

Yom Kippur 2018

This is an overwhelming honor for me. My gratitude today and always goes to my teacher, Rabbi Bronstein. My deep thanks, also, to the ritual *chevrah* because David Abramson asked this ninety year old woman to speak on Yom Kippur.

I tell you my age because I lived during the time when the New York City Public Schools advanced the concept of “individualism.” We were taught that our founding fathers believed that “individualism” was crucial to the birth and development of democracy in the United States.

The ideas of individualism, of self actualization, the pursuit of one’s own opinion about existence were fundamental for me. Google’s first listing for “individualism” was about Frederick Douglass, the ex slave, abolitionist and statesman who wrote that “human beings are by nature distinct, separate beings, each with his own body and whose faculties are necessary to his own existence. People are individuals”

This is undeniably one of the first things a foreigner will notice when arriving here. Whether it’s a five year old child being encouraged to tie his own shoes or an 18 year old moving out of the parental home, Americans grow up with the expectation of becoming independent individuals, early-on. A few weeks ago, David Brooks wrote in the Times “You can see it in today’s commencement cliches: follow your passion, march to the beat of your own drummer, listen to your own heart.” I am an early childhood educator and we say, “give your child *roots and wings.*” The wings of independence.” The wings of individualism.

When I graduated from college, I married. My husband, Arthur, and I surely adopted these notions of individualism, it was our cultural and academic inheritance

However, what I now realize and embrace was that **Judaism was the “roots” part of that axiom.**

Judaism was also a part of our inheritance. We enjoyed time with parents, grandparents and cousins and celebrated holidays together, with delight. We became parents and soon Arthur and I read, Judaism as a Civilization written by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the philosopher and founder of Reconstructionism. We began to study and joined with a small group of others to found this Bet Am Shalom Synagogue. Arthur and I planned to build a Jewish home but there were aspects of the tradition we could no longer accept. Rabbi Kaplan, Reconstructionism, gave us an approach we thought we would be able to adopt with integrity. As we participated within the life of this group we experienced a quality of intimacy that felt very much like extended family. We began to recognize that we were individuals within our community. We were building community. Jewish life for us, was growing to be, community life. We two individualists now had a focus upon community life!

Community life, ----this morning we read of ancient Israelite community life and how the concern for purity led to bringing two goats to the sacrificial altar. Lots were placed upon the head of each goat, one labeled, “or Adonai” and one for “Azazel” a wilderness denizen. The goat for “Adonai” was sacrificed by the High Priest according to specific sacrificial instructions and then the priest placed his hands upon the head of the second goat. Through this act, he transferred the year’s accumulated sins of the community to that goat. That second goat was led out to escape into the wilderness with all of the community’s impurities. That second goat was the “scapegoat.”

Notice the precise nature of the instructions given to the High Priest; a panful of glowing coals; two handfuls of finely ground; behind the curtain; sprinkle; east side; in front of the cover; seven times.

Visualize our ancestors in the desert camp surrounded by possible enemies or by wild beasts, or

fire or disease. Life in the desert wilderness was unpredictable, irrational, filled with terror. BUT, following those precise sacrificial instructions gave the people a sense of control. The arbitrary and frightening quality of their lives was tamed and modified by carrying out those exact prescriptions.

What was the nature of this community? How did those Israelite men and women live and what could this strange goat practice mean? I searched through the writings of some anthropologists, archaeologists and Rabbis and found differing opinions about issues of sacrifice, purity and sin. Of course no one knows what the ancient desert life was actually like, there are no concrete evidences of pottery shards no remnants of writing. What is remarkable are the centuries of scholarly investigation, study and interpretation of the biblical text. As Rabbi Arthur Green wrote, "While the claims of the tradition may not be historically valid, they remain valid in a much more existentially important way: in the richness of rabbinical imagination and insight."

The belief, wrote Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, was that, "each person in the community was unclean because impurities were unavoidable. They arose from impure natural sources such as those from proximity to body fluids, animal carcasses, to childbirth, to human corpses. They thought impurities were contagious, and would cling to them. But, they believed that the defilement was not permanent and procedures such as bathing and washing clothes and certainly through the goat rites of the Day of Atonement, the people were rid of impurity."

Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, in an essay found in our Atz Hayyim Chumash, explained that The community, now rendered clean, celebrated the Shabbat, celebrated the Passover, circumcised their males, ate prescribed foods, held feasts of the first born and respected their animals by insisting that work animals refrain from doing work on the Shabbat. They celebrated festivals, sang and danced, respected their parents; met their tithing obligations;

buried their dead and came to the aid of family and kinsmen in times of danger and trouble.

I've tried to describe specific aspects of the intimate, daily routines and habits of our ancient ancestors because I hoped to bring them to life—to our imagination. I hoped we would visualize the High Priest of the community performing specific cultic steps to insure the purity that was required for God's presence in the tabernacle. I hoped we would think of the people as individuals with specific duties, responsibilities and expectations that would insure the viability of the community. These specific instructions gave individuals an opportunity to celebrate the milestones of life and to create memories of those celebrations; to eat defined foods shared with neighbors and friends; to build a sense of continuity as they watched newborns grow up; to help one another in times of sorrow; to provide a sense of control and safety and protection from the terrors of the desert. Those specific instructions for the priest and those specific instructions for each individual assured, as Rabbi Shai Held writes, "the emergence of a stable community within a life sustaining order."

Today's parsha closes with the words, "This shall be to you a law for all time: to make expiation for the Israelites for all their sins, once a year. For all time! Here we are, individuals within a community, making atonement for our sins in 2018. After centuries filled with tragedy, horror and destruction we are the fortunate ones to congregate in our beautiful tent. We come here as individuals within a community.

Comfortable as we are, we are nevertheless faced with "a world that often seems chaotic. On Rosh HaShanah, Beth Davidson spoke of the controversies and fears of today. We fear for the health of family members, we fear that we, or our children, may suffer a freak accident. Rabbi Shai Held writes, "The reality of chaos and the experience of seemingly total randomness are always with us and the fear they induce is real." The Al Het and Ashamnu

prayers we prayed this morning give us an opening for confession. Does this moment of confession act for us in the same way that the striving for purity acted for our ancestors?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik helps me to answer that question, and he writes using the masculine gender (but it applies to us all,) “There are many things that a person knows and even thinks about, but lacks the courage to speak about... He refuses to accept the reality and facts about his life, yet he will not say so...though in the still of the night, he ponders and secretly weeps over it. But outwardly, he is of good cheer and genial. ...On Yom Kippur, the painful process of confession compels him to see things as they are, and to express unequivocally the unvarnished truth...Just as we burn an offering on the altar, we burn that cowardly, artificial life with the act of confession.”

Does this moment of confession act for us in the same way that the pursuit for purity acted for our ancestors? I understand that once the ancient Israelites achieved a level of purity, the people were able to enjoy the gifts of life within community.

Our community, today, is made up of individuals whose lives parallel, in more ways than I realized, the lives of our ancient ancestors. Each year, after we go through the introspection and confession of Yom Kippur, we find ourselves ready to return, to continue our individual lives within this remarkable stable and joyful community.

I thought back to events that took place in my life during one month in June of this year and recognized how my individual life became more and meaningful and purposeful within our community. I will be specific in the same way that I was specific about describing community life in the desert: On a Shabbat morning, a member dear to us all, took an aliyah, came to the

Torah along with her mother in loving memory of their father and husband; A few days earlier, my newly sworn-in lawyer grandson became an associate in a law firm in the city. I tell you this because a partner in that firm was my six year old student in our religious school! AND a few days before, I had attended the Bar Mitzvah of that student's son; On another Shabbat, the children of our Rabbi and Cantor came to services with gratitude that their mother was out of the hospital after receiving a new hip. Many of us remember when those children were babies and toddlers; On another Shabbat, an extremely hard worker all through the years of her membership, came to the Torah with her family to name a new grand daughter; One June morning I loaned my niece a book, Mindful Jewish Living, written by a Rabbi who is a member of this community; I was with a pair of twins who, as infants, went to a child care center where I taught. They are now outstanding young women at wonderful colleges; A couple came to the Torah to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. We met them twenty five years ago on the Shabbat morning before they were married. Rabbi Bronstein officiated at their wedding.

These, and other specific happenings about which I could relate, took place this past June. Individual happenings that parallel events which took place in the desert community centuries before!

On May 30th , some of my family members were driving to the swearing-in of that grandson I mentioned, before. My cell phone rang and I learned that my dear, dear friend, Deborah Kligler Krasnow, had just passed away. We'd been close for 60 years, almost as many years as the age of the synagogue. She had been disabled for several years by the loss of much of her vision and hearing and it grew more and more difficult for her to be mobile. She was

brilliant, competent, filled with integrity .and abundant love, her life was precious to me and to so many others. At her funeral, in our sanctuary, our community listened to her family and colleagues speak of her extraordinary life.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater, who wrote that book I spoke of on Jewish mindfulness, asks: "What are we doing here in this world if in the end, we will all die? This is the question we all come to, and it is the motivation for much of our spiritual life. What is the meaning of our lives? What are we to do with our days on earth? What could life mean when it withers away for all of us?"

Yom Kippur teaches us that until death inevitably comes, we have the gift of reading, again, about our ancestors' lives in the desert and to repeat in our own way, the necessity to build community. We have the extraordinary privilege of starting anew each year and affirming life, itself, individually and in beloved community.

G'mar Chatimah Tova!

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