



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 22, 2015
Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

**Post-It Notes: Messages
that Stick**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5776 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What can Post-It Notes teach us about *Kol Nidrei*?

Everything.

Within those sticky (but not too sticky) canary yellow, 3x3-inch squares lies the deepest secret of Yom Kippur and of our unique adhesive connection to God.

Using the Post-It metaphor, this sermon will explore the reason we begin the holiest day of the year with *Kol Nidrei*, the nullification of all commitments, when in fact commitment would seem to be the thing we want to strengthen, not nullify.

It will also examine a heartbreakingly beautiful lyric from a world-class Jewish poet and songwriter, Leonard Cohen (not coincidentally carrying the name of a Jewish priest) in order to get across a thing or two about cracks, tablets and glue.

By exploring how the deepest truths are sometimes discovered “by mistake,” this sermon will inspire your community to find God and holiness even in the most broken fragments of life.

POST-IT NOTES: MESSAGES THAT STICK

1. A Sticky Situation (Story)

3M is a multinational conglomerate based in St. Paul, Minnesota, employing 88,000 people worldwide and producing more than 55,000 products, including Scotch Tape and Thinsulate.

In 1968, Dr. Spencer Silver, a chemist at 3M, was busily researching adhesives in the laboratory. In the process, he discovered something peculiar: an adhesive that stuck lightly to surfaces but didn't bond tightly to them.

"It was part of my job as a researcher to develop new adhesives," he later explained, "and at that time we wanted to develop bigger, stronger, tougher adhesives. This was none of those."

What Silver discovered instead was something called microspheres, which retain their stickiness but have a "removability characteristic" that allows attached surfaces to peel apart easily.

For years, Silver struggled to find a use for his invention. "I came to be known as Mr. Persistent because I wouldn't give up."

Meanwhile, Art Fry, another 3M scientist, was frustrated. Every Wednesday night while practicing with his choir, he would use little scraps of paper to mark the songs they were going to sing in the upcoming performance. But by the time the performance came around, he'd find that the markers had all fallen out of their designated place in the songbook. He needed a bookmark that would stick to the paper without damaging the pages.

Thinking back to a seminar he'd attended on Silver's microspheres, he had what he now refers to as his Eureka moment. "The one where you get the adrenaline rush," as he put it.

Partnering together, Silver and Fry began developing a product. Once they found themselves writing messages on their new notes to communicate around the office, they realized the full potential of the idea.

"I thought, what we have here isn't just a bookmark," said Fry. "It's a whole new way to communicate."

They decided to make 3M corporate headquarters their proving ground and supplied the entire company with the new adhesive notes. Employees loved them. The notes stuck but were movable.

3M initially launched a massive sampling effort – of the notes which they called "Press 'n Peel" – which was a runaway success. Ninety percent of those who tried the product said they'd buy it.

The notes spread "like a virus," said Fry. "It was always a self-advertising product because customers would put the notes on documents they sent to others, arousing the recipient's curiosity. They would look at them, peel them off and play with them, and then go out and buy a pad for themselves."

Silver said that, like many groundbreaking innovations, theirs was a product nobody thought they needed until they did.

Today, 3M manufactures some 50 billion of these notes a year, generating profits of over \$1 billion annually.

On April 6, 1980, "Press 'n Peel" was re-introduced in stores across the United States with a new name, a name you obviously recognize: "Post-It Notes."

2. Post-It Notes and Yom Kippur

Why am I talking about Post-It Notes – a light subject if there ever was one – on this holiest day of the year, just before we hear the haunting hymn of *Kol Nidrei*?

As I will shortly explain, Post-It Notes and *Kol Nidrei* have a lot in common.

Kol Nidrei is a hymn that expresses our desire to be released from all oaths, bonds and commitments. As such it seems out of place on such a holy day.

Is not the purpose of holiness to bond and connect with the Holy One Blessed Be? Why then untie all connections and absolve every commitment? Why begin Yom Kippur, the holiest of holy days, with a pronouncement that seems to suggest the opposite?

To answer all those questions, let us first explore the nature of Yom Kippur's holiness.

3. Leonard Cohen's "Anthem"

On Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, a descendant of Aaron the High Priest, would enter the Holy of Holies as part of an atonement rite. It was the only day of the year that he was permitted to do so, as he begged God to forgive the Nation of Israel for their transgressions.

This rite was suspended two-thousand years ago when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. But that has not stopped the modern day Kohanim from carrying on with their holy task, in one way or another, whether consciously or subconsciously.

One Kohen - Leonard Cohen - a world famous poet and songwriter, who at times proudly signs his name "HaKohen," has written a song called "Anthem." It is a moving composition about brokenness and light. And the song's refrain conveys a truth that only a priestly Jew could articulate so perfectly:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.

Knowingly or not, in these few words Cohen captures the essence of Yom Kippur's holiness.

4. Yom Kippur and Sinai

Yom Kippur was the day back some 3,300 years ago,¹ when Moses – after much begging and praying on behalf of the Nation of Israel – finally received forgiveness from God for their Sin of the Golden Calf.

As we may recall, shortly before this, the Jewish people had gathered at Mount Sinai for their astonishing and unprecedented encounter with God. At that time, Moses went up the mountain to receive the two tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Forty days later, Moses came back down with the tablets in hand, only to find that the Israelites had built an idol in the form of the Golden Calf. As a result of their behavior, Moses threw the tablets to the ground, shattering them.

For the next eighty days – twice forty – Moses beseeched God to forgive the Jewish people's mistake ... to repair that which has been broken ... to glue back together that which has been shattered.

God initially refused. Then on Yom Kippur, God finally relented and granted forgiveness – *solachti k'devorecho*, "I have forgiven as you [Moses] have spoken"² – as we will recite three times tonight after *Kol Nidrei*.

And that day, on Yom Kippur, Moses received a new, second set of tablets.

This is why Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. It is the day on which forgiveness was born, perseverance was rewarded, and the true human capacity for transcending challenges was realized.

5. A Tale of Two Tablets

Leonard Cohen captures all this in his song.

There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

¹ 3328 years ago to be exact.

² Numbers 14:20.

To connect to God when you are complete and whole is one thing; but to connect to God after you have been broken and shattered is a much deeper thing.

Only cracks in our lives allow the light to get into places that otherwise would remain shrouded in darkness.

Finding God in a synagogue is relatively easy (or so we should hope). After all, a synagogue is a house of worship, built for communing with God. The prayers, the Torah scrolls, the sanctuary – all create a sanctified environment. But to find God in the cracks of life, in our broken hearts, in our losses and challenges, in the graffiti-sprayed, garbage-strewn alleyways of our respective cities and personal lives is not easy at all.

Until Yom Kippur, we (and the world) were unsure if God could be found in the broken places, if there is hope after betrayal, healing from our wounds and scars – if the light could emerge through the cracks.

But on Yom Kippur we learned that, God is found not just in the complete tablets of life, He is found in the shattered tablets of life as well. Furthermore: In the cracks we find an even deeper dimension of Godliness – the God that can help us transcend and become even stronger through our setbacks.

The words we will recite tonight and throughout Yom Kippur: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha* – “And God said ‘I have forgiven them as you have spoken,’” convey to all of existence that though we make mistakes, though we have our shortcomings, though we break and even shatter, the light of the Divine prevails. And that out of the brokenness, a new and higher set of illuminated tablets may be formed.

However, the question still remains: If Yom Kippur demonstrates our intrinsic connection with God, our unbreakable bond with heaven, why do we begin this hallowed day with *Kol Nidrei*, a prayer that explicitly nullifies all bonds and abrogates all commitments?

Instead of a haunting paragraph about nullifying all vows and commitments would it not be more prudent to chant an inspiring paragraph about renewing them?

6. A Lesson from Post-Its

The answer comes from Post-Its. [As the Baal Shem Tov teaches us that everything we see or hear carries a lesson for us in our lives].

As I mentioned at the outset, Dr. Silver, the 3M chemist, was tasked with creating “bigger, stronger, tougher adhesives.” Instead, Dr. Silver discovered something completely different, an adhesive that stuck lightly to surfaces but didn’t bond too tightly to them. In short, he discovered something that was the exact opposite of what he set out to discover.

Now Dr. Silver had a solution without a problem. The problem was that people wanted a stronger glue, not a weak, removable adhesive.

It took twelve years of perseverance and a seemingly chance encounter with another scientist to find a purpose for this discovery.

The results were more powerful and transformative than any “bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive” would ever be: 50 billion Post-It Notes produced a year, an ubiquitous presence on virtually every desk in the country, not to mention every fridge, every classroom, every rabbi’s pulpit.

We could say that the Post-Its have certainly stuck.

For our purposes here tonight, the lessons that the Post-It Notes may teach us, and the story of their unintentional discovery, can define what Yom Kippur and *Kol Nidrei* are all about.

7. Lessons You Can Post

Life happens. We are by no means perfect. We break things. We can shatter relationships, fight with our parents, hurt our spouses, yell at our children, quarrel with our friends.

We look for God in the synagogue and holy books; but is God also in the breaks and fragments?

[Yes, because when ...]

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

We often do not get along with God. What happens when we break a set of tablets in our lives? We look for a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive to glue the pieces back together again.

But as is the case with such things, instead of discovering a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive, we discover something entirely different, almost diametrically opposite to an adhesive that glues things back together.

Instead, we discover a compound that sticks to every surface but in such a way that it may be moved and adjusted without harmful consequences.

After a "sin," after a mistake, after a break, we look for Super Glue and, instead, we discover Post-It Notes.

Super Glue has the ability to stick one thing to another in a strong way. But that thing may still be dropped and shattered again. Post-It Notes is a by-product of a search for such a strong adhesive, but it is a completely new and innovative product: it sticks, sure, but not so much that it causes a tear when peeled away.

Such a discovery seems to be a solution without a problem, for who needs to stick lightly?

But, in fact, as we come to realize, this discovery is even more profound than a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive. This discovery is the ability to post a new message anytime, anywhere, on any surface with the ability to pull it away without doing damage. This discovery allows you to mark the world in subtle ways that no bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive could ever hope to replicate.

But this discovery will only be found when you are looking for a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive. When you look to connect to God in a bigger, stronger, more permanent way – as Moses, our representative did – then the result is revolutionary.

The cracks of life, the mistakes, the flaws are where the most revolutionary discoveries and brightest lights are found. To let those lights in, all we have to do is look for the strongest adhesive and God will do the rest.

There is one final piece of Post-It trivia that may hold another lesson: do you know how Post-It Notes got their now iconic Canary Yellow color? By that ever-present factor called “happenstance” which in a synagogue we call “Providence” – a lab next door only had yellow scrap paper on hand.

What we have on hand, what is available to us, what is closest to us, is often the best and only material we will ever need.

8. This is Kol Nidrei (Conclusion)

This is why we begin with Kol Nidrei, the abolishing and nullifying of all commitments.

If Dr. Spencer Silver was committed wholeheartedly to discovering a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive, and *only* a bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive, then he would have seen his discovery as a failure and Post-It Notes would never have come into being.

By nullifying all commitments and bonds, by annulling all pre-conceived notions of how adhesives should work, Dr. Silver created the room for perhaps the stickiest product ever to grace this humble universe.

Kol Nidrei is a prayer that urges us to remove our pre-conceived notions of what commitment, bonds, holiness, God, or we are.

When we do so, we open ourselves up to the possibility that perhaps in the “mistakes” themselves, in the brokenness of the tablets themselves, in the cracks of the hearts themselves is how the light gets in.

Nothing is as complete, say the Chassidic masters, as a broken heart.

Kol Nidrei teaches us that holiness is found not only where we think we will find it, but also in those places that we think are mistakes. The second set of tablets – which Moses received on Yom Kippur – teaches us that, instead of trying to stick the pieces back together again, we should build a whole new wholeness, one that may adhere to any surface and one that can never break, even if seemingly torn away.

Surely this, my dear friends, is a Yom Kippur message that sticks. Amen.