



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 14, 2013

Yom Kippur - One

Eviction Notice



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5774 Enter the Heart”*

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Eviction Notice: Resist Your Landlord

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ABSTRACT

If you were a guest in someone’s home, and your host told you to leave, what would you do? Would you listen? If you had any kind of manners at all, of course you would.

And what if God told you to leave His home – earth, heaven – what would you do? Would you heed His demand?

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish year. But why? What makes this day holier than all other days? And what practical message does it provide for us here, today, in 2013?

Everyone knows about *Kol Nidrei*. But a lesser emphasized line we repeat three times after *Kol Nidrei*, carries the real secret of Yom Kippur: how Yom Kippur infuses us with the greatest power of all – the ability to change God’s mind and our destiny ... the ability to find hope in the most hopeless place ... the ability to achieve the impossible.

We unravel these mysteries by going to a most unlikely place: the tragic story of Acher – the only person ever labeled with the disparaging name “the Other” or “Someone Else” – one of the greatest Talmudic sages who became an apostate...

Today, on Yom Kippur we learn how to respond to an eviction notice – how not to take “no” for an answer, even when the Boss tells us to leave...

This sermon goes where others have not dared go before. Peppered with spicy anecdotes and unusual Talmudic instructions, it teaches when it is right to buck your boss or landlord ... or even God.

**EVICTIION NOTICE:
RESIST YOUR LANDLORD**

Take-away message: The holiness and power of Yom Kippur is hope, never give up, no matter what, because you, man, can be victorious even when confronting God!

1. Finding God (Joke)

All hot and sweaty from drinking too much Manischewitz, a drunk stumbles into a *mikvah*, a ritual bathhouse, on the day before Yom Kippur. He gets undressed, walks into the cool, clean water and stands there next to the rabbi.

The rabbi, noticing the old drunk, says, "Mister, are you ready to *toivel* and find God?"

The drunk looks back and slurs, "Yesh, rabbi ... I sure am!" And he dunks under the water.

When he pops back up the rabbi asks him. "Nu, did you find God?"

"Nooo, I didn't!" says the drunk. And he proceeds to dunk again.

When he comes back up again the rabbi asks, "Now, brother, you must surely feel holy; did you see God?"

"Noooo, rabbi, I did not see God!"

The rabbi, now losing all semblance of patience, takes the drunk and pushes him under water, holding him there for 30 seconds. When the drunk finally resurfaces, sputtering and muttering, the frustrated rabbi yells, "Come on, my good drunkard, have you found God yet?"

The dripping man wipes his eyes, looks at the rabbi, points down to the water, and says: "Rabbi, are you absolutely sure that this is where He fell in?"

2. Looking For God

Imagine that this world is a *mikvah*, a global body of water within which is submerged the deepest purity and the holiest truth. Because they are submerged they are not visible to the naked eye.

But so it is – looking at the world is like looking at a deep ocean – we see merely the surface and are blind to the infinite leagues beneath.

Thus do we go through life: looking at the ocean ... diving in here ... or swimming out there ... searching for purpose, meaning, reason, truth, God. Much is concealed, and even more is obscured.¹ And to such an extent that we are not even sure that God is here at all.

To quote our drunk friend who said something very sobering indeed – “Rabbi, are you absolutely sure that this is where He fell in?”²

And then we have Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year, the day each and every Jew looks for God, searches for God, seeks God – the day every Jew finds God.

Everyone senses a special sanctity on Yom Kippur. If you ask any Jew – from the most devout and pious scholar, to the worst apostate who may deny his faith – what one day is the holiest of the Jewish year? The unequivocal response would be: Yom Kippur!³

And speaking of apostates...

¹ Indeed, the Hebrew word for nature, *teva*, also means submerged, as in *tovayah b'yam suf*, because like a sea which conceals any object submerged in it, nature conceals the divine presence within it.

² Mikvah, incidentally, has a special connection with Yom Kippur. In preparation to entering the purest day of the year, we submerged ourselves earlier today in the pure waters of the mikvah to spiritually cleanse ourselves, See the last Mishne in Yuma (85b): Mikvah yisroel Hashem (Jeremiah 17:13), just as the mikvah purifies the impure, so God purifies Israel. This purification happens on Yom Kippur, as it says: On this day you shall have all your sins atoned, so that you will be purified. Before God you will be purified of all your sins (Leviticus 16:30).

³ **Optional addition:** For some reason, even in our modern world, despite the deep levels of assimilation, Yom Kippur remains special in our consciousness and our calendar. Just look at the streets of large cities on this day. And who doesn't know of Sandy Koufax refusing to pitch in the World Series which fell on Yom Kippur? But why? What happened on Yom Kippur to make it the holiest day? And why do all Jews feel compelled to go to synagogue, fast, pray, and connect on this day? I recently met a Jew, who told me that he does nothing Jewish except fast on Yom Kippur. (I highly doubt that possibility. As I shared with him, that if he is kind to others, gives charity, visits the sick etc. – he has already done more mitzvos than many others). When I asked him, why do you fast on Yom Kippur, he had absolutely no answer. “It just seems like the right thing to,” he simply said.

3. The Other

The Talmud is full of interesting characters, brimming with colorful personalities. One of the most fascinating is an apostate known as Acher, meaning “the Other” or “Someone Else.”

Of course that was not always his name. He was really Elisha Ben Avuyah, a Torah genius par-excellence. The Babylonian Talmud⁴ describes how Elisha Ben Avuyah lost his faith and acquired the name Acher:

He had been delving into the deepest mystical mysteries – which the Talmud calls “entering Pardes (the orchard)” when he encountered matters he did not understand. He then began to question whether there were two masters in heaven – God and the angel Metatron. Because of this a heavenly voice declared *Return, o wayward sons*⁵ except for Elisha Ben Avuyah. Now in full rebellion mode, Elisha said, “Since I have been banished from the next world let me indulge in this world.” He then went out to pursue various carnal pleasures. Once he solicited a promiscuous woman. She said to him, “Are you not the great sage, Elisha Ben Avuyah?!” He uprooted a radish from the earth on Shabbat (which is a desecration) and gave it to her. She said, “This must be Acher, someone else.”

I remember the first time I studied this passage of Talmud. I was blown away! Here was a man capable of delving into the deepest spiritual mysteries and what happened? He got lost. Elisha Ben Avuyah was searching in the depths of the proverbial ocean – perhaps God fell in here?

⁴ *Chagigah* 15a: [In the Pardes orchard] Acher chopped down saplings. About him the verse states, *Let not your mouth bring guilt upon your flesh.* (Kohelet 5:5.) What was it [that caused him to cut down these orchard saplings]? He saw the angel Metatron, who was given permission to sit in order to record the merits of Israel. Acher said to him, “We have it by tradition that above there is neither sitting, nor competition, nor the back of a head, nor weariness [yet the angel is sitting!] Perhaps – Heaven forbid! – there are two authorities, [God and Metatron]! They took Metatron out and said to him, “Why did you not stand before Acher when you saw him?” Metatron was then given permission to erase the merits of Acher. A heavenly voice emerged and said: “*Return, o wayward sons* (Yirmiyahu 3:22) – except for Acher. Said Acher, “Since this person has been banished from the World to Come let him go indulge in this world.” Acher strayed to bad society. He went out and solicited a promiscuous woman. She said to him, “Are you not the great sage, Elisha Ben Avuyah?!” He uprooted a radish from the earth on Shabbat [which is a desecration] and gave it to her. She said, “This must be Acher, someone else.”

⁵ Yirmiyahu 3:22.

4. Personal Relevance

Let us for a moment apply this story of how Elisha became Acher to our own personal, everyday lives.

I know this congregation well, and you all are perfect. So I will apply this to myself:

There are times when I do not feel like myself, when I feel like “someone else.” I know that I, [insert name here], came into this world to be the best I can be ... to learn and study ... to help people ... to do good deeds ... to search for God in the oceans of the world, and find Him too ... to be a good husband and father ... to build a beautiful family...

And I try. But sometimes, intentionally or not, it just doesn't work out the way it's supposed to. I see something I do not understand and I question – maybe (Heaven forbid!) there are two authorities: God and money, God and the government, God and me. Or, I see something like the loss of a child, like six million of my brothers and sisters murdered, and I ask: How could this happen? Is there really a God?

And sometimes I even make a mistake. Two mistakes. Many mistakes. Sometimes the mistakes are so many and so big that I am broken into a million pieces.

I hurt someone I love. I ignore a begging man. I ignore myself. I build a Golden Calf, I create false, gilded, fatted, calf-shaped gods – I worship my work, I serve my body, I pray to my banker, I use my friends, I take candy from a baby.

It reaches a point where, if I listen closely, I can hear the heavenly voice whispering – “*Return, o wayward sons* except for [insert name here].” It comes to a point, where I feel like I am no longer welcome in heaven.

Should I imitate Acher and indulge in every physical, narcissistic, selfish pleasure – after all, if I'm lost, I might as well be lost all the way! I might as well lose myself in it completely! The heavenly voice told me so – God no longer welcomes me into His home! Doors closed. Game over.

From the Talmud it seems that there is a point of no return, a place of such darkness that heaven says: “I am sorry, son, but you messed up real bad; you are no longer welcome here.”

5. Eviction Un-noticed

Ah, but then I open the great mystical book, *Reishit Chochma*,⁶ and suddenly my eyes fill with tears. For this is what I read:⁷

Even if you have heard “Return, o wayward sons – except for so-and-so,” like with the case of Elisha Acher, do not be resigned, for even Elisha Acher, ultimately (through the prayer of others) was accepted, even though he himself did not return. How much more so if he had returned, oh how beneficial that would have been for him. Even if the doors of return were closed before him, all he needed to do was push until the doors opened. This is what our Sages of Blessed Memory said: “All that the Landlord tells you do, except [if He tells you] to leave.”⁸

The Landlord, this refers to God; everything He tells you to do, you should do, except to leave. That is, if God tells you “leave My house and do not enter,” like in the case of Elisha Acher, do not listen to Him. Enter with *teshuvah*, repentance, for this is the true desire of the Landlord, only He is testing you.

When I read this from *Reishit Chochma*, it blows my mind every time and opens my heart.

Sure we make mistakes, but do mistakes make us? Never!

Even when we hear the heavenly voice yelling in our ears, “You are not welcome here – leave!” We open a Talmud to the Tractate of Psachim, page 86, side B, and we quote: “All that the Landlord tells you do, except [if He tells you] to leave.”

And we say: “I hear you, O Heavenly Voice, telling me to leave. Thank you very much, but I think I’ll stay.”

⁶ Rabbi Eliyahu da Vidas (1518-1593).

⁷ *Reishit Chochma*, Shaar Hakedusha, Chapter 17 (p. 75).

⁸ *Pesachim* 86b.

6. The Power of Yom Kippur

Arguing even when the Landlord tells us to leave, my dear friends, my fellow squatters, is what Yom Kippur is all about – this is its real power – and this power was acquired for us by Moses, our great teacher, after the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Following the revelation on Mount Sinai, Moses went up the mountain to receive the entire Torah – everything, the Written, the Oral, the Inner, the Outer, the Law, the Mystical, the whole entire Torah! This took him 40 days and 40 nights.

Afterwards, Moses came down holding the two tablets. He was greeted with a sight that pained his eyes. The Jews had created a Golden Calf, a false god. This was a desecration, a blasphemy, a mistake like no other! Moses then took the tablets and shattered them on the ground into a million pieces.

God, the ultimate Heavenly Voice, the Universal Landlord, said: “These people are no longer welcome here – get the hell out of My house!”

And, thus we, Jews, reached a moment of truth, a diverging road where one path leads to destruction and the other to redemption – the point on every journey when the boys are separated from the men, when the leaders are separated from the followers.

Moses could have taken the easy way out. He could have said, “God, Creator, Landlord, You are right. The people destroyed Your property, soiled Your home, made dark Your world with this terrible sin. They deserve to be evicted, removed, sent packing.”

This is the road Acher chose. Acher heard that he wasn’t welcome in heaven, so he went to live in corporeal hell. He left himself and became “someone else.”

But Moses was made of a different stock. When God the Landlord yelled, “Get out!” Moses commenced the greatest and most challenging period in all of his leadership. Moses said, “No way, God, we are not leaving, no how.”

7. No Easy Task

But this is no easy task. When God tells you to get out, when a heavenly voice rumbles that all are welcome except for you, it takes more than two feet to stand your ground. It takes your very soul.

For 80 days and 80 nights Moses argued with God, litigated with God, contended with God. In sum, he said something like:

“You, God, created man, us, we the people. You tossed us into this vast ocean of concealment, where we are just dog-paddling around, looking for You. But we are not even certain that this is where You fell in! We try our best, we give our everything, and then we give more, and even more! And yes, we make mistakes, we mess up, we stumble and we may even crash. But we don’t stay there resigned? We get back up and we try again, and again. Do You, Landlord, really want to evict us Your tenants for *trying* to live up to Your sublime standards? Well I, Moses, refuse to take no for an answer. You can tell us to leave, but we are not going anywhere.”

Day 1, God said “No.” Week 1, God said “No.” Another day, another week of pleading, begging and arguing with God, and another, and another, and still no results.

And, if we are really honest with ourselves, and put ourselves in God’s shoes, we have to admit that God was not being stubborn with Moses; His resistance to Moses’ appeals was very justified.

I mean, not a month and a half after receiving the Torah, we destroyed the trust between God and ourselves. We created a Golden Calf, a false image that basically states: “You God aren’t the only entity; we have another, a man-made cow!”

This is like a man coming home after a few weeks of marriage and telling his new wife: “Hey, honey, I love you but, I have another woman...” The wife would throw her husband out of the house faster than any landlord! So, wasn’t God equally justified in doing the same thing?

Actions have consequences. If you stick your hand in the fire you get burned. “These are the rules of existence,” God told Moses. “The people severed their relationship with Me. What do you expect Me to do?”

8. Moses' Response

And Moses responded to God:

"True, I agree with everything You say. What the people did was terrible. And yes, there must be consequences to their actions. But we both know that You created these rules, and that You can transcend them. The Jews are accountable for what they did. They are not off the hook. But, even with all that, God, I am telling You that we cannot end this relationship here, we cannot leave, we cannot be evicted – we can and will do sincere *teshuvah* and return to you. So, please open a door – any door (a back door if necessary) – that will tell the human race that there is always hope. Please do not allow me to leave You without hope..."

How was Moses so sure that he would succeed in changing God's mind?

Because he knew God's secret – that there is always an opening ... that God is not bound by His own existential rules of cause and effect ... that we have the ability to transcend the forward flow of time itself and grow through a broken past.

Moses was so sure of this, so confident in being able to reach God's innermost "heart," that he put himself on the line. He said, "Erase my name from Your book if You don't forgive the people."

With a super-human effort, Moses persisted. For 80 days and 80 nights – double what it took him to receive the entire Torah – he argued with God and changed reality.

This, in itself, is a life-changing message: to download the Torah takes a long time, but to return from the abyss, to turn night into day, may require double the time, double the effort.

Oh, but the results are transformative, truly divine, truly holy.

9. Immortal Words

On the 80th day, on the first Yom Kippur in history, God looked at an exhausted Moses and said these immortal words,⁹ which we say here tonight [have just said] three times right after the holy *Kol Nidrei* prayer:

I have pardoned in accordance with your words.

I have pardoned in accordance with your words.

I have pardoned in accordance with your words.

Yom Kippur is the holiest, most profound day of the year because it is the birthday of hope – the day that the tenant can be victorious over the Landlord, the day that man can change the very mind of God!

Moses gave us this power. He unleashed the power of *teshuvah* and introduced a force of renewal and return into our mortal existence, revealing that nothing can destroy the human spirit. He showed us that, when we persist and insist, we can break down every door, and we can achieve anything we want.

This is the power of a Jew – even if the Landlord, God tells us to leave, we say, “No, we are here to stay, we will knock down the doors of heaven, of earth, of anywhere if we have to, we will pierce any obstacle keeping us from entering Your home, but we are here to stay – for eternity.”

No matter what happens 364 days a year, on Yom Kippur we know that we are here for eternity.

So, when you receive an eviction notice – when you are told that you are not wanted by the world, or even by God – you have three options: 1) ignore it, 2) comply with it, or 3) fight it.

Yom Kippur provides us with the ultimate option: We never take no for answer.

All that the Landlord tells you do, except [if He tells you] to leave.

⁹ Bamidbar 14:20.

The holiness and power of Yom Kippur is hope, so never give up, no matter what, because you can be victorious even over God!

And the Landlord is smiling – He is saying, *Natzchuni, bonei, natzchuni*¹⁰ “you have prevailed over Me, My children, you have prevailed.”

He has just signed the lease – the lease on a long and prosperous and soulful life! Amen.

¹⁰Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b.