Yom Kippur 5779 Rabbi Daniel H. Liben

Praying Across the Aisle

I don’t usually tell jokes, but today I’m going to begin with two very old ones, both of which you probably know. The first is about the guy who survived a shipwreck, and washed ashore on a deserted island. He was very fortunate. There was food, water, and plenty of material with which he could build a shelter. In fact, over time, he not only built himself a house, he built himself a whole village- just like the one he left behind. Eventually, a rescue team arrived to save him, and he gave them a tour. “That’s the town square. That’s the library. That’s my house.” The head of rescue team noticed a beautiful building with a Star of David on it. “Oh,” he said. “I see you are Jewish. What building is that?” “ Oh, that’s my synagogue.” Looking further down the street, the rescuer noticed an equally elaborate structure, also with a Star of David. “Well then, what’s that?” “Oh,” he said, “that’s the synagogue I would never set foot in!”

Okay. The second joke takes place not on a deserted island but in synagogue, on Yom Kippur. The Rabbi and Cantor are standing before the Ark, praying. “Ribono Shel Olam, I am but dust and ashes,” the Cantor cries out. “Ribono Shel Olam, I am but dust and ashes,” the Rabbi cries out. Then, next to him appears the Shammas- the caretaker. “Ribono shel olam, I am but dust and ashes,” he, too, cries out. The Rabbi nudges the Cantor and whispers, “*Ach,* look who thinks he’s dust and ashes!”

My friends, sometimes, we can be so judgmental of others, often cruelly so. And we would carry those judgements to a deserted island if we had to, even though there is no one there to hear them. But today, on Yom Kippur, we are asked to let those judgements, the judgements we make of others, drop away.

Although Rosh Hashanah is the day that we call *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgement, it is on the eve of Yom Kippur that we experience the trappings and the drama of a court of Law. As the evening begins, we remove the Torah scrolls from the ark as witnesses to the proceedings, and the entire community stands as one, as the Hazzan begins the three-fold repetition of Kol Nidrei. The purpose of Kol Nidrei is to annul the vows that we have made, and have failed to keep, over the past year. According to *halachah,* Jewish law, only a court constituted of judges has the power to do that.

But first, as a prelude to Kol Nidrei, we solemnly declare: “*By authority of the court on high and by the authority of this court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, anu matirin l’hitpalel im ha-avaryanim- we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.”*

*L’hitpalel im ha-avaryanim*- to pray with those who have transgressed. Who are these *“avaryanim,”* sometimes translated as sinners, or transgressors, or possibly, perhaps “boundary crossers,” that they should need our permission to pray with us; or that we would even *want* them to pray with us?

Let’s look at three possibilities. The first is that this declaration is simply a way of acknowledging that we are all *avaryanim*- that we are all sinners and transgressors. On Yom Kippur, we admit that we have no claim of superiority over anyone in the room. We are all creatures of flesh in blood, who come humbly here tonight in all our fallibility.

The second interpretation is a historical one. It is possible that the *avaryanim*, to whom we grant permission to join us in prayer, are the conversos, those Spanish Jews who, under the cruel pressure of the Inquisition, converted to Christianity. In this reading, Kol Nidrei- the release from vows is pointedly aimed at them. These secret Jews would come to the synagogue on Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness for the false lives they have adopted and to affirm their identities as Jews; and the community would grant them permission, at least for this night, to pray with us.

But it’s a third, more radical approach which interests me the most. Yehuda Kurtzer, of the Shalom Hartman Institute, suggests that we grant permission to the *avaryanim* to pray with us for *our own sake*, as much as for theirs, because, without them, our community would be incomplete.

In the Talmud (masechet Keritot 6b), Rabbi Chana bar Bizna claims that “any fast that doesn’t include the sinners of Israel is not a true fast.” As proof, he points us towards a verse in Exodus about the daily incense offering that the priests would offer on the altar. The incense was made of equal parts of four herbs. Three of the herbs were sweet smelling, but one had an extremely unpleasant odor. Our Etz Hayim commentary explains, when blended together with the other aromatics, it has the effect of making them more pungent. Rabbi Chana claimed that, just as the incense needed that fourth, rather foul scent, our communal prayer on a fast day was efficacious only when the sinners, whom we might ordinarily shun, were included within our midst. Rashi elaborates on this verse that it is a serious obligation to count them, the transgressors, as ourselves.

It is a rather counterintuitive teaching. We might more easily understand the desire to separate ourselves from those who have crossed beyond either the letter of the law, or the accepted norms of behavior. It is a natural instinct- to associate ourselves with those whom we would like to think are *like us*, who share our high standards and values.

Yet, our tradition seems to intuitively understand that that approach slips too easily into a self-righteousness that narrows both our thinking and our hearts. At the end of the day, it is better that we should identify with the sinners instead, and open our hearts, as they do tonight, in contrition, because ultimately, God doesn’t need or want our perfection. “God wants the heart,” the Rabbis tell us: “*Rachmana Liba Baei*.” God wants the heart.

Kurzer suggests that we need to include the *avaryan*, a person whom we might consider beneath us and not worthy of emulation, because he has something important to teach us. Listen to this tale from the Jerusalem Talmud about a guy who worked in the sex trade of the ancient world, which apparently was no less seedy then, then it is today. *It* *happened once that R. Abbahu had a dream. He dreamt that an unsavory character named Pantokokos should lead the community in prayer so that rain would come down. R. Abbahu sent and had him brought before him. He said, ‘what is your profession?’ ‘I commit five sins every day. I sweep the theater. I hire out prostitutes. I carry the prostitutes’ garments to the baths. I clap and dance before them. And I clash the cymbals before them.’ R. Abbahu said to him, ‘what good deed have you done?’ He said to him, ‘One day I was sweeping the theater a certain woman entered. She stood behind a column [posing as a prostitute] and wept. I said to her, ‘what is the matter?’ She said, ‘my husband is incarcerated and I want to see what I can do to free him.’ (Pantokokos continued) I sold my bed and bedding and gave her its cost, and I said to her, ‘This is for you. Free your husband, and do not sin.’ R. Abbahu said to him, ‘you are worthy to pray and to be answered.’(Yerushalmi Ta’anit64b)*

Now, you and I might never associate with people like Pantokokos; in fact, we might go out of our way to avoid them. Yet, hearing his story expands our vision of what repentance might look like; we open up to the *possibility* that good and bad are being negotiated in corners of the community that you and I can’t even see.

Listening to anyone whose day-to-day circumstances and challenges are very different from ours, invites us to open our hearts to what we *just don’t know*, to realities that we are perhaps afraid to acknowledge, or that we have been conditioned not to see.

Our ancient sex trader also reminds us that no one, even the worst person, is totally an *avaryan*. And if we think someone is, then we are probably not looking and listening closely enough.

And then there are the people who we write off, who we label as *avaryanim*- because from our perspective, they have crossed some ideological line that we hold dear. I think you know what I mean. We right people off, cast them into the category of *Avaryan*- Boundary Crosser, with the toss of a phrase. “Oh, *he’s* a *Trumpist*. *She’s* a *radical left winger*. Oy, that group is so *anti –Israel*. Oh, and this one’s my favorite: *He’s* a *Tikkunista.*” That’s how some Jews refer to other Jews whose social activism has become, they believe, dangerously misplaced.

So, to say that our prayer community is not complete without the *avaryanim*, is to say that making a minyan together is not supposed to be simple or easy. We are supposed to be challenged. Rather than form a minyan of people who think just like me, I have to do the work to create religious community even with those people who upset me. That could be the person who talks too much in services, or whose kids run around too much, or the person whose politics I find distasteful. Or, someone who I simply don’t get along with. When I confront what irks me about those folks, I am challenged to question the limits of my compassion, and sometimes, to recognize in the very behavior I dislike the shadow side of my own nature.

So here is my vision of an ideal community: A place that appreciates differences as much as shared values, and that honors the uniqueness of the individual, in all our sacred complexity. It’s a home. It’s a place where we feel safe to be who we are. It’s a place where we stigmatize less and listen more. It is where we break out of our individual solitariness and can be seen; truly seen.

And of course, building such communities begins as soon as individuals, you and me, are willing to make the effort. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield teaches, “Seeing is not believing; believing is seeing. When you believe in the person in front of you, you see the very best. And when you’re open to seeing the unexpected and to seeing what you don’t necessarily agree with… and you are open to seeing the possibilities that people have to connect in ways you never imagined—then that’s seeing.”

I was a college freshman when war broke out on Yom Kippur in 1973, and I don’t think I ever felt lonelier in my life. If you are over a certain age, you might even remember being in synagogue, (possibly sitting right here in this room!), when you heard the news. Israel, caught unprepared for an attack on the holiest day of the year, was fighting on several fronts, and taking severe losses.

Until then, I loved everything about life at Haverford College, a small Quaker campus on Philadelphia’s Main Line. I enjoyed my classes, my new friends, the excitement and reinvention of making a life away from home. But, that week, I just wished I was with family, with people who understood my anxiety and concern for a country and a people who were half way around the globe.

This was more than concern for the safety of my family members, my grandparents who lived in Tel Aviv, or my sister Shirah, who was taking a year of graduate study in Jerusalem. (Her response to being in Israel in that historical moment was to call home and tell our parents that she had decided to stay there permanently, which she did) No, this was about the core of my identity as a Jew. I grew up believing, and still do, that to be a Jew is to be a Zionist, that the creation of the State of Israel in our era represents no less than the miraculous revivification of the Jewish people after 2000 years of exile.

And here I was, myself in exile among a sea of college students, most of whom didn’t understand any of that, and for whom a war in the Middle East was just no big deal. I tried to explain all this to my friend Nat, who was Episcopalian. After a long time, he looked at me, bewildered; just not getting it. “But you are an American. Judaism is your religion. Why should you feel this special connection to Israel? The Episcopalian Church has its roots in the Church of England, but we don’t feel any special bond with the land of England. It just doesn’t make any sense.” Finally, he looked at me and sighed, and said, ”But I know you, and I see that this is really important to you, so I’ll just have to try to wrap my head around it and accept on faith that for you, this is the truth.”

I’ve never forgotten that conversation; it was a moment of true grace, of …being seen. The turmoil that I had been feeling loosened its tight grip. Nat’s widening his world-view, even just a little, to include mine, taught me something about how we construct communities out of difference, and how we grow.

A second story: Many years later, at Camp Ramah of New England, I was teaching a class to staff members on modern Jewish theology. Judaism teaches us that one of the ways we can sense God’s presence is on the stage of history. The classical Biblical example is the crossing of the Red Sea. Searching for a contemporary example was not hard for me; I knew just where to look. Israel’s victory over the Arab armies in June 1967, and the subsequent reunification of Jerusalem, was exactly such a moment. When I remember how vulnerable Israel was at that time, and the relief we felt when Israel emerged not only safe, but victorious, it is hard for me not to sense a divine, salvational hand acting on the stage of history. I can’t explain it, I just know it. My heart still thrills when I hear the original Shuly Natan version of “Yerushalayim shel Zahav.”

I knew this example would land with the young adults in front of me: Ramah counselors, among whom were several members of the *mishlachat*, Israelis who were hand-selected to come to the United States for the summer to work at camp. So, imagine my surprise when one young Israeli counselor loudly challenged my claim. “Miracle,” she said? “Miracle? How can you say that! More like original sin!” she was almost shouting. “1967 was the beginning of our moral downfall, sowing the seeds of the settler movement and turning us into occupiers!”

We continued to talk after the class ended. Part of me instinctively wanted to just write her off. I could label her as a “secular Israeli,” or a “leftist kibbutznik…,” an Israeli kid whose secular education denied her emotional access to the grand sweep of our people’s history and legacy. But that would have been too easy, and just plain wrong. Her family and friends were the ones training in the Israeli army, living with the day to day realities of life in a country never fully at peace- who was I, an American Rabbi, to judge her? (Little did I know that one day two of my kids would live in Israel, and one would serve in the IDF) Now, however, it was my turn to widen *my* world-view to include hers. I didn’t have to agree with her, but I had to try to understand her, and hear what was driving her passion, her truth.

Today, when I want to provide an example of how we can experience God acting in history, my heart still turns instinctively to the events of June 1967. But, I recognize that it’s complicated.

I’m not going to talk today about just how complicated it’s become, in a climate that now includes BDS (which is the world-wide movement to boycott, divest and sanction the State of Israel), and in which support for the State of Israel even among our own children, let alone among significant political demographics, is no longer a given. That is an important conversation, but for another day. My point now is that the constriction and fear that we have around our Israel conversations, even if it comes from a place of love and concern, makes it harder than ever to listen to each other, and to widen our perspectives.

Yet, we have to. We like to think of the Jewish community as an open tent, welcoming, like Abraham and Sara, to all who would choose to walk with us. Yet, Jewish Federations and synagogues alike wrestle lately with the question: just how wide should the tent be?

I think we are too quick to apply litmus tests to determine who stands within the community, and who has crossed the line; who we can pray with, and who we designate as *avaryanim.*

My friends, Kol Nidrei cautions us to think twice before writing any one of us off, before casting any of us as beyond the pale. I was so proud of Temple Israel this year for inviting the organization Resetting the Table to begin a series of community conversations about Israel. These facilitated conversations created a spaciousness that allowed people with diverse and opposing views to truly hear one another, their passions and concerns, with a more open, respectful and compassionate heart. The people who attended those forums felt heard. Safe. Able to learn from one another. Isn’t that part of what communities are supposed to be about?

On Yom Kippur, each of us arrives with a unique narrative, a story that explains the values and commitments that we hold dear, that clarifies why we believe and act as we do. We come here today to examine where we have fallen short, and to rededicate ourselves to those commitments. Yet, together, we form a larger story of the Jewish people, seeking not only atonement, but also clarity and direction. How do our differences, and not just the things we share in common, weave that larger narrative? Can we loosen the tightness with which we grip the truth as we see it, to allow space for other possibilities, for a more expansive and complex reality? May we have the courage, and the compassion, to open our hearts to the task of holy listening, of seeing what we have not yet seen, and of building a sacred community together.

L’Shanah Tovah Tikateivu v’Tichateimu. May we be written and inscribed for a year of health, of open heartedness, and of holy listening.