

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

5771

About two months ago, Ilan, Abby, and I went with my brother and his family to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of my favorite places in New York. After touring the various galleries we ended, as usual, in the gift shop.

Abby and Ilan wanted me to buy "something." So, not wishing to disappoint them, but also not wishing to throw the money away on a tchatchke, I bought a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle, one that portrays the museum as it appears in the children's map of the Met.

Abby was excited with the gift and when we arrived home she showed the box to Silvia, who surely enough said, "You just threw the money away over a tchatchke! Who is going to put together a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle?" Silvia proceeded to remind me that the only puzzle I had assembled in my life was one consisting of 24 pieces and that was when I was six years old.

Trying to prove Silvia wrong, and after Abby had noddged me long enough, I opened the box only to find 500 pieces that look all the same to me. I thought to myself: "Silvia was right," but not wishing to admit it, I encouraged Ilan and his friend David to start working on the puzzle, planning to continue myself a little later.

Ilan and David were able to put together the border of the puzzle and a few more pieces in almost no time, but when it got more complicated, they abandoned the task.

Two weeks later the puzzle was still in the same place where Ilan and David had left it, in the middle of the living room, and Silvia was starting to become annoyed.

About three weeks ago, a month and a half after we had bought the puzzle, and understanding that with the upcoming holidays either the puzzle or I would have to leave the house, I started working on it slowly. By then my brother and his family had left and Rabbi Mlynski, my friend from Ecuador, had arrived with his wife and their two daughters, and so, with the help of Abby, my friend's wife, and her daughters, we resumed the project and started making some progress.

When Silvia saw that the end of the task was closer than the beginning, she joined us as well, and so did Daniela and Ilan. Soon enough, putting together the jigsaw puzzle became a family project, and it became evident that the completion of the job was in sight.

Then a thought occurred to me: what if a piece was missing? What if, after so much work on the puzzle -which by then was looking really good- it remained incomplete? After all, we have moved the puzzle from the floor of the living room to the dining room table and from there to the kitchen table, always collecting little pieces here and there. After six weeks of little or no work on the puzzle, and after so many big and little hands playing with it, it was only natural to expect a missing piece or two; and yet, the thought of a 499-piece puzzle was distressing. Believe me, I have seen much more elaborate puzzles – 2,000 or even 3,000 piece puzzles - displayed on kitchen and living room walls in homes of friends and relatives, but I have never seen one lacking a piece or two.

Before you get too anxious, let me tell you that we found all the pieces and finally finished the puzzle, just a few days before Rosh Hashanah.

We framed and hung the puzzle in the basement, more as a self-reward for our teamwork and perseverance than for an aesthetic reason, but the thought of an incomplete puzzle kept hovering in my mind.

While it is possible to find all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and to put them together in a perfect combination, the reality is that when it comes to the puzzle of our own lives, it is unrealistic to expect the same. If we are so lucky as to have all the

pieces, they rarely come together the way we want them to, and more often than not, we end up missing one, or two, or many pieces in the puzzle of life.

The truth is that our lives are far from being a perfect puzzle. So many pieces... Physical and mental health, work, friends, parents, family, marriage, children, money, peace of mind... Who can say, "I have it all!"?

And even if you are among the privileged ones, did all your blessings come at once like the jigsaw pieces in the box? Did all your blessings come painlessly? Did all of them come when you really needed them?

What about your character traits? What about your relationship with God, with your people, with your heritage? What about your responsibility towards your country, your society, the human race? Are all the pieces there? Are all of them in the right position, in the right place? Is every single story in your life puzzle a success?

Who can say, like the jigsaw puzzle hanging in my basement, "I am complete and nothing is lacking in me!"?

Our life is, in the best of the scenarios, a puzzle under construction.

While we all aspire to find all the pieces, to put them together and to make sense of the puzzle, the truth is that we only succeed partially. The reality is that this unique puzzle-under-construction we call life is never complete, and it will never be complete.

If we are lucky we get fragments of the puzzle, a corner here, a corner there. We put a few pieces together but the pieces keep moving, and a few years later, when we thought we had it all under control, we may be forced to start afresh, only - a few years older, and more tired.

So where do we go from here?

The challenge, dear friends, is a double one:

First of all we – *I* – need to learn how to live with an incomplete puzzle. This is by itself, the subject of a whole dvar Torah, which I owe you.

Second; and here is the subject of *this* dvar Torah: while we know that it is not up to us to finish the work, to get all the pieces in place, we must try our best, we ought to give it our best shot, we need to keep working on the puzzle.

In the words of my teacher, Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, *"Judaism is an aspirational religion which, while accepting the reality of failure, believes in the human capacity to transcend and achieve levels of excellence in our everyday lives."*¹

"A significant manifestation of this future," continues Donniel Hartman, *"is the commandment of tshuva. We expect people to honestly assess the content and the quality of their lives, regret and admit their failures, and commit to embarking on a new direction. This expectation is brought to a climax during Yom Kippur, where the vidui (confession) which lies at the nucleus of the Yom Kippur liturgy places before us the realities of our sins and challenges us to honestly confront what we have done with our lives."*²

"Ashamnu" – Here is one piece of the puzzle I need to place. "Bagadnu" – Here is another one, "Gazalnu" – a third one...

The main problem of Yom Kippur, again in the words of Donniel Hartman, is that *"the passion, seriousness, and devotion which accompany many of us throughout Yom Kippur, peters out into a form of amnesia during the break-fast meal as we return to our behavior of yesterday. To paraphrase Isaiah, the quality of repentance is not judged by what one does on Yom Kippur, but by what one does afterwards. If Yom Kippur is to be the force that our tradition aspires it to be, it must cease to be*

¹ Hartman, Donniel: Yom Kippur: Why Doesn't It Work Outside of the Synagogue? September 9, 2010. <http://donnielhartman.wordpress.com/>

² Ibidem

the end and culmination of the process, and instead serve as its beginning. The purpose of the all-inclusive lists cannot be to ask an individual to review all of his life, but to create a menu from within which every individual can find one dimension, one quality that they can commit to working on.”³

While we ponder on Yom Kippur where the pieces of the puzzle belong, the time to place them in the right place is the day after tomorrow. We can get the puzzle in the gift shop, we can open the box, we can play with the pieces, we can count them and recount them, but nothing will really happen until we start putting the pieces together, until we transform our plan into accomplishment, our words into action.

People often come and tell me, “Rabbi, your sermon made me think,” or “Rabbi, your sermon made me cry.” I used to be more than satisfied with such comments but I have become more ambitious. Now I want my congregants to come and tell me, “Rabbi, your sermon made me change,” or “Rabbi, your sermon made me volunteer,” or “Rabbi, your sermon made me light Shabbat candles, or come to minyan, or pick up the phone and call my estranged brother, or forgive my parents...”

Our tradition teaches us that it is not for us to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it.

Paraphrasing the above quote from Pirkei Avot, it may not be for us to complete the puzzle, but we need to do more than just open the box and look at the pieces.

Let me borrow one more time from my teacher Donniel Hartman, this time to wrap up:

"Yom Kippur must cease to be a forum for New Year's declarations and instead become a catalyst for a new culture amongst the Jewish community, a culture which fosters individual responsibility, reflection, and a commitment to being a tshuva person. As a tshuva person one commits to the ongoing and difficult path of

³ Ibidem

constantly aspiring more from oneself. As a tshuva person one neither views oneself as an ideal, nor fools oneself into believing in overnight conversions.

This year, let us take tshuva out of the synagogue, disconnect Yom Kippur from its myriad of rituals, and place it at the foundation of our everyday lives.”⁴

The puzzle is waiting. Let’s work on it!

May God bless you and your families with a year of many pieces together, with health, joy, sustenance and peace, with a good, sweet and blessed year!

⁴ Ibidem