

# Become the Change You Most Want to See in the World

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With every *Kol Nidrei* night comes the realization that each of us is a year older. The question is: are we a year wiser?

Yom Kippur holds a special urgency for me. I can hardly believe it, but I've reached that point in my life where there are more years behind me than there are ahead of me. For all of us who have reached that point in life the words of Bachya Ibn Pakuda, one of our great medieval sages, truly resonate: "The days of our lives are like scrolls. Write on them only what you want to be remembered about you."

Our Rabbis teach that every human being possesses two tendencies, a *yetzer hatov*, a good impulse, and a *yetzer hara*, a bad impulse. This means all of us are capable of great good and great evil. Each of us is both a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde. Each of us, says famed psychologist Carl Jung, has a shadow, a side of ourselves we are not proud of and do not like.

In asserting the duality of human nature, Judaism insists our fate is not predetermined by original sin, the belief that human beings are innately flawed. Judaism insists we are free to choose whether we will turn in the direction of our *yetzer hatov* or our *yetzer hara*. The choice is ours to make. Since this choice looms so large in contemporary film, our human struggle between good and evil must be constantly weighing on our minds. From Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort to Frodo and Gollum in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and to Luke and Darth Vader in the Star Wars epic, what we crave to know is whether or not our beloved hero and anti-hero will choose the good side or the dark side.

Yom Kippur embraces both sides of our human dialectic. On the one hand, this sacred day proclaims we are always capable of change. We can always choose to make a different choice in the present. Our future is never defined by our past. On the other hand, we readily confess many times over during these 24 hours that "We have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed."

Do you remember the Woody Allen line "In my family, the worst sin was paying retail"? In truth, each of us has paid retail – and done far worse. We have compromised our integrity, done things we knew were wrong, and given in to more temptations than we care to admit.

For the next 24 hours, we acknowledge the real truth about ourselves. Notice, however, that none of us is forced to say publicly, "This is what I did." Our liturgy of confession is invariably couched in the plural, never the singular. Our individual misdeeds are subsumed into the

collective “we.” This is our Jewish tradition’s sensitive way of helping each of us to save face. And the collective “we” is also our tradition’s way of saying that life is a journey, and it is far better to go on that journey together, rather than alone. This reminds me of a beautiful story told by Rabbi Harold Kushner:

“I watched two children who had been building an elaborate sandcastle by the sea. The castle had gates and towers and moats. What a huge and utterly neat creation. But, just when the children had nearly finished their project, a wave came and washed away all their work.

“I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead of lifting up cries of protest, they ran up the shoreline, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another sand castle.”

Rabbi Kushner concludes, “All things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy building, are built on sand. Only our relationships to people endure. Sooner or later, the waves will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When this happens, only the person who has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh and endure.”

Tonight, we derive both strength and comfort from each other. We truly need each other. For *Kol Nidrei* summons us to reflect seriously on our sand castles – to revisit our personal triumphs and our tribulations during the past year. Looking back is never easy. But if we want to move forward with our lives, we must first look back.

On this *Kol Nidrei* night, we revisit our choices over the past year, and the prices we paid as the consequence of those choices. We ask ourselves: What brought me the most joy in the past year? What brought me the most regret? Of what am I the most proud? Of what am I not so proud?

On this Day of Atonement, we restore the balance of our humanity. We bring ourselves back to the core of our being. We take back responsibility for the future direction of our lives. We summon up the resolve to change those things in our lives that have really got to change.

How do we make sure that this New Year will not be just a repeat of the last? How do we make this New Year truly different? How do we access the best that is within us? Where do we find the inspiration and the strength to change the direction of our lives?

Let me tell you a story. The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the famous Chasidic singer, used to travel around the world to give concerts. Once he visited a small town in eastern Europe, after the collapse of the Former Soviet Union. Unlike most people he met, the people of this town wanted nothing to do with him. They were cold, distant. All except for one man. Carlebach found one man who was loving, open, accepting. He spent some time with this man, and before he was about to leave, Rabbi Carlebach asked him the question that had been burning inside him.

“There is something I need to know. I understand the people of this town. I realize why they want nothing to do with a singing Rabbi from the west. After all, they were devastated by the

Holocaust. Then they lived for close to fifty years under the jackboot of communism. I understand their anger. What I don't understand is you. Why are you so loving, why are you so different?"

The man smiled. "I know why, and I can tell you when it happened. I am an old man, and I have lived in this town my entire life. And I recall one night before the first World War, a rumor swept through the town that there would be a pogrom. We were told that the Cossacks were coming, and they would loot, pillage, steal and destroy. So all the parents from the entire town gathered up all the children and brought us to the Rabbi's house. It was the dead of winter. Scattered throughout the Rabbi's house were all the children of the village, sleeping on his floor, in the kitchen, the living room, the study. The Rabbi paced up and down all night looking out over the children as we slept. I was curled up in a small corner of the Rabbi's study. He thought I was sleeping. But I could not sleep because it was bitter cold. The Rabbi came up behind me and slipped his cloak off his shoulders, and he laid it over me and said, 'Good child, sweet child.'"

"You know," said the man to Rabbi Carlebach, "It has been seventy-five years since the Rabbi spread his coat over me – but it still keeps me warm....."

Over these next 24 hours - holy 24 hours - from sundown tonight through sundown tomorrow, please think about who kept has you warm. Think about all the goodness you've been given, all the blessings you've received. Take this warmth and pass it forward. Feel this warmth and become - *become* - the change you most want to see in this world.