

KOL NIDREI  
5771

A Hasidic rabbi instructed his followers to keep two notes, *kvitlach*, in their pockets at all times and pull out the one whose message they needed to hear at any particular moment. One note said to remember that you are the Crown of Creation and the other said to remember that worms and insects were created before you.

Every religious tradition with which I am familiar teaches the importance of humility and agrees that of all the spiritual-ethical qualities, humility is the most difficult to obtain. Humility is also the only spiritual-ethical quality that you can never claim achieving. Repenting, doing an accounting of our lives and self-improvement cannot be done without humility. The mitzvah of forgiveness cannot be fulfilled without humility. The question for us this *Kol Nidrei* evening is where and how does humility fit into our lives?

Why is it traditional to wear a *kittel* on Yom Kippur? The *kittel* is to remind us of the Jewish burial shroud that everyone—rich or poor—is to be buried in. The *kittel* is one of Judaism's great equalizers reminding us that everyone comes into the world and leaves the world in the same way. In the old days, Baron Rothchild wore the same clothes on Yom Kippur as Tevye the milkman. Our rabbis asked why did G-d create only one woman and one man, Adam and Eve, instead of populating the earth in one fell swoop? To assure that no one can claim that his or her lineage is better than anyone else's; we all come from the same parents. How much pain and *tzoros* is a result of some thinking they are better than others, their theology is more truthful than others, their race is superior to others, their politics more righteous than others?

The *Netaneh Tokef* prayer—"Who will be born and who will die"—forces us to realize that we do not know what will happen a moment from now yet alone a year from now. This prayer is intended to humble us and make us realize that we are not the Creator, we are created; that we are not in as much control as we sometimes think we are and would like to be. *Netaneh Tokef* is another great equalizer. The *Netaneh Tokef* is difficult for some of us because it reminds us so starkly that we are mortals who have been born, who will live and die just like all human beings. *Netaneh Tokef* helps understand what it is to be a chosen people; chosen for our unique responsibility and not chosen to be above or superior to others. Are we aware that during the High Holy Days we pray for the entire world and all peoples, not just for the Jewish people? Such concern and empathy for others requires humility. We cannot be the best we can be, we cannot be the Crown of Creation if we do not learn what *Netaneh Tokef* has to teach us.

Given how our culture is so filled with self-promotion, self-concern and self-aggrandizement, our confessions during Yom Kippur take on added significance. Our *Ashamnu* and *Al Cheyt* are so counter-intuitive to our normative lives. We stand together publicly acknowledging that we have sinned, that we are not perfect, that we have to improve and make amends. Just think for a moment, if we do this sincerely, how extraordinary of an experience this can be.

Humility allows us to look in the mirror, straight into our own eyes, deep into our own hearts and not be ashamed of what we see. Reb Nachman teaches that when a person is moved by humility to truly face his or her weaknesses and wrongdoings, this creates an inner space in one's life because by dealing with our shortcomings and errors we are able to dispel them and thereby vacate space within us. In this vacated space something new and positive can be created. Reb Nachman describes what we create as a hidden treasure. Contemporary culture certainly does not encourage us to do this; Jewish wisdom tells us that this kind of self-work pays the biggest dividends possible.

When I recently learned this Reb Nachman teaching, it reminded me of one of my favorite Talmudic statements about *teshuvah*. Rabbi Abbahu teaches that a person who has never sinned cannot stand in the place of a person who has sinned and done *teshuvah*. When we are humble enough to acknowledge our existential failures and defeats, we are then positioned to do something about them. A person who has done *teshuvah* is transformed so much that when he or she rights a wrong, this person brings redemption to the world. What greater empowerment is there than to know that we can help heal our fractured world as a result of dealing with our

weaker selves and our dark side? It is ironic that the greatest thing we can do, help redeem the world, requires humility. It is simple mathematics: the more we work on ourselves, the more whole we are and the more whole we are, the more wholeness there is in the world. If we are to *shep nachus* from being Jews, let it be because we are of a tradition that values humility and working on ourselves; that we are part of a people that has rejected egotism and selfishness and elected selflessness and altruism. Let us on this *Kol Nidrei* night commit to making our lives an antidote to the arrogance and entitlement, the self-centeredness and self-absorption that characterizes so much of our culture.

Our Talmud teaches that G-d withdraws from the world because of the arrogant. Arrogance fills up the space of life and the world thereby leaving less room for others; leaving less room even for G-d. Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira, the rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, in struggling to answer the question of where was G-d, said that the Nazis behavior was the epitome of hubris, human arrogance, and drove G-d into the deepest recesses of the Universe, further away than ever before. Thus, so demonically powerful is human arrogance.

Our rabbis knew that humility brings us closer to G-d. Think of experiences of deep awareness and inner richness that you have had because of moments of humility: the birth of a child, receiving a negative result on a medical test, being forgiven for a serious wrong we committed, standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset, visiting Children's Hospital or an Alzheimer unit at a nursing home, being with someone who is plagued with problems but remains thankful and hopeful, standing in Auschwitz with a survivor?

David Brooks, the columnist, recently wrote a beautiful piece entitled: "Humility takes a back seat in culture of self-celebration." He compared Americans today to how Americans reacted after winning World War II. He quotes Bing Crosby when the Germans surrendered as saying: "All anybody can do is thank G-d it's over....Today our deep down feeling is one of humility.....I hope that in victory we are more grateful than we are proud." Brooks goes on to say that "when we look back at 1945 we are looking into a different cultural epoch, across a sort of narcissism line. Humility, the sense that nobody is all that different from anybody else, was a large part of the culture then." Today, Brooks asserts, "immodesty is as ubiquitous as advertising. Baseball and football games are so routinely interrupted by self-celebration that you don't even notice it anymore." Brooks concludes regarding WWII: "It's funny how the nation's mood was at its most humble when its actual achievements were at their most extraordinary."

After the French Revolution, when what we call modernity began, the individual became center stage: citizenship, personal autonomy and individual rights. No one back then projected the trajectory of such celebration of the individual because if they did they would have seen the intoxicated individualism and narcissism that David Brooks writes about. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said: "An individual has not started living until this person can rise above the narrow confines of one's individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." Is this the prevailing advice of our times, the advice we give to our children?

We have all heard of Lucifer, the Devil. Have you ever thought of what his name means? It means luminous, shining. How did a shining, bright angel fall from grace and become the Devil? This, by the way, is a Jewish story. Lucifer is Satan and Satan is from our Bible; Satan is a Hebrew word. In our rabbinic Midrashim we are told that initially Satan sat by G-d's right side, he was the highest angel in heaven, G-d's favorite. The Midrash tells us that Satan was not satisfied being the highest angel, he wanted to be G-d. This is why he was thrown out of heaven. This lack of humility thereby gave birth to evil and all the human suffering it creates. Humility or the lack thereof is certainly not child's play.

A rich man was walking with a friend and bent down to pick up a penny on the sidewalk. When asked why he would bother to do so, the rich man explained that everything big is made of that which is small; think of atoms and molecules. To pick something up and raise it high, we must bend down. Humility allows us to pay attention to the small things of life and to appreciate the so-called accidents and coincidences of life. Humility allows us to see the genuine quality of people unmasked by anything superficial like clothes or cars, money or titles. Humility makes us respect other people, talk kindly to servers in restaurants and to the customer service people on the telephone; especially when they are in other countries and our patience is put to the test. A medieval text, *Orot*

*Tzadikim*, tells us that the real test of humility is how we talk to subordinates. How do we talk to the different people in our lives?

In Jewish tradition, who is the most powerful prophet, the most enlightened human being, the only person to whom G-d spoke face to face? Yes, Moses. The Torah tells us only one thing about Moses' personality. What is it? Moses was an exceedingly humble person—*haish Moshe anav meod.*" Humility is not weakness, humility is not meakness, humility is not low self-esteem as too many of us and our children think. Humility is strength; humility is holiness.

Humility teaches us that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are part of eternity and infinity which means we are so small; we are part of something that has no beginning and no end—not in time or space. How big does that make us? Our Kabbalists remind us that for there to have been room for the creation of the universe, G-d needed to contract G-dself, make G-dself smaller. If G-d is willing to make G-dself smaller to make room for others, how much the more so should we, created in G-d's image, be able to do the same? When we contract egos, we expand our hearts creating room for more empathy, compassion and love; when we contract our egos we make more room for G-d.

Rabbi Simcha Zisel Ziv reminds us that the more true wisdom a person has, the more humble this person will be. When we are wise we understand how we fit into an infinite and eternal universe. When we are wise we appreciate that the purpose of our lives is to contribute during whatever years we have as much goodness and kindness as possible. When we are wise we know that every human being is a child of G-d including each and every one of us! When we are wise we understand what the great Hillel said two thousand years ago: "My humility is my loftiness and my loftiness is my humility." Hillel was the founder and head of a school numbering tens of thousands of students that significantly influenced Judaism, other religions and the world. Hillel appreciated every person's inherent dignity and the importance of self. Hillel was an extraordinarily kind, patient and humble person.

In our heart of hearts, we know that we have to be more humble in how we live our lives and how we treat other people. We know that we have to do something about the narcissism, sense of self-entitlement and self-centeredness that characterizes so much of our lives and we especially have to begin providing a real alternative to all of this for our children. Our children need us to teach them to understand that they are part of something much bigger than themselves, that they are part of a world where each one of them is precious and where each of them is equal. They need to know that although the world does not revolve around them, the world needs them and G-d loves each and every one of them.

Our rabbis ask why did G-d appear to Moses at a lowly burning bush and why was the Torah given to the Israelites on one of the smallest mountains in the world: to teach unequivocally and for all time the importance of humility. We are part of an historical people that take these matters seriously and seriously value humility. Humility is regarded as the most difficult spiritual-ethical attribute to perfect. Only humility can give birth to the compassion and forgiveness, thankfulness and responsibility, justice and peace that our world is crying out for.

Let our Yom Kippur experience be humbling and fulfilling, humbling and insightful, humbling and empowering. There is a second version of the two notes, *kvitlach*, that every person is to keep in his or her pocket. One note says the entire world was created just for you. The other says know that from dust you were created and to dust you will return. May we all be humble enough and wise enough to know which note to take out at any given moment and may we hear and listen to its message. May each and every one of us know how equally big and little each of us is. On this *Kol Nidrei* night may we be blessed to truly understand that no one is nobody and everyone is somebody; everyone is a child of G-d, precious and beloved and, please G-d, let each of us treat each other, every human being and ourselves, accordingly.