

Why Yom Kippur
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Introduction:

The Talmud often introduces folk sayings with two Hebrew words, *Yesh Omrim. Some say.* When my family was in Costa Rica, I learned a wonderful Spanish folk saying, *donde el diablo perdió su chaqueta*—where the devil lost his jacket. It is a colorful way of saying you are in the middle of nowhere, which is a place we all end up sometimes. In a certain way, the purpose of these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, is to recognize when and where we got lost over the past year so we can find our way back to the place we are supposed to be: home.

As I look out at your faces on my final Kol Nidrei as your senior rabbi, I am flooded with memories. Some of you had to contend with damage to your home from trees after last year's ice storm. Others welcomed a new member into the family, changed careers or lost a job to downsizing, contended with an illness, married, or divorced. If each of us is a book, this room is filled with an incredible library of love and life.

Yet as different as our stories are, we all struggle with the challenges and dilemmas of being human. How can we do our best? What makes our lives significant? Which is the best way to respond to a life crisis?

Judaism seeks to answer these same profound questions. For nearly twenty five years in the rabbinate, I have learned close at hand “why religion matters and why we need it.” Tonight, using Yom Kippur as a lens, let’s explore explicitly how Judaism can provide us a valuable framework and a set of directions by which to contend with our deepest human concerns.

Permit me to attempt to summarize our 4000 year old tradition in a single sentence. Ready? Here it is: “Religion is a pathway, mechanism, or spiritual technology by which we can rediscover and reconnect with Divine love.” Yom Kippur, meanwhile, is a singular day within our religion that helps us clarify what that Divine Love is for ourselves.

In other words, Yom Kippur matters. While the average person is too busy to take advantage of all that our synagogue offers, we feel a strong pull to attend services on the high holidays, like the way a flock of migrating birds feels a deep, internal call home each year.

Throughout time, it’s been the same for us.

In the days of Moses and Miriyam, Aaron led the people through the formative Yom Kippur experience of forgiveness, laying our failings on the heads of two goats. He helped our ancestors get right with themselves.

During the Shoah, when life was as hard for Jews as at any other point in our history, Jews in the death camps continued to observe the holiday because *davka*, in that place of utter horror, Yom Kippur still mattered to our people, and helped them survive their torment.

“We needed to show G-d that we’re locked in hell, but we were capable of singing his praises,” recounts Elie Wiesel in *Night*. Mordecai Stern’s story, found in *Witness to History*, recounts how “On Yom Kippur, SS officers arrived and gave a speech in German. ‘In honor of your holiday, we will serve you special food.’ The Nazis, who had scientifically determined the minimum number of calories needed to keep their Jewish slaves alive, handed out marmalade and a hearty soup, hoping the Jews would dishonor the Yom Kippur fast. They even distributed cigarettes, shouting. ‘Eat what we serve you or you will be beaten.’ That day, I worked very hard, near a pile of cement bags so I hid my soup among the bags. After dark, I returned to fetch my food but by its odor I knew it had spoiled. I was so hungry that I quickly ate it anyway. Thank

G-d, I did not become sick. I saw the hand of G-d keep me alive until liberation.”

Mordecai Stern’s faith sustained him to work through the fast, eating only after sundown.

This holiday bolstered Israelis during the Yom Kippur War, even for non-religious soldiers. The war brought forth for them a unique blend of reflection and sorrow that transcended religious observance, imbuing it with existential urgency. Just as we do, they prayed to be written into the book of life when death surrounded them. It mattered.

Even today, as we confront our own existential crises in a world still marked by antisemitism, and in which Israel divides us, Yom Kippur remains deeply relevant.

Most of us have never had to directly face the world’s oldest hatred. It is making us wonder about our place in society. Many of us are faced with our own existential crisis. My own siblings shared that they consider where they might move if America becomes too inhospitable for Jews. Frankly, I was surprised by this. My brother is pretty far left politically, while my sister is more center left. Their individual lives and personalities are also quite different,

yet they both question if the wide open gates of America were closing on the Jews.

Yom Kippur matters because mortality comes to all of us, whether it is the loss of a pet, a parent, a friend or partner. While the themes of death resonate throughout our 25 hour fast, Yom Kippur is less about dealing with loss than it is about how to live today. Indeed, the Sefardic liturgy is almost exclusively about living better. Yom Kippur teaches us that our lives, though fleeting, are filled with purpose. Each and every action we take echoes in eternity, and the process of teshuvah—returning to our best selves—is a reminder that we are capable of change, growth, and becoming more attuned to the divine purpose for us, and for our community.

This brings me to an American folk saying, often ascribed to Alexander Bell, the creator of the telephone. “When one door closes another door opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the ones which open for us.”

Ultimately, the purpose of the High Holidays, and indeed our religion in its entirety, is to highlight this dynamic, pulsing nature of life, as well as offer ways to conduct ourselves when everything in our lives ebbs and flows,

and opens and closes again and again. Nothing stays the same. Everything changes.

Yes, but if our lives don't endure, do our actions even matter? This is the approach that hedonists have taken throughout the ages to the existential questions - what's the point? If our existence doesn't matter because everything passes away, then pursuing pleasure is the sanest answer according to this school of thought.

Purpose matters. We all crave it. Yom Kippur points us in the direction of purpose. Yom Kippur matters.

What are the goals of Yom Kippur?

The hedonist's approach, however, has not been the Jewish way. Indeed, if we were to ask what the goals of Yom Kippur are, the first lesson is that *everything we do matters*. That's why we need atonement and self-reflection, because otherwise we might feel overwhelmed. No way can we get it all right, nor do we need to.

Even though everything we do matters, much of the time we act automatically. Mechanically. When we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that too often we don't exercise the gift of free will. Too often, we are on autopilot.

This occurs in ways large and small. In the *vidui* prayer, we confess to lifted eyes and sneers, these small acts of betrayal against other people. The *vidui* long ago expressed a sense of what today are called micro-gestures, such as rolling our eyes or making sideward glances, but those micro-gestures are universal, not limited to a given group. Our unhappy little micro-gestures are the way we express our displeasure at others, or life itself, often without our conscious awareness.

If we even have to atone for our micro-gestures, where precisely do religion and Yom Kippur wish to point us instead?

Everything can and should be connected to divinity

Everything can and should be connected to divinity. Why? When we feel life is meaningless, chaotic, or lacking in moral grounding, we experience a sense of ourselves or those around us as meaningless, chaotic, or lacking in moral grounding. Life feels small, filled with worry. Yet it is precisely because the world is suffused with divinity and God's love that life is deeply meaningful.

Meditation is an essential spiritual practice for me. It is through my meditative practice that I have come to recognize and experience how we are all bathed in divine love. Not the shallow Hallmark card slogan love. But a transformative love that resides in the heart of Judaism, not as a motto, but as an outcome of rituals like Yom Kippur and Judaism.

However, no one promised that attaining it would be easy. It takes practice to overcome the inertia of our dissatisfaction that revisits us no matter how accomplished we are, lurking and waiting to make us feel unhappy about ourselves, about others, or about the state of the world. That inner inertia and our own self-doubt is what makes it so hard to believe that our lives are suffused with love, let alone experience it on a moment to moment basis.

It takes work. Yet as both God and the Torah remind us in the Book of Genesis, life is good. Religion and Yom Kippur offer us mechanisms to rediscover and reconnect with divine love. It is why, by the end of this twenty five hour fast, many of us will walk out of here feeling a little lighter. We will feel cleansed of the terrible grip that the past holds on us. Why? Because we will have used the mechanisms of Yom Kippur to do the necessary work to get there. After years studying our tradition, I have concluded that one important goal of our tradition is to help us have more

moments like that, where we square off with and shake free of our past mistakes. This sort of divine love comes as the second chance we give ourselves. .

Increase a sense of freedom and expansiveness

Another goal of Yom Kippur and Judaism is to help us increase our sense of freedom and expansiveness, for these principles are both the mechanism to discover this divine love as well as the outcome of experiencing love. For me, Jewish prayer and meditation have been helpful; what most matters is finding your own path to those elevated spiritual states. Maybe you are a runner, or an athlete, or a music lover. Those are all good pathways to encounter the beauty and goodness of life, whether we are in a death camp, a war zone, or struggling beneath a hatred that permeates too much of contemporary American life.

From the religious perspective, it's worth emphasizing that our theme for the year is Amen: Be a Blessing. Being a blessing, as well as experiencing life as a blessing, is Judaism 101. It's also a graduate level course. We never finish this learning. Being a blessing is a purpose - a daily, 24 hour, 365 purpose. It's unending, and always necessary.

During this year, I hope that you will carve out more moments to be a blessing to others and yourself, even as you pause to discover all of the blessings that are there for the taking. Sunsets and flowers, the Friday night blessing on children, helping a friend in need, all of these actions are righteous in themselves. They help us to be *yosher*, to act in a straight-ahead manner.

On Yom Kippur, we pause from a world that is very good at making us feel small, constricted, or insufficient. I can't believe that is what God wants, and I hope you don't hold by that either. This precious gift of life is too valuable and short to squander on the many flavors of despair. We owe it to ourselves - to each other - to find more expansive ways to *Amen*.

The past doesn't need to define us. We are not our worst actions

Yet it is hard to let go of our painful pasts, isn't it? I don't know which is harder, forgiving ourselves or others. Maybe it depends on how we are built. Either way, though, the past doesn't need to define us. We are not our worst actions, our lost opportunities, the hurts we have suffered. Nonetheless, those pieces are part of us; they don't magically disappear. Rather, we need to take an active role in releasing them. Jack Kornfield, a famous meditation

teacher who grew up Jewish once said that “forgiveness is letting go of hope for a better past.” What a tremendously profound teaching!

The world is non-dual: there are not good people and bad people; good politics and bad politics; us and them.

Non-dualism teaches us that life is not simply divided into good and bad, us and them. Instead, each of us carries within us both light and shadow. Yom Kippur calls us to embrace this complexity, to forgive both ourselves and others, and to seek a path forward that is filled with grace.

Several years ago, I gave a high holiday sermon about how we shouldn't think of *mensch* as a noun but as a verb. It is not so much that someone is wholly a *mensch*, but that throughout our days, we have moments of *mensching* when we act from our deepest sense of self, concerned for ourselves and others. Being a blessing.

Because *mensch* is best understood as a verb rather than a noun rather, it teaches us that the world is non-dual. There are not good people and bad people; good politics and bad politics; us and them. We are all flawed beings, who first fall, then need to pick ourselves back up. This is one of the reasons why, in every culture across the world, there is a 'fall from grace' myth or folk tale. To fall is

human, to help someone up, that is mensching. Yom Kippur reminds us that no one gets a free pass, yet that reminder should encourage us to be kind to ourselves and others. Which again is a means and the outcome of divine love.

How does the day work

So how does Yom Kippur work? It functions when we approach it as a day of retreat from or a disruption to our normal routines, so that we can loosen the reins of our bad habits.

The prayers, the fasting, and the communal gathering all serve to break through the noise of everyday life. These rituals are not burdens, but gifts—reminding us that, no matter how lost we feel, we are bathed in divine love and have the ability to return to it.

Indeed, it is the communal aspect of both Yom Kippur and Judaism that reinforces how this path of teshuvah is serious, important; we are not alone in the work. While fasting is hard for many of us—and some of us can't fast because of doctors' orders, this day is designed so that we can free ourselves from the needs of the body because too often, our cravings distract us from living as we really want. They are the monkey on our back.

What are the pitfalls of YK and How to Respond to those pitfalls

The genius of Judaism is how it has created an abundance of mechanisms to remind us that everything and every life is significant. It recognizes that once we can stare directly at all our imperfect actions that cause us shame, we can begin to come to terms with our imperfect pasts and accept our imperfect selves. This is all part of the path of love. We take stock of ourselves so that we can become more loving, and in turn we will discover that we are more open to receiving the love that surrounds us at every moment.

For many Jews, the rituals themselves or the Hebrew can be off-putting or foreign. In this sense, they can *increase* a sense of dualism, rather than non-dualism. We feel ourselves at a distance from others, the tradition, or even ourselves.

For those of us who find the Hebrew prayers or the fasting difficult, Yom Kippur offers a deeper message: It's not the words, but the intention behind them that matters. There's an old fable about an unlettered shepherd who attends Kol Nidrei. As a child, the shepherd learned the aleph bet, but nothing more. While others prayed, the shepherd recited

aleph, bet, gimmel, over and over. As the story goes, that year the most powerful prayers offered up by any Jew was the shepherd's alphabet. Intention really does matter.

Whether through silent prayer, personal reflection, or acts of kindness, the goal is the same—to reconnect with the divine and with our truest selves.

And sometimes, maybe too often, we just don't want to do the work of love. Inertia is a bear, and it is easier to disbelieve in love. It is easier to imagine that the life we currently experience is all there is—is all we are.

Yet the purpose of Judaism is to disabuse us of our small-mindedness and small-heartedness. God wants our days to be filled with a sense of joy, openness, gratitude...blessing.

As we reflect on the journey of Yom Kippur, it's essential to recognize that in many ways, this day is designed to help us find our way back when we've become lost. In life, we all wander off the path, ending up spiritually and emotionally, as the saying goes, "**donde el diablo perdió su chaqueta**"—where the devil lost his jacket—far from where we ought to be.

In the end, Yom Kippur, and indeed religion as a whole, provides us with the tools to find our way when we've wandered off the path. The prayers, the fasting, the moments of introspection—they help us reset, refocus, and return to a life filled with meaning and purpose. No matter how lost we feel, Yom Kippur reminds us that there is always a path back.

Are we willing to walk the path? Put in the effort? Trust this sacred process that has been handed down from parent to child over the millenia? For when we do so, like Noah's rainbow, the eternal promise beckons us, reminding us that home awaits.

Welcome home, my friends, welcome home.