

Searching for Texts that Matter to our Lives Yom Kippur 2013

On Yom Kippur afternoon, the congregation read the Book of Jonah from a very particular perspective. Three biblical prophets (Amos, Micah, and Isaiah) came to the bimah each claiming that his “text” in the Bible presented a more compelling source for the afternoon Haftarah.

Discussion ensued until Rabbi Shapiro invited three Sinai congregants forward to comment on what their most important “text” was. Each was asked to speak on whatever “text” from novel to poem to drama to non-fiction had the most resonance in their lives.

The following “texts” are the presentations made by our Sinai congregants.

My Text – Jim Gordon Yom Kippur 2013

This is Yom Kippur, the great and awesome day, when we think about our freedom to choose and about the consequences of our choices. But Yom Kippur is also about God’s power: God’s power to judge and to hold to account, to determine our fate. Our liturgy speaks of God writing and sealing our future: Who will live, who will die, who will suffer, who will know hope, who despair. These themes of Yom Kippur are complicated and conflicting.

I was born on Yom Kippur so my bar mitzvah portion was *Nitzavim*, the portion we read on Yom Kippur morning. Its words have been a powerful influence in my life:

15] See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16] For I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments. . . . that you may thrive and increase, and that the Lord your God may bless you 17] But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, . . . 18] I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish; . . . 19] . . . I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life

At 13, I understood the portion *not* as commanding me to follow all of the *mitzvot* – I was raised in a Reform Jewish family that took the Torah, as I have heard it expressed, “seriously, but not literally.” Rather, I understood the words to mean: there is good and evil in the world; we face choices in our lives between them, and as a consequence of how we choose, God rewards us or punishes us. We *get* what we deserve.

Since we read these words every Yom Kippur, *Nitzavim* comes back, year after year, for me to ponder. The more I have thought about these words, the more

they have puzzled me. By the time I graduated from college, I believed the choices I made could make the world better or worse, but I didn't believe God would reach out, directly and personally, to bless me or curse me because of my choices. I didn't think God worked that way. I still assumed we were free to choose and that our choices had consequences, but God had receded into the background and my understanding of reward and punishment had become more complicated. God was a coach, not a player; an influence, not an actor.

Later, I thought more about the *limits* of our free will. We *don't* always get what we deserve. Much of what happens to us is beyond our control. Some were born in Europe to suffer and die during the Crusades or during the dominance of Nazi Germany; others are privileged by being born in the United States. Some are stricken as children and some live in good health to extreme old age. Some are born into loving families and others to neglect. Who really has free will? How can any thinking person believe we are the masters of our lives and destinies?

Lately, I have struggled to reconcile these two conflicting lines of thought: that God determines our fate and that we have free will. One way I have done this is through a metaphor I like. I imagine we each live our lives within the limits of a circumscribed circle. The limits of that circle are defined by things beyond our control: where and when we are born, our genetic inheritance, who we encounter in our lives, and so on. These are things we *cannot* change. They are fated. But, within that circle, we are free to choose how we arrange the space.

How does this help me reconcile the conflicting themes of Yom Kippur? How reconcile God's power -- what some call fate -- with free will? Allow me to change metaphors. I sometimes play stud poker. Before a hand is dealt, the cards are mixed. After this is done, nothing the players can do will change the order of the cards in the deck. But each player's final hand depends on how many players are at the table and whether those who begin the hand, stay in or go out. If everyone stays to the end, the cards fall to the players in the order in which they were originally arranged. But usually, some players will fold. If they do, their decisions influence the cards everyone else at the table receives.

We must each play the hand God gives us, but the way each person plays determines how the game goes for him and for the other players at the table -- those whose circle my circle touches. Sometimes my choices affect the location and size of the circles of others. Without Fleming's choices, which led to the discovery of penicillin, or Salk's choice to study the Polio virus, how different would be the lives of those who have followed them. If my grandparents had stayed in Europe, my parents would have died in the Holocaust, and I would not be here.

To think we are in complete control is an illusion. We are born into a time and place, with certain talents and deficits. We have no control over our genes or the environment into which we are born. But *we decide* what we make of our lives. We can choose to be grateful for what we have or dissatisfied because of what we

lack. We can choose to be good husbands, wives, parents, colleagues, citizens. We can live with integrity or choose to be dishonest; we can choose to make our lives a blessing or a curse to those we touch. I cannot be Abraham Lincoln or Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, jr.; but I can try to be a good *me*; I can try to be what *Nitzavim* tells me God wants and inspires me to be.

Every year on Yom Kippur morning we read my bar mitzvah portion. Every Yom Kippur reminds me that my life is a mysterious blend of fate and free will. I do not have total control; sometimes, I will choose badly in matters over which I *do* have control; sometimes, I will fail to be what I aspire to be. Still, every year, Yom Kippur reminds me that I can find meaning and contentment in striving to make the space within my circle shine with love, friendship, compassion, integrity, and faith. My good and bad choices will not change the *size* of my circle, but they will affect how I *feel* about living inside it. My choices also will affect the circles my life touches. Who can know how my decisions will ripple out in time and space? Yom Kippur and *Nitzavim* return, every year, to remind me to struggle with these themes and to give me hope that I can do better in the year ahead.

My Text - Leslie Kittredge Yom Kippur 2013

So in picking a piece of text to write about I struggled to find just the right one. To pick just one poem, one song, one of the hundreds of books I've read, each contained only singular memories. The text I selected, carries with it memories stacked on memories. It has meaning beyond the meaning. That said, I feel I should prepare you. The text I am going to discuss today is a cookbook. On a holiday where we fast, I am going to talk about food.

I'm an only child. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago. We lived far from any of our relatives. Basically, it was just mom and dad and I. It sounds lonely, but it wasn't. I can't think of single holiday, where our house wasn't full of talking and laughter. When I was about 6 months, my mother took me to a swim class at the community pool. There she met two other new moms with young children. The Gruenhuts and Silversteins became regulars in our house, and vice versa. There were just random family dinners, and afikomen searching, and menorah lighting. Wonder Woman birthday parties with pin the lasso on Wonder Woman, spaghetti on the brand new carpet and stolen Easter eggs.

But what I can recall even more clearly is the smells. I can smell the just baked lasagna and the Portuguese sweet bread, the brisket, the Chinese take-out from Fongs, and the liver and onions for the chopped liver. There was the oil frying for the latkes. The fishy smell that took over when my mother made her homemade gefilte fish. Each one evoking a full and complete memory of the occasion.

My mother did almost all the cooking in our house. My father would make an occasional breakfast, but my mother was the cook and baker. She married my father barely knowing how to boil water. But over time, she became a great chef, finding and following recipes, repeating them over and over, and tweaking them to her liking. My mother was

never keen to let me into her immaculate kitchen, into her sanctuary. Despite that, when I was in high school, my dad had the idea that we would prepare dinner for mom to let her know we understood how much we appreciated all her hard work. I took my first crack in the kitchen, picking one of the most difficult recipes I could find: a cream puff heart filled with homemade whipped cream and topped with a chocolate ganache. I followed the directions precisely. I measured and stirred and baked it all just so. When it came out, it was a masterpiece. My mother was thrilled. But the next year, I had to go bigger. Baked Alaska. It would have been perfect. But I missed two very important steps in the recipe. First, foil the bowl before you fill it with ice cream. Skipping this meant I actually had to melt it a little to get it out the bowl. This alone would not have sunk it. Second mistake: bake immediately. I made my meringue, and let it sit for bit. The eggs fell, and when I put them on top, it all slid off in the oven. Basically, my mother's day gift was eggs and ice cream all over the bottom of her oven. Two self-cleaning cycles later it was still evident. Needless to say I wasn't allowed in the kitchen much after that.

Fast forward. Those babies from the pool, one of them decides to get married. My mother wanted to give her more than a check or some platter off her registry. She put together a cookbook filled with all our family favorites. She put in the lemonjello recipe that accompanied every break the fast kugel and bagels. The kugel was in there too. So were her holiday marinated vegetables with green beans and button mushrooms. (More on those in a moment.) There was the bride's mother's almond cake which made every seder sweeter. She filled that book with all the love and laughter of all those happy times. The book started with around 30 recipes, and over the years has reached somewhere near 80.

My mother has made many of these books giving them as wedding presents to brides, as a gift to a gracious hostess, to the women she calls friends and family. I actually got mine when I moved into my first apartment. I loved to entertain and make those recipes. I would bring her artichoke dip to the super bowl party. Make the Pasta House salad dressing to keep in my own fridge. Make Creamy Delight cookies for a work holiday party. I love to entertain my mother most of all. She gets such joy, watching me in the kitchen, making a beautiful table just like she had taught me. I'll never forget the look of pure terror on her face when she dropped a glass bowl filled to the brim with those marinated vegetables I mentioned onto the carpeting of my rental apartment dining room. No amount of seltzer or even carpet cleaning could get out the herbs and oil. I made those vegetables for her again later, her and my future mother in law, on another Mother's Day, with the ham and crescent egg bake from the book.

The recipes in there are from all over. Many of them were my grandmother's. Her award-winning cookies and treats got her written up in the St Louis Post-Dispatch multiple times, and were enjoyed by many a temple sisterhood luncheon and many a family gathering. The kugel recipe was given to my mother by a woman she worked with at an ad agency before I was born. The lasagna recipe was her sorority sister, Hetty's. It was her go to recipe for company, and now it's one of mine. The avocado feta salsa, a newer addition, is from Better Homes and Gardens. My mom used her tweaked version of it to win a cooking contest of her own.

My mom was telling me how she had a friend who got a recipe from someone, where the key ingredient was left out. This way, no one could make it just like her. Another friend

told her she would never share her recipes. My mother thinks that's crazy. To her, this is immortality. It's how you live forever. Every time someone uses my grandmother's kamish broit recipe her light will shine on. She has no idea how true that is. Another of my grandmother's specialties was her strudel. A labor intensive, two day process, my mom documented it on film, luckily before her passing. Every time she makes a batch and sends it to my husband, I have to smile watching him savor every bite. Wherever she is my grandmother is smiling, and while my husband never got to know my grandmother while she was alive, through her cookies he knows who she is and what she loved.

Many of the pages of the book are stained. Many have a fold in the middle from taking them to the grocery store to find all the right ingredients. Some I don't even need anymore. Her meat sauce is memorized. I add a little more garlic and oregano than her. There are some I haven't even attempted yet. The Salmon Wellington (her fancy dinner party entrée) is a two pager I am completely daunted by. I have added some of my own. They are stuffed in the front of the cookbook, collected from magazines, printed from the internet, photocopied and sent to me by my mother. My guacamole. My strawberry, white chocolate oatmeal cookies. My parmesan brussel sprouts.

I watch now as my son is forming his own palette. He plays in his own kitchen when Mommy cooks. Come to our house and he'll share his recipe for sushi with you and offer you a piece. He loves grandma's chocolate chip cookies, the new ones with the semi-sweet chunks and the milk chocolate chips. He loves grandma's kasha, her kugel, her chopped liver.

This cookbook is my family history. This is my sacred text.

My Text - Bernie Cohen

OK, so I answered the phone and there was Rabbi Shapiro, asking me if I could participate in the Yom Kippur afternoon service. I must confess, (because, after all, it is the season for confessions), that I was less than thrilled with the proposition. One more task added on to an already busy schedule. I said I'd get back to him. I didn't, so a couple of days later, the phone rang and there was Rabbi Shapiro again.

I had given it some thought, however. Here it was, Yom Kippur and the Rabbi was asking me to actually think about a reading that had some significance to me as it pertained to this Day of Atonement. Rabbi was requesting that I take some time to reflect on something that I had read that resonated with me on this holiday. After all, isn't that part of what Yom Kippur is about? How could I say "no."? I didn't, so here I am today.

The readings I have engaged in recently involve war, a timely subject given the current Syrian conflict. More specifically, they are about the experiences of soldiers at war. I first read "the Yellow Birds" a beautifully written first novel by an Iraqi war veteran. I then chose to read "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien, a story written by a Viet Nam vet about soldiers in Viet Nam. My daughter, Rebecca, a recent graduate of LHS, was also reading the book for her English class. We embarked on our journey together and I hope to share with you how this book made me think of the people who fight our wars in a much different way.

This book brings you into the war like no other book I've experienced. I have read "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "Johnny Got His Gun" which brought from the front

lines to the hospital rooms of WW1. I have read many books about WW2. Viet Nam was a seminal time for me, a time in which my political consciousness was raised. Or so I thought.

I would like to share some excerpts from the book. Time doesn't allow for me to share the full picture but hopefully, you will get the gist of what I am trying to convey.

"The things they carried were determined largely by necessity. Among the necessities or near necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt packets packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military payment Certificates, C-Rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 15-20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he's stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed five pounds including the liner and camouflage cover. They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear ... What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty. As a first lieutenant and field leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps code books, binoculars and a .45 caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men. As an RTO, Mitchell Sanders carried the PRC-25 radio, a killer, 26 pounds with its battery. As a medic, Rat Kiley carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape and comic books and all the things a medic must carry, including M & M's for especially bad wounds, for a total weight of nearly 20 pounds.

As a big man, therefore a machine gunner, Henry Dobson carried the M-60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded. In addition, Dobbins carried between 10 and 15 pounds of ammunition draped in belts across his chest and shoulders.

As PFC's or Spec 4s, most of them were standard grunts and carried the standard M-16 gas-operated assault rifle. The weapon weighed 7.5 pounds unloaded, 8.2 pounds with its full 20 round magazine. . . . The riflemen carried anywhere from 12-20 magazines, usually in cloth bandoliers, adding another 8.4 pounds minimum, 14 pounds at maximum. When it was available, they also carried M-16 maintenance gear – rods and steel brushes and swabs and tubes of LSA oil – all of which weighed about a pound. Among the grunts, some carried the M-79 grenade launcher, 5.9 pounds unloaded, a reasonably light weapon except for the ammunition, which was heavy. A typical round weighed ten ounces. The typical load was 25 rounds (or 15.6 pounds).

They carried all of the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing – these were intangibles but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all . . . They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which

was the fear of blushing . . . By and large, they carried these things inside, maintaining the masks of composure.

. . . Often, they carried each other at night, the weak and wounded. They carried infections. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, insignias of rank, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, plastic cards imprinted with the Codes of Conduct. They carried diseases, among them malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried Vietnam itself, the place, the soil – a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity. They marched for the sake of the march . . . They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages where it would always be the same. They carried their own lives. The pressures were enormous.”

So what did these descriptions of soldiers at war convey to me. They have caused me to reflect on the privilege of growing into manhood in the safety of my college cocoon. I was vehemently against the war but I could protest with the knowledge that my high draft number and financial resources would likely prevent me from ever having to think about serving. My college and neighborhood friends with low draft numbers served in the National Guard and Army Reserves. I knew no one who went to Viet Nam.

This talk to you also caused me to reflect some of the things that I have carried around over the past years. One of the things I carry is a couple of huge stacks of newspapers sitting by my bed. While it's nice to compare the Bush and Obama economic plans and be able to back up the comparisons by pulling out the May 22, 2008 NYT, I'm not sure that it's necessary. Perhaps these piles could be one less thing for me to carry into the New Year

On a more serious note, I carry around the fear that I'm not good enough, that other lawyers are a little smarter than me, if only I had worked a little harder. I'm good but am I really that good? I know the answer, yet I carry the fear that I may not even be as good as I think I am.

I carry the certainty that I am not as good of a partner to my wife as she deserves. I can be harsh, critical and rarely apologize, even when it's clear that I'm wrong. I respond rather than let things go. I can carry bickering to an Olympic level sport. I carry around the knowledge that while I love my wife, I can do a better job of showing her my affection on a daily basis and take further steps to make our relationship a more loving one.

On a more positive note, I carry the knowledge that I am working hard to make the world a better place. Very early on in my life, Judaism gave me the guide as to how I should live. Our readings today from Leviticus and Isaiah reflect those values. While I frequently fall short, as acknowledged throughout this day, I know the directions in which I should be heading thanks to my Jewish upbringing.

Finally, I carry around the knowledge that I owe the men and women who serve our country an apology. I never gave adequate thought to what our military personnel

experience. In my youthful ignorance, I equated the service of our soldiers with the policies of our country. Many people enlisted believing it is the right thing to do and others were drafted who had no choice. Either way, I never thought about the families of those who were killed and wounded and the millions of people who were affected physically and emotionally as a result of this war. For this sin of omission, I ask for forgiveness and hopefully, this will be one less thing for me to carry into the coming year