



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

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Enter the Heart”

Shabbat Shuvah > The Birth of Hope
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ABSTRACT

One of the tragic victims of 9/11 was a newly-married man whose young wife was nine-months pregnant with their first child. The baby was born on Yom Kippur (two weeks later), and was named Lior Mordechai, as had been pre-agreed by the couple. But the mother gave him an additional name – Avichai, which means “my father lives.”

The mother described how her newborn child instilled hope in her after the devastating loss of her beloved husband: “At first, beyond the tears was the shock and anger that God would take my husband from me and the father from our unborn child. How could a compassionate God make me bring this child into this world all alone? But then my son was actually born, and of all days, on Yom Kippur – a day that I was taught is the birthday of hope. My new innocent child seemed like a gift of compassion from heaven – bringing a message of hope that all will be good... All will be good...”

Shabbat Shuvah – which corresponds this year with 9/11 – always falls between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It prepares us for the most holy of days, teaching us how to return to God, how to tap into divine compassion, how to rediscover hope even after loss, and how to seek forgiveness, be forgiven and forgive others.

Moses, when he pleaded for 120 days so that God would forgive Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf, received the “password” to forgiveness known as the Thirteen Traits of Divine Compassion, which we recite repeatedly over the High Holidays. The Talmud tells us that if we *do* these Thirteen Traits we will always be forgiven. Note that the Talmud does not merely say if we *recite*, but if we *do*.

In order to capture the full flow of God’s compassion, it is not enough for us to recite this special “password.” Rather we must take the words to heart and act. We must emulate God’s compassionate ways, so that we can be sure He will treat us compassionately in return. We must make of ourselves a vessel that can receive and hold God’s compassion flowing towards us. And this we do by cultivating compassion in our own lives.

THE BIRTH OF HOPE: SHABBAT SHUVAH AND THE ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

1. 9/11

Since today is the ninth anniversary of 9/11, allow me to begin with a story that takes us back to that fateful day.

One of the tragic victims of 9/11 was a newly-married man whose young wife was nine-months pregnant with their first child. The baby was born on Yom Kippur (two weeks later), and was named Lior Mordechai, as had been pre-agreed by the couple. But the mother gave him an additional name – Avichai, which means “my father lives.”

The mother described how her newborn child instilled hope in her after the devastating loss of her beloved husband: “Beyond the tears was the shock and anger that God would take my husband from me and the father from our unborn child. How could a compassionate God make me bring this child into this world all alone? But then my son was actually born, and of all days, on Yom Kippur – a day that I was taught is the birthday of hope. My new innocent child seemed like a gift of compassion from heaven – bringing a message of hope that all will be good... All will be good...”

2. A Message of Hope

Hope is the underlying message of the High Holidays – hope even under duress; hope even after loss; eternal hope even when we cannot see through the fog.

What message is more appropriate on this anniversary of 9/11, when we think about the senseless losses and destruction wrought that fateful Tuesday morning? That day, when Middle Eastern havoc was brought to American shores, when we were all hurled, trembling, into a new uncertain reality.

On Rosh Hashana we said, *HaYom harat haolam*, “Today the world trembles.” But the Hebrew word *harat* can mean “trembles” and it can also mean “is born.” To give birth to a new world is our powerful response to 9/11 – and to any challenges that come our way.

3. All Will Be Good

Many of us are concerned these days about our economy and other uncertain forces impacting our lives and our decisions. A sense of tentativeness hangs in the air.

One of the ways Jews deal with difficulty is with a bit of humor, just to lighten up the spirit.

A businessperson is walking down the street and bumps into a homeless beggar with an outstretched arm. The man gives the beggar a few coins, and asks him what circumstances led him to this destitute state. The beggar replies, that he lost his job due to the recession. In an attempt to console him, the businessman says: “Don’t worry. My broker tells me that the recession will be over soon, and we will bounce back better than ever.” The beggar stares into the businessman’s eyes and says: “I am your broker!”

Or:

Two old friends met one day after many years. One attended college, and now was very successful. The other had not attended college and never had much ambition. The successful one asked his ne’er-do-well friend, “How has everything been going with you?”

“I’m as rich as Rockefeller.”

“What?” the successful friend couldn’t believe it. “How did you do it?”

“Well, one day I opened the Bible at random, and dropped my finger on a word, and it was *oil*. So, I invested in oil, and boy, did the oil wells gush. Then another day I dropped my finger on an-

other word, and it was gold. So, I invested in *gold* and those mines really produced. You can't go wrong following the Bible."

The successful friend was so impressed by his ne'er-do-well friend's system that he rushed to his hotel, grabbed a Gideon Bible, flipped it open, and dropped his finger on a page. He opened his eyes and saw that his finger rested on the words: *Chapter Eleven*.

Joking aside, today's message instills in us the hope, confidence and courage to not be overwhelmed by personal, social and world events. We have persevered through far harder struggles and not only survived – but thrived.

We look to the child Lior Mordechai Avichai, born nine years ago on Yom Kippur, in the aftermath of 9/11 – we look to him and we gain hope. We share with him the promise: all will be good.

To that I would only add – all will be good if we do our part. We cannot sit waiting for goodness to come pouring down from heaven like manna. We have to engage in goodness ourselves. In order to give birth to a better world, we have to make ourselves better. And that is what the High Holidays are all about.

With Yom Kippur just a week away, we have no time to waste.

4. Job Applicant

Imagine yourself arriving in the reception room of a big corporation.

"Can I help you?" says the receptionist.

"Oh, I guess so," you answer with a yawn.

The receptionist looks quizzically at you. "Well ... why are you here?"

"I'm not sure exactly."

“Are you here to apply for a job?”

“Yes, I think that’s it.”

“Okay, did you bring a resume?”

You look at her feeling a little stupid. “No, I didn’t bring anything.”

“Well, perhaps you can come back when you’ve prepared for this.”

If you arrived at a big corporation that ill-prepared, you’d expect nothing to happen. Similarly, if you arrive at a synagogue on Yom Kippur without preparation, without knowing what you are there for, or what it is all about, what can you truly expect?

So, since we are in the middle of the ten day countdown between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, this is a good time to talk about preparation.

5. Shabbat Shuvah

Today is *Shabbat Shuvah* – which is how the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is traditionally known. It is called *Shabbat Shuvah* after the opening words of today’s Haftorah reading: *Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Elohecha* – “Return, O Israel, to the Lord Your God...”¹

The opening word *shuva* – meaning “return” – gives us the Hebrew word for repentance: *teshuvah*. But as you can readily see, the implication is quite different. Repentance implies that one is going away from something – leaving the path of wrongdoing – whereas *teshuvah* literally means one is returning to something.

This is not to suggest that Judaism doesn’t believe in repentance, or that there is something amiss with the notion. It is clear that before you can embrace the right path, you must leave the wrong path; you must regret having taken it; and you must get away from it.

¹ Hosea 14:2-10.

But return is much more profound. It is not just going away from wrongful behavior, it is going back to your true self – your divine soul. It is not just damage control, it is returning to the essence that could never be damaged – it is returning to God.

6. The Right Way to Apologize

Imagine a mother and father who arrive home to find their teenage child has had a party in their absence and, what is even worse, the evidence of it is still all over the place. Dirty plates and cups are strewn on every available surface. A broken lamp is lying on the floor. The trash can is overflowing with discarded fast food and buzzing with flies. Half-drunk cans of soda are spilled on the carpet. And the place smells. The parents are understandably upset. But they react differently.

The father says, “The first thing I want to hear is an apology. Then you are going to clean up this mess, and when you are through, we are going to talk about how you can make up for what you did.”

The mother says, “I want to tell you how very disappointed I am that you didn’t live up to our trust in you. Because I know that inside you are a trustworthy child. Inside, you are so much greater than this.”

Which parent is correct? Both are.

You can’t *just* wax eloquent – you have to acknowledge the error and make good on the damages. There is no way around that. But then you have to see that this is not the real you – the real you is greater than that.

There are two levels of *teshuvah*. The first level involves cleaning up the mess in your house, so to speak, because your house has to be clean before you can bring something new or fresh in there. This is level one – making order and repairing that which was broken. But level two, which is even more important, is connecting to your essence.

Your essence is your soul. Your soul can never be damaged. The body, yes. The psyche, yes. But the inner core of goodness that is the soul,

¹ Genesis 28:12-13.

never. The essence always remains intact.

Now, although that is true, the damage that we do in our physical lives can create a ruin so big, so high and so wide that it completely obscures the pure essence underneath. So what do we do then?

Moses taught us that there is never a ruin so big that it can't be rebuilt; there is nothing that breaks that can't be mended.

The rebuilding begins with a plea for forgiveness. That is exactly what Moses did after the Israelites betrayed God with the Golden Calf. And, in our process of returning to God, this is also what we must do.

7. The Plea for Forgiveness

In the traditional prayers for the High Holidays, we find three Hebrew phrases all of which mean "forgive us" – *selach lanu*, *mechal lanu* and *kapper lanu*. But while they all essentially mean the same thing in English, they have very different implications. Let us examine these implications in order to shed light on the process of seeking forgiveness – both from God as well as our fellow human beings.

Selach lanu comes from the word *selichah*, meaning "pardon." To ask for pardon is to say to the one we have injured: "I am sorry for what I did. I sincerely regret having done it, and I will never do it again." According to Torah law, the appropriate response to this request from the one we've injured is to believe we are sincere and to respond positively. One who refuses to do this is considered a cruel person.

Mechal lanu comes from *mechilah*, meaning "wiping away." Here, we are asking the one we've injured to wipe away the transgression as if it never happened, and restore the relationship to the former level of warmth and intimacy. For the one who has been injured a positive response to this is naturally difficult. But it is within each person's God-given powers to forgive to this extent.

Kapper lanu comes from *kapparah*, meaning "atonement" – as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. When we request from one we have in-

jured to grant us atonement, we are saying, in effect, “My conscience will not let me live with myself, because of what I did to you and to our relationship. Please forgive me and take away the guilt that I feel.” To respond positively to this is beyond human capacity. It is only God who can reach inside our hearts and say, “Be consoled.”

Indeed, we ask forgiveness from God, because we *know* we will be forgiven. We ask to return because we *know* that we will be taken back.

How do we know? How can we be sure?

8. An Open Door

After the sin of the Golden Calf, in his plea for forgiveness, Moses told God, “You created human beings as a flawed race who are bound to make mistakes. You must create a way for them to repair these mistakes. You must tell them that there is a way out, that there is hope.”

In response God told Moses, “I created the world in accordance with the laws of cause and effect. For every action there is a reaction. And sometimes the reaction is such that it can’t be reversed. You’re asking Me to change the natural law that I myself created.”

But Moses argued, “I’m not asking you to change the laws. I’m asking you to crack open just one door.”

But God did more than that – He opened two.

The first door is called the “gate of tears.”

Tears are like the spout on a kettle that allows internal pressure out. They have the power to open any door. Moreover, the Talmudic sages say that “tears bathe the soul.” When we cry before God and are genuinely sincere in our sorrow, we wash away much that obscures our pure essence.

The second door is called the “gate of compassion.”

During the High Holidays, as we petition God to forgive us – to take us

back – we repeatedly recite the Thirteen Traits of Divine Compassion, to remind ourselves of this special password to the “gate of compassion”:

ADONAI, ADONAI, Almighty, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth, keeper of kindness for thousands of generations, endurer of iniquity and transgression and sin, and cleanser [of those who repent].²

These Thirteen Traits were revealed to Moses when he pleaded for God’s forgiveness after the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses was dealing with the aftermath of a very grave thing – betrayal of God Himself. And this act of idolatry was quite intentional – the Israelites knew the consequences, as only a few days before they had heard the Ten Commandments which at the very beginning forbid idolatry. Nevertheless, knowing all that, Moses would not let up his entreaties.

Finally, after a total of 120 *days* of pleading on the mountain, Moses succeeded. God responded not just with an affirmative reply, but with an unprecedented gift. He revealed these Thirteen Traits – thirteen secrets of God’s personality (so to speak) that only He could have revealed. Each one of the words that make up these Thirteen Traits is profoundly mystical and contains enormous divine energy. The Thirteen Traits of Divine Compassion are described in the Zohar (the classical work of the Kabbalah) as the “thirteen-petalled rose” – the greatest secret of life, the formula to repairing whatever is broken.

According to the Talmud, God told Moses: “Whenever Israel sins, let them *do this* before Me, and I will forgive them.”

Note that the Talmud³ does not merely say “let them *recite* before Me.” It says, “let them *do this* before Me.”

This means that, in order to capture the full flow of God’s compassion, it is not enough for us to recite this special “password.” Rather we must take the words to heart and act. We must emulate God’s compassionate

² Exodus 34:6-7.

³ Talmud, Rosh Hashana 17b.

ways, so that we can be sure He will treat us compassionately in return. We must make of ourselves a vessel that can receive and hold God's compassion flowing towards us. And this we do by cultivating compassion in our own lives.

9. Emulating God's Compassion

Yes, it is true that God told Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show compassion to whom I will show compassion."⁴ Therefore, sometimes we can experience God's compassion without having done anything ourselves. But we can't always expect it. We still have to do our part.

So in preparing for Yom Kippur, we must examine how compassionate we are in our own actions.

You say you are a compassionate person? Well, as compassionate as you may think we are now, you can always be more compassionate. (As they say, if good is good, is better not better?)

So you can always do more. But in cultivating compassion, make no mistake – as people often do in the Western World – compassion does not mean looking the other way. Compassion does not mean ignoring crimes committed against you or others. Compassion is not a contradiction of justice.⁵

Compassion means being sensitive to another person's soul. It requires remembering that each one of us – however coarse and imperfect we may be on the outside – is endowed with a perfect divine soul on the inside. And, compassion means transcending our own comfort zone out of love for another.

⁴ Exodus 33:19.

⁵ Optionally, you may want to use this (from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's book on Ethics): Even Pope John Paul II subscribed to that notion. Despite of all the things that Christianity teaches about forgiveness which Judaism does not, when the Pope forgave Ali Agca, the man who tried to assassinate him, he did nothing to stop the wheels of justice. And Ali Agca was sentenced to life imprisonment. That's forgiveness with justice. And while it is true that forgiveness is part of compassion, compassion is a great deal more than that.

10. Call to Action

So, in the week that we have remaining before Yom Kippur, I suggest that our preparation for this most important of holy days follow these steps:

- 1) Let's do our best to connect to our essence. Let's each of us identify a few areas that need to be cleansed in our life, and let's also identify a few areas that reflect our essence, our higher self.
- 2) Let's ask forgiveness. Let's make a list of people we have hurt in some way, let's figure out what we must do to ask their forgiveness, and let's do it.
- 3) And finally, let's bring out our most compassionate self. Every day during this week, let's do a deed which expresses compassion, especially to someone who may have wronged us.

Then, on Yom Kippur, we can all feel good when we stand before God and recite the Thirteen Traits of Divine Compassion and say, "Forgive us as You have promised."

11. My Father Lives

I conclude with what I began – the indelible image of the child Lior Mordechai Avichai, born nine years ago on Yom Kippur. His birth captures the message of this High Holiday season, so relevant to our turbulent times: The birth of hope amidst loss, confusion and despair.

Today the world trembles, today the world is born. Born out of the ashes of his father's death on 9/11, young Lior Mordechai Avichai, teaches us that all will be good. All will be good.

I would like to share with you one detail in the story I did not mention earlier: The reason his mother gave him the additional name Avichai ("my father lives") was in the hope that they may yet find his father alive.

Allow me to say that young Avicahi, by virtue of his very name does indeed embody, in a very real way, the fact that his father does yet live – in his son, in his life and in all that he will accomplish.

And we collectively learn the same lesson in our lives: Through our actions, our forgiveness and compassion, we too bring rebirth and renewal to our lives. Avichai: My father lives, indeed.