

Yom Kippur 5784/2024: Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE

My words of Torah this Yom Kippur, on the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, are dedicated to those who gave their lives in that war, in defense of Israel and the Jewish people.

May their memory be a blessing.

The Real You

(Kol Nidrei Night)

It was Yom Kippur, Kol Nidrei night 1929 at Congregation B'nai David, an Orthodox synagogue in Northwest Detroit. The room was packed. A hushed silence descended on the congregation as the Cantor began to chant the haunting words from the beginning of Kol Nidrei, allowing us to pray with egregious sinners in our midst (אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבריינים). The Chazzan must have intoned these words with great fervor because there were, indeed, some serious *avaryanim* or sinners that night in B'nai David. Their names were Louis Fleisher, Harry Fleisher, and Henry Shorr - three of the most infamous underworld personalities in Detroit, members of what was then called "The Purple Gang", a crime syndicate that controlled everything illegal in the city and were considered by some to be even more ruthless than Chicago's Capone Gang.

Also present that night in synagogue were three other men no-one knew, dressed in traditional Chassidic garb. Knowing that these three gangsters would never miss Yom Kippur services, three G-men, FBI undercover agents dressed as Chasidim - showed up in synagogue, preparing to arrest the gangsters when services let out. One of the agents stepped outside (probably during the appeal) and lit a cigarette, not realizing how out of character and prohibited such an action is on Yom Kippur. Even to a group of hardened mobsters, lighting a cigarette on Yom Kippur was just not done. In that foolish act the agents blew their cover, and the three *gangsters* were able to escape.

What I don't get from the whole story is, if these were such cruel and ruthless gangsters, why did they bother showing up for services on Yom Kippur? If their life was filled with so much crime - theft, hijacking and arson, why would they risk being caught by the FBI to come to pray in a synagogue on Yom Kippur?

The answer goes to a fundamental Kabbalistic teaching, one which relates to every one of us - even those of us ordinary citizens who are not criminals. The Kabbalah, as expressed by the Bal Hatanya, the great 18th century scholar Rabbi Shneur Zalman Liadi, teaches we have fundamentally different sides: a *nefesh behemis* – an animal soul and a *nefesh elokis* – a Godly soul. The *Nefesh Behemis* is the part of our soul most closely related to the body. It's the energy within us that animates the body, and which is exclusively focused on the fulfilment of our physical needs. The *Nefesh Elokis*, on the other hand, is the spiritually pure part of who we are, which as the Bal Hatanya teaches is a piece of the Almighty itself. There is a prayer we recite each morning which refers to that part of our soul: *Elokai neshama*

shenasata bi tehorah hi – “My God, the soul you placed within in me is pure”. This part of our soul which desires only to connect with God. It’s the part of us which is incorruptible and wants to live a good and spiritually fulfilled life. And so, all of us, even criminals and gangsters, have a part of us which is purely good.

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern Psychology, also believed the human self is defined by competing forces, conscious and unconscious - the id, ego and super ego, but for Freud there is no part of the human makeup that is purely spiritual or good. Victor Frankel, who was a prized student of Freud in Vienna in the 1920’s, adopted much of Freud’s theories but after some time began to diverge from his teacher’s approach to human nature. Frankel started speaking of the human soul’s potential to transcend the limitations of the self through a search for deeper meaning and purpose in life. Freud died in 1939 so he never saw the horrors of the Holocaust. Frankel however lived through them. He survived Auschwitz and believed that if his teacher had seen what he did, he would have changed his position. In Frankel’s words “Beyond the basic natural drives and instinct of people he would have encountered the human capacity for self-transcendence. We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances; to choose one’s own way”.

The essential question, and an important one to ask ourselves tonight on Yom Kippur, is whether there exists something deeper than our competing forces for food, money, power and sex. Judaism deeply believes there is. That is the *nefesh elokis* - the divine soul within us, what the Chasidim call “the pintele yid” - this spark of the divine that we all possess, irrespective of the wrong or even evil we may commit.

A well-known professor once approached the late and great Lubavitcher Rebbe with the following question. “From my encounters in life I have noticed that people might seem nice and charming at the outset...But if one digs a little deeper ...at their core, everyone is exactly the same-selfish, arrogant and egotistical. Why is the nature of mankind?

Typical of a rabbi, the Rebbe responded with a parable. “When one walks on the street, things often look so elegant and appealing – tall flowery trees, fancy houses, paved roads, and expensive cars. But if one takes a shovel and begins digging beneath the surface, he discovers dirt and mud, nothing like the beautiful but deceptive world above ground.

At this point the professor was nodding his head in agreement.

“but” - if he weren’t to give up”, the Rebbe continued. “and would continue digging deeper, he would eventually encounter precious minerals and diamonds”.

The Rebbe acknowledged that beneath the surface of our personalities there’s a less than flattering psychic reality, which is what Freud discovered and wrote about, but if you dig further, beneath the dirt and the mud, there is something very beautiful. A precious stone,

our Godly soul. And the classic work, the Tanya teaches further that even the animal soul - the part of us which is focused on the physical - can also be transformed and elevated. The mitzvot of the Torah we are commanded to observe enable us to to elevate the *nefesh behemis* - the *physical* aspects of who we are, our thoughts, speech and action. Every mitzvah we carry out, whether it is Shabbat, Prayer or Tzedaka (charity) impacts the way we think, speak and act. The mitzvot, because they represent God's will, contain some of God's light and so when we perform a mitzvah it releases some of that spiritual light into the physical parts of who we are. And so, we not only believe that if we dig deep enough, we will find a purely spiritual and good part of who we are, but that even our physical makeup can be elevated when we perform the mitzvot.

This is why the Rebbe took such an interest in Dr. Frankel's work because the conclusions he reached from his research corresponded with the Jewish view that the soul forms the very core of who we are and that activating our soul is what ultimately allows us to transcend our base nature and become a force for good in the world.

But this is not just a nice insight. It's a principle upon which our lives depend. Victor Frankel taught that just like we cannot survive physically without oxygen, we also cannot survive emotionally without meaning and purpose. In his famous book, *Mans Search for Meaning*, Frankel tells of a cell mate in Auschwitz who had this reoccurring dream that on a certain date he and his bunk mates would be liberated from the camps. When the date in the dream arrived and the dream did not come true, he went to sleep that night and never woke up. Technically the man died of Typhus, the disease many Jews succumbed to in the camps, but Frankel wrote he died then and there because he lost hope. He had no more meaning or purpose to his life.

We are so much more than just our bodies and our egos and that's what we are tapping into tonight on Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur we express a part of ourselves we don't reveal the rest of the year. It's the side of us that's angelic, the part of us that's pure. It's why on Yom Kippur we wear white, to symbolize our purity. It's one of the reasons why we fast - to emulate the angels who do not require food. And it explains another less well-known tradition which we will perform in just a few moments. During the course of the year when we recite the Shema, immediately afterwards we say the phrase: *baruch shem kevod malchuto leolam vaed* - "Blessed is God whose Kingdom is forever and ever". But we always say that phrase quietly to ourselves except on Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur we sing the *baruch shem kevod malchuto* out loud. The Talmud teaches that all year round we say this line silently because Moses overheard the angels saying the *Baruch Shem Kevod* phrase. That's how he came to learn it in the first place (when he was on Sinai receiving the Torah) and since it wasn't his own phrase - not a human utterance but rather an angelic one, we humans say it silently--except for Yom Kippur because on Yom Kippur, we ourselves are angels and so we too can say it out loud, just like the angels do.

But who are we kidding? We're like angels? We dress up in white, refrain from eating and drinking, saying the *Baruch Shem Kevod* out loud? Who are we fooling? We're no angels. We know how we sometimes speak ill of each another. How we sometimes behave at work when we're in the throes of a big deal. We know that we neglect Hashem's mitzvot and are

often hyper focused on our own needs, forgetting even our most loved ones - so who are we kidding? Are we trying to fake out God? But making believe we're angels isn't deceiving God because the truth is there *is* a part of us is angelic. There *is* a pure aspect to makeup, a *nefesh elokit*, a Godly soul that wants to do the right thing and live in a sanctified way. And so, it's only appropriate that on the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur, we reflect *that* part – the holiest part of who we are.

The problem is that's not *entirely* who we are. Besides the part of us which is angelic we have other sides to our personality. But when we stand before God on Yom Kippur to make resolutions for the coming year we do so as angels and so those resolutions tend to be unrealistic. They usually sound something like this:

"In the coming year I pledge to be a kinder person. I will always give others the benefit of the doubt and I will never yell. I will diet 365 days of the year and work out twice a day. I will make time for my family and friends. I will remember what is truly important and always keep everything in perspective. I will pray 3 times a day and attend all of MJE's services, classes and programs and contribute large sums of money toward their vital outreach work. I will throw out my flat screen TV, my laptop, ipad, ipod and everything else that distracts me from my purpose and mission in life. I will never speak ill of others, I will volunteer with the elderly and visit sick patients in the hospital every day. And oh yes, I will always smile."

We're angels today, and so maybe our Yom Kippur resolutions turn out to be a little *too* angelic. When we make resolutions, we need to make them in a way that allows *all* of our sides a chance to make them happen. Not just the angel in me but also the guy who likes to work out, who likes to watch violent movies and drink beer. And so, if I go to the gym every Saturday morning and I only attend services once a year on the High Holidays then even though the angel part of me on Yom Kippur says, "I'm going to come to MJE every Saturday, the gym part of me starts getting a little nervous. So, let's work it out with the gym side too. How about once a month? The gym part of me maybe can't handle every week but maybe once a month or every other week.

On the other hand, we also need to be careful about selling ourselves short: if we're capable of more than we need to strive for more. If I'm already plugged into the community but it seems to be mostly social then maybe I have a conversation with myself about starting to learn, coming to classes and getting more serious about mitzvot observance which, as I mentioned, bring light into our everyday physical lives, to our thoughts, speech and action. Or do we say to ourselves, hey that's not me - I'm not one of those people who prays regularly, studies Torah, goes to classes or reads Jewish books. Or I'm not the type to volunteer or raise money for a cause in which I believe, or who regularly donates money to the poor. It's just not me.

That my friends, is selling ourselves short.

There's a story told of a professor who stood before his class of 30 senior molecular biology students, about to pass out the final exam. He tells his students: "I have been privileged to

be your instructor this semester, and I know how hard you have all worked to prepare for this test. I also know most of you are off to medical school or grad school next fall," he told them. "I am well aware of how much pressure you are under to keep your GPAs up, and because I know you are all capable of understanding this material, I am prepared to offer an automatic "B" to anyone who would prefer not to take the final."

The relief in the classroom was audible as a number of the students jumped up to thank the professor and departed from class. The professor looked at the handful of students who remained, and offered again, "Any other takers? This is your last opportunity."

One more student decided to go.

Seven students remained. The professor closed the door and took attendance. Then he handed out the final exam. There were two sentences typed on the paper: "Congratulations, you have just received an "A" in this class. Keep believing in yourself."

This is such an important message as we make our resolutions for the coming year. Because whether in our professional lives, our personnel relationships or our spiritual connection to God, unless we believe in our own potential for greatness and holiness, we will condemn ourselves to a life of mediocrity. We can come away with a B and I guess that's OK but it's not actualizing our potential. It's not being who we can be.

Let's strive for greatness and holiness in the coming year. As long as we take into account *all* the different parts of our personality, as long as we deal not only with our angelic part but with the totality of our being, we will *b'ezrat Hashem* fulfill our lofty resolutions in the coming year. But only if we believe in ourselves. And if we don't, just remember, Hashem does. God thinks we're capable of greatness. We know this because He gave us a Torah with so many laws and traditions to follow - to honor our parents, to observe the Shabbat, to pray, to be kind to our neighbor and literally hundreds of other things. If God didn't think we could accomplish all this, why would He command us to observe these laws? Is the Almighty setting us up to fail? No, because more than anyone else, the Creator knows what His creations are capable of. He knows we possess a *nefesh elokit*, a part of His own soul which remains pure and holy and an animal soul which through the mitzvot can be transformed and redeemed. *That* is the real us. We have egos, physical drives and yes, we can be selfish, but as the Lubavitcher Rebbe taught and Victor Frankel confirmed through his research, if we dig a little deeper, we will find precious minerals.

Let's do some digging this Yom Kippur. Let's use the holiness of this day and the power of our prayers to access the angel within us. And in doing so, may we merit to emerge from this holy day atoned and purified, each of us inscribed for a year of good health, prosperity, spiritual renewal, meaning and purpose.

Born to Give

(Yom Kippur Day)

Six-year-old Molly Nash was born with a rare disease called Franconia Anemia. This terrible disease is characterized by the inability to produce bone marrow, leaving Molly with no immune system. Unfortunately, most born with this genetic disorder contract leukemia and die. The only possible salvation for Molly was a stem cell transplant but the chances of finding the right match were minimal. She needed a bone marrow transplant from someone with a very close genetic match and they could not find a good match. So, their doctor advised Molly's parents to have a child thru invitro fertilization to ensure their next child would not be born with the same disease, and so their new child could be a good match for Molly.

Fifteen embryos from Molly's parents were grown in petri dishes and all were sampled to find the healthiest and best possible match for Molly. The doctors then took the embryo and implanted it into Molly's mother who eventually gave birth. It was a boy—his name Adam. When Adam was born, the doctors then took some blood from Adam's umbilical cord and injected it into Molly's blood stream.

The procedure was successful and thankfully Molly grew up as a relatively healthy child. She was even chosen from 500 children in her school to have her artwork exhibited in a month-long art exhibit at the Curtis Arts & Humanities Center. Not bad for a child born without thumbs.

Many ethicists have been dialoging on this case—as it raises all sorts of moral and ethical issues. We now have the technology to produce several possible children, and then select the kind of children we would prefer. Certainly, to protect against disease, most would argue why not—but what about if it's just to have a child with prettier eyes, or with greater intelligence or athletic prowess? Where would we draw the line?

One ethicist, from the University of Wisconsin, said that Molly's situation was almost identical to another case involving a child born with a failed kidney. The parents understood that to maximize the chances of a successful kidney transplant, their child should receive a kidney from a sibling. But this little boy had no brothers or sisters. And so the parents decided to have another child so that its kidney could eventually be transplanted to her brother. They had a girl and waited for her to be old enough and at the age of 14 she successfully donated a kidney to her brother. The ethicist from Wisconsin said and I quote: "She understands that she was created to be a donor."

Both this girl and Molly's new baby brother, Adam, were created for a purpose. Both were brought into this world to fulfill a certain mission. And when I read that comment made by the ethicist it almost seemed like, in a strange way, he was envious of Adam and the others because they knew that were created for a purpose.

For Adam and the other donor children, their mission was clear. They were brought into this world for a very specific purpose - but weren't we too? Isn't every human being created for a certain reason? The only real difference between us and Adam is that Adam and these other children never got to choose whether to live in accordance with their purpose whereas we have free will, we get to choose our purpose and decide whether to live accordingly. But what is that purpose? Today is Yom Kippur, and we've all come here for a reason. Presumably that reason should have something to do with the very purpose for our existence. What is that purpose? What is the reason we are here and what's the connection to Yom Kippur?

I think the *Jewish* answer to this question can also be found with Adam and these special children.

We were created to be donors. We were created to give. Adam and the other children were created to donate a part of their body, but we are also all brought into this world to provide for others. The Torah demands we live lives dedicated to other people, ensuring that those less fortunate are looked after. *Olam Chesed Yibaneh*, the Psalmist declares, "the world is built upon kindness". God's motivation in creating the world was kindness, and as beings created in God's image, we are commanded to imitate God by becoming givers ourselves. The Torah commands us to "love our neighbor", to love and provide for the *ger, yatom and almanah*, for the stranger, orphan and widow and stranger. Love is an important emotion in Judaism because that is ultimately what results from giving. The great Jewish ethicist Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler famously pointed out that the root of the Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, is *hav*, which literally means "to give" for love is only created when we give. A contemporary Rabbi from Israel Rabbi Wolbe taught that the word "*nissuin*", which is the Hebrew word for marriage is taken from the root word *linso* which means to carry. Marriage is not simply what you get from the relationship but what you give. Marriage is about carrying the other person.

This is challenging because we live in a world which emphasizes how to get what we want out of life. So much of contemporary literature - articles, books and social media focus us on how we can get this or that out of our life, how to make more money, nothing wrong with that but since we are created to be donors, we only *get* when we *give*.

In Crown Heights there was a Jew, Yankel, who owned a bakery. Yankel survived the concentration camps and eventually emigrated to the United States. When he was asked how he survived when so many others perished, he said he attributed it to a particular incident that took place when he was a teenager on the train to the camps. "We were on the train, in a boxcar, being taken to Auschwitz, Yankel explained "Night came and it was freezing, deathly cold, in that boxcar. The Germans would leave the cars on the side of the tracks overnight, sometimes for days on end without any food, and of course, no blankets to keep us warm. Sitting next to me, continued Yankel, was this beloved elderly Jew from my hometown who I recognized, but I had never seen him like this. He was shivering from head to toe, and he looked terrible".

Yankel continued to share what happened: “So, I wrapped my arms around him and began rubbing him, to warm him up. I rubbed his arms, his legs, his face, his neck. I begged him to hang on. All night long; I kept the man warm this way. I was tired, I was freezing cold myself, my fingers were numb, but I didn’t stop rubbing heat on to this man’s body. Hours went by this way. Finally, night passed, morning came, and the sun began to shine. There was some warmth in the cabin. The sunlight entered and I looked around. To my horror, all I could see were frozen bodies, and all I could hear was a deathly silence. Nobody else in the car made it through the night. Only two people survived: the old man and me. The old man survived because somebody kept him warm, and I survived because I was warming somebody else”.

This is one of the secrets of Judaism: when you provide warmth to another, you warm yourself. When we support and encourage others, we give ourselves what we need to survive existentially. And so, as givers, one question we must ask ourselves this Yom Kippur is: who will we give in the coming year? What new *chesed* or giving project will we take on in the coming weeks? MJE is embarking on a number of such projects, including our annual Blood Drive to be held on November 12. If you’d like to get involved in that event or in any of the others, please let us know. We are all meant to be donors.

The same applies in the spiritual realm, in terms of our relationship with God. We may not think of God as a Being we need to give to, and in a strictly theological terms, God doesn’t *need* us to perform His mitzvot, but Judaism teaches that those mitzvot were given to us as a way of being connected to our spiritual source. The word *mitzvah* means commandment, but it’s also related to the Aramaic word *tzavta* which means to attach or to join. (Sfas Emes, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter). Mitzvot enable us to be attached, to remain connected to our spiritual source - to Hashem, so we can benefit from a relationship with our Creator. The great Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, Italy 1707-1746) taught that God created humankind to enable us to be attached to the greatest possible good, to God Himself. But to achieve that closeness, we must earn it, and that’s where the mitzvot come in. The mitzvot are the means or the vehicle through we earn a relationship and closeness with God. But it can only happen if we extend ourselves. The Ramchal explains that we were created in such a way as to fully appreciate something only when we’ve earned it. If we don’t give of ourselves, we simply cannot appreciate its value. Think about anything truly important you’ve accomplished in your life - chances are you had to work hard for it. Judaism is no different. If we invest ourselves and work at it, it will mean something to us.

When we don’t feel inspired, the first question we must always ask is what are we *doing* to feel inspired? What concrete steps are we taking? Are we extending and giving of ourselves, through the mitzvot which were designed to make us feel connected? And if we are, are we performing those mitzvot with passion and excitement or are we just going through the motions?

We all know how important it is to feel a connection to Israel. But what are we *doing* to feel that connection? Are we traveling there often enough to feel a connection? Are we

speaking up when Israel is maligned in the press? If we want to feel for Israel, we must do for Israel.

The same goes for Shabbat. On Rosh Hashanah I spoke of the importance of once a week disconnecting from technology so we can connect with something greater, but what actions can we take to make our Friday nights and Saturdays a time of reflection and spiritual growth? Perhaps it's by lighting Shabbat candles or participating in Shabbat meals. And if that's already a given, maybe this is the year we start joining for Shabbat services on a regular or semi-regular basis, becoming more active in our community? I was very impressed with a young woman who came to MJE last week on Rosh Hoshana for the first time. She came back this past Saturday morning for Shabbat services because she said she wants some Shabbat in her life, and she's never previously been active in any community. So, she decided to show more. Last year someone else who had been attending this Yom Kippur service every year for 4 years, but never came to anything else, started coming regularly and joined MJE's year-long Fellowships Learning program.

We built this community with individuals who previously only prayed with us once or twice a year, but then started coming every Shabbat, some even meet me to pray on a weekday. Whichever place you find yourself in, consider taking yourself to the next rung up. If you're a High Holidayer, join us on Shabbat, if you already come every Shabbos, consider praying a little each morning. There's no better way to start your day.

Like any relationship, the one we have with Hashem and with our community, requires doing and giving. This is precisely why mitzvot can and should at times, feel challenging. Because we only appreciate what we have earned through our own exertion. *L'fum tzara agra*, our Sages teach, "according to the exertion is the reward". No pain, no gain. It's like the gym, to feel connected, with Hashem and with our fellow human being, we need to *shvitz* at it a little –we need to give of ourselves. But it's the kind of giving that gets us out of bed in the morning and fills the rest of our day with greater meaning and purpose. We were born to give and so today on Yom Kippur let's think of the work and the giving we can do in the coming year, and may that new commitment serve as a merit for a new year of sweetness, good health and success.