

YK Morning 5779

When I was growing up in the South, we called this day “YumKipper”. I was surprised to learn that the Hebrew is *Yom haKippurim*. And even more surprised to learn, as often happens with Hebrew, that the name of this day has another meaning hidden within it: “*Yom HaKippurim*”, the Day of Atonement, has the same spelling as *Yom ha-K’ Purim* – “the day that is like Purim.”

Could today -Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement - resemble in any way a day that is *K’Purim*, like Purim?

On Purim we give *mishlochai manot*, gifts of food, and hold a big feast that includes lots of wine. Today on YK we are of course fasting.

Purim seems frivolous and fun. YK is serious and intense.

How then is *Yom ha-K’Purim* like Purim?

I think the connection is that on both holidays we explore who we are – though on Purim we wear a costume, we put on a mask. On YK we take off all our masks.

Today on YK, we reveal our plain selves to ourselves and to God, we bare our souls.

It is not a punishment to deny our bodies food, drink, bathing, fragrance, physical pleasure and comfort. Rather, these rules are a device, a spiritual tool, enabling us to see ourselves, our souls, as we really are. Our fast today helps us remove our various masks, remove all the layers of material stuff we are buried under. Today we try to see more than all the external features of our existence, to peer beyond all our immediate and transient material concerns.

There is an Ashkenazik custom to wear a ‘kittel’ on Yom Kippur – a simple, white, unadorned linen garment in which its owner will one day be buried – as a reminder that we come into this world and leave it without any possessions. Our souls are refugees on this physical earth, trying to fit in. The classic song of the 80’s band The Police said it best: “We are spirits in the material world.”

And in fact, our material world is quite hospitable for our delicate souls, is it not? Thank God, we have an abundance of creature comforts. None of us is truly starving or – even if you’ve seen better times financially – none of us, thank God again, is imprisoned by our poverty like in many parts of the world if not for most of the people in the world... poverty to the degree that you have no prospects, no opportunities and no mobility, no skills with which to even hope that you can improve your lot. How fortunate we are that almost anything our heart desires, or needs, we can get one way or another eventually.

Abundance, almost limitless variety, and convenience characterize our world – the Western world at least.

So if today is the day we uncouple ourselves from the material world we ordinarily inhabit by a long day of fasting and denying our physical needs, I ask you: When today’s focus on our spiritual selves concludes at sundown, what understanding will you take away from this experience? When you once again eat satisfying food and drink water, juice and wine, put your nice leather shoes back on, enjoy the physical comforts and blessings we, thankfully, have the rest of the year, what new understanding about who you truly are and what your life is truly about will you have gained?

There's an amusing story from the Talmud that gives some insight about the value of the spiritual and the material. Like us, the ancient rabbis were fascinated with the mystery of dreams and what they might mean. They believed "A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is unread" (Berachot 55a). They even had rabbis whose craft it was to interpret dreams!

[Brachot (56-57)]

Bar Hedy was such an interpreter of dreams. But of course, you know, he had a business to run. So, to one who paid him he would give a favorable interpretation and to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavorable interpretation.

This is significant, because according to their understanding back then, the message contained in a dream could materialize and become real ONLY according to what its interpretation was declared to be. So if you got a good interpretation, that good thing is going to happen, a bad interpretation - that's what will come to pass. (Clearly, the union of dream interpreters did a good job of promoting their industry....)

It once happened that Abaye and Raba each had the same dream one night. They went to Bar Hedy for an interpretation. Abaye could pay a little bit and gave him a few coins. Rab could not pay and gave nothing. They told him the dream: "We saw a cask [barrel] hanging on a palm tree."

Well, to Abaye, Bar Hedy interpreted the dream thus:
Your business will spring up like a palm tree. [That's very positive right? Growth. More produce, maybe it means a franchise, even a little shade – and time - to relax in...]

To Raba, who did not pay, he said: Your goods will be sweet like dates. Well, that sounds good too, right? Dates, sweet...wonderful!

But remember, these guys are in Babylon where they have a lot of dates, an overabundance of dates. So the blessing “sweet as dates” in Babylon means sweet for the customer, who can buy many for a low price. But not so sweet for the seller – in fact it’s bitter – he’s worked really hard to create a bounty of produce that has minimally low value. Bar Hedyā’s interpretation is a curse more than a blessing.

So I wonder for us about all the material blessings we have in our lives with which we surround ourselves, is there an aspect to them that is not so sweet? Is our bounty ever a burden?

With the notable absence of our material concerns this Yom Kippur day, we have a kind of Archimedean vantage point, a place from which we can gaze at our everyday lives from outside our everyday. Do we sense that the usual abundance we enjoy can in fact at times be a burden? Not always certainly, but sometimes: Is our material stuff in the way, cluttering our homes and our lives, impacting how we treat others and how they see us? Does all manner of the “stuff” in our lives weigh us down:

- Are our minds so cluttered and distracted by the latest news and gadget and text and ‘to-do’ item that we struggle to give anyone or anything our undivided attention?
- Is the backlog of our unfinished business, our incomplete projects, our unresolved issues preventing us from moving on to focus on other things?
- Do we have a clutter of behaviors or habits we’d like to get rid of, that aren’t good for us, but which we keep holding on to?

Maybe what's needed as a first step to truly make room in our lives for all our blessings, both spiritual and material, is some context, some perspective. Interestingly, the holiday of Sukkot – which starts just five days after Yom Kippur – is about that context and perspective, about the spirit and the material! I invite you all to sit in a sukka this year, to build your own sukka. I'm an expert at building very amateurish structures – I'm happy to advise you if you want to give building your own sukka a try.

A poignant story about Sukkot and perspective:

There was once a poor teacher, a *melamed*, who was hired by a wealthy merchant to instruct the children. Home-schooling. The job included room and board, and was for a set *zman*, a set time period of so many months or years. During this time, the merchant built a new house, they all moved in, and a celebration to dedicate the house with new mezuzot was held. During the celebration, the *melamed*, was dancing and drinking and celebrating, really carrying on with utter delight and enthusiasm. More exultant even than the merchant and his family. It was kind of weird – you would have thought it was his own house, yet he was merely a temporary resident, a visitor. The merchant took him aside and said: “I’m glad you are so happy for me, but after all, don’t forget you are only a guest in the house, here for a short time. The *melamed* stopped a moment, looked at the merchant and said: “So are you.”

That's the context that Sukkot gives us, when we move out of our usual home and become itinerant dwellers in a fragile sukka, susceptible to the elements, bugs, and prowling animals, exposed to passers-by, insecure...refugees. If Yom Kippur is a spiritual unmasking, as I said earlier, Sukkot is a physical unmasking. But don't forget, as joyous as Purim is, which again is somehow a day parallel to Yom Ha-Kipurim today, the day which is like Purim,

Purim's joy is as nothing compared to Sukkot: Sukkot is all about the beauty and the nature, all about the happiness, all about the peace of just sitting under *sukkat shlomecha*, God's peaceful canopy, and being as the Torah says, *ach sameach*, nothing but fully happy with where you are, with what you have, with what you are doing. I highly recommend it next week as the most profound – and enjoyable – spiritual exercise you can do this year. Yes, even more profound – maybe - than fasting today.

The Mishna's book Wisdom of the Fathers, *Pirke Avot*, discusses in its way whether abundance diminishes value, whether our stuff clutters us on a deeper level, and whether we look to our material world for a spiritual fulfillment it cannot provide. It puts things rather bluntly: The more flesh the more worms; the more possessions the more anxiety... the more maidservants the more lewdness, the more manservants the more theft..." (Mishna Avot 2:8)

But, fortunately, that is only part of how things are. Abundance of the right kind can also be the source of our true happiness, joy, and fulfillment in life. That same Mishna then continues its teaching: "...But the more Torah the more life, the more schooling the more wisdom; the more counsel the more understanding; the more righteousness the more peace. If you acquire a good name, you've gained something which enriches yourself; and if you've acquired words of the Torah, you've attained eternity."

Our tradition teaches us, then, what has true value, how our spirits transcend the material necessity of this world. What we need an abundance of is not more material things, but to find more value in things that truly sustain and nourish our spirits.

We need an abundance of authenticity – of sharing our real unmasked thoughts, emotions, and reactions in relationships. Clicking “like” is no substitute for a real, hands-on pat on the back or looking someone in the eye when you talk to them. So often we are busy strategizing socially. We were told to ‘play hard to get’, to ‘hold your cards close to your chest’, have ‘a stiff upper lip’when maybe bearing our souls and wearing our hearts on our shirtsleeves would build more satisfying relationships and the understanding that grows from them. Being our authentic selves is the way to cultivate our capacity for compassion and kindness.

We need an abundance of community. Community helps us be our best selves, gives us the opportunity to give of the unique and holy spirit of ourselves that, today, we are connecting with inside our own hungry skins – sharing our thoughts in classes, our personality at social events, our ideas, and time, and helping hands, our networking, our energy, our resources, our voices, our tears...your being connected and connecting us all with you especially here at MJCS is needed for us to be the community we can all find ourselves a part of.

We need an abundance of honesty, of loving-kindness and of reaching out to others. This gives us opportunities to perform righteous deeds, to make the bridges that bring people together and build peace.

We need an abundance of learning. Not necessarily to acquire more degrees that crowd the space for frames on our walls, but to live in the constant spiritual awareness of the slow, lifelong acquisition of wisdom. We do this through engaging in our world, in relationships and community, living Torah and experiencing a full life.

The diligence of character that earns a good name – respect - is the best gift you can give yourself. And all of these together grow from the wherewithal to learn and live the words of Torah. “How can riches be made beautiful?” asks the Spanish Jewish poet Yehuda Alharizi nearly a thousand years ago. He answers “By performing acts of righteousness.”

May we all merit many blessings – both material and spiritual – in this new year. Gmar chatima tova...