

I want to tell you a *mashal*, parable of the Dubner Maggid, that Reb Shlomo Carlebach's father, Naftali Carlebach used to tell to introduce the Kol Nidre service.

There was a poor man walking by foot from one town to another, along an unpaved, muddy road. He was dressed in raggedy clothing, covered with dust and mud, and carried a huge bag on his back. He was bent over nearly double from the weight of this bag, which looked to be as big and heavy as the man himself. He heard a sound coming up behind him and turning, he saw a beautiful carriage, the largest he had ever seen, pulled by 6 horses. The carriage stopped, and the well dressed owner, clearly a very wealthy man, leaned out and offered him a ride. The poor man climbed in back, still carrying the bag on his back. It was a long ride. After a while, the owner asked him, "Why are you still carrying that huge burden on your back? Why didn't you give it to my driver? He would have taken the bag from you and stored it above with the other bags. The man replied that he was simply so grateful for the ride, he didn't want to ask the driver to take care of his bag as well.

In the *mashal*, the poor man represents us. The owner of the carriage is God. Tonight, on Kol Nidre, we have stepped into the carriage for a 25 hour journey. The bag contains our personal burdens.

The *nimshal*, the lesson, is that if we trust God enough to come into shul, why don't we trust God enough to take our burdens off our shoulders. We trust God to stop and lift us out of the mud, we have enough faith to come through the door, but we don't have enough faith to trust God to relieve us of our burdens, our guilt, our pain, our suffering, our agitation. God wants us to take our burdens off our back and God is willing to take them from us.

I admit, I have a cynical streak. When I first heard this parable, my initial thought was of airline travel. I understood the poor man. I trust Northwest to get me to my destination, but I'd rather carry my own luggage whenever possible, because I don't completely trust them to get my baggage to my destination along with me.

But the story stuck with me. It really spoke to me. We do all this work to get to Yom Kippur, and sometimes the experience itself falls short. It's supposed to be an amazingly powerful experience, but sometimes we are here because of tradition or a sense of guilt or obligation, and we sit and wait for something to happen which never happens.

We come all the way to the synagogue, we sit in our seats, and maybe we get impatient and angry that the experience is not working for us. On Rosh Hashanah I gave you one technique for being transformed by the service - that of sitting quietly and seeking the silence. Today, I want to give you the opposite technique. I want you to talk -- not to your neighbor, but to God.

You are sitting here, each of us is sitting here, with a large rucksack full of our burdens. Problems with our spouse, children, siblings, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles; problems with our job, our professional lives, finding the time to get all the

work done; problems with money, with health; problems with worry, jealousy, anger, and hatred. We have these big bags sitting on our shoulders, weighing us down. What we ought to do is empty them. What we ought to do is take out the objects in the bag, examine them, and one by one give them to the carriage driver, give them to God.

Talking to God is not always easy. I'm not talking about reading words from a book. I'm talking about really unloading, letting it out, pouring out your heart to God. Two striking examples of this come to mind -- from an episode of *West Wing* and from the 2005 Israeli movie *Ushpipzin*. Both contain tremendous scenes of individuals unloading on God.

After experiencing the sudden death of a close friend, President Bartlet asks the Secret Service to seal the National Cathedral. Alone with his God, Bartlet vents his frustration over the senseless tragedies that have plagued his personal and political life. He walks down the cathedral's aisle flinging invective. He says to God, "You're an SOB, you know that? Have I displeased you, you feckless thug?" Then he continues in Latin, "Thanks a lot, buddy! Am I to believe these things are from a righteous God, a just God, a wise God? To hell with your punishments! I was your servant, your messenger on the earth; I did my duty. To hell with your punishments, and to hell with you!" -- and he walks away.

In the movie *Ushpipzin*, the main character, after suffering disappointment after disappointment, runs off to the woods and begins to shout at God, unloading all of his anger. In the Hasidic tradition, this is called *Hitbodedut*.

If ever there is a time for this kind of prayer, it is Yom Kippur. The gates of heaven are wide open. For the next 24 hours, we are invited to throw ourselves into God's presence, to say everything that needs to be said, beginning with the intensity of Kol Nidre.

Stuart cries every year when singing Kol Nidre. He isn't crying because he made a vow last year that he regrets having made and is now asking to be released from it. He is crying because the whole context of the holiday places us in the presence of God, and for the moment of Kol Nidre, he is at the front of the line. His words set the tone for all of us. His words determine what kind of holiday, and in turn what kind of year, will be in store for each of us. We are depending on him - he knows it - and the pressure is incredible.

The introduction to Kol Nidre convenes a formal Beit Din, in which the court grants us permission to pray with *Avaryanim*. This part of the prayer was instituted by the 13th century German Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg in order to grant permission for Jews who had been excommunicated to rejoin the community for the duration of Yom Kippur. Those are the *avayanim*.

Rabbi Alan Lew, in his book "This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared" observes that all of us are really *avaryanim*, all of us are sinners, all of us are imperfect. Moreover, the root of the word is *avar*, which means 'to pass.' Basically, we are all

avaryanim in the sense that we are all just passing through, we are all impermanent.

This is part of the historic meaning of Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur -- that we are all mortal. This is why we recite Yizkor on Yom Kippur morning.

At my first Institute of Jewish Spirituality retreat, one of my colleagues was going through a very difficult time in his life. In the middle of Yoga on the 1st day, he was gripped by a panic attack. He couldn't continue with the Yoga. Afterwards, he went up to our teacher and explained that he stopped doing the Yoga because he felt like he was dying. She looked him straight in the eye, and very calmly said, "You are." And then smiled. It was like a veil was lifted from his eyes. We're all dying, at every moment. Usually, we try not to think about it. On Yom Kippur, the fact that we are mortal, dying beings, is shoved in our face moment after moment. Emotional? Yes, no doubt. But looking at mortality, and looking at those around us who are on the journey through life alongside us, somehow makes it better. From Yizkor, we move into the Musaf service and the prayer known as unetane tokef.

Think back to the movie "The Paper Chase", and the scene in which John Houseman as a stern law school professor said at the first class, "Look at the person on your right and the person on your left. One of them will not be here next year." Of course, while you are looking at others, they are looking at you. What an introduction to Unetaneh Tokef, which asks the question, מי יחיה ומי ימות, "who shall live and who shall die."

Unetaneh tokef jolts us with the harsh reality that we have no control over our death. On Yom Kippur, we are standing on the edge of death. This is a horribly disconcerting thought - but if we never considered it, if we lived our lives always thinking that our days were unlimited, what kind of lives would we live? What kinds of choices would we make? Wouldn't we make different, poorer choices? This is the message of the Martyrology service -- to stare our mortality in the face through texts which describe the death of 10 of our early Sages for teaching Torah. Their faith in God and dedication to the ideals of Torah stand as role models for us.

Rabbi Lew observes:

Against Death, which we see as the ultimate failure, we offer up success.

Against Death, which we see as the ultimate emptiness, we offer up the acquisition of objects.

Against Death, which we see as the end of all feelings, we offer up the pursuit of pleasure.

Against Death, which we see as the final stillness, we offer up a ceaseless rage of activity.

Against Death, which we see as the ultimate impotence, we offer up the glorification of our own power (page 119).

We fight death with everything we have, we believe that we can solve every problem with just a little more effort, but the truth is that we cannot. The sooner we acknowledge and accept the reality of death, the sooner we can truly and fully live the

life that God intended. The martyrology service lays out the question starkly -- what are you willing to die for? Is there something so important to you, as Torah was for our Sages, that you would willingly give up your life for it?

Finally, we come to the Neilah service. It is our last gasp -- our last moment to reach out to God and affirm the value of our lives. The gates of heaven are closing. This long, sacred day is nearing an end. And once again, as I do every year, I will invite everyone who has a burden, everyone who has a petition in his or her heart, to come forward, spend a moment or two before the open ark, and place that burden, that petition, before the Holy One of Blessing. The ark is certainly no closer to God than any other place in this room, but I think it has a power for us Jews, and as we stand before the scrolls of Torah, symbol of God's love for us as a people, we pray that God will hear our pleas and remember us and our loved ones for good and for blessing.

May we find within ourselves the strength to spend the next 24 hours unloading our burdens before God; may we find the strength to say what we need to say; may we find the strength to look at our mortality, and find within it vital purpose for our lives; and may this Yom Kippur lead us to a place of shalom and blessing.