

Congregation Betenu, Yom Kippur Sermon
Nate DeGroot, Oct 4, 2014

We begin in a world of fantasy. In our opening scene, we find three daughters, their father's kingdom to be divided amongst them according to their professed love for him. We are in Shakespeare's world, and it is here that we meet King Lear, a retiring king whose basic flaw is that he values appearances over reality. He does not ask his daughters "which of you doth love us most," but rather, "which of you *shall we say* doth love us most?". This opening sequence is described by one commentator as, "a studied and a deliberate indifference to fact. If subsequent scenes are so realistic as hardly to be endured, the opening scenes have not to do with realism but with ritual and romance."

Now, isn't that why we're here? For ritual and romance? My answer, is no. We're here for reality.

As one of my favorite musical artists, Lauryn Hill, puts it, "Fantasy is what we want, but reality is what we need."

The first two daughters dote and fawn with falseness coating flitting frills. Fittingly, Lear is smitten by their vacuous flattery and at once gives them their share. The youngest daughter is Cordelia, the symbolic archetype of honesty, and the only daughter to speak straight to her father. With "love more ponderous than her tongue," Cordelia responds to her father's invitation for adulation saying, "Nothing, my Lord." When pressed, and threatened not to receive her share, Cordelia plainly explains, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less." In embarrassment and disbelief, Lear quickly divides what was to be Cordelia's portion between his other two daughters and in a fit of rage, disowns the one daughter whose temperament lent itself to honesty: "Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood, and as a stranger to my heart and me hold thee from this forever."

We are Lear and all three daughters live inside us. Too often, we disown and banish the truth about ourselves in favor of a safer and more topically satisfying fantasy. We cast off the light that shines the

brightest, the mirror that reflects most clear, and we plug our ears when Cordelia speaks truth too hard to hear, preferring instead the siren song of security-blanket lust.

Today though, we repent. On this day, this one day a year, on Yom Kippur, we free ourselves from the world of fantasy, we release old stories that are no longer helpful, we shed the parts of our self we can tell no longer serve us. Why? This is how we praise God.

“Every top has to stand on its own bottom,” Lauryn Hill says, “And in that respect, we all get to do what our passion is. That’s what praising God is all about. It’s doing your passion. [Religion] is not useless worthless ritual, you know, monotonous ritual, where we just show up and can’t wait to see the game. It’s doing your passion, fulfilling your passion. That’s how we are thankful, that’s how we say we appreciate the opportunity to be alive.”

When who we are is covered up by who we think we’re supposed to be, our divinity is diminished and we diminish the divine. When we exist in the world of fantasy and don’t live into who we are, the Shechinah wails. We are each a gift, our uniqueness unlike any other, and the more we can discern and honor and live out our own potential, our personal strengths, our individual singularity, the more whole God is. We pray to an infinite God with magnificently diverse expression, creating all creatures and all moments, creating each of us perfectly unique and absolutely different. To fulfill the will of this God, I’m proposing, is to continually manifest our most authentic self, to be the gift that only we can be, to share ourselves generously and courageously. We are the gift. It is who we are that we alone get to share and that is our contribution to the tapestry that is haShem.

After revealing Torah at Mt. Sinai, God addresses Moses, asking him to tell the Israelite people that they should bring God gifts.

vayidaber adonay el moshe l’emor
and God spoke to moshe saying

daber el b’ney yisrael
tell the Israelite people

vayik’chu li terumah

bring me gifts

m'et kol ish asher yidveynu libo, tikchu et terumati
from every person who wants to offer from their heart, receive that gift
on my behalf

From every person who wants to offer from their heart, from every person who is in touch with their heart, who can discern the longings of their heart, from every person who can get real with who they are and what their heart desires, from every person who wants to give from that place, that is a gift God will receive.

Make for me a mikdash, God says in the next line – v'asu li mikdash - v'shacanti b'tocham - so that I may dwell within you, and amongst you.

How do we build sacred space, how do we construct a world around us in which to experience God's most intimate presence? How do we invite God into our lives, into our selves, into our communities? How do we manifest the sacred?

By sharing ourselves and our truth from the inside out, sharing our hearts, and fearlessly being the gift we each are intended to be.

However, if reality is such a blessing, why do we defend the curse? Why is it that we perform our lives with renditions of masks and layers of protection? Perhaps because we're afraid. Maybe we're afraid to do anything other than try to fit into society's expectations of who or what we're supposed to be. Maybe we're afraid of not being loved, or of losing a loved one, and so we try to please them, bending our own will to theirs. Maybe we're too scared to even slow down and listen for our truth because we don't think we'll like what we find or what it will compel us to do. Maybe we're scared of the self that's longing to be revealed and the way in which that would force us to revise our own identity. Maybe we're scared of how others will respond if we reveal what's really inside.

At the end of the day, we hide because we're afraid of confrontation with reality and the rupture that causes, and with good reason. Like Avraham being asked to sacrifice his son, his only son, we are scared

of what might be asked of us and the damage it might cause. After all, we know that Isaac is blinded from the experience and some say he dies, we believe that him and Abraham never speak again, and we're told that Sarah dies from the events. Listening and responding to that voice, even and especially when it's telling you to go against the grain, is high-stakes and almost always painful.

But holding on tight is not the answer.

We meet Lear again, this time at the midpoint of the play, experiencing woefully the painful embrace of stark reality. A serious storm swirling spitefully surrounding, Lear leaves his daughters' houses now knowing just how ruthlessly they deceived him and how completely they undermined him, to wander and linger listlessly on a lonely heath at night. In this moment of vivid exposure, Lear is stripped down, all pretenses gone: "Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." With that, Lear tears off his clothes, exposed for who he really is and unable to escape himself, but also freed from the shackles of fantasy for the first time.

Our Shakespeare commentator writes, "Ostensibly the play is one long denouement. In fact the declining action, which is the dogging of the hero to death, is complemented by a rising action, which is the hero's regeneration...As the one wanes to nothing, the other, which lives within it, emerges. This emergent, or renascent, action is a condition of the hero's loss of the world. The play fools us. Its primary story is not the descent of the King into Hell, but the ascent of the King as he climbs the Mountain of Purgatory and is fulfilled."

Life so often fools us, too. It tricks us into believing that those moments on the heath are moments to avoid. It teaches us to retreat from confrontation with reality and the depths of our inner worlds. It makes us believe that our primary story is just one long denouement.

But in fact, life is a series of descensions and ascensions, expansions and contractions, confrontations and retreats, releases and

regrowths, deconstructions and reconstructions. Life embraces death, acknowledges the cycles, and realizes that you need to destroy in order to rebuild. For the plant to grow, it must first crack and break through its hard shell. Or, as Leonard Cohen sings, “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity to release, unbinding our hearts and making room for new growth and for new habits. This holiday is a practicum on how to incorporate that philosophy into our lives. We know we’re constantly evolving and changing. We know that anything that’s not growing is dead. It’s up to us to embrace the cycle.

For Sigmund Freud, our friend Cordelia in *King Lear* symbolizes death, the ultimate and inevitable reality that we all face and cannot escape. Lear rejecting his youngest daughter at the beginning of the play, for Freud, is the King rejecting death, unwilling to face the finitude of his being. By the end of the play, though, having gone through all he’s gone through – having been betrayed and having been broken down, having found compassion and pity and having confronted his own humility – Lear finally embraces death. The veiled cloak of fantasy has been removed and in the climax of the play, Cordelia is needlessly executed while in prison. Without any ambiguity or false pretenses, carrying the dead body of his youngest daughter, Lear cries plainly, if not emphatically, “Thou’lt come no more, never, never, never, never, never.” In her death, Cordelia causes a realization of his finitude, or as Freud puts it, she causes him “to make friends with the necessity of dying.”

As some of you may know, when we speak of someone who has passed in the Jewish tradition, it is customary to say, “May his or her memory be for a blessing.” We carry with us the legacies, the teachings, and the love of our dearly beloveds, and in really concrete and significant ways, their memories really do, G-d willing, become a blessing for us, shaping and guiding us in life. As we repent this Yom Kippur, as we release all that is keeping us stuck and constraining us, as we allow old stories and stuck habits to be discarded, and as we confront and embrace reality, leading with our hearts, discerning our passions, and offering ourselves as a gift, I want to wish for us all that the old selves we’re letting go of this Yom Kippur, the former versions of ourselves that we are burying today, that their memories too may

be a blessing for us, allowing us always to stay connected to who we have been, to who we are, and to who we are becoming. G'mar hatimah tovah!