

Jewish Peoplehood, Leadership, and Longevity: “Who Needs a Chazzan” Your Role on Yom Kippur

Have you ever wondered ‘if someone came to Yom Kippur davening, and observed the goings on, what would they think is happening? What would they see and what conclusions would they come to?’ I think if someone came in for Yom Kippur they would think our religion is very much “top down” and hierarchical. It would look like there are a couple people “doing everything” and everyone else is a spectator. Is that what most of us are on Yom Kippur – **are we spectators?** We watch the chazzanim, the baal korei, and the rabbi ‘do Yom Kippur’ on our behalf. Is that how it’s supposed to be? Isn’t that how it used to be, just with a Kohen Gadol doing those jobs all together?

In Judaism, there are a lot of times when we think we’re the spectators, we’re not doing anything, besides for maybe singing “ah-ahah-ay-yay-yay-yay-yay ay-yay-yay” and so we ask ourselves, ‘would it mean much if I weren’t here?’ In another vein, this is a deep social question, **can there be a society where all or at least most of the society acts in accordance with its ideals? The nature of an ideal seems to imply that it’s not for everyone.** Simply put: is it possible for all of us to be leaders, to be special? They say about the Rabbinate, like in a company, you spend 80% of the time, with 20% of the people and 20% of the time with the other 80%. It’s called the Pareto Principle. 20% shoulder 80% of the responsibility. Is that how it is with God? **Do we need a Rabbi, Rebbetzin, Chazzan, Jewish educator to enshrine ideal Jewish living, to be a conduit, to connect us to God?**

The Chasam Sofer, the 18<sup>th</sup> cen. Hungarian Torah giant and community leader explains, that that’s how Judaism was at Sinai. At Matan Torah, Moshe explains at the beginning of his epic speech of Deuteronomy, introducing the *aseret hadibrot*, אָנֹכִי עֹמֵד בְּיַדְהָ' וּבְיַדְכֶם בְּעֵת הַהֵוא לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי ה' כִּי יִרְאֶתֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא־עֲלִיתֶם בְּהָר לְאִמֶּר,

You couldn’t go up the mountain, you were afraid. I stood between you and God. I gave you the Torah from God, says Moshe... But now I’m going to die. The Chatam Sofer explains that Moshe is telling us that **there was a time when we needed leaders to stand between us and God, when we as a people were incapable of actualizing our mission without leadership** - the way that having the sun blocks out the stars. But, **as much as those leaders helped, guided and facilitated our connection, they were also a hinderance.** Yitzchak heard from Hashem once Avraham passed away; Yaakov only saw the ladder when he left Yitzchak’s house. This leadership is also a barrier, a mechitza that keeps us from direct access and connection.

אַתֶּם נֹצְרִים הַיּוֹם כָּלְכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֻטֵיכֶם וְקַנִּיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כֹּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל – *You are standing, today, all of you, in front of Hashem your God; leaders of tribes, elders, officers, every single Jew.*

Moshe is telling the Jewish people, ‘You don’t need an intermediary anymore’. **The Torah provides direct access.** Anyone can learn it anyone can use it to relate to, to know Hashem. **Religious educators may make it easier to know what to do if you haven’t studied, (no one can know everything); they can motivate you when you feel lethargic; but they are not closer to God than you.**

The chazzan and the kohen gadol have a role, their job is on a communal level to pray for the welfare of the community, as Rav Soloveitchik puts it *tefillat hatzibbur*, **the shaliach tzibbur isn’t a messenger of the individuals, he’s the community (tzibbur) representative (shaliach).** During the First and Second Temple, the same was true of the kohen gadol. That’s why he wore the choshen (breastplate). He spoke for the *tzibbur*, but not for the individuals within it. There were small shuls throughout Yerushalayim and the pilgrims who had come to Yerushalayim would daven for themselves in those small shteibels.

**What the onlooker on Yom Kippur doesn’t realize is the inner dialogue that each of us gets to have with the Creator of the Universe, Hashem Yitbarach.** Unlike in other religions where confessions are made to a person, or some other intermediary, **our confession is to God Himself.** Each of us stands, with our heads bowed, shoulder to shoulder with our sisters and brothers and each of us gets to talk to God. Even if we’re home with children or too ill to come to shul. We get to talk to God – one on one.

Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem. We each have a role, no one else speaks for us and we speak to God on our own behalf. But what about the sociological issue with a whole community living up to its ideals? What about the Pareto Principle? We’ve concluded that on an individual level, I matter to God, but that’s just for me and maybe my family.

Judaism wants a lot of each of us. It doesn't just want a lot from the Rabbis, Rebbetzins, teachers, educators and cantors. It wants that from all of us. **Is it feasible for all of us to live up the ideals of the Torah?** If so, how? The answer lies in the mission...

Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem. By the fact that you're here [in shul] you are amongst the few (less than 20%) that has access to an authentic Torah lifestyle of the multi-millennia-old mode of serving Hashem. And we have a mission. Hashem outlines in the Torah – to be a *mamlechet kohanim* and a *goy kadosh*. **We are meant to be the world's religious leadership. You're meant to be part of the religion that God chose to be the models for how individuals and a society can relate to God. You were meant to play that role - to be that religious educator.** It's ok if you think you're not knowledgeable enough. It's not a secret, *lo bashamayim hi*, the answers are all in the Torah – written and oral and it's available to you, free of charge.

When I think of leadership this way, when I think of each of our responsibility to this generation and the future, it makes me nostalgic for the leadership of old. I wish we had a Moshe. Or at least, one of the great leaders of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Have you ever considered how many incredible giant Torah leaders there were?! The Rav [Soloveitchik], the [Lubavitcher] Rebbe, R' Aharon Kotler (founder of BMG in Lakewood), Nechama Leibovitz, R' Yitzchak Hutner, Rebbetzin Bruria David (founder of Bais Yaakov in Jerusalem), Rav Moshe Feinstein, the Chazon Ish, and R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. Through what did this generation merit such incomparable rabbinic/Torah leadership. I think, perhaps, the answer is that in the aftermath of the Holocaust the need was simply incredible. Much like the generation that left Egypt, the upheaval post holocaust required a quality of leadership that bridged the gap between a wounded people and a hidden God.

Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem – those leaders are gone. Judaism is reconstructed. This foundation brings us to another understanding of “atem nitzavim hayom kulchem”. R' Shimshon R. Hirsch, the 19th century German leader of the Torah Im Derech Eretz movement, ever the linguistic commentator provides a compelling and stirring interpretation of this verse. Nitzavim- נִצְּבִים *standing* is related to the word matzeiva- מצִבֵּה , *gravestone*. Each of us is a gravestone, or at least we will be.

The year 5781 is done and 5782 has begun - every single one of us here was given life for 5781, but our vigor will cease, as for all mortals; but the *klal*, our people will endure forever. (*I thought about Susie Berber a"h when I wrote this part of the drasha and so I called one of her cousins to tell her so, and she told me that there have numerous people who have been named Shulamis after Susie.*) The *klal* is impacted, Ahavat Achim is imprinted by every single one of our people.

Each and every one of us is a *matzeiva* waiting to happen. But until then, the things that you do will shape ourselves, our *matzeivas*, our families, the future of Judaism and her destiny of bringing Godliness into the world. You aren't followers. You aren't the ones who couldn't handle God's Presence and God's word and hid behind Moshe. You - atem nitzavim. Hayom kulchem – all of you today, we get to have the Shaarei Shamayim P'tach - The gates of Heaven open; we get to transcend physicality like angels. Every single one of us is meant to be a Jew – is meant to stand – is meant to relate to God individually without intermediary – is meant to make an impact on our family, community, and the world as a Jew. Atem Nitzvaim Kulchem Hayom.

At Yizkor, we remember those legacies and we display the impact by giving money to a cause that elongates and actualizes the impact, the imprint that our ancestors and lost loved ones made on us and the world at large. Our donations this year from the yizkor fund will reflect that inside out notion we will fund: the rabbis discretionary fund for our friends and neighbors who may be in more desperate circumstances than we know. we will fund tomchei Shabbos for the broader local need. We will fund a Paterson food pantry to help the non-Jewish along with Jewish poor. We will expand to a Hurricane relief fund, the JDC and Yad Eliezer for global Jewish hunger and hunger in Israel and an international fund helping to resettle refugees from places like Afganistan. The impact of your matzeiva and that of your loved one will be”H be linked to that legacy. You are meant to be here. We need you.

**(R' Ely Shestack, Cong. Ahavat Achim, Yom Kippur Yizkor Drasha 5782)**