

Kol Nidre 2009 - If I am Only for Myself: The Ultimate Jewish Fantasy

Rabbi Sharon Brous

It was 4:30am when the Israeli athletes were awakened to the faint sound of scratching outside the door of their apartment in the Olympic Village in Munich. By the time the camera crews arrived hours later that September morning in 1972, two of the athletes – Moshe Weinberg, the 33 year old coach of the Israeli international wrestling team, and Yossef Romano, a 32 year old weightlifter -- had already been shot and killed. The rest of the Israeli team was being held at gunpoint by the terrorist group *Black September*, and the German security were scrambling to formulate a plot to free the remaining hostages – though they were shamefully unprepared to respond to such a situation.

Given that the Olympics were only 27 years after the end of WWII, and held only a few miles from Dachau, it was particularly poignant that the Israeli athletes– many of whom had lost family in the Holocaust – were even there. Before the Games, Israeli security experts had complained about lax security in the Olympic Village, but their concerns were dismissed. As the hours of the hostage crisis dragged on, Israel attempted to send in special forces, but their offer was rejected by the German government. Blood, fear, terror. The fate of the remaining Israeli athletes was unknown. All of Israel and Jews around the world held their breath as the situation unfolded. And for one day, the Games were called off.

This is when the news cameras accidentally captured one of the most formative images in recent Jewish memory: poised to capture any action in the apartment building, viewers couldn't miss the sight of the Olympic athletes in the background – in reality only meters away -- not holding vigil, but lightheartedly playing ping pong and sunning themselves.

This year we are orienting our High Holy Days around three great questions asked by a great Rabbi named Hillel over 2000 years ago:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, WHEN?





Munich was, perhaps, the most graphic demonstration of Hillel's first question— if I am not for myself, who will be for me? If we do not take care of ourselves, let's not fool ourselves – does anybody else really give a damn?

And yet to be FOR ourselves, or for our people, doesn't only mean to be willing to defend ourselves. It also means that it is our job to figure out who are at our core – how we can be most fully ourselves. *If I am not myself, who will be me?* Who are the Jewish people, fundamentally? What is our role in the world? What are we doing to realize it?



This summer when I was in Jerusalem I planned on walking through the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Sha'arim to buy a huppah for my sister's wedding. But it turned out that this July was not the time to stroll through the streets of Mea Sha'arim. An ultra-Orthodox woman had starved her three-year-old son down to 15 pounds and denied him medical care. When this came to the attention of the authorities, the boy was hospitalized and the mother was arrested. And that's when:

"all hell breaks loose. A rabbi declares the event a blood libel, comparing the police to Cossacks. Immediately, young men in black robes and fur hats take to the streets, setting bus stops and dumpsters ablaze, pelting police with stones, and decrying the [Israeli] doctors of Hadassah [Hospital] as latter-day Josef Mengeles. Someone sets aflame the government welfare and social services building... In the first three days after the toddler is taken for treatment, dozens more are sent to the hospital with wounds from stones and broken glass, and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of city property are burned or smashed."¹



This conflict was the climax of months of growing tensions between Jerusalem's secular and Ultra-Orthodox residents. That same month, there were violent riots over a parking lot that the mayor wanted to open on Shabbat, protests demanding male only buses, and an incident in which a yeshiva student who didn't want to pay his parking fee instead ran over the parking attendant with his car, causing her severe brain damage.

As if that wasn't bad enough -- the summer then climaxed in the salacious arrest of several New Jersey rabbis for money laundering and organ trafficking – allegedly selling kidneys for 15 or 16 times what they paid the poor people who sold them.



¹ Noah Efron, *Foreign Policy* 7-20-09.



And all of this without even mentioning the indictments of several Israeli political leaders – a former Prime Minister on charges of corruption, a former President for rape and sexual assault, and obviously the coup de gras, the great stain on the Jewish community this year: Bernie Madoff and the billions of dollars he bilked out of unsuspecting investors.

Not a great year for the Jewish people, one might say.



What has happened to us? A light unto the nations? The bad behavior of some Jews this past year was so public, so egregious and unapologetic, that it threatened to completely obscure all of the good work done by Jews and the Jewish community. Some days this year the public face of the Jews had been so sullied that it was embarrassing to even open the newspaper.

After a year like this, we need to begin to fill the void. Who are we, as a people? Who *should* we be? How can we reconnect with our mission and our purpose, with the people we should be rather than the one we have become?



Let us look tonight to another famous Jew who spent time in prison – but this time not for extortion, sexual misconduct, organ trafficking or rioting. Simultaneously confronting the ruling elite, the religious leadership and the popular masses, the Prophet Jeremiah thundered against falsehood, hypocrisy and greed, which he argued would inevitably lead to the kingdom's destruction. For this, he was seen as a traitor, an enemy of his people -- threatened by government forces, attacked by his neighbors and even his own brothers, and thrown into prison. But their resistance to his message him only emboldened him, and he continued for the remainder of his life to excoriate the people for their selfishness and abandonment of God.



The legacy of Jeremiah is the enduring Jewish legacy: your role in the world is to be a people of conscience, a light unto nations. You are to confront Kings and priests, to inspire morality, to fight for justice and human dignity, even at your personal peril. To smuggle children from Uruguay to safety in Israel, like my rabbi, Marcelo Bronstein. To stare down the junta in Argentina and demand an end to the disappearances, like *his* rabbi, Marshall Meyer. To risk everything for equality and justice, like Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman who – along with James Chaney -- were murdered by the KKK while registering Blacks to vote in 1964. To fight relentlessly for the poorest and most vulnerable of God's children around the world, like Ruth Messinger.





...THAT is your role in the world.

If I am not myself, who will be me? How can we become the people we were put into the world to be? For Jeremiah, Hillel's first question is answered by his second – *if I am only for myself, what am I?* We are most fully ourselves when we are not only for ourselves. When we believe so deeply in ourselves that we find the power to go beyond ourselves. When we recognize that our work is to spread light, to shatter structures of injustice, to awaken conscience, to bring healing. When we recognize that a fundamental commitment to human dignity must guide our actions and shape our experience of the world.



The genius of Hillel is that he doesn't stop with self-preservation (how can I protect myself?) or self-definition (how can I be me?). By asking his second question -- *if I am only for myself, what am I?* -- he marries the local and the global, the personal and the political. If I am *only* for myself, what am I? If my whole existence becomes about protecting my own interests, promoting my agenda, then what will I have become? The Rabbis explain that each person is surrounded by holy space about the distance of 4 arm lengths (8 feet) – called your *dalet amot* – which reflect your personal space. What my 3 year old niece calls her bubble. According to the halakha, each of us is responsible for our own *dalet amot* – and some of us have grown quite skilled at controlling and protecting that space. We have built routines around those boundaries – we are very clear about who and what we'll let into the inner sanctum. But as much as we are charged to protect and honor our personal space, we must remember that it would not be possible to live meaningfully cut off from the human experience beyond our immediate sphere of influence. We must not allow ourselves to live with the impression that the whole world is encompassed by our *dalet amot*.



And listen to Hillel's choice of words: *u'khsheani l'atzmi, ma ani?* Not WHO am I, but WHAT am I? What happens to a person when she becomes completely self-consumed? Where is her humanity?



This summer in Jerusalem, between avoiding Mea Sha'arim, fighting with cab drivers, eating chocolate cake at Caffit, and acquiring some kind of parasite, I had the opportunity to study the Prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah with Professor Micah Goodman at the Hartman Institute.





Ezekiel envisions the apocalypse – the End of Days – coming when the nations of the world join forces to destroy Israel, but in a great and epic battle, Israel prevails and her enemies are buried by God’s wrath. His vision is a fantasy of the powerless – that God will one day take revenge and destroy all our enemies, leaving Israel singularly triumphant.



In Isaiah’s apocalyptic vision, the nations of the world also join forces and pursue Israel. But rather than fight a great and terrible battle, Isaiah imagines God’s presence flowing from the tops of the mountains of Judah and Jerusalem, and witnessing the greatness of God, the people *beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks*, proclaiming the possibility of peace among nations -- *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more.*²



Isaiah’s vision follows the exact same structure as Ezekiel’s, but is not a fantasy of the weak – it is a fantasy of the powerful – one who dreams not about war but wishes to inspire peace, one who believes, fundamentally, in the possibility of transformation, one who knows he has something precious and profound to share with the world.

It’s remarkable, actually! The Hebrew Bible holds within it a *mahloket nevi'im* – a dispute between prophets. By canonizing both possibilities, the power shifts from the Book to *us*, the readers of the Book, because it is *we* who must decide how history ends: with destruction or with peace, with revenge or with inspiration.



What is your fantasy? – the Bible calls out to us. Are you an Ezekiel Jew, who ultimately believes that there is a Nazi hiding under every rock, and therefore will rest only when every last enemy is destroyed? Or are you an Isaiah Jew, one who is realistic about the challenges we face, but also believes fundamentally in humanity and dreams about a resolution to conflict that affirms human dignity and the power of God’s love to heal age-old wounds? Do you dream about destruction, or do you dream about reconciliation? Do you believe that there is no peace to be made with the Palestinians – or do you believe that as long as the human heart beats the possibility of transformation, reconciliation and forgiveness persist?

If what drives us is Ezekiel’s fantasy, surely we will never achieve peace.

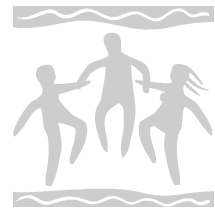
But if we share Isaiah’s fantasy – if we fight to see humanity in even our enemies, if we believe at our core in the possibility of transformation, even



² Isaiah 2:2-5



at the risk of sounding naïve, then we can, surely, take one step closer to peace.



We must remain vigilant to Hillel's first call – if I am not for myself, indeed who will be for me? History will not let us forget the truth of this Torah. The attacks in Mumbai last November were in part revenge for the destruction of a mosque by Hindu radicals in 1962 – and yet the Chabad House, home to a sweet Jewish couple from New York and a handful of Israeli tourists, was inexplicably one of the primary targets. To not recognize the peculiar and precarious position of the Jews in the world is to willfully disregard reality. And yet to build an identity entirely around protecting and defending the Jews, at the expense of openhearted engagement with the rest of humanity—including our enemies -- is to ignore the central challenge of Jewish life.



In the dark of night, in the privacy of your home, what kind of Jew are you? What kind of a people are we to be? Will we define ourselves as anti-anti-Semites³, or will we be known for our compassion, for our moral courage and humility, defined fundamentally by our willingness to take unpopular positions and respond to pain with love and understanding? I ask this question not as a theoretical abstraction, but as a challenge to our lived reality. A friend of mine once said: *Sometimes the most powerful spiritual tool is the mirror, and this year we're not looking so good.* What are we – you and I – willing to do about it?



Rabbi David Wolpe recently told me a story that his father shared with him years ago. There was a German man who risked his life again and again to hide Jews from the Nazis. Even after being arrested and tortured he remained resolute in his commitment to rescuing Jews. After the war, he was honored at Yad V'Shem – the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem – with other righteous gentiles. After the ceremonies, he expressed his desire to stay in Israel for some additional time, but he wanted no special tour, no escort, no formal receptions. He just wanted to wander around on his own and experience Israel.



Asked why he wanted to travel in that manner and what he was looking for, he said: "I want to go and see by myself what you have become. I want to see if you were worth my risking my life for you."

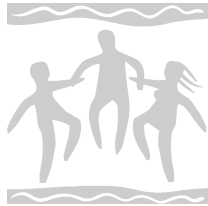
Of course every human life is worth saving, but this man is asking a much deeper question: are we, as a people plucked from the ashes of Europe,

³ I first heard this expression from Prof. Steven Cohen.



living in a way that reflects the best of the Jewish people? Are we doing justice to our legacy and our potential?

The Rabbis tell a great story about twelve people travelling together in a boat when one guy begins to drill a hole under his seat. Everyone stares at him in dismay. He says: “What??? I’m only drilling under MY seat.”



We’re in this together – whether we like it or not. We have as much at stake in the Jewish future as the yeshiva student who’d rather run a woman over than pay his parking fee. Any person in this room is as much a Jew as that man. What will it take for us to refuse to let his voice, and the voices of the organ traffickers and the ponzi schemers and scoundrels be the prominent ones on the Jewish stage?



This is our great challenge: At precisely the moment that the public image of a Jew has reached its nadir, just when our instinct should be to run and flee Judaism, Jerusalem and the Jewish people, we are called upon to affirm it instead. To refuse to cede Torah to people who have forgotten its essential, enduring message or to those who have chosen the narrowest, most fear-based reading of our sacred tradition. Rather than run away, let this be a charge for us to delve deeper and learn more, to affirm our stake in our own future.

This year is not the year for us to bemoan what we don’t know – it is the year for us to start learning.



It’s not the time for us to kvetch about the hypocrisy and emptiness in Jewish religious life, but rather to invest every resource, spiritual and material, in building a different kind of Jewish future.

It’s not the time to hide in shame from the greed and excess in our community, but to affirm an authentic spirituality that is rooted in a commitment to justice, dignity and peace.

This year, let us become Jeremiah Jews – finding the courage to speak out against greed, narrow-mindedness and corruption.



This year, let us become Isaiah Jews, affirming the humanity in our enemies, becoming an influence for good, a source of inspiration.

This year, let’s become Hillel Jews – manifesting our best selves through serious, openhearted engagement with others.

Let us remember this year that we can do better. We must do better. If not now, when?

