



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 3, 2014  
Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

**Praying with Sinners**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5775 Enter the Heart”*

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**Praying with Sinners: The Heavenly Tribunal and Earth**

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## ABSTRACT

Welcome to the holiest people, in the holiest place, at the holiest time.

We are about to begin one of the most haunting prayers in all of Judaism, *Kol Nidrei*. We are about to enter into the Holy of Holies of the year. We are about to cross the borders between body and soul, dissolve all boundaries between heaven and earth, and remove all barriers between God and ourselves.

The cantor opens with a fascinating prayer:

*With the sanction of the Omnipresent and with the sanction of the congregation, by the authority of the heavenly tribunal and by the authority of the earthly tribunal, we hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

That implies that sinners are praying right here and now – with us! But is a praying sinner not an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms? Because how can he be both? If he is praying, he is not sinning. If he is sinning, he is not praying.

As always, there is more to it than meets the eye, as a beautiful Chassidic story about the heavenly tribunal and the earthly tribunal make clear.

And an equally beautiful passage from the Talmud states: *Every fast day that does not include the sinners of Israel is not a fast day.*

Together, they reveal the sacred mystery of Yom Kippur – a day when sinners become prayers, and prayers become one with the Omnipresent.

## PRAYING WITH SINNERS: THE HEAVENLY TRIBUNAL AND EARTH

### 1. Kol Nidrei

Welcome to the holiest people, in the holiest place, at the holiest time.

We are about to begin one of the most haunting prayers in all of Judaism, *Kol Nidrei*. We are about to enter into the Holy of Holies of the year. We are about to cross the border between body and soul, dissolve all boundaries between heaven and earth, and remove all barriers between God and ourselves.

We are about to walk into a place of complete purity. We are about to walk into a sanctuary of complete sanctity. We are about to walk down a path that needs no shoe. We are about to become ourselves.

*Kol Nidrei* is the opening prayer of Yom Kippur. The words of *Kol Nidrei* are a meditation on removing all the boundaries of the world, untying all of the physical (and spiritual) bonds that restrict us, and unshackling all of life's chains, both those imposed upon us and self-imposed.

Such a profound moment does not come without a prelude. To segue into this most-awesome prayer, the cantor recites a pithy paragraph, repeating its succinct message three times in Hebrew:

*With the sanction of the Omnipresent and with the sanction of the congregation, by the authority of the heavenly tribunal and by the authority of the earthly tribunal, we hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

That implies that sinners are praying right here and now – with us! But is a praying sinner not an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms? Because how can he be both? If he is praying, he is not sinning. If he is sinning, he is not praying.

Come to think of it, the entire introduction seems to be one puzzle stacked atop another:

- Why do we need permission to pray with sinners?
- Are any of us truly so perfect – or so arrogant – as to require permission from on high (heavenly tribunal) and from down below (earthly tribunal) to pray with people who are, quote-unquote, sinners?

- And if we are sanctioned on high by the Omnipresent – God Himself – do we really need to be sanctioned below by mere fallible mortals?
- If we have the authority of the heavenly tribunal to enter into this solemn day with warts and all, do we really then require the authority of the earthly tribunal as well?
- And what are these tribunals anyway?

It is said that the best way to ask a question is with humility, and the best way to answer a question is with a story. So let me tell you a story.

## 2. Judges of the Supreme Court (Chassidic Story)

The third Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, known as the Tzemach Tzedek, had a super-human grasp of both the concealed and revealed aspects of the Torah. Yet, when he once graced a large group of his followers with his presence at a wedding party and asked them if they would rather hear words of Torah or a Chassidic story they answered almost in unison: a story.

These Chassidim happened to all be great Talmudic scholars and deep mystical thinkers in their own right, but they knew that a Chassidic story can open the heart and activate the soul in a way no other words of Torah can.

The Tzemach Tzedek smiled. The room became totally silent. Everyone leaned forward to listen. All eyes were upon the Rebbe as he began.

“There once was a Chassid, his name is not important, but he lived not far from here with his wife and five children. He made his living by managing a small inn where he would sell whisky and rent rooms to the travelers that passed by.

“For a while God helped, and he eked out a meager living. He always paid his rent on time and managed to provide for his family, but then he fell on hard times. Maybe it was the weather or the economy or just bad luck but, week after week, month after month, there was almost no business at all.

“Needless to say, he was unable to pay his monthly rent and, at the end of the year, all he had were debts – he owed money to the local grocery, to the teacher who was teaching his children, and to a few other people whom he borrowed from. But worst of all, he owed a full year’s rent to his landlord.

“Well, it so happened that this landlord was a Jew and, to his good fortune, not just an ordinary Jew but a Chassid and follower of the same Rebbe as himself.

“So our innkeeper went to his Rebbe and begged him to convince the landlord to have mercy and push off the payment for another few months.

“Of course, when the landlord heard his Rebbe’s request, he complied with a full heart and even agreed to wait for another full year for payment, but on the condition that the innkeeper start paying his monthly rent now.

“The innkeeper thanked the landlord profusely for his understanding, thanked the Rebbe for intervening, and promised that from now on he would never miss a payment. And that he would save up money to pay his debt in full even before the year was up.

“But it did not happen. In fact, business the next year was even worse than it was the previous year. After twelve more months of not receiving rent the landlord presented himself at the innkeeper’s door twice as angry as last year and demanded that he either pay in full or leave immediately. Otherwise, he would have no choice but to call the local authorities.

“Up against the wall, the innkeeper again ran to the Rebbe and begged that he save him a second time. The Rebbe again called in the landlord, but this time the man wasn’t so compliant. He was mad and rightly so – he was losing money. As far as he was concerned, the innkeeper had to go. He wanted to rent the inn to someone else. He was even willing to erase two year’s worth of debt. But he was not willing to lose money for a third year. ‘How long can this go on?’ he cried.

“The Rebbe agreed but he asked that the landlord do him a personal favor – have mercy and not throw an entire family into the cold!

“So, the landlord, totally against his better judgment, gave his debtor another chance.

“But when the third year proved no better than the previous two, things came to an end and the landlord presented the innkeeper with a letter of eviction.

“The innkeeper again ran to the Rebbe and the Rebbe again called in the landlord to intercede, but this time the landlord refused to show up. The Rebbe then wrote the landlord a letter asking him to give just one more year, but he ignored it. He did wait until the weather warmed up, and then he evicted the entire family and with no trouble found another innkeeper to take over the rental. He went to another Rebbe for advice and blessings.

“Well, the ex-innkeeper and his family wandered for awhile moving from poorhouse to poorhouse but it wasn’t long before he and his wife, fell ill and passed away. His children were distributed among relatives and other kind people, and the entire incident became history.

“But there is more. Several years later the landlord also passed away. When he got to heaven he discovered that he had to stand trial for evicting the family.

“He tried to protest that he had done nothing wrong! The innkeeper owed him money and didn’t pay. According to the Torah he had every right to evict him immediately, but he didn’t – he gave him three years! And in the end, he lost all that money. Why should he be judged for that?

“But the prosecuting angels rebutted that he went against his Rebbe! And not only that, but he really didn’t need the money. He should have trusted in God more and waited another year. Because of him, two people died and five children suffered!

“The landlord saw that things looked bad for him so he adopted a different strategy. He replied in his defense that the heavenly court was not qualified to try his case being that they were souls without bodies, completely ethereal and spiritual, and had no way of really understanding what was involved here – what money really is and what it can make people do.

“The heavenly court deliberated for a while and agreed that the innkeeper was right, they did not completely understand the nuances of the earthly world.”

“The members of the heavenly tribunal disqualified themselves as judges and decided to choose, in their place, people who had been in the world – the souls of two great rabbis well-versed in monetary legalities.

“But the landlord again objected. He said that these two holy men had been in heaven for over two hundred years and certainly had forgotten the pressures of making a living. He wanted a court of living people in this physical world to decide his case.<sup>1</sup>

At this point the Tzemach Tzedik paused in the story, looked around at the Chassidim who were intently listening and announced:

“I say that the landlord is innocent! What do you say?”

All those gathered there, listening closely to the story, suddenly realized that they themselves were the court that the landlord demanded! The story was actually occurring right now, and they were part of it.

They looked at one another, then at the Tzemach Tzedek, and spontaneously answered, almost in unison, “Our verdict is innocent, innocent, innocent!”

The Tzemach Tzedik nodded his head in agreement, stood up, and returned home.

### 3. Heaven and Earth

There is a realm called heaven, and there is a realm called earth. Heaven is completely spiritual, ethereal, divine, wholly removed from the physical materials of earth. Earth is the exact opposite. Earth is completely physical, material, and coarse. Usually, when you look at heaven you do not see earth, and when you look at earth you do not see heaven. Usually, when you experience the spiritual you forget the physical, and when you experience the physical you forget the spiritual.

The heavenly tribunal’s jurisdiction is the *Olam Ha’Emet*, the World of Truth, where everything is revealed as it is, without any facades. *Olam Ha’Emet* is a world of possibility, of what could be, of dreams.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Makot* 23b for three examples of the earthly court influencing the heavenly.



The earthly tribunal's jurisdiction is *Olam Ha'Zeh*, This World, the physical world of here-and-now, the material world of empirical reality. *Olam Ha'Zeh* is a world of what is, not a world of *what could be*.

These two worlds are two diametrically opposite forces that pull at us in conflicting directions. On one hand, as in the story of the landlord, we desire to do what is right, what is difficult, what our souls aspire to; we really do want to help out the innkeeper and provide shelter for his family. But on the other hand, reality calls: we have to pay our bills, we have to feed our own families, how then could we manage to exist in this physical, unforgiving world if we have a tenant that hasn't paid rent in three years? True, the aspirations of heaven call, but so do the realities of earth.

#### 4. Something Much Deeper

These are the two forces of existence and the two voices within each and every one of us. This is the normal state of affairs. There is, however, something much deeper.

There is a thing called the Torah and a thing called a mitzvah. The Torah is a blueprint of how to live in this physical world while maintaining and following a spiritual compass. And a mitzvah is how we bridge these two opposing forces.

Every time a Jew does a mitzvah – a spiritual act with physical parameters – a bridge is built between heaven and earth, a slice of heaven is revealed here on earth, a spark of spirituality glimmers in the physical plane of this world. Every mitzvah is a divine act, a “good deed,” for what could be better than a deed that bridges the extremes of heaven and earth?

And, God forbid, when a Jew does the opposite of a mitzvah – what the Hebrew School teacher calls a “sin” – then the divide between heaven and earth becomes more pronounced. In Hebrew, it is called an *aveira*, a “detour,” where instead of walking straight down the path of bridge-building, one meanders through a dangerous neighborhood.



As man has one leg in heaven and one on earth, there is both a heavenly tribunal, evaluating the “heavenly” aspects of existence (the dreams, possibilities, and aspirations), and an earthly tribunal, evaluating the “earthly” aspects of existence (the challenges, the difficulties, and the limitations).

This is the norm all year long. On Yom Kippur, however, everything changes.

## 5. The Same Verdict

On Yom Kippur the gates between heaven and earth, between the spirit of the heavenly tribunal and the matter of the earthly tribunal open up, and all of existence – from heaven to earth, body to soul, matter to spirit, God to man – reaches the same verdict.

And this verdict the cantor recites right before *Kol Nidrei*:

*With the sanction of the Omnipresent and with the sanction of the congregation, by the authority of the heavenly tribunal and by the authority of the earthly tribunal, we hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

That’s the universal verdict: *We hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

But what exactly does this verdict mean? On a certain level – especially right now at the onset of Yom Kippur – are we all not like angels?

To answer this question, we must look in the Talmud.

## 6. The Talmud

There is a beautiful, if somewhat perplexing, passage in the Talmud:

*Every fast day that does not include the sinners of Israel is not a fast day, for galbanum has an awful smell and still the Torah includes it among the spices comprising the incense.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup>Kritut 6b.

As we shall read tomorrow in the Musaf prayer, one of the focal points in the High Priest's Yom Kippur service was the offering of incense, a spice mix of soulful proportions and divine aromas. The fragrance of the *ketoret* incense was the scent of heaven itself.

One of the *obligatory* spices included in this divine mix was galbanum, a bitter malodorous resin that smelled anything but divine. Yet, when this acrid, fuming ingredient was mixed together with the other spices of the *ketoret*, the whole mixture – galbanum included – did indeed smell heavenly.

The Talmud applies this same principle to the people of Israel – all of us sitting here today. The heavenly incense mixture that is the spice of the Jewish people is comprised of all types of scents – including the foul smelling, the imperfect, the sinful, the desperate. A fast day without this spice ingredient is not a true fast day. It is *obligatory* to include the imperfect, even foul, spice into the mixture.

So, as we are all pretty much holy in here, I suggest we all walk out into the street and look for some sinners to complete our *ketoret* spice mix.

In all seriousness, though ...

What exactly does this Talmud mean? First of all, why would the incense *require* an unpleasant spice in its mixture? And second, why should a fast day, a day of spiritual introspection and soulful honesty, *require* sinners?

Herein lies the power and mystery of Yom Kippur. And herein lies the meaning of the two verdicts – that of the heavenly and earthly tribunals – which both say: *We hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

## 7. Either/Or

All year round, we are either on one side of the fence or the other. We are either fusing heaven with earth through our deeds, or we are not. We are either influencing the world, or the world is influencing us. We are either spending our time focusing on God or on ourselves.

All year round we are like solitary spices, and sometimes our spice smells divine, sometimes it doesn't really have a smell, and sometimes it is utterly horrid. All year round there are boundaries, definitions, categories and labels that put us in one box or another – sweet smelling or foul, pungent or weak, genuine or phony, floral or fishy.

Therefore, all year round, when defined by one stereotype or another, a praying sinner is an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. Because at any given moment, he cannot be doing both – sinning *and* praying.

Same for all of us. We are either learned or ignorant, kind or mean, givers or takers, righteous saints or riotous sinners – but not both.

## 8. Enter Yom Kippur

Aha – but comes Yom Kippur and all the rules change. In fact, on Yom Kippur all the rules are suspended. On Yom Kippur, even the boundaries between the heavenly tribunal and the earthly tribunal disintegrate. On Yom Kippur, even the walls between the Omnipresent Himself and wee little people of the congregation begin to crumble – and when all barriers break apart, all of the realms and all of the levels and all of the judges agree: *We hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

When borders are defined and when lines are drawn, heaven is not earth and earth is not heaven. Matter is not spirit, and spirit is not matter. If you pray you pray; if you sin you sin.

But when all borders are removed, all contradictions dissolve: the foul smell becomes divine, the sinner becomes holy, earth becomes heaven.

This is why the Talmud asserts that a fast day without a sinner is not a fast day. How can you have a day dedicated to fusing heaven and earth, without true representatives of earth? How can you have an experience that bridges the heavenly tribunal with the earthly tribunal, while excluding one side of the bridge?

You can't. And thus:

*With the sanction of the Omnipresent and with the sanction of the congregation, by the authority of the heavenly tribunal and by the authority of the earthly tribunal, we hereby grant permission to pray with sinners.*

## 9. All Are Welcome (Humor)

As we already know the verdict of this here Judgment Day, and we know that it is a joyous one, before we begin *Kol Nidrei*, allow me to leave you with a bit of humor:

A man, down on his luck, went into a high-society synagogue that catered to the filthy – that is, the filthy rich.

Spotting the man's cheap, threadbare clothing, the associate rabbi, worried about the synagogue's image, went over to the man and asked him if he needed help.

The man said, "I was praying and God told me to come to this beautiful synagogue."

The rabbi suggested that the man go pray some more and possibly God will reveal to him some different directives.

But the next week the man returned.

The rabbi asked, "Didn't you get a different answer?"

The man replied, "Yes, rabbi, I did. I prayed my heart out to God. I told God that I didn't think the good people of this magnificent congregation wanted me in their synagogue. And the Lord replied: 'Do not worry, my child; for years I too have been praying to get into that synagogue – but alas, it seems I am not welcome there either!'"

Often times, we come to synagogue and feel like a fly caught in a flytrap must feel – stuck, alone, depressed. Not only that, sometimes God comes to a synagogue and must feel like a stranger in a strange house. The synagogue is cold, condescending, unwelcome, and ungodly.

Often times, there is a big gap between the heavenly court above and the earthly court below. Often times, there is a big disconnect between what God up in heaven desires and what we here on earth desire. Often time there is a major divide between what our spiritual souls aspire to and what our physical bodies are attracted to.

Sometimes, even the houses of worship seem to be worshipping earth more than heaven. This is why throughout the year many houses of worship are devoid of worshippers.

But not on Yom Kippur.

## 10. Together As One (Conclusion)

Tonight, heaven and earth fuse. Tonight, tribunals above and tribunals below become one. Tonight, we come here to worship, but more: we come here to be one congregation united with the Omnipresent One.

On Yom Kippur, all the gates between heaven and earth are blown wide open, sinners become prayers and the prayers become one with the Omnipotent.

Praying as one, may we be granted a verdict of a blessed year, and may this verdict ring from the heights of heaven to the depths of earth. Surely both the heavenly court above and the earthly court below will inscribe – and, tomorrow eve, seal – us in the Book of Life.

With this knowledge, and with this confidence, let us enter into the holiest day of the year, as one community, as one soul, praying as one spice mixture of a divine perfume.