

Kol Nidre 2010

It's my pleasure to welcome you to JTS.

This welcome is heartfelt. Whether this is your first visit to JTS, or you are a regular in the building, I hope you will feel welcome this evening and come back many times in the course of the year.

Whether this is your first observance of Kol Nidre, or your seventieth, I hope you find that the service and the liturgy embrace you.

Whether you are Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, secular, or a Jew who prefers to live without adjectives, or a member of another faith or ethnicity or of many such communities or none at all—you are most welcome here.

Finally—I know that some people in the room have doubts on this score, given the age-old liturgy to which we give ourselves over on this day—let me say explicitly that the liturgy is designed to welcome you, and JTS does too, whether you are here to talk to God, or to listen to your own conscience, or to put yourself in a Jewish time and space on this holy day, or because you just want to stand with friends and family who are here for any of those reasons. Whatever your point of origin at Kol Nidre, I hope that your Yom Kippur with us expands your reach and helps you advance on the journey to *teshuvah*.

I say these things out of far more than politeness. A certain magic occurs in congregations such as this one if we are at our best on Yom Kippur. You will find—and may have found already, half an hour into Kol Nidre—that the quality of the personal work of *teshuvah* that each of us performs here depends in part on the quality of the *tefillah* we achieve together.

The prayers of individuals soar on energy emitted by the entire community of “pray-ers.” The music of Yom Kippur moves us—thanks not only to the spirit poured into it by the *sheliah tzibbur* up here on the bimah, but as a result of the thought and emotion poured into those melodies by everyone sitting in every row of the auditorium. This includes those who do not know the words and cannot sing the notes correctly but infuse words, music and silence with *kavanah*, sincere intention. We've all heard Hasidic stories to this effect. They capture an important truth.

The welcome I have just extended points directly to the theme of my remarks this evening. I want to reflect on two ways in which the liturgy of this day, focusing a

major emphasis of Judaism as a whole, tries to *move us toward a new sort of self and a new kind of community*.

I don't just mean a self who is ethically better, i.e., composed of more good and less bad, and a community that cares more about pursuit of principle and less about satisfaction of collective appetite, though these are of course part of the message of Yom Kippur.

I am speaking about a *different sort of self* than is generally prized in our culture, promoted by our politicians and our economy, and generally taken for granted by modern individuals; a self *less* bent on guarding its own autonomy and options, *less* convinced of its own fundamental isolation, and *more* aware of the web of connection and responsibility that binds us at every level to other selves; in short, a self better at affirming *us* than at shouting *me*—and so more open to the message of Yom Kippur

I am speaking too about a *different sort of community* than those taken for granted and promoted by most ethnic and religious groups, including some representatives of Judaism—a communal self, as we might call it, that is *less* convinced of its own autonomy and isolation, *less* concerned with demonstrating its own rightness and superiority, and *more* aware of its connection at every level to other communities; in short, a communal self better at affirming an *us* inclusive of other communities than at shouting an exclusivist *we*—and so more open to the message of Yom Kippur.

To explain what I mean, and why my point is the opposite of abstract, I want to step away from the *mahzor* for a few moments and turn to a classic set of works and ideas that were put forward around the turn of the twentieth century by the great French sociologist and anthropologist, son and grandson of leading rabbis, Emile Durkheim. The theme of his scholarship, articulated in many works and at the core of his masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, was that a new kind of “solidarity” was needed for an age of greater individualism. The lack of that solidarity was proving destructive to individuals and societies alike. Its development, Durkheim believed, would not only *improve* Europe but *save* its societies and the individuals who composed them from self-destruction.

I want to be clear in this brief account of Durkheim that he did not want to see a return to medieval hierarchies and to life-patterns determined by one's class, gender, or religion. No Jew in his or her right mind, he would have said (and I agree), would want to see a return to the conditions of ghetto or shtetl. Durkheim fully embraced the new reality of choice, openness, free inquiry, and science. He was very much a man of the university and all it stood for. His politics were

progressive. The old order of things—the *ancien régime*—held no attraction for him.

But as he looked around, Durkheim saw individuals uprooted from all moorings and societies suffering from social chaos, and he believed that the new science he was practicing and pioneering—sociology—held important lessons that his readers needed to heed—most importantly, that they erred in seeing themselves as separate units that entered into limited contacts with others, on the popular Enlightenment model. Rather—and I believe he learned this in part from the liturgy that we are observing this evening—society lives and moves inside each of us. We are inconceivable without it. Regarding the self as apart from society, except for limited voluntary engagement, is nothing less than an optical illusion—a kind of blindness that is fatal to self and society alike. Durkheim believed that better vision could save individuals and communities from disaster. He in effect said to his readers, in the voice of the prophet Ezekiel, “For why should ye die, o house of Europe. Turn yourselves, and live.”

The *mahzor* has the very same objective.

Every single word in the haunting prayer we call Kol Nidre speaks of selves who are the opposite of alone or isolated or autonomous. We are tied to one another by vows, renunciations, oaths, obligations, and promises. The liturgy is concerned that some of these bonds might strangle or paralyze us, and so get in the way of selfhood and community. We do not pray for an end to all obligation and responsibility. Quite the opposite. This is Judaism after all. We seek *balance*. Kol Nidre offers release in advance from vows to God and ourselves that we simply cannot keep, so that *all the other promises we have made can remain intact*—and so that we ourselves can remain intact.

Just *how* any of these binding oaths could possibly be undone and retracted in the year ahead even before we make them—this is a mystery that the prayer does not try to explain. The Aramaic rhyme and incantatory rhythm only heighten that mystery. Only God could possibly know what it means or why it works.

But one thing we do know, all of us know it, from experience: without deep bonds to others we ourselves are null and void. Lacking the ability to make and benefit from promises, we are less than human. The conviction of *mitzvah*—commandedness—is utterly crucial to Judaism and, our tradition is convinced, to selfhood.

If we are not part of the congregation of sinners that dwells below, the *yeshiva shel mata*, we have no chance of encountering the court on high, the *yeshiva shel ma’ala*, whatever it might be.

The salvific power of this prayer and of the entire Yom Kippur liturgy rests in the fact that it is *couched almost entirely in the plural*, not the singular, because that is where selfhood lies, where life is found.

We exist with DNA that is shared,

We think thanks to language that is shared,

We feel thanks to patterns of emotion that are shared,

We move thanks to aspirations that are shared,

We sin thanks to shortcomings that are shared,

We love thanks to love that is stored up in us and replenished by others who love us,

We better ourselves only if we let walls down, let others in, and recognize that the walls are to some degree an illusion of convenience.

The illusion is in part as old as human nature. We tell ourselves, “that poor person over there is not me, can’t be me,” or “that sick person is not me, can’t be me.” So, “I don’t owe them anything. My obligation is to myself alone, and to the ‘we’ that I choose to let include me. It is not to them.”

Durkheim argued, and I believe he was right, that the illusion of total autonomy has been exacerbated, and lent credibility, by facts of modern life such as easy travel to the four corners of the earth, distance from friends and family, marriages that often do not last, choice about absolutely everything, and marketing that appeals to self, exalts self, promises the self fulfillment

These facts of experience work to convince us that the freedom we rightly prize, the individual dignity we justly cherish, require selves who ultimately stand utterly alone before God and one another.

This evening’s liturgy disagrees. Quoting from the Torah, it promises forgiveness to “the whole congregation of Israel” and to “the other who dwells among them.” I will return in a moment to the implications this statement bears for the understanding of community. My point here is what it says about the self. We are forgiven not alone but together, and we are forgiven along with the other who dwells among us. I would make the midrashic case that here as elsewhere in the Torah we should read “*be-to-kham*” as meaning not only “among them” but “inside them.” The men and women who dwell alongside us—our community—live inside of us.

“For all have erred,” is how this verse from the Torah, the verse which establishes the possibility of atonement and forgiveness, concludes. We sin when we do not see ourselves for what we are: part of a community that is made holy by virtue of all the diverse minds and hearts and souls and experiences that compose it.

The very same point is in the readings from the Torah and the prophets that we will chant tomorrow morning. In the Torah reading we follow Aaron the high priest as he enacts in the physical space of the Tabernacle the movement from outside to inside that Jews perform on Yom Kippur. We leave public streets and workplaces behind, enter private Jewish sanctuaries, stream in from outside as on no other day, ask forgiveness of those closest to us, and then moving in the course of the day ever inward, we reach recesses of self that we do not often encounter. Aaron moves from camp to Tabernacle to outer court to inner court to Holy of Holies, entered only by him and only on this day, and we move with him. We do no work on this day—out in the world—but instead afflict our souls, deep within.

But, this being Judaism, we are not permitted to stay inside the self very long—for the haftarah that follows immediately is Isaiah’s proclamation that God has no interest in our self-affliction, and could care less about our stomach’s growls or even our declarations of intent. “No, this is the fast I desire . . . to let the oppressed go free and break off every yoke . . . Then when you call, Adonai will answer . . . and you shall be called Repairer of fallen walls.”

No hiding from community by burrowing deep in the self is permitted in this tradition—and no hiding from the self or those nearest to us by flight into communal activity or business. The tradition knows our ways. It promises life to those who cleave to the balance between self and community. That is how the book of life is written and sealed in this world.

As segue to my final point this evening—the nature of the life-giving communal self, no less a concern of Judaism and the Yom Kippur liturgy—consider that Isaiah does not restrict the justice for which he calls to Israelites. He demands in God’s name that the oppressed go free—with no limitation on their nationality or religion—and insists that every yoke must be broken, regardless of who is enslaving and who enslaved.

The Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah made this point with a power that cannot be denied, particularly in 2010. Jews went into the High Holiday season this year with Muslims very much on our minds, thanks to the renewal of peace talks with (largely Muslim) Palestinians, the controversy over

the Islamic cultural center and mosque near Ground Zero, and the looming threat of Iranian nukes—and we found ourselves in shul reading a Torah portion that is devoted to the interlocking stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac.

God makes a covenant with Abraham and announces that it will be transmitted through Isaac—but says of Ishmael, “I will make a nation of him too,” for he is Abraham’s seed. God addresses Hagar and blesses Ishmael with fertility and power. Then—most amazing of all, I think—God orders that the sign of the covenant, circumcision, be inscribed first on Abraham and his (at that point) only son, Ishmael. Jewish males to this day, as a result of that command, share the mark of the covenant with the men and boys of another people, another faith.

The close kinship of the two faiths and the intertwining of their destinies are fixed at the very moment that the people Israel comes into existence and enters into covenant with God.

It should be no surprise, then, that Jews find ourselves, many centuries later, sharing an enormous amount with Muslims—not only these stories, albeit in different versions, but law, philosophy, mysticism, ritual patterns, the notion of a people defined by covenant with God and instructed by God’s prophets—and of course sacred claim upon the Land of Israel promised by God in Scripture to Abraham and his descendants.

The rabbis who gave us the liturgy we observe here made sure we read about Ishmael on Rosh Hashanah. They placed Isaiah in the morning service of Yom Kippur—as counterpoint perhaps to Leviticus, and the many vectors of the service, and of Judaism, that point resolutely inwards. Their aim is balance—in this case balance between the Jewish communal self and other communities without which we cannot fulfill the divine promise stored up in humanity.

Judaism directs us to stand before God as *individual* selves, blessed with agency and choice, alongside other human beings to whom we are obligated and responsible. We also stand before God as *members of the community of Israel*, partners to God’s covenant, alongside other faith communities. The latter are not only composed of individuals created in God’s image but are bound as *communities* by the covenant that God made with all children of Noah. The rabbis who gave us the gift of Yom Kippur proclaimed that the wise person is one who learns from every human being. They declared that the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come.

You know this matter is not academic in 2010. Many religious leaders, including some rabbis, take the opposite view. I think a great deal is at stake in the

definition of the communal self, as a great deal is at stake in our notion of the individual self. It needs saying again and again that we cannot become more ourselves by banishing others from sight, whether the self and the other is an individual or a faith-community. A self or religion does not become purer by walling itself off, denying the presence of the other inside it, or making the value of the truth it holds depend on the claim that no one else has purchase on the truth.

The kind of Judaism that resonates with me, that JTS has taught for over a century, and that I think the Yom Kippur liturgy presumes, insists that diversity is essential to learning, that faith advances when it is challenged, that loyalty to our own tradition does not preclude respect for other traditions, real and not grudging respect, fostered by real listening and argument and not just polite nods of the head.

We need all the connections to others we can muster this Yom Kippur, all the promises, *Kol Nidre*. We need a saving balance of self and community, ever hard to find and maintain, that stands on the side of life for ourselves and for the world.

I wish us all an easy fast, and a good year. May we be sealed in the book of life, together.