

Kol Nidre Sermon
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Back in late March 2020, when Evie and I were still living in the city and when our world had already been upended for about two weeks, which really felt more like two years, I was walking down 10th avenue around 25th street, on my way probably either to buy toilet paper or canned tuna. Definitely either to buy toilet paper or canned tuna.

On the corner, just off the street, was a young man who looked to be passed out. Arms hoisted above his head, legs crooked, head on the curb, looking almost as though someone had placed him right there, on the street, as an extra for a Law and Order episode. But this was not a TV show. I walked by but then doubled back. Was he breathing? I wasn't sure, and this was March 2020. I was scared to come within 10 feet of him.

Lots of people walked by, but eventually, some others stopped as well, trying to rouse him but never getting too close. We agreed to call the paramedics. It could be COVID, we thought, and in the height of our anxiety, it could be a dead body on 25th street. The paramedics came, moved in close, and gave this man a slight nudge, waking him up almost instantly. The power of human touch. He was now up, talking, and completely alert and coherent. The EMTs nonetheless loaded him into the back of an ambulance, which he wasn't crazy about, and took him I imagine, to the closest emergency room.

It was a strange experience and one that has sat with me for a year and a half. Why did I stop this time? Was it fear? Anxiety? Legitimate concern for my neighbor? When I got back home and told Evie what happened, I remember saying something like, "Can you believe the hundreds of people that walked by and didn't do anything?"

But I caught myself eventually. Not instantly, but eventually. Not only was I, almost daily when I was living in the city, one of those who walked by and didn't do anything, but also, maybe, perhaps, in this situation that's what I should have done. Part of me felt like a bit of a fool, like a neophyte trying to do good but missing the mark. Did I ultimately disturb this man's sleep out of my own fears? Did I cause him a week or more of struggle, perhaps run-ins with the authorities, simply because I could have misunderstood the situation, because I was scared? I have to live with that unknown and the knowledge that my action could potentially have done more harm than good, regardless of where the intention came from.

The Torah makes explicitly clear, as does its commentary in the Talmud, that Jewish law does not permit one to stand idly by in the case of potentially witnessing someone's death. *Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa*. Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow. A verse from Leviticus 19, the chapter we'll read together at mincha tomorrow

on Yom Kippur day. As Rashi explains, most literally, do not stand yourself upon his blood, but rather, save him.

The Talmud offers rather explicit examples for when such a situation might arise: Seeing someone drowning in a river, being dragged by a wild animal, or being attacked by bandits. The imperative is to step in and help. But trying to do the right thing, trying to understand what those around us need, the art of being a citizen of the world, is hard. And we're not always going to get it right.

Still, the fire of universality rings from the heart of this verse. The word *re'ah*, and I want you all to remember this word, *Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa, re'ah*, fellow or friend, is not specific to a family unit, a tribe, or even the Israelite community. We have other words for that, plenty of them. *Re'ah* is universal. It is a friend, a fellow, a neighbor, or simply another person.

I can't quite tell which direction COVID has caused our world to move. Yes, we are far more insular than we had been in years prior, many of us only seeing family and close friends in person up until a few months ago. We have all been desperately trying to keep those most dear to us at arms length. But, this insularity is part of a shared global experience. We all have, in a sense, become each other's *re'im* - friends, fellows, and safety nets. It's become painfully clear that the only way we're going to get through this pandemic as a country, as a world, is if everyone does their part for their own sake and for the sake of others.

Every year, as we enter into Rosh Hashanah, into the season of rebirth, we take part in an intricate, liturgical dance with God. We pray to experience both a return of the divine presence and a return to the divine presence. As we explored on Rosh Hashanah in the end of Lamentations, *Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha V'nashuva*, Return to us, Adonai, and we will return to you.

On Yom Kippur, tonight, we began this day of atonement by nullifying vows, by seeking renewal, a fresh start, and a new lease on life. *Hadesh Yameinu K'kedem*, continues the verse from above. Renew our days like that of old.

Renew our days like that of old. The *pshat*, the plain sense of the text seems relatively clear. We were better off before. Bring us back to what was before. And we can understand this in the context of the original source. Lamentations ends with a Temple destroyed and a people dispersed. Who wouldn't want to go back to the way things were?

We could say the same for tonight. God knows I and we all have people and places that we wish we could be with and return to. On a day that we plead for God to distance us from our transgressions, from the difficult past which we confront over the next 25 hours, we simultaneously plead to be brought back, *k'kedem - hadesh yameinu k'kedem*, to the so-called before times. Now I want you to remember this word too. *Kedem*. Yes, like the grape juice.

Kedem can mean “before,” or “of old,” as most translations have it, but it’s just bursting at the seams with more meaning.

The word kedem first appears in Genesis 2:8:

וַיִּטֵּעַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גֶּן־בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר:

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in kedem, and placed there the person whom God had formed.

Commentators have debated for centuries as to whether kedem refers to an actual place, somewhere in the east, or marker in time. But in either case, this word kedem brings us back to Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden, the ultimate “before time.” A place, a metaphor if you will, an experience, that was almost indeed before time itself.

And it brings us back to a time where we all saw each other as re'im, remember that word from above, as fellows, companions, and friends. A time that we reflect upon at Jewish weddings during the sheva brachot. A moment in our liturgy where these two concepts beautifully come together.

שָׁמַח תִּשְׂמַח רְעִים הָאֶהוּבִים כְּשִׂמְחָךְ יִצִּיחֶךָ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן מִקְדָּם

Loving companions, re'im, will surely gladden, as you gladdened your creations in the Garden of Eden mi'kedem.

Returning to Eden, returning to a world k'kedem, a world of the east, a world as before, is also a return to re'im, toward seeing humanity as just that, human.

But the road back to Eden, the return back to the times like before, k'kedem, is not an easy road to travel. It's a road that Genesis 3:24 tells us is guarded by a לֶהָט הַחֶרֶב, a fiery, ever-turning sword. And that is not simply a metaphor. Because we know, that sometimes the road to expressing our own humanity, to understanding someone else's humanity, is as difficult as skirting past flaming blades of steel. We try to do right by others, but sometimes life just doesn't end up the way we expect it to.

Still, in just a moment, the Cantor will lead us as in Sh'ma Koleinu, as we implore God to do just that, to bring us to a place like before, to bring us a step back in time, to kedem, to eden, while moving us a step forward, renewing our days.

In the Sifra, an early midrashic compilation, there's a famous debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai. What is the klal gadol baTorah? What is the essence, the core teaching, of our Jewish tradition? Rabbi Akiva, whose answer won the hearts of the history books, says that the essence of Torah is “v'ahavta l'reiacha k'mocha,” to love your fellow, your re'ah, as yourself. Ben Azzai, on the other hand, responds not with a mitzvah, not with a commandment, but with a phrase from the beginning of Genesis,

harkening back to those long lost moments in the garden. He says, “Zeh sefer toldot Adam. This is the Book of the generations of Adam. This is an even greater principle.”

The Malbim, a 19th Century commentator writes: According to [Rabbi Akiva’s principle], to love your fellow as yourself, everyone would act on the basis of the benefit of themselves...Ben Azzai elevated the principle to a more universal matter. All people were created in the image of God... All of them are like one single person, like one body, which is composed of different members.

Ben Azzai’s insight can be found in his ability to see his own self as part of the larger collective. That the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That our book is not *only* the Book of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel or Leah. It certainly is. But it is the Book of Adam, of *Adam*, humankind.

Judaism offers us the language to see ourselves as a part of the world; it is the particularism of our texts and traditions that allows for the awareness of the universal - to see others as our re’im, fellows, companions, and friends. Through the spark that stretches all the way back to gan eden, and through the growing pains of reentering this world anew, may 5782, please God, be a year for human connection, for renewal. Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha v’nashuvah, chadesh yameinu k’kedem.

G’mar chatimah tovah.