

Kol Nidre
Sinai Temple, Springfield, Massachusetts
October 11, 2016

What Should I Expect from Myself?

Pirkei Avot asks: "Who is rich?" It answers: "The one who is happy with his portion." (Avot 4:1)

A story: a man was once walking through a forest. Suddenly, he heard a voice singing, "I'm truly rich. I'm truly rich." Curious, he followed the sound of the voice. Soon he came to a totally dilapidated, ramshackle hut. Arriving at the door frame – the hut didn't have a door – he peered in and saw a place with the barest of creature comforts: a table maybe, one chair, a single plate on the table with a bent-up knife, fork, and spoon beside to it, and a single old pot hanging over a fireplace,

Of course, he knew it was a Jewish place. There was a very plain tin mezuzah on the doorpost, which I guess is what you would call it had the hut had a door. And above the fireplace, there were two very simple candlesticks. And then next to the candlesticks there was a rusty tin can on which someone had scribbled in Hebrew the word, *tzedakah*. But beyond that, nothing! And then once more he heard the voice again, the voice of a man coming closer and closer and singing. "I'm truly rich. I'm truly rich."

The singing man arrived at the door frame. The other asked, "Is this your home?"

"It is," he replied. "Hey, come in, come in. Sit down. Here, you take the chair."

"No, that's okay, I'll stand. But wait a minute. How come you're singing, 'I'm truly rich'? You don't have anything in the house practically. What? Do you have some hidden bank account somewhere?"

"Nope, this is it."

"So how come you're saying you're rich, you're rich?"

"Because I am. I'm happy with what I have. I'm content."

"Who is rich?" Pirkei Avot asks. Here's the whole quote, exactly as Ben Zoma, our sage, said it: "Who is the rich person? The one who is happy with his lot, as it is written, 'When you eat [of] the labor of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be good for you.'" (Ps. 128:2)

RaSHI, pointing up R. Hiyya b. Ammi's commentary on this verse from Psalms, elucidated. "You will be happy" means, "in this world"; "it will be good for you" means "in the world-to-come." (Berakhot 8a)

To be content and happy with ourselves... When I lived in Hong Kong twenty years ago, I thought of Ben Zoma's dictum often. Never once, no matter who I talked to, Asian or Western, did I ever meet someone who even came close to being happy with what he or she had. It was always about more and more and still more.

In this country, the name of the game I had seen over and over was "He who

dies with the most toys wins.” There, it was “He who dies with the most money wins.” And the pursuit after money was something that could go on without end. Because as much money as one had, there was always more to be made. And among the super wealthy who didn’t have as much as the one who was wealthiest of them all, the quest was always to beat him out.

But despite the fact that we, here or there, are part of a very materialistic culture, and even within the synagogue world we sometimes bring materialism to the fore. Take for example the tiny Sephardic k’hal back in Peabody that named me emeritus when I went off to service as an interim rabbi for the first time, where, very much a part of Sephardic culture they auction off honors (Don’t worry...I’m not even going to *think* about bringing that one to our Board!); or the fact that the dedicatory plaques inside Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in NY have over the door the names of two of the early big-donors with, in Hebrew (though not in English) the *amounts* of money they gave to the synagogue [!]; or the fact that a big thing in many traditional synagogues on this night of Kol Nidre is to have a major fund appeal (Again, not to worry...that’s totally anathema to Reform Judaism), But, no, I’m not going to talk about money at all tonight. About that, we *all* know what the needs of our congregation are...and I trust, or hope, at least, that you will always make our synagogue a recipient of a significant portion of your *tzedakah* outlay.

Rather, I’m going to speak of what Yom Kippur and this special time of year say to the entire notion of inner contentment, inner tranquility, inner happiness, and inner peace.

Who am I? What am I? And where do I want my life to go? What are my *real* goals, the hopes and dreams that I want to fulfill because what they are will, within my life but within the world beyond me, make a significant difference. Not in terms of how many square feet I want in my house, or what kind of cars I’d like to own, or artwork I’d like to have in my house. But, rather, in terms of what will bring me truly lasting and enduring happiness.

Yom Kippur as a model for our lives is about a process. But what is so significant about it is the Kol Nidre prayer itself. I’m not speaking now of what it contains, of the legalistic, formulaic, mostly Aramaic language within it that isn’t completely clear, but, rather, of the time we recite it. While we here recite the Kol Nidre long after dark, the traditional time for reciting it is before dark, before, time-wise, Yom Kippur even begins. In it, we renounce for the *future* the same host of acts for which, in the next twenty-four hours, we’re going to say “I’m sorry” because we fell so woefully short on them during the year just past.

At first glance, that makes no sense whatsoever. What kind of an “I’m sorry” for what I wrongly did is it when before it even starts I create an absolution card that proclaims, “Hey, God, the bad stuff that I *am* going to do again after Yom Kippur, is, *ab initio*, in advance, hereby cancelled and deleted”?

When we were kids we said that if we crossed our fingers behind our backs

when we made a promise, the promise didn't count. But all of us knew, even back then, that that was wrong. So what about Kol Nidre?

What I think is that the whole Kol Nidre exercise, for all of the emotion that it evokes, isn't about the content of the prayer at all. Rather, Kol Nidre is about the fact that we are recognizing something about ourselves in relationship to Yom Kippur right from the start. It's that, no matter how hard we try, we're *never* going to reach perfection. We're always going to need Yom Kippur, first this year, again next year, and then the year after that, and even the year after that. In fact, we're going to need Yom Kippur all the way to the end of our lives.

And that takes us back to the entire *inyana d'yoma*, the subject of the day, namely working on the process of reaching fulfillment for our lives.

A statement about college: it costs such a *lot* of money these days. In absolute, indexed terms, the cost of an education is *so* much greater than when I went off to University. So what happens, say, when, after all the loans have piled up, someone suddenly says, I'm not happy at all in what I thought was going to be this so-called chosen field?

I've been lucky. As some of you know, beginning with when I was nine and came home from Hebrew School and announced that I was going to be a rabbi, I never for longer than a day veered from my inclinations toward the rabbinate. The exception was for one short period of time following the death of my mother, *nuchah 'eidn*, may she rest in peace. That was when I started to question whether I had entered the rabbinate because of the joy I knew it brought to her or because of what it brought to me. It was deeply challenging, so challenging that it brought me into months of therapy.

It only ended when my therapist asked me one day, "Howard, if you had your 'druthers, what would you druther be (From the word, "druther," I'm sure you can figure out that this took place in the South)?"

I thought about that *really* probing question for a few moments. Finally I replied, slowly, but firmly. "You know, I think I'd druther be a rabbi!"

Well, actually there was one other time as well. It was in the very early nineties. I suddenly had a hankering to go off to law school to study criminal law and become a criminal defense lawyer. But that ended in short order when one day I asked myself, "Okay, why criminal law?"

"Well," the voice inside me answered, "It's because there you will pick up the cause of the underdog"

"Hey," yet another voice inside of me called out, "Isn't that what you already do in the rabbinate???"

That ended that. So I guess I was lucky: only one career. In fact, someone recently asked me (and, no, this wasn't one of those voices that I hear sometimes but a real question), "If you had it to do all over again, what would you be?"

My answer came quickly. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd be a rabbi!"

But it's not just about finding fulfillment in one's career, or job that this is all about. It's about finding fulfillment, satisfaction, inner richness, in our lives...period.

Says Judaism - and this is also why we do Yom Kippur not once in our lives but year after year - it's an ongoing practice. It's about trying to perfect ourselves. As Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (Avot 1:14) It means seeking out that which will bring fulfillment and satisfaction to our lives, always. It means seeking out that which will bring us satisfaction given the realities of our lives, by living in the present and trying to savor the goodness of whatever good moments we do have, always.

But then, it's not only about ourselves. We say, *al chet shechatanu*, for the sin which *we* have committed, to remind ourselves that we are responsible to and for people beyond ourselves. As Hillel continued, "But if I care only for myself, what *am* I???" (Avot 1:14) We have responsibilities to enrich not only ourselves but the people around us and the society we live in.

Just as the Kol Nidre reminds us that we will *never* fully reach the kind of perfect happiness that we hold as our ultimate goal, what all of Yom Kippur reminds us is that we need constantly to work at it, not only for our own inner satisfaction but for the perfection of the world as well. And while you likely will not be able fully to complete the task, neither, as Rabbi Tarfon taught, are you free to desist from it.¹

There are two things all of us who were alive then remember, I'm sure.

The first: exactly what we were doing when we learned of the assassination of President Kennedy. It was that President Kennedy who had proclaimed - and perhaps some of you have heard the recording of his words down at the Kennedy Library, if you ever visited the library in Boston - "I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth."

The second: exactly what we felt the moment when, watching TV, we saw Neil Armstrong, who died four years ago at the age of 82, step down onto the surface of the moon and proclaim, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

I was in Germany as a chaplain early in my career when I saw and heard Neil Armstrong step down and make that now-immortal statement. It was in the middle of the night, in front of the tiny TV one of my congregants had in his living. What a thrilling moment.

But how we have progressed scientifically since then. They tell me that the smart phones we have in our pockets are more advanced and powerful as computers than the computers that took the first astronauts to the moon!

But, beyond that, I couldn't help be deeply moved by the words Neil Armstrong's family said about him the day after he died, words that I have heard similarly

¹Avot 2:16

recited about others once or twice while I was doing a funeral intake: “While we mourn the loss of a very good man, we also celebrate his remarkable life and hope that it serves as an example to young people around the world to make their dreams come true, to be willing to explore and push the limits, and to selflessly service a cause greater than themselves.”

I’d say, not only as an example to young people. Rather, as an example to all of us. Every day. That we feel satisfaction in our lives, and that our lives make a difference to those around us and to the people of the earth. For when we achieve that, we *will* be truly rich, free to be content with our portion in life. That *is* the leitmotif of Yom Kippur. May its message weave itself into the fabric of our lives...amen