

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei Night

5767

In the shtetl everybody was busy during the days before Yom Kippur. The Jews gathered in the House of Study and poured out their hearts before their Father in Heaven: "*We have sinned, God, please pardon us.*" Many Jews stayed in the House of Study after the evening prayers were over in order to recite Psalms in front of the Holy Ark, and a few of them slept on the hard and uncomfortable benches of the House of Study, in order to atone for their sins, and in order to be the first ones in the morning to address their Creator in prayer and supplication.

It was on one of these nights before Yom Kippur, that the richest man in the shtetl also came to the House of Study in order to recite Psalms and in order to sleep on the hard and uncomfortable benches to atone for his sins.

The Rebbe, who was at that time in the House of Study, turned to the rich man and in a soft voice told him, "Dear Yid, your place tonight is not in the House of Study, amidst those who recite Psalms and pour out their hearts in front of their Creator, neither is it amidst those who sleep on hard and uncomfortable benches in order to atone for their sins.

Tonight, dear Yid, your place is outside the House of Study, amidst the poor and the needy, giving away your riches, to lighten their burdens. Your place tonight is not with us, said the Rebbe, but out there. With a gentle motion, he showed the rich man the way out and closed the door behind him.

I have known this story since I was in my first years of Rabbinical School. I thought that it was a nice little story, praising the value of tzedakah over the value of fasting and excessive prayer. This was in line with many of the social justice messages of the Prophets, especially Amos or in Isaiah, as we are going to read in tomorrow's Haftarah.

A while ago, however, the story came back to my mind with a new insight, an insight that prompted me to write these lines and to share them with you, on Kol Nidrei night.

What was the Rebbe's message in our story? What was he trying to tell the rich man? Was he suggesting that he was stingy? Was he telling him that there are more important values than prayer, that there are better ways to atone for his sins than to sleep on hard and uncomfortable benches? If so, why do he and the other Jews remain in the House of Study? Why do they spend their time reciting Psalms and sleeping on hard and uncomfortable benches to atone for their sins?

I believe that the message that the Rebbe of our story tried to convey to the rich man, and to the poor Jews who gathered at the House of Study to pray, is a deeper one, a much more complex one than "don't be stingy," or "give tzedaka." I believe that the Rebbe of our story was also talking to himself, and that he is talking to all of us as well, and I think that this is what he is telling us, in his soft, yet wise voice:

Each of us is different. As the Rabbis explain, *"only one man, Adam, was created to show the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, for if a man strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, made each man in the image of Adam, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore every single person is obligated to say, 'The world was created for my sake.'"* (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5).

The rabbinical maxim, "the world was created for my sake," implies that each of us comes to this world with a mission. The mere fact that each of us came into this world, that each of us exists, and walks, and thinks, and breathes, points to the fact that God wants something special, something unique from each of us, something that nobody else can achieve

Using a simple Kabbalistic terminology, each of us comes to this world to fix something, to repair something that is broken. If we accomplish our mission, if we do our job well, we contribute to the fixing of the whole, or in more spiritual terms, we help hasten the final redemption. If we neglect our job, if we sit idle, the job doesn't get done and the final redemption is delayed.

God sends us to this world with a general "Instruction Manual" called the Torah, but He doesn't tell each of us what our specific mission is. We know that we have

a specific mission, proof of that is that we came into this world, and that we are alive, but again, we don't know what this specific mission is.

Countless Hassidic stories revolve around this same subject, and are translated into the following questions: What is my mission in life? What do I have to fix? How and when will I find out?

The matter gets more complicated since the search for answers to these questions is a personal one and usually a lonely one as well. There are no fast recipes, or magic potions, or shortcuts. It is a patchwork that lasts our entire life. Like in Jacob's dream, we are on a ladder and we go up and down all the time. One step forward and two steps backwards, and you never know for sure where are you standing, and you never know for sure if you are on the right path.

It could be that someone's mission in life is to be a leader, and someone else's mission is to be a follower. Sometimes I may be able to accomplish my task thorough words, and sometimes, through silence.

In the Hassidic stories, there is a master, a Rebbe. The Rebbe can't do the job for you, but since he knows your soul, he can tell you if you are on the right path or not. The Rebbe in our story told the rich man that his place was not in the House of Study; that his fixing job was outside, somewhere else. The Rebbe was not admonishing the rich man, as I thought when I first read the story many years ago. The Rebbe was simply telling the rich man, that if he was to sleep on hard and uncomfortable benches, he would be taking someone else's mission and his own mission would not be accomplished.

We are not as lucky as the rich man in our story. We don't have a great Rebbe nearby who can read into our souls and tell us what our mission in life is, and what we need to fix.

However, I believe the story as a subliminal message, one I am eager to share with you on this night of Kol Nidrei: our unique mission in life has to do with the unique strengths, gifts, skills and blessings, that God gave us.

If you are intelligent, your mission probably has to do with the use of your intelligence. If you were blessed with wealth, your mission has probably to do with channeling your wealth to noble causes. If God put you in a position of royalty and honor, like Queen Esther in the story of Purim, your mission is probably rooted in your position, as Mordechai tells Esther, *"...and who knows whether you have not come into royalty for such a time like this?" (Esther 4:14)*

So, if I am on the right path, if our unique mission in life is related to our unique strengths, to our exclusive gifts, the journey must start with the Socratic dictum: "Know yourself!"

Only someone who is aware of where his strengths and weaknesses lie has the ability, and the potential, to make the best out of his or her journey.

In this regard, Yom Kippur is a journey to our inner selves. The word introspection, usually associated with prayer, consequently acquires a new dimension. "Know yourself!" not as a mere intellectual exercise, but in order to start your personal journey. "Know yourself!" not to become who you are not, or to exchange the unique gifts God gave you with new ones that don't belong to you, but to use your unique, personal gifts to get the job done!

Where I come from, the Rabbi doesn't speak on Kol Nidrei night, but I thought that some of us, and hopefully all of us, could use the rest of today and tomorrow to get started in this difficult, yet fascinating journey.

And remember that a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

If we exit this Yom Kippur one step ahead in the right direction, if we get to fix on this Yom Kippur one single line of our "Al Chet" list, if our presence here today, and tomorrow, makes us more sensitive, more receptive, more insightful, better Jews and better human beings, then I will feel that this little task of mine was accomplished, and I will be one little step ahead in my own personal journey.

May Hashem bless you and your families with a good, healthy, sweet and meaningful year!