

Today is Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement , the holiest day of the Jewish Year

A few minutes ago we recited: Kol Nidray- “All vows” – articulating the crucial importance of words as the source of our most hurtful mistakes and framing our value of being the person we strive to be in action and in word.

This sacred day we gather together to reflect on our lives. We pray for forgiveness of our sins to God and concretize our plans to complete asking for pardon from our associates, friends and loved ones. This day is the peak experience of introspection about the course of our lives and seeking to bring ourselves into that vision understanding of who we are and who we wish to be.

How do we decide what to do? How do we figure out how to make the right choices? I begin by sharing one possible answer based in the themes of our sacred day and using an illustration from Rabbi Harold Kushner’s “Overcoming Life’s Disappointments.” He was being interviewed by a strikingly attractive young reporter. She told him that she had been offered a job as an anchor in a major market. But she was ambivalent because it would mean sacrificing a serious relationship in her present community. It’s was the kind of job she always dreamed of... But: She’s so ambivalent. She really likes her boyfriend. Her friends who dropped careers for marriage tell her about wondering what their lives would have been like if... And her friends who devoted themselves to their careers worry they’ll never get married and have a family.

Kushner told her he had neither the right nor the wisdom to tell her what to do with her life. But a therapist once told him how to think about this kind of dilemma: Imagine yourself as having grown old and looking back on your life after choosing one path over the other. Then imagine having chosen the opposite path. Which scene are you more comfortable with ... and which one leaves you with more regret? Which self do we want to be? We’d like to have it all – but since we know in our heart of hearts, that we can not, what will we sacrifice, to be true to our best dreams and values? And we can do this reflection whether we are 20 or 50 or even 80 – what do we want to do with our lives and choose what we believe will be best.

At the beginning of our service, in the middle of Kol Nidray, right after the keynote paragraph, we pray for forgiveness “and all the congregation of Israel shall be forgiven, as well as the stranger, the alien who dwells among them.” One commentator suggests that everyone has a stranger, an alien inside us, an inauthentic self that keeps trying to persuade us to do things that are not truly us. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement: being one with God, one with our loved ones and one with ourselves ... we need to be cleansed of that inauthentic part of our souls.

In ancient times and in our liturgy of this holy day we remember the sacrifices our ancestors offered in ancient times to be forgiven and cleansed of their sins. Then and now sacrifice means more than just giving something away. Sacrifice from the Latin to “make holy” means fashioning a moment of

holiness by giving something away. It means giving up something important to you in an effort to draw closer to God or in the broader sense of atonement to some we love.

This kind of cleansing is not easy, it can even be painful in the short term. It is painful in and of itself to confess that we can't have it all, can't do it all, can't be all things to all people. I've been thinking a lot throughout this holiday about the painful truth that I will never have enough time to do all the relationship building necessary for good of this sacred community that I envision, without to some degree neglecting my family. How do I change habits which are easy for me – but which prevent me from being who I want to fully be? What sacrifices am I willing to make, what tradeoffs will I make – what primary legacy will I choose to strive for (hopefully better than in the past) ... If we're doing our reflective process sincerely, we will all grapple with our personal choices and sacrifices we have unconsciously developed and those we need to now implement. Some of us may be realizing that our career choices are not really ours, but we have been living out the dream of a loved one. Some of us may realize the sad truth that we may never be a parent and channel one's love into some other form of love offered by that person's soul.

Being a person of faith means to find meaning and holiness in these hard, anguish filled choices – and handling the sacrifices we choose with sincerity and holiness. Avoiding the pain of these crucial choices is the pathway of emptiness or loss of spirituality. So often in our culture, we pursue absence of pain at the greater sacrifice of never knowing moments of holiness and joy. Broken dreams, broken hearts, unrealized hopes should NOT be seen as badges of failure. If anything, they are tokens of courage. We dream, we struggle, and we don't get what we want – we cope and carry on. Those fragments of dashed hopes continue with us, telling us who we used to be as a prelude to discovering who we might become. And it is the journey to which we devote ourselves today – with the hope that we will experience the highs which make life worth living. So my first thought of three for this Kol Nidray eve – is to pursue our most authentic self as we reflect this holy night.

A second story from Harold Kushner: A friend asked him: what are his favorite movies? And he named two usual suspects for his generation: Casablanca and Shane. His friend was dismayed that he chose two stories where the hero walks away from the woman he loves. But Kushner beautifully teaches that those men were not fleeing committed relationship. Rather, they are honoring commitment ... someone else's commitment. Both women were married. Bogie and Alan Ladd choose to let the woman they love keep their marital vow, rather than force them to break it for the personal love.

Too often today we've learned not to trust, that people are unreliable at keeping their promises. In business, at home, even in charitable donations – we know we have to get it in writing and even then – we don't count on people's word being good anymore.

Randy Cohen writes a column in the NY Times Magazine called the Ethicist. Once he received the following letter: "My 10-year old son and I submitted a form to our synagogue reserving his bar

mitzvah ceremony date. It included our commitment for him to continue his religious education through 10th grade, He is willing to do so but cannot truly commit to behavior 5 years from now and I won't force him. Was it ethical for us to sign this? Cohen answered: you behaved honorably. If in the future you or son amends your ideas about Jewish studies, that is understandable and reasonable.

I understand that response, even though I can't conceive of a shul that forces anyone to keep such a promise. But more crucially, I can't think of few statements more destructive to the soul of a young person than to have a parent tell him or her: If you promise someone something and then change your mind, that's OK, you don't have to keep your word. You take a loan from the bank, you accept or give a deposit for some contracting, and you make marriage vows – but if one of the parties doesn't want to live up to their promise – just walk away.

Kol Nidray which we recited a few minutes ago is exactly about keeping our promises. Yes – promises made under duress can be cancelled. Certainly God forgives us the promises we made to God when we sincerely repent what we verbalized. But Yom Kippur is about praying for the ability to knit our broken souls together, so that we will be able to do what we said we would do and to become the person we vowed to be.

Keeping a promise is more than just maintaining your own integrity. It is more than doing what you said you would do. It is a sign that you recognize the image of God in another person by taking your obligation to that person as seriously as you take your own well-being.

This is true in our neighborhoods, in our synagogues, in our businesses and certainly in our homes. Another illustration: Near the end of Thornton Wilder's play: *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the heroine says to her husband: I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them and it wasn't our love that protected them. It was that promise.

I know that the benefit we gain from breaking a promise is all too clear and it is not surprising that were all tempted by it. The cost of breaking a promise is harder to see – the loss of other people's trust; The loss of one's own sense of integrity, losing the security of living among people we can count on. So my second thought for this Yom Kippur is that we reflect seriously on our promises of the past and sincerely on the promises we make this day. When we break a promise – something inside of us breaks too and something vital and indispensable is preserved when we are strong enough and good enough to keep our word.

Third thought for tonight: Five years ago I was humbled when I had to have back surgery. I learned, or I thought I had learned a powerful lesson about my limits and even about my mortality. As I lay in the hospital bed before surgery there was a flash of panic that I could be paralyzed or die – I

thought then I learned some things that have faded in the years since. I've had so many wonderful successes – my son's Bar Mitzvah, my 10th Anniversary here and 25th Anniversary in the Rabbinat, becoming a national leader through the Jewish Funds for Justice in Congregation Based Community Organizing, so many great simchas and classes, so many wonderful people enjoying joyous occasions and coping with tzuras.

But every time I see my Father – “The Rock” unable to walk anymore or listening on the phone to his sometimes slurred speech & inability to put together his thoughts – I am reminded of what this day is really about. Don't waste the time we have. Every moment in fact is precious, when we are aware of this spiritual fact.

In early March this past year, I woke up one morning and could no longer raise my right arm laterally. The pain froze me ... I knew I was in trouble when I could not reach to the side even to throw a light switch. Painful and scary. So at the end of July I had shoulder surgery. Fortunately it was just a big bone spur. But I had this amazing sense of humility and appreciation for almost 24 hours after I woke up. They had put in a nerve block to deaden the arm during the procedure and all that Thursday from 10 am until I fell asleep my arm was in effect paralyzed. I felt so lucky that as my finger started to feel touch again that I was going to recover sensation and usage of my hand and arm. And I felt great compassion for those who have lost use of their limbs. I can empathize in a way I never could before.

So I hope I have relearned and pray I will not forget several lessons about real humility. Humility is not about self-effacement or even false modesty. Humility is just the realization that not everything that happens in life is all about me. Things may turn out great, but I may not be the primary reason for the success. Or things may bomb, but the failure may not have been my fault. Humility is the realization that I am not God. It's not my responsibility to run the world and make everything right. That's what our prayer tomorrow at the beginning of Musaf is about. When we talk about the BOOK OF LIFE we are saying that some of the things that will happen to us in the year ahead will be the result of what we do and the choices we make. We will deserve credit and blame for about half of what happens to us.

But when we talk in Unataneh Tokef about who will live and who will die: we are saying that our fate in the New Year will be out of our hands, the result of biology, luck or other people's choices. Humility means to take responsibility for things in our lives over which we have some control and to recognize that many others things are events beyond our control.

While I do want to emphasize that each one of us is unique, special and holy and there is great wonder and joy and finding our connections to each other's talent and gifts. It is just as hard, but just as significant to connect to each other through our pain and our weaknesses. Now there probably were times when I was miserable and self-pitying in my shoulder pain – but as I mentioned in passing, I truly feel a renewed sense of kinship with other suffering souls. Therapist Miriam

Greenspan writes in her book *Healing Through Dark Emotions*, “What connect us to others and to the world is what breaks our hearts.” I think she’s saying we can respond to personal pain in one of two ways. We can let pain monopolize our thoughts to the exclusion of others and their problems. Or we can let our experience open us to compassion – connecting and empathizing with our shared human experience. Learning we are not that different from others gives us the opportunity to share and learn from each other how to deal with illness and disappointment.

This then is the meaning of humility: When something bad happens you will probably get over it. When something good happens to you, it too will pass. We may or may not get what we deserve. If it’s good be grateful. And if it’s misfortune, don’t let it separate you from other happy, healthy people; let it connect you to all the other hurting people – which ‘pretty’ means everybody.

We are approaching Sukkot and then Simchat Torah when we complete the Torah with the story of the end of Moses’ life. In the last lines of Deuteronomy we are told Moses is just as strong at the end of his life as he was when God first called him at the Burning Bush. At the end of his life Moses’ humility wins out over his desires. He left his unfinished work to those he had trained – another of God’s servants would continue his life work. Moses accepted that he was not God, it was not all about him. He knew he was one of many servants – doing God’s work for the benefit of his family, community and his world. So too on this holiest of days, may we: make good plans to heal our inauthentic selves, keep our promises and humbly love our friends and family – throughout a healthy and good 5768.