

KOL NIDRE

It is no secret that I do a great deal of traveling. Many of us look forward to travel and the chance to get away. For some of us, travel is a romantic experience: filled with dreams of far-off lands, or a change of scene, a time to relax, or simply to be incognito. For others, however, travel is not as glamorous as we may believe. Business travelers often see travel as nothing more than schlepping luggage across vast airports, gobbling down expensive fast food, and losing one's baggage. In the modern world, travel is "big business." For example, it is estimated that currently, vacationers spent over \$5 trillion dollars annually on leisure travel and total travel combined may come to be more than \$9 trillion dollars. In the US, the travel and tourism industry is the nation's second largest, and travel to the US is one of our nation's major exports.

Travel has not, however, always been seen as fun. The word travel is derived from the French word 'travail' meaning work, and travail is derived from the Latin word for pitchfork. In other words, throughout most of history, people have classified travel as hard and often dangerous work. To return home without incident was far from certain. To do so, was more often than not considered miraculous. This classical fear of travel is depicted in the Hebrew prayer that is said upon one's return from a "trip." The rabbis who compiled the prayer book expressed their attitude toward travel by insisting that anyone who safely survived a long journey needed to say, the Birkat Ha'Gomeil or the "Blessing for those who survived a dangerous situation or illness." The blessing goes: "Baruch Atah Adoshem Elokeinu Melech Ha'Olam Ha'gomel l'chayavim tovot, she-

g'malani col tov...Blessed Art Thou O Lord Our G'd, King of the Universe who bestows favor upon the undeserving just as He has bestowed favors upon me." Classical Judaism, like most of the world, viewed travel as a dangerous and almost foolish process. It was something that was undertaken by those with a death wish, by those who were mad, or by those involved in highly suspect or unethical behavior.

We see these same fears in the Talmudic passage that we have been studying throughout these high holidays. On Rosh Ha'Shanah eve, we began our study of one of the Talmud's most elliptic of passages. It is a passage about a strange and frightening journey undertaken by four rabbis. The Talmud tells us that these four men made a mystical journey to a special garden. Called simply by the Hebrew name "Ha'Pardes" meaning "The Orchard". ¿Was this place the paradise that existed prior to time, the place where dreams and nightmares, hopes and fears merged? ¿Is the Pardes the place where yesterday was tomorrow and tomorrow was part of our distant past?

Let's review the tale for just a moment. If you remember from Rosh Ha'Shanah, there were four scholars who undertook this journey. Rabbi Azzai, who stared too deeply at the Orchard and died; Rabbi Ben Zoma whose obsessions caused him to go mad; Rabbi Abuya who became a traitor, and Rabbi Akibba who emerged from the journey both sane and healthy.

During the Rosh Hashanah holiday we studied the first two of these figures. We spoke of how they symbolized many of our own fears and anxieties. We wondered if Rabbi

Azzai's death was not caused by his inability to let something go, his obsessive need of detail. We also spoke about Rabbi Ben Zoma, who could not forget, was unable to free himself of the tyranny of history, and so paid the ultimate price of madness.

Now we turn to the most controversial of the four. The one whom the rabbis excluded from Jewish history, and whom they connect with the evil son of Passover. The one who is often called in Jewish history simply by the nickname: "Ha'Acher" meaning "He who is no longer part of us." Or perhaps the letters: Alef-Chet-Resh should be read not as "Acher" but as "Echar" meaning "for him it was too late to turn his life around."

¿Who was this man called Abuya? ¿Why did he provoke such a negative reaction? ¿Did he ever live or is he symbolic of the lost lamb, the one who errs and cannot turn back? Like so much in Jewish history the data provide us with more questions than answers, more doubts than certainties. From Talmudic times until our own, no figure has created so much controversy, as has Abuya. For some, he is a Jewish Benedict Arnold, for others he is the evil Pharaoh reborn. In Milton Steinberg's classic book "As A Driven Leaf," Abuya is the lost soul, seeking to find truth in geometry, only to discover that math, like religion is based on nothing more than faith. ¿What provoked such a negative reaction by the Rabbis? ¿What was his sin? Perhaps most importantly: ¿Why study about him on, of all nights, on Kol Nidre?

Like the Orchard in our tale, Kol Nidre, is a magical night. Just as nothing is as it seemed in the Orchard, so Kol Nidre teaches us that now we must face both the realms of the

apparent and of the hidden. This is the night when we start our own personal journeys to the depths of our very souls. Some of us, like Rabbi Azzai, will fail to see our faults, refuse to repent, and continue on our self-destructive paths. Others, like Rabbi Ben Zoma, will squander their psychic energy and become mad. These are the people who are so stuck in the past, they cannot let go, and so in their isolation, reality fades and lunacy begins to reign.

Tonight we examine yet a third personage: Rabbi Abuya. Legend teaches that Abuya realized that the journey to the Orchard was not for him, but committed to seeing the task through, he traveled on and in so doing dropped out of Jewish history. Like Abuya, there are those who are so sure of themselves, so arrogant in their behavior that turning back from a mistake is a virtual impossibility. We study about Rabbi Abuya on Kol Nidre then, for his life symbolizes the antithesis of Kol Nidre.

Tonight we ask ourselves if we suffer from the sin of arrogance. ¿Are we so sure that we have found the right path in life? ¿Ethically, are we so arrogant as to believe that without a moral compass we too will not lose our way in the forest of arrogance? Kol Nidre's message is: Stop! Look around! Note where you have failed, and then, do something about it. As we read through the Machzor, the High Holiday prayer book, think about your life. Have you found, without realizing it, the correct solution to the wrong problem? ¿Are you, like Abuya, so certain that you have all of the answers that you have not taken the time to contemplate if you even know the questions? In the social sciences, this type of error is called a teleological error; which is simply a fancy way to say "Al

chet she chatanu lifanech bimutz ha'lev: for the sin, which we have committed before Thee by hardening our hearts.”

Kol Nidre teaches that we can correct any fault; we can repair any error, except when we are so arrogant as to believe the error to be true. When we become, like Pharaoh, so certain of our ways, so sure that we have the correct answers that we fail to see the question, then like Abuya, we lose the creative uncertainty that forms the synergy of Judaism.

Too many of us suffer from the sin of certainty. How many of us are so stuck in one paradigm that we no longer realize that society has changed and that we too have changed? Overly confident that we are invincible, we lose ourselves in the passageways of morality and fail to connect our science to our ethics, our need to know with our sense of radical amazement. How ironic that we who live in history's bloodiest of times, who live in the second century of holocausts and ethnic cleansing, are so arrogant as to believe that we do not live in a dark age, and that we hold a monopoly on truth. We need to only see the horrors of Syria, the tortures and beheadings of Mexico, the gang violence of Central America or the insanity of Iran to know that ours is an age that makes the Dark Ages seem like the Age of Enlightenment.

Kol Nidre teaches that, although each of us is capable of committing the sin or arrogance, there is an antidote. If the poison is called “arrogance” then its antidote is called: “Teshuvah,” meaning “turning around, finding another way, getting back on track.” That

is what Kol Nidre night is all about: “returning,” finding our way out of the surety of our answers into the reality that life is a never ending process of questioning, a constant opportunity to turn one’s life around and to begin again. Teshuvah is never easy. The word means more than simply stating that you are sorry. It is the sincere act of change, the profound act of shifting gears or changing the course of one’s life. Few of us ever make a perfect repentance. Most of us are better at justifying our actions than changing them. And many of us are willing to forgive ourselves but hold-on to the other person’s errors. ¿Are not many of us experts in self-forgiveness and failures at forgiving the other person?

This evening, then, is the antidote to the poison of arrogance. What made Rabbi Abuya such a tragic figure is not that he sought to understand the world, nor that he wanted to explore the garden of life, but knowing he had erred, he was too ashamed to turn back.

On Kol Nidre we begin to conduct our own “inquisition of the soul”. Now is when we face those questions which we would prefer to have avoided: ¿Where have I failed? ¿How have I been arrogant? ¿What have I done wrong? ¿Whom have I unjustifiably hurt? This is a night for honesty. It is the moment when our souls cry out for the nourishment of introspection, an introspection that leads to real change.

With the setting of today’s sun, we realize that, despite the darkness that now encompasses us, tomorrow will bring fresh hope. In a like manner, we can replace the darkness of the sin of arrogance with the rebirth of light. Rebirth, real teshuvah,

however, does not occur without sacrifice, without effort, without struggle. ¿ Might that need for sacrifice, for struggle not be another reason that we fast? For Yom Kippur's fast acts as a reminder that it is all too easy to be comfortable, and all too simple to find the right answer to the wrong question.

We will never know what really happened to Rabbi Abuya. The Talmud teaches that he went too far, that he was so committed to himself that he could no longer be committed to others; that everyone was wrong except him. Thus, Abuya became the man committed only to himself and ironically his egocentricity made him into the "other" without parallel. Kol Nidre's message is that we can learn from Abuya. Tonight the gates of change are open. It is we who must decide if we desire to pass through those gates. It is teshuvah, the act of "turning one's life around" seeing clearly one's mistakes, turning to G'd and asking what is the proper way to face those whom we have hurt that makes it possible for us to heal. Now we too set off on a journey to the garden of life. For some the trip will be filled with danger, for others it is a voyage of opportunity. Kol Nidre teaches that we can take from life a sense of commitment and ethics or seek in it only the hedonistic and narcissistic. Kol Nidre's challenge, and Rabbi Abuya's lesson is that wisdom comes when we realize that each of us needs to stop and re-examine the questions we ask. May we use this experience as a moral compass, guiding us as we seek to leave the sins of arrogance by returning to the righteousness and love that is G'd.

Amen