

Reframing Yom Kippur: Less Oy, More Joy

In New York City there is a fellow by the name of Christopher Emdin. He is a Professor of Science Education at my alma mater, Teachers College. When his son Malcolm was born, the doctor in the delivery room said, “Do you hear his first cry?” Emdin’s response was, ‘No, I hear his first note.’ Because for me, he’s telling the ancestors, ‘I am here.’ And when you frame this chorus that’s in tune with the cosmos as only a cry...you misunderstand the whole experience.”

In a similar vein, I think we misunderstand the Yom Kippur experience. Many of us experience Yom Kippur as the burdened cry of enduring this 25 hour marathon, when it could be a chorus of beautiful notes.

Two quick examples how we frame Yom Kippur as an experience of burdened endurance. For most of us, there is some degree of ‘fasting anxiety.’ We don’t really like it. We fear the caffeine-withdrawal headache. We want to do *teshuvah*.... and we also want a bagel.

And, our religious traditions, as reflected in the *mahzor*, center this day on transgressions aplenty. We have not one but two lists of transgressions. We recite the *Al Chet* list and the *Ashamnu* list over and over and over.

What if we could reframe our experience to focus less on the hunger pangs and counting the hours till break-fast and instead celebrate the hours of positive change unfolding in our hearts and souls? In short, we need to focus less on the cry of transgression and more on the notes that sing the beautiful song of personal growth. This morning my message is, Yom Kippur: less oy, more joy.

Our challenge is to find an answer to this question: How can we have an inspired Yom Kippur? A blinding white light of a Yom Kippur? One which transcends these sacred hours in this sacred space. A Yom Kippur of not merely routinized recitation of the many ways humans are flawed; rather, a Yom Kippur of inspiration and motivation that catapults us forward, better than before. Yom Kippur should fire us up to go back out

there leaning into a better version of ourselves and taking pride in our growth.

If you, like me, get lulled into reciting the lists. If you, like me, struggle with the content of those lists after the third, fourth, fifth recitation. If after Yom Kippur you, like me, sometimes experience a post-Yom Kippur rapid return to the ways of the past; I offer us three suggestions for breaking out of this malaise; a pathway to reframing the rest of today. I'll share with you three steps, Yom Kippur homework as we continue today's journey to bettering our souls.

It begins by asking a different question. The focus in *Al Chet* and *Ashamnu* is backwards looking. How was I flawed this year? What behaviors were problematic? And while there certainly is value to a backwards-looking self-assessment, the better question is, Who are you becoming? Who is the 'You' you want to be? If we're going to spend 25 hours in sacred reflection on our personal behavior; if we're going to commit to an uncomfortable fast meant to get our attention; shouldn't we have a clear sense of where we're heading? This day, this hopefully transformative experience, has to be more than multiple repetitions of transgressions and counting the hours to break fast. So I suggest that you craft a strategic plan for your soul. Have a clear understanding of who you want to be. Define how you want to evolve into something different. Try this homework exercise as the day progresses. Everytime we get to the *Ashamnu* or *Al Chet*, ask yourself, 'Who do I want to become and how will I move closer to that?' The Oy of YK focuses on who we've been. The joy of YK emphasizes who we want to become and who we intend to become.

That brings us to step two. Something I call the spiritual hokey-pokey. You put your whole self in, you put your whole self out....NO! You put your whole self in and that's how you turn yourself about. The spiritual hokey pokey calls us to bring intentional commitment to becoming a better version of ourselves. It calls on us to take seriously the crafting of a strategic plan for who we want to become. This whole day, this entire experience has to be rooted in our intentionality to evolve. In other words, the key to reframing Yom Kippur is to decide upfront that we want to become something better.

Rabbi Neil Gilman, of blessed memory, who was a professor of philosophy at JTS, once told this story. When his daughter was a teenager, one *Erev Shabbat* he said to her, 'Shabbat starts soon, company will be here, I'll give you \$5 if you vacuum the living room and dining room.' A few minutes later he observed her lazily going through the motions. He said, "How about vacuuming with a little *kavannah*, a little intentionality?" To which she responded, "Abba, *kavvanah*/intentionality costs extra."

My friends, *kavanah*/intentionality does cost extra. There is a price to be paid for intentionally embracing Yom Kippur and committing to becoming a better version of ourselves. It costs us effort and energy and emotional toil. But you know what? Complacency also has a cost. It renders us last year's model, a bit outdated, and missing some new features. Your soul is precious. It is worth paying the price for the latest upgrade. I suggest we bring intentional commitment to our Yom Kippur experience. Being mindful and purposeful is the antidote to being lulled into *Al Chet* recitation fatigue. So the second step to reframing our Yom Kippur experience is to commit to the journey, to be intentional. Put your whole self in; that's how you turn yourself about.

And that brings us to the final element I offer you as Yom Kippur homework for the remaining hours of today. We can learn a wonderful lesson from the Yom Kippur ritual of the Kohen Gadol in the days of the Temple. On Yom Kippur the High Priest had a once-a-year meeting with the Divine, inside the holiest space in the Temple: the *Kodesh Kodashim*. This ritual is the central drama of our Musaf service this morning. This encounter with God was a big deal. This one person on this one day entered the Inner Tabernacle Chamber and had as close an encounter with God as anyone not named Moses was ever allowed. For our Israelite ancestors, this encounter with the Divine was considered dangerous, high risk and the High Priest worried that if he failed to perform the rituals flawlessly, he might be struck down. And so, a wonderful tradition developed. When he emerged successful in his tasks, it was his custom to throw a party the next day in celebration. The Kohen Gadol was in touch with the path he just traveled successfully and he celebrated that success.

We learn from the Kohen Gadol about gratitude, joy, and celebration. When you journey through something difficult, appreciate it when you get to the other side. When you have an experience that is unsettling and you successfully traverse it, celebrate the success.

Our Yom Kippur journey to becoming something better is a difficult one. Identifying who we want to become and how we'll get there is hard work, and for some it might even be scary work. We should celebrate at the end of Yom Kippur. Not because we made it through a 25 hour fast; because we took ourselves seriously, we did the hard work, we crafted a vision of Version 2.0 from who we were yesterday. Celebrate, glorify, hold gratitude, be proud of who you committed to become. Be joyful that you had this day, that you did the work, and that you are on your way to being who you want to be.

Three steps, three suggestions for the rest of the day.

Ask a different question. Who am I becoming? Who is the 'Me' I want to be?

Do the spiritual hokey-pokey. Put yourself into the Yom Kippur transformation with *kavvanah/intentionality*.

And feel the joy. Appreciate and celebrate the soul work you are doing.

My wish for you is this. Though the stomach may cry from hunger, I hope your soul will sing with joy as it finds its new voice.