

Spirituality in Every Day Life

For Kol Nidrei

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In her poem, "Over There," poet Merle Feld writes, "Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I get a glimpse of my life. Quickly then I make a shopping list or rent a video. Quickly, I look away."

When was the last time you got a true glimpse of your life? On this Yom Kippur night, we must not look away. We must fight our human inclination to avoid those glimpses, for fear of what we might actually find. We must ask ourselves: what's this resistance of mine all about? What truth am I defending myself against?

In truth, we need these glimpses into our lives. If we are ever to become whole, content, and at peace, we must courageously face those aspects of our lives in need of tikkun, in need of repair.

One Yom Kippur morning, the Rabbi noticed little Alex staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the synagogue. It was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it.

The seven year old boy had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the Rabbi walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good Yom Tov, Alex."

"Good Yom Tov, Rabbi," replied the young man, all the while still focussed on the plaque. Then Alex asked, "Rabbi Bernstein, what is this?"

"Well, Alex, it's a memorial to all those who died in the service," explained the Rabbi. Somberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Finally, Alex asked, "which service did them in rabbi? Was it Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?"

Kol Nidrei. What is it that makes this night so powerful, so compelling, so haunting?

This night is a threshold moment:

We stand in between the old year and the new.

We stand in between our old selves and the new.

This night brims with pure possibility:

Will we choose to make this New Year one of resignation and repetition?

Or will we choose to make this New Year one of rebirth and renewal?

Kol Nidrei summons us to honest reflection.

Ask yourself, in the year gone by:

What brought you the most joy?

What brought you the most regret?

And what will you do about them both in this New Year?

Kol Nidrei summons us to honest reflection.

Ask yourself: for the New Year that has just begun

What do you most hope to achieve?

What do you most hope to birth within yourself?

"On Rosh Hashanah it's written, on Yom Kippur it's sealed...who shall live and who shall die."

Taken not as literal truth but as religious metaphor, the unetannah tokef prayer speaks to the human reality that life is precious and life is finite. One moment we are here and the next moment we are no more. "great is the gift of life; greater still that we know our life is a gift."

But if life is so precious why, then, do we squander most of it? Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "ask the average person which is more important to him, making money or being devoted to his family, and virtually everyone will answer family without hesitation. But watch how the average person actually lives out his life. See where he really invests his

time and energy, and he will give away the fact that he does not really live by what he says he believes."

And so it goes. The things we almost do. The help we almost give. "Someday" we will spend more time with our spouses. But not today.

"Someday" we will devote more time to our children. But not today. "Someday" we will forgive our brothers and sisters. But not today. Is it a coincidence that the torah reading for tomorrow morning mentions what we must do "today" sixteen times?

All of us know how to make a living – for some, a living beyond our wildest imaginations. But most of us still don't know how to live or what to live for. Comedian George Carlin said something once that was actually eloquent: "life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

Tomorrow afternoon we shall read the Book Of Jonah. Of all the biblical books why this particular book on Yom Kippur? Rabbi Vicki Hollander explains, "We are told, go and learn from the water. ..We are likened to fish. They rise to feed, and sometimes are caught, reminding us we, too, are easily ensnared, trapped in nets of life, eaten....How to survive the meshes of the mundane? How to go beyond eating the crumbs thrown to us?" for we be not fish, but humans, the nets we weave for ourselves."

Our daily lives can be consumed by trivial pursuits, minutiae, leaving little time for the stuff that really matters, the things that make life worthwhile. But we can transform our lives -- perhaps even make them into works of art-- by bringing a sense of spirituality into our everyday existence.

Spirituality means many different things to

Different people. For me, spirituality in everyday life begins with practicing peace. "The paradox of our time is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints " [Carlin].

Practicing peace begins with this simple question: how often do you yell? How often do you leave unsaid the word of praise or affection to your spouse, your child, your employee?

A Rabbi was once warned that his severest opponent was headed for his home, ready for a confrontation. When the adversary burst into the Rabbi's home, the Rabbi raised his hand and uttered one word: efshar. Perhaps. "Perhaps, you're wrong; maybe I am right. Maybe you are right and perhaps I am wrong." at that, they fell into earnest conversation.

Like the ripples from a rock thrown in the water, yelling has far-reaching implications. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh explains, "violence is never far away. We see the seeds

of violence in our everyday thought, speech, and actions. The daily wars that occur within our thoughts and our families have everything to do with the wars fought between peoples and nations throughout the world."

So let us keep the words of the psalmist ever before us: "seek peace and pursue it" [Psalm 34: 15]. Practicing peace means to stop yelling. Practicing peace means we can always say Efshar – perhaps—and talk.

Spirituality in everyday life means living

Fully in the present moment. While spending ten days in overlook hospital and three weeks recuperating at home, one of my most vivid memories is the speed at which we move around here in the New York area. I thought to myself, "You don't have to be sick to realize this rush we call normative is insane." And I felt badly because I knew I couldn't keep up. That experience gave me a glimpse into how the infirm elderly and the chronically ill among us may feel all the time.

Living fully in the present moment means bringing all our conscious awareness, all our focussed attention to whatever is before us.

A Chassidic Rebbe was once asked what his most important priority was. He replied, "Whatever I am doing at the moment."

Living fully in the present moment enables us to be fully present for others. Our ability to live in the moment – our quality of presence – "can begin or end a relationship, invite people to stand tall or make them feel like cringing. It can curse or bless, heal or hurt" [Robert Morris].

Living fully in the present means gathering

For ourselves a treasury of moments to cherish forever. Living in the present moment means "there's nothing more precious than now" [Stephen Paul] and there's

Always time to hug, to kiss, to smell the roses.

The past is over. The future is a mystery. Today is all we have. The present moment is a gift.

Spirituality in everyday life means looking for God in others. Looking for God in others is not always easy. Sometimes people won't act on the highest that is within them. Sometimes we won't see the godliness in others, blinded by our own critical natures or childhood wounds.

One of the best ways to look for God in others is by building sacred community. No man or woman is an island. It is no coincidence that the Hebrew word for life – lechayyim – is grammatically in the plural. There is no life in the singular. All of us want and need community. The Talmud puts it very well: chevruta o mituta "community or death" (b.t. ta'anit 23a).

But living in community, like living in a family, comes with inherent tensions. Sacred community addresses those tensions and brings out the best in people. Sacred community is about helping a group of very different people to balance polarities –needs versus wants, desires versus constraints, tradition versus innovation, action versus reflection—and remain a community.

Joining a temple is easy. Creating a sacred community within that temple is hard work. Temple Sinai will become a sacred community when this community stays true to Jewish values and acts out of a shared vision, includes everyone and values everyone's contributions, shares responsibility for success, cultivates warm, close human relationships, and encourages open and honest conversation. Then looking for God in each other will be a whole lot easier too.

Forging sacred community is precisely what our synagogue 2000 team has devoted itself to learn how to do, and the team is now ready to come forward and share its insights and experiences for the benefit of the congregation as a whole. All of us have a vested interest in helping Temple Sinai become a sacred community.

Spirituality in everyday life means looking for God within oneself. During my recuperation, I often found myself filled with anxiety. I couldn't understand it. My surgery had been successful and I was finally able to eat solid foods. And then it came to me. I was anxious because I was not being productive. I could not work. All I could do at home was "be." and that didn't feel okay. I had never realized to what extent my sense of self-worth and value, my ego, had become invested in my work and productivity.

But looking for God within oneself means knowing that we are so much more than what we do for a living or how much money we make or how efficient we are. Each of us is created betzelem elohim in the image of God. "we dance with spirit, drawn by the light beyond"[Hollander].

How we love, how we rest, how we "be" is far more significant than how we work.

The great prophet Isaiah wrote, "holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of God's glory." I love that verse so much that I had it inscribed on the neckpiece of my tallit. When is the earth full of God's glory? When each of us recognizes the godly place within us and resolves to bring more godliness into the world.

On this Kol Nidrei night, we say goodbye to our old selves and hello to our new and,

hopefully, improved selves. Each of us is given the chance to reinvent ourselves for the 21st century, to rethink how you live and what you live for.

"as the year is birthed yet again...we come and cast that which weighs us down, and release it into the water, that we might leave the shore lighter, cleansed, kissed by waters' lips. A step closer toward coming home" [Hollander].

The Talmud gives us several fanciful stories of what the heavenly court will ask when we give an accounting of our lives. I imagine the interview going something like this:

Did you practice peace?

Did you live fully in the present moment?

Did you hear the sounds of breaking hearts and the cries for help from lonely souls?

Were you careful with your words knowing that your loved ones, friends and strangers will carry your words with them forever?

Were you aware that the needs of the world are infinite and yet you could make a difference?

Did you look for God in others?

Did you look for God within yourself?

Questions. Lots of questions. Open-ended questions. Tonight, each of us must begin finding our own answers for them and for the biggest question of them all:

What can your life still become?