

High Holiday Sermons

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Yom Kippur

I have tried through this series of talks this year to accomplish two related goals. First, I've tried to establish the fact that religious life gives us access to certain truths, certain ideas, which have a share in truth despite the fact that their share in truth is not the same share held by strict reason or science. I have tried to suggest that one of the reasons we are no longer aware of this fact is that reason itself, since the enlightenment, has become the only type of truth that we accept as valid and that following the canons of reason we have been led to read sacred scripture, which is the seedbed of religious truth, in a literal way. Once we read scripture literally we judge it by the standards of either history or journalism and since it lacks the appropriate credibility to meet these standards we consign it to the realm of fiction. And fiction is anything but true. In pursuit of these two goals I have specifically illustrated the share of truth inherent in the ideas of creation, revelation and sin. This morning we come to the final leg of this journey and the most difficult, we come to the idea of redemption and its sister idea, that of the world to come.

That the idea of redemption is fundamental to Jewish thought is unarguable. Redemption is a key biblical concept but scholars' debate whether the idea of either the world to come or resurrection of the dead or the messiah is present in biblical texts per se. Its centrality to rabbinic Judaism is a given. At the same time despite the centrality of the notion of the conquest of death to rabbinic thought, the form this conquest takes is expressed by a number of different metaphors, not entirely consistent with one another. Nor does Judaism spend a great deal of time arguing over the details, seeing as how no one has ever come back from the dead to describe the experience. Rather, in this arena too, patience is a central virtue. We will all find out sooner than we'd like. So our discussion this morning will not be about what the menu in the world to come might be or about whether if there is a resurrection we will come back with our original liver, heart, teeth or wife. Such debates precisely emerge out of the literalist standpoint and debase the very pursuit of that share of the truth of human being redemption signifies. This will be more than enough for us to grapple with.

As with the construction of any theory about what is true, we begin with those facts that we have established. We have established that we are created, meaning that we are not responsible for our own creation but rather are indebted and grateful to another. We have established that by way of revelation we come into consciousness with a past that we have not lived but is none the less ours and shapes us. And we have established that the primary impediment to redemption is sin and that sin is a fundamental experience of impatience: we want what we want when we want it. It is Infinite Selfishness. On the basis of these already determined principles I submit that we can begin to speak intelligently about the share of truth that is expressed by the non-literalist reading of the Jewish narratives of redemption. Since redemption requires the overcoming of sin, then it must reflect a world in which sin has been overcome. A world in which instead of Infinite

selfishness we obtain to infinite selflessness. A world, if you will, in which the ego is no longer required for the material pursuits that it serves and can allow itself to be permanently de-centered, a world in which infinite patience is possible. Since revelation teaches us that we have a past that we didn't experience, redemption suggests that we have a future that we will not experience, a future that will remain forever out ahead of us as the field upon which our selfless selves will be able to serve another infinitely. And whereas creation taught us that we are not responsible for our own coming into being, redemption teaches us that we are hyper-responsible for this future that stretches infinitely before us. We are responsible and nothing but responsible. Anything less than this level of responsibility would return us to the world of sin, whereas via redemption we have entered another world, the world to come, the world not yet attained, the future and the possibility of an infinite future. It is at this level of hyper-responsibility that the non-literalist impact of the idea of the world-to-come takes its profound shape. It is not a time or a place that occurs after death, but is rather an always potential dimension of life itself. A dimension that, based on our actions, we can even experience at moments during this lifetime. We live, as it were, between the tension of this world and the world to come, momentarily achieving the future we hope for and then falling away again as a result of the inevitability of our sins. We repent, we start again, and the future opens to us with renewed possibility. Theoretically, if we could live at this level of hyper-responsibility entirely, then the world would indeed be transformed, history, time as we know it would be transformed, and the future would become present. But such a world is not permitted to human beings...it is always in our future; it is never this world, but always the world to come.

But you protest: what role, after all, in all of this for death? Where does my individual death fit into this picture? What can I expect after I die? What meaning does the world to come have in this regard? With these questions we have come to the end of our journey. I have tried to explore the ways in which non-literalist readings of scripture reveals its share of truth as unequivocally as any scientific proof reveals its share of unequivocal truth in its domain. But facing death this application of thought, even if it is not strictly speaking rational it is still thought, fails. When thought fails the scientist either assumes that he or she must only think harder and better and the truth will be revealed, or that all the truth that is to be discovered has been discovered. Religious thought responds differently to the end of thought. Words themselves are transformed, language adopts its different role: no longer interested in communication per se, not even communication between human beings and the divine. Language is transformed into prayer and liturgy replaces thought at the edge of the possible. Faith in its original and uniquely Jewish expression emerges. Not blind faith in the impossible, but supreme faithfulness to our experience. We know we are not responsible for our creation and we know that we have a past that shapes us despite our not having experienced it. So our liturgy serves to remind us that in that past we have already experienced the fact of not being abandoned to oblivion and we are faithful to that experience of redemption. Our first redemption is ours despite our not having experienced it, so we are faithful to the expectation of a redemption that we have not yet experienced. The key to understanding the Jewish notion of Redemption lies in the liturgy wherein every day we praise God for our redemption from Egypt at the Red Sea. Every day we re-experience the physical sensations of that

redemption through song. Every day we experience the fact that we are already redeemed, that redemption is part of our past and that it is therefore surely part of our future whatever form it might take. Prayer, regular daily prayer, is the pre-cursor of redemption, the seed-bed of redemption. We can only be faithful to the memory and the future memory of redemption, but the power to do so is never far from our hands and from our lips.

Our faith in the future is not blind faith. It is faith built on our experiences of our creaturliness and of our pre-existing past as well as on our struggle with the difficulties inherent in living for the future, our sinfulness. But in the end conventional words fail us in trying to express such insights and so we turn to liturgy, a special task of language, to help us. Rather than struggle to express the inexpressible any more, I propose that we model this turn to liturgy by looking together at the *Yizkor* liturgy for this day and what it teaches us about that which only liturgy can teach us.

Yizkor Elohim, ‘Let God remember.’ With these words we begin each of the individual paragraphs that comprise the heart of the *Yizkor* service. Already we have expressed liturgically more than we could express in any other language. We attribute to that which is beyond any possibility of ours to know, the characteristic of memory. We assert that it is not only we who are shaped by a past that we can not have experienced, but it is God also who is shaped by each of our individual lives that we lived privately, that God did not live. Thus God’s immortality is forged by our mortality. Without our lives God would have nothing to remember and with our deaths’ God is granted a future by virtue of our past.

Nishmat emi, avi, bni etc. ‘the souls of my mother, my father, my child, etc.’ Our prayer continues to express that which we could not otherwise express. My mother, not just any mother, my father, not just any father, my child, not just any child, each one is a soul. A soul is not something we tend to dwell on these days, but it is a liturgical necessity for *Yizkor* because it represents the realization that we are fundamentally not defined by our material make-up. That there is a part of us that from experience we know exists apart from materiality and therefore escapes the demands of ego. It is that part, whether small or large, of the people who we are remembering, where we remember their overcoming their egos, when they served us or served others. It is that service, in turn, which is what we call their soul, and it is their soul, again in turn, which we now offer as the elements forming God’s immortal memory. God’s immortality is not made up of all of our loved one’s lives, but the selfless aspects of their lives.

She-halach l’olamo/a, ‘he or she has gone to his or her world.’ With these words we return to creation. These words recognize that it is not only the immortality of God that is built on the goodness of human lives, but that this goodness is itself the source of the human lives that come after it. We spoke about creation signifying the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation. Now we have named the responsible party, as it were: the selfless acts of those who’ve come before us gathered together in the immortality of God. Language itself, even the language of prayer strains at the radical

nature of this insight, but it does not break. It refuses to be cowed by the limits of reason or the canards of literalness.

Hineni noder zedaka b-ad hazkarat nismato/ ‘Here I am. I pledge to give *tzedaka* on behalf of their soul’s inclusion in memory.’ This statement is the centerpiece of our prayer. We take a stand, using the same language of Abraham and Moses when they were called to Divine service, we announce our willingness to serve as the opening between immortality and mortality by accepting responsibility for others, for the poor, the homeless, and the orphan; or by contributing to the maintenance of the central institutions of religious life, the synagogue for instance. When we say *hineni* we form a link between the gift of our creation and the immortal. When we learn to emulate selflessness, we become creators in our turn, on our way to our own immortality. We become the generators of worlds, worlds to come, but not for us; for others. Therein lies the profound paradox of the world to come. If we think it is about us, for us, then it does not exist. Only when we can help to provide it for others does its existence become real.

Ana, ‘we beseech.’ Confronted by these nearly impossible truths we can only turn in prayer, beseeching God that *t’hi nafsho/a zroro/a b’zror hahayyim*, ‘his/her breath will be bound to the breath of life.’ That is, that the gift of creation that he/she bestowed by virtue of whatever small part of themselves acted selflessly in the world continue to live in and through that creation and in and through God – *ut’hi minuchato/a kavod*, ‘and they rest in glory.’ That is, their rest is only the Glory of God’s continuing creation of the world. We do die. But our deaths have ultimate meaning when the goodness we bring with us from life becomes part of the memory of God and those whom we leave in the world accept their responsibility serve the past we left them and the future we will pave for them. Beyond that, even words of liturgy cannot go.

Knowing now how much rests upon our prayer and how much of what is inexpressible of truth it contains. Let us rise together for the *Yizkor* service.