

The Tenth Jew

A Yom Kippur Drash – David Abramson¹

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In the 1950s a group of scientists was studying Japanese monkeys on the island of Koshima in the South Pacific. They had been feeding these monkeys sweet potatoes, which had been dropped in the sand by the scientists. The monkeys enjoyed the sweet potatoes, but not the sandy residue. One young monkey began washing the sand off his potato, and over a period of a few years all the young monkeys had followed suit. Some, but not all, of the older monkeys also began washing their sweet potatoes. There is a scientific parable that at some point this norm had reached a critical threshold – perhaps 100 monkeys – in which all the monkeys on the island began adopting the new practice. Even more surprising was the suggestion that Japanese monkeys on other South Pacific islands also began adopting this practice, without ever being exposed to the Koshima monkeys. The parable suggests the presence of a collective unconscious, in which the hundredth monkey creates a communal force that leads to new behaviors and new values.²

Whatever the empirical truth of this particular scientific observation, we Jews have a practice that certainly echoes the same theme – the notion of a *minyan*, the assembly of a minimum of ten Jews to engage in collective prayer. There is a Biblical precedent – in Parshat Vayera, Abraham negotiates with God not to destroy the cities of Sodom & Gomorrah if there are at least 10 righteous people living there (Gen., 18:20-33). For a *minyan*, though, it doesn't even matter much who the tenth Jew is, or how pious that tenth Jew is, just that the tenth Jew shows up. The implication is that with 9 Jews you have 9 Jews – 9 individuals. With 10 Jews, though, you have a new organism. The whole is apparently greater than the sum of its parts. But to what ends? Is the

¹ Source material and inspiration was drawn from the following texts: [Entering the High Holy Days: A Guide to the History, Prayers, and Themes](#), by Rabbi Reuven Hammer, 1998 (Jewish Publication Society: Phil PA); [Days of Awe: A Treasury of Traditions, Legends and Learned Commentaries Concerning Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and the Days Between](#), by Shmuel Yoseph Agnon, 1948 (Schocken Books: New York, NY); [A Guide to Jewish Prayer](#), by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, 2000 (Schocken Books: New York, NY); [The Art of Public Prayer](#), by Rabbi Lawrence A Hoffman, 1988 (The Pastoral Press: Washington DC); and [The Yom Kippur Anthology](#), by Rabbi Philip Goodman, 1971 (Jewish Publication Society: Phil., PA). I owe an enormous debt to Rabbi Les Bronstein for introducing me to these insightful books, and for plumbing the depths of these ideas through many years of drashot and teachings.

² See Ken Keyes, [The Hundredth Monkey](#), 1982 (Vision Books, St Mary, KY), and a critique by Elaine Myers, “The Hundredth Monkey Revisited,” [Strategies for Cultural Change](#), Spring 1985 p 10 (accessed at www.context.org?ICLIB/IC09/Myers.htm, on Sep 17, 2010). Because of the critical questions of the science and its interpretation raised by Myers I have elected to refer to this as a “scientific parable” rather than empirically-rigorous science. Nonetheless, the eagerness with which scientists and readers have embraced this concept of a collective force among the Koshima monkeys reveals a persistent impulse to seek a communal imperative that extends beyond the individual.

importance of this new organism what it can achieve through collective prayer, or is the relevance in the strength of its numbers, that it represents a collective that coheres as a group, even for just a moment? In other words, perhaps the group dynamic is even more important than the substance of the group's actions. All of which leads me to my central question this morning – do we, as Jews, assemble in order to pray, or do we pray in order to assemble?

Today, and last night, Jews all around the world are assembling for Yom Kippur, and it represents the absolute height of Jewish religious assembly, at least in terms of numbers. We are all the Tenth Jew when we come to Yom Kippur services, adding to the greater whole. But why are we all here? I know why I am here, but why are you all here? If I were to poll the thousand or so people in this tent I imagine I would get variations of three types of responses – I *want* to be here, I think I *should* be here, I *have* to be here. The maggid of Kelemer, a 19th century storyteller from Vilna, joked that Yom “Ki-purim” can be translated as “a day *like* Purim – on Purim we masquerade as non-Jews, and on Yom Kippur we masquerade as pious Jews.”³ In fact, it is hard for us to approach this day as if we were pious. Perhaps we come with a sense of obligation or with a sense of expectation. To many of us, the Yom Kippur experience seems simple, almost one-dimensional. We come to synagogue, sit on hard seats, stand in place until our back and feet hurt, listen or not, wander about, daydream, calculate and then re-calculate the time until the final shofar blast will signal the end of prayers, and then Yom Kippur is over. For others, a much smaller dose of Yom Kippur is needed to feel that we have discharged our obligation. At the end of the day Yom Kippur has occurred and we have generally been passive players in the drama, feeling perhaps that the experience is archaic, distant, foreign, or merely irrelevant.

Or, Yom Kippur can be approached very differently. We can allow ourselves moments of introspection, in which we contemplate where we have been and where we are going. We can reflect upon the many dimensions of Yom Kippur – the historical elements of engaging in many of the same rituals and prayers that other Jews have done for hundreds or even thousands of years; the social aspects of gathering our community together for a shared purpose; the emotional ties to people in our lives who have touched us but are no longer with us; or the psychological challenge of aligning good intentions with courageous actions. And it offers the potential of a collective experience – perhaps a moment of a shared harmony, shared inspiration, or shared awe.

Let's take the Google Earth perspective. For those unfamiliar with this wonderful web-based application, Google Earth affords the user satellite imagery that can zoom all the way down to the most local area, such as your house, and then allow you to pan back to satellite views of your town, your country, or even your continent. Imagine zooming out from your chair today, first as if you were having an out-of-body

³ Goodman, The Yom Kippur Anthology, pp 122-123

experience, then going up to tent view, to a White Plains view, to a US view to a global view. Then, imagine zooming up not only in space, but in time as well – consider see yourself across all the Yom Kippurs you have ever experienced, wherever you may have been. Now imagine that we can zoom up and see our collective Yom Kippurs. Now, zoom up across 3,500 years, across all the Yom Kippur's we as a people have ever experienced.

In our individual timelines we may have had quicksilver moments or unique experiences that have lingered with us, what Rabbi Larry Hoffman alluded to as “peak experiences” as he applied Abraham Maslow’s term.⁴ I can vividly recall Yom Kippur 1973, as a teenager in an Orthodox shul in the Bronx. The rabbi announced that war had broken out in Israel, with coordinated attacks by Egypt on Israel’s southern flank and Syria to the north. Israel was badly outnumbered and unprepared for the attack. This was the first most of us had heard of it. He said the doors of the synagogue would be closed until we raised \$1 million for Israel. In a little over 20 minutes time, as one after another of the congregants rose from their seats and pledged money publicly, over \$1.5 million was raised. Communal action had hardly been clearer.

There were two traveling Yom Kippur's which have lingered with me as well, when I was drawn in to a Jewish community in unexpected ways – one, in the early 1980s when I was cycling across country and ended up in Portland, Oregon for Yom Kippur, not knowing anyone. I looked up a local chavurah and got in touch with them, and they found a young family who welcomed me in to their home, and graciously extended themselves as if I was a part of their family, a feeling extended by the entire chavurah. The other other traveler's moment occurred when I was in the densest Jewish place on earth for Yom Kippur – the Kotel, in the mid 1970s, again alone. I wandered over to a bimah where a group was davening and was welcomed there as well. This was a group that gathered each year at the Kotel from around the world, *me-arbah kanfot ha-aretz*, the four corners of the earth, even though they didn't know one another. It was nusach ashkenaz, the European liturgy with which I had grown up and was familiar, and I recognized many of the tunes. With this history of the Kotel and the temples surrounding me I again felt enveloped and welcomed within a Jewish community, at that moment, and across the ages.

Right before the destruction of the Second Temple Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel, the Rashbag, was a president of the Sanhedrin and a prominent teacher. He is quoted as saying that there was no greater holiday than YOM KIPPUR, when the daughters of Jerusalem would borrow white dresses from each other – so as not to shame those who had no rich dresses – and sing and dance in the vineyards before the men who had not yet married. They sang, “Young man, lift your eyes and see what you are choosing; do not set your eyes on beauty, set your eyes on family.”⁵ Which leads me to the most

⁴ Hoffman, The Art of Public Prayer, pp 11-18

⁵ Agnon, Days of Awe, pp 258-259

memorable of my Yom Kippur's, the Jewish version of How I Met Your Mother, when 18 years ago I wandered in to a synagogue for the first time and met my future wife, Heidi. Since I wasn't aware of the Rashbag's teaching at the time, I felt free to set my eyes on both beauty and family.

These personal reflections of peak Yom Kippur's is accompanied by historical touchstones, too. On our laps, in our hands, the Machzor – formulated around the root word *chazar*, to return – embodies our collective Jewish history, if we have the imagination to summon it. In each era we get the Yom Kippur we need, or the one we deserve. Imagine the following illustrations:

- Biblical era: Lev 23:27-32, mark the 10th day of the 7th month... a day of atonement... do no work... practice self denial... expiation on your behalf... law for all time... throughout the generation. This was the Yom Kippur of a newly nomadic tribe still immersed in world of demons and superstitions, uncertain of its own collective identity. In the Avodah service we read of two goats, one to sacrifice and one for Azazel, the latter the "escape goat" that has been popularized as the scapegoat. In this era, agency is in the hands of the High Priest operating on our behalf, speaking to a people who still believe in the mystical/magical elements of the goat demon.
- 2nd temple era (530 bce – 70 ad), marked by "big ritual" and slow transference of responsibility to the people
- Early mishnaic period of exile (1st through 3rd centuries), in which democratic principles emerging and synagogue-based prayer becomes central focus (Kol Nidrei, Eleh Ezkerah references, psalms)
- Middle ages
- Holocaust and modern poems and reflections that supplement the traditional

Our challenge on Yom Kippur, when we seek meaning in our history, is how to grapple with it – every year and every generation of the Jewish people adds more to our history. When Meshullam ben Kalonymous, one of the most prolific authors of piyuttim in the machzor, wrote in Rome in the late 900s⁶, he was already reflecting on 2,000 years of Jewish history. He was writing before the Crusades, before Rashi and Maimonides had been born, before the Spanish Inquisition. We post-modernists, in 2010, have enough trouble with the barrage of information from recent history, and we labor to make sure the next generation does not forget the Holocaust, which was as if it was yesterday in a 3,000-year timeline. Too often we approach our Jewish history with cynicism or indifference, or through a contemporary lens of social stability, agency, self-actualization. We have been through our Summers of Love and Winters of Discontent and often regard ourselves as masters of our own fate, captains of our souls. How do we relate to these historical eras? Can the self-denial of Yom Kippur – particularly the fasting, but also denying our normal routines – push us toward that momentary

⁶ Hammer, Entering the High Holy Days, pp 150-153

connection to our historical past. This day of fasting and self-denial is somewhat akin to a Native American sweat lodge, or other ancient rites engineered to achieve an altered consciousness – something to throw us off the way we normally think. And yet, as we heard our teenagers chant in today’s haftorah from Isaiah, fasting for the sake of fasting – without a sense of mission, is wasted. “Is this the kind of fast I delight in,” Isaiah writes (Isaiah,58:5-8), “a fast merely to deprive one’s body? Is it bowing the head like the willows, or reclining in sackcloth and ash?” Instead, Isaiah says, “the fast that I desire is the unlocking of the chains of wickedness, the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude.”⁷ The story is told that after the destruction of the Second Temple Rabbi Joshua bemoaned to Rabbi Yochana ben Zakai that they could no longer fulfill the Biblical injunctions of atonement through sacrifice. Rabbi Yochana answered him, “Be not dismayed. We have an atonement just like it. *Gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness.”⁸ Still, these are intentional acts of individuals, a moral compass to guide us. Vidui offers us a different expression of atonement -- as collective expiation (we are “limbs of a collective Jewish body”). Individual atonement is necessary but not sufficient; collective atonement is the goal. If we can’t see ourselves historically, we can often see ourselves in Vidui: it represents the norms and values we must aspire to in order to survive collectively.

Yom Kippur keeps reminding us of the communal imperative, how critical it is for each of us to be ready to the Tenth Jew. The size and cohesion of our social groupings are inversely proportional to the existential threat (think of the pioneers banding together to head west). In the US today, we can live comfortably as single generation families, or live alone. We are less dependent upon one another, since the structures of government, markets, and civil society provide the backdrop for our individual pursuits, although sometimes we can see how quickly that can unravel. As Jews in the US, we don’t feel threatened. Most of us would say that something like the Holocaust could never happen here.

Still, we assemble as a community “just in case,” as a drill for the potential calamity – we support each other at individual life cycle events, but also need to be able to imagine something on the order of another holocaust – by assembling we re-establish the bonds.

So, do we assemble in order to pray, or do we pray in order to assemble? We are all, at one point or another, the “tenth Jew,” necessary for creating that organism, regardless whether we are gathering because the power of group prayer is unique or because of the social imperative to survive and identify ourselves as a group.

Michael Zylberberg, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, recalled successive Yom Kippurs in Warsaw, from 1939 through 1944. In particular, he wrote about 1941 when a

⁷ Hammer, Entering the High Holy Days, p 14

⁸ Goodman, The Yom Kippur Anthology, pp 31-32

local teacher, Dr Janus Korczak, asked him to help organize Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services for about 150 orphaned children. Even though Korczak had not been religious, he insisted on a traditional service. They found a young chazzan to lead them, and Korczak prayed with the children throughout the day. During his last address, at Ne'ilah, he spoke of life and death, and the importance of Jewish faith. "Who knows," he said, "whether we shall live to assemble again next Yom Kippur." One year later the children had been removed from the ghetto, many sent to concentration camps, and Korczak had been killed. As Zylberberg closes his memoir he writes, "Very few survived to tell the story. I am one of them."⁹

Today we can look around at each other under this tent, hear the arching melodies, contemplate our common heritage and know that we are in this together – we have been in the past, and we will be in the future. We know who we can turn to, and if we find ourselves in the midst of other Jewish communities, thrown together by extraordinary circumstances, we will each know how to be The Tenth Jew. So, do we assemble to pray, or pray to assemble? The answer, of course, is yes.

Shabbat shalom. Shanah tovah. G'mar chatimah tovah.

⁹ Goodman, The Yom Kippur Anthology, pp 204-208