

Erev Yom Kippur Sermon – 2009 **Rabbi Brad Bloom**

Yom Kippur is about God. And for many of us it is the most difficult subject. This is not the time to take a poll to ascertain who can pray and who cannot. But we know the numbers would be split, maybe even percentages. Let's be honest about the fact that many modern Jews believing in a conventional god who answers or does not respond to our prayers is a difficult proposition. Some of us may be here for our loyalty to the culture and tradition for Judaism. Some of us are here because we connect into the deeper religious currents found in the liturgy and in the spiritual domain of Judaism. Some of us are here because our spouses are Jewish and we honor them and the religious heritage they come from. We come for many reasons to Yom Kippur. But we cannot escape the fact that the time and the liturgy are about the relationship between us and God. It is about judgment and atonement. It is about asking uncomfortable questions of ourselves and those to God as well.

About the same time that Abraham Lincoln was born, in the world of eastern Europe, a rabbi spoke to his congregation on the evening of Yom Kippur about the subject of the difficulty of prayer. He instructed them to pray for the Jews who cannot pray, for the Jews in the fields and woods, for those who are here and for those who are not here, and not only for the living, but also for the dead. The Rabbi of Kotzk finished by saying, "I tell you the walls are swarming with souls!"

Who are we praying for tonight? Is it possible that this question is not so simple on the face of it? Yes we are all reciting the words in unison. And that by itself is an important and sacred task. But I am asking us to go further into the heart to consider someone we know, maybe it is ourselves, who cannot pray whether they are here tonight or not. On this Yom Kippur could our prayer to God tonight be one that calls for the ingathering of those souls who are not here? Maybe this year our atonement could include one additional thought – for the people who cannot pray.

We might say, "It is not our business what someone else feels privately about their spiritual life." True, yet how can we ignore those we care about and whom we love, and especially when they cannot connect to the religion. They are on our minds tonight. For some it is our children; for others it is our siblings, our friends, our spouses or our parents. It is a natural and legitimate concern that we carry with us. The ability to pray and to reject prayer may be two sides of the same coin. These two ends of the spectrum might not be that far away from each other.

The need to preserve one's privacy is certainly a legitimate reason to focus on ourselves alone. But please do not forget that we are a community of faith. We are supposed to care about everyone. How then can we ignore the spiritual health of that community?

Point One

About whom was the rabbi of Kotzk talking about when he asked his congregation to pray for people who cannot pray? It is like the Passover story of the four sons who each bring a different perspective to why they are participating in the seder. The wise asks questions and demonstrates a curiosity to learn. The wicked child scoffs at the enterprise. The simple son asks a basic

question, but does not indicate any interest – or perhaps any capacity – to go deeper into the meaning of the Exodus. Finally, the child who does not know how to ask a question reminds us of children for whom religion and spirituality are just not on their radar screen.

I don't think that parable is too bad an analogy for what the rabbi was talking about with reference to the people of his day who did not connect to Judaism. Some were simple folk and others more endowed with intellectual prowess. Yet all were not present in the community for that evening of Yom Kippur.

One could say that today we have our own share of people who represent similar kinds of categories of non-involvement in their faith tradition. Some don't show up because they see religion as a farce or irrelevant to their lives or just that they are not aware there is a message for them. The rabbi of Kotzk was talking to an audience over two hundred years ago but he may as well have been talking to us today. He was not castigating his congregation or those who chose not to attend services. Rather he was trying to appeal to the conscience of the people to consider them in their prayers. They matter. We care about them. And I would say the same to us tonight about expressing compassion and hope for the people we wish would be in a synagogue but who aren't out of their own decision regardless of what the reason may be.

Point two

But people do have different kinds of reasons not just for why they do not show up but for why it is a challenge to reconcile the realities of the world with faith in the role of an omnipotent God who stands as arbiter over our lives. Remember, our prayers are variations on a theme: namely, acknowledging our mistakes and then proclaiming God's role to judge us followed by our appeal to God to judge us favorably and forgive us. That is how it goes in our High Holy days.

But what do we do when we don't believe in that type of God? What do we do when we don't ascribe that kind of role to God as judge over our spiritual lives? What does one do when we simply feel mad at God for having judged unfairly or not been present at all when we need God in our lives? The truth is that there is no one answer to this question that fits all sizes.

What I have always found fascinating about Judaism is that our tradition allows us to brood over our struggles with belief in God. In fact it is a Jewish trait and tradition to question God's authority and effectiveness. Here, let me share a story with you to illustrate my point.

A congregant approached her rabbi. "Rabbi," she complained. "I keep questioning and doubting in myself and I just cannot seem to stop it."

"What do you brood about?" asked the rabbi.

"I keep thinking about whether there really is a judgment and a judge."

"What does it matter to you!"

"Rabbi! If there is no judgment and no judge, then what do the words of Torah mean!"

“ Why is that important to you? What should that matter so much to you?”

“Rabbi! What does it matter to me? What does the rabbi think? What else could matter for why else would I have come and sought your advice?”

“Well if it matters to you as much as all that,” said the rabbi, “then you are a good Jew—and it is quite all right for a Jew to brood: nothing can go wrong with that person.”

This story from our tradition illustrates an important point: in Judaism, we have a long standing tradition of doubt and questioning about God, and an equally long tradition of wrestling with traditional theological assumptions versus what we see and think about God. The rabbi was trying to tell the student ,’it’s ok to have those feelings and doubts.’ Keep on it and don’t give up.

Do we not all go through and continue to harbor doubts and questions about God, especially regarding how events play into our lives that have brought us trauma or disappointment? The rabbi validated the struggle and did not try to dissuade her from her doubts. In fact the rabbi went one step further and complimented the student for wrestling with her doubts and called her a good Jew.

I don’t think the message has gotten out that wrestling or contending with God is a good thing. Do we impose upon ourselves an artificial standard that faith must be rock solid and impenetrable to the unpredictable in life? Have we set ourselves up for failure when we convince ourselves that questioning and arguing with God is somehow blasphemy? When we do that, does it not become a self-defeating circle of doubt and denial?

The hard question is ,’ok rabbi, will I now start to challenge you and bring up everything I have been wondering about all these years?’ Now what? The answer is that with each question we ask, expecting quick answers from a rabbi is not what it is all about. What is required is to strengthen and enrich that fiery spirit to challenge God with an inquiring mind to learn and read what others have taught.

The story is told about my rabbi in Baltimore, that when a congregant approached him and declared his disbelief in God, the rabbi quipped, “Really, so what have you read on the subject?” Proclaiming and signifying proudly one’s disbelief is no honor, but the struggle to learn and to be engaged in the process of evolving a deeper understanding to one’s questions and, yes, one’s disbelief is part and parcel of the legitimate questioning that the rabbi of Kotzk was talking about to his students.

Point Three

The sadness and even the sinful component that started us off with the rabbi’s prayer for those who cannot pray is not the fact that they aren’t in the temple. It is not about their place in the community or anything else. The heart of the matter, the reason why they do not show up, is about engagement, versus disengagement, about giving up versus working through the spiritual challenges. The sad part is knowing that we as a community miss out on all that the disengaged would offer and contribute to our community. We know they would be an asset but that is not in their hearts. And so we pray for them and hope that one day they will see and reengage with us,

wherever they live. That is what the Rabbi of Kotzk was getting at in his address to his congregation over two hundred years ago.

Why are we afraid of doubt in ourselves and our faith in God? Does it show weakness? I think not. The struggle to engage God and challenge ourselves by studying what our best teachers have said and thought about God over centuries makes, at the very least, for an interesting life. Religion is about finding out why we are here and what our purpose is on this planet. It is about making sense of the world we live in. The fact is that the answer to those questions and others do not come easy to us. Judaism says, 'don't be afraid to question and to struggle with the questions. Where Judaism does make a moral judgment is to say it is wrong to give up.

In my spare time, I thought I would develop a proposal for a new TV reality series. In this show there will be a representation of ordinary people from the world's major faith traditions. Each one has a vexing spiritual problem that they have never been able to resolve. The show will take them around the world to meet with the scholars, the wise and learned people who spend their lives dealing with these kinds of theological questions. We will watch them argue, probe and process later on what they heard and evaluate ourselves how they are coping with the challenge of the questions. The name of the show is simple; just one word, "Redemption."

To redeem something means to free it just like the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Do we carry the burden of questions and doubts around us a like a millstone on our backs? To have a question that follows us and remains unanswered for years and impacts the way we live and, in some ways, do not live life to its fullest, can be a terrific burden. These questions beg us for redemption, but redemption does not always mean completely resolving a thorny question, but it means moving forward on a journey of life that never lets up on us from one issue to the next.

Conclusion

The moment we stop and review how we are doing with God is engagement. The moment we shrug our shoulders and push issues out of our mind is disengagement. The moment we find a resolve to plow forward on an issue is hope. The moment we savor a new insight is redemption.

There is no insurance for soul seekers. No deductibles for us to wrestle with the Eternal One. The wounds we sustain are not covered by any plan. We are on our own each in pursuing our own questions. But we are not alone if we recognize that talking about God, questioning God and worrying about why our beliefs are not in sync with what we think Judaism teaches is acceptable and legitimate because to ask those questions leads to down the road where we can begin to sense redemption ahead us.

Did we think we were praying for only ourselves tonight? I am humbly suggesting that we pray for others to retrieve the spirit that will reengage them to ask questions. Maybe we start with ourselves? Is it someone who feels distance from their heritage? The rabbi of Kotzk was right about the fact that the walls are swarming with those who cannot pray. It was true then as it is still today.

In the v'ahavtah we read, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, we read, "And these words which I command you this day shall be upon thy heart." Note that the verse does not say, 'in thy heart,' rather it is written specifically upon thy heart. The rabbis say that there was a secret purpose for writing upon thy heart rather than in thy heart. For there are times when the heart is shut, and the words lie upon the heart, and when the heart opens in holy moments, those words sink deep down into it.

May it be God's will that all the souls who cannot pray will finally open their hearts, so that the questions they cannot bring themselves to utter will find a voice, and, perhaps, a new chance at faith and prayer. We shall wait and we shall hope.

Amen