



Praying With Sinners Rosh Hashanah 5779 Sermon - Day 2 Rabbi Dara Frimmer

The following teaching was taught to me by Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Thank you to Dr. Kurtzer for this exceptional teaching which I share in his name.

I know it's Rosh Hashanah, but I want to start my sermon with a verse from Yom Kippur. More specifically, Kol Nidre. Kol Nidrei begins with the following declaration:

"By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of this court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed."

I want to talk today about what it means to be in community with people who we think are wrong.

In this day and age, that feels right to say in a divided country, but this isn't just a lens to talk politics. This is also about how we see our community of Temple Isaiah. Who do we think belongs here? I.e. Who do we wish belonged elsewhere?

"We grant permission to pray with the Avaryanim," the Hebrew is translated most often as sinners or those who have transgressed, but it also means boundary-crossers. Those who have stepped over the line. Those who make it easy for us to talk about an "Us" and for them to be identified as a "them". Those people.

What does it mean to say "on the holiest night of the year, we want you to pray with the boundary-crossers"? What if it's not just saying: "Those people get to be here" (as in, I'll tolerate Goldberg in the 8th row, but I'm certainly not invested in his experience while he's here), but rather, "I'm incorporating this person and their sins together with me in the same ritual act of prayer"?

I want to suggest today that it might mean we have to rethink our definition of community. It might mean we have to reevaluate what we thought of as effective or powerful prayer.

Let's go back to the verse: We grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed. Why is this prayer even needed?

First, according to Dr. Kurtzer, it's a nice and simple drash to say, "you know what? We're all sinners." The verse is meant to unify us, not divide us. So, let's come together with forgiveness of self and others, and let's do this holy work of repentance. That's nice - but it's too easy.

You could also say, "Listen, those sinners need us holy folks if they ever hope to change their ways. Let's open our doors and give them the unexpected honor of joining us." It's paternalistic. It's patronizing. It reifies the division of us/them rather than eliminates it. And it's clear, the burden of repentance is on the sinners.

As if to say: I'm not sure there's much I need to do today, but for them, oy, for them I'm happy to share this space and maybe they'll finally do something useful while they're here.

But if you want a more provocative reading, consider this: "Community requires sinners...and a community of prayer *should* be constituted of and with people who are sinners. This is not just tolerating sinners...this is saying that we are in fact strengthened by them." (Dr. Kurtzer) This is saying we can't achieve our goals without them - without the diversity they bring.

We can't reach our highest peak without disrupting our love of homogeneity and the value we assign to "alignment" - to agreeing that what's best, is when we all agree on how we see the world.

Take a look at this text that Dr. Kurtzer uses to build his argument:

Exodus 30:34-35 Adonai said to Moses: Take the herbs stacte, onycha, and galbanum—these herbs together with pure frankincense; let there be an equal part of each. Make them into incense, a compound expertly blended, refined, pure, sacred.

Stacte was an unspecified gum resin.

Onycha they think might have been vegetable resin or seashell parts.

Galbanum, also described as gum resin, is derived from a Persian plant...but, take note, for Galbanum, it is described as *disagreeable*, with a bitter taste, and a peculiar, somewhat musky odour.

Mix these 3 with frankincense, a sweeter smelling resin, and you get your incense offering to burn before God.

Do you remember the Sesame Street song "one of these things is not like the other?" One of these ingredients does not smell like the others. It smells terrible. Dare I say it is offensive? Nevertheless, it's included. So, the rabbis take note and draw some interesting conclusions.

From the Talmud, canonized in the 5th century CE, we read:

Keritot 6b 65-66 Rabbi Chana bar Bizna said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Chasida, any fast that doesn't include the sinners of Israel is not a true fast. (*What is the proof?*) For behold galbanum has a foul smell and yet the Scripture counts it among the ingredients of incense.

And then Rashi, a rabbinic commentator in the 11th century adds, "What is Chelb'na?" (the Hebrew word used for the 3rd spice which requires identification/classification)

Rashi on Exodus 30:34:3 *Chelb'na*: This is a malodorous spice which is called galbanum. Scripture enumerates it among the spices of the incense to teach us that we should not regard as a light thing the duty of associating with ourselves when we band together for fasts and prayers Israelites who are transgressors — that they should be counted as ourselves (Keritot 6b).

Just as the bad smelling spice is required for the offering to God to be successful, to make it "kosher," so too are sinners required to complete a successful communal fast. This is why I'm suggesting we might need to rethink or revisit our expectations of community, congregation and what God wants from us.

The *instinct* of community is to be good smelling. Or good-sounding. By way of example, if we pride ourselves on having great singers in shul (Hello, HaSharim), then we believe we reach higher spiritual levels when our music is exceptional. So, *what do we do with the congregant who sings off key?* (Thanks to Dr. Kurtzer for this musical illustration.)

"[We] think think the commodity of religious performance is about the sensory experience." (Dr. Kurtzer) We believe the best possible outcome is when it all sounds and smells great. Moreover, we think that the opposite - the offkey singer, the errant smell - ruins the experience. What if we're wrong?

What if the experience of community and of communal prayer is meant to be bad smelling and off key? What if it's meant to be with sinners? Rather than the paternalistic approach of saying, "Come here, Dear

Sinner, and join my community. Do your best to catch up,” we might want to consider if praying with sinners places a religious demand on us, the allegedly pure of heart.

As Dr. Kurtzer teaches, rather than saying, “They should go elsewhere,” what if the burden is on us to figure out how to construct religious community with people with whom we don’t agree, don’t connect with, and don’t align?

These sinners, those who you consider to be “other”, they not only “shape what we must learn to see as community but they shape our experience within it.” They provide us with a way to reach higher and ascend beyond what we thought was possible, but we may miss that chance if we are focused on us/them. On their sins. On their responsibilities.

There’s another wild text Dr. Kurtzer discovered which adds to the richness of this teaching about the importance and necessity of diversity in community. Stay with me. This one involves a janitor for prostitutes:

Jerusalem Talmud Ta’anit 64b -- It appeared to R. Abbahu [in a dream] that Pantokakos [roughly translated as Mr. Completely Evil] should pray so that rain would come down.

R. Abbahu sent and had him brought before him. He said, “What is your profession?” (*Trying to intuit why this man would be successful in praying for rain when rabbis had failed.*) He said, “I commit five sins every day. I sweep the theater. I hire out prostitutes. I carry their [the prostitutes’] garments to the baths. I clap and dance before them. And I clash the cymbals before them.

[R. Abbahu] said to him, “What good deed have you done?” He said to him, “One day when I was sweeping the theater, a certain woman entered. She stood behind a column [posing as a prostitute] and wept. I said to her, ‘What is the matter?’ She said, ‘My husband is incarcerated and I want to see what I can do to free him.’ I sold my bed and bedding and gave her its cost, and I said to her, ‘This is for you. Free your husband and do not sin.’”

[R. Abbahu] said to him, “You are worthy to pray and to be answered.”

Even the janitor for prostitutes, who admits he sins every day, is able to do some good.

We allow sinners into our community on Yom Kippur (and on every other day of the year) because it reminds us “no one is fully imperfect...No one is completely evil. Good and bad are negotiated all the time in community; and those who are wholly good sometimes can’t see it.” (Dr. Kurtzer) Quite simply, we are limited in what we can understand about human beings and the choices that are made each day.

“Sinners flesh out the moral universe of religious community by giving us vision and access to how religious sincerity and performance can be enacted.” (Dr. Kurtzer) In other words, doing good when we’re not in the throes of the world is easy. How do we do it when we’re in tough places?

Praying with sinners helps us expand our vision of what repentance and redemptive acts of holiness can look like. And while this year, we may find ourselves on the side of the “holy ones”, next year might look different. And, should we reach that other side, it will be helpful to know there are ways to navigate and negotiate those spaces with the hope of communal redemption.

You might have thought Yom Kippur and this season of renewal was about individuals. The refrain is familiar: Each of one of us should be reconnecting with those we’ve hurt and seeking apology. But the origin was a drive for communal redemption with an ancient practice of sending a goat out into the wilderness bearing the sins of the community -- a collective act of purification.

Perhaps it’s time to pivot our focus away from the individual and look instead at the community. Rather than expunge the sinners in hopes of reaching greater alignment, we need to look at the collective and own the limitations of who we are. The good, the bad and the bad-smelling. The offkey singers and the offensive ringers.

This is our motley crew with whom we are bound together as we cross the Wilderness. I use that metaphor [of Wilderness] purposefully because, again, the Torah has something to teach us: Coming out of Egypt,

the homogenous group of slaves was accompanied by a group of people referred to as, “ha-saf-soof”, loosely translated as “riff-raff.”

Rabbinic commentators over the centuries decided these must have been Egyptians, perhaps unhappy living under the Pharaoh’s rule, who chose to be liberated alongside of our ancestors. But, say the rabbis, they were trouble.

The riff-raff are blamed for starting a riot in Numbers 11, convincing the Israelites that life was better in Egypt, and lobbying Moses to change course and return “home”. The Golden Calf? Blame it on the riff-raff. Ultimately, they are the convenient excuse for why things go wrong for an ostensibly flawless community.

But we are not flawless. And an honest reflection of our own limitations may only be revealed if we allow our community to be an honest representation of who we are.

We thought the goal of spiritual practice was comfort and perfection. What if we were wrong? What if the strongest practice passed down from our ancestors is a practice that breeds discomfort? A practice rooted in agitation?

Ugh. Or, maybe, “Hmmm.”

Maybe we’ve got something to think about in the New Year. Where do we tend to “grow” more, spiritually and emotionally: from a place of comfort or from a place of discomfort? When have we felt a sense of greater reward: when a task comes easily or when it takes effort, involves a fear of failure, but ultimately, we reach a new plateau?

We have 2 stories that can be told about this year and about this politically divisive age in which we live:

The first is that we dig further into our holes, enjoy our echo chambers, shame or patronize [or both] the people with whom we disagree, and hope they find another community to join...and the lesson we teach and model for our children is “fit in or be kicked out.”

The second is that we dig further into our tradition and sacred texts. We accept that being part of a community means we may not always agree, but we are willing to listen, learn, and, ultimately pray together. If we do this, then the lesson we teach and model for our children is one of communal salvation. We reach a higher level because of everyone in this room, not in spite of.

Temple Isaiah is in the business of communal salvation. Join us, as we discover our purpose anew in this New Year.

Shana Tova.

Thank you again to Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer for inspiring these words. To see the full teaching online, click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uda_bIVOLZA&feature=youtu.be