

Kol Nidre

Kol Nidre

We are the only creatures on the planet that are aware of our own deaths.

“Against death, which we see as ultimate failure, we offer up success.

Against death, which we see as ultimate emptiness, we offer up the acquisition of objects

Against death, which we see as the end of all feeling, we offer up the pursuit of pleasure

Against death, which we see as the final stillness, we offer up a ceaseless rage of activity

Against death, which we see as ultimate impotence, we offer up the glorification of our own power” (Lew, 119)

The Midrash describes Moses’ encounter with death:

When Moses realized that the decree [of death] had been sealed against him, he drew a small circle around himself, stood in it, and said, "Master of the universe, I will not budge from here until You void that decree." At the same time, he donned sackcloth--indeed, wrapped himself in it--strewed ashes upon himself, and persisted in prayer and supplications before the Holy One, until heaven and earth--indeed, all things made during the six days of creation--were shaken...What did the Holy One do then? He had it proclaimed at every gate of every firmament that Moses' prayer be not accepted nor brought up to God's presence, because the decree concerning him had been sealed... ..Moses said to the Holy One, "Master of the universe, known and revealed to You is the trouble and pain I suffered on account of Israel, until they came to believe in Your Name. How much pain I suffered because of them, until I inculcated among them the Torah and its precepts! The Holy One replied, "Nevertheless, such is the decree that has gone forth from My Presence!" Moses pleaded with the Holy One, "Master of the universe, for my sake, remember the day when You revealed Yourself to me at the bush; for my sake, remember the time when I stood on Mount Sinai forty days and forty nights. I beg You, do not hand me over to the angel of death." Again a divine voice came forth and said, "Fear not, I Myself will attend you and your burial." Upon hearing these words, Moses stood up and sanctified himself like the angels. God himself came down from the very heights of heaven to take away the soul of Moses. And God took away the soul of His servant Moses with a kiss. And God wept.

Moses, too, died underscoring his mortality. Yes, even Moses died. And not only did he die, but he was afraid of dying. He was attached to life and wanted to live – just like all of us.

The rabbis teach that death and Yom Kippur atone. Today, we wear the white kittel, a shroud – the same garment in which we will be buried. Yom Kippur with its fasting, its

abstention from sex, and its restrictions on clothing imitates the experience of dying. We rehearse the experience of death as a way of awakening ourselves to new life.

Our prayers for the next day will be a kind of performance, a performance of our own deaths, and tomorrow night, we will be renewed and prepared to reignite our passion for life.

Life may be lived in two ways. We can live life asleep, as if we were already dead, or we can live life awake, fully alive.

This year, the term “woke” took off in American culture. It came to mean a state of mind with respect to change in society, particularly around the plight of African Americans and their efforts to enjoy equality.

The idea of being “woke” was already present, however, in our liturgy. We strive to awaken ourselves today not only for the sake of moral issues in our society, which – to be sure – are as important as ever, but also for the sake of our personal relationships.

The most important relationships that we have are those who reside in our inner circle: our parents, children, siblings, grandchildren, and spouses. These people are closest to us and, as a result, they are the ones that we hurt the most. Today, we step back from our involvement in the larger world and focus on a dimension that is even greater, perhaps infinite, the inner world. This is a world where silence predominates and is indicative of the presence of God. This is the world that we dwell in at moments of self-revelation. This is the world that calls to us from the depths of our being.

That is the world in which we seek reconciliation and atonement.

God created us, says the Midrash, because He was lonely. He wanted to share the world with His creatures. We should look upon God not only as a king and parent as Avinu Malkeinu teaches, but also as a friend, a teacher, even a lover. God resides in the most intimate of realms.

We turn away from the public self today and the personas we wear like ornamental garments and search for the inner person. We are trained to act and behave in the world in accordance with the expectations of others. Today, the expectations that matter are those of the people who inhabit our inner world and the person we are in our inner life. We look to the small areas for self-improvement and step away from grand visions of great change – political, cultural, and social.

On Rosh Hashana, I spoke about the culture of narcissism that has overwhelmed our society. We have seen how dangerous this culture has become. Tonight and tomorrow, we take a stand against excessive self-absorption and excessive self-involvement. We contract into our most basic selves and seek reconciliation and atonement.

The presence of death that is so close on Yom Kippur enables us to make the choice that God has put before us between blessing and curse. We choose blessing, and we choose life.

This year was an exciting year for me and for my family. Shiri and I went from a married couple to a family with the addition of Aviv. We watched him develop over this year cherishing the moments on display before us:

Rabbi Simlai, a talmudic preacher, taught that the embryo sits in its mother's womb like folded writing tablets, its hands rest on its two temples, its two elbows on its two legs, and its heels against its behind. In this position, the infant sits and learns the entire Torah. As soon as it sees the light, an angel comes and slaps it on the mouth and it forgets the entire Torah (Niddah, 30b).

This is where the philtrum comes from, the cleft in our lip. Often, when I look at Aviv's face I think of this midrash. I am astonished to think of Aviv as a Torah scholar who has forgotten everything he knows and must spend his life relearning what was lost. But [say with a smile] at least according to Rabbi Simlai, each of us was once an infant and knew the entire Torah. We spend our lives relearning what was lost after our birth.

The Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it. What will strengthen our resolve on this Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur is the Torah to which we hold fast.

This year, we have been ever so close to death, its presence has surrounded us. A plague fell upon our world, driving us indoors compelling us to stay distant from one another. The truth is that we were already distant from one another. The COVID virus just instantiates a state of being that preceded it in spirit. Today, as we contemplate our coming year, we ardently pray that this virus will lift from us, and we will return to life.

Like all unpleasanties, however, we cannot imagine that we will escape this plague unscathed. All of us will carry the scars that COVID inflicted upon us. The inability to hug our grandchildren, the distance we were forced to keep in the presence of our parents, the fear that we felt being in the supermarket will all cling to us even when this nightmare ends.

My favorite part of the midrash about Moses' death that I opened with is the ending. And God wept. We think that because God is omnipotent that He is immune to suffering. What an unfortunate misconception that is. It is as though God feels all the suffering that occurs in the world. That is why it is consonant with rabbinic thought to affirm that this plague is harder on Him than it is on us. Our Sages sensed that the Creator experiences the suffering of His creatures. We have to imagine, we have to believe, that if God does ever directly bring suffering, He does it only to achieve a larger good. Moses, for example, inherited the world to come. For enduring what we are enduring, we will gain

Kol Nidre

some reward; we will have learned some lesson that we could learn no other way. That we must be educated through pain is one of the unfortunate facets of being human.

Against death, we try to throw up all kinds of barriers. Sometimes, we must have the presence of death come mighty close to us. Yom Kippur is that day. Today is that day.