
Don't Let God Get Off Too Easy

Rabbi Barry Lutz
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It was the conclusion of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok was speaking with Beryl the Tailor. Knowing that he was illiterate, the rabbi wondered how Beryl had occupied himself during this day of prayer.

"Since you couldn't read the prayers today," the Rabbi asked Beryl, "What did you say to God?"

Beryl replied, "I said to God, Dear God, You want me to repent of my sins, but my sins have been so small! I confess: There have been times when I failed to return to a customer pieces of left over cloth. And sometimes, when I couldn't help it, I even ate some food that wasn't kosher. But really, is that so terrible?"

Now take Yourself, God! Just examine Your own sins: You have robbed mothers of their babies, and have left more children helpless orphans. So You see that Your sins are much more serious than mine.

I tell You what, God! Let's make a deal! You forgive me and I'll forgive You!"

Rabbi Yitzchok looked at Beryl the tailor and shook his head.

"Oh Beryl, how could you?" the rabbi cried, you let God off much too easily."

As retold in "A Treasury of Jewish Folklore" edited by Nathan Ausubel

If you are like me, you find more than a little resonance in this story. Like Beryl, we too may be having some difficulty reading the prayers in our machzor. Not because we are illiterate, but because after the events of September 11 there is a hollowness to their sound. As we join together on this Day of Atonement pleading for God's forgiveness I can't help but think that the pleas are flowing in the wrong direction.

The questions have been asked many times in recent days: "Where were you God?" "Why did you God?" Those of you who know me, who have shared your thoughts and concerns with me over the past few weeks know my answer - "God didn't, horribly evil people did." And "God was right where we would expect God to be."

There is no need to rehearse here all the incredible stories of love and compassion, of support and outright heroism that we have heard in recent days. But know that this is where I find God - in the truly miraculous compassion, support and love that we have given to each other.‡

And while everything I have witnessed has brought me some solace and comfort, I still stand here this evening/morning in some discomfort. I am worried ... Worried that if we are content to find evidence of God's presence in the heroic and heartwarming responses of this past weeks, and to leave it at that, then we, like Beryl, will have let God off much, much too easily.‡

Reb Yitchok and I have very different understandings of the way God works in this world. In truth my own understanding of where we find God may be more difficult because it puts much more of a burden on us. I believe that we let God off too easily when, for whatever reason, we are unable to take the time, make the effort, do the hard work necessary to connect with the Divine presence that resides in each of our souls. We are called upon by this day and certainly by this moment in history to reconnect with that Divine source of our human potential for wholeness and unity, that we might see in each moment an opportunity to heal the world around us.‡

After all, regardless of our theology, it is not in our nature to let God off easily. We are Yisrael - literally, ones who wrestle with God. Our rituals, our liturgy, challenge us to wrestle with the Divine impulse that resides at the very source of our being. We are dared to live lives which are, in fact, heroic. Not the heroism we have witnessed in recent days, but the heroism of living a life based on a commitment to lift up those around us.‡

We all know individual who live this kind of heroism. We can look around this sanctuary and find them. They have touched our lives because they have the ability to reclaim sparks of light and hope from the husks of darkness in which they have been encased. That is our heroic task: to collect holy sparks in order to repair the world.‡

You see, our ancient mystics tell a story of another great calamity, one at the very moment of creation. They tell us that God wished to include some substance of God's presence in this new creation. So, special vessels were created for channeling this presence from Heaven to earth. Unfortunately the vessels were unable to contain these Divine emanations and in a great explosion they shattered, spreading shards of the vessel, containing holy sparks, across the entire earth. They are to be found everywhere, in plants, animals - and most certainly in each of us. Our job, the mystics tell us, is to collect these sparks in order to heal that rupture, restoring the emanation connecting heaven and earth. Recovering those sparks of holiness is to work for shalom, not peace, but wholeness, unity, integrity for ourselves and for our world.‡

✠ We have been witness to another horrible shattering sending sparks not only across lower Manhattan, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania but across our lives as well. As the legendary initial shattering forever changed creation, so too have our lives been forever changed. Divine sparks have been encased inside dark husks of fear and anger. And we find ourselves desperately trying to release those sparks from their darkness, struggling to put the pieces of our broken world back together. ✠

✠ In an incredible burst of energy we have been busily collecting sparks, and affecting some repair of our shattered world and broken souls. But many pieces world are deeply hidden and I wonder, "Will we be searching for them with the same diligence three weeks from now? Three months from now? Three years from now?" ✠

✠ With the haunting melody of Kol Nidre we have acknowledged our losses: Both those that we have committed and those that were perpetrated upon us: forgotten promises and old patterns upon which the sun has set. We stand here in the light of a new day. This day holds within it the potential to be so much more than words, it holds the possibility for true transformation. We stand, like our ancestors in the Torah portion we read on the edge of a promised land. But that land can be ours only through conscious choosing and through constant and deliberate effort. ✠

✠ But how? How do we do that? How do we gather the sparks and create some wholeness, some shalom in a world that is so obviously shattered? ✠

✠ The answers are here all around us in our prayer book, in our Torah and in each others presence. I know, I'm a rabbi, what else am I supposed to say? But in all honesty, I don't say these words because I am a rabbi, I am a rabbi because of what these words say to me - the way they touch my soul. And they say the same things to you. There are no secrets here - no carefully guarded secret rabbinic cabal. I stand here because of the incredibly profound insights and healing wisdom of our tradition which teaches me daily about being human and about living in this world. And I stand here because, every day for the past 18 years, you have taught me those lessons as well. ✠

✠ Truly, if the only purpose of the words of our prayers was their perfunctory recital a few times a year, if the only purpose of these scrolls was to celebrate the coming of age of a young person each week, then we might as well lock the doors and close up shop because we will have let God off much too easily. ✠

✠ But we know that this is not the case. In our heart of hearts we know that our tradition has the power to transform our lives but first we have to be willing to listen! Listen -- Shema -- it is the watchword of our faith - We are told, "Pay attention." Open your ears and most importantly open your heart. Or, indeed, you will let God off much too easily. ✠

I here are three words at the heart of our prayers during these Days of Awe; three words which hold the possibility of transforming our lives by arousing the Divine impulse within us. Three words that will insure that God does not get off too easily. So, I invite you to listen and consider the possibilities.‡

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teshuvah-t'fillah, tzedakah ma-aveereen et ha-roah ha-g'zayrah‡

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But teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah temper judgements severe decree.‡

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We could loosely translate: Make use of teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah in order to make sure that God doesn't get off too easily.‡

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Teshuvah - which is usually translated as repentance actually means turning. Real change begins with a conscious and physical act; a deliberate decision to move in a new direction. And here is where it often ends as well. Because as much as we might like to change, we all know that change is just too darn difficult. The human psyche is the prime example of Newton's laws of physics: a body in motion will keep moving in the same direction and at the same velocity until a force is applied to move it in another direction. As a nation we have certainly experienced such a force. The events of September 11th have been sent reeling in a new direction.‡

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We have, from time to time, experienced these forces on a personal level as well. It may be the death of a loved one, or our own brush with death, or, perhaps, confronting life directions that have become so difficult, or so painful that they have forced us to move in new directions. Today we are asked to acknowledge that we all need to move a bit. None of us have done enough collecting of holy sparks. And now the reality of our time demands that as individuals and as a community we commit ourselves to teshuvah to consciously and deliberately turning away from life patterns that no longer work.‡

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Such movement involves an inward turning of our minds and spirit as well. So we come to our second word: t'fillah - prayer. I am aware that for some the only thing more difficult than change is prayer. So, first a helpful thought from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. He offers this assurance: "Prayer only sounds as if it is directed at God." Really! "Prayer only sounds as if it is directed at God." Prayer, in fact, is directed at us; towards those Divine sparks lying within the recesses of our own souls. Prayer serves to focus our attention that we might gather those sparks and reach for the potential that is implied when we say we are created in the image of God. Finding these Divine sparks begins with calming all the noise that distracts us from hearing the quiet voice at the core of our being. So all prayer truly begins with silence.‡

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Listening is the central religious experience of our tradition. Think about the great moments of revelation - they all involve hearing. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Moses, Miriam, the prophets - all heard God calling to them. And then there is that moment of our creation, as a people, at the foot of Sinai. Our

response to God's call wasn't "I see what you mean" but na'aseh v'nishmah - we will do and we will hear.✠

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A wonderful midrash asks just what it was that the Israelites heard at Sinai? Some say the first commandment, some say the first word and some say only the first letter. But, the first letter is silent, an Aleph How do you hear a silent letter? It is taught that what the Israelites heard was the preparation for speech, the filling of lungs that proceeds the utterance of a sound. Everytime we quiet ourselves enough to actually hear our lungs filling with air we are listening to The Voice at Sinai. That kind of listening - profoundly quiet, focused, heartfelt listening is at the heart of prayer. How many of us have ever quieted ourselves enough to really listen in this way? To truly touch the source of our being? This kind of prayer nurtures our spirits, keeping our body, our mind, our soul and our spirit balanced in order that we might focus on the task at hand, collecting holy sparks in order to heal our shattered world.✠

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We affect this healing through tzedakah - not charity, but acts of righteousness. As prayer allows us to gather together and heal the shattered pieces of our souls, so too, through tzedakah do we gather together the shattered pieces of our world. They are, of course, connected - prayer is an act of tzedakah directed inwards just as tzedakah is a prayer directed out into the world. Tzedakah is the human, prayerful response to injustice and tragedy. It is what we have seen expressed in profound ways in recent days. Tzedakah is our refusal to be immobilized by fear of circumstances that are beyond our control. While we may have no control over many of the circumstances that shape our lives we do control our responses to those events. Tzedakah is that heroic response.✠

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The call for justice has been sounded in our country, and rightly so, those who have perpetrated these obscenities should be brought to justice. But our sages are quick to remind us that the Divine attribute of justice must be balanced by the Divine attribute of tzedakah - of righteousness. To sway too far in either direction is to throw our lives and the life of our community out of balance. While we pursue justice, we must not lose sight of the importance of pursuing righteousness as well. While we seek to root out that evil that would seek to destroy humanity's God given rights of human freedom and dignity, we must also, through acts of tzedakah, work with all those who will join us in eliminating the slavery of hunger, homelessness and political oppression that fuel the furnaces of anger and hatred that even now are forging a new generation committed to acts of terror.✠

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We stand in the light of a new day. Before us is a promised land. Before us stands the possibility of transforming the darkness of these past weeks. It is, indeed, an overwhelming task. Gathering sparks is hard and often dirty work. But, if there is one message in this day, it is of hope, of belief in humanity. What possible purpose would today serve if there was not an underlying confidence that we can grow and better ourselves? We are urged today to choose life by committing ourselves to a new

righteousness we might become collectors of holy sparks, making God's healing light burn brighter and stronger in our damaged world.‡

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We are called to a truly heroic act, one that the reality of our day and the sacredness of this moment demand of us. I urge you, I plead with you not to leave this day unchanged. Listen to the words of our texts and to the words of your own soul. That we may, through teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah find the healing we seek for ourselves and for our world. We owe it to all those lost souls and we owe it to all those souls yet to be. We can not afford anymore to make the mistake of Beryl the Tailor and let God off too easily.‡

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I am grateful for the insights of Rabbi Arthur Green, "These are the Words: a Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life," Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk," Carol Ochs and Kerry Olitzky, "Jewish Spiritual Guidance: Finding Our Way to God," and Rabbi Karen Kedar, "God Whispers: stories of the soul, lessons of the heart."
