

SERMON FOR KOL NIDRE SERVICE: LOVE AND DEATH

We flee the direct confrontation with love whenever we can, and many times even when we legitimately cannot. We flee the direct confrontation with death whenever we can, and many times even when we legitimately cannot.

Few circumstances demand that we be utterly present. Torture demands it, but here is a case wherein if we could remove ourselves from the present moment, if we could flee presence, than we would have conquered the one who seeks to conquer us by reducing our spirit to its meat. Alas, but very, very few are they who can flee the demand of presence in this horrible situation.

The moment of love's consummation demands our full presence. The imperative is nearly as strong as torture, and like torture, the act identifies our spirit with our flesh, but in an absolutely antithetical manner, for in the act of love the spirit is not reduced to its meat, but released to be its flesh, redeeming the very fact of having been created as an embodied spirit.

It is hard to flee this moment's demand of presence, and mainly one would not wish to. But it is more possible to do so than it is in the case of torture. And many do so flee, to avoid the utter vulnerability that the identity between flesh and spirit makes possible, when the inner me and the outer me are one and the same. At some time or another we do flee the absolute presence demanded of us in the consummation of love as though it were indeed torture.

And besides this love of lovers, there are other loves that demand our full presence. There are moments of love between siblings, between a parent and child, between friends, when the gift of that love, and its dangers, wells up fiercely and pulls us out of our complacency into utter presence.

And then there is death. Death too so demands. Death too will not be put off. Death, which we experience in many different ways throughout our lives, and which will someday, and very inevitably, make of us an experience of death for others, demands presence. The Existentialists claim that the facing of death renders us utterly individuals, for we shall each of us die as an individual.

But this lends to death far too much power, for we are not merely defined by our end, but by the whole of our lives, the vast, vast majority of which is lived in relationship with others, and not merely as a lone individual. At least, that is how it could be, if we allowed ourselves to let go of the fear of such vulnerability, if we allow our inner self and our outer self to be unified.

And even death is not quite so individual. An old Jewish tradition has a father or a mother referring to their child as "my Kaddish." What does this mean? It means that we know

that when we die, there will be somebody to say Kaddish for us. And it may not be a child, or even a family member, it may be the community as a whole.

Tradition also insists that Mourner's Kaddish be recited only in the presence of the community. Those few "Amens," the "Brich Hu" and especially that central line "Yehey shmey rabba mevorach, le'alam ulalmey almayah..." must be responses by the community; thus the prayer is not an individual recitation- one bereaved mourner alone- but a mourner held up and loved and supported by the kehillah. If you douse the insistence upon utter individuality, if you cease fighting for your own opinion above all other possibilities, if you allow yourself to flow into the community, then you are supported through your life, and you are supported in your death.

If we succeed in this endeavor to be a true part of a community, we shall have then raised ourselves up toward the harder question: how is my spirit grounded in my body? I do not know what happens after death, all I know is that during life we are not, in actuality, a spirit residing within a body, we are an embodied spirit, that is, one unified existence that is corporeal and spiritual at the same time. And there is a sign that we can see to determine how well we have embraced this truth: how different is my inner self from my outer self?

I recall a boyhood fantasy that I used to enjoy. It was when I swam in the lake by my family's summer house. I used to imagine that my body was a giant exploration ship and I was a being in the control center, which was the head, looking out of the eye-windows and working levers to cause the ship to move in various ways. "Submerge!" I would whisper, and the ship would submerge, swim and come up some several yards, that is, imagined miles further from shore for another look-see.

The fantasy is far from unique, most, maybe even all people have imagined something along these lines. Even cartoons and movies frequently feature variations on this theme. It is the philosophy of body/mind dualism grounded in play. Here is the attraction of such play: that my outside and my inside can be so utterly different, and who would know? It is a wonderful defense. And we do not resort to this defense merely as childhood play, but, alas, as a regular part of how we go on living our lives.

And we are not entirely to blame. For the union of body and spirit, of inner and outer is not a perfect union. There are disjunctures, fissures, fracture lines that come upon us whether we will them so or not.

And so, although it may be a fine ideal to walk this earth as a well-tuned and perfectly unified body-soul, the correlation between the two is imperfect. We are forced to acknowledge horrible ambiguity: that the life of a person is not a duality of soul and body temporarily coupled, yet neither is a life a pure singularity of body/mind. There is some disjuncture.

As always, we must beware the too quick, simple answers, the traps that our longing for comprehensibility sets for us. As always, we must but gently frolic with our theories and

theologies, and never wallow in them, for all theories and theologies rest upon seas of unknown depth.

In the end, religion is a matter of relationship between God and ourselves, and not a matter of theology, just as a marriage, for example, is grounded in a real relationship between two persons and not a psychological theory of interpersonal interactions.

The body-soul is sometimes more unified and sometimes more fractured. Certain moments, moments of presence can help to heal the fractures and bring us the vulnerable peace of unity. Other moments all but demand separation. This package we call a living self, however unitary or dualistic it may in its ultimate form be, can be pried into two antagonistic parts, and it can be slammed into an utter one-ness. Always the two will affect one another, as apart or as together. In dissonance or in harmony. God's joke: that the answer to the question of body and mind may be determined by our own way of living. They are as united or as dualistic as we make them.

The continued practice of hiding our inner self behind a cultivated facade of outer self, however, will only do us harm. I can think of only one circumstance when cultivating the dualism is of value, and that is if we find ourselves under torture. *Ken a hora, chas v'chalilah!* Let us all pray that this horrifying situation never touches us. So the real question is, in ordinary life, how do we enhance our tendency to be unified selves and not dualistic, inauthentic selves hiding behind facades? We must learn how to say yes to being more integrated, which is to say, more open, more vulnerable, not bullet-proof, not titanium.

And if we say yes, and try to unify our lives, then are we not also saying yes to love, to the demand of love to be utterly present, to be a single spirit of body/mind? To cease being embarrassed in the face of love's demand to show one's-self utterly, to throw off the robes within which we hide, the masks we wear to hide? Hiding even from our closest lover, hiding always hiding?

And if yes to love, then is it not also true that we must say yes to death? Not yes meaning we court death, but yes meaning "I will not hide?" Yes meaning we have no choice? Yes meaning this is the world we must live in, and saying no changes nothing but our own integrity, our own ability to live in truth. Hiding always hiding, for saying yes to death is as hard as saying yes to love. As *Song of Songs* puts it: "Love is as strong as death, and passion is as hard as the grave."

2000 years ago, when the Temple still stood, although we fasted and repented, the rituals of Yom Kippur were mainly a priestly business. The sacrifices were made. The Mishnah tells us that on Yom Kippur afternoon, the young unmarrieds used to dance in the fields. They flirted, they courted.

On Yom Kippur! Right at the time that we today will be doing the *Avodah* service, concerning the martyrdom of our great sages during the second Roman-Judean War,

right at the time that we will be doing *Yizkor*... that is when the young folk frolicked and tested out potential love matches.

Love is as strong as death, and the two are tied together more intrinsically than we may feel comfortable with. Because, in the end, it is love and death that are our most powerful motivations to stop faking it, to let our outsides and our insides blur together, to become unified and thus more authentic, more truthful, more vital human beings than we normally allow ourselves to be.