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Kol Nidre 5778: The Dance of David

For over 200 million people in this country, over a billion in the world, Jesus is how Christians do Yom Kippur. They skip this whole long day of prayer thing. They don't fast or afflict their souls. Instead, at a moment of their choosing, they accept Jesus in their hearts, acknowledge that he died for their sins, and then they can rest assured, knowing that whatever they might have done wrong in the past, they've been forgiven.

When you come back tomorrow afternoon you'll hear that Judaism had a very similar idea. Our service describes the ceremony the High Priest performed on Yom Kippur during the days of the Second Temple. First, he made a sacrifice on the altar, asking for forgiveness for himself, his household, and finally for the entire nation. And just in case this wasn't enough, he placed the sins of the entire nation on the head of a goat and sent it wandering off into the wilderness. When it died, (they made sure it "wandered" off a cliff,) the red yarn tied to its horns turned white; a sign that the people's sins were forgiven. Through these two acts, the animal sacrifice on the altar, and the rite of the scapegoat, our ancestors made atonement and were forgiven for their sins.

But that all changed when the Temple was destroyed. Instead of sacrifices, we began approaching God directly through prayer. We also took responsibility for repentance away from

the priests and put it on our own heads. So, while Christians require a transcendent figure to save them, for Jews the power of redemption is in our hands. We can save ourselves.

But the differences between Judaism and Christianity go beyond “how to find forgiveness;” they extend to our image of the ideal human being. For Christians, once again the model is Jesus, who the New Testament describes as having a pure soul. A lone traveler who walked the land looking for wrongs to right, searching for ways to help the downtrodden, and offering hope to those without status; teaching that one day, they would sit at tables like kings, while those whose success came through unrighteous deeds would receive their just reward. Jesus never sinned. He was a perfect man.

Jewish role models present a far different picture. Take Abraham, for instance. We know that Abraham was a God-fearing man. But when he encountered a dangerous situation, he didn't hesitate, not for a second, to put his wife in harm's way to save his own skin. (Gen. 12:13; 20:2) Yes, Abraham was a man who argued with God and fought for justice. But when the situation involved members of his own family, he didn't get involved. (Gen. 21:10,11; 22:2) And while Abraham found great success during his lifetime, increasing his wealth many times over, at his death he didn't share any of it with his followers. In fact, he even neglected the rest of his children, leaving everything he acquired, his material and spiritual possessions to just one heir – to Isaac alone.

We also find flaws in our hero Moses, who grew up a prince in Pharaoh's court. Early in his life Moses killed a man. (Ex. 2:12-14) Years later, when God called him at the burning bush, Moses looked for a way out, pleading with God to send another in his place. (3:11; 4:1, 10-14) And during the years in the wilderness, Moses grew so angry with our stiff-necked ancestors that when they were afflicted by hunger, thirst, plague and war, he was not beyond letting them suffer a bit before taking up their cause. In the end, after leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, not only was Moses not worthy of bringing them in, he wasn't even allowed to enter himself. Like Abraham, Moses was acquainted with sin.

Perhaps the best example we can find of the Jewish ideal is David, whose story is told in the First and Second books of Samuel. (I Samuel 16:12 – II Samuel 23:7) (We'll be reading these stories on Tuesday nights this year.) David was the youngest of eight sons, a "ruddy, bright-eyed, handsome" boy, who grew up quickly, becoming a shepherd for the family's flock. He was strong and brave, able to care for himself and the sheep. (I Samuel 17:12)

David was still a young man when he made his name. He found himself in the Israelite camp as they were preparing for battle. The Philistines had offered to settle their dispute with a "warrior's challenge" – each side would send just their champion to battle, instead of the entire army, with the winner taking all. The Philistines sent out their champ, a giant of a man named Goliath. When the Israelites saw him they lost heart. No one was willing to face him.

When David heard, he pleaded with King Saul to let him face Goliath and defend the honor of the Israelites and God. And since there was no one else for Saul to choose, he let David stand in as the sacrificial lamb. When David stepped onto the battlefield he wore the clothes of a shepherd. But despite his attire, he defeated Goliath and sent the Philistines running away in fear. (I Samuel 17:1-58)

This was the first of many battles for David. In his lifetime, he was a skilled fighter, a musician and poet – he wrote the book of Psalms. He was an emotional man with intense passion, which he expressed to his friend Jonathan, his lovers, his wives, as well as to God. David remained loyal to King Saul even when, in fits of rage, Saul tried to kill him. David captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites, hence its name: City of David. Finally, after becoming King, David used his charismatic personality to bring the tribes together and form a united monarchy – a kingdom that lasted through his and Solomon’s reign.

David was a remarkable man. He was adored, not only by those of his age, but also by generations of our people throughout the centuries. And yet, despite his glorious achievements, David was far from perfect. In fact, he committed one of the gravest sins that anyone could ever imagine.

Late one afternoon, David was looking out over the rooftops of his city, admiring the view, when a beautiful woman, Bat-Sheva, caught his eye. David told his guards to bring her to the

palace, where he learned that she was married to Uriah the Hittite, who was serving in the army, fighting to enlarge David's kingdom.

A short while later Bat-Sheva told David that she was pregnant. David sent for her husband, to bring him a report on the battle. Uriah arrived and reported to David, but much to his chagrin, Uriah did not follow David's instruction to go home for the night. Instead, he slept in the palace barracks with the other soldiers. The next night, David got Uriah drunk, and again sent him home to be with his wife. But again, Uriah would not go. The following morning David sent Uriah back to the battle. He gave him a note to bring to his commander, ordering that he be placed on the front line, where he was certain to be killed. Sure enough, a short time later, David received word that Uriah was dead. (II Samuel 11:1-27)

Now listen, I know that if we spent five minutes we could come up with a long list of politicians who've fallen prey to their sexual impulses, but what David did here goes beyond the pale. It is truly reprehensible. Indeed, when Nathan the Prophet learned of it he went to David, ostensibly to seek his advice about a troubling matter. He told David a story, that one of his neighbors, a very wealthy man, had stolen a poor man's only animal, and then fed it to a stranger. David flew into a rage. "As Adonai lives," he cried, the man who did this deserves to die!" When Nathan revealed that the story was a parable, that the rich man was David and the poor man Uriah, David was humbled and humiliated. Even he realized the depths to which he'd fallen. (II Samuel 12:1-14)

And yet, what is remarkable about this scene, what is unbelievable about our tradition is that, not only does *hazal*, not only do our sages forgive David, but he remains so beloved by both his people and by God, that the rabbis of the Talmud name him the Messiah. And if not him, they say, then most certainly it's one of his descendants. (Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 17a 2:4; Zohar Lech Lecha 82a-b)

Now tell me, how can this possibly be? How can this be justified? When Christianity discusses the Messiah, they describe a sinless, God-like man. How could Judaism suggest that an adulterer and murderer could be the great Redeemer – the Messiah? *Maybe* David could be allowed to ask for forgiveness and do *teshuva* – repent for his sins. But this, to be named the one who will usher in God's world, a time of peace, prosperity and plenty for all – to receive this ultimate reward – surely David must be disqualified. What are we missing here?

The answer my friends, can be found in the Zohar, a mystical text, a Midrash, most likely written in the late 13th century in the wake of the exile from Spain which devastated the Jewish world, turning a well-off community into penniless wanderers in search of a home. It is this text that will help us make sense of this anomaly.

In the Zohar, David becomes more than just a charismatic political leader, more than a warrior, a poet, an artist, a lover or a friend. David becomes an actor on the cosmic plain, a performer on the grandest of stages, a man who sits in God's palace and serves as the jester. David makes God laugh. He is funny and witty, vain and conceited. He flirts with the queen (maybe more); he

humbles himself. But the jester is more than a comedian – he is also a tragic figure who serves as the King’s confidant and conscience, a role requiring him to speak the truth, to tell the King things he doesn’t want to hear, words that no one else would ever speak.

To be the jester, David must learn how to stand on a pin, how to dance on the edge of the border separating laughter from sorrow. It’s a dangerous dance, because if he fails, if David does not please the King, it will cost him his life. But David is a very good dancer. And the Zohar reveals his steps. David dances through prayer.

The Zohar tells us that there are three kinds of special prayers. There’s the prayer offered by Moses, an exacting, line by line, word by word, letter by letter prayer. God responded to Moses’ prayers like no others, but only after He received every line, word and letter. Then there was the prayer said by a king. David said this prayer better than any other king. It wasn’t quite as efficacious as Moses’ prayer, but still, God would hear it and eventually respond. Finally, there’s the prayer of the poor. This, the Zohar says, is the most special prayer of all because God *always* listens to the prayers of the poor. When such a prayer is uttered, God pushes aside all the other supplications that surround Him and responds to it first. (Zohar III Balak 195a)

So how did David do his dance? How did this king, this sinner, this jester maintain his honor and preserve his life? How was it possible for him to be called the Messiah? Because instead of using the prayer of the king, David learned how to say the prayer of the poor, the prayer God always hears immediately, the prayer God always responds to.

But how is it that a wealthy man, a king could be entitled to offer the prayer of the poor? The Zohar explains that God treats everyone who is broken-hearted as if they were poor. Anyone who honestly looks into their heart and soul and sees their own faults and shortcomings, God will respond to their prayers immediately. David was a great sinner, but man, he knew how to dance. Read a few of his Psalms and you'll get to know a man who knew the depth of his soul. God may despise the sinner, but God loves those who dance.

Psychologists tell us that there is a connection between sin and redemption. That we cannot be whole until we look into ourselves and find what we are lacking. Only after we know what our sin is can we start to find the way towards redemption. But knowing our sin is not so easy these days.

We live in a world that has idolized perfection and is entertained by failure. At a time when gossip no longer needs coffee at Starbucks to spread, other's mistakes are ever-present, patiently waiting to be acknowledged on Facebook and Twitter. In this environment, this instant information age, is it any wonder that we try to hide our flaws and shortcomings? Is it any wonder that we're unwilling to admit them even to ourselves?

Too many of us walk around wounded, not only by our mistakes, but by the pain caused by trying to cover them up, trying to maintain the illusion that all is well. We hide our imperfections, sometimes by living defensively – by finding fault with others. We're afraid to look in the mirror and accept our own responsibility.

But you and I, we have a choice. We can “pretend” to live, ignore our failures, avoid the truth, live an existence that’s accompanied by a dull ache that never goes away. Or we can face our fears, acknowledge our sins and shortcomings, become aware of the heartache, sorrow and loss we’ve caused ourselves and others. We can face our fears because we don’t want to keep pretending. We can face our fears because we want to live fully, freely and unburdened; with hope and joy, promise and peace.

This is not an easy road to take. But unless we’re able to be honest with ourselves, our lives will never change. We’ll keep walking on that treadmill, pretending that everything’s fine, with only that dull ache in our soul to remind us that we’re just fooling ourselves.

Judaism doesn’t ask us to be perfect. It doesn’t ask us not to sin. It doesn’t tell us not to fail. What it tells us is that God, the one who created us, *understands* our nature and knows we’re not perfect. Not Abraham, not Moses, not even David was perfect. But that’s okay. God doesn’t want us to pretend to be something we’re not. God wants us to be honest – to speak the truth to ourselves, to ask forgiveness for our failings, to grow and become whole.

David used the poor man’s prayer because he knew that he was a sinner. He knew that he’d caused sorrow and pain. He knew that he deserved to be punished. But David also knew that there is nothing God loves more than a broken spirit and contrite heart. David knew that if he was honest about himself, God would hear his prayer and draw him near.

As long as we're honest with ourselves, God will hear us – God will listen. After all, this is the purpose of God's existence – to let us know that we are acceptable as we are, sins and all.

We spend too much of our lives hiding from ourselves, not being honest about our shortcomings, afraid to admit our faults. But what God most desires is that we use this day as the gift it was intended to be. Not to run errands, not as a chance to see friends, not as a time to have lunch with the family, but as a day when we can begin to make ourselves whole; a day that we can learn to dance. Your partner is waiting.