

Second Chances

It's so wonderful to see families together today, on the holiest day of the year. Part of what makes the holidays so special and so meaningful is your presence here. Please know you always have a place here at the Jericho Jewish Center.

Lucille Frenkel "A Note to My Ancestors"

That you were.

And that you were what you were and as you were.

And that my being mirrors what you were.

And that you are now mirrored in my soul.

And that you were-and in me, you still are-

Just that you were is but ample reason

That I am and shall progress to be.¹

Do you believe in second chances? That is what Yom Kippur is all about. Yom Kippur is the anniversary of the second set of tablets. Moses ascended to Sinai on the first of Elul and came down with the tablets forty

¹ Lucille Frenkel *A Jewish Adventure* (Milwaukee, WI: The Eternity Press, 1983), p. 129.

days later on the tenth of Tishrei. It was a day of second chances. The tablets which had been destroyed were replaced. As Rabbi Avi Weiss writes, “No wonder that we feel joy on Yom Kippur. We celebrate being given a second chance. In too many of life’s pursuits, we are only given ‘one shot.’ If we miss, it’s all over. G-d says: ‘No matter that you have failed before; you can still return.’”²

The tablets serve as the blueprint for the entire world. When the first tablets were destroyed by Moses, only shards were left. G-d reminded Moses that he made a mistake by making him write the second set of tablets by himself and stating וכתבתי על הלוחות את הדברים אשר היו על הלוחות הראשונים אשר שברת, “I will write on these tablets the exact same words that were on the first set of tablets which **you** broke.”³ Today is the anniversary of that second set of tablets coming into the world, a sign of forgiveness for the mistake Moses made by smashing the first set. At the same time, after Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face was radiant. He exuded confidence and light, no longer dwelling on the past.

² Rabbi Avi Weiss, “Four Reasons to Rejoice on Yom Kippur,” in *The World of the High Holy Days*, edited by Rabbi Jack Reimer (Miami, FL: Bernie Books, 1992), p. 231.

³ Exodus 34:1

The light of Moses is the same radiance we seek for ourselves. We constantly strive to be stronger and better, in a more elevated place in life. We yearn to be inspired, to burst out of this service with a sense of radiance and light. What can we think about as we sit here hour after hour to give our lives a sense of meaning, to appreciate what we have and to try to structure our lives so that we provide this for ourselves?

Where did Moses' radiance come from and how can we experience it in our lives? In the Midrashic collection Yalkut Shimoni, the rabbis state that Moses received radiance when he saw G-d. G-d said, 'You cannot see my face, but you can see my back,' and then proceeded to put Moses in a cleft of rock and passed in front of him.⁴ The nature of the intensity of Moses' closeness to G-d is the source that provided the radiance. Imagine being in such an intense relationship that you lose track of the outside world. Any thoughts you have about the rest of your day or your commitments fall by the wayside and you just engage in the moment. You don't even check your phone for emails or text messages (which you shouldn't be checking anyway today). That's the level of mindfulness and engagement we're talking about.

⁴ Yalkut Shimoni Ki Tisa 34. See also Exodus 33:12-23.

Unfortunately this is becoming a very difficult skill for many of us, including me. Our lives are so full, we spend so much time being busy and even when we not busy we look to fill our time. When in line in the post office or the grocery store, we put hands in our pockets, take out our cell phone and we rifle through our e-mails. I know I'm guilty of this. We don't give ourselves a chance to just be ourselves. We spend too much time doing and not enough being. Where's the white space in our lives? The words of the Torah only encompass half of the scroll. For every black letter there's a white letter, for everything written, a blank space. This encounter between Moses מֹשֶׁה, at the cave, is his experience being comfortable with himself, focused on his relationship with G-d which provides him with radiance.

There is a power to solitude. The first source of our radiance is being comfortable with who we are, not always rushing off to do something. In his book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Anthony Starr writes about “the desire of solitude as a means to escape from the pressures of ordinary life and as a way of renewal.”⁵ He writes about Admiral Byrd, an explorer of Antarctica, that he would be certain to take time every day “to be by himself for awhile and to

⁵ Anthony Starr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), page 34.

taste peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are.”⁶ Obviously solitude is not meant as an end in and of itself, as too much solitude is a bad thing. It’s why they place prisoners with severe crimes in solitary confinement. A person’s mental health depends upon relationships with others. One needs to ask him/herself ‘what nurtures and sustains me?’ as well as ‘what gives me the ability to replenish and sustain others?’

A congregant e-mailed me after Rosh Hashanah asking if I’d do a meditation during Musaf. I decided instead to do it during my sermon. In January I will begin an eighteen month program called the Hevraya at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which focuses on developing skills in yoga, meditation, silence and song as well as weekly study of Hasidic texts. I chose to do this program not because mindfulness is “in vogue” or for a “kumbaya” moment but rather so that I can serve you better as your rabbi, being fully engaged in every encounter with congregants rather than distracted by my “to-do list.” I want to be fully present and the new year with its bringing second chances is a new opportunity to try to do that. You might have a different skill you’re working on now. If you’ll join me on this brief journey, let’s close our

⁶ Ibid.

eyes, breathing in all the potential, the skills and the good things that will come our way this year and breathing out all the pain, suffering and difficulties we experienced in the past year. We breathe in...and we breathe out...

Is everyone still awake?...A second source of radiance, as demonstrated by Rabbi Berachiah in the Yalkut, is that of the tablets themselves.⁷ He writes that the length of the tablets was six handbreadths. G-d held onto the top two, Moses grabbed the bottom two and radiance emanated from the middle two. Like many Kabbalistic ideas, there is a limited part of the world with which we can connect. The top two handbreadths are too holy; we cannot live in that world. The bottom two handbreadths are too mundane and don't inspire us at all. The radiance emanates from the middle two handbreadths that are between heaven and earth. As we do on Shabbat, we take the earth and bring it a little closer to heaven. We do something spiritual, relinquishing control of our daily routine, and it elevates us closer to G-d.

⁷ Yalkut Shimoni 34.

Moses was a great leader in elevating earthliness closer to heaven. When G-d threatened to destroy the Jewish people after the sin of the spies, Moses would not permit him to do so. He demanded that G-d pardon Israel. What great *hutzpah* to first demand this from *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, G-d Almighty, and then to ask for pardon of a people who were ready to return to the slavery of Egypt. What did G-d do? ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך, G-d said “I will pardon in accordance with your word.”⁸

The Talmud goes even further, referencing another time when G-d threatened to destroy the Jewish people: the sin of the golden calf. Rabbi Abahu asserts that Moses took hold of G-d, like a man who seizes his fellow by his coat, and said to Him: “Master of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them.”⁹ Moses’ enduring passion for a people who didn’t believe in him, who brazenly said “We do not know what has happened to him”¹⁰ is what caused G-d to save our ancestors.

What can we do to live an exalted life, to raise up ourselves and our families to a higher, more spiritual standard of living? That effort is *karnei*

⁸ Numbers 14:20

⁹ Babylonian Talmud Berachot 32a

¹⁰ Exodus 32:1

hod קרני הוד, a source of inner fulfillment. On Yom Kippur, we celebrate the first human being who exuded that form of radiance. Moses thus came down holding not merely a set of rules but rather the blueprint for human existence.

The third and most important idea on Moses' radiance is espoused by Rabbi Yehudah bar Nahman. He asserts that when Moses finished writing the Torah, he had a little ink left in his quill which spilled onto his fingers. He took from that ink and wiped his forehead, and that was the source of his radiance.¹¹ Moses wrote a blueprint for humanity and yet even when he finished, there was something left, a little ink. We sometimes feel, "What can we do? What difference can we make?" The answer is "You can make a huge difference." No matter what you do, there's a little bit of ink left over for us to write a difference in our lives. We are the authors of our own book of life. We just finished writing the chapter on 5777 and now we are ten days into writing the chapter for New Year, 5778. We always need to be confident and optimistic that there is a little ink left over for us to write a new, glorious chapter in our lives. If we did something wrong in 5777, we have the chance to right it in 5778. After all, our greatest ancestor, Moshe Rabbenu, enabled

¹¹ Yalkut Shimoni 34

Israel to get a second chance through G-d giving Israel a second set on Ten Commandments, the anniversary of which we celebrate today on Yom Kippur.

There is a lesson to be learned from each of these three interpretations. The unnamed rabbis in the first interpretation from Yalkut Shimoni teach us to be comfortable with ourselves, to nurture and sustain ourselves. If we do this, we will be in a position from the radiance we gain to return and help others. Rabbi Berachiah teaches us to find that sacred space in the middle, to bridge the gap between the peaks of heaven and the realities of earth. It is Rabbi Yehudah bar Nahman's interpretation that I want us to hold onto after Yom Kippur: that our work is never done, for there is always more to write, contribute and to share. May G-d grant us the ability to appreciate our lives, overcome our challenges, and enhance ourselves as we sit here in the synagogue on this most holy of days.

What do we remember about loved ones? Their work was never done. There was always ink left in their quill-they modeled it for us. We are the ink left in their quill. Their *neshama* (soul) continues and we help it on its

journey. Their story has not finished being written, and we continue to write chapters in their book of life. They tried to bring heaven and earth closer together. They lived with radiance and brought life into the world. Religion's job is to reflect between the earthly and heavenly, the infinite yearnings and the finite reality.

On this *Yom Kippur* I reflect back on those loved ones who have gone to their eternal reward. What can I do to make them proud of the person I am? How can I live each day with meaning and purpose, continuing to follow in their footsteps? There are many ways in which we can show honor to loved ones. One is to attend services, not only for *Yizkor* as today but for each *Yahrzeit* (anniversary of their passing) and to commit oneself to attend our *minyan* at least one morning or evening of the week. We are also going to be starting a weekly class on the service (proposed names are "Shul Shy" or "Baby Steps" but I want to find something a little less infantilizing) to complement our Beginning Hebrew class and help people feel more comfortable at services and in the synagogue. No one should be embarrassed by what they don't know as אין הבישן לומד "the person who feels shame does

not learn.”¹² I hope that you are open to learning new things. Please let me know if you are able to commit to either one day of minyan a week or to attending the weekly class-or if you have an idea for another class topic.

In addition to growing intellectually and communally, we have the opportunity to grow spiritually in the New Year. Last Sunday evening I left for a short trip to Arizona as one of my friends in Tucson flew me out to see a football game. I had finished the drafts of my sermons right before Rosh Hashanah so I had a five hour flight to do something I don't get the chance to do often anymore: read a book. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that the book I chose is the most powerful book I've ever read-I couldn't stop tearing up as I was ensconced in its pages-and that it has the potential to serve as an impetus to change me for the better. The book is *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul* by Rabbi Naomi Levy. I'm only going to share with you one piece of wisdom from her book this morning: her memorial prayer for before lighting the *Yahrzeit* candle in her chapter “Living on Soul Time.”

A Memorial Prayer

¹² Mishnah Avot 2:5

I haven't forgotten you, even though it's been some time now since I've seen your face, touched your hand, heard your voice. You are with me all the time.

I used to think you left me. I know better now. You come to me.

Sometimes in fleeting moments I feel your presence close by. But I still miss you. And nothing, no person, no joy, no accomplishment, no distraction, not even God can fill the gaping hole your absence has left in my life.

But mixed together with all my sadness, there is a great joy for having known you. I want to thank you for the time we shared, for the love you gave, for the wisdom you spread.

Thank you for the magnificent moments and for the ordinary ones too. There was beauty in our simplicity. Holiness in our unspectacular days. And I will carry the lessons you taught me always.

Your life has ended, but your light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine upon me even on the darkest nights and illuminates my way.

*I light this candle in your honor and in your memory. May God bless you as you have blessed me with love, with grace, and with peace. Amen.*¹³

I remember all my grandparents this *Yizkor* and want to share one story from my maternal grandmother whose poetry I've been sharing during my holiday sermons. Lucille Frenkel z"l epitomized for me the importance of the spiritual. She attended synagogue services Shabbat after Shabbat not knowing one word of Hebrew, with her eyes closed whenever the Cantor and choir sang, just absorbing the music. She was "always behind" and often did not get past the English in the Silverman Preliminary Service. I asked her once why she came to synagogue when she couldn't understand what was read. Wasn't this frustrating for her? Her response surprised me: she said "I need this. I need this to survive."

I didn't understand it then. Why would anyone "need" a service in a foreign language reciting the same prayers week after week? I think I do now: there is something beyond the words, even beyond the melodies used, that can emanate deep into the soul if we let it in. It's not even about what's said but

¹³ Rabbi Naomi Levy, *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017), p. 283.

rather about letting go of oneself, being present and connecting deeply with something greater than oneself. Her closing her eyes was like we do for the Shabbat candles or the Shema: blotting out all external distractions, letting go of all thoughts, and striving to connect to The One, to G-d. She understood the deeper, spiritual connection whereas I get distracted by the physical needs of my “to-do list.”

As we remember our loved ones with Yizkor, let us all find our refuge: our place where we can be mindful, meditative, thoughtful. I hope that our synagogue will be one such place for you throughout the year. If you have doubts, think ‘I’m too far removed,’ just remember that Yom Kippur is a day beckoning us towards new opportunities. Who would have thought in their wildest dreams that our ancestors would have merited receiving a new set of tablets? Let us take advantage of each new opportunity that presents itself to us over the course of 5778.

Lucille Frenkel, “Synagogue Thought”

Within the Sabbath service,

*I can hear the echoes,
The presence of soft echoes
Of every Jew that ever
Prayed a Sabbath prayer.*

*And I wonder if
Someone in the future,
In centuries beyond me,
Will share the distant echo
Of my earnest Sabbath prayer.¹⁴*

We rise and continue with Yizkor on Page 321.

¹⁴ Lucille Frenkel, *A Jewish Adventure* (Milwaukee, WI: The Eternity Press, 1983), p. 52.