

WHY GOD WANTS JEWS

Erev Rosh Hashanah / 5768

It is a well-known fact that Rabbi Kushner likes movies. He likes to watch them. Discuss them. He even likes to preach about them. Especially on the High Holy Days. This has become such common knowledge that congregants have been known to start pools trying to predict which movie of the past year will be featured in one of Kushner's High Holy Day sermons. Sometimes they even guess right.

I am predictable, it is true. But this year's entry for *Best High Holy Day Sermon Film* is something off the radar screen, even for me.

This past summer Aviva and I went up to Maine, just the two of us. It was our kind of "On Golden Pond" *Jewish-style*. No loons—just seagulls, hawks and a couple of cranes. We had a great time, with the help of a little Divine intervention. You see, we couldn't get Internet service up there, so we actually had to *talk* to each other. But we also had our laptops...and our DVDs.

One night Aviva says to me, "Dad you have to watch this. It's absolutely incredible." I confess that I had never heard of *Planet Earth*, but that just shows the limits of my so-called 'expertise'. We never did watch an entire episode of this extraordinary BBC documentary, let alone the entire series. Aviva kept on trying to find this one particular scene where a Great White Shark jumps entirely out of the water to catch a seal, but I did see a lot of "parts" of scenes. (The scene of the shark, by the way, is *really* amazing.) Yet what impressed me most about the series was the perspective it offered—especially about what it means to be a human being.

Like an omniscient observer, the high-definition camera mounted on the underside of the helicopter and the dramatic cadence of narrator David Attenborough offers the viewer an extraordinary view of this planet we call "Home". Like Jacques Cousteau and Carl Sagan before, Attenborough introduces us to our world in ways we never thought possible. *Planet Earth* allows us to see how marvelous this creation is, how beautiful is the miracle of life, and on some level how humbling it is to consider that we are just another species sharing this green planet.

Watching these remarkable scenes of polar bears and elephants and wild dogs and exotic birds, one cannot help but appreciate that we—as human beings—are just another of earth's inhabitants. So much so that when you would see these animals behaving in ways instinctive you couldn't help but compare them...to us. "We do that, too," you think to yourself. The way that mother elephant treats her young is no different than the way we interact with our children. The way those birds migrate to the warmer climates is really the same as do we. Because, of course, we too are just another species of animal. Cohabitants of *Planet Earth*.

"Further south the winter snows have almost cleared from the arctic tundra," narrates Attenborough. (The British accent really makes a difference.) "Northern Canada's wild frontier. Here nature stages one of her greatest dramas. Every year 3 million caribou migrate across the arctic tundra...Some herds travel over two thousand miles a year, in search of fresh pastures. This is the longest overland migration made by any animal."

And then I began to wonder, what if *Planet Earth* were to examine the behavior of human beings? What if David Attenborough were to narrate an episode examining our behavior from

the air, no differently than if we were caribou, or sea lions, or salmon? And then I began to wonder further, what if there were a particular episode devoted exclusively to the behaviors of Jews? Especially on Rosh Hashanah?

“Each year, following the summer escapes to the less stressful destinations of pleasure, the Jew gathers his energies for re-entry into the drama of daily living. Collecting her young, reuniting with her mother and father, the female and her partner make their way with the other Hebrews and those who have chosen to walk with their tribe toward the sacred ground of the community. They eschew the duties of daily living for this bi-annual pilgrimage to squeeze into a narrow space, remain in a seated position on painfully uncomfortable contraptions, to listen to the curious intonation of a ram’s horn. Then, now having affirmed their commonality, having remained in a static position for nearly three hours, they emerge into the late summer mid-day sunlight to go their separate ways, to return to their dwellings...and dine on excessive portions of carbohydrates and uniquely-treated strips of salmon imported from Canada’s northland.” (That’s “*bagels and Lox*” for those of you unable to follow my creative narration.)

The caricature aside, I often wonder why it is we do what we do? Why *are* we here today? What must this phenomenon look like to an uninformed outside observer? Why *do* we put aside our daily routines, gather with loved ones, to join together? Are we here to acknowledge our shared faith? But surely we do not all believe the same things. Do we come to this space to celebrate our common heritage, our legacy as members of a people with a unique history (if not destiny)? Have we gathered out of a sense of tradition, of obligation, or is our presence here this evening an act of affirmation and identification? Is it a search for community? A search for meaning? A search for resolution to internal conflict?

Whatever it may be, there is *something* that compels us to be here. (And I’m not including parents here.) There is a voice within that says, “This is important. This is of value. Even more, there is a reason we are Jews. There is meaning to our existence as a people. Today I come here to affirm that reality.”

And that begs the question: What is that reality? What is our *raison d’etre*? Why does God want Jews?

The *Sefat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (the *Gerer Rebbe*), answers this question in his commentary on *Shirat HaYam*—the Song of the Sea. He’s intrigued by the opening word of the Song—Az. “*Then* sang Moses and Israel”...” When you begin a statement with the word “Then”, you are left to presume that it follows something, that whatever is about to happen is in direct relation to what has preceded it. Commencing the Song of the Sea—the original Mission Statement of the Jewish people—with the word “Then” teaches us that Israel sang God’s praises only in consequence to something which occurred before. This, he suggests, was their discovering of faith, as the verse immediately prior to the *Shir* is “...and they came to have faith in God and in Moses, His servant.”

But—the *Gerer Rebbe* goes on—they were still confused. They couldn’t understand why they had to be redeemed from Egypt in the first place? Why was it necessary for Israel to be enslaved, to endure oppression, only to be later redeemed? But once they witnessed the extraordinary *ge’ulah* or redemption at the Sea, they came to appreciate that they were to be *keilim* or vessels or instruments, that the living under oppression was to teach them in order that, once they have tasted freedom, they would truly appreciate the sweetness of freedom and

thereby be emboldened to emerge and raise their voices in song. That the *Az yashir*—the “*Then they sang...*” suggests that once they understood the meaning of their oppression, they knew what was required of them.

In other words, we are a people that was created to sing. *Az yashir Moshe uv'nei Yisraeil*—*Then Moses and Israel sang...* means that ours is to sing of God and freedom. To sing of hope and redemption. And this is why in the Torah, in Deuteronomy where the *Shema* is inscribed, the last letter of the first word *Shema*—*ayin*, and the last letter of the last word *Echad*—*dalet* are ‘enlarged’. The *ayin* and the *dalet* stand twice as high as the other letters. They are twice as bold. Prominently they present themselves to the reader’s eyes: *ayin* and *dalet*—together they spell *Ayd* and that means Witness. To remind us, to recite *Shema Yisraeil*, to live *Shema Yisraeil*, to be a Jew is to serve witness to God.

And so the *Sefat Emet* continues by pointing out that Isaiah confirmed this notion when he said, “*Am zu yatzarti li tehilati y'sapeiru*—This people I have formed in order that they might sing my praise.”

But, of course, it is not enough to simply sing God’s praise. It is not enough to live our lives reciting, “Praise the Lord.” For Jews, we are judged not by our beliefs but by our behaviors. To serve witness to God, to be *keilim* or vessels requires not so much that we merely carry the words of God but that we embrace and embody the *spirit* of those words. We are to be *kadosh*—holy, because God is holy. And the way in which we reflect God’s holiness is by doing for others what God has done for us. To be redeemers. Hence, for Isaiah, we were not created merely to sing God’s praise but to praise God through our actions. So Isaiah also teaches:

“I, *Adonai*, in My grace, have summoned you, I have taken you by the hand. I created you, and made you a covenant people, a light unto the nations—opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

This is why we exist as a people. And this is why we are here this evening. To re-enchant ourselves with our mission as a people dedicated to the repairing of the world.

It is in this context that we are to truly understand the fundamental meaning of *teshuvah*. Of course *teshuvah* means repentance. That’s the way most of us think of *teshuvah*. We come here to right our wrongs, to turn from our failing ways. But literally the word means simply to “turn”, or in this case to “return”. To the point, Martin Buber teaches that if our *teshuvah* begins and ends with simply focusing on our individual shortcomings then we fail in our purpose as Jews. Buber writes:

“Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way—it will always be muck. Have I sinned, or have I not sinned—what does God get out of it? In the time I am brooding over it I could be stringing pearls for the delight of Heaven. That is why it is written: ‘Depart from evil and do good’ – turn wholly away from evil, do not dwell upon it, and do good. You have done wrong? Then counteract it by doing right.”

For Buber, *teshuvah* is less about “repenting” and more about turning back toward God. We come here on these days to renew our relationship with the Source of all Being, to draw closer to the Voice that challenges us to become that which we were created for. And we do that by reminding ourselves why God wants Jews in the first place. God wants us to do good. God wants us to be partners in Creation, to care for the world, to repair that which is broken.

This is why we are here tonight. This is why we gather as Jews. To affirm our role as messengers of God. To renew our commitment to the way of life it demands. And perhaps above all, to remind ourselves that to be a Jew means to embrace the essential message of Torah—that all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God—and that we are bound to do everything possible to ensure that that principle remains at our center.

Rabbi Aaron Bisno tells the story of the young student who found a large map of the world in the newspaper. Curious, the student took the map to his teacher. Seeing an opportunity to challenge the student, the teacher took the map of the globe and tore it into many, many pieces. Fragments of paper fell to the floor at the student's feet. And then handing over a roll of tape, the teacher challenged the student to reassemble the map of the world, and then the teacher returned to work. The student dropped to the floor and, in short order, completed the assignment by correctly taping together each of the pieces of the whole of the world. Where only minutes before the image of the world we believed we had known so well was torn asunder, and strewn across the floor, now it was being offered up as an intact whole. When the teacher asked the student how it had been possible to reassemble the fragmented world so quickly, the response was short and to the point: “There was a picture of a person on the back side. I repaired that one person and the whole world got fixed too.”

As Tarfon taught, just because there's so much work to be done, just because the challenge can seem so daunting, does not free us from the responsibility to start. Sometimes it's as simple as seeing a single face.

I come to you tonight to impress the centrality that *tzedakah* should have in our lives. Not singular moments (as well-intended as they might be), not the mitzvah-projects that we ask of our *b'nai mitzvah* students, but making the *values* of compassion and justice, making the act of “caring” a regular thing in our daily lives. And if we can demand this of ourselves as Jews, then how much the *moreso* should this be true for our congregation as a whole?

The *Tikkun Olam Committee* has taken a huge step in restoring this *mitzvah* to our table. Darfur. The Interfaith Hospitality Network. Food drives. Each of these initiatives has helped to return “social action” to a place of prominence in the programmatic agenda of Temple Ner Tamid. But now I would like to see us go (as our tradition would phrase it) “from strength to strength,” to move up to the next *madregah*—the next rung on the ladder. I would hope that all of us could follow the lead of the *Tikkun Olam Committee* and make acts of justice an integral part of who we are as a synagogue, to make *tzedakah* more than just a “program” or even a cause, but part of our fabric, of who we are as a community.

And to do this means we need to ask ourselves some questions: When we buy food for Temple events, do we pause to take into consideration where the food comes from? (And I'm not talking about *kashrut*.) When we buy produce, do we ask who the pickers are? Do they have health-care benefits? Do they have lavatory facilities in the field? Does the phrase “fair-trade” ever make it into our deliberations as to which product to buy? We know the word “biodegradable”, but are we doing all that we can to re-cycle? Have we ever thought about using our building as a weekly soup-kitchen?

This is not an accusation; on the contrary, if anything it's a confession. Social justice and community organizing has never been my strength. But I believe that with your help we can make *Tikkun Olam* an essential part of our mandate, of our identity as a community. If our purpose as a people is to serve witness to God, if our formative experience in Egypt was

intended to sensitize us to others who suffer indignity...Az / then...how can we not integrate the value of *tzedakah* into *everything* that we do, especially as a synagogue? It could very well be the most enduring legacy we might ever offer to our children. Lest we forget, the world is still in need of repair.

It is in this context that Rabbi Avraham Eiger has a somewhat different take on the opening verse of Song of the Sea.

Focusing on the *second* word of that first sentence, *yashir*—Eiger notes that it is surprisingly written in the *imperfect* state, that is, in the *future* tense. Literally the verse reads: “Then Moses and Israel *will* sing...” The reason for this, Eiger points out, is that the exodus from Egypt was just the beginning. It *began* the process of bringing redemption to the world, but it did not complete it. That is our job. For Eiger the litmus test for acts of *Tikkun Olam* are if their impact lasts beyond the moment, if their importance transcends the present and permeates into the future, if future generations can look back on that event and affirm it as, indeed, having been redemptive, Az *yashir*...then we *will* sing—or more accurately, then *they* will sing.

In this sense, then, to be witnesses of the holy is less about our singing and more about the deeds we perform for which our descendants will sing. And that should be our focus this day. Like those caribou trekking in common cause, that is why we gather in this sacred space as a *community*. To acknowledge and affirm our shared responsibility of performing deeds of redemption, deeds that will give our great-grandchildren and their descendants reason to sing.

Julius Fisher (his memory is a blessing), the one entirely responsible for members of our congregation chanting Torah on the High Holy Days, had a particularly favorite song. He loved it so much, that he specifically instructed that it be sung at his funeral. Oddly enough, this former *yeshiva bocher* loved a English hymn which we would sing on Yom Kippur afternoon that began, “O that I might be a servant unto Thee...”

This, indeed, is the mission of the Jew. To be an *Eved Adonai*, a “servant of God”. Ours is to serve witness to God. By doing *mitzvot*. By seeking peace and pursuing justice. And on these days we gather to form a community to renew ourselves to that purpose.

Perhaps to the outside observer we might *appear* to resemble the other creatures of the earth, but in fact we are different. What separates human beings from Planet Earth’s other creatures is that we have the ability to hope. And to dream. And as Jews we are charged and blessed with the responsibility to remember. To remember *Yetziat Mitzrayim*—the Exodus from Egypt. To remember the lesson our ancestors bequeathed to us in their redemption from slavery. Now all we have to do is continue the refrain.

May God prosper the work of our hands. May God strengthen the resolve of our hearts. And above all, may we give our children’s children reason to sing.