

“Your Pure Soul”

Kol Nidrei is the holiest night of the Jewish year, and Yom Kippur day is the Sabbath of Sabbaths. Both are focused on the well-being of our souls. It all begins when we stand before God to measure our deeds; not our wisdom or our intentions, but our deeds. If you thought that your wisdom mattered more, you'd be mistaken. We've been taught, that if our wisdom is greater than our deeds, then our wisdom won't endure; but, if our deeds are greater than our wisdom, then our wisdom will endure. Though wisdom is important, it's all about our deeds (Pirkei Avot 3:9).

On Yom Kippur, all our deeds are revealed and judged. Together, we read aloud the litany of deeds we did or failed to do, knowingly and unknowingly. Together, we stand before God and admit our transgressions and make our apologies. If only --- if only --- we had come sooner and turned more quickly towards God's way for us. Would we have done less harm? Would we have created more harmony?

The questions deserve our attention. The process makes a difference. We are not destined to be condemned or punished; rather, we're urged to be cleansed, called to be renewed, and welcomed to be whole, again. In response to our plea, God responds, “Salachti Ki D'varecha,” I have forgiven according to your plea. And, then we're assured that “Prayer, repentance and charity” temper the severe decree. Prayer, repentance and charity, are deeds that heal wounds. We can edit the text that is being written about our future. It isn't only in God's hands, as it were; it's also in our hands to do what God has made us ready to do.

To begin, we need to open our hands to greater personal responsibility. Faith, alone, cannot do for us what we can do for ourselves. Remember the old saying, “God helps those who help themselves”?

Rabbi Karff, of blessed memory, taught in a sermon that we should not view God as a “Cosmic Bellhop.” Do you remember it? His choice of words was perfect. A bellhop, the man-at-the-ready in a hotel, literally hops-to-it upon hearing the bell ring. He's ready to carry luggage, assist guests, and do all manner of tasks. The “cosmic” part describes our all-too-familiar expectations that prayer might summon God, like some bell hop who's ready to serve us. Such expectations might begin in childhood when we pray for a toy that appears on a birthday; when all along it was a parent who listened well and created the awesome moment. Such deliverables might continue in school when we pray for a good grade only to learn that studying hard was the best answer to our prayers. But, later, when life gets hard, and it does, the Cosmic Bellhop doesn't appear as readily, and when he does, he doesn't always serve what we wanted him to bring. Our relationship to this Cosmic Bellhop suffers. In my view, if we never liberated ourselves from depending on God as a Cosmic Bellhop, then it's time that we did.

At best, God is, as our rabbis taught us, all-knowing, ever-present, and, to some, all powerful. In the middle of the last century, Jewish theologians offered the possibility that while God is all-knowing and ever-present, perhaps God is not all powerful. Perhaps, God is less like a monarchical deity who sits on a heavenly throne, and more like an unconditionally loving parent. If this is acceptable, then God isn't a bellhop who waits to be called to answer our needs; rather, God is constantly loving and true. And, when we need comfort, consolation, and validation, God is a source of these things and more.

Rabbi Karff likened it to the awful experience when a parent and child are exiting the car, and bad timing results in the child's finger being caught in the door. If it's happened to you, as a child or a parent, then you know how painful it is. Rabbi Karff's example highlights how a parent whose role is to protect the child could also be the unwitting perpetrator of such a painful accident. The parent couldn't prevent the accident, but the parent still knelt down to comfort and relieve the pain. Likewise, God's role isn't always to shield us from pain, because pain is, inevitably, part of life; but God is a Source of help, salvation, and comfort, as well as a Source of healing, love and peace. In our daily prayers, we say, "Baruch Atah Adonai, Shomeiah Tefilah," Praised are You, Adonai, Who hears our prayer. We don't need to ring for God. God hears us. Today, God forgives us.

But, like that parent who didn't intentionally close the door on her child's finger, we know from experience that it can still be difficult to forgive ourselves. In our prayer book, we plead, "Teach us to forgive ourselves...and help us overcome the past." When we fail to learn the lesson and overcome the past, we linger in a world of our own misfortune. Cut off from joys and blessings we could know, and which Yom Kippur could clear the way for us to enjoy, where do we turn? The Jewish poet, Abraham ben Samuel, wrote about his despair in the 13th century. He put it this way:

I have tested the hearts of those who hate me, but no one hates me as my own heart does. Many are the blows and wounds inflicted by my enemies, but no one batters me and wounds me as my soul does...To whom can I cry out, whom can I condemn, when those who are destroying me come from within myself? I have found nothing better than to seek refuge in Your mercy...God who sits upon the Throne of mercy!"

The poet didn't linger in a world of his own misfortune. He leaned on God more deeply when his ability to forgive himself failed. His insights led him to new understanding. Forgiveness can't obliterate our memories of the past, but it can liberate us to move beyond them.

Two weeks ago, the point was made clear to us by the most unsuspecting teacher. From television's *Ace of Cakes* on Food Network, Duff Goldman was our guest at Beth Israel. Streaming in by Zoom, hundreds listened and learned from Duff, a nice Jewish boy who made good and with profound Jewish insights. Asked how he prepared himself for the Holy Days, he took a breath and answered. He reflected on what it means to be Jewish and, naturally, how to make a great cake.

Apparently, they're one and the same. I know; I was surprised, too, but I love cake, so I listened.

Duff Goldman, born Jeffrey Goldman, explained that improving himself is a lot like baking. The best products don't depend on a new oven or remodeling the kitchen. Some of the best products come out of old ovens in small kitchens. Over years of experience, including two years just baking biscuits and bread, he learned that small changes to the recipe can have large impacts on the product. For example, putting the dough in the refrigerator overnight, instead of using it shortly after mixing, makes the biscuits come apart like soft clouds. Who knew? Each time he adjusted his recipe, something different happened. It wasn't lost on him that the same thing happened to him when he adjusted his view and his efforts.

Duff attributed much of his insights to generations of family history and experience. He called his Judaism a tradition that celebrates human kindness and goodness. He said such priorities were in his DNA, and he found his passion for baking cakes and delicious bakery goods a means of doing the best he could with what he was gifted to do. But, what our Beth Israel audience heard him say, is that it wasn't about sudden success. Cloud-like biscuits didn't happen for him until he tried to make them differently. Ironically, when he was asked what his favorite cake recipe was, he answered in way that no one expected. We thought he would tell us about his secret ingredient or his award-winning cake design. Instead, he admitted that his favorite cake recipe was a yellow cake mix from a box and frosting from a can. We were stunned. He explained his odd answer. He said that that yellow cake-mix and chocolate frosting took him back to his roots in his childhood. It was a time when every mother, he said, made the same cake for their child's birthday party at school. He connected that flavor with essential ingredients of simple pleasures.

We know that he didn't become the "Ace of Cakes" with a yellow cake-mix from a box. He became the Ace of Cakes, and quite a mensch, by valuing his family's traditions. He worked very hard at what he learned along the way in some of the strangest and unremarkable kitchens. He adjusted to each experience and turned himself towards a future that depended on what mattered most, namely, small changes, a few adjustments, and the right blends to accomplish his best work. Later, those small changes and few adjustments weren't just about cake, at all; they were about the person he was becoming.

It can happen in us, too. Small changes and few adjustments, over time, replace old habits and tendencies. As we forgive ourselves in order to become what we're intended to be, the process can bear much fruit.

I remember a young man who was at odds with his parents. The situation reached a critical juncture when his father died. His mother, ever demanding, wanted him at the graveside. But he had had enough and didn't even want to be at his father's funeral. He turned to me for advice. I told him that our Judaism teaches two important lessons about this struggle. First, Torah commands us to honor our parents; it doesn't command us to love them. Sadly, I acknowledged, there was little love between him and his parents, but there was still room to pay his respects. Second, I taught him that saying kaddish at the grave was about respecting his father, but it was also about mourning what never was and could never be. Say

kaddish for both losses, I said. He did attend his father's funeral. He said kaddish at the graveside. He made peace in his heart by forgiving himself for what he couldn't do, alone, to make things right between them. After the funeral, he turned in a new direction to find peace in new places and with new friends.

Likewise, there was a member of our congregation who came to services every week and was eager to participate. Over time, she regularly expressed dissatisfaction with this and that, including the attire of some of our congregants, which was hard to believe, and with the role of women clergy, which was unthinkable. When she told me that she would no longer come, I wasn't surprised. Before she left, I offered her this advice. Kindly, I said to her, "When you find peace within yourself, I believe you'll find peace with others, too." The subtle changes that were required would begin within her, not in others. Turning even now would have opened doors to knowing Rabbi Scott or Cantor Trompeter, to feeling at home among us, and to making a new friend or two, which is what was at the root of her challenge.

At every age, we're constantly seeking to improve. At every step, we can aim to be enjoyed by others. It begins with knowing that we are inherently good and blessed. Turning in a new direction, changing our habits, can re-orient us towards others and how they experience us. Can it create closer friendships? Can it build bridges where there used to be walls? Can feeling blessed wash over us as we find our new way?

The answer is unequivocally, yes, but it hinges on having some faith, too. In Proverbs (20:27), we learn, "The human soul is the light of God." The soul that burns within us is God's light. That is, according to Jewish thought, there is a spark of God in each of us. That light is pure, and our soul is pure. How do we reveal it and enjoy what God has created in us?

The answers are found in the Torah and prophetic readings on Yom Kippur. We'll read from Torah, in Leviticus (19), "Kedoshim Tiheyu," you shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." On the one hand, it can mean that we are already holy as God is holy. Our life's journey gives us time to perform acts of holiness. On the other hand, it can mean that holiness is in the future. That is, our life's journey is a daily effort, not to be perfect, but to become humanly holy, as the rabbis put it.

From the prophets, we'll read from Isaiah. Though our prayers are essential, they are not enough, and our fasting is inadequate. Isaiah urges us, "This is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cord of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home, when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own people."

And when we get it right, or when we do it better, Isaiah promises, "Your light shall burst forth like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly." Why? Because, "Your Righteousness shall go before you, and the Glory of God will be your rear guard." You see, the notion of a Cosmic-Bellhop is inferior to what we can do in covenant, in partnership, with God. If we turn ourselves in order to re-orient with faith's promise; if we temper our fears and amplify our hopefulness; and, if we depart from old habits, speak kindly and do good, then we will find the

light that is God's spark inside us. Then that light will burst forth and we will be well.

We were born a blessing, and we are works-in-progress. Our life is brief and we've been taught that "Our days are like scrolls. Write on them only what you want remembered" (Bahya ibn Pakudah 11th c). Now, as the Holiest Day of the year commences, let us stand before our God, with faith in ourselves that our soul's light is pure, and that we are worthy to be loved and to be blessed. Amen.