

IV. Staying in the Common Flow

Kol Nidre

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High Holy Days 5768

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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

Kol Nidre, al cheyt, ashamnu. Today is the day of our great confession. With our great confession, our most sincere apologies. With our confession and most sincere apologies, our prayers for forgiveness. And along with our confession, most sincere apologies and prayers for forgiveness, our utmost commitment to make the changes in ourselves and in our lives to fully evolve into the human beings we were created to become.

We have already travelled together, a lot, talking about cosmology, the nature of our world, and cosmogony, the creation of the world.

Erev Rosh HaShanah, we studied how a river flows from Eden and waters the garden. To say it differently, how a constant stream of goodness and blessings flows at all time directly from God, to nourish us with goodness, and we must open ourselves up to that flow.

On the morning of the first day, we read the second story of creation to discover how it is we grow into ourselves as beings in the Divine Image, rather than being created in that way. We discussed our ability to care for each other, to bless each other and to create together.

Finally, on the second morning, we talked about how the Tree of Life nourishes all the other trees of the garden, and how we are obligated to eat from all the trees – all of them – including all the fruits and vegetables, but also the Tree of Joy, the Tree of Sorrow, the Tree of Music, the Tree of Gratitude, the Tree of Hope and even the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Remember, the Zohar teaches that we are obligated to eat from this tree as well, but it must be part of a balanced diet or it is poison. We discussed the connections between this tree and the ego – important for many reasons, but easily over-enlarged, and often blinding to our judgment. Thank you to those who reminded me afterwards that the Cocoa Tree is also a tree if the garden.

Tonight, this Yom Kippur, we come fully to the Day of Atonement, the day when our *Teshuvah*, the redirecting of our lives, comes to absolute center stage, in the hope of forgiveness and the granting to us, our families, our community and our world, a good New Year. Center stage – to the exclusion of all our creature comforts: eating, drinking, bathing, and so forth.

A number of people have questioned me during the past week, in response to the handout that we emailed around and passed out at *Rosh HaShanah*, why the Kol Nidre texts include so many from the Book of Esther?

Does it seem strange to you that the holiest day of the year should be linked to the silliest, most frivolous day of the year?

I couldn't agree more, a fantastic question. How can it be that there is a link between today and Purim. To use the Torah's name for today, what is the connection between

Purim and this Yom HaKippurim? Purim and Yom HaKippurim? How could it be that the Holiest Day of the Year is called Ke-Purim – a day like Purim?

Even those of you who aren't conspiracy theorists, who don't believe that God's Will or Divine Providence, is behind everything in this world, have to admit, that is a pretty amazing, unbelievable, outrageous coincidence.

The holiest day of the year is named, literally, the day like the most frivolous day of the year. Something worthy to explore.

So tonight, I want to explore this connection.

Our sages understood that there was something different about Purim and Megillat Esther – the Scroll of Esther.

Whereas the Torah is eternal, all of the other Biblical books do not have their place in the Redeemed World, in the World to Come. None of them, that is, except the Book of Esther.

We learn in the Jerusalem Talmud, and it is codified by Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah, that the Book of Esther is the only non-Torah book that will remain valid, binding, for all eternity. See texts one and two on the Kol Nidre Supplement.

Also, remember, Esther is the only Biblical Book that has its own section of the Mishnah and Talmud. Let me say that again, no other book in the entire Tanakh, the entire Hebrew Bible, has its own treatise, devoted section, in the Mishnah and Talmud.

No other non-Torah book needs to be written by a Sofer, a Kosher scribe, in order to be read as part of its ritual.

The Book of Esther has a specialness, a kedushah, a holiness, that no other non-Torah book does. So much so, that the holiest day of the year is named Ke-Purim, like Purim.

I want us to read the Story of Esther and learn three critical lessons on this Erev Yom Kippur, in the hope that our Teshuvah during this day, and the new life we will be given on the morrow and for the coming year, will be influenced by this special book.

First, Esther commands us that we must remain in and connected to our community. If you read through the excerpts in your packet, you will see that the life of the Court, around Ahashverosh is a life separated from the rest of the world, insulated, a life which limits the access of the natural world.

For example, in the third chapter of Esther, number one on the handout, after Ahashverosh sends out the edict about murdering the Jews, we are told that he and Haman sat down to have a drink while the city was dumbstruck, bewildered. In the

castle life was normal, in order. And outside, chaos reigned – not just among the Jews, but throughout the whole city!

Text two, no one in mourning could enter through the king's gate. Again, the king is cut off, disconnected, oblivious, in serious denial.

Text three, again the king is unapproachable except on his own terms.

And Esther, the queen, is in the palace. She doesn't have access to the king, but she is also out of touch with her own family, her own people. Mordechai needs to send messages to her.

The near tragic, near annihilation of the Jewish people on Purim is what happens when people are disconnected from each other. Ahashverosh's willingness to be deceived by Haman, and Esther's sense that she is powerless both result from their being behind large walls, separated from the rest of God's creation.

Text six contains the Talmud's amazing tale of Shimon Bar Yochai, the legendary author of the Zohar. Shimon Bar Yochai has gotten himself in trouble by speaking badly of the Roman occupiers of the land and had to go into hiding. He hides at first in the Beit Midrash, and then when that is no longer safe, he goes to hide in a cave.

Inside the cave, as you have it on your handout, a number of miracles happen for him allowing him to live as if he were only a talking head. That is, totally separated from the normal functioning of the world. First, he is separated from the whole community, hiding in the cave. Each day he buries himself up to his neck and remains a talking head studying Torah with his son.

Twelve years he lived as if he was not really human, disconnected from the rest of society, except his son.

When Elijah, finally, subtly notifies him that the time has come for him to exit the cave, the first thing he does is condemn another person for forsaking the kingdom of God and being absorbed in the temporal, physical world. Shimon bar Yochai's power and rage are so great that every where he looked he burnt up people and things with his eyes!

To read the text, it sounds like the person who ignited his ire was doing something truly evil, like visiting a brothel, eating treyf, stealing, or spending a whole day watching NASCAR. But what was the person actually doing? Plowing and soughing a field, not wasting time or hedonistically celebrating the physical world. The person, the farmer, was engaged in caring for himself and his community by growing food. And on top of that, his actions were not about immediate gratification, but rather, it would take months for him to reap the fruit of his labors.

So Shimon bar Yochai has become so separated from the world, from his community, that the farmer represents somebody overly engrossed in this world – so he gets exiled back to his cave. He is not ready to live among the rest of us.

Upon emerging from his cave again a year later, he still believes that he and his son could be self-sufficient and independent from the rest of the world. It is not until he sees that beauty of Shabbat, that is the beauty of the community coming together, that he is healed from his limited vision of reality.

Community is the key. Community is the nexus of our lives. Community is the end product when people connected to the flow, in the Divine Image, eat from the fruit of the trees.

As we now move into this Day of Atonement, now is the time to do an honest evaluation of the emphasis I have placed on community in my life. How have I failed to connect to the community? When in this past year have I hid in my cave, my work cave, or my home cave, to the exclusion of being connected with the farmers and the rest of my community? Where have I failed to celebrate Shabbat with friends and family, and therefore not properly allowed the flow to enter my life and this world?

At the end of the Book of Esther, text number four, when it comes time to celebrate that the Jews were not killed, celebration does not mean sacrifices to God. The celebration is joy and feasting – a communal experience – sending of gifts to each other – a community building event – and gifts to help support the poor – a community mitzvah, in support of all segments of the community. That is how we celebrate being alive, with community.

So this day Ke-Purim, like Purim, is a day to raise within us a deep desire for communal connection, to stand in the flow as a people and not just as individuals.

But the very end of Purim teaches us another critical lesson for this day that is Ke-Purim. See text number five. For Mordechai establishes the Feast of Purim as a festival for all times, it is accepted by all the people and their descendants. The people choose to allow Purim to be a holiday. God did not ordain it, nor threaten punishment if they failed. The people chose to create community and celebrate.

There is an amazing midrash, number three on your supplement, which links this moment at Purim to the moment at Sinai. Many of you know the Midrash where God holds Mount Sinai over our heads and says: “if you accept my Torah it will be good for you.” Clearly, a problematic understanding of our covenant with God, since it appears that we were coerced – remember there was a mountain over our heads!

So the Talmud teaches that it was in the days of Esther, the end of the book, that the people freely chose to confirm what they already accepted. In the absence of any mystical appearance, the people freely gathered as a community to care for each other and to celebrate. This is the final stamp of approval on the covenant of Sinai.

And where in the Talmud does this midrash appear? In Masechet Shabbat. That is, when discussing the day that is based on God's creation, but really the day when Jewish community is in the fore.

So what does this teach us on this day Ke-Purim, like Purim? It is easy to understand the commitment to Jewish life and the Jewish community when miracles happen every day, think Manna in the desert. But Purim is the story in the absence of God. God makes no appearance. So this day like Purim, calls us to affirm our commitment to our Jewish lives and our Jewish community, in the absence of great miracles.

This is the second great lesson Ke-Purim, like Purim. We live in a world where God doesn't appear, at least not in obvious ways. We live in a world in which God does not save through great miracles in the natural world. We need to be self-reliant as a community. We cannot blame God or wait for God to act. We need to protect ourselves from those who would harm us, and care for the weak and at risk among ourselves. And celebrate our ability to do so. That is like Purim.

So this year, what are you going to do to protect or fix? How will you, working with the community, on behalf of the community, not blame God or wait for God to correct something out of sorts? What will it be this year, so by next Rosh HaShanah you will not be seeking forgiveness for blaming or inactivity or lethargy?

Finally, Purim is to be celebrated – a time of great joy. We are alive. Yes, life hurts. Yes, we mourn for people. Yes, there are a great many things that need to be fixed. Yes, the world is a very scary place.

But that is exactly the world like Purim. A world, where we are no longer in the garden, fed and protected by the great Gardner. We need to accept that we can choose, sometimes from which tree we want to eat, and always how to understand the fruits of each tree, where we can acknowledge that we have become powerful in our ability to care for each other, to bless each other and to create together. And we can accept responsibility for where we have failed to live up to that image.

This is Yom HaKippurim, the holy day like Purim, that we can understand the absurdity of human power and potential, the tragedy of all that we have done to despoil the garden, and with joy, celebrate our ability to keep going to learn from our mistakes, to fix them, and to send gifts to each other and support for the poor.

As a community, let us come together to make this a great day, and even a great year, let us make it, truly, Ke-Purim.

Ken yehi ratzon.