

Yom Kippur 5767

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[Note: Sermons are meant to be experienced in an interaction between rabbi and community. This one is no exception. What follows are the ideas and concepts conveyed and an approximation of the words delivered.]

a taste of the garden of eden

My task this evening is impossible for the power of Yom Kippur cannot be told, described, nor argued for. At best, we can steal a glimpse until we genuinely experience it ourselves. I believe that since last Yom Kippur I have, for the first time in my life, experienced the awesomeness of God that Yom Kippur strives to create for us. Though impossible, I will endeavor to share this with you with a true story, a myth, and a personal reflection.

A true story: about 100 years ago, a young Jewish German intellectual named Franz Rosenzweig sought to understand the great puzzles of human existence: why are we here, does life have meaning and purpose, can we know anything, is there a God and does it matter? His nominal Jewish upbringing and minimal Jewish education did not equip him to answer these questions. He was impressed by the liberal enlightenment Protestantism of his host culture whose adherents were at peace both religiously and intellectually.

In 1913 Rosenzweig decided to convert to Christianity and finally be fully accepted in to the modern culture he was already so comfortably in, as many of his contemporaries had done.

And with intellectual honesty, he wanted to enter the church as a Jew, just like the founders of Christianity; not by rejecting his Jewish origin but by re-enacting what he saw as the culmination of Judaism in Christianity. When Rosenzweig shared his plans with his mother, she threatened to have turned away from their synagogue for Yom Kippur. So, on October 10, 1913, Rosenzweig walked into a little orthodox shul in Berlin for Kol Nidre.

Rosenzweig never described what happened to him on that Yom Kippur, but it transformed his life. Immediately afterwards, he expressed that conversion was “no longer possible.” He went on to dedicate his life to Jewish learning and teaching. He personally influenced many of German Jewry’s more distinguished intellectuals; he collaborated with Martin Buber, and ultimately become one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century.

What happened that Kol Nidre evening? Something touched him that was not intellectual: it was more than the community feeling or the haunting music of Kol Nidre. That evening, Rosenzweig experienced a closeness to God that cannot be explained in words, for he entered a relationship beyond all rational thought. He experienced his tradition, his God, first hand in the way one knows first hand a parent’s or a spouse’s love. You cannot explain it; you can only know it by experiencing it. Such is the way of loving relationships: we come to know things that are beyond reasonable explanation.

Rosenzweig experienced something that night. He knew something in a radically different way. He knew God. Let me try and explain.

A myth: When Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev returned home from his first visit to his rebbe, Reb Shmelki of Nikolsburg, his father-in-law asked him: “What did you learn there that you could not learn here?”

“I learned that there is a Creator of the universe,” Reb Levi Yitzchak replied.

“And for that you had to travel to Nikolsburg?!” He then called to his maid and asked her, “What do you say? Is there a Creator of the universe?”

“Of course!” she said.

Reb Levi Yitzchak father-in-law gave him a look and said: “Nu?!”

Reb Levi Yitzchak responded: “She says ‘I know’.”

[*Hassidic Tales*, Rami Shapiro, p. 118-9]

What is Reb Levi Yitzchak point? Saying you know something is different than knowing it first hand. You know you are hungry not because someone told you but because you have first hand knowledge. *And first hand knowing is the heart of spiritual awakening.*

Too often we simply make do with second hand knowing. We know God is love, but we don’t experience God’s compassion. We know God is good, but we don’t experience goodness. We know God is just, but we don’t experience justice. We know the menu but we have never eaten the food and drank deep from the fountains of nourishment. Even the maid knows what we know, for she, like us, has been brought up on the same menu.

We know God is One, but we don’t experience that Oneness. Yom Kippur is not just the day of atonement, it is the day of at-ONE-ment—a day designed to facilitate experiencing God’s oneness. We return here, year after year, and we know in our minds what Yom Kippur is about, but have we experienced Yom Kippur and God first hand? Franz Rosenzweig did, and he was transformed.

In his latter writings, he emphasized that beyond personal feelings of exaltation and community solidarity, Yom Kippur constitutes “a testimony to the reality of God that cannot be controverted.” And despite the apparently unbridgeable gap between us, mere mortal beings, and God, the Creator, on Yom Kippur we are as close to God as we as human beings can ever be.

I have not experienced this aspect of Yom Kippur ever. But between last Yom Kippur and this one, I experienced the oneness and unity of God. A first hand knowing.

It began eight and a half years ago when my wife and I learned that she had some serious health issues that severely compromised her fertility. Our first concern was Ruth’s health and well-being. And as a consequence of her treatment, we had no idea if we would ever be able to have our own children. At that time we took an oath to God. We figured that if we were able to be blessed with children no matter what the circumstance, we would have that child. Well, as it turns out, we have been quite blessed with children.

Our third child, however, is a blessing that came with special challenges. She, for unknown reasons, never began eating or drinking on her own. She is, thank God, healthy and developmentally where she should be. Thanks to a feeding tube which originally had been taped to her face running through her nose down into her stomach. After nine months of that, we opted for surgery and a feeding tube that goes directly into a hole poked into her little stomach.

Needless to say, we have been quite overwhelmed with doctors and therapists: running to the pediatrician, the developmental pediatrician, the pediatric GI, the integrated physician consultant, the homeopathic doctor, the speech therapist, the occupational therapist, the feeding specialist, ...the anxiety of each time we take her in to be weighed as she creeps back on the growth chart she fell off of. The pain, discomfort and infections that come with an open wound with a plastic tube preventing her little body from healing itself. And the timely demand of working with her while neglecting our other children in addition to the physical exhaustion of tube feeding her around the clock like a newborn

In the midst of all of this, overwhelmed and exhausted, on the morning of Ella's second birthday party, we learn we are pregnant. Thank God my wife is so healthy after all she's been through, but with Ella's situation we couldn't imagine having a baby at this time, or, to tell you the truth, a fourth child without any other extenuating circumstances can be quite overwhelming. With this news we felt like we were sinking....and then the oath we took came to mind...or perhaps I should say came to heart. And I was bathed in an overwhelming sense of Holiness and Godliness that I cannot explain.

I had thought that I had experienced God, holiness, spiritual moments in the past—at the Shabbat table surrounded by good friends and family, at my wedding chuppah, at the birth of my children. But none of these compared to being pushed to the edge like we were and experiencing something deeper. It was not simply about having a new baby, but about deepening my relationship with God. It wasn't just joy or happiness, it was connecting first-hand to something deeper as if the essence of my own being found root in its foundation.

I share this with you this evening because this is where my spiritual journey has taken me. Since each must travel their own journey, I have attempted to share a glimpse of mine with stories and reflections with the hope that you too will seek and find your own path to a first hand experience of God. It is different for each of us, just like the taste of manna. The rabbis teach that when manna came down to feed Israel, each person tasted it according to their capacity. For infants it was like mother's milk, for the young it was like bread with oil and honey, and for the old like a honey cracker. [adapted from *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 12:25]

Franz Rosenzweig tasted something of the Divine that Kol Nidre night in 1913 and with it he came to know God first hand. I too have tasted it and have also been transformed in my relationship with God. Yom Kippur is a day when we don't taste food in order to facilitate tasting holiness.

There is an expression in Hebrew: *ta'am gan eden* – a colloquialism to say something is “very delicious” but which literally means the “taste of the garden of Eden.” *ta'am gan eden*. Taste is a very interesting metaphor for us precisely because we only know taste first hand.

You cannot convince someone with words or concepts that they like a particular taste...it is a pleasure you can only know personally.

The joy in our coming to know God first hand lead to us name our new daughter Eden for we tasted *ta'am gan eden*. The Garden of Eden is a place of deep intimacy with God. Her presence in our lives brought us a closeness to God we had never known. One that is beautifully expressed by the Psalmist [36:8-10]:

מֵהֲיָקָר חֲסִדֶּךָ אֱלֹהִים וּבְנֵי אָדָם בְּצֶל כְּנָפֶיךָ יִחְסְיוּן:

יְרוּיָן מִדֶּשֶׁן בֵּיתֶךָ וּנְחַל עֲדֻנְיֶךָ תִּשְׁקֶם:

כִּי־עֲמָךָ מְקוֹר חַיִּים בְּאוֹרֶךָ נִרְאָה־אוֹר:

How precious is Your loving kindness, O God!

Human beings take shelter in the shadow of Your wings.

They feast of the rich fare of Your house;

and You let them drink of the [נְחַל עֲדֻנְיֶךָ] river of Your pleasures.

For with You is the fountain of life;

in Your light shall we see light.