

Kavannah for lighting the candles at beginning of the service:

When I was a teenager I stumbled across Kahlil Gibran's book *The Prophet* and fell in love with his exploration of sacred paradox. While Gibran might not have been Jewish, his ideas seem so to me. He wrote that **"your joy is your sorrow unmasked."** He explained that the sorrow carves a well in us and the deeper this inner well, the greater our capacity for joy.

Perhaps Gibran was inspired by Rabbi Nachman a century earlier who taught that tears can be a form of prayer and a gateway to greater joy. Many people think of Yom Kippur as a very solemn, heavy day. And it is, but that's only half the story. The Talmud identifies Yom Kippur as the happiest day of the year. How could that be? Well, if we do the work of digging deep and clearing out our souls, we have an amazing capacity for joy. If you've ever transformed a dirty, crowded, chaotic garage into a clean, orderly, convenient place, you know how satisfying that is and how much you might want a good celebratory meal when you're done!

So let's commence with cleaning our inner garages. It will feel so amazing by tomorrow night! Before we begin though, a gentle reminder to please please turn off phones while you're at shul during this sacred time. Turn off the digital connection to turn on the Divine connection. Ok. Let's light some candles.

Yom Kippur Drash - 9/20/26 - Gretchen Shoshana Hughes Lieberman

Remember that opening meditation from the Song of Songs, "achoti, rayati." That intimate relationship that knows you so well that you can be safely vulnerable and authentic? Well, that's definitely how *achoti*, my sister, is for me. I called her up a couple of days ago and asked her to help me cut down what I knew was a way way too long draft of this drash. I told her, be brutal. Well, she wasn't brutal, but she was wise and helped me realize I could set half of my thoughts aside for another time. So you can thank my sister for making this shorter than it could have been.

I mentioned at the start of the evening that my love of paradox is the primary spiritual lens through which I tend to see the world. You may remember that I shared one of them at the end of my drash on Erev Rosh Hashana, the teaching from the 18th century Hasidic rebbe Simcha Bunem, who taught us to hold two truths: That "for me the world was created" and also, "I am but dust and ashes." This a good paradoxical truth to carry in our pockets every day, but I think it's particularly relevant for this season of teshuva as we focus on realignment in our individual and collective lives to achieve atonement or more relevantly, at-one-ment.

I have to admit that my inspiration for this evening's drash didn't come from a particularly erudite or ancient source. It came from *The Pitt*, the new Noah Wyle emergency room series. Any fans? There is very little TV watching at this time in my life, but as a genXer who crushed on him on ER, I had to tune back in to watch his new series. If you have seen it already, you already know it's very Jewish! And if you haven't, I promise, my little example here won't spoil anything.

Noah Wyle plays Dr. Robinovitch, or Dr. Robby. He's a work-a-holic who gives all of himself to making sure the staff of this chaotic and highly stressful inner-city ER does the best they can to meet the needs of patients. His gruff exterior is barely covering up

his own vulnerabilities and trauma, though he works valiantly to hold all that at bay so he can deal with one crisis after another in *other* people's lives. He is in desperate need of a real vacation, and wants to escape, possibly forever, but he finds it next to impossible to step away. What will they do without him?

In a pivotal moment, a friend confronts him about this paradox and Dr. Robby's response felt like the opening lines of a modern rabbinic wisdom tale. He explains that he can't be there any more, but he can't leave either. Being there gives him purpose and also distraction. It's killing him, but leaving might too, because he would have to face himself alone, without the heroic mask he's wearing. Without the distraction. Who is he if he's not "Dr." Robby? What happens when you shed the distractions of ego and identity? The writers, realizing that the questions were more powerful, left hanging in the air than being answered, let the viewers sit with that. And for me, it gets to the heart of this work we are doing on this Day of Atonement, aka, At-One-Ment.

Here we are, many of us dressed in the traditional white of Yom Kippur. White, the symbol of purity, like a slate wiped clean, like angels. That's part of the reason for the white, but it's also seen as a rehearsal for death. The liturgy asks, "who will live? Who will die? Who shall be sealed in the Book of Life?" And given it's a rehearsal for death, it might be instructive to consider what Judaism teaches about that moment. While we *don't* have a set dogma about what happens after we pass from this realm, we *do* have some shared rituals. Traditionally, a Jewish burial involves a simple white shroud and a simple pine box, or even no coffin at all in some places. Why so simple? Because the ancient rabbis were clear that when we come in, and when we go out, we are all equal. The rabbis say we all come into the world as descendents of the same Adam, so that no one can argue their ancestors were better than someone else's, and we all go out wearing the same outfit and held in the same type of box so that (theoretically anyhow), no one's status or value in death is higher than someone else's.

Yom Kippur is a reminder that this is actually true *all* the time, we just get so caught up in overvaluing our individual identities, especially in 21st century American life where individualism is likely at its peak importance in any time in human history, that we forget. All this in **dividualism**, with emphasis on the root, "divide," runs counter to the path to at-one-ment, or atonement. We can't have at-one-ment with others or with Hashem, in death or in life, until we shed our masks and our individual egos.

So is Judaism anti-individual? No, not remotely. This is where paradox comes back into play. There are countless sources that make it clear that our tradition values the individual, starting all the way back in the first chapter of Genesis where we learn that each unique person is created in the image of Hashem. Throughout the stories of Torah and Talmud we see that individual lives and experiences matter, even those with little to no status. A comparison of Biblical literature with similar genres from the same era across the region shows this to be one of the distinguishing features of Biblical law. The early rabbis continued valuing the individual. They went so far as to say that destroying or saving even one life was the same as destroying or saving an entire world (Sanhedrin 4:5).

Not only do we believe in individual rights, but our tradition has a long history of acknowledging the contributions of individuals (though perhaps more men than others). Our entire Talmud is arguably one of the earliest and most sophisticated records of citation and attribution showing how we stand on the shoulders of specific individuals and giving them credit for the development of our ideas. Speaking of, did anyone here ever have the rabbi trading cards that came out in the 1980s?

Our individualism is built on our inherent free will which the sages have explained is a good thing. Early Talmudic Rabbi Nahman (of the 3rd century, not to be confused with Rabbi Nachman of the 18th century) argued that our *yezter hatov* and our *yetzer hara* (our good and “bad” inclinations) are indeed *both* for the good. His midrash says that only humans have the *yezter hara*, not the other animals, but that God saw this and called it good. He writes, “How can the evil inclination be “very good”? That would be extraordinary! But without the evil inclination, no one would build a house, take a wife or beget children.” In other words, our individual drives and intentions motivate us to be co-creators in this world with Hashem. We *need* our unique personalities and desires and our identities. They make things happen. How very stagnant and uniform and dull the world would be if everyone thought and did the same thing.

Now, hopefully I demonstrated clear support for Judaism’s belief in the value of the individual, because the rest of what I have to say is to make a case for the other side. And given the hyper-individualism of the time and culture we live in, I think the other side needs a bit of a boost. So, just as Judaism celebrates the individual, so too does it make it clear that the path to at-one-ment, is in loosening our grip on our identities. We don’t have to *lose* them altogether, at least not in life, but *loosen* them. Again, a bird’s eye view of Torah shows us over and over again that Hashem is talking to us as a collective. The sins we ask for forgiveness for in our Yom Kippur liturgy are recited in the first person plural. But in order to really be part of a collective we have to strip down to our essential selves. Take off the hats, the capes, whatever we are wearing that’s keeping us from being authentically present and ready to commune.

This takes me back to the fictional character of Dr. Robby. Baruch Hashem for his individual character. He is saving countless lives wearing his scrubs and sweatshirt. But he doesn’t know how to respond to his own wounds, because he doesn’t know who he is without his ID badge. The Kotzker Rebbe is famous for saying that “there’s nothing more whole than a broken heart.” I have often wondered if that’s where Leonard Cohen got his idea that “a crack is where the light gets in.” But the Kotzker Rebbe’s quote seems as much an instruction as a description. A further story about him says that in an emotional moment of frustration with a group of his followers he blurted out, “Masks! Where are your faces?” In other words, how are you hiding behind your identities? How are you protecting yourself from being vulnerable? **How is your mask preventing you from true union with the Divine?**

It can be hard to even know where our individual identities end and our masks begin. Judaism has a belief in five layers of soul, from nefesh to yechida. Our nefesh

level is seen as our life blood. Ruach is the level of personality and emotions. Neshama is how we connect to and contemplate Hashem and the sacred realm. Chaya is the nullification of the ego, and Yechida is pure union or at-one-ment. (The Buddhists might call that Nirvana. Rabbi Rami Shapiro calls it the non-dual realm.) Judaism doesn't denigrate the realms of nefesh and ruach. They are beautiful manifestations of the diversity of creation. But we can also recognize that we are also something more.

Last week, Ezra, my youngest son, let me read the short essay he wrote for an introductory assignment in one of his classes. I was astounded by how relevant it was to exactly what I was writing for this drash at the same time. He gave me permission to share. This is an excerpt from his response to a basic back to school prompt, "Who are You?"

Who Am I? It's a hard question. I am someone who enjoys running, plants, school, people, fish, dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, biking, riding my onewheel, flying drones, creating outfits, along with many other things I'm sure I'm forgetting. But does that mean I am a runner, a planter, a student, an extrovert, an animal lover, a biker, a onewheel rider, a drone pilot, a stylist? While *who I am* includes those things, no single one thing, student for example, can fully define me. Oh and add "musician" on there too along with friend, son, cousin (this is sounding like a tombstone now), procrastinator, jokecracker, photographer, driver, builder, and designer. So, so many things are part of who I am, that no one, not even me, can truly put me into words. The same is true for everyone else. The question, "who are you?" can go so many ways. Who are you related to, who are your friends, what do you do, where are you from? What defines who someone is? Because, obviously, although I'd be lonely if everyone disappeared right now (no friends, no family, no one) I'd still be me. If all my *interests* disappeared, would I still be me? Is my hesitation to say, I *would*, proof that the interests are what makes someone themselves? Well no, because I bet there are two people out there that both have the exact same interests, but are completely different people. ... All this to say, I don't know "who I am." I know that I am me and nothing more. I'd argue that everyone that *knows* me doesn't know who I *am*, although they may know just as much about me as *I* do.

Ezra may not have known or remembered about the five layers of soul, but his essay is wrestling with this question of where "I am" begins. At nearly 16, he may not be particularly interested in the Jewish part of his identity (his rabbinical student mother notices that was left off of the long list of attributes), but his essay feels profoundly Jewish to me. Afterall, what does Hashem tell Moses when he asks who YHVH is? God replies, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה I will be what I will be" or more commonly translated, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

Furthermore, we see that Hashem is permeable and elastic. Kabbalah teaches us that in order for creation to occur, YHVH had to contract itself in a process known as tzimtzum, to create space for something *else*, us and the rest of creation to exist. We have pieces of God in us, but we are our own independent realities too. A teacher of mine, Bill Liss-Levinson, explains that "If we are to be partners with God" we need to ask ourselves how we should contract our own presence in order to allow others to exist

or to let more of God in.” I don’t believe he means we shouldn’t have our personalities and our passions. I think he’s talking about what happens when we shed our protective shells, our masks as the Kotzker Rebe said. These are the masks that stifle our growth, trap us in grudges, and inhibit our full range of vision and understanding of others and complex situations. Our masks not only keep us from being fully seen for who we are, but they keep us from fully seeing the Divine in others as well. In other words, they keep us from at-one-ment. I had three personal stories to share about how that’s happened for me in the past, but thanks to my sister, I will save those for another time. Instead, I will share what I think is a brilliant connection to this topic from Rabbi Rami, someone we both admire.

On his blog just this past week Rabbi Rami was reflecting on a teaching from Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn of the early 20th century about tomorrow’s Torah reading from Leviticus about the high priest going into the Holy of Holies in the Avodah ritual on Yom Kippur. The verse says, “No person shall be in the Tent of Meeting from the moment he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out.” Reb Schneersohn wonders why the Torah describes it this way. Why does it say “no person” instead of “no other person” when obviously the High Priest is in there?

Building off Schneersohn’s work, Rabbi Rami suggests that “when the High Priest enters the Tent of Meeting, his “I” melts into the I AM (Ehyeh) of God. He becomes ‘no person.’” He enters the “state of consciousness ... called yechidah, nondual” existence. Two thousand years later, without a temple, without high priests, the rabbis have taught us that we each have to do this for ourselves and for each other. Rabbi Rami explains, “Yom Kippur is an opportunity for each of us—the High Priest or egoic I—to enter the Tent of Meeting—the inner self—and be surrendered to Ehyeh, the nondual I AM. The dissolution of the “I” into the “I AM” is an act of grace from I AM, not an act of will from I. You can enter the Tent of Meeting, but from that moment on, what happens is out of your control.”

The drama of the Avodah ceremony makes it clear that our ancestors were truly afraid of what could happen to the High Priest in this annual ritual. Shedding our own layers of ego is hard and scary work, both in sacred space and in mundane daily life, but it’s both more powerful and easier when we set aside time and commit to doing it together like we are today. May you find your time in prayer and reflection to be meaningful and rewarding. In the last line of my son Ezra’s essay he wrote, “This year I hope to get to know your “me” better, as well as I hope to let my “me” be seen. Looking forward to a great year.” I pray that’s true for him and for all of us too.

May you have an easy fast if you are doing so and may you all be sealed in the Book of Life for a sweet, good new year full of authenticity, health, peace, and joy.