

Chosen Families, Choosing God
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The drashot offered this year have each provided insights along with some humor, righteous political anger and intellectual stimulation. This morning I speak of the heart. For Judaism is more than our faith or worldview, it is a way of life; a holistic, human way of life. As such, it calls upon us to weave our humor, anger, and intellect with the warmth of our hearts.

Over the years that I have studied rabbinic writings, Torah commentary, Chassidic fables, centuries of philosophy - everyone seems to agree that Yom Kippur can be a day of fear – fear of judgment; fear of God; fear of oneself reviewing a year of error and sin.

I come before you this morning with my own public confession. I do not fear this day. I am no longer willing to fear or feel guilty for what I *do not* do in my relationships, be it with friends, family or God.

These Days of Awe are awesome, but I am no longer awe struck. God is not in our lives simply to be feared, God is also to be loved. My love of God is unconditional, and I assume it is a reciprocal relationship. I am responsible for maintaining the relationship I have with God, just as I am in every other relationship. This does not absolve me of responsibility; it requires me to accept it.

I struggled with and finally gave up my image of God as a vengeful Sovereign.

At first I thought this struggle was quintessentially American – we Americans are fairly presumptuous on this point – in a nation where everyone is equal, who needs a sovereign ruler?

As a New Yorker by birth, I knew, truly knew, down to the marrow of each bone, that no one was better than I was. New York is the best city in the world, New Yorkers the best people in the world, and generally that included God.

Finally, who could judge me more harshly than or be less forgiving of any transgression than my own mother? After surviving that woman, who couldn't face God? Our liturgy may say that God punishes those who do not obey the rules down to the tenth generation, but believe me; my Mother can hold a grudge far longer than that.

On Yom Kippur, each of us is given the opportunity for t'shuva, turning ourselves away from sin; turning ourselves towards God.

But what is a sin? Who defines it?

I am not the only person to question the very definition of sin after I came out. Having been raised to think that marriage was the only blessing required for a fulfilling life, and certainly raised to think that marriage was required for a fulfilling and blessed sex life. How do we define sin when our very lives; our very selves, are considered sinful?

For some of us the realization that we were gay led us to choose to distance ourselves from God, from Judaism, and perhaps from the idea that *anything* was sinful.

If who we are, if our essential self is sinful, and we absolve ourselves from the sin of being gay, why should we not absolve *ourselves* from other sins? Who needs God for redemption?

Some of us have come to think the word sin is simply old fashioned or that only *goyim* actually talk about sin and redemption. Sin is simply not part of our worldview. Evil may exist in the world, but evil and sin are not the same. If evil belongs to the underworld of murder, abuse and horror that thankfully most of us only know from watching television or reading Steven King, than sin belongs to the realm of the fundamentalist branch of every religion. I doubt any one of us here lays claim to a fundamentalist faith or worldview.

Some of us did not actually distance ourselves from observing Judaism, but are here in the midst of struggling, really struggling during Yom Kippur, finding the *Una Taneh Tokef* with its imagery of God writing our fortune in "The Book" challenging, if not impossible.

Some of us struggle to actually believe in God, and are here on Yom Kippur out of habit or obligation – because we simply *cannot* stay away.

We no longer see ourselves as sinful, but no longer believe we have anything to repent. No sin, no guilt, but no real faith either.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote that all of us carry an image of the ideal man or woman we should like to be inside of ourselves. This simple fact - that we even project an ideal for ourselves is all the evidence needed to prove God exists –for it is this ideal image of who and what we really are that is the image of God within us.

The ritual of atonement is nil, its symbolic power of no value, Kaplan wrote unless the sense of sin leads us to seek reconstruction of our selves in accordance with these highest ethical possibilities of human nature. Only then can we experience *teshuvah*, the sense of returning to God.

In other words, we should embrace sin as essential, for without sin there is no need for personal redemption.

We are reminded of this throughout our Yom Kippur ritual. How many times do we repeat the communal confessional prayers? How many times do we repeat the communal Ahavnu?

This collective and repetitive recitation of lists helps focus our attention on the ideal of who we are and who we can become.

Yom Kippur is not simply about sin and redemption; about faith and absolution. Yom Kippur is our annual reunion not only with God but also with our selves, with our best selves.

Reunions can be intimidating.

How many of us simply panic at the thought? We try to lose weight, or buy the right outfit or ask the right person to come along with us to a high school or college reunion?

But reunions can also warm our hearts, and bring us peace and opportunities. Every reunion is an opportunity to reflect upon the past, review the intervening years, and then move forward again.

I experienced two reunions this summer that I share with you.

The first reunion was with my older brother, who left home after high school graduation and never returned. Through various circumstances, we actually saw each other twice in two weeks last July, once in his adopted country and the second when he traveled to the US for a visit.

As I drove home after dropping him at Dulles for his flight home; it occurred to me that while I am not conscious of actually missing him very often; I miss having a life connected to him.

I miss the opportunity to actually know him and the minutia of his life. I miss knowing his frustrations and his triumphs. I missed helping him through the pain of his divorce, and the joy he experiences as he contemplates marriage again.

And then, I thought, I honestly thought: this is the kind of connectedness that I want with God; that I miss having. It's not that the Torah does not guide us in how to stay connected with God, it's that most of us simply are not conscious that this connectedness is the whole point of keeping Kosher, or observing Shabbat, or studying or joining a congregation.

God was not actually very present in the Jewish education I received. We learned the prayers, and the history and the holidays, Jewish heroes and heroines. We took on social action projects, bought trees in Israel and argued endlessly about everything – was it possible to buy a Volkswagen, should Barbra Streisand have a nose job? And if the religious education I received had very little to do with God, it had even less to do with sin; except for the one about obeying our parents.

The second reunion I had this summer was with a cousin I had not seen in 25 years. He had committed an act of treachery so destructive that four generations of our family were caught up in a feud of his creation. I discovered his life during these years of separation has not been easy; his experiences have included the horrific – an arrest, the loss of a fortune, the death of a three-year old daughter.

He has found his way back – to a happy second marriage, to fatherhood for a second time too – he has twins in preschool that most think they are his grandchildren. He has a new business and a new religion; having been raised by his parents as a Christian Scientist, he discovered Judaism; the faith of his grandparents. Through the miracle of the Internet he found us again, chose to reach out to us, and we have chosen to welcome him back.

How could I not welcome him back? When his first email arrived I was tempted, very tempted to hit the delete button. And then I asked myself – what are the limits of forgiveness? Not political forgiveness, as if I would ever forgive the sins of this government, but how could I come to Yom Kippur had I not welcomed this reunion, not taken the time to forgive? His treachery aside, could I ever forgive myself the sin of not forgiving?

After each reunion of these two reunions, I could step back and see that each relationship has its own path, its own parameters, and that it was my behavior, my participation in them that defines them.

So here I find myself today, having my annual reunion with God. This reunion is no less important, and actually a bit easier than the others.

Rabbi Gunter Plaut writes that God is hidden only as long as the world chooses to be alienated; it is not God who hides, we hide from God.

Like many before me, I decided that I would welcome God to my heart the same way I welcome others. I have made God a member of my chosen family. And God always accepts that invitation.

We *glibte* Jews know all about chosen families. Many of us left home and journeyed here to what was once an unknown land.

And after some time, we have chosen those who fit and created a family for ourselves. Whether these chosen families include anyone from our birth family or not, they are our families.

Have you invited God to be a member of your chosen family? Someone you treasure, invite to holidays, visit with and care for? Someone with whom you create and maintain a relationship that really matters?

God chose us as family long ago at Sinai, but today I ask: how many of us have chosen God? As we just read in the Torah: "*Atem netzavim hayom*—You stand *today*, all of you before God...to enter into the covenant of Adonai, which God is concluding with you *today*, so that God may establish you *today* as The people."

Rabbi Ed Feinstein writes that this reiteration of the word "today" in the opening verses of this Torah portion embraces us. *Today*, we are invited to the Covenant. *Today*, we are invited to share God's dreams for the world.

Little children will tell you that there are magic words in this world – please, thank you and I'm sorry. How many of us have watched parents prompt their children to say the right magic word at the right time?

As adults we often forget these words, or feel they relate only to people, not to God. We think that God is too remote; that the words of the prayer book are too formal, too formulaic for us.

We can easily find ways to keep God out of our hearts and out of our lives. But "this commandment is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in the heavens, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart and you can do it."

You simply have to choose it.

Unlike my brother, or my cousin, or any other member of the family to which I am related by blood, I learned, as most GLBT folks do, to create a family for myself. As I look out into this congregation, I see many whom I am honored to call family. These are the folks who call and say "Good Shabbos" every Friday; who held my hand when Catherine was in the hospital; with whom I share holidays; both religious and secular.

As I moved through Elul making amends to these good people, as I spend today making amends to God, I suggest to each of you that turning toward God, turning away from sin, is not as hard as you think it might be.

Each one of us can welcome God as a member of our Chosen family. We can then love God with all our hearts, all our souls and all our might. And these words, which come to

us from across time and bind us to K'lal Israel, the family of all Israel, will be *real*. No longer just words on a page.

A Hasidic master once asked his disciples, "What is the most significant moment in all Jewish history? In all the experience of the Jewish people, what moment stands out as paramount?" One student answered: "The crossing of the Red Sea, another guessed, "the giving of Torah on Sinai", and a third thought it was the conquest of Jerusalem.

No, taught the master, the most important moment in all Jewish history is right now.

When we embrace God as we do other members of our Chosen family, we come to Yom Kippur as a celebration of that relationship. Not out of fear, not out of obligation, but with love and care and an embrace that God has always offered and we have only to accept.

The Gates of Redemption are open, but the question remains: is your heart open to God? The path to redemption is not paved with yellow bricks; you need not travel over the rainbow to find it.

The path to redemption begins here and now, the first step is here and now. Open your heart to the image of who you want to be, invite God on the journey and take the first step today, here in this Bet Mishpachah, the house of family.