

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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Devar Torah for Yom Kippur

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The story goes that a rabbi of a large synagogue in New York City delivered a Yom Kippur sermon on Kol Nidrei night that lasted one hour and ten minutes. At the end of services -10.45 pm- the congregants approached the rabbi to wish him an easy fast and a good year. Among those who came forward to greet the rabbi was a young reporter from CNN, who introduced himself and then asked the rabbi:

-“Excuse me, Rabbi, do you think you could condense the essence of your inspiring sermon into five minutes?”

The rabbi pictured himself in the CNN evening news, being watched by millions of Americans, and he answered, “Yes, I guess I could.”

To which the young reporter responded, “So, why didn’t you two hours ago?”

Although the above story is a joke (for those who didn’t realize it yet); the story could have been a real one.

Rabbis relate to the Yom Kippur address as the “Super Bowl” of the Jewish year. I am afraid that the reason is not related to the holiness of the day, but to the overwhelming presence of congregants at services.

Rabbis in small or medium sized congregations, who struggle during the year to get a minyan or those in large congregations, who spend every single Shabbat addressing Bar Mitzvah boys and Bat Mitzvah girls, finally have a captive audience, all to themselves.

Paraphrasing Woody Allen’s movie, it becomes, *“Everything you ever wanted to tell your congregants and nobody was there to listen.”*

Rabbis usually have full agendas to share with their congregants, and congregants –on the other side- usually are too busy during the year to listen to their rabbi.

On Yom Kippur, however, rabbis feel they can take sweet revenge and share with their congregants everything they wanted to share throughout the year but couldn't. So, like all jokes in general, these jokes about rabbis contain a kernel of truth.

A couple of years ago, in Roanoke, when I came downstairs to greet the congregants after Rosh Hashanah services, I saw a young member of Beth Israel Synagogue in her mid twenties holding a book.

"What are you reading," I ask her.

With a little embarrassment she showed me the book, How to Survive the High Holy Days Services.

"I am glad I didn't need it," she told me, which made me feel a little better, although I didn't know if she was being honest or being kind to me was her mitzvah of the day.

Although my divrei Torah rarely last more than 10 – 12 minutes, I can still relate to rabbi jokes on Yom Kippur.

There is so much to share and so little time!

Should I talk about Israel and how is it important for us to support the Jewish state during this coming year? Should I share with you the results of the last survey on Jewish population and Jewish identity in the USA, which describes the shrinking of the Jewish population in America due to a lower birth rate and high rate of intermarriage? Should I stress one more time how I believe that Jewish observance and Torah study could enrich your lives and the lives of those near and dear to you? Or should I use my 10-12 minutes to tell you how important it is to support

Hillcrest Jewish Center during this coming year, with your physical presence, with your commitment, with your money?

What a dilemma...And meanwhile, sharing my dilemma, I used 6 precious minutes of my Devar Torah...

A quiet voice inside me tells me that I need to pick and choose, that I won't be able to cover 4000 years of Jewish history in one Devar Torah, and that if I don't want to add my name to the list of rabbi jokes on Yom Kippur, I had better focus on one idea, on one short, but hopefully meaningful message, in which I consolidate everything I would like to share with you today.

The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership – CLAL- provided me with an insight, which will help me introduce my message.

Yom Kippur is usually translated as the "Day of Atonement".

"The word atonement has at its heart the phrase 'at one.'

But what does it mean to be "at one"? For some it may mean to feel at one with the cosmos. But to most people it has a more direct meaning: to reconcile — the act of bringing together two things which have grown apart and making them one again.

Perhaps during this past year you have done something hurtful that has caused you to grow distant in a relationship which once felt very close." Atonement means repairing that relationship. Maybe you grew apart from God and from your Jewish heritage during the past year, or during the past years. Atonement also means repairing that relationship. Most likely you are part of the vast majority of people who have not had a terrible falling out. In fact, you may have kindled new relationships and sustained old ones. Maybe you found yourself in the synagogue and among your people. So what does atonement mean to you?

Yesterday night I told you that I believe that our unique mission in life has to do with the unique strengths, gifts, skills and blessings, that God gave us.

How are you blessed?

How can you extend that blessing in a way in which others who are in need can benefit?

This Yom Kippur you might say:

"I had a successful surgery – I'll make sure to visit someone in recovery."

"I went to a graduation ceremony – I'll devote more time to teaching."

"I bought a new home – I'll open it to those in need."

"I won a settlement- I'll do some pro bono work."

"I developed a new friendship – I'll reach out to someone who needs a friend."

"I felt welcome at Hillcrest Jewish Center– I will welcome others."

"I started to learn Torah - I will share my little knowledge with those who know less than I do."

"I was able to keep my job in a time of turmoil – I will help others find a job."

"I was comforted in my loss by the members of my congregation and my community – I will be sure to be there for others who don't have anybody to comfort them."

"I was hugged, and kissed and appreciated." – Maybe there is someone out there (and when I say out there, I mean out here) who needs your hugs, your kisses, your appreciation?

In these days, we can extend blessings for the New Year and do the reconciling needed for atonement.

If we do so, hopefully the words of the Rambam will apply to us: "Whoever blesses others is blessed as well."

May God bless you and your family with a year of long term lasting meaningful experiences, with health, sustenance and peace, with a good, sweet and blessed year!