

YOM KIPPUR

If we were to be asked to define Judaism's essence in just a couple of words, after some careful reflection, many of us might, call Judaism a celebration of life. Life is the essence of Judaism. Yom Kippur 's central theme is not sin, nor is it death, but rather "life." The Yom Kippur service is dedicated to life. From the Kol Nidre prayers until the Neilah service, the holiday's theme is: "Uvacahrta baChayim/Choose life!" In fact, it is not unfair to argue that the entire philosophical foundation upon which Yom Kippur rests is the notion that teshuva, repentance, and good deeds make life worth living. Yom Kippur teaches us that no matter how dark life may seem, no matter what our errors, as long as we chose life the gates of repentance are always open.

Life, however, is more than merely living. Some of us seem to know how to make the most of life; others squander it. Some people are wise in how they spend their life's allotted time, while others vanish as if they had never been. ¿What makes some people successful and others not? ¿Why do some of us seem to have a Midas touch while others of us sense that without much effort we can turn pure gold into led? Why do some people chose to make life a wonderful adventure while others chose to see life as nothing more than an obstacle course?

These types of non-answerable questions have perplexed scholars and laymen, theologians and philosophers throughout history. Even the least sophisticated of us intuitively senses that life is often unfair; that different people may travel along the same roads within life and yet at the end of their journey, come to different places. One of the most famous prayers of these High Holidays, the "Unataneh Tokef" expresses this thought poignantly: "B'Rosh Ha'Shanah yicatevun uvaYom-Tzom yicahteymun: camah ya'avrun v'chamah ybareun, mi yichyeh u-mi yamut.... On New Year's Day it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die..."

During this High Holiday period we too delved into the question of why people who travel along life's same roads often end up in different places. From Erev Rosh Ha'Shanah until now we

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have spoken of the strange journey of four scholars who traveled life's highway to the mystical garden the Talmud calls "Ha'Pardes." Their journey was one that would take them to the place that was before-there-was- a "was," to the Orchard of pre-time, the location where time and place interface.

This is a place filled with awesome power, a place fitting for these Days of Awe. Still, we know precious little about this journey or about those who undertook it.

Like the journey we call life, each would travel the same road, and yet each one would arrive at a different location. And like the four blind men, each of whom touched a part of the elephant and then described it in very different ways, our four protagonists visited this garden of life, and experienced it, each in their own fashion.

As we review this powerful tale, we cannot help but be reminded of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. For like the author of that prayer, these four men began their journey to the "Orchard on the other side of reality" not knowing which one of them would die and which one would go mad. Who among them would emerge scorched by the fires of alienation, and who would return unscathed. Theirs, then, was more than an adventure; it was a trip to unknown places whose consequences were irreversible. Like so much of the Talmud, this legend tells us precious little. ¿Upon beginning their journey were our four protagonists filled with anxieties or filled with hope? ¿Did they have high spirits and great anticipation? or ¿Were they frightened? ¿Did they need to make this journey or was it simply a lark? ¿Did this trip take place in virtual or real time? And if it were a virtual trip, might it have been more psychedelic than physical in nature? In other words, ¿Was this trip, as described by the Talmud, a voyage into the depths of reality or into the depths of the mind?

If you remember from our other discussions there are four protagonists. Rabbi Azzai, who could only see the obvious, peered too deeply and died. Rabbi Ben Zoma, who saw only the hidden that lay within the obvious; he could not cease looking, and went mad. Our third protagonist, of whom we spoke last night, Abuya, was so certain that he never needed to ask directions, that ironically he lost his way, and dropped out of Jewish history forever.

Only one of the scholars, the one of whom we speak today, connected the obvious with the hidden, his sense of data with theory, and thus returned home unscathed. Today, then, we turn to the story of the fourth protagonist in our legend: Rabbi Akibah. Only Akiba made the journey, saw the garden, and returned safely to this side of reality.

¿What made Akiba so special? Why did he alone return unscathed? Why was he inscribed for life, when the others failed? ¿How does his life connect with the theme of Yom Kippur: to choose life?

Of the four Rabbis, we know the most about Rabbi Akiba. Born in great poverty, this humble man grew to become one of Israel's greatest legal minds. He was the founder of the principles upon which social science exists, the developer of modern scholarships' hermeneutics, and a military leader. It is Akiba whose body the Romans desecrated at the end of the Bar Cochba revolt. Legend has it, that as the Romans burnt his body wrapped in the Scrolls of the Torah, Akiba's soul flew to heaven carried by the very letters that comprise the sacred text. More than any other rabbi of the second Temple period, we know Akiba as the man who faced the angel of death and through sheer strength of spirit, defeated death by his belief in life and in his people's will to survive.

For centuries, Akiba has been perhaps the greatest of Jewish academic symbols. He is the man who connected the apparent with the obscure. He is the one who successfully navigated the passageways of the mind and found the way to create a balance between the spiritual and the empirical. Of the four, he was the one to connect the question to the answer and the answer to the question. ¿Is that not also the challenge of Yom Kippur? Today is the day that we pause to think of life as a series of journeys. Now we too must find the way to couple the otherworldly with the intellectual and to harmonize the empirical with the spiritual.

Yom Kippur then argues that seeking forgiveness is more than merely saying: I am sorry. Life is movement; it is knowing how to go beyond despondency and to start afresh. Today we begin our journey anew, seek new spiritual paths that lead us from the forests of cynicism into the meadows of creative living. How do we find our way? What are the methods by which we

travel along our particular path in life? What makes life such an adventure is that there is no one correct method.

For some, today is the day when we not only speak to G'd, but carefully listen for G'd's words to us. For these people the path is based in the act of dialogue: the dialogue with others, with G'd, and even with themselves. Although some who choose these dialogues of the heart may be seen as mad; Yom Kippur would take a different approach and argue that to be human is to know that G'd speaks to us and with us, and asks that we not only hear but answer. Yom Kippur would have us look at the world in which we live. ¿What do we see? Do we see only the obvious or are we wise enough to see the message behind the message?

On Yom Kippur day we travel the road of life through "speech." Yom Kippur is the day when we realize, that like G'd, we too create our own individual worlds through the act of speech. Just as it was through speech that G'd created the world; it is through the power of speech that we can create or destroy, build up or tear down. Today then is the day for examining our speech, to see where it places us on life's path

Yom Kippur is also the day that we recognize that G'd speaks to us through other people. For surely if G'd can speak to us through objects and history, then G'd can use that being which He made, just a little lower than the angels, as a way to communicate the service of the heart. ¿How many of us are willing to hear others? ¿How much grief has come into our world, simply because humanity has not learned how to hear other people's voices? No one knows why Rabbi Akiba succeeded where others failed. Some have argued that he was an expert listener or communicator. Others believe that he knew how to dialogue.

I would like to suggest another option. I believe that Akiba succeeded simply because he understood, what the others did not. That life is a journey based on radical amazement. That to live life we must see changes, embrace them and then learn to deal with them, that we must enjoy each day and realize that to waste a day is to insult G'd. I can imagine Akiba asking as he traveled the path of life: ¿What new thing has this trip brought into my life? ¿What has changed today? Because Akiba knew that he might never travel this same path again, he embraced the journey. Alone among his colleagues he understood that life is a mixture of formulas. At times

there are things that are best left in the past, and questions that are counter-productive to pursue. At other times, memory serves us well, helping us to learn from the past and create a brighter tomorrow. Akiba then understood, what Yom Kippur would have us know. The gates of Teshuvah require the ability to harmonize life's currents, to seek the spiritual in the empirical and to find the data behind the façade of the obvious.

Judaism recognizes that not everyone has the same abilities or given the same chances in life. But no matter what the burdens that life gives us, each of us has a chance to embrace life and to visit the orchard of life. In our own personal orchards we learn to deal with life's hard data, and to interpret them through the prism of faith and love, the spiritual and the esthetic.

There is a second part to the parable to the Pardes. To make the journey a success, each Rabbi had to find his own piece of fruit that had split into two and then reunite the pieces. All four found their piece of fruit, but three of them failed at rejoining the two halves. Only Akiba understood that this fruit called "pri ha'daat v-ha'lev" was both the fruit of the mind and the fruit of the heart. This is the fruit that teaches us that we need both discernment and feelings; a sense of what is and a sense of what can become.

Perhaps the meaning of the tale can be found in the meaning of today, Yom Kippur. As we stand before G'd's ark, we are challenged to enter into the realm of our minds and our hearts. Let us pray that we find the courage to place the pieces together and to embrace all of its many aspects so that we may travel safely through 5773.

I pray that as each of us travels through our own personal "journey of life", that all of us be written in the book of life as we make our way through the path of time.

Amen