

WHAT THEY FORGOT
Kol Nidre
September 27, 2009

Many Jews of my generation got into a habit early in their growing up. It's not a bad habit. It's just one that most younger people don't have.

Whenever the New York Times publishes a list of people who were killed in a crash, or honors are bestowed or prizes given, we instinctively look to see how many Jews are present among those listed.

While the New York Times has not created a list for corrupt Jews in 2009, I have my own list. And it is quite long. It includes those involved in Ponzi schemes which bilked billions from thousands of people, Syrian rabbis who sell body parts, and those who were elected to serve the people of the State of Israel and ended up serving only themselves.

I will not mention any of the names. You know them as well as I do. But I will follow the old Jewish tradition of "Y'mach Sh'mam" May their names be blotted out. But it does seem appropriate on this eve of the most sacred day of the Jewish year to speak of their deeds. In fact, our liturgy for Yom Kippur is quite specific about their sins - their sins of commission as well as omission. They are object lessons of what Jews should not do, how Jews should not behave.

In our Yom Kippur *Al Chet* prayer, among the sins listed are: sexual immorality, fraud and falsehood, arrogance, insolence, exploiting the weak, and giving and taking bribes. For many years, I assured people that most of these sins did not

apply to us personally, but to the community as a whole. Indeed, many of these sins do apply to us personally, and certainly to the totality of the Jewish people.

I. LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

The entire Jewish tradition is concerned with how people behave in a complex society. From fairly simple biblical doctrines, the rabbis rule on increasingly complex human situations. They spend enormous amounts of time on the minutiae of business relationships, contracts, and real estate transactions. As society got more complex, the discussions in the Talmud become more complex.

At the heart of the Talmudic process is one of the essential doctrines about human behavior is the “Golden Rule.” Stated in Rabbinic terms, it is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” or “Don’t do anything to anyone else that you would not want done to you.” While there are nuances of these formulations that many times are exceedingly complex, the basics are quite clear.

Don’t cheat on your wife, if you don’t want to be cheated on. Don’t mislead people if you don’t wish to be misled. Stealing is wrong. How would you like to be robbed.

This doctrine of reciprocity is found in most of the religions of the world. Recently (2008) a conference on the Golden Rule was held at Bard College, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. Some of the pre-eminent professors of religion, from Judaism and Christianity, Islam to Buddhism, Confucianism and Zoroastrianism participated. Each religious tradition has its own version of the Golden Rule.

The story of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible is one of the articulations of examples of this in the Jewish tradition. You remember the story. Ruth, the widow, returns to Moab, her late husband's birthplace, with her mother-in-law Naomi. Without Ruth marrying another Moabite, there would be no way to restore Naomi's family name or fortune. Ruth meets Boaz, who is known as the "restorer" and marries him.

Here's what the text says: Then Ruth said to Boaz: How is it that I have found favor in your eyes, since I am only a foreign woman? Then Boaz replied " I have been duly informed of all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband's death; how you abandoned your father and mother, and the land of your birth, and came to a people whom you did not know before. May God fully pay the reward of your deeds and may your recompense be complete from the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought shelter."

Here we have Boaz playing the role of the reciprocal redeemer, but God is also involved in the process as well.

The doctrine of reciprocity plays itself in Judaism not only in human relations, but in relationship to God as well. Things should be even, on a human level and with God.

II. PROPHETIC JUDAISM

Most of us in this sanctuary tonight grew up with a heavy dose of Social Action. Social activism has been a hallmark of American Judaism in the second half of the twentieth century. Whether that activism was in behalf of the civil rights movement in the sixties and seventies (culminating just this year with the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States) or on behalf of Soviet Jewry a decade later, or concerning Darfur or other human crises in our world.

The biblical prophets articulated a notion that not only was it crucial, as a human being and a Jew, to behave responsibly toward your fellow human being, it was important that one take action to see that everyone was treated fairly and honestly.

When I was an undergraduate more than 50 years ago, I had little notion that I was part of a movement. I became involved as the editor of my college newspaper. We wrote editorials about what we thought were important issues for students and faculty. I remember clearly the arguments that we had about whether it was appropriate for a college newspaper to support the case of Autherine Lucy, who became the first Black student admitted to the University of Alabama.

We did write those editorials. I did what I thought was right. I am not certain that the prophetic imperative was at the top of the list of reasons for supporting her cause. It was just the right thing to do.

It was in the 1890's that social justice came to the fore in the American Jewish community. We Jews were just beginning to feel comfortable in America. In the brief span of 40 years or so, since the arrival of German Jews, we began to look

outside the Jewish community, to speak out on social issues. We became visible activists in decrying the dreadful conditions of the Chicago stockyards. We became leaders in the early days of the civil rights movement. Names like Moskowitz and Springarn were among the first organizers of the NAACP in the early years of the 20th century.

Social action was the step beyond the doctrine of reciprocity. Social activism became a hall mark of American Judaism, and grew in strength immediately after World War II.

Caring for others grew to become an essential manifestation of being a Jew. Not only were we to behave toward others the way we wanted to be treated, but it was urgent that we participate actively in correcting the ills of our society.

I confess to you that I am totally at a loss to explain the behavior of Jews who claim to be religious, who claim to be partners in bringing God's kingdom on earth, who pray daily the words of our prayer book, who fast and confess on Yom Kippur the way we do.

Their garb, their charities, their friends are all public manifestations of their Jewishness, and yet something is missing. Something got lost in the translation. They got confused. Perhaps they forgot, or perhaps they never knew or understood what we meant to be a Good Jew.

III. RITUAL IN BALANCE

Our Prophetic reading on Yom Kippur is taken from the Book of Isaiah. Here is what it says: “Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58)

Clearly the prophet is quite condescending towards those who get the ritualistic part of Judaism correct, but miss the main point of what Judaism is all about.

For many Jews, the observance of rituals is an end in itself. It is as if the symbols of Judaism have overtaken the reality. It is the symbol which takes on a life of its own. Some of Conservative rabbinic colleagues have looked carefully at the treatment given to animals on their way to slaughter at Kosher slaughtering house. They have pointed out that the treatment is so inhumane, missing an essential element of *shchita* (kindness to animals), that from a moral and ethical point of view, the meat is *tref* and not kosher at all.

These kosher slaughtering houses employ many undocumented day workers. Their treatment is worse than that given to the animals. Every tenet of Jewish legal tradition about the kindness that must be shown to aliens and workers has been violated.

This too would make the meat *tref*, in spite of their adherence to the minutae of *kashrut*.

The Traditional Jewish community is unappreciative of Liberal Judaism's emphasis on social justice to the detriment of Jewish rituals, a home and in the synagogue. But it is the balance that needs to take place. The perpetrators of the Ponzi schemes were active in their Orthodox synagogue. They sat on the board of Yeshivah University. They enticed their fellow Orthodox Jews to invest with them. And it was they who were bilked. The Syrian Orthodox Jews who sold human organs to those in desperate need of organ transplants at vast profits, obviously were absent when the important things were being taught.

The Israeli government officials who pay lip service to Orthodox voting blocs to get elected miss what Judaism is all about.

And what about nursing homes, which bilk the sick and dying for the goal of making more and more money.

For the sins of exploiting the weak. For sins of arrogance. For the sins of abuse of power. These are the sins which we must atone for on this Yom Kippur.

CONCLUSION

While there have been happy headlines in the newspapers recently, there have been too many which depress us as Jews.

We have rejoiced at the fulfillment of many of the civil rights goals that many of us fought for through the years. We rejoice that the recession seems to be coming to an end. We rejoice for our own personal achievements and those of our children and grandchildren.

But the state of the Jewish world depresses us. The State of Israel seems to be led by those who misunderstand what leadership is all about. (To be sure, there are some government officials in the United States whose behavior is far from admirable, including local members of Congress and state officials.)

Names once honored in the Jewish community need to be stricken, *y'mach shmam*. There are those whose public behavior and private acts which bring dishonor to them and the community. There are those who get all the dots, but never understand the whole picture.

Yom Kippur is a time for evaluation of ourselves. It is a time to measure our deeds against the eternal values which Judaism has articulated through the centuries. May it be our will to live in such a way that we will bring honor to ourselves, to our families and to the Jewish community in the year to come.

Amen.

