

Pluralism and Praying With Those We Are Sure Are Wrong

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Shana Tova. Given how much was happening with the synagogue this year, the board and I reached a mutual decision for me to take three, instead of six, months of sabbatical this past spring. I am grateful to our community for the renewal those months gave to me in my seventh year as Beth El's rabbi. For the remaining three months, I submitted an application to participate in the 7th cohort of the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel. RLI includes spending one month each summer at Hartman in Jerusalem with a selected group of 25-30 North American rabbis; during that time we will immerse in Jewish learning with an aim towards meeting contemporary challenges around Jewish identity with ever-increasing intellectual and moral sophistication. I'm pleased to announce that just a few days ago I found out I was accepted to that program.

Our community has many connections with the Hartman Institute. Rabbi Sager was a student in the first RLI cohort and has spent more than 20 summers as a student of its late founder, Rabbi David Hartman (z"l) and as a teacher in the Hartman Beit Midrash. Here in Durham, Duke's Chief Representative of Muslim Affairs, Imam Abdullah Antepli - a close friend of our congregation and I am willing to wager the only Imam in the world who has served as a host of a Yiddish concert, "What's Not to Like?" – is a co-founder with Yossi Klein Halevi of the Muslim Leadership Initiative, an internationally known program that aims to build relationships of understanding, respect, and trust between North American Muslim and Jewish communities. Finally, as many of you know, this year, I'll be teaching a class at the JCC called Jewish Values and the Israeli / Palestinian Conflict based upon the curricular materials of the Hartman Institute in the hopes of raising the level and sophistication of discourse in our community about a place and a subject that means so much to so many. So far, more than 80 people are registered for the course and enrollment is still open.

What I want to share with you today is based upon a shiur recently given by Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. While the subject is from Yom Kippur, my hope is that it can serve as a useful kavannah, a helpful Torah for our community to meditate upon during the 10 days of repentance that bridge this 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

In just over a week from now, we will gather here for Kol Nidrei. Because of the fire code, we cannot invite people who've lost someone in the past year to each light a yartzeit candle, but, with thanks to David Klapper and the Chevrei Kaddisha, those who have a loved one who died in the past year will be invited forward to take a stone upon which it is written Yizkor / Remember to hold onto during Yom Kippur and eventually place on the grave of their loved one or to keep in a special place as a memory of this year of grief. We will remove two, not five, sifrei Torah from our ark, and walk them through the bottom level as we chant Or Zarua and then we'll gather back here and Eric will chant Kol Nidrei. But right before those haunting notes, there is a

too often overlooked line with which Yom Kippur begins – “Anu Matirin l’hitpallel im ha’Abaryanim” / “We are permitted to pray with Abaryanim.” That word is translated many different ways: most classically as “sinners”; in modern Hebrew it is the word for “criminals”; it is related to the word Hebrew – Abraham in the bible is known as an Ivri because the root means “to cross over” and Abraham was known in Israel as one who had crossed over the Great Euphrates river – so another reasonable translation is “trespassers” but for the purpose of this sermon, I’d like us to think about it as “people we are sure are wrong.”

Kurtzer proposes three possible interpretations of why we begin Yom Kippur this way. The first, which he sees as “nice” but not spiritually productive, is to read this phrase as something we are saying to ourselves. In other words, rather than think of it as something said by an “us” to a “them,” what we are doing is beginning by acknowledging that there is a part of all of us that has made mistakes and we are giving permission to be fully present, to bring ALL of our selves to Yom Kippur. This is certainly a nice idea but is a bit unsatisfactory because while that may be a helpful kavannah / intention for that moment, that is not really what the words say. The words seem to have an “us” and a “them,” a subject and an object.

The second possible interpretation is to understand the phrase rather paternalistically – “we” the righteous people permit “them,” those who we believe are not righteous, those we are sure are wrong, to pray with us. Interestingly, this is probably close to what these words meant in their original historical context. Most scholars believe the phrase entered Jewish liturgy as a communal response to the situation of conversos – to when Jewish communities were threatened – either convert to Christianity or die – and when some Jews chose to convert and live outwardly Christian lives but, on Yom Kippur, would return to synagogue to ask forgiveness from God for the choice they made. At that moment, communal leaders might have said to the community – we who did not outwardly convert give permission to you who did to be here and to pray with us on this day of forgiveness.

But, even if this is historically accurate, such an interpretation is not satisfactory for two reasons: first, because most people through most of Jewish history have continued to say these words not knowing that explanation and second, we are lucky enough to live in a place and a time when Jews do not face that choice and so, even if that’s what the words meant long ago, we are still challenged to ask what it might mean for us to hear these words a little more than a week from now.

The third possible interpretation is to understand the phrase as a spiritual and religious challenge for Yom Kippur, namely that Yom Kippur requires us to constitute community precisely with those people who we feel sure are wrong, who are beyond the boundaries of what we feel should constitute Jewish community. Many of us see Yom Kippur as a deeply personal day – as a day of introspection for me, of reflection on the choices I made in the year which has passed, and that is an important and perfectly legitimate approach to the holiday. But in the Torah, Yom Kippur is not primarily an individual day – it is a day where the community – through the elaborate ritual of the High Priest in the Temple – hopes to attain forgiveness and purification from sin. This last interpretation pushes us not merely to allow or tolerate the presence of

abaryanim in the room, but presents us with the radical possibility that the very purposes of Yom Kippur cannot be achieved without them. That at the beginning of Yom Kippur, we declare ourselves as in community, as a community constituted with “them,” people who we are sure are wrong and beyond what we understand to be the boundaries of community.

Religious communities are particularly susceptible to “monism,” to what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called, in his 1958 essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” described as single truths and the dangerous things people will do to preserve their sense of truth over others’ truth. It is easy to imagine one fervent believer looking around at Kol Nidrei and saying, “How can we allow “them” to be here? We are praying to God for forgiveness and if our communal fate depends on them, there is no way we can succeed!” This third interpretation raises the possibility that these words are part of our liturgy precisely to combat that impulse.

Lest you think that my topic today is merely theoretical, as the person who talks and counsels as wide a swath of our community as I can manage, I can tell you that in the past year, I have received letters from – and spoken with – people in this congregation and in the community at large, from many points of view along the ideological spectrum - in regards to American politics, and in regards to Israel – challenging me, encouraging me to declare, from the bimah, that one group or another should simply be, beyond the pale, of the Jewish community.

I want to offer that perhaps our communal work this High Holidays, of preparing for and experiencing Yom Kippur, can be to think about the possibility that a praying community on Yom Kippur is incomplete without the presence of those in our community who “know” are wrong.

I want to be intellectually honest in making this suggestion. Exclusion and disqualification has some roots in the Jewish tradition. In his law code, Maimonides argues that, “When a judge knows that a fellow judge is a robber or a wicked person, it is forbidden to sit in judgment with him, as it is stated: “Keep distant from words of falsehood.”” And, while such a practice might be understandable for the sake of the integrity of the legal system, he goes on to say that Jerusalem’s men of character would not only not sit in judgement or sign a document with those whose character could not be vouchsafed, they also “would not enter a feast until they knew who would be joining them.” The movement of that sort of disqualification or exclusion from the court to the table may ensure some sort of ideological purity but it risks making the creation of political and religious community nearly impossible.

When it comes to a religious, prayer community, there is also a deep sense of inclusivity rooted in the Jewish tradition. There is a story in the Jerusalem Talmud, Ta’anit 64b:

Rabbi Abbahu [had a dream in which he was told] that Pantokakos [=Mr. Completely Evil] should pray so that rain would come down. Rabbi Abbahu sent and had him brought before him. He said, “What is your profession?” He said, “I commit five sins every day. I sweep the theater. I hire out prostitutes. I carry their [the prostitutes’] garments to the baths. I clap and dance before them. And I clash the cymbals before them.” [Kurtzer argues that this person is not a pimp, but a sort of prostitutional custodian ☺] He said to him, “What good deed have you done?” He said to him, “One day when I was sweeping

the theater, a certain woman entered. She stood behind a column [posing as a prostitute] and wept. I said to her, 'What is the matter?' She said, 'My husband is incarcerated and I want to see what I can do to free him.' I sold my bed and bedding and gave her its cost, and I said to her, 'This is for you. Free your husband and do not sin.'" He [R. Abbahu] said to him, "You are worthy to pray and to be answered.

There are two ways to read this story. One is that the moral of the story is that no one – not even Mr. Evil! is fully imperfect; that everyone has something to offer. But a second, complementary reading may be that people who we view as completely sinful may have access to a whole area of our moral negotiations that, without them, we will never see, and that there is goodness and righteousness being negotiated in corners of our own community that we, who see ourselves as good and right, cannot see without making an active decision to incorporate them into our communal field of vision.

In Exodus 30:34, we read,

קח־לֶךָ סַמִּים נְטֹף | וְשִׁחֲלֹת וְחֶלְבֵנָה סַמִּים וּלְבָנָה זָכָה בְּדָבָר יִהְיֶה:

Take the herbs stacte, onycha, and galbanum—these herbs together with pure frankincense; let there be an equal part of each.

And on the word “galbanum,” Rashi explains: This is a malodorous spice which is called galbanum. Scripture enumerates it among the spices of the incense to teach us that we should not regard as a light thing the duty of associating ourselves when we band together for fasts and prayers with Israelites who are transgressors” and, he brings a statement from the Talmud, Mesechet Keritot 6b, “any fast that doesn’t include the sinners of Israel is not a true fast. For behold galbanum has a foul smell and yet the Scripture counts it among the ingredients of the incense.”

To be clear, please do not misunderstand me: I am not declaring or hinting or saying with a wink/wink, nudge/nudge from this bimah that certain people or groups in our community should be understood as “sinners.” I am arguing that perhaps the spiritual challenge of the next ten days is for us to ask ourselves – who are those people who we think of as sinners, as people who are wrong and beyond the pale, and what would it mean to constitute community with them? To acknowledge that our own perspective on the world is limited, that people are complex and contained within each of us are worlds, and that people are not static, but change and grow and evolve and that the people we see one day may not be the people we saw yesterday or will see tomorrow.

There are limits and weaknesses to what I’ve been saying today. One is that we dare not re-victimize those who have been hurt before. If someone has, God forbid, committed crimes that are abusive or destructive, a Jewish community of prayer may reasonably make decisions to protect people in its midst from re-experiencing the trauma of their experience through an unwanted confrontation with their abuser. Pluralism should not require self-immolation. But absent extreme circumstances, I believe we, as a community, are capable of opening ourselves

wide; that we are capable and even responsible of loving one another not in spite of the complexity that sometimes entails, but precisely because of it.

I will finish with one more story.

Someone came to me in the last few months, interested in our community, but knowing that s/he thinks differently than others. This person wondered: “Will I be safe here?” The answer I gave may surprise you.

Lovingly and gently, I told this person that was not something I could promise. I said that in part because something that I know quite well ☺ is that a rabbi isn’t in charge of every interaction that takes place in his or her community; that Judaism is a tradition of ideals that, like all religions, is embodied by a congregation of imperfect people.

But I told this person that, a deeper level, safety was not something I could promise because while it is true that a religious community must be a sanctuary, that Judaism must be in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, “a comfort for the afflicted,” a true community should not be “clean” of those we think are wrong, that part of the purpose of religious communities is to push us to beyond where we are comfortable, to love more than we know ourselves to be capable of. Real communities give us access to a world of good being done in corners of the world we don’t otherwise allow ourselves to go.

This sense of deep pluralism is part of what drew me to Beth El in the fall of 2009 when I first interviewed for the job. A community with an egalitarian and an Orthodox minyan, with a love for tradition and a welcoming embrace of people whoever they are and wherever they are in their journey – these things are some of what I love most about Beth El; it is a pluralism I struggle for us to hold onto in a world that needs it so desperately. May we be blessed to do this work together between now and Yom Kippur, and for many, many more years to come.