



Kol Nidre D'rash – Oct. 12, 2024

By Marsha Slotnick

THE VERY DAUNTING TASK OF DELIVERING THIS YEAR'S KOL NIDREI DRASH WAS INSPIRED BY THE POWERFUL WORDS OF THE YOM KIPPUR VIDDUI OR CONFESSIONAL, BY THE HIGHLY ACCLAIMED BOOK WRITTEN BY RABBI JONATHAN SACKS ENTITLED MORALITY, AND BY MY OWN PERSONAL NEED TO FINALLY WRITE AN ETHICAL WILL.

WE HAVE JUST RECITED THE KOL NIDREI PRAYER WHICH ABSOLVES US FROM THE UNFULFILLED VOWS WE MADE TO GOD DURING THIS PAST YEAR.

HOPEFULLY WE HAVE ALREADY RECENTLY ASKED FORGIVENESS FROM INDIVIDUAL FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES FOR ANY WRONGDOINGS. IF NOT, THE VIDDUI OFFERS US THE OPPORTUNITY TO REPENT AS A CONGREGATION AND REALIZE HOW WE CAN IMPROVE OUR LIVES AND BECOME BETTER HUMAN BEINGS. IN HIS COMPREHENSIVE ARTICLE ENTITLED "UNDERSTANDING VIDDUI," RABBI ELIE KAUNFER, NOTES THAT RECITING THE VIDDUI IS ONE OF THE CORE REQUIREMENTS OF YOM KIPPUR. IT IS CITED IN THE ANCIENT RABBINIC WORK KNOWN AS THE TOSEFTA, AND IS COMPRISED OF TWO ALPHABETICAL ACROSTICS, THE ASHAMNU SERIES AND THE AL CHET SERIES, EACH OF WHICH IS RECITED 5 TIMES DURING YOM KIPPUR.

RABBI KAUNFER FURTHER NOTES THAT THE IDEA OF CONFESSING A SIN DERIVES FROM THE BOOK OF NUMBERS, (CHAPTER 5) WHICH SAYS THAT PEOPLE WHO SIN TOWARD ONE ANOTHER AND REALIZE THEIR OWN GUILT, SHOULD CONFESS THE WRONG THAT WAS DONE. FURTHERMORE, TO MAKE OUR ATONEMENT COMPLETE, WE MUST INCLUDE THE PHRASE "אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ חַטָּאִים" IN TRUTH WE HAVE SINNED." THIS PHRASE MIRRORS THE ONLY ADMISSION OF GUILT IN THE

TORAH. IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS (42:21) THESE WORDS WERE RECITED BY JOSEPH'S BROTHERS ADMITTING THAT THEY WERE GUILTY OF LOOKING ON AT IS ANGUISH AND PAYING NO ATTENTION TO IT, EVEN THOUGH HE PLEADED FOR HELP.

THERE ARE MANY CATEGORIES OF SINS IN THE VIDDUI, BUT I WOULD LIKE TO HIGHLIGHT THE CATEGORY WHICH APPEARS MOST FREQUENTLY IN BOTH THE "AL CHET" AND "ASHAMNU" SERIES. THIS CATEGORY CAN BE DESCRIBED AS SINS RELATING TO OUR MISUSE OF WORDS AND HOW OUR WORDS CAN HURT OTHERS, EITHER PURPOSELY OR IN ERROR. I ALSO CHOSE THIS CATEGORY BECAUSE IT IS THE ONE IN WHICH I FEEL I NEED THE MOST IMPROVEMENT. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, JUST ASK MY CHILDREN! I ALSO FEEL THAT THE LIST OF SINS SHOULD PERHAPS BE REVISED TO INCLUDE "FOR THE SIN OF GIVING UNREQUESTED ADVICE TO FAMILY MEMBERS. "

4 OF THE 24 SINS LISTED IN THE ASHAMNU SERIES ARE:

(דיברנו דפי)	WE HAVE SPOKEN SLANDER
(יעצנו רע)	WE HAVE GIVEN EVIL OR HARMFUL ADVICE
(כזבנו)	WE HAVE DECEIVED
(לצנו)	WE HAVE SCORNEDED OR MOCKED

IN THE "AL CHET" SERIES, AT LEAST 10 OF THE 44 SINS RELATE TO HARMFUL SPEECH. MANY INCLUDE THE WORD פה OR MOUTH OR שפתיים LIPS

FOR THE SINS WE HAVE COMMITTED AGAINST YOU

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך

בדבור פה	IN SPEECH
בטמאת שפתיים	WITH IMPURE LIPS
בטפשות פה	WITH FOOLISH SPEECH
בשיח שפתותינו	WITH IDLE CHATTER OF OUR LIPS

בבטוי שפתיים

BY AN UTTERANCE OF OUR LIPS

ברכילות

BY GOSSIP

THIS INSISTANCE ON SPEECH BEING PURE AND POSITIVE ACTUALLY DERIVES FROM PSALM 34 (14) WHICH TELLS US:

נצר לשונך מרע

GUARD YOUR TONGUE FROM EVIL,

ושפתיך מדבר מרמה

YOUR LIPS FROM DECEITFUL SPEECH.

THESE WORDS ARE ALSO VERY FAMILIAR TO US BECAUSE THEY APPEAR AT THE CONCLUSION OF EVERY AMIDAH. IN THE AMIDAH, HOWEVER, THE VOICE IS CHANGED FROM “GUARD YOUR TONGUE FROM EVIL AND YOUR LIPS FROM DECEITFUL SPEECH” TO “GUARD MY TONGUE FROM EVIL AND MY LIPS FROM DECEITFUL SPEECH,” ACKNOWLEDGING THAT WE ARE COMMITTING OURSELVES TO FULFILLING GOD’S DIRECTIVE.

REALIZING THROUGH THE VIDDUI THE IMPORTANCE OF THOUGHTFUL COMMUNICATION LEADS US TO POSE THE QUESTION: HOW CAN WE TURN THE SINS FOR WHICH WE ARE ATONING INTO POSITIVE BEHAVIOR? IN THE BOOK MORALITY RABBI SACKS OFFERS SOME CONCRETE ANSWERS.

AS BACKGROUND TO EFFECTING PERSONAL CHANGE, HE NOTES THAT SOCIETIES OVER TIME HAVE MORPHED FROM BEING CONCERNED WITH “WE” AND STRESSING COOPERATION AND CONCERN FOR OTHERS INTO THOSE WHICH DWELL ON “I” FOCUSING ONLY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL. WORDS LIKE RESPECT, DUTY, AND CONSCIENCE HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH INCREASED REFERENCES TO “RIGHTS.” RABBI SACKS POSITS THAT TO HELP US RETURN TO A MORE CARING SOCIETY, WE MUST FIRST FIND WAYS TO DEVELOP TRUST, EMPATHY, AND COMPASSION IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

ONE PATHWAY TO BEGINNING THIS PROCESS IS TO SPEAK AND LISTEN TO OTHERS FACE-TO-FACE. ONLY THROUGH FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION CAN WE FULLY UNDERSTAND THE ESSENCE OF THE OTHER. EYE TO EYE CONTACT AND PERHAPS A NICE SMILE SHOULD REPLACE TEXTING AND SOCIAL MEDIA ALLOWING US TO RECOGNIZE THAT FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS HAVE VALUES OF THEIR OWN THAT MIGHT BE DIFFERENT FROM OURS. IN THIS CONTEXT RABBI

SACKS TALKS ABOUT HIS FLIGHT TO PRIME MINISTER YITZHAK RABIN'S FUNERAL ON THE ROYAL JET ALONG WITH THE BRITISH PRIME MINISTER, THE BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY AND THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION. THIS GROUP HAD NEVER BEFORE SAT ALONE TOGETHER TO TALK CANDIDLY AND IN TRUE FRIENDSHIP ABOUT THE BIGGEST ISSUES OF THE DAY. THIS FACE-TO-FACE DIALOGUE ALLOWED THEM TO ESTABLISH A HIGHER DEGREE OF RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER WHICH PROVED BENEFICIAL TO FUTURE AFFAIRS OF STATE.

RABBI SACKS DESCRIBES ANOTHER INSTANCE IN WHICH LIVES WERE CHANGED FOR THE BETTER WHEN A WHOLE TOWN CHOSE KINDNESS AND CARING ABOVE THEIR OWN NEEDS. ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, FOLLOWING THE TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER AND THE CLOSING OF AIR SPACE IN THE UNITED STATES, 38 PLANES CARRYING 7,000 PASSENGERS LANDED IN THE REMOTE TOWN OF GANDER, ON THE ISLAND OF NEWFOUNDLAND. WHILE THIS DISRUPTION MIGHT HAVE CAUSED CHAOS, THE OPPOSITE PROVED TRUE. TOWNSPEOPLE WELCOMED THE STRANGERS INTO THEIR HOMES AND PROVIDED FOOD AND SHELTER FOR AN ENTIRE WEEK, SUPPORTING THEM IN EVERY WAY POSSIBLE AND MAKING SURE THEY HAD REGULAR CONTACT WITH THEIR FAMILIES AT HOME. THEY EVEN CELEBRATED THE BIRTHDAYS OF THEIR GUESTS AND PROVIDED TOYS FOR THE CHILDREN. THE ONLY REWARD FOR THE RESIDENTS OF GANDER WHO TURNED THEIR LIVES UPSIDE DOWN DURING THAT WEEK WAS THAT THEY WERE ABLE TO HELP OTHERS IN NEED.

RABBI SACKS' INTERVIEW WITH PHILANTHROPIST MELINDA GATES SUMS UP HIS NOTION OF HOW TO BECOME A BETTER HUMAN BEING. HE ASKED MELINDA HOW SHE WOULD ADVISE TEENAGERS ABOUT WHAT THEY SHOULD STAND FOR IN LIFE. SHE REPLIED THAT THE THING THAT THEY ARE GOING TO FEEL BEST ABOUT IS BEING LOVED BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND BY DOING SOMETHING TO CHANGE THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER. "WE CHANGE THE WORLD," SHE SAID, "ONE ACT OF KINDNESS AT A TIME. AND WHEN WE CHANGE THE WORLD SOMETIMES IT CHANGES US."

IN OUR OWN COMMUNITY WE CAN FIND EXAMPLES OF ROLE MODELS WHO VALIDATE RABBI SACKS' GOAL OF ACHIEVING A KINDER WORLD. AN ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE BOSTON GLOBE ON JUNE 14TH AFTER THE CELTICS WON THE CHAMPIONSHIP. IT WAS ABOUT CELTIC JRUE HOLIDAY, ONE OF THE BASKETBALL'S TOP DEFENDERS. IT WAS SUBTITLED "GUIDED BY HIS

SPIRITUALITY, JRUE HOLIDAY LIVES A LIFE OF GENEROSITY AND CONCERN, TREATING OTHERS BETTER THAN HIMSELF.” IN HIS OWN WORDS JRUE SAYS, “I’M A BASKETBALL PLAYER, BUT THAT’S NOT ALL I DO. THERE’S A LOT OF THINGS I CAN FIND LOVE IN AND THAT’S WHAT I’VE TRIED TO DO. IT JUST SEEMS LIKE MY LIFE HAS BEEN SO MUCH MORE FULFILLED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S SUCCESS BECAUSE I GET TO JOIN THAT JOURNEY, I GET TO SHARE IT WITH SOMEBODY.” RABBI SACKS WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE BEEN PROUD OF BOSTON’S JRUE HOLIDAY!

SINCE THE WASHINGTON POST’S REVIEW OF THE BOOK MORALITY DESCRIBED IT AS RABBI SACK’S BRILLIANT “ETHICAL WILL,” I FEEL COMFORTABLE IN USING ITS TEACHINGS AS A MODEL FOR MY OWN. I FIRST LEARNED ABOUT THE JEWISH TRADITION OF WRITING SUCH A DOCUMENT NEARLY 35 YEARS AGO FROM RABBI SAMUEL CHIEL ז"ל DURING HIS ROSH HASHANAH SERMON. ALTHOUGH I HAD A FOLDER IN MY DESK DRAWER ALL THESE YEARS ENTITLED ETHICAL WILLS WITH MANY WONDERFUL IDEAS IN IT, I WAS NOT PREPARED TO UNDERTAKE THE PROJECT UNTIL RECENTLY CELEBRATING A MILESTONE BIRTHDAY.

AN ETHICAL CAN BE CHARACTERIZED AS A KIND OF WINDOW INTO OUR SOUL AND A WAY TO PASS ON TO OUR LOVED ONES OUR SPIRITUAL VALUES. IT’S AN ANCIENT JEWISH CUSTOM DATING BACK TO MOSES WHO INSTRUCTED THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IN DEUTORONOMY וּבְחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים CHOOSE LIFE AND TO JACOB WHO EXPRESSED HIS VALUES BY ADDRESSING EACH CHILD PERSONALLY AT THE END OF HIS LIFE. AN ETHICAL WILL OFTEN BEGINS WITH INSTRUCTING READERS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PERPETUATING JUDAISM AND JEWISH TRADITIONS. IT USUALLY INCLUDES THE DIRECTIVE TO FAMILY MEMBERS TO TAKE CARE OF ONE ANOTHER, TO PRESERVE שְׁלוֹם בֵּית PEACE IN THE HOUSEHOLD, AND TO GIVE EACH OTHER STRENGTH AND COMFORT IN DIFFICULT TIMES. IN THE LIST OF THE FAVORITE TEACHINGS OF RABBI ARNOLD GOODMAN ז"ל IS HIS BELIEF THAT “IF YOU HAVE MADE IT WITH YOUR FAMILY, YOU HAVE MADE IT IN LIFE.” AND THE GREAT YIDDISH HUMORIST SHALOM ALEICHEM ASKED HIS FAMILY IN HIS ETHICAL WILL TO GET TOGETHER ONCE A YEAR ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH AND READ HIS STORIES, PREFERABLY THE FUNNY ONES! THE FAMILY DOES INDEED GET TOGETHER ANNUALLY TO READ HIS STORIES AND HIS ETHICAL WILL.

THOUGH NOT YET COMPLETED, MY “ETHICAL WILL” WILL INCLUDE FAVORITE SLOTNICK FAMILY SAYINGS LIKE “YOU VOTE WITH YOUR FEET” AND “TAKE YOUR

B+ AND RUN" AND ON LESSONS LEARNED FROM JEWISH LITURGY AND TEXTS. THEY WILL INCLUDE SAYINGS FROM פרקי אבות ETHICS OF OUR ANCESTORS, SUCH AS:
איזה הוא עשיר, השמח בחלקו

WHO IS WEALTHY? WEALTHY PEOPLE ARE THOSE WHO ARE CONTENT WITH THEIR LOT IN LIFE AND

הווה מקבל כל אדם בשבר פנים יפות

BE SURE TO ENCOUNTER ALL PEOPLE CHEERFULLY, WHICH FOR ME MEANS WITH A SMILE! OTHER POINTS WILL INCLUDE:

LOOK FOR THE BEST IN OTHERS AND MAKE IT A REGULAR HABIT TO SAY TO THEM "YOU DID A GOOD JOB".

THE WORDS "I'M SORRY" SHOULD NOT BE RESERVED FOR YOM KIPPUR. THEY WILL BE WELL-RECEIVED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

HAVE COMPASSION AND NEVER STAND BY IDLY WHEN SOMEONE NEEDS YOUR HELP. VALUE EMPATHY AND TRY TO FEEL OTHER PEOPLE'S JOYS AND PAINS. BE KIND TO THOSE WHO CAN'T DO ANYTHING FOR YOU. AND BE SURE TO SAY "I LOVE YOU" OFTEN TO THOSE WHO DESERVE IT.

WITH REGARD TO THAT MILESTONE BIRTHDAY I JUST CELEBRATED, MY ENGLISH BIRTHDAY WAS ON SEPTEMBER 27TH BUT MY HEBREW BIRTHDAY IS ACTUALLY ON THE ELEVENTH OF TISHREI WHICH BEGINS AT SUNDOWN TOMORROW NIGHT. I WAS BORN AT 8:30 PM AFTER THE FAST, IN BOSTON, 80 YEARS AGO!

IT IS NOW TIME TO PASS ON MY VALUES TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS, AND I INVITE YOU TO DO THE SAME WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR YOU. TO CONCLUDE, PLEASE SING OR HUM ALONG WITH ME THE SONG WHICH INCORPORATES THE VERSE WE DISCUSSED FROM PSALM 34:

"GUARD YOUR TONGUE FROM EVIL, YOUR LIPS FROM DECEIPTFUL SPEECH"

נצר לשונך מרע ושפתיך מדבר מרמה

AND THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT APPEARS. THE VERSES TEACH US THAT THE PERSON WHO IS EAGER FOR LIFE AND FOR GOOD FORTUNE WILL BE THE ONE WHO RESISTS SPEAKING AND DOING EVIL AND WILL PURSUE PEACE.

מי האיש החפץ חיים אוהב ימים לראות טוב.

נצר לשונך מרע ושפתיך מדבר מרמה.

סור מרע ועשה טוב.

בקש שלום ורדפהו.