

The Cantonist's Prayer
Kol Nidre 5764
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When people ask me how I'm doing these days, I'm never quite sure how to answer. In the realm of own private life, my family, my work—I'd have to say I'm quite well, thank you; aware of many blessings. But in terms of how I'm feeling about the world in general—that's not such an easy answer. It's been a struggle, lately, to remain hopeful in the face of so much that is going wrong. There are days when it's hard not to feel a good bit of despair.

And then recently I came across the following story, which I'd like to share with you.

It's a story about Reb Mordechai, a Chassidic rabbi who wandered the Russian countryside in the first part of the 19th century, journeying from town to town, to inspire the Jews scattered there with the teachings of Chassidism.

He arrived one day in a small town in the middle of nowhere, on the morning of Kol Nidre, only to hear that all of the town's Jews had left the day before to go to the city of Vitebsk, to pray in the large synagogue there on the Day of Atonement. So suddenly Reb Mordechai found himself a few hours away from the holiest day of the year, without a minyan—without the ten Jews needed for communal prayer.

“You won't find any Jews here, Rabbi,” one of the townspeople told him. “But about two hours away there's a small village of Cantonists. They're a strange bunch, but that's the closest thing to Jews you'll find around here now.”

Let me explain who the Cantonists were. These were Jewish men who, when they were young boys, age 7 or 8, had been forcibly drafted into the Russian army for 25-year terms of service. They were tormented and tortured in the Czar's army in an attempt to get them to abandon their Judaism. The few that survived were often unable to live normal lives after their release, so they lived together in little villages apart from the world.

Well, hearing that there were Jews within walking distance, Reb Mordechai set out for the Cantonists' village. He walked and walked, and finally saw a few old wooden houses on the horizon.

The first man who saw the rabbi enter the village called to everyone else, and in no time they were all lined up with shining faces, taking turns shaking the newcomer's hand. They were overjoyed – such an honor to have a real rabbi as their guest!

Suddenly the men stepped back, formed a sort of huddle, and began whispering to one another. Then they fell silent, looked again at Reb Mordechai, and one of them stepped forward in great humility, cleared his throat and announced:

“Excuse me, Rabbi, but we would be very honored if you would please honor us with leading the prayers of Yom Kippur.” Reb Mordechai nodded in agreement, and the joyous hand-shaking ritual was repeated once again.

“We only have one condition,” the man continued. “That one of us will lead the closing prayer of the holy day, the Ne’ilah prayer.”

Reb Mordechai agreed, and an hour later, they were all seated in their little shul, davvening the Kol Nidre prayers. The Chassidic rabbi had never experienced a Yom Kippur like this. He had never been in such a minyan, comprised of Jews each of whom had been through hell, things that he could never even dream of experiencing. His soul flowed into the prayers, and it seemed to him that he had never sung so beautifully in his life. First Kol Nidre, then the evening service, and then on the following day the morning prayers, and then the afternoon prayers.

And finally, at the end of the day, it was time for Ne’ilah.

Reb Mordechai stepped back, took a seat in the small shul with everyone else, and waited to see what was going to happen. Why did they want this prayer for themselves?

One of the Cantonists rose from his chair, took a few steps forward and stood at the podium, his back to the crowd. Suddenly, before he began to lead the prayers, he started unbuttoning and removing his shirt.

Reb Mordechai was about to say something, to protest: You can’t take off your shirt in synagogue!

But as the shirt fell from the man’s shoulders, it revealed hundreds of scars, years upon years of deep scars, each one because the man refused to forsake the God of Israel.

The Cantonist then raised his hands to God and said in a loud voice:

“God, send us Mashiach, the messiah! Redeem the Jewish people now!

“I’m not asking for the sake of our families, because we don’t have any families.

“I’m not asking for the sake of our futures, because we have no future.

“I’m not asking for the sake of our livelihoods or our comfort, or our children, or our reputations, because we don’t have any of those things either.

“We’re just asking: *Asei l’ma’an shemecha*—do it for Your sake!”

And then he put on his shirt and began the prayer.

When I first read this story, I was moved on a very deep level. It struck me as a story of great sorrow and, at the same time, a story of great spiritual resistance. And I also think it moved me because it gives testimony of such a profound, deep faith. In the face of my own feelings of frustration, hopelessness, helplessness—here is an expression of a powerful, mysterious faith. On

the one hand, a faith in God—and it is quite amazing that these men continued to believe in a Godly power whatsoever, given what they had been through. But even more than faith in God—a faith in the coming of Mashiach, in the possibility of a messianic.

I read this story as a kind of challenge. Could I have this kind of faith? What, in fact, do I have faith in, if anything?

And this is the question that I want to bring to you, to all of us, on this Kol Nidre evening. As we stand here on these High Holydays, recommitting ourselves to that which we consider most important in our lives, I think we need to consider this question of faith.

Unlike our counterparts in the Christian community, I know that many Jews aren't even that comfortable with the word "faith." It sounds somewhat alien to us. Being a Jew is about who you are, about what you do—not so much about what you believe. We're asked to observe Jewish practices, to do *tzedakah* and acts of caring, to live in Jewish community—but are we ever asked what we have faith in? Does it matter?

And if our Jewish selves have discomfort around the whole notion of faith, then how much more so our 21st century, highly rational, often skeptical, raised to question authority and assert our individuality selves! And if we consider ourselves agnostic or a bit fuzzy on the whole God concept, then what in the world do we do with "faith"? Can we even talk about faith—especially religious faith—if we don't believe in a God Up There who saves, who redeems, who will send us a Messiah?

Another challenge, I think, is that often we associate passionate faith with religious fundamentalists and extremists, with those Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, who profess to be preserving a pure—usually highly rigid—form of their tradition. We take their word for it, that they are the faithful, perhaps because of the passion of their commitment. And while of course it's true that there are many people of faith who are not extremists at all, I do think that the image of the dedicated true believer makes the whole "faith" business a bit off-putting—if not mystifying—to those of us who are less zealous in our beliefs.

Our cultural corner of the world—which very much includes Reconstructionist Judaism—tends to prize hyper-rationality and the ability to see many sides of a situation. We affirm the value of ambiguity and nuance, we are suspicious of sweeping claims of any sort, and our own belief system is often relegated to very private or personal experience, without making any larger claims about the nature of reality. All of this tends to make us a bit uncomfortable with any great proclamation of faith.

So perhaps we should begin by exploring what exactly this faith business is about. What does it mean to have faith?

Perhaps the simplest definition of faith is believing in something even when the evidence seems to point in the other direction. That is, it's easy to believe in the power of love when you're in love,

when you experience love in your life in some way. But I would only say that I have faith in the power of love if I continue to believe in it even when love is absent from my life. I may assume that I believe fully in the benefits of modern science, but I would only say I have faith in science if I continue to believe in its power for good even when I see the harmful effects of scientific advances.

And it's the same for faith in God. Our beliefs may be rooted in certain experiences we've had which we call Godly, but faith is about holding on to our beliefs, holding on to some sort of hope of God's presence, even when God feels hidden from us. That is why the Cantonist's prayer, in the story, is so powerful—because what a statement of faith, to call out to a God who has been so hidden, so absent, in the lives of those who believe.

The Hebrew word for faith is *emunah*, which carries the meaning of trust, reliability, steadfastness. To have faith in something is to rely upon it, to trust it. To trust someone or something is in many ways a leap of faith—because we don't have control over what it or they might do. There is a certain amount of surrender, in the act of trust—a willingness to give some portion of our well-being over to another. Similarly in the act of faith—a willingness to acknowledge that we need to rely on something other than ourselves, for our own sake.

There is great power in a strong faith, especially a messianic-type of faith. I remember a comment made by a professor in a class I took in college about the social psychology of the Holocaust. The professor was Erich Goldhagen, himself a Holocaust survivor. He remarked once that there were two categories of people in the concentration camps who had a better survival rate than others: those who were very religious, and those who were Communists. Each group had a powerful belief in the possibility, the inevitability, of redemption yet to come, and their faith seems to have played a role in their making it through a living hell. And faith often lives most strongly among people who are oppressed, who are most in need of a redemptive vision.

There is no doubt that faith, especially religious faith, can be manipulated and used for harmful purposes; it can feed division and hate just as it can feed solidarity and liberation. Faith can shut minds down just as certainly as it can open hearts up. But I don't want to cede the passion of faith, or the messianic belief in redemption, to fanatics and fundamentalists. We can't dismiss faith just because those who often have it take it in directions that are problematic.

I think we all need some sort of faith, precisely because the world is not always such an easy place. And while we might make do with a limited, domesticized version of faith—a faith in our own little corner of the world, in our immediate connections, in that which we can see and touch in our daily lives—I honestly don't believe we will make much of a difference in this world without a more expansive faith. The cool light of reason will only get us so far, and ultimately a skeptical stance offers little in the way of hope or inspiration.

I would like us to claim a faith which is audacious but not arrogant; a faith which can inspire without making exclusive claims to Truth. I would like us to claim a faith that has the audacity to affirm the possibility of redemption, of a liberating transformation of the world as it is, without

insisting on a narrow path to that great day.

Okay, you might say, sounds good—but faith in what, exactly?

And here is where I find the work of Mordecai Kaplan so helpful. Kaplan’s understanding of God allows us a different way of approaching the whole notion of faith.

Kaplan’s basic idea was that what has been traditionally called “God” in Jewish tradition can be understood not as a Supreme Being, but as an aspect of reality. Kaplan described God as a Power that works in and through human beings to bring us to what he called “salvation.” What he meant by salvation was the achievement of human self-fulfillment, on an individual and a societal level: to create a human society, a world, in which every single individual could realize to the fullest his or her potential, in the context of social cooperation. This, for Kaplan, would be the equivalent of the coming of *Mashiach*, the messianic era. He wrote:

“[The] fact is that God does not have to mean to us an absolute being who has planned and decreed every twinge of pain, every act of cruelty, every human sin. It is sufficient that God should mean to us the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos. This is what we [mean] by God as the creative life of the universe. Religion is the endeavor to invoke these animating and organizing forces and relationships and to get us to place ourselves in rapport with them. (MOG p. 76)

That is, God is an aspect of reality, what Kaplan called the “creative life of the universe,” and what we call religion is the attempt to come into positive relationship with that force.

Kaplan goes on to say:

“Thus in the very process of human self-fulfillment, in the very striving after the achievement of salvation, we identify ourselves with God, and God functions in us. This fact should lead to the conclusion that when we believe in God, we believe that reality—the world of inner and outer being, the world of society and of nature—is so constituted as to enable [humanity] to achieve salvation. *If human beings are frustrated, it is not because there is no God, but because [we] do not deal with reality as it is actually and potentially constituted.*” (MOG, pp. 26-27)

So, for Kaplan, belief in God meant essentially that one had faith—faith in the ultimate ability of humanity to achieve the highest good for ourselves, as a human race, and faith as well in the creative power of Life itself to support us in that goal. Our faith is a kind of orientation, a stance, a way of dealing with reality, of harnessing the energy of that reality to support us in our work, both personal and societal.

Kaplan understood religious belief as a way of confronting the truths about the evil in the world, confronting the reality of sin, of oppression, of violence, and neither despairing nor turning away

in cynicism. He proclaimed a faith in the basic structure of the universe, that it is so constituted as to be on the side of the good and the just, and he argued that this attitude is fundamental to Judaism. It is precisely the messianic nature of Jewish belief that is the antidote to despair—the same messianic belief, although in a more universal form, that was expressed in the Cantonist’s prayer.

Kaplan’s way of articulating this Jewish truth gives an opening to those of us who struggle with traditional notions of God. The power and possibility of redemption is written into the structure of the Universe, and it is our job is to align ourselves with that power, to have faith in that possibility. When we do so, we are both helping to move that power forward, helping to bring that possibility a bit nearer, and at the same time we are supported in our own path to self-realization. Faith means coming into relation with something larger than ourselves, both for our own sake and for the sake of something greater. And this relationship has a mutual quality which is very powerful.

There is a remarkable statement that Jews traditionally say each morning as soon as we wake up. The blessing goes:

Modah ani l’fanecha melech chai v’kayam, sh’chazarta bi nishmati b’chemla, rabah emunatecha.

I am grateful before you, Living and Enduring God, for you have returned my soul to me with love; great is Your faithfulness.

This blessing reflects an ancient belief that the soul goes somewhere else while we’re asleep, and returns when we awake—and so it tells us not to take for granted the daily miracle of awakening each morning. But it’s this last phrase that intrigues me—*rabah emunatecha*, we say to God, “how great is Your faithfulness.” Shouldn’t this blessing be about our faith in God—our faith that we’ll wake up tomorrow morning? Instead, the blessing teaches that the fact that each of us wakes up in the morning, for as long as we are given the gift of life, is in itself an expression of faith—the universe’s faith in us. Just as we are asked to have faith in the Godly powers of the universe, the universe has faith in the Godly powers within each one of us—and this faith is expressed in the simple fact of our existence, in our getting up each morning.

This brings me back to the haunting story of the Cantonists’ Neilah prayer. What does this story teach us about faith?

The climactic moment in the story begins when the man takes off his shirt, uncovering his scars. There is a powerful symbolism at work here. Because the truth is, if each of us were to undress ourselves, in the sense of revealing our inner selves, we’d all exhibit our own share of scars. Scars from the pain of loss and struggle; scars of sorrow and disappointment. Scars from living in a society which has very narrow notions of what it means to be beautiful, successful, valuable. Scars from the realities of abuse and oppression, scars from any number of experiences which take their toll on our dignity, our humanity, our sense of self. We’re covered in scars we can’t even

see.

The next powerful moment comes in the words of the Cantonist's prayer. He confronts God directly, neither hiding nor excusing those scars on his back—rather, he challenges God, putting forth his demand: Bring *mashiach* now! And even more movingly—not for our sake, but for Your sake, God! Meaning: redemption, salvation, must come—because that is Your very nature, that is the very nature of the Godliness inherent in the Universe. The Cantonist demands of God that God fulfill God's own potential, by bringing the great day of total transformation.

And so, too, faith asks of us that we neither ignore nor despise the Reality of which our scars are a part. Instead we are called upon, like that Cantonist in his prayer, to confront and engage that Reality, to grab it by the lapels and shake it and say, “Redeem us! Redeem us now! Not tomorrow, today; not just for me, or my community—but for all of humanity!”

Faith, reclaimed in this way, is not a refuge for the weak-minded, nor a soothing escape from the troubles of the world. It is a powerful stance, an empowering stance—a stance that is at once humble and audacious, a stance that proclaims the possibility of change in the face of real setbacks, real struggles, real delays.

This is the faith that I would like us to reclaim: faith in redemptive possibility. Our tradition calls it “*Mashiach*,” messiah. We can call it transformation, liberation, the ultimate reign of justice and love—whatever we call it, it means believing in the possibility of profound change for the good. Our faith can be clear-minded, and inclusive, open to the light of reason and to critical awareness. It only demands of us that we entertain the possibility of having trust, in being willing to see beyond the evidence that the world brings us on a daily basis. It asks to align ourselves, in small ways and large, with that power that works for our own self-realization and the fulfillment of all humanity.

And it also asks us to believe that there is a Power that has faith in each one of us. *Rabah emunatecha*—not only do I need to have faith that redemption is possible, but also to have faith that what I do makes a difference, is in fact part of that redemptive process.

The Aleynu prayer, which we are about to say, is about this movement towards a day of wholeness and peace, and our role in that movement. It says, “*Aleynu*”—literally, “it is up to us.” *Aleynu l'shabeach l'Adon ha-kol*—It is up to us to praise the Source of All. It is up to us to reject idolatry, to reject attitudes and beliefs that take us off track. It is up to us *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*, to repair the world in cooperation with the Godly power that moves us towards salvation.

I invite you, before we say together the Aleynu, to sit for a moment, and think about something that gives you hope; something that can feed your own faith.

And I'd ask that you stand as you feel ready, ready to take upon yourself some piece, large or small, of this project of *tikkun*, repair. Whatever feels manageable to you this evening, then that is

your piece. Whether it's something in your own life, the life of your family, your community, something in our society, or in some other piece of the world—stand as you feel ready, and then we'll say the Aleynu together.