

Oz Torah

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A selection of Rabbi Raymond Apple's insights on Yom Kippur from
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How close can we get to God?

On Yom Kippur the high priest left his congregation and entered the Holy of Holies by himself. So solitary were his prayers at that moment that the congregation feared what would happen if something befell him and he did not emerge. No-one could go in and bring him out.

In some fashion his solitariness is symbolic of the moments of aloneness that we all experience during the most holy day of the year.

One moment we are the congregation of Israel addressing our Maker. The next, we are off on a personal spiritual excursion. The rest of the congregation stands beside us but suddenly they



are no longer there. It is each of us alone. If our spiritual moment succeeds it is not shared.

What happens when a spiritual moment succeeds? Is it a mystical union of the human soul with the Divine? Some would deny that possibility and insist that there is and must always be a gulf between man and God.

Yet even without the earthly and the Divine becoming one it must be possible for us to glimpse – at least metaphorically – something of the grandeur of the Almighty.

Not that we are any closer to knowing the secrets of God. But at moments of spiritual elevation we can commune with His goodness and holiness and emerge changed forever.

Before we pray

The Rebbe of Tzantz was asked by a disciple, “What does the Rebbe do before starting his prayers?” The Rebbe said, “I pray that I may be able to pray...”

Surely we can all learn from this Rebbe. We should always pray to be able to pray. There are a number of ways to achieve it. In the *Mishnah B'rachot* we are told that the pious men of old meditated for an hour before their prayers. They sat quietly and tuned in. Their actual prayers waited until they were ready for them.

The same source tells us that people whose prayer came fluently from their mouths knew that they

had prayed successfully. Their inner compass told them that they were in the right direction.

These and other items of advice from the sages are far more important than rushing into the synagogue, finding the place and pretending to participate in the service.

We tend to ask the wrong question when we decide what *shule* to attend on the High Holydays. We ask, “When will the service end?”, when we should be asking, “When will the prayers (i.e. our own personal praying) begin?”

The answer cannot possibly be, “The moment we enter the building”. It takes time for us to pray to be able to pray...

Dolls without heads

Franz Kafka wrote a rebuke in his “Letter to His Father”:

“I could not understand,” he told his father, “how, with the nothing of Judaism you yourself possessed, you could reproach me for not making an effort to cling to a similar nothing.

“It was indeed, so far as I could see, a mere nothing, a joke – not even a joke. Four days a year you went to the synagogue. I yawned and dozed through many hours (I don’t think I was ever again so bored, except later at dancing lessons) and did my best to enjoy the few little bits of variety there were, as for instance when the Ark was opened, which always reminded me of the shooting galleries where a cupboard door would open in the same way whenever one hit a bull’s eye; except that there something interesting always came out and here it was always the same old dolls without heads. That’s how it was in the synagogue...”

Kafka is speaking for many others. Unfortunately the services do nothing for them. Out of boredom, they yawn, doze and watch the clock, hoping against hope the day will pass more quickly.



Even that is not so bad so long as it does not become an undercurrent of conversation that can well up and drown out an earnest *chazan* who is pouring heart, soul and voice into his efforts for a less than appreciative congregation. When this happens, there is little point in going on with the service.

Some advocate constant gimmicks to stimulate a jaded spiritual appetite, but this trivialises a serious liturgical moment. It is more important for congregants to recognise that their role does not begin with merely turning up for the service and mechanically going through the motions. They should recall the principle (Pirkei Avot, ch. 5): *l’fum tza’ara agra* – “According to the effort is the reward”.

One has to bring something to the Yom Kippur service in order to get anything out of it. The greater the personal effort at preparing for the day, the more meaningful it will turn out to be. Once started, the work on one’s soul should be so all-absorbing that Yom Kippur is over before we can complete the task.

We should be so spiritually busy that we don’t even notice the dolls without heads.

The God of Abraham & the God of Aristotle

The power of Yom Kippur is immense and compelling. As a traumatic religious experience, Yom Kippur has been a turning-point for many a Jew: but for none more significantly than Franz Rosenzweig. Yom Kippur in Berlin in 1913 brought him back from the brink of apostasy, and he decided he could never be anything other than a Jew.

What happened to Rosenzweig that Yom Kippur he never explicitly related. But it is significant that years later he described what Yom Kippur means to the Jew, who on that day “confronts the eyes of his judge in utter loneliness as if he were dead in the midst of life.” And he said, “Anyone who has ever

celebrated Yom Kippur knows that it is something more than a mere personal exaltation (though this may enter into it) or the symbolic recognition of a reality such as the Jewish people (though this may also be an element) – it is a testimony to the reality of God which cannot be controverted.”

In these passages Rosenzweig not only hints at what one particular Yom Kippur meant to him; he provides a classical description of the nature of religious experience. Personal exaltation and participation in a worshipping community are part of it, but fundamentally religious experience is what William James in his “Varieties of Religious Experience” calls a private faith-state, when, as Rosenzweig says so movingly, one confronts the eyes of God in utter loneliness.

It is an intense, overwhelming, existential experience, almost beyond the realms of expression in words. It happens rarely, and it cannot always be maintained at such a peak. But this is religious experience, oblivious to time, place, context or company, and it is this which Rudolf Otto, moved by Yom Kippur in a simple North African Synagogue, called the numinous.

The God whom one confronts in utter loneliness is, as Abraham Joshua Heschel would put it, the God of the prophet, not the God of the philosopher. For the prophet has an overwhelming, intuitive apprehension of God, whilst the God of the philosopher is the end result of a long, careful process of reasoning. The one, says Heschel, uses “situational thinking” in contrast to the other’s “conceptual thinking”.

Yet for Judaism both approaches – “the God of Abraham” and “the God of Aristotle”, as the medieval Jewish teachers expressed it – are not only acceptable but necessary. Each provides a corrective to the other. Rosenzweig wrote, “To have found God is not an end but in itself a beginning... The reasoning process comes afterwards. Afterwards, however, it must come.”



Franz Rosenzweig

The reasoning process prepares for, reinforces, and evaluates religious experience. It helps to protect the sensitive person from the excesses of his own imagination. It guides him to establish and maintain an on-going relationship which the God confronted in utter loneliness.

But the reasoning process can, as William James argues, suffer from a “tendency to let religion evaporate in intellectual terms”. One can study God so coldly and clinically that one freezes out the warm, personal Father in Heaven.

The pathway to God can be that of the prophet and it can be that of the philosopher. Each seeks the same truth. “The philosopher seeks at the end and what the prophet knows at the beginning”, says Arthur A Cohen in an essay on Heschel, Cohen

himself comments, “Where faith leaps, philosophy moves slowly”. Judaism is adamant that faith and philosophy must finally come to the same truth.

“The seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is ‘truth’”, said the sages. The truth which the prophet sees in a moment of intuition is the same truth at which the patient reasoning of the philosopher must eventually arrive. As the classical Jewish thinkers put it, a man weighs several hundred identical coins and knows in a moment how many he has; but instead of weighing the coins he might count them one by one, and though this will take longer he will come to the same result in the end.

The problem the religious teachers of the classical age faced is different in degree but not in kind from that which confronts the contemporary believer, who is adamantly informed by the agnostic and the atheist that the use of reason does not confirm, but denies, the truth of the religious claim. The believer suggests in reply that apparent contradictions are largely due to the limitations of human intelligence and reason. Yoseph ben Shem-Tov was right to remark that there is a distinction between that which is *above* human reason, and that which is *counter* to reason.

My teacher, Isidore Epstein, wrote: “Judaism, whilst having too much respect for human intelligence to subscribe to any proposition involving the total surrender of human reason, nevertheless rightly recognises the limitations of the human faculties and senses and may well proclaim as an act of revealed faith, ‘Credible quia non intellectum est’ (‘To be believed because it is beyond the understanding’) – quite a tenable and rational position which it would be unscientific to assail or deny a priori.”

What Judaism could not do would be to assert, “Credo quia absurdum” – “I believe because it is absurd”, “Credible quia ineptum” – “To be believed because it is foolish”; or “Certum est quia impossibile est” – “It is certain because it is impossible”.

His universe

Said God to Moses, “You cannot see My face, but you can see My works.”

We cannot see love, but we know what it can do. We cannot see the wind, but we recognise its effects.

What is our problem in the post-Holocaust twenty-first century? Like humans throughout history we would dearly love to believe, but we are baffled at the way He runs His universe.

Before the Second World War, CEM Joad was an agnostic. If asked, “Do you believe in God?”, his answer was, “No, because we cannot be certain, and because there is much in life, like the prevalence of evil, which argues against it.”

After the war he said the simple truth was that you simply cannot help yourself and you have to believe. Precisely because of the existence of evil, to have to rely on your own resources to overcome it would be, he confessed, a greater burden than we can bear. The only way to defend our world against evil is to have a God to whom to communicate our distress and from Him can come strength and comfort to aid us in coping with the world.

Someone has said that belief in God gives you rest – and unrest.

It gives you **rest** – faith, trust, peace of mind, serenity, optimism, meaning, assurance, enhancement of life, redemption.

It also gives you **unrest** – dissatisfaction with yourself and the world, indignation at the cheap, the tawdry, the false, the hollow, the untrue, unjust and intolerable, the determination to defy that which is wrong and smash the false gods and try to build a better world.

To believe in Him is terrible – and wonderful.



In the Torah, Yom Kippur is called *Yom HaKippurim*, not the Day of Atonement but, literally, the Day of Atonements. Atonement, as an English word, comes from the two smaller words “at” and “one”. To atone is to be at one with our God.

The Zohar explains the idea of *Yom HaKippurim* like this: on this day there are two streams of love, from God to man, from man to God. You might even borrow two book titles from the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel: “God in Search of Man” and “Man’s Quest for God”.

This Yom Kippur let us go looking for each other, God reaching out to man, man yearning for God. As we encounter each other in love, may the Day be enhanced, the moment be inspired, and our lives ennobled and uplifted.



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