

To pray here today on Yom Kippur, we must be capable of admitting the suffering that we have experienced during the year into our innermost self. As we undergo the suffering that COVID inflicts upon us, we wonder if suffering has a purpose. On the one hand, we don't want to dismiss suffering as some unfortunate side show of the human experience. Suffering is clearly a key part of being human. On the other hand, we don't want to encourage a view of suffering that directs people to pursue it. In the age we live in, suffering is confusing. In an earlier time when we had less mastery over our world, suffering was more commonplace. The suffering we experience is more likely to be emotional and mental, though suffering has not lost its physical character.

The quintessential statement about suffering is the Book of Job. Job's whole family is destroyed, his wealth is lost, and he has a terrible skin ailment. His friends come to comfort him, but their comfort is of an unusual kind. Strictly committed to a theology of reward and punishment, they cannot conceive of undeserved suffering. God runs the world as a strict meritocracy. The righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. If you are suffering, then you must have done something wrong, for you are being punished; therefore confess, and God will forgive you. Job, however, is unshaken. He clings to the conviction that he is innocent. In this conviction, Job lays the groundwork for a radical reworking of suffering. Suffering is not punishment. Suffering is simply a facet of life. The rabbis go a step further and suggest that suffering actually has redemptive qualities. Those who suffer lay the groundwork for a better time---perhaps even the coming of the Messiah.

What is so striking about our suffering during the COVID period with its strict social restrictions is that it is shared, and shared worldwide. All of us are suffering and suffering together. We must look at this in reverse. If all of us can be together in suffering, then surely we can be together in constructive ways, too. We constantly have to imagine how we will behave differently once a vaccine for COVID has been found and administered. We must commit to being together in a constructive way. We have learned how to be together in pain; now we must take that collective experience and convert it into an attitude toward collective experience that emphasizes flourishing.

Even in a period of COVID, when we are deprived of so much, gratitude is indispensable. Often I think of how challenging our lives are under these circumstances, but then I do something simple, like turn on the faucet and out comes rushing water. Suddenly I reflect upon all that we have in the midst of lacking so much. This is how gratitude begins. We need to examine our lives and recognize - daily - how much we truly have. Once we see how blessed we are - in terms of our families, our livelihoods, our friendships, our marriages---then we can ground ourselves upon the rock of gratitude. From gratitude, we can infer that God is concerned about our lives, that God's love for us is not some abstraction but something that expresses itself in the form of protection and caring.

If we consider COVID, one of the demands it makes upon us is that we cover our mouths. It prevents us from congregating in a normal fashion. One can see the punishment, as it were, in these practices. We have abused our mouths in this society. We have been reckless in our exchanges and interactions; so now, they are no longer

accessible to us. When we return to normal interactions, we must ensure that we bear these lessons in mind. When we take the masks off of our mouths and must no longer practice social distancing, we must honor the divine image in the people who are before us. Until that time, we have the opportunity to hone our dialogue with God. Think of God as the great listener. When we imagine God, do not think of a face, think of an ear. Think of one's words as entering the hearing of a great listener. We might say, What is the point of speaking if God knows already what we think? Speech is the distinguishing mark of the human being. When we transmit thought to speech we fulfill our humanity. Prayer is our speaking to God, and God's speaking to us occurs through study.

In certain respects, Jewish history has prepared us for the crisis of COVID. The preeminent theme in Jewish history is exile. Exile constitutes a rupture not only between the Jewish people and the land of Israel but also a rupture in the Jewish people's relationship to God and history.

COVID has exiled us from the conventional world we inhabited. It has made the world around us unfamiliar and estranged us from it. This process of defamiliarization is necessary since we were not behaving in the world as we should have been. Our society had already demonstrated its disregard for polite discourse and truth. Viciousness replaced respect. This viciousness can only occur, though, if we are already undergoing an estrangement - an exile - from our very selves. We are here today to try to recapture the connection to ourselves that is the prerequisite for restoring our relationship to the world. While COVID is underway, we have to do the internal work necessary for reconciliation. Reconciliation, however, can only occur if we are mindful of what we are

experiencing. The pain of our exile from the world must be deeply felt before we can initiate a process of restoration.

All this is spiritual work. The spiritual arena is the one that has been neglected for too long and those of us who are in this room today and are live-streaming from home must be at the forefront of restoring spirituality. We may, to a great extent, be living in a material world, but we don't have to submit to that reality with all of our being. We know that materialism is not all there is. A spiritual dimension to our lives also exists.

Recognizing that God is concerned about us and how we live our lives can inspire us to practice self-sacrifice, generosity, justice and other virtues of the noble and moral life. If we can do this then we can unlock the wisdom of our heritage. Wisdom means holding the present and projected future in mind simultaneously. We may not be able to predict what will occur in the future in the macro picture, but in our lives and in our congregation, we can look at the present with the wisdom that allows us to see the future that is pregnant within it.

Wisdom teaches us how best to manage the human situation of suffering and the intense experience of desire. The Talmud tells of the response to the Temple's destruction.

Rabbi Yohanan declared that the Temple had been destroyed and the Sanctuary burned and the righteous ones murdered, and the Jewish people exiled because of the evil inclination. And the Children of Israel wondered, Why did God give us the evil inclination? And they declared, the evil inclination was given to us so that we could enjoy the reward that follows from overcoming it. The Children of Israel, however, decided to

forgo this reward and requested that the evil inclination depart from the world. A note fell from the heavens with the word Truth written on it indicating that God had accepted their request. To firmly secure the divine acceptance, they fasted for three days and nights, and the evil inclination was delivered into their hands, and they sought to stifle it. It was sealed in a container. For three days it remained in that container, and after three days, the Children of Israel searched throughout Eretz Israel and could not find a fresh egg anywhere. Since the evil inclination had been captured, and the desire for procreation had ceased, no eggs had been produced. At this point, they realized that they had to release the evil inclination for without it civilization would dissolve. (Yoma 69B)

The purpose of Yom Kippur is not to reject the desires of our heart even if these desires sometimes cause destruction. Rather, these desires are to be acknowledged. The Torah does not seek to eradicate human nature; it seeks to work with it---indeed, it seeks to harness it. Desire becomes dangerous when its realization in the external world becomes our consuming passion. On Yom Kippur we behold the inner world, and there the desire arises without compelling us to pursue its realization outside of ourselves.

During the month of Elul, we read parshat ci tetzei. There the Torah describes what a soldier who has conquered a town must do if he finds a woman among the conquered whom he desires. The Torah commands that he take the woman home, shave her head, cut off her fingernails, and give her new clothes. She must remain in the soldier's house weeping for her father and mother for an entire month. At the conclusion of a month, she may become his wife.

By sharing an anecdote about sexual desire, the Torah speaks about all desire. Our goal today is to remind ourselves not to be overtaken by our desires. When they arise, we should strip them of their eroticism. Unadorned, they will lie within us for an extended period of time, wiping out any possibility of impulsive satisfaction. If after a month – as in the case of the captured woman – we still hold that desire, then we can act on it. We also may learn after a month that we no longer desire that new car that new device or that new suit. To reside in the inner world – to be in touch with our deepest selves – desire must not be permitted to rule the kingdom of our selves.

God's love and concern are abundant. We can sense that love and concern by dwelling in silence. That silence gives us access to a kind of communication with the Holy One that our ancestors, the prophets, experienced. Our dialogue with God is dependent on our dialogue with those closest to us, those who are most familiar to us. We are practiced in this society at speaking to those outside our inner circle with deference, but sometimes we are coarse or indifferent with those whom we love. The I-Thou relationship depends upon the kind of intimacy that is standard in the relationships of our inner circle. We will never draw close to God if we do not work on the communication in our most intimate relationships. If we lead God will follow. Most think that the God-human relationship works in the other direction, but in truth, in this partnership, man is often the one that leads with God acting in response. This is not to say that God cannot lead, as He led us out of Egypt, but as history developed, humans gained more power and therefore more responsibility. For us to have that responsibility, God has to freely choose

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to restrain himself. As the rabbinic dictum has it: “Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven.

In general, even without the doubling of exilic experience with COVID, the High Holidays already represent the moment when we as Jews and our God seek to overcome the estrangement from each other that our sinning has caused. To do that, we should seek to doubt our doubts. If we doubt God's existence, we should doubt that doubt, and in that we create an opening. All God needs is an opening, and He will fill the space.

When Israel journeyed in the wilderness, they carried the ark with them. The Torah goes into elaborate detail about Israel’s encampments – how it set out and how it settled down. It describes the procedures for building up and breaking down the Tabernacle and for transporting the Ark. The Ark was the most precious element of the Tabernacle. In the Ark were the tablets – not just the new ones, but the broken ones as well.

The broken tablets are the person that we have been for the past year, and the new tablets are the person that we will become as we proceed through the crucible that is Yom Kippur. Something about this image of the Ark containing two sets of tablets speaks to me. Yes, we become a new person, but we still carry with us the old person that we once were. Both are necessary for us to be the holy vessels that we are meant to be in the world. In order for us to form the new tablets, we need to live through a kind of breaking, a near death experience.

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I'd actually now like to end on a positive note---or at least a hopeful one. On the one hand, it is right and fitting on this properly somber day to mourn our sins and our grave mistakes. But after our contrition and repentance, after our teshuva and "near-death", we are once again confronted by the question of how we are to live. The project of living a good and righteous life is greatly advanced if one has a foundation of self-respect. So instead of focusing on human sin, let's take a moment to focus on human strength and specialness.

There is a midrash told by Joshua ben Levi: Before every human being, goes a procession of 10,000 angels who sing and declare, "Make way, make way, for here approaches the Image of God." (Deuteronomy Rabbah). Inspiring as this midrash is, some may find themselves reacting to it with skepticism. After all, shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't 10,000 sinning *human beings* be moved to form a procession and herald the arrival of each sinless *angel*? Yet this saying is unambiguously what it is. Is there any way of making sense of it? And if so, how?

I think there is a way of making sense of it, and I'd like to share it with you. To understand why it is the *angels* in this midrash that celebrate and honor each human

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being's approach (rather than the other way around) we need to try to understand why God created human beings in the first place. Yesterday, I related a midrash that explains the creation of human beings by citing God's loneliness. He wanted there to be creatures with whom He could share the world. But this seems to me not quite right. Because if all God wanted was pleasant company, he could have created the angels and stopped right there. So here's another way of looking at it. Why did God create the universe with human beings in it? To bring more holiness into existence. By holiness, I mean **value**. More precisely, holiness is **value** understood in a very specific way. The specific way in which holiness is value should become more clear in the next few moments.

It has been suggested that God's decision to create a fallible universe can be explained by the following example. Let's say you like apples, oranges, and pears to exactly the same extent. To start, you are given 10 apples.

Now you have a choice. Given that you already have 10 apples, you can add to those 10 apples either a) 10 more apples *or* b) 3 apples, 3 oranges, and 3 pears.

Most of you, I suspect, will choose b), as contributing more value. Now on the one hand this may seem strange. If you like all three fruit to the same extent, why would you choose 9 such fruit over 10 such fruit? Upon consideration, the answer seems clear. You do like all three types of fruit to the same *extent*, but you like each type of fruit *in a different way*. In other words, value is expressed as much through different *qualities* as it

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is expressed through different *quantities*. And sometimes, if you already have secured an ample *quantity* of *one* type of thing, what you will really want is different *qualities* of that thing---even if the different qualities of that thing come in a lower quantity.

This example may explain why God chose to create a radically imperfect universe with radically imperfect people. God, who is of infinite holiness, wanted to improve upon that level of holiness that was in existence. But in order to do so, He had to create a reality other than divine reality. A non-divine reality would have to be created which would exist alongside the divine reality. God could have just created angels, but since angels are but concretizations of the divine will, they do not add anything new with respect to holiness. Human beings, while far less holy than God quantitatively, are potential embodiments and sources of a holiness of a fundamentally different *quality*. Precisely because human beings are *not* divine, we can become what even God cannot become: the embodiment and source of non-divine, human holiness. God commands and instructs us to do this, but He will not do it for us. So perhaps that is why human beings are created. To become the source of a new holiness, an (albeit lesser), non-divine holiness, that successfully supplements the divine holiness. That's something even the angels can't do. And the angels know it! That is why angels honor the approach of each human being, not the other way around. **Thank you all so much.**

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