

Yom Kippur Eve (version II) 2007/5768
Rabbi James Mirel

This is the holiest time of the year. The evening of Yom Kippur, or Kol Nidre is at one and the same time the most challenging time-but also the time with most power and potential. It is the one night when our life may experience a monumental transformation. But because of this potential, it can be overwhelming and almost too powerful.

As a rabbi, this night presents what seems like an overwhelming task. It is the time when I speak to the largest number of people. But I know that in the congregation are some who come this night and this night only. You are my biggest challenge. I feel you are saying to me-all right I am here-you have 20 minutes to win me over for God, for Judaism, for the Temple, for the whole ball of wax-and if you fail-I'll see you a year from now-with the same attitude. You might think that I might resent the challenge-but actually I welcome it. I feel like a closer in baseball-brought in with 2 outs in the 9th and the bases loaded-you have one shot-but you leave it all on the field.

At the same moment, there are those here who come to the Temple week and week out-they've heard me a thousand times-but still their expectations are heightened on this night. What do you really have to say-when it counts.

The reality is that each person here-and throughout the Jewish world brings a deep longing to this service. People do want to change, they do want to be inspired, they do want to know that their lives have meaning, ultimate meaning.

You see what pressure there is on me-on every rabbi who speaks at Kol Nidre.

Tonight, after much soul-searching, I will focus on a single message, based on a single midrash, based on a single verse in the Bible. It is simple, but I believe it is profound-if heard with open ears and an open heart. It is, I believe the Secret of Life. It does not promise success, richness, over even happiness. Judaism is a tradition of realism. It makes no facile promises based on obedience to torah or constant prayer. Judaism recognizes that the righteous often suffer and the wicked may prosper. It is clear that we can not bargain with God with a guarantee that God will answer us with what we desire. Ironically, many of our prayers on Yom Kippur appear to try to do just that, but that is a topic for another day.

So here it is: the most important lesson Judaism has to offer: In the book of Job we find the verse: BAKHUTZ LO YALIN GER: No stranger will reside outside. The rabbis teach: She-ain hakadosh barukh hu posel la-bri-ah eleh l'chol hu mekabel. Ha-sha-arim naftakhin b'chol sha'ah,v'chol mee she-hu mevakesh l'kha-nes---ye-khanes. The rabbis explain it as follows: The Holy One does not reject a single person. rather all are acceptable to God. The gates are open at all times and any one who wishes to enter, may enter.

I will repeat that: God does not reject any one. All are acceptable. Any one who wishes to enter, may enter.

My heart tells me: stop here-there is no more to say. My head tells me-you are getting paid too much to stop here.

So following my head and not my heart, let me offer a few words of commentary on the commentary.

First of the verse itself. It says plainly BAKHUTZ LO YALIN GER. The stranger will not be outside. One might think it is speaking of the homeless, the visitor, the non-Jew or the person who is disenfranchised in some way. But the verse is saying something much more profound-we are all GERIM-all strangers. Every person had some internal sense of inadequacy. All of us feel alienated and unacceptable in deep and enduring ways. We all feel as if we are phony, inadequate or simply imperfect. In that respect, we all feel like GERIM. But the tradition teaches- that sense of imperfection does not disqualify us from being in God's inner circle. No one is destined Laleen BaKhutz- to be permanently outside of God's house, no matter who we are, no matter what we did or did not do.

But, it does not stop there. There is a process for getting inside-which is available to everyone and at all times. So while we appreciate your being here tonight; the Midrash is saying tomorrow night is just as good. The gates are open to us at all times. Yes, it is true-this is a good time for change, a propitious evening for looking deep inside, for making promises. But it is not the only time, not the only day, not the only year. But there is a caveat, not found in the Midrash. Life is finite and we put off doing what we know we must do at some peril. Each day may be the last one, we can never know when our time is up.

But the third comment is even more urgent-more urgent even than that of mortality. V'khol mee she-hu mevakesh lekhanes, ye-khanes. Every one who wishes to enter, may enter. There is the rub and the secret. Only those who truly wish to enter will be able to do do. The initiative must be yours. But I have very good news for you. You have already stated: anee m'vakesh lekhanes: "I wish to enter"-You have said that by being here tonight. Whatever the surface

motivation, your inner soul, the stranger which is inside you said: you must be at the Kol Nidre service. I know some of the kids are thinking-it wasn't my inner stranger it was my Mom. Sometimes your inner stranger takes on various guises.

The fact is you are here and you can decide to make changes in your life. It would be presumptuous of me to suggest what the changes should-but isn't that the definition of what the word rabbi means-the maker of presumptuous suggestions?

This week some of us heard the Director Rob Reiner speak at the annual Federation dinner. He stated that his next project is a film entitled "The Bucket List" about two people both who have been given the news that they have terminal illnesses and little time left who make a list of a few things they each want to do before they 'kick the bucket'-thus the title; and how they help each other complete their lists.

Sadly, we have a few people in our midst who face a similar sense of urgency-but I would say, we all have been given that news: each day brings us closer to death and brings greater urgency to complete our goals. Perhaps tonight you might begin to make a bucket list-to use the dark humor of that film; goals that you wish to meet, accomplishments yet unmet; spiritual longings yet unfulfilled. As I did at Rosh Hashanah-let us take a minute of silence to contemplate one or two things which might be on your list.

But the most important things to keep in mind is that although you may see yourself as a GER-an outsider to God's embrace-you have already been brought inside. You took a small step to be here tonight, and that small step turned out to be monumental-for you have been taught an

ancient lesson and one that I hope will sustain you until you leave this world: the Holy One does not reject a single person-rather all are acceptable to God; and the gates are open at all times.

Tonight I am thinking of one person, far far away. It is our fellow member Kevin Joseph who is serving as a surgeon with his Army medical battalion in Baghdad. He is far from us-physically far from us-but I feel him quite close. More poignantly he is far away from his wife Heather and his one year old son Andrew. He did not contemplate this assignment when he began medical school under the military's sponsorship many years ago-but he knows that it was a possibility, and he left with our blessings but with a heavy heart-fulfilling his obligation. I know what his Yom Kippur prayer is-God bring me home safe and sound along with all the others-when my tour is over.

I say to Kevin, what I have said to you-you are already home, for you have been embraced by God and have entered the Gates of Blessing. For him and for you, my prayer is simple-in the midst of the challenges of being alive and for some staying alive-may you know that you are already home, a stranger no more. You have knocked on the gates and said-let me enter-and you have heard a generous voice reply-come in -you are welcome.