

Rabbi Ezra N. Ende's Yom Kippur Sermon 5767 **"On Rosh Hashana It Is Written"**

I remember myself as a child growing up in Israel during the summertime spending countless days on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, breathing the good air that a typical Israeli summer brings and appreciating the precious gift of freedom.

Toward mid-August I would suddenly realize that this freedom would not last forever and that, sooner or later, I would have to tie myself down to certain obligations. The year started with the high holy days. That always placed a big burden on me.

My father usually led the services, and that created a special atmosphere. On one hand it demanded a special family effort, but it also made me very proud and very excited. When I heard his voice reciting the words of the *Kol Nidre*, I knew that he was representing everyone before God.

This was the peak of the year for me, and I believe that it did have a strong influence on what I am doing here today. The Hebrew word for a cantor is "*shaliach tzibur*," a messenger of the crowd. It is a big obligation, but also a great honor to serve in such a capacity.

I don't know how many of you have ever been to Israel during Yom Kippur. In Israel the excitement does not happen necessarily inside the synagogue but rather outside of it. After the end of the evening service, all of *Am Yisrael* (the people of Israel) start walking on the main roads because no one drives on them on this day. Millions of Jews walk on the roads greeting each other with the traditional greeting of Yom Kippur – *Gemar chatima tova*.

Gemar chatima tova--what does that mean? Well, there is a well-known *Midrash* that tells the story of God sitting in heaven and using a scale to measure the good and the bad deeds of every one of us. If the scale shifts toward the pile of your good deeds, then your name will be written in the Book of Life and you are in for a good year. But if the weight shifts to the other side, then you are at risk. *Gemar chatima tova* means, "May your name be sealed in the Book of Life." This is the traditional greeting for Yom Kippur today because our time for repentance is limited.

"Today is the day of repentance," the day that the skies are open for our prayers; and as the day passes by, we have less and less time to repent--a very intense day, and a huge challenge.

We all have fantasies of letting go of all of our sins and our guilt and dedicating our lives to acts of love and kindness, giving our partners everything they deserve and making them happy on a daily basis. We all want to be perfect parents for our children, giving them all the time and patience that they need.

When we talk about *teshuva*, repentance, on a broad level we realize that it is an ongoing task and a value according to which we shape our lives. It is one of the things that we are always aware of in the back of our minds, but we don't always succeed in turning our intentions into action. We do procrastinate.

The prayer *Unetane Tokef* reminds us that **“this is the day”** – today is the Day of Judgment - this is the due date! In the *machzor*, our prayer book for the high holidays, we find the basis for one of the fundamental differences between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

**“On Rosh Hashanah it is written
On Yom Kippur it is sealed
How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be
Who shall live and who shall die”**

According to this prayer Yom Kippur is the Day of Judgment, which sums up the period of repentance, and we are in a bit of trouble if we choose to postpone our plans to repent today. Do we have something to gain from that approach?

Being the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur does create a certain kind of urgency. Yom Kippur calls us to be as close as we can to our real selves and not to rely on any outside influences-- not on food, not on technology--not even on tomorrow! What we have is what we have. If we made some mistakes this year, it is time to take responsibility for them NOW--not tomorrow, not next week--because the due date is today! We can't stretch it out any longer. We are going to have to accept ourselves for what we are and not run away from our fears and hesitations.

Indeed, Yom Kippur is a day, which forces us to face our lives here and now! Each of us carries a different load, and we all have our own share of sins. It is very hard to bring ourselves to deal with the problems that we have created. Sometimes we think that we are so unique. Our sins are too complicated to be resolved. We are afraid of the consequences, but THE TASK IS WITHIN OUR GRASP!

Our Rabbis have a saying on this matter in the *Mishna*. They write:

Brachot 34/2 “Bemakom sh'baaley teshuva omdim afilu tzadikim gemurim einam omdim”

“The repentance (*teshuva*) of a sinner is always more powerful and reaches a greater degree of holiness (*kedusha*) than the repentance of a decent person.

One example of this we remember is our own righteous king of Israel, King David, who saw a beautiful woman by the name of Batsheva sunbathing on a roof and was attracted to her. Typically for a king, he called for her and slept with her. She was already married, and he knew that, but that did not deter him. His only concern was that he wanted her to be his wife, so he sent her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to die in a war. After Nathan the Prophet confronted King David about this, he was punished. But David did

get another chance to earn his greatness by accepting his faults and repenting and becoming a *Ba'al Teshuva*.

Rabbi Kook (the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine under the British mandate) wrote that when a person puts his sin in front of him and takes responsibility for his deeds, his soul will be elevated and he will taste the "holy freedom" that heals him and sets his agonies free. The reward of repentance is to be free!

The spiritual experience that Rabbi Kook is referring to is not only about the outcome of repenting on the legal side, it is also about the **feeling** that we get after realizing that we must transform our behavior and become better people. With every end, there is a new beginning. If we are brave enough to deal with our guilt and fears by revealing them and dealing with the consequences, there is no need to protect ourselves by secrecy. That chapter would end and a new one could begin.

This is the holy freedom that Rabbi Kook is referring to. And that is the reason that spiritually, great sinners that are brave enough to repent reach a high degree of *kedusha*, spirituality. Creating limits for ourselves can create the conditions for entering a new beginning, and that is what makes Yom Kippur so meaningful.

During one Yom Kippur when I was nine years old, after spending the whole day in mourning for my upset stomach, I chose to come in to the synagogue during the morning service. I sat next to my dad and asked myself how much more of this I could take when suddenly one of the older congregants collapsed on the floor--right in the middle of the cantor's words...

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People ran to help him, poured water over him and lifted his head and legs. My feet were stuck to the ground--I could not move! Suddenly it all came in to place. The prayer *Unetane Tokef* became real to me:

unetane tokef kedushat hayom ki hu nora ve-a'yom

"Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day
The tender sound of silence is heard
The angels gripped with fear and trembling declare in awe
This is the Day of Judgment
And all who dwell on earth
Stand arrayed before you"

I realized what I had been so afraid of, and this shock opened my mind and my soul. What was it? I felt energy building up within me, together with an obligation to worship

God, to mend the world. It wasn't about tomorrow or even about my future. It was now. Now or never!

The man began to recover, and I felt the water that was dripping from his face was the water of life, *mayim chayim*, the source of life that I found myself connected to.

It is said in the *Mishna* that Yom Kippur and the 15th of Av are the happiest days in the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur is a holy day AND our rabbis tell us that it is a **happy** holy day--if we choose to make use of it and bravely accept the gift of repentance!

**IF WE ACT NOW
IF WE REACH OUT
IF WE CLAIM OUR OPPORTUNITY
THEN WE MIGHT EXPERIENCE THE HOLY FREEDOM
AND CREATE A NEW BEGINNING.**