

Rabbi Lisa Delson

Yom Kippur 5773

Delivered September 26, 2012 at Temple Beth Emeth (Ann Arbor, MI)

In between the High Holy Days, I had the opportunity to experience something very special. Serving as a rabbi in a Jewish community one may expect lifecycle events to be commonplace. This was an exception; this was something joyful, singular, and personal. My closest friend gave birth to a baby boy and he was entered into the covenant of the Jewish people this past Friday morning. It was special for all of the reasons you might expect. But, it was also special because each and every time this event occurs it reminds us all that we were once 8 days old, a shining presence in our parents' eyes. Throughout the brit mila ceremony, there were mentions of the prophet Elijah. It is Elijah who is supposed to warn us of the coming of the Messianic Age and who we associate with patience. We invoke his name on Passover and occasions such as this one. During this brit mila we welcomed a new life into the covenant of the Jewish people; a defining moment not only for this 8-day-old baby but also for each one of us. In that moment we are once again defining and affirming who we are as a Jewish people. This powerful moment of inclusion and promise reminded everyone that each soul has the opportunity to bring great and wonderful things upon the Jewish people, reminding us of the individual power of being present.

On Yom Kippur we read Atem Nitzavim kulchem: You stand here this day, men, women and children, water-carriers and wood choppers. These grand words from Moses are representative of a different kind of covenant being proclaimed and fulfilled. During this moment, Moses offer his wisdom and his special gift to the people, reminding them for one of the last times that God is God and that we have a part of the deal to uphold and cherish. A deal that allows us to sit here today, celebrate the good times and the bad, a life full of cultural norms, music, Torah, and an opportunity for ourselves to pray and connect with God. We are the men, women, and children who are standing here. This message is not fossilized in the Torah, but it is living. We place ourselves into the narrative, imagining ourselves once again overlooking the Promised Land from across the river with Moses as our leader. We are honored guests at this covenant ceremony. Moses is the speaker and we are the audience.

The portion goes on to say that we should 'Choose life, so that you and your offspring might live.' How poignant on this day when we emulate death. Traditionally, today is the day to wear a kittel – the piece of clothing that accompanies a person to the grave as well as other sacred occasions. On Yom Kippur we do not eat or enjoy life's pleasures. Instead we fast, we contemplate and we remember the deeds of the past year and look forward to the

year to come with fewer mistakes and misgivings. This day represents an opportunity for us to choose life when we are shadowing death. Choosing life means living up to our highest selves. Living life the way it should be lived with all of the wonderful things such as celebrating both the large and small joys. Choosing life means imagining the world the way it could be instead of the way it is, seeing where we have missed the mark and with the help of God and community, making it better.

Envisioning an improved world is not to say that we wish it were a perfect world or that we ourselves wish we were perfect. Yom Kippur does not ask for perfection. We all have areas in which we hope to improve; places where we wish we could have done better individually and as a community. For better or for worse our tradition helps recognize our failings or our almost failings. Many times during our high holy day liturgy and in particular on Yom Kippur, are we faced with an alphabet of woes, a litany of al chets, and avinu malkeinus. The prayer book helps us see where we have gone wrong even if we forgot about it and even if we never did it. Originally, the vidui or the confession of sin was not standardized. Instead it was a moment during the service where one could recall their own missteps and reflect on them. Over time, just like other oral traditions, this one was also written down and alphabetized for easier memory recall.

We all have committed offenses; together we confess these human sins:

The sins of arrogance, bigotry, and cynicism; of deceit and egotism, flattery and greed, injustice and jealousy. Some of us kept grudges, were lustful, malicious, or narrow-minded. Others were obstinate or possessive, quarrelsome, rancorous, or selfish. There was violence, weakness of will, xenophobia. We yielded to temptation, and showed zeal for bad causes.

These words, stated in the communal voice, allow for everyone to say the same thing. There is a positive and a negative to this type of recollection of sins. On one hand it allows those who have committed them to not feel alone. How powerful it is to have 1,000 other voices behind you allowing your voice to be drowned out by the group. A Kabbalistic rabbi, Isaac Luria, supports this idea by saying:

“Why was the Confession composed in the plural, so that we say, We have sinned, rather than, I have sinned?

Because all Israel is one body and every one of Israel is a limb of that body; that is why we are all responsible for one another when we sin. So, if one’s fellow should sin, it is as though one has sinned oneself; therefore, despite

the fact that one has not committed that iniquity, one must confess to it. For when one's fellow has sinned, it is as though one has sinned oneself."

So, if one person in the community has made a mistake, it is as if we are all at fault. There is some truth to this statement, but in our individualistic thinking it is a little uncomfortable to imagine that everyone has come down with a case of xenophobia, when it might not be true. It requires us to say words that are not true to who we are.

Despite the discomfort of saying words that seemingly do not apply, the communal language in this prayer also offers us another way of seeing this prayer. Dyonna Ginsburg, Director of Jewish Service Learning with the Jewish Agency, suggests that, "when encountering the line in vidduy about illicit sexual relations, the innocent among us generally either bend over backwards to construe our own actions through this prism or use this as an opportunity to reflect upon the existence of sexual offenders in the larger Jewish community. But, rarely will we ask ourselves systemic questions, such as: What actions have I taken to fight sexual harassment in my own workplace? To promote healthy and loving relationships in my community? To prevent objectification of women in society? To eradicate human trafficking and the sex trade – domestically, in Israel, and beyond?"

This also goes for the line about financial misconduct, where, "the blameless among us usually search the recesses of our memory to come up with some minor infraction or concentrate upon recent, high-profile business scandals. But, when was the last time we pointed the finger at ourselves, asking what have we done, as consumers, to support ethical businesses and business practices?" There are others that we could search for a deeper meaning such as gossip. When was the last time we turned away from glancing through the tabloid magazines in the checkout line in the name of staying out of gossip?

There is a great deal to learn and to reflect on from the written language of our prayers on Yom Kippur. The lists of sins give us a lot to think about on a personal and communal level. They are right; we probably have been guilty of those transgressions here and there, hopefully there rather than here, and we will repent. But our ancestral liturgists were probably on to something too. If, in life, we strive to be self-aware we probably already know what we have done wrong in the past year. We know what behaviors we would like to change as individuals and as a

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community. We get it. We have done wrong and we need to repent in order to move on and make it right again. And we will. This year, we might use the lists of transgressions as if they were a writing prompt, a jumping off point. Let the words in our prayer book be a starting place and not an ending place when it comes to recognizing where we have gone astray. These prayers can be useful even if they may be initially off-putting to us. They can point us in the right direction and make us see things that we might not have seen in the past. This path is most likely more difficult, but also potentially freeing from the shackles of the words on the page.

Searching deeply into the prayers in our books and the prayers in our hearts we have the ability to return. Both of these paths, finding deeper meaning in the text and writing your own text, are extremely challenging, but once again the words of our Torah portion were meant for us today. It says, "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say 'Who can go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we can do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who can go over the sea for us and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we can do it?' But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you can do it." Both covenants, the welcoming of an individual who is 8 days old and the renewal of the covenant of all of us standing here today in a community of over 1000 people, we are up the challenge of choosing life and renewal. We are committing ourselves once again to the covenant of our people and recognizing our full potential on this Day of Atonement.

Shana tova!