

SERMON FOR YOM KIPPUR MORNING: ENTER THE COHEN

Yom Kippur is an overwhelming confusion of hope, forgiveness, grace, compassion and death. Yes, death, and that's what makes for the confusion. For if the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* moves us on Rosh Hashanah, it does so even more on this Day of (Beseeched) Atonement.

There is always the question: that which I have been putting off year by year... will I live long enough to do it? What if I am one who dies by fire or by water, and it happens before I have spoken my piece, before I have made my peace, before I have, in actual fact, forgiven and been forgiven?

And just in case that sense of looming death gotten from *Unetaneh Tokef* is forgotten or repressed later on in the day, and we have gone back to our usual inauthentic procrastination of "But I still have time," the Yizkor service arrives and forces us to confront our pain anew over every soul that we have loved, but has passed on, and is now beyond our hopes for reconciliation.

Hope, forgiveness and death. A strange constellation, but perhaps the only motivation strong enough to get us off our backsides and act, at least once, with authenticity.

And here is the real kicker: this entire apparatus of spiritual movement works just as well for the atheist as for the believer; for whatever one's theology, we know that some will indeed live and some will indeed die before the year has ended.

My own theology is a complicated one that includes a stout faith in God, but no God like the omniscient, omnipotent puppet-master of facile and infantile non-thinkers. My God is the God of the Kabbalists, whose infinite and eternal being is broken by creation into a fractured God whose power over the happenings of the world is incomplete. A God who created the universe by the expedient of *tzimtzum*, withdrawal: the deliberate bringing into being of the imperfect, the unfinished, and the awaited. In this universe, chaos remains the joker in the deck, or perhaps it is ten or fifty jokers, and (as I have expressed it many times) can erupt at any moment to blast blessing into horror.

Thus even a believer can own a theology that does not bring security and certainty, but anxiety and the understanding that we can never fully understand. None of this being some modern liberal version of Jewish thinking, but a thinking found in the texts of the ancient sages, such as Joshua ben Sira, who I quote regularly at funeral services. And all those numberless Kabbalists that I already mentioned, stretching over Jewish history for over two thousand years.

Yet whether your God is the omniscient and omnipotent puppet-master, or the Kabbalistic, or even the wisp of nothingness that atheists convince themselves is the truth, the fact remains that we act like fools all too often, we transgress against one another relentlessly, we have pushed aside things that need to be addressed, we have short-changed our most beloved family and friends, and all this when we might be dead before we can attend to fixing some of it.

Enter the Cohen. We have looked to the Cohanim for over three thousand years to bless us and help us pull our souls out of the darkness. Enter the Cohen, in this case, Leonard Cohen.

*And who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time,
Who by high ordeal, who-by common trial,
Who-in-your merry merry month of May,
Who by very slow decay...
...And who... shall I say is calling?*

*And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate,
Who in these realms of love, who by something blunt,
Who by avalanche, who by powder,
Who for his greed, who for his hunger...
...And who... shall I say is calling?*

*And who by brave assent, who by accident,
Who in solitude, who in this mirror,
Who by his lady's command, who by his own hand,
Who in mortal chains, who in power...
...And who... shall I say is calling?*

And yes indeed, who *shall* I say is calling? Is it the all-powerful King of Heaven? Is it a pattern of a universe we only barely know? Is it the malicious act of a broken fellow human being, or of a broken God, or is it a random occurrence of relentless chaos? This the Cohen teaches all of us, regardless of our personal theologies: that *Unetaneh Tokef* is an urgent call.

It is an interesting juxtaposition that even as our liturgy brings in legal and regal language of a king with a record book, it also brings in many reminders that we are the beloved, and that it is our lover, our friend beckoning to us, not merely our sovereign master. Not even mainly our sovereign master. It is love and compassion that should most fully compel us toward our better selves, not fear and trembling.

Martin Buber, in his famous and most irritatingly opaque book *I and Thou* says to us: "...the lines of relation between I and you point to, and are all grounded in the Eternal You, God." A complicated Germanic philosophical expression of something that the prophets millennia ago were already teaching us: The doorway into the highest spiritual realm, the threshold to the divine, is the eyes of our beloved.

And most of us, especially those of us of a certain age, whose closest friends or whose marriages have gathered many years... we have allowed a good deal of dust and debris to obscure this doorway. We have become too cavalier with our beloveds, and thus we close ourselves off into our lonely individuality, which, whatever we might like to claim, is a weak and petty shadow compared to the magnificence of the self that hold the hands of the

beloved, and stares into their eyes and finds that long sought redemption is in fact right at hand.

Enter the Cohen. He offers to us another teaching. A song in which the beloved at hand is indeed the doorway to redemption.

Now, I have to make something clear. This particular Cohen was a spiritual eclectic, a Jew for certain, but one who could see the spiritual pathway illuminated using the imagery of any number of faiths, and express things in multiple spiritual languages.

The former, freely learning from all available multicultural insights, is a practice I have engaged in and think a powerful way toward truth. I have studied Christianity, Islam and Hinduism extensively, and hold a graduate degree in this study. Like the Cohen, I have been deeply shaped by teachings of a wider range of spirituality than just Torah.

The latter part of the statement above, the free use of any or all religious language in order to express the truth, is not my way. For me, in the end, the language of prayer and return must be a single language, not a universalist polyglot language.

So when the Cohen sings of Jesus, I can bring his sharp and powerful meaning into my own soul, but I cannot sing that song. Thus, as I have already done with regard to the song *Hallelujah*, I have revisited this other song of the Cohen and altered lines so that a single Jewish language is spoken. It is an important song, I think, one that taught me Buber's *I and Thou* philosophy long before I had ever read it or even heard of it, for this song taught it to me in my teenage years.

*Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river,
You can hear the boats go by, you can spend the night forever,
And you know that she's half-crazy and that's why you want to be there,
And she feeds you tea & oranges that come all the way from China,
And just when you mean to tell her that you have no love to give her,
She takes you in her arms and she lets the river answer, that you've always been her
lover...*

*And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind,
And you think that you can trust her,
For she's touched you, and she's moved you, and she's kind.*

*Jonah was a sailor when he fled across the waters,
He fled a prophet's service for he found no pity stirred him,
Thrown in the sea and drowning, yet redeemed despite his hatred,
When God saw his unhealing heart would keep him chained forever,
He showed him that forgiveness was in the eyes of his beloved,
He saw God shining brightly in the eyes of every single neighbor, a gift of grace...
So although he was so broken he found love was waiting for him,
And he found that he could trust him,
For God touched him, and God moved him and was kind.*

*Suzanne takes your hand and she leads you to the river,
She's wearing rags and feathers from Salvation Army counters,
And the sun pours down like honey, God's compassion's in her smile,
And she shows you where to look among the garbage and the flowers,
There are heroes in the seaweed, there are children in the morning,
They are leaning out for love and they will lean that way forever while Suzanne holds
the mirror...
And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind,
And you know that you can trust her,
For she's touched you, and she's moved you, and she's kind.*

So look for the love in your life, look for that friend, that kin, that mate, that lover... and look at death, that ender of opportunities, that deadline before which we *must* act, a deadline that can come at any moment, and so enter the doorway, do not flee across the water, do not drown in the water... forgive, and be forgiven.