

## YOM KIPPUR MORNING SERMON - 2017

I knew that this would be my last chance. After that year, never again be a Jew-in-the-pew, and so I had to make this holiday count. What's more, I was in Jerusalem. There were at least 20 synagogues within a mile of my apartment. Each one that year had its own Yom Kippur service, and I knew they would all be different. Different prayer books, different cantors, different movements. I wanted it all. I was at the all-you-can-eat buffet of a Jewish nerd and I had a big plate. We made it to a number of them. The great synagogue, with walls that ran up to a ceiling almost the height of the sky, in the sanctuary the music led straight up that open tower, as if dropping a marble down a hole but backwards, into the heavens. Conservative Yeshiva had a nice hamish atmosphere, like you wanted to make friends with everyone there, and then curl up in your seat and take a nap. By the time we made it to the Hebrew Union College it was nearing the end of the day but we caught Rabbi Marmur's sermon. Some of my classmates were in the choir and the prayer book was much more familiar.

Something happens to me during the High Holy Days. There is intensity to the days that cause me to hyper-focus, to try and burn into the deeper meaning of every word, every moment. Looking over the worn pages of the older Machzor in my hand, I leafed through to the meditations on the day, a set of rabbinic stories and texts. As I read through one of my favorites, about a person, sitting at the gates of the city, wrapping and unwrapping his bandages, I started having trouble reading the words. I went back to the beginning of the story and tried again and still couldn't focus. I thought that maybe I needed a break, after all, I'd had a lot of services so I excused myself and walked down the middle aisle of folding chairs, my feet tapping on the Jerusalem stone floor.

I distinctly remember the taste of orange juice. The kind from concentrate that my mother used to get in the freezer section at the grocery store. Enough water to dilute the syrup texture but not the alkaline flavor. Two tanned Israelis were looking down on me, the ceiling behind them, as they offered me the little waxed Dixie cup. I sat up and drank before I realized that it was still Yom Kippur. It was late enough that the ceiling lights had been turned on, but it wasn't fully dark outside. As the sugar entered my blood my circuits whirred back to life. I had pushed myself too much that holiday, too much walking, reading, talking, and my body simply gave out, I had collapsed.

As Jews we pride ourselves on being a people of action. We do not have a set of beliefs that place us inside the bounds of the community, rather a set of actions. We study, but always with the hope that it leads to doing, and our history has borne out that value. In the United States alone our people has made great waves in virtually every area imaginable. A people so driven that Barak Obama once described us as a people that "punch above our weight class."<sup>1</sup> Peter Segal, of the NPR comedy news show *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me* once quipped to his fellow Jew, Michael Bloomberg that now that he was a billionaire and three time mayor of New York City, that it wasn't too late for medical school.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/14/remarks-president-afternoon-hanukkah-reception>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130437934>

We are a people of doing. And we can slip into the understanding that our worth is bound up in our ability to produce. We constantly tell ourselves that we are building the world around us, and it can feel at times as if that weight were pressing in on us. A community that tries to push into motion forces that are beyond our control. We become human doings, losing the inherent value of our own worth simply because we are. Each of us bears the responsibility of the world, and at the same time each of us deserves to be here.

When I look out at our community, I see one that has a fire in its chest. One that is alive with the understanding that life lived with passion is life lived with purpose. I also see a community that is in danger of letting that fire consume them. One that is still hurting from an election that took place almost a year ago. We know all too well the ability for any society to slip into complete chaos, and we will fight every day to hold it up, but while we are doing so we also need to hold ourselves up. How have we done the work not just of *tikkun olam*, repairing of the world, but *tikkun atzmi*, repairing of ourselves?

I love Netflix. My phone almost opens to it automatically, all I have to do is sit, and the muscle memory in my hands bring up the latest episode of whatever show I happen to be on. I'm sure I'm not the only one. Google's phones now ship preset with the voice command "Ok Google, you know what to do." Which triggers a marathon of the TV show *Gilmore Girls*? / My own Netflix viewing started with *West Wing*, but soon thereafter devolved into less noble pursuits. I find myself always giving it the benefit of the doubt. "Eh, that episode wasn't that good, but I'm sure it will get better." To be sure, my instinct comes from a good place. It is essential that we have ways of letting down, and there is nothing in the world like a good Netflix splurge, but I often find myself feeling let down afterward. Rather than feeling rested, I feel like I just want a little more time, another show, chasing after that elusive place where I am at peace, where I feel like I've fed myself.

I often feel the same with social media, looking around on the web, so many of the things that I do on my phone seem more like distractions than legitimate activities. My dad has always said that the things that are worth doing are the things that feel good after we do them. My phone is not one of them. But inevitably I end up looking at it, searching in it for some means of fulfillment. The news, Amazon, even Internet activism ends up getting close to the mark, but never hit it. I'm looking for something more.

Now when we talk about what things fulfill us, we enter a black hole of words. Terms like "meaning" and "purpose" litter the conversational landscape and get sucked out by an ever expanding understanding of what exactly those words mean. A linguistic drift on which the words lift up and float away. And then we end up with the same problem we had in the first place, how do we fill a sense of emptiness?

Martin Buber is the image of Moses you have in your head. Rough tempered skin with a long, frayed, white beard that would challenge even the most entrenched hipster. Born in 1878 to a rabbinic family he became fascinated with the question of meaning, of purpose, and in his life's journey went on a search to define it. He earned a PhD in philosophy and then chased the great Hasidic rabbis around Eastern Europe drinking in what they could tell him about meaning. What he found was stories. Nothing but stories.

Martin Buber returned home frustrated, and began his great work *I and Thou*. In it, he wanted to explain, once and for all, what meaning is, what purpose is. And found himself writing backwards. I don't mean literally, like some magic moved his pen the opposite direction, I mean that he found instead of writing about meaning, that he was writing about what it was like to experience meaning.

He described it like this: when we go about our regular day we have what he called an "I-it" relationship to the world. Things are things. Just stuff. Nothing special, the key fits in the ignition and the car starts as normal. And then, for a brief moment, without realizing it, the car drives itself, and we hit the road at just the right time for two birds to dance alongside our window, and the moment seems to stand alone in time, that space between the second hand notches on our watch. In that moment, Buber contends, we have reached I-Thou, a deeper connection with the world, a holy moment, a meaningful moment. We are part of something greater, not supernatural, exactly the opposite, we are a part of this world, deeply a part of it, and we know it. In the end, he said he really couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was that caused that moment, but that it definitely was a temporal thing, something that stood in time, not bound or even necessarily because, of any space or thing.

Not for nothing, Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat this year. The one day of the year when we sit together, remove all distractions, and look inward eyeing what things need to change, and what needs to be done so that we can keep pushing this world to a better place, so that we can get a little closer to the world that we imagine could be. This day of refocus, of awakening, just so happens to come on the same day that we gather to take a break.

Just a short nine days ago we read the story of creation in our Torah. The text describes the process as having taken seven days. Day one: light and darkness, day two: heavens and the earth, days three and four: the sea, seedlings, saplings, the sun, and the moon, five and six: life, and on day seven as the final act of creation, God rested. With great actions God creates a majestic world, calling into being all the things in it, water, life, the expanse of space, and for the final piece, God rests. Because in our tradition rest is a vital part of creation.

And so we come to another word. The first time the word *kadosh*, holy, is used in the Bible is in reference to Shabbat. Each and everything in our world was created, but it wasn't until time was made intentional, that it was recognized, that holiness entered the world.

There's a great story in the Talmud of Rabbi Joshua sharing a Shabbat meal with Caesar.<sup>3</sup> The emperor comments on how delicious the food is, and Rabbi Joshua responds that he has used a special spice. Immediately Caesar demands that Rabbi Joshua give him that spice. To which he casually responds that he can't. Enraged, Caesar states that Akiva has been a good friend to him these many years, but that he will not hesitate to throw him in jail. Give me the spice, he says. Rabbi Joshua explains that the spice is nothing to give nothing to bottle and hand over, it's the day, and everything in it, that brings such flavor.

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<sup>3</sup> Shabbat 119a

So this year I invite us to rest, to take this great gift from our tradition, and feed ourselves. To find a way to set aside time to enjoy the beauty of this world. We can pass it by, so easily.

Shabbat Shalom and Shannah tovah