Yom Kippur Service: Leviticus 16:1-34; 18:1-30

Gut Yontif! Gmar hatimah tovah! It’s an honor and a privilege to be asked to give a dvar Torah on Yom Kippur. I’m very grateful. Thank you.

Hashem spoke to Moses, saying:

Pronounce aloud in Hebrew:

Vayomer Adonai el Moshe Dbar el Aharon.

16:2

Now Hashem spoke to Moshe: Speak to Aharon your brother, (so) that he (does) not enter, at (just) any time, the Holy-Shrine inside the curtain, facing the Purgation-Cover that it is on top of the Coffer, that he (does) not die; for in the cloud I make-myself seen, over the Purgation-Cover.

— (English Translation Everett Fox)

Hashem spoke to Moshe who then repeats the instructions to Aharon all about the holy sanctuary and the proper order of sacrificial worship. Hashem spoke to Moshe who says to his brother... It’s like game of telephone. Only Moshe can hear G-d. The Israelites were so horrified by the thunderous issues of Hashem during the revelation at Sinai, they couldn’t bear to hear it. (Exodus 20:15) Moshe goes up alone to receive the teachings. And in today’s Yom Kippur parasha Achrei, we read that Moshe the prophet receives divine inspiration from Hashem to issue the instructions of the Torah. Divine inspiration is what Moshe receives and through Moshe we receive the Torah’s instructions. More than that, divine inspiration includes the feelings evoked by our rituals, and our current day observances. Not just words. The instructions can’t be separated from the practices. The practices we perform today are very different than what’s described in Leviticus or Vayikra in Hebrew. No bull will be sacrificed here today. Why? The short answer: Judaism is a living religion, a religion in which Hashem and the people are on a continuing journey together, a joint venture requiring flexibility and mutuality. It’s an ongoing conversation.

Hashem tells Moshe to speak to Aharon communicating the order and practice of entering the shrine, what the priest should wear, how he should comport himself, the sacrifices — what and how they are to be offered. Aharon must enter the sanctuary only on Yom Kippur to make the ritual sin offerings. If Aharon enters at any other time, he will die.
Consider now, today, that our Rabbis do not perform these rituals as described in Leviticus. The rituals did not prevent historical tragedies in the ancient world and we understand now that the woes and horrors of the world are not the fault of the priests’ failure to perform sacred rites correctly. Why would Aharon die if he entered the sanctuary at the wrong time? Rashi teaches us “"וֹלָא יְמוּת" THAT HE DIE NOT — for if he comes into the Holy of Holies at any time other than Yom-Kippur he will die (Sifra, Acharei Mot, Section 1 4, that’s Mishnah). What can we glean from this teaching? Direct contact with G-d is too much for the mortal to bear. Hashem hides himself from Moshe, too (Exodus 33:20) G-d says to Moshe “You cannot see my face, for no human can see me and live!”

*Emphasis:* our Rabbis do not perform the rituals as described in Leviticus. The rituals don’t prevent historical tragedies in the ancient world and the woes and horrors of the world are not the fault of the priests’ failure to perform sacred rites correctly.

Divine inspiration contains feelings of fear and awe. Aharon and the ancient priests were held to a very high standard. Life or death. The rites and instructions of Torah affirm the fear and awe felt when the ineffable is encountered. Over time various rites are and are not performed; they’re altered, modified. Through Jewish history Judaism grows and changes. Observances may be performed correctly or incorrectly or not all. Are we doomed?

Sometimes the seriousness of Yom Kippur stirs fear of a vengeful G-d. I believe in and pray to a merciful G-d. I will not be able to perform all the mitzvos of the Torah, yet I am still granted the opportunity to make earnest tshuvah, to return to divine inspiration. If my lot does not improve, I have not necessarily failed. The Rabbis teach that the most important principle by far is to aspire to Hashem’s infinite patience with a stiff-necked mixed multitude — Hashem’s divine pathos has no limits. Please recall that in our literature, Hashem is sometimes referred to as a mother. In Haftorah Parshas Eikev, Hashem consoles the Jewish people saying: “Can a mother forget her babe, or stop loving the child of her womb? (Isaiah 49:15) It’s significant that among many attributes divine inspiration contains a mother’s love.

Actually, we have the opportunity to make tshuvah every day. Our religion encourages us to return daily to a merciful forgiving Hashem by making amends to those we have offended or harmed; and in doing so we approach closer to the ineffable name. Baruch Hashem. It’s an everyday common affair.
When I recite the bedtime Shema before going to sleep, I am prompted by the siddur to forgive everyone. Forgive everyone and anyone who offended me, insulted me, hurt or harmed me, intentionally or unintentionally—because I shouldn’t go to sleep with anger in my heart. Let go all resentments. I forgive everyone and more importantly, I also ask for Hashem’s forgiveness, because I certainly offend, insult, hurt or harm others and myself, intentionally or unintentionally—because I am human. Human relationships contain frictions, expectations, and hurt; my relationships also hold love, compassion, and forgiveness. Davening the orthodox siddur those who say the bedtime Shema pledge forgiveness to others and ask to be forgiven in this transmigration, and the next transmigration. Yes! I said transmigration.

The notion of transmigration, the soul passing from one body to another, has a significant history in Jewish thought. The great Talmudist, halakhist, kabbalist and the foremost leader of misnagdic (non-hasidic) Jewry, HaGra or the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) understood the story of Jonah as a story about the transmigration of the soul. (On Yom Kippur we read Jonah). According to the Vilna Gaon, Jonah is approached by Hashem and sent on a mission. Jonah is a disembodied soul when Hashem first calls on him to deliver a message to Nineveh: the city is on the edge of destruction. Running from G-d’s assignment, Jonah takes to the sea, which, according to the Vilna Gaon, is a representation of the world, our world, human life as it is lived—both fluid and turbulent. Life is not passed on solid ground. Jonah passes through his fleshly life on a buoyant ship. Life is an ocean upon whose surface we are carried. You know the story. Jonah passes through his fleshy life on a boat and he’s cast overboard because the avoidance of his calling brings a wrathful storm upon the vessel, a storm that threatens to drown all aboard. The Gaon tells us, this is death. Jonah is dying when his floating drowning mortal body is swallowed into the belly of a big fish. There, in the belly of the fish, physically dying, Jonah makes teshuvah promising to fulfill Hashem’s mission. The big fish spits Jonah onto land, and for the Vilna Gaon this is Jonah’s afterlife. This is where Jonah has the opportunity to fulfill his teshuvah and complete his original mission. Jonah exists in very different states throughout the story. When Hashem first approaches, Jonah’s a soul spark; then Jonah becomes a flesh & blood person who dies running from his divine purpose. Jonah makes teshuvah only in death; and only then does he return as a soul changed, committed to the labor of his calling. It’s unclear if Jonah is alive or dead when he’s warning the people of Niniveh to repent, to return. Alive or dead, Jonah’s got soul.
Why did Hashem need a messenger? Why did Hashem approach a disembodied soul as the bearer of the divine command to return, to repent? Why this game of whispering in one person’s ear to speak to multitudes?

You know the end of the story, Hashem shows mercy on the people of Nineveh because hearing Jonah’s message, they repent. The people, their sovereign, all repent in the streets of Niniveh. As G-d is great and merciful and forgiving, the city is saved.

Yom Kippur, is the one holiday, the one day of the year in the Hebrew calendar where we are all invited, inspired, encouraged to make tshuvah together assembled as one congregation here all at the same time. No bull will be slaughtered here behind the curtains. Regarding observance, whether you’re fasting or not, wearing sneakers or leather sandals, saying the prayers or speaking directly from your heartmind, you can’t go wrong. There’s nothing anyone can do here to interfere with G-d’s forgiveness. And we need forgiveness. We are all guilty because humans hurt each other. We all commit wrongs, intentionally or not, because we’re humans. Humans make mistakes. Humans act in anger. Humans defile creation.

We also forgive. Like G-d, B’tselem Elohim (made in G-d’s likeness) we are endowed with the divine attribute of forgiveness.

Where do we find Hashem? (Here I am going to paraphrase a point of view brilliantly articulated and compellingly taught by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book The Prophets). G-d’s presence in history is located in how we respond to tragedy; how we oppose injustice. G-d’s presence is not located in or manifest as historical tragedies; we bring those catastrophes upon ourselves. For example, climate chaos. Extreme weather, rising seas, uncontrollable consuming fires, air pollution, water poisoning, and dying species — these are not Hashem’s punishments cursed upon the people. People are responsible for climate catastrophe; human modes of production are causing that and humans must stop it.

We need to find a structural solution to climate catastrophe by ending the use of fossil fuels, identifying, protesting corporations and industries that profit from defiling creation; we need to vote for representatives that are committed to saving the planet. It’s an enormous problem and the greatest existential threat to our existence. So, many of us find our own personal individual ways that we can
make tshuvah with the earth. I asked an environmentalist clothing manufacturer, Rachel Faller, how to lessen my role in the endless stream of textile pollution that deposits plastics in the water system, in our oceans and drinking water. Rachel said, wear your clothes and mend your clothes. Wear them forever, don’t buy newly manufactured clothing. I’m telling you this because the idea of mending is so central to the notion of tshuvah. Mend, mend, mend what we already have.

In the morning prayers, we declare to Hashem: I love the house in which you dwell. I’m grateful to dwell in your house.” Even though it often feels like the world is falling apart, this declaration makes me even more committed to Hashem, my rock, my refuge. How do we find Hashem? Did you ever drive yourself crazy looking all over your own house looking for your eyeglasses only to reach up and feel them balanced on your own forehead? Hashem where are you?!

Seeking justice is seeking G-d. Seeking compassion is seeking G-d. Being slow to anger and quick to forgive is divine. Patiently dwelling in uncertainty is required. G-d is not the tragedy. G-d is found in our best attempts to defeat the human tragedy.

I’m in pain Kolot. I’m no longer only an Haskala Jew; the enlightenment has reached its end for me.

Divine inspiration, whispered words, transmigration. I want soul Kolot. If I give voice to my desperation, can I still find a voice among the congregants of Kolot Chayeinu. Do you forgive me Kolot? Do you forgive me for giving voice to belief in The Name? Baruch Hashem. It’s deeply compelling to me now to believe in the ineffable name. Unpronounceable. Beyond comprehension. A divinity that’s not anthropomorphic. Not anthropocentric.

— I believe that Hashem will accept my genuine desire to return to the mercy and plenitude of an indescribable divinity; I will forgive and be forgiven in the still formlessness and void of this constantly mutating universe. I hope to find forgiveness by taking steps to forgive myself; to make tshuvah to others who I hurt and to myself for hurting. Forgiveness is a necessary step toward being forgiven— in this life or the next or the next. May all of our deeds and words find embodiment in the greatness of The Name. A person is at their best when we are divinely inspired to face all challenges, both individual and collective. And that’s what’s so meaningful about being here with us all together. There can be no awe, no wonder, without the humility of being one among many together seeking tshuvah—

“Tzom Kal,” “easy fast” to those of us who are fasting. “Shana Toiva,” as my grandfather used to say. ‘Tikatevu”— “May you be inscribed.”

Text by Gregg Bordowitz