might be for the better, but when you are going through it, it is unbearable. It's painful. You know you are no longer what you were, but you don't know yet what you will become, and the uncertainty and the insecurity are devastating. Depression is hard to avoid.

The good news, the opportunity here, is that so much of you has been stripped away that you are really are going to change, so the opportunity is, why not change for the better? And in fact, many, many people do. But very few of them would say, I'm glad the trauma happened to me. Very few would chose so much suffering and pain, even if the result is that they are living a better life.

So here's the question. How do we live that better life, how do we learn the lessons, without having to battle a life-threatening disease or suffer a near-death event? How can we change without going through trauma and loss?

Enter Yom Kippur. Enter ritual. Enter our 24 hour retreat. The prayers are brutal. Hey there, you could die this year. Not a major trauma to hear that, it's just a thought, but if you take it seriously, it's still a trauma, a small trauma. Traumatic enough that we make sure to avoid that thought in the routine of our lives, where we do our best to avoid pain and suffering.

A full day fast. That means pain. Not a big amount of pain, but pain nevertheless, pain that shakes us up a bit, that takes us out of our comfort zones, that makes us feel our bodies, where our sub-conscious habits reside.

Intentionally, consciously, we try to change by inducing trauma and pain, not a lot, not in dramatic fashion, but a little. And we hope that the result will be little changes for the better. Soul maintenance. Yom Kippur is a wonderful opportunity, if we take advantage of it.

I'll continue this line of thought in my remarks tomorrow. For tonight, I'd like to offer some advice for entering our Yom Kippur retreat.

Let me start off with the negative. We are not here to see if one hundred people can read out loud in unison. That's not what the rabbis had in mind when they put the High Holiday liturgy together. So why do we do it? We pray together because it helps each of us. It gives us power. We can tap into the energy the room.

That energy comes from intention. I'm sure some of you have been to a meditation retreat where a hundred people are meditating in silence. There is no social interaction whatsoever. But being in the room with all those other people helps each person to do their individual practice. Each person is alone and yet all are together. It's totally different than meditating by oneself.

If everyone here takes the role the tradition asks us to take, the role of individual Jew looking into his or her heart and asking, how can I live up to my godly potential, you are not only doing your own soul maintenance, you are helping everyone else in the room their soul maintenance, each of us alone, each of us together.

We do a lot of readings and responsive readings in order to keep each of us awake and engaged and we read a lot of prayers to challenge and provoke us. But we face a danger. We can get so busy reading words that we go into a kind of auto-pilot and they bounce off us.

Our goal is not to read the words, our goal is to inhabit the words. Rabbi Shefa Gold says, when I pray, I'm trying to be the words. How to put that into practice? Think of the prayers as poetry, not theology or history, but poetry, painting images through simile and metaphor, and thought experiments that are meant to provoke the mind and inspire the heart. Inspire the heart, in spirit, that put spirit into your heart and soul. So when you read, try to open your heart to whatever spirit may send your way.

When a phrase or an image moves you, let it resonate in your mind and heart. Repeat it. Close your eyes. Think about it. Or don't think about it, just be with it. Meditate on it. If it causes you to reflect on some aspect of your life, that's teshuvah, that's what we're supposed to be doing, so reflect.

So when you're reading out loud or find an image or an idea that inspires you, stop reading for God's sake. Let everyone else continue reading. You can join back in whenever you're ready.

Really, do this for God's sake. The Talmud says, God wants the heart. Nowhere does the Talmud say, God wants synchronous reading and proper enunciation.

Another piece of advice, don't expect to be entertained by the musicians. They're not here to entertain you. Neither is the liturgy. They're here to help us do teshuvah, to help us to change our lives. So many people come to services like they are going to a movie or a concert. Let's see if the rabbi and the musicians and the prayer book writers keep me interested tonight.

Some of you are taking the Making Prayer Real Course and you know the first question we ask in the Course. Who is responsible for your inner life? Who is responsible for what goes on in your heart? Is it the rabbi? The cantor? The musicians? The prayer book writer?

All those factors are important, they can help. And just like a good movie, you might come away moved emotionally and spiritually without you doing anything other than showing up.

But nothing I can do compares with what happens when you bring your intention and sincerity and consciously open your heart to what the tradition throws at you, and then let your heart take it from there.

Music is critical because we know that working with the left brain alone usually isn't enough to make us change. How much better the world would be if I could just think the thought, I'd be better off if I lost some weight and then I actually lost weight. Change is not a rational process, or to be precise, not only a reasoning process. We have to bring our emotions and intuition into the equation, and music helps by arousing our senses and activating the right side of the brain. It helps to bring our whole selves into the process if we are going to change.

So how might this play out practically. Don't listen to the music like you're at a concert. Receive it with the intention of softening your heart and directing your attention to the great mystery that is this life, and how we might receive the divine. I find it helpful to put my attention on my chest, on my heart area, and let the music wash over my body. Let the music open our hearts, and inspire us, in spirit us, so that we can bring our hearts to the forefront and do teshuva.

I wish us all a heartfelt Yom Kippur and some good praying in the next 24 hours.