

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Ezra Ende, Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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## **The Holiest Day of the Year**

Today is the holiest day of the year and we are all here to touch holiness.  
How do we do it?

How will we succeed in immersing our self in holiness and not let it pass  
us by?

### In song

Some of us know the Chassidic tale of an orphan who lived in a small village and was adopted by some warm hearted Gentiles. They treated him very well and gave him a job as a shepherd. The boy knew he was Jewish but had no understanding of what this meant. He would go out each day with the flock and as he would watch the flock, he would sit on a rock and play his flute.

As the Jewish High Holidays neared, he saw many people traveling on the road going to the nearby city of Berdichev. Each day more and more people would pass the seldom-traveled road. Their presence aroused the boy's curiosity and he asked the travelers what the reason was for their travels.

"We are on the way to Berdichev, to spend the High Holy Days with the Tzaddik, (a pious and righteous man) Rabbi Levi Yitzchak," was the reply.

"High Holy Days?" the boy asked confused, "What is that?"

"It is the Jewish New Year, the entire world is being judged. The boy was taken aback. He really did not understand what it was all about. As he sat out in his field watching the sheep graze peacefully in the green pasture, he began to think about what the men said. Perhaps I should go with them, he thought. But then again, I don't know how to pray.

I only know that there is a God and that I am a Jew.

Several days later, he saw the people going back in the opposite direction.

He understood from this that the High Holidays had passed. How surprised he was the next week to see the pilgrimage to Berdichev repeated.

"Excuse me," he asked of the people, "why are you going again to Berdichev? Did you not just have the High Holidays?"

"Tomorrow is Yom Kippur," they explained, "We want to go to our house of gathering, our Beit K'neset, to pray for a good year."

"I thought that you did that last week for Rosh Hashanah? Why do you have to go again?"

The people replied by saying that judgment only begins on Rosh Hashanah, but it is sealed on Yom Kippur. You should come to Berdichev and pray also for a good year.

These words had an impact on the boy. As he sat out in the field playing his flute and watching the grazing flock, he felt a desire to go the synagogue in Berdichev. But he did not know how to pray. He did not even know how to read Hebrew. What could he do? He just sat in the field playing a mournful tune on his flute.

The next day was Yom Kippur. The young boy told his adopted family that he wanted to go to Berdichev, but he felt uneasy since he had never been inside a synagogue. They, being God-fearing and good-hearted people, encouraged him to go. Not knowing what to do, the boy went into the woods with his flute to meditate and think.

Meanwhile, in the small town of Berdichev, in Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's synagogue, the congregation was deep in prayer. The holy Tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, was not happy. He stood under his large Tallit, which covered his head and body, swaying in Holy Communion. He sensed that the prayers of the congregation were not making their way into the heavens. He tried, but in vain, to elevate the prayers.

At this time the young boy entered the synagogue. He was totally amazed at the sight of the people engaged in prayer. They were beseeching God to give them a good year.

The young boy, not totally understanding the scene that he saw, felt unhappy. Each person in the synagogue was able to communicate with God, but not him. He felt an urge to do something, but what could he do? He could not read Hebrew, he knew no prayer.

With streams of tears, he decided to play a tune to God. It was his way of communicating. He did not know that, in there, playing music on the holiest day of the year was forbidden.

He pulled out his flute and, in sincere concentration, dedicated a soul searching tune to God.

As he began to play his melody, the entire synagogue became astounded. They turned in anger to look at this terrible desecration of the Holy Day. As they shouted at him to stop this terrible desecration, the boy looked terrified. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak came running to the boy, smiling and joyous. "Ah," he laughed, "know that this boy's innocent mistake has saved our prayers."

The congregation stood back in awe of the Tzaddik's words. What had happened?

"This boy saved our prayers." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak continued, "I saw that our prayers were not ascending to the heavens. We were not able to pray with the purity and sincerity that are required to elevate our prayers into the heavenly courts. Suddenly, this boy with his unknowing error but pure heart and tears, began to play his flute. His purity was added to our prayers, and the doors of heaven opened up and our prayers were accepted. "We owe our thanks to this young man." He finished his words and took the young boy with him to the front of the synagogue. "You shall sit with me, for you have saved our prayers."

When I read this story I wondered, how many of us feel today like this young boy? How many of us are trying to express our inner voice but feel a little trapped in the crowd, the prayer book, the liturgy, the Hebrew?

We are all here to touch holiness. And it seems like we mention the word "holiness" quite frequently. Instead of trying to explain what holiness means, I would like for each of us to relate to a moment when we experienced holiness.

Sometimes we relate to holiness in a way we wouldn't necessarily define as religious. We see some relationships as being holy. A Jewish marriage is called KIDUSHIN (holiness) We sanctify ourselves to each other.

What is it that makes some relationships holy? Perhaps it is the feeling that we are willing to devote ourselves to others, when we can let go of our defenses.

What makes Yom Kippur holy and how can we get closer to God through prayer?

In Israel, people observe Yom Kippur in different ways--some inside synagogues, some outside in nature and some at home. But for everybody, time stops. 24 hours of being here and now. Here in the US we need to create holiness by entering a sacred space.

Yom Kippur is a day that unites us. It is not about families spending time together. No one rushes home. On the contrary, it is a time to see people that we haven't seen for a while. Everybody feels a strong sense of togetherness, of oneness! Today all of us face ourselves and our God.

When you came here last night, you entered a space that is not governed by time. The services continue repeatedly. In order to experience this sacred space and time no one should be in a rush.

Today we are here, now, with ourselves, with our congregation, with our God.

Our prayers on this day might help us let go of ourselves.

What are we guilty of?  
 Who did we betray?  
 Who did we deceive?

Can we forgive ourselves?

In the past, things might have been a bit more perceptible. On Yom Kippur the high priest would gather two goats and bring them to the Judean desert. He would put his hands over the goats and confess the sins of our people Israel. The goats would serve as atonement for the sins of the whole community. Then one goat would be sent to the wilderness which in the Torah is called LA'AZAZEL and one would be sacrificed to God. This way every body would see how their sins and transgressions are going up in flames.

And today we are here and have nothing to offer but our intentions and our prayers.

Can our prayers offer us atonement?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that when we pray we try to surrender ourselves and abandon every measure of pride.

**Our words are the altar and we are the sacrifice. We offer ourselves by looking inward in our prayers and, by doing so, we purify ourselves.** Yom Kippur offers us many opportunities to cleanse ourselves through prayer. Such an intense experience demands a high degree of comfort and a feeling of security, that we are in a secure place.

Do we need to isolate ourselves to do that? Or can we let go of ourselves here surrounded by our family, friends and community?

We are all here to touch holiness; how can we get closer?

By our thoughts? Our hearts?

We can also avoid touching holiness by looking at our watches.

*I encourage you to take your watches off today, physically or just spiritually.*

When we come to temple we want to be moved by what we see and hear. And we have every right to expect that because this day needs to be different--special and holy--we want to be moved in a way that would help us feel connected to something that is greater than us, to the magic of creation, to God...

Together we can try to push ourselves a little beyond the ordinary, a little beyond our usual selves, allow ourselves to pray with all our being, with our hearts, with

our voices, with our bodies. Let us open ourselves up and rise to God, just this one time.

Yom Kippur calls us to go beyond our usual routine and dedicate ourselves by fasting or changing our everyday practices.

I encourage each of you to choose something that you will, or will not do today, that will distinguish today, the holiest day of the year from all the other days.

Yom Kippur is the only Jewish holiday that takes precedence over Shabbat, Hopefully this soul searching CHESHBON NEFESH can help all of us connect to our inner selves and to God so we can reflect on this past year and remember the important things in life that we might have forgotten along the way.

I remember 16 years ago when I was stuck in the middle of the desert, I had a strong urge to go home...

*It was 5:00 in the morning the sky was dark blue and gradually the hills were becoming clearer in this beautifully and cursed dessert.*

*“How can such a miserable place be so beautiful...?”*

*My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of steps that got louder and louder as my friend was walking towards me.*

*We walked past each other without saying a word. I knew how eager he was to get to bed and go to sleep.*

*I was preparing myself to enjoy this guard shift .. watch the sunrise, experience the awakening of this wild and beautiful land. Oh, there is so much that I could think of during this guarding shift: My beautiful girlfriend (who is now my wife), my precious family, my friends, my future, and so many songs I could sing without caring what I sounded like. By now I knew how to take advantage of this time by myself. After all this was my third year in the Army. But this day was different. I had something on his mind that drove me crazy.*

*Earlier this week my commander held a lottery to determine what would be the order of the leaves. Unbelievably, I was the one that got the longest leave. I got to go home for Yom Kippur, and that meant two nights. I was so excited!*

*This year Yom Kippur felt like heaven on earth. Being at home seemed more than I could have hoped for. But an hour later rumors started spreading that we might be sent to join the rest of our platoon in Gaza, which meant that I could say good bye to my dream vacation...*

*By now the sun was already shining. It was only 6:00 AM and already about 80 degrees. The heat and my nervousness were rising at the same pace.*

*I thought that maybe it was better for me to guard now. Ironically, for me these guarding shifts were always a shelter. On one hand I was defending the base and, therefore, standing at the fire zone. But on the other hand I was protected from watchful eyes and irritating commanders.*

*When the shift ended I went back to my tent.*

*At 2:00 PM we still didn't know what would happen. I was so afraid of the answer to the question, so I decided not to ask, but just to wait ...*

*Two hours after that, my commander walked over and said "What are you doing here? Go – leave!" "Can I go?" I asked. "Well," said the commander, "If you can manage to find a way to get out of here."*

*The army base was located in the middle of the desert, and the closest Jewish settlement was about 30 miles a way.*

*Against all the odds, I dragged my duffel bag to the gate and waited for some salvation. By now there was a better chance for aliens to land there than for someone to drive through.*

*It was Erev Yom Kippur, the fast was only 2 hours a way and people were already gathering to eat their dinners. Besides, during Yom Kippur most of the Israeli roads are blocked.*

*I chose to sit down at the gate and wait. The guard told me that it was crazy to think that someone would drive by when in fact the flies were the only moving force around, but I wouldn't leave. Another hour has passed.*

*Do you believe in miracles?*

*Well- You can't argue with the facts... Five minutes later a red sports car was standing at the gate and two tourists pulled their heads out and asked, "Do you know how to get to the Dead Sea?"*

*Before they had a chance to finish their question I already answered, "Well I can't quite explain, but if you will take me with you I could definitely show you where it is."*

*I had no idea how to get to the Dead Sea –but I did know that those tourists were sent to save me–so I hopped in their car and lead them to... Jerusalem, and then explained to them how to get to the Dead Sea. Only by then they had already decided to change their plans and go to Tel Aviv.*

*I got out and walked the rest of the way.*

*There were no vehicles on the roads. I heard the beautiful sound of silence as I walked through the Ben Yehuda market (usually the noisiest place in Jerusalem), the SHUK market's alleys were completely empty, everything seemed cleaner, and I felt certain sweetness in the air.*

*I walked through poor neighborhoods and expensive neighborhoods. The same silence was kept throughout. There was hardly anyone in the streets—no cars, no buses, no noise. I came down from the sidewalk and walked on the road.*

*Walking on the road was a physical reassurance that it was really Yom Kippur. Israelis always walk on the streets on Yom Kippur it's the only day of the year when the roads are completely empty.*

*While I walked, I sensed the excitement in the air and also felt a little strange being there while most of my friends were in Gaza. I also got to Jerusalem in a way that wasn't completely "kosher" because those poor tourists didn't get to see the Dead Sea.*

We all make mistakes, all have our moments of weakness and wrong doings. Today we are called to confess our sins, let go of our defenses and in doing so get closer to God and set ourselves free.