



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 23, 2015
Yom Kippur - Yizkor

The Titanic and Yom Kippur



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

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ABSTRACT

Macy's - the world's most famous department store.

The Titanic - the world's most famous ship.

The connection - two Jewish brothers, Isidor and Nathan Straus.

Now, what's all this got to do with Yom Kippur?

On Yom Kippur, we read about another ship that almost sank - a ship from which Jonah was cast into the sea, landing in the open mouth of the whale and dwelling in the beast's belly for three days.

This sermon will explore how the waters of all the oceans of the world can never extinguish love, and how the waters of the *mikvah* can convert darkness into light.

Indeed, on Yom Kippur we are all converts, immersing three times into the pure waters and emerging as new entities with perfectly clean slates.

This is something you cannot buy, even at Macy's.

THE TITANIC AND YOM KIPPUR

1. The Legend of Macy's (Joke)

Legend has it that Yankel, a small shopkeeper in New York City's Herald Square, at 34th Street and Broadway, was dismayed when a new gleaming store opened next door with a huge sign that said, "BEST DEALS!" To make things worse, another store opened on the other side of him, even more modern, more state of the art, and with an even bigger sign reading "LOWEST PRICES!"

Yankel panicked. He knew he'd go out of business in a second with such competition. His store was old, outdated and under-stocked. Yankel was resigned to going out of business when he was struck with an idea.

The next morning, bright and early, workers could be seen installing a very large sign atop of Yankel's store. It read: MAIN ENTRANCE.

And that, my friends, is how Macy's was born.

I am kidding. But now I will tell the true story of Macy's founding.

2. Macy's Department Store

While Jews may only buy wholesale, anyone who has ever bought anything retail has probably heard of the Macy's department store. Macy's is synonymous with shopping.

Covering 2.2 million square feet, the Macy's flagship store in Midtown Manhattan was long famous as the world's largest department store - that is until 2009, when the South Korean chain Shinsegae opened a store of nearly 3.16 million square feet in Busan.

As of today, Macy's at Herald Square, 34th street and Broadway, has stood at the same site for 114 years.

How did Macy's end up there?

Some 120 years ago, two German Jews, brothers Isidor and Nathan Straus, acquired a dry goods store in lower Manhattan, known as "R. H. MACY & CO.," named for its founder, Rowland Hussey Macy. In 1902, the Straus brothers moved Macy's to its current location and the rest is history. Thanksgiving Day parades, chain stores throughout the country, and its trademark slogan: "The World's Largest Store."

3. The Titanic Sinks

In 1912, the Straus brothers traveled to the Land of Israel, their ancestral homeland.

Isidor and his dear wife Ida then headed to vacation in Europe, while Nathan remained in the Holy Land.

Following their vacation in Europe, Isidor and Ida Straus boarded a magnificent ship on its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York.

The ship was state of the art, and its promoters allegedly bragged that "God himself could not sink this ship."

On the morning of April 5th, after hitting an iceberg some 400 miles south of Newfoundland, the glorious ship did sink, along with some 1,500 passengers and crew.

This ship was the famed Titanic, and Isidor and Ida Straus went down with it.

When it was clear that the Titanic was sinking, and women and children were being loaded into lifeboats, Ida refused to abandon Isidor and would not leave for safety without him. Isidor was offered a seat in a lifeboat to accompany Ida, but he refused to take it while there were still women and children aboard.

Ida insisted that her maid, Ellen Bird, get into lifeboat #8. She gave Ellen her fur coat, stating she would not be needing it. She said to Ellen, "I will not be separated from my husband. As we have lived, so will we die, together." Isidor and Ida were last seen on deck arm in arm.

According to Wikipedia, eyewitnesses described the scene as a “most remarkable exhibition of love and devotion.”

Later, Isidor Straus’s body was recovered by the cable ship Mackay-Bennett and brought to New York for burial. Ida’s body was never found.

Isidor and Ida are memorialized on a cenotaph with a quote from Song of Songs: *Many waters cannot extinguish the love, nor can rivers flood it*¹

And indeed, the many waters into which Isidor and Ida tragically sank, did not extinguish their love. And Isidor’s brother Nathan went on to spread it.

4. Back in the Land of Israel

Back in Israel, Nathan Straus felt that his life had been spared by Divine intervention – he could have very easily been on the Titanic himself!

Nathan devoted two-thirds of his fortune to helping Israel, which was then in the hands of the Ottoman Empire, and which passed, after the end of the First World War, into the hands of the British.

Among his achievements was the establishment of a school for girls, a clinic to fight malaria and a free public kitchen. He also opened a Pasteur Institute, child welfare stations and funded the Nathan and Lina Straus Health Centers in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv.

The city of Natanya, founded in 1927, was named in his honor – after Nathan which means in Hebrew “gift of God” – as was Rechov Straus in Jerusalem.

All these good works came about because of the sinking of the Titanic and the deaths of Isidor and Ida.

¹ Song of Songs 8:7.

5. The Story of Jonah

The Titanic brings to mind another doomed ship about which we read today on Yom Kippur. During the afternoon *Minchah* service, we read about a ship that almost sank after harboring a castaway prophet – the Prophet Jonah.

One of Israel's greatest prophets, Jonah was commanded by God to travel to the city of Nineveh to foretell of its destruction, because the evil of its inhabitants had reached the limit. This mission, however, was not to Jonah's liking. Nineveh was a bitter enemy of Israel, and Jonah would have preferred to see it go down. If he succeeded in his mission, and Nineveh repented and was spared, it would remain a constant threat to Israel. Jonah therefore decided to flee.

He boarded a ship that sailed for Tarshish, hoping to evade his mission. Once he was on the high seas, God caused a storm that threatened to tear the ship asunder. The sailors were frightened and each one prayed for rescue. Jonah, however, lay down to sleep. The captain of the ship, seeing the sleeping man, went over to him and reprimanded him for sleeping at that fateful hour, instead of praying to God.

Meanwhile, the sailors drew lots to find out whose fault it was that this misfortune had been brought upon them. The lot fell upon Jonah. When the sailors questioned him, Jonah told them that to quiet the raging sea they had to throw him overboard since the storm had been caused by his refusal to obey God's command – *Vayomer aleyhem sa'uni vahatiluni el-hayam veyishtok hayam me'aleychem ki yodea ani ki vesheli hasa'ar hagadol hazeh aleychem*. If they did so, all would be calm and well again, for the storm would immediately die down.

At first the sailors did not want to do as Jonah asked. But the storm grew fiercer and the end was seemingly unavoidable. Very reluctantly, the sailors threw Jonah into the water and the storm ceased at once.

As soon as Jonah was in the water, God sent a large fish (the whale) to swallow Jonah alive. Three days and three nights Jonah stayed within the fish. In distress, he prayed that God should save him. His prayer was answered. The fish ejected Jonah and set him on dry land.

Again, God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh to convey the divine message. This time he obeyed.

Upon his arrival in the city, Jonah stepped right into the middle of the busy thoroughfare and announced that the city would perish in forty days. The prophet's solemn warning electrified the city. The residents believed Jonah and repented. They fasted and wore sackcloth; even the king himself took off his royal robes and put on the garbs of mourning. Everyone in the city honestly and sincerely decided to abandon their evil ways. Possessions unjustly acquired were returned to their rightful owners, and false judgments were reversed.

God saw that they were sincere in their repentance and accepted it. Nineveh was saved.

Jonah was displeased at this turn of events. He had hoped for the doom of Nineveh, so that Israel would be rid of one of its bitter enemies.

Unhappy at the outcome, Jonah built himself a hut outside the city in which to live the life of a recluse. It was a very hot day, and God caused a plant grow to give him shade and protect him from the hot sun. Jonah was overjoyed with the plant. Then God sent a worm that infected the plant and made it wither. When the protection of the plant had been withdrawn, the sun beat mercilessly upon Jonah's head until he became faint and wished to die.

Then the weary prophet heard God's words:

"You are sorry for the plant which you have neither tended nor made grow, which came up in one night and perished in the next. Shall I not then spare Nineveh, the great city, wherein more than one hundred and twenty thousand people [children] live who do not know how to discern between their right hand and their left and many animals in addition?"²

6. Depths of the Sea

The reason we read the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur is obvious – its message is that through our repentance and atonement we may return to God.

² Story of Jonah courtesy of Our People.

But, right after, we read this passage from the Book of Micah:

Who is a God like You, Who forgives iniquity and passes over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage, Who does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving-kindness? He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities, and You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins....³

How do we reconcile: *And You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins*, with: *Many waters cannot extinguish the love, nor can rivers flood it?*

Water cannot extinguish love, but it can drown our sins? Is that the message?

7. Tashlich – Converting Our Deeds

This passage from the Book of Micah is also recited on Rosh Hashanah when we perform the *Tashlich* ceremony. This involves heading down to a body of water, preferably a body of water containing fish, reciting some prayers (including the passage from Micha), and throwing out crumbs of bread from our pockets. This custom symbolizes throwing our sins into the watery depths (*Tashlich* means throwing, casting).

The idea is straightforward: we cast away our sins into the purifying waters, disavowing all ownership of them, so now our sins are ours no more.

But perhaps there is a deeper lesson to be learned here. For the three days that Jonah spent in the sea inside the whale correspond to another Yom Kippur custom that involves immersion in water three times.

³ Micah 7:18-20.

8. Purified Tattoos (Inspirational Story)

It is a mitzvah for married women to immerse in the waters of the *mikvah* each month. In fact, family purity is one of the most fundamental mitzvot in all the Torah.

Though it is not a mitzvah for men, many males have the custom of going to the *mikvah* every day or before Shabbat. But the most common time for a man (and also some single women, depending on each community's custom) to go to the *mikvah* is just before Yom Kippur.⁴ Indeed, on Erev Yom Kippur, many have the custom to go three times, once in the morning, once before *Mincha*, and once after the *Seudat Hamafseket*, the meal before the fast.

Various reasons are given for this in the Code of Jewish Law.⁵

A most beautiful reason given is based on the commonality that all Jews have on Yom Kippur with a *ger tzedek*, a righteous convert.

Upon converting to Judaism, the convert immerses in the pure waters of the mikvah three times and thus enters a new dimension. At that moment, a new halachic entity is born, a new pure individual is created with a perfectly clean and clear slate.⁶

Every Yom Kippur every single Jew becomes a convert, a new entity with a clean and clear slate.

Thus, the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur isn't only about returning to a previous state; the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur is also about creating a new entity with an entirely clean slate and fresh start.

And this explains why we cast our sins into the water and why Jonah was cast into the sea.

⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581:4, 606:4.

⁵ See Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 606:12.

⁶ Interesting to note that in Temple times, the High Priest would immerse himself in the mikvah five times on Yom Kippur before entering the Holy of Holies (Yuma 30a), as we read in the Seder Avodah in today's musaf prayer.

9. Mikvah – Converting Ourselves

Jonah sat in the whale not for one day, not for two, but for three. These three days are akin to the three immersions of the convert and the three immersions of Erev Yom Kippur.

To inspire Nineveh and convert the world to good, Jonah first had to convert himself to God's vision. To become this new entity with a clean slate, Jonah had to immerse for three days in the belly of a whale in the depths of the sea.

The same is true of the *Tashlich* ceremony when we cast our sins into water. We aren't merely casting our sins aside; rather we are dunking them in a natural *mikvah* (the sea, lake or river). We are immersing our imperfections in the holy and pure waters of the *mikvah*, transforming ourselves into new entities, converting ourselves to righteous holiness and innocent purity.

10. Waters Cannot Extinguish Love (Yizkor)

We are about to begin the Yizkor service, remembering our loved ones who have passed from this mortal earth. On this holiest day of the year, the lesson for us is clear:

Nothing, not even all the waters of the world – not even physical death – may extinguish the love we feel for our beloved ones. Their souls may no longer be here physically, and it may seem as if a sea of mystery and confusion separates us from them, but, as Nathan knew of Isidor and Ida, *Many waters cannot extinguish the love, nor can rivers flood it.*

We love forever and ever.

But this is only half of the message. The other half is: *And You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins.*

While the waters of the world can't extinguish love, they can extinguish our sins. Indeed, the waters may be used to convert our sins into acts of righteousness and transform us into new beings – pure converts, fresh entities.

As we begin Yizkor, we are mindful of the fact that our boundless love for those who have passed will surely never be extinguished, but we also pray that the darkness that does not allow us to see them in the flesh be cast into the sea.

And that they, immersed in the pure and holy waters of the *mikvah*, may emerge as new entities, endowed with everlasting life.

This is what we are promised and this is what we await with the coming of the immediate and eternal and final redemption. Amen!

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