



LeoBaeckTemple

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“No Prayer, No Nothing”

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The rabbi wished to engage his congregation in serious interactive text study during Shabbat services. So one Shabbat, he told the worshipers, “This week, I ask that you spend a little time reviewing Psalm 152, as we will study that psalm at next week’s service.” The week passed, and the congregation reassembled for Shabbat services. And when it came time for the study discussion, the rabbi said, “You may recall that I asked you to read Psalm 152 in preparation for today’s study discussion. Please raise your hand if you had a chance to look it over.” Two-thirds of the hands went up. “Well, that’s too bad,” said the rabbi, “because there is no Psalm 152. There are only 150 psalms. And today’s sermon is on lying.”

The story does not include any mention of whether the rabbi had his contract renewed. But yes – today’s sermon is on lying. But not the lying that is on so many of our minds... the lying that we see splayed all around us in the news. And not even the lying that we do to our family and friends and even strangers – although that lying might well be seen as corroborating evidence for the lying I do want to talk about today... that is, the lying we do to ourselves.

To help us get there... a story, by one of our Jewish tradition’s greatest storytellers, the legendary giant of modern Hebrew literature, Shai Agnon. He wrote the following story, entitled *Tallit Acheret*, “Another Prayer Shawl,” to help us better understand this Yom Kippur day:

“About my other prayer shawls I have already told,” Agnon writes. “So now I merely add what happened on Yom Kippur with the *tallit* which I had left in the synagogue of my grandfather, may he rest in peace.

“That Yom Kippur, I had the notion to pray with my grandfather. Because I lived far from the synagogue, and because I had stayed in bed too long that morning, I arrived after the chanting of (the whole first section of the morning prayers). This is truly regrettable, for on Yom Kippur, at my grandfather’s synagogue, they recite this early part of the service verse by verse, in a special chant. Already in my childhood, before I knew the meaning of the words, whenever the cantor wrapped his *tallit* around his face and chanted (these prayers), I would be perplexed, for the cantor called to God in a loud voice even though God was right there! Why did he cover his face? If he uncovered his face, the whole world would be filled with the kind of great joy I felt when I played hide-and-seek with my father. We used to look for each other until, finally, I would uncover my face, and then we found each other.

“When I entered the synagogue, my grandfather brought his face out of the folds of his *tallit*, and turned here and there, searching out a seat for me in the synagogue which was already filled with worshipers. By the east wall, to the right of my grandfather, sat a group of old men, each looking different from all the others and, it goes without saying, from other men in general. Their faces were wrinkled like raisins, their beards looked like cinnamon sticks. Their eyes, which had no lashes, were bloodshot, yet from their eyes there streamed a joy so substantial you could feel it with your hands. How did they all come to be in one place, in my grandfather’s synagogue, and why were their features so different? One of them, who understood what my grandfather wanted of him, answered in Aramaic: ‘The law for Yom Kippur is not like that of Passover which states that all who want can sit and eat.’ To paraphrase his statement in terms of the matter at hand, we might say, ‘Today I am not obliged to be pushed around to furnish a seat for one who has none.’

“I was disturbed that my grandfather should be troubled on my account, and I said to him, ‘Please, do not bother about me. I shall find a place for myself.’

“(But) I was just talking. This was his synagogue, and he could find no place for me. How could I find a seat by myself? However, my grandfather was troubled not only because there was no place for me, but because I had come so late. I deliberated: perhaps I should tell him that I prayed the morning service at the synagogue in my neighborhood. But it is not nice for one to make his grandfather a cause for telling lies...

“My grandfather again gave me a troubled glance. ‘You are upset because I stand here without a *tallit* on,’ I told him. ‘I’ll get my *tallit*, the one that’s here in your synagogue, and wrap myself in it right away.’

“I looked up to see if he was satisfied, and I saw that they had brought benches into the synagogue and placed them to the left of the Holy Ark, one on top of the other, like the steps of a bathhouse... How did they get here? And when did they get here?

“‘What is this?’ I asked myself. ‘When my grandfather was looking for a place for me, why didn’t he look to the left of the Ark? There were many benches and many empty places there...’

“My grandfather looked at me. Suddenly I reached into a hole in a table and brought out my *tallit*...”

“As I prepared to wrap myself in my *tallit*, I saw that one of the fringes was missing. A certain fellow, whom we usually ignore though he never ignores us, whispered to me: ‘Your *tallit* has only three fringes.’ I began deliberating: what is he telling me? Don’t I know that a *tallit* with only three fringes cannot be used? Or did he want to remind me of a forgotten tradition: while a man is alive, even though he may be holding a *tallit* of three fringes in his hand, he is not allowed to wear it. But when he is dead, they pursue him with a proper *tallit* of four fringes, pluck out one fringe, and force him to wear it.

“Depression overcame me. Not because of what had been whispered to me, but because of this holy day of Yom Kippur which had passed by *b’lo t’filah, uv’lo klum*... no prayer, no nothing.”

I think we understand perfectly the experience that Agnon described having had at his grandfather’s synagogue, whether you arrived late this morning or not. Perhaps it was something about your car, or your work, or your clothes... or someone else’s clothes... that distracted you today. Maybe the seat you wanted here today wasn’t available, just like in the story. Maybe that derailed you, at least for a time. And maybe you also dissembled to

yourself about your distraction, just like Agnon – going through the motions of Yom Kippur, reciting the requested words in lockstep when instructed, and yet somehow, when all was said and done, finding yourself cloaked in the three-fringed tallit of the dead... the unchanging, the ungrowing.

To be sure, all of us – rabbis and cantors included – have had those Yom Kippur experiences that were, as Agnon described, *b'lo t'filah uv'lo klum*... no prayer, no nothing. Usually, we pin the responsibility for that disappointment where Agnon did – on the experience itself, not on us. The faulty alarm clock is to blame – upon our nightstands or inside our souls. Or maybe it's the other people who hassled me. Or someone I usually ignore who never ignores me. Or maybe, just maybe, the problem is that I didn't really come here to do the work of Yom Kippur at all. I came to be able to *tell* myself I did it – to lie to myself, and to leave the parts of my soul and my story that really need some truth-telling undisturbed in self-protective hibernation.

That is a very, very human thing to do. The psychological science on the matter has been documented by many. The hardest truths about ourselves – the ones that should be filling up this day – are usually the ones we won't go anywhere near. This starts at a very young age, when we feel small and vulnerable, and hunger for assurance that we are loved and are lovable. And so we begin to fashion our self-stories in a manner that keeps us feeling safe. That includes creating narratives about our families that are suitably sanitized. About our parents, even in cases where they hurt us more than they helped us, for they were the ones upon whom our lives literally depended when we were young. About our children, for they lay bare unvarnished truths about us that must be harmonized with the self-stories we have chosen to tell.

All of this is our left brain's well-honed mechanism for protecting our hearts from the frightful exposure to unlovability – and what's remarkable about our self-deception is that it actually works. It doesn't always fool others, of course, especially when the real us is doing them harm. But the old maxim holds up: "The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool."

Last night, Rabbi Ross tenderly urged us to surrender our grip on the wounds and grudges and judgments that hold our spirits captive – to be self-loving enough, self-caring enough to let go. One of the great impediments to making that happen, arguably the greatest impediment, is our failure to stare right into the eye of what we fear makes us most unworthy of that kind of release. To stare right into our own eyes – for real – and not blink.

If you want to know what Yom Kippur is for – that’s it. If you want the kind of day that leaves you feeling fully embraced by a tallit of the living and changing, with all four fringes intact, the tallit whose warmth enables you truly to grow... if you want to avoid the fate of “no prayer, no nothing”... there is no shortcut. You’ve got to tell the truth. About you. And by that, I don’t mean simply returning to your annual lingering in the bad habits that you and all those closest to you already know about. There’s a reason you keep returning to those every year. It’s because they’re not really changing all that much... and that’s because you’re not so terribly ashamed of them, after all. Sure, you’d like to be better. And you might even be taming some of those habitual impulses, at least modestly. But if they don’t make you truly uncomfortable even to think about, and certainly to admit, you’ve pretty much made your peace with them, more or less.

This day is for the truth you lie to yourself about, successfully – the one you’re afraid to let in, because even you don’t know if you’ll love you if you shed the protective armor that protests so virulently, “That’s not me.”

It may be a deep and dark secret you’ve allowed nobody to know – and for which you’ve definitely never apologized.

It may be a pattern of behavior that others have learned to accommodate but which never gets named what it is, at least not by you.

It may be a crutch you’ve leaned upon for decades in order to walk through your life without stumbling, but one you prefer to minimize or euphemize or even pretend isn’t there.

I don't know what it is for you. I only know that we all possess such lies – and we all buy them, at least enough to live with them, instead of living past them, beyond them.

What is one lie you tell yourself about you?

What is one truth from which you hide, precisely by engaging in this annual exercise of reciting litanies of sins, the ones you'll allow yourself to say out loud?

Sit with that truth for a moment. Summon it from the deep inner cave to which you've relegated it, and let it see light – your light. For you don't just have to live with it. You *can* live beyond it. Are you brave enough to try?

Believe me, I understand how harrowing it is to try. I have my own self-truths to tell, you know. If you're really staring at your big self-lie right now, you are probably pretty flummoxed in its presence. You might even want to return to fleeing. After all, our hardwiring as humans is designed to talk you into the lie and out of sitting with it. What might enable us to transcend that hardwiring and make something truly sacred of this Yom Kippur day?

We can find some wisdom for answering that question from a teacher who visited our congregation as scholar-in-residence just a few years ago, Founder and Director of the Mussar Institute, Alan Morinis. Mussar, as you may recall, is the strand in our religious tradition that is less focused on ritual observance and more dedicated to the cultivation of a principled life of personal transformation. Mussar study is aimed at helping us to live as four-fringed tallit Jews... changing and growing Jews. Mussar is about taking a day like this one – filled, we hope, with the trepidation that comes with honest self-discovery – and converting it into self-growth.

In his book, Everyday Holiness, Alan Morinis describes how telling ourselves the truth, the hardest truth, is a faith-restoring act. It restores our faith in *us*. It restores our belief that we can really change – by actually showing us how. He writes, “When you make truth a practice, you will inevitably come up against the soul-trait (or traits) that underlie the fear that prompts the falsehood... the soul-traits that get revealed are clearly ones that figure into your spiritual curriculum.”

So tell the truth, scary as that is, and the syllabus for your growth appears before you – and once you see it, the liberation it offers is tantalizing. You can't resist taking the course. It's only the imaginary safe harbor of the lie that stands in your way.

While we hide inside our lies to ourselves, we are barred from unlocking the prison they hold us in. We are stuck with the shame, the fear of being found out or called out, the dread of humiliation, the terror of being abandoned, rejected and unloved. All of that pursues us like an insatiable beast, causing us to behave like a cornered animal, stubbornly hiding in even greater secrecy. The truth is the key that unlocks the prison and reveals the growth curve. The truth is what gifts you the curriculum for becoming the person you'll like better, the person you will really love... the person we all say we're here to become, right before we slip into the old routine of "no prayer, no nothing."

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – because you are the easiest person to fool... until you're not. You see, walking the road of life and death with so many people teaches a person a thing or two. And if I've learned anything from the deep honor of being invited into so many of your lives at those intimate moments when you or someone you love is truly staring into the abyss, it's that there really isn't anywhere to hide. Sooner or later, the insatiable beast will find you, and you will be left to stare at the truth, likely at your most vulnerable moment – with regret, with shame, with a crippling fear. You may be sick or injured or bereaved. You may even be dying. And you won't be fooled anymore. Your truth will demand its telling.

Back when I was in rabbinical school, I applied for an internship as a hospital chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. My interview was with the then-longtime Jewish chaplain at Cedars-Sinai, Rabbi Levi Meier, now of blessed memory – and that interview is a story I love telling.

Rabbi Meier and I have barely exchanged introductions when he is paged to a patient's bed. "Ken, come with me," he says, "I've got to go visit a man who just learned he has inoperable cancer."

And just like that, my interview turns into the real thing. I try to breathe deeply as we enter the room. Rabbi Meier sits down next to the bed, and he takes the hand of the patient, a rough-and-tumble-looking sort of man. He's not old. He looks strong. And while I look on, trying to become invisible, I hear them engage in a brief and very ordinary conversation. They're talking about the news, the hospital food, the Dodgers game — practically everything except you know what.

Soon, the rabbi's pager buzzes again, and he excuses himself and motions for me to join him in the hallway. "I've got to use the phone," he explains, staring at his pager, not at me. "But wait here. We'll go back into this room in a moment. You see, this fella's obviously troubled — he thinks he did something immoral that caused his illness. We've got to help him through that." And without really finishing his thought, the rabbi strides off to a nearby nursing station.

So with a little unexpected time on my hands, I start to process the whirlwind I'm experiencing here. You see, I've done my homework on Rabbi Meier. I know that he's not just an Orthodox rabbi. He's also a Jungian psychotherapist. Not a common joint degree program. So I can't help but wonder if maybe the rabbi has somehow been gobbled up by the psychotherapist in Rabbi Meier. After all, this patient hasn't said a word about feeling "responsible" for his own illness. In fact, he hasn't said a word about his illness at all. And just as my skepticism is really overtaking me, Rabbi Meier comes bounding back: "Let's go back inside, huh?"

No sooner has the rabbi settled back in at bedside than the patient locks eyes with him: "You know, rabbi, I'm not very religious, but I've tried to be a good person. I've been honest in business... most of the time. There were those few times I did a little something you might call unethical. And now look — it's come to this."

I remember being floored at the time, wondering how Rabbi Meier knew that was coming. After more than two decades as a working rabbi, I don't wonder anymore. You see, no one can hide from the truth forever. Wouldn't you rather speak yours to yourself today — when it possesses the power to inspire you, to free you, instead of terrifying you?

Let me be clear – I don't think God gives cancer to people who cheat in business, and neither did Rabbi Meier. And you know what? Neither did the dying patient, either. But in his most vulnerable moment, he wondered. And let me tell you – that moment is hard enough without such wonderings. Picturing yourself actually wearing that three-fringed tallit of the dead will carry enough burdens. Now is the time for unburdening ourselves – to make this day... and the rest of our lives... count. Will we come out from our hiding and tell the truth?

The 19th century Chasidic master, the Rhiziner Rebbe, once came home from his shtibel and found a little boy sitting outside his home weeping.

"Why are you crying, my son?" the Rhiziner asked.

"Because I was playing hide and seek," the boy answered.

"I don't understand," replied the rebbe. "Why the tears?"

"Because I was hiding. But no one was seeking."

The Rhiziner Rebbe knew why you came today. You're here to seek, not hide... to make sure this Yom Kippur day doesn't pass *b'lo t'filah uv'lo klum* – with no prayer, no nothing. Be brave. Be true. A new year, with all its hope and promise, awaits.