

## Praying with the Transgressors

Tom Fields-Meyer  
Kol Nidre 5768  
Library Minyan of Temple Beth Am

A very wealthy man once commissioned an architect. He said, "I want you to design the most incredible house you can imagine. Spare no expense. It should be the most exquisite, remarkable house in the world."

So the architect went to work, envisioning a palatial mansion, with dozens of rooms and long corridors and with the finest materials in every detail: Italian marble, crystal chandeliers, gorgeous Persian rugs.

After months of planning, the architect finally visited the rich man, and showed him the blue prints. The wealthy man was impressed. He said, "Wonderful. Go ahead and build the house."

The architect was thrilled and he immediately went to work. (He was what we call in Pico-Robertson a design/build firm.) He laid the foundation, and started the framing. But as the months passed, his enthusiasm began to wane. The plans were so ambitious and he found them difficult to carry out.

The special mahogany from the jungles of Brazil wasn't so easy to find. And he figured, "There are so many rooms, the rich man won't even get to that one. I'll just use plain old pine for the floors there."

And the inlaid ivory he was going to use on the mantle piece? That was going to take too much effort. So he cheated a little bit and used some plastic. He thought, "*Who's gonna know?*"

Pretty soon he was cutting corners left and right. He left off a whole wing of the house! And after many months, he decided he was done. The builder went to the wealthy man. And he said, "Sir, I'm finished. Your house is ready."

But the rich man looked at him and he said, "*My house? Oh, no, the house isn't for me. . . .It's for you!*"

\* \* \*

Tonight we begin the holiest day of the Jewish year. It is also the day most densely filled with liturgy. These next 24 hours are packed with non-stop words of prayer. And this marathon all began a little while ago with a single, troubling passage.

*“B’ishivah shel ma’ala. U’vishiva shel mata.  
Al Da’at HaMakom, v’al da’at ha kahal.  
Anu Matirin l’hitpalel im ha’avaryanim.”*

“With the consent of God  
And the consent of the congregation  
We grant permission to pray with those who  
have transgressed.”

“We grant permission to pray with the *avaryanim* – to pray with the sinners.”

It’s easy to miss that sentence. It happens very abruptly. And there’s so much emphasis on the paragraph that follows it. We call tonight “Kol Nidre,” not “B’ishivah shel ma’ala.” That may be because the very *first* sentence of the Yom Kippur Machzor is so deeply disconcerting.

It describes a world rent in half. This passage has three lines, and each one describes a duality:

The court above – and the court below.

The Da’at – the knowledge – of God – and the knowledge of the congregation

And most troubling of all: Us – and the transgressors.

“We give ourselves permission to pray with sinners.”

What does that mean?

I thought this was a day of personal introspection! I thought this whole season was about acknowledging our *own* flaws. I thought this day was about looking inside, admitting *our* sins. So why do we begin the entire Yom Kippur experience with this sentence, which seems to say: “It’s okay for us to pray with those *avaryanim* – *with those bad guys over there*”?

What’s this all about? Why do we begin Yom Kippur by giving ourselves permission to pray with transgressors?

The rabbis and the tradition give us many reasons, which really come down to three:

First, the Talmud says, that for a public fast to have real meaning, even the sinners have to be included. It points out a list in the book of *Shemot*: a list of the spices used in the *Mishkan*, in the tabernacle. And one of the spices was called Galbanum. (Not a spice you probably pick up at Trader Joes for your spaghetti sauce.) Apparently it has a very bitter taste and a very foul odor. But it was still included in the offerings at the Mishkan. So in the 13<sup>th</sup> century they inserted our passage just before Kol Nidre. The idea was that just as this awful smelling stuff was included with all the beautiful, fragrant

spices, so, too, should we include the *avaryanim* – the transgressors – in our minyan.

So the first explanation is an argument for inclusiveness, for *klal Yisrael*. We may have to hold our noses -- literally -- but we all have a place before God.

The second reason is more historical. It comes from medieval shtetls. When a Jew would break the community's rules, he or she would be cut off. But the community would re-admit the person for one day a year, on Yom Kippur. There is even a line of thought that the word *avaryanim* is a transliteration of another word: Iberians. Which Iberians? The Maranos! So this passage may have referred to those Jews in Spain 500 years ago who were forced to convert to Christianity, but continued to live secretly as Jews. There was fear in the community that if we had these people in shul with us, it might somehow (God forbid) soil the community's prayers. *What if God mixed up their prayers with ours?* So before Yom Kippur began, we would literally have this *beit din* – this rabbinic court, two people holding Torah scrolls and a third chanting – and legally give ourselves permission to pray with these “Iberians.”

Why include this passage? First, there's a reason of inclusion; second, a reason of separation; the third: tolerance.

This third explanation simply takes the root of the Hebrew word *avayanim*: “*avar*.” To pass. Who are these *avaryanim*? People who are just passing through. They might not be the pillars of the shul. They might not be people we see all year. But you know what? It's okay. They're welcome. And it's an idea that many of us would embrace. Maybe this is the only time this year you'll walk into a synagogue. The very first sentence of our service says, “Welcome.” Whether you come once a year or three times a day, we're all Jews, we're all part of the same holy congregation.

Three possible explanations for our passage: inclusion, separation, tolerance.

But none of them is entirely satisfying. It still seems so very unsettling to start this day of introspection by slapping a label on “those people over there.”

Perhaps there's another way to read this passage.

Maybe the word *avaryanim* doesn't refer to those transgressors over there, or those sinners over there. Maybe it refers to the people right here.

Today, all of us are the *avaryanim*.

We start with such big plans, with lofty expectations from life. But we're like the architect, the builder in that wonderful story. (which, by the way, I heard from my friend David Sacks of the Happy Minyan,

who learned it from Rabbi David Zeller, z"l, the very creative spiritual teacher, who died this past year.) We're like that architect. Sometimes it's hard to live up to the plans. It's easier to cut corners. We scrimp here and there. *Who's gonna know?* Sometimes it's not our fault. Our life just doesn't measure up to what we had in mind.

We all have two houses: the house that was in the plans, and the house we end up building.

There's the version of ourselves that might have been, and the version of ourselves as we really are. We go through most of our lives pretending they're the same.

Tonight, *Anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha'avaryanim*. We give ourselves permission to pray alongside those other versions of ourselves: the parts we usually keep inside, sometimes hidden even from ourselves.

We know a lot of people out there show many faces. Just watch the news or click on YouTube. But I'm not talking about politicians who preach energy conservation while they live in immense homes that cost a fortune to heat. I'm not talking about members of the clergy who thump Bibles in public and then in private . . . act differently. I'm not talking about celebrities who drink and drive again and again . . . and again.

I'm talking about us.

We all have the versions of ourselves who show up in synagogue, at the office, at polite dinner parties. And then there are those other versions – the ones that show up in arguments with our partners; the ones that appear behind our steering wheels when somebody cuts us off on the 405; the ones that rear their heads in heated moments with our teenagers.

Do you ever notice those cell-phone towers on the side of the freeway? The ones where they've screwed on a few fake palm fronds to try to make it look like a tree? Don't you sometimes feel like that tower? "Maybe if I just stand here, nobody will notice that I'm not really a tree. I'm just a bunch of metal." But you know the truth.

I know I've got the version of me that shows up at the parent-teacher conferences, and another version that appears when I'm trying to get my kid off the computer to do his homework.

We all have our public, magnanimous selves – and the selves, that sometimes neglect or mistreat the people who are closest to us. We all have the faces we display, and the private ones that only we know.

(By the way, the Torah has a lot to say about this. I learned a wonderful insight from Reb Mimi Feigelson, who is a friend and teacher to many of us: The Zohar notes that in the Torah, there are only a few places where God calls someone's name twice. "Avraham, Avraham!"

"Moshe, Moshe!" Those are people who appear exactly the same to God as they do to man. The implication is, of course, that the rest of us look very different. There's the ideal, and the real -- two versions of ourselves.)

Today we give ourselves permission to pray alongside the *avaryanim* – all of the imperfect versions of ourselves. If you only bought one ticket for Kol Nidre, then you got a bargain. Because there are many people sitting with you, right there, in your chair. A lot of you's.

Today, for 24 hours, we live with those broken, flawed versions of ourselves. We examine them. We pray with them. Over pages and pages of liturgy we just sit with them.

That's what the opening line of Yom Kippur is giving us permission to do.

*"Anu matirin l'hitpalel im haAvaryanim."*

That's where Yom Kippur begins. How does it end?

Tomorrow, 24 hours from now – and about 200 pages of prayers from now -- we will end the Ne'ila service, also with three statements: The first two are the *Shema* and *Baruch Shem Kavod*, two statements of faith we say every day. And then we end this most holy day of prayer with three words, repeated seven times. Three words we say communally just *once* a year, at precisely that moment.

*"Adonai Hu HaElohim."*

"God is Elohim."

What does that mean?

The words come from Melachim Alef, the First Book of Kings, where there is a remarkable spiritual showdown. On one side stands the prophet Eliyahu. On the other are a few hundred idolatrous priests. In one dramatic and fiery moment, with all of Israel watching, Eliyahu faces them down, and proves that there is only one God. And that God is Adonai.

And the text says. "All the people saw it and they fell on their faces, and they said, 'Adonai Hu HaElohim. Adonai Hu HaElohim.'"

Right now, as we begin Yom Kippur, we are *avaryanim*. We acknowledge our shattered selves; our divided community; and we might feel very far from God. The journey of this day begins here. And it ends with these three words: *"Adonai Hu HaElohim."*

God is God.

As I sit in shul on Yom Kippur, I always think of my grandfather, my Grandpa Dave Rabinowitz, who was a regular shul goer in Brookline, Mass. Every year, at some point when we all started to feel the hunger pangs in the afternoon, he would smile and say the same thing: "Tommy, as soon as I hear that shofar blow, I could fast for another 24 hours."

I'm sure a lot of us feel that way. We could go for another few hours without food. But it would be harder to go for 24 more hours living beside those other versions of ourselves. In fact, it might be difficult to sit with them even for this one day.

But the Machzor doesn't say we *have to* pray with the *avaryanim*. The verb is *matirin*. We have permission. We can.

Let me humbly give you permission to try something else: What if we spent tonight and tomorrow morning praying alongside those less desirable versions of ourselves. And then turn that on its head. Tomorrow afternoon and into the Ne'ila service, try praying alongside that *better* version of yourself. Try sharing your chair with that version of yourself as you really *could* be: the version of yourself that pays visits to people when they're sick in the hospital; the version of yourself that is able to look up from the Blackberry or the iPhone or the Treo and into the eyes of the person who needs you -- your child, or a person without a home, or a friend in search of a sympathetic ear; the version of yourself that, as *Pirke Avot* says, "greet everyone with a cheerful countenance."

Pray alongside that version of yourself -- and see how that feels.

Maybe we *could* fast for another 24 hours. But we don't get another 24 hours. We get only this one precious day, to take this holy journey: from feeling broken to feeling whole; from recognizing our flaws, to recognizing what we could be -- and seeing the divine presence in the world, in this room, and in ourselves.

And then, after the shofar blows tomorrow, to begin to build again -- brick, by brick, by brick -- the beautiful homes, the beautiful lives, we know that we can build.

*G'mar Chatima Tova.*