

Should We Forgive God?ⁱ
 A Sermon for Kol Nidre Eve
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Shanah Tovah

Tonight we ask God to forgive our sins, as have generations before us. Is it too *hutzpadik*, when things are as tough as they have been this year, to expect God to ask forgiveness of us?

To answer, listen to this true story of another difficult Kol Nidre, in Baltimore, 1946.

The Rabbi led a man completely enveloped in a tallit (a prayer shawl) to the Reader's table, then took a Torah Scroll and stood with another man, also holding a scroll, each on either side of the stranger. "Now we will say Kol Nidre," the Rabbi cried.

The man chanted the first two words and immediately began to sob bitterly...The congregants stood in fear... the man composed himself and stood ...silent... as the congregation waited... tense... Finally, the Rabbi chanted the concluding words of Kol Nidre, "And it shall be forgiven to the entire congregation of the children of Israel," though only the first two words of Kol Nidre had been recited.

The Rabbi explained: "Yesterday, this young man..., [visited me]... His name is Yosef ben Sh'muel...In ...Poland, he was called Yossele.

'My tale is long and tragic,' he said...three weeks before my bar mitzvah...the Germans...entered our town...They immediately began to kill Jews [including my family]. By a miracle...I stole out of the city...to the partisans in the forest...Most ...were ...friendly to Jews...Some [were not]...Whenever I dared, I went deep into the forest [to practice] ...[my] Haftorah ...[but] bit by bit I began to forget parts...I therefore took care to repeat all that I remembered...

Once...singing aloud, I did not notice...a few anti-Semitic partisans...I cannot tell you what...they did to me, for I am ashamed to think about it... I ran away from the partisans...running...at night, hiding [by] day...hungry...[but I sang what I remembered of my Haftorah every day].

...I reached...[Russia]... what the Russian[s]... did to me I neither can or will talk about...In comparison..., the Poles were practically angels... ...[I continued to recite what I remembered of my Haftorah and it seemed by that merit, I was] freed from [the Russian] jail...[I] left one hell...[for] another... Siberia. There is no limit to evil, there is no limit to God's miracles. For the fact is, inspite of everything, I am a lucky person... [I escaped]...to Shanghai ... [where the Jewish community helped me and sent me ...here].

...I beg you let me say the sacred Kol Nidre...in your synagogue...[in] place of my Haftorah which I no longer remember...for my bar mitzvah.'

[...The Rabbi continued...I did not have the heart] to refuse... We did not hear the [full] text...tonight, but could there have been a more beautiful Kol Nidre than the weeping of our Yosele?

The Rabbi ...[continued]... "I have a story to tell you,...a family tradition, that the Tzadik Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk told this story every year...before Yom Kippur]...

'...There was a Jew[ish innkeeper named] ...Chaim [whose] custom [it was] to write down in a small book, between one Yom Kippur and the next, all the wrongs ...he committed against the peasants he served....Sometimes he did not give...the full measure of vodka [or] the right change...He wrote in another small book every wrong the landowner, from whom he rented his inn, or the peasants, did to him."

"One year, things went very badly for our innkeeper. That year...on the day before Yom Kippur...he took [his] small book and [reading], mused aloud: 'Master of the Universe... You and I...know the truth... I [mixed whiskey with water...Perhaps not a great sin], but stealing is stealing. I wrote it down. Two days later, I kept 20 kopecks of change I owed...I wrote it down. What else...I ...added it up...bit by bit it added up to 23 rubles...

Chaim banged his head with his fists, Master of the Universe,...I have decided I cannot go to synagogue...for Kol Nidre... because I am ashamed... before You.

Chaim ...thought and...began to speak again, Truth to tell, I know... You also, Lord, will not be in synagogue. For I have another little book. Let me read ...from that book... Today, some peasants...wrecked my bar... The damages....50 rubles...these were not my peasants...they are Your peasants...A few days later, soldiers beat me up, [and] took [my whisky]... The damages...70 rubles... Chaim began to shout: These were not my soldiers. These were Your soldiers...Do You

want to know the total for the whole year? You, God in Heaven, owe me, Chaim the thief, 226 rubles...

...If I, a simple man of flesh and blood, am [so] ashamed before You because I stole 23 rubles, [that] I am not going to synagogue, how dare You, Who owes so much more, come to such a holy place?...What will it look like if Your Jews are in synagogue and You, Dear Father, are not...?

...the innkeeper continued, 'Master of the Universe, I have a deal to offer You...I, Chaim the innkeeper am ready to forgive You for all the evil which Your servants have done to me...And what do I want from You?...Just as I am saying to You, "I pardon You," say the same precious words ...not only for me but for ... the entire People Israel [the Jewish People]...

[Chaim] stood...head bowed...and suddenly, as if he ...heard an answer,...[he]... called to his [family] "Hurry...we must go to synagogue...With [God's help] we will have a good year..."

...On completing this story, the Rabbi [turned to Yossele]... "Yossele, my dear Bar Mitzvah child, just like Chaim the Innkeeper, you, too, can now confront the Creator of the World with your account...the destiny of the whole world is in your hands. If you are ready...the Rabbi cried..."repeat after me...and Yossele repeated: "Lord of the Universe, I, Yosef ben Shmuel say to You, 'I pardon... You for all Your sins. But I beg...no I demand...You say... "I pardon" for the whole of Your People Israel."

...Total silence reigned. Everyone stood in fright. Suddenly, the Rabbi [smiled], kissed Yossele on the head and cried... "...Our Bar Mitzvah boy has succeeded... let's say our prayers." [It was the most joyous holiday season anyone remembered.]ⁱⁱ

Our past president Mel Walhberg shared this story with me, and I with you, almost 20 years ago after our lives were changed forever on 9/11. The terrorists who killed almost 3,000 people then were God's creatures, not ours. That night, we held God accountable, as did Chaim the Innkeeper. As did Yossele the Holocaust survivor.

Mel and I agreed it was time to share this story again. Why? Because this year, more than many others in recent history, God also has to account for God's self, for the over 200 thousand US deaths, almost a million world-wide deaths from COVID-19.ⁱⁱⁱ For the suffering of people out of work; lives ruined with failing businesses, children going hungry. For all the stress of how our lives have changed, from how we work, ensure our kids an education, pray and play together,

shop for essentials and stay in touch with those essential to us. For the mental and spiritual cost of being deprived human interactions critical to our well-being: a hug, seeing a friend in person, physically gathering together as a sacred community.

At some point, an effective COVID-19 vaccine will become widely available and life will, in some ways, return to “normal.” But not in other ways. Lost loved ones are gone forever. As after 9/11, there will be changes in how we travel, go to work, shop, educate our children. Here at Beth Shalom, as we look forward to our next 50 years, we plan to remain the same caring and creative community even as we invariably adapt in some ways we can foresee, like relying on more technology, and other ways we cannot foresee.

To be honest, we were not always our best selves this last year. We have not done all we could to keep ourselves and others safe. We have reason to ask God’s forgiveness at this holy time. But to be honest, it is not just us who needs ask forgiveness.

God, we know You are the strength that helps us persevere; the Source of Goodness that inspires our health care heroes, researchers, first responders, shoppers, truckers, teachers, volunteers, all those who are helping us through this difficult time. We know You are the Source of Healing for those who survived. We aren’t ungrateful. But what about those who did not survive?

Holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel wrote, “To be a Jew means to serve God by espousing man’s cause... Only the Jew knows he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of [God’s] creation.”^{iv}

Like Chaim the innkeeper, we are keeping an account, God. Yes, we have sins great and small. But You? All those people who refuse to wear masks or keep social distance? They are Your people, God, not ours. All those officials who spread misinformation and value their electability over the safety of their citizens? They are Your officials, God, not ours. As Creator, COVID-19 is Your virus, God, not ours, which is why a pandemic like this can be called an “Act of God.” And what about all the other people, God, who suffered and died from other difficult illnesses this year, some because they could not get timely care because of COVID-19? Aren’t those illnesses also Your illnesses, God?

So, you see, God, You have a lot to ask forgiveness for this past year. Like Chaim the innkeeper, like Yossele the Holocaust survivor and his Baltimore Rabbi, we are willing to forgive You, God, for all the things You did not do to avert the evilness of this year. And what do we want? We want You to forgive us, not just us on line tonight, but the entire People Israel, and – if You will forgive our *hutzpah*,

not just the Jewish People, but all Your children, all the peoples of this world suffering the pandemic, and grant us all a shanah tovah, a good year.

Has God accepted our deal? We have to hope so. May we thus be inscribed and sealed for a good year, of peace, hope, health, and happiness so that sometime soon, we, too, will be able to dance together in joy. And let us say, Amen.

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ⁱⁱ I have condensed the story, which appears in full in a newspaper article from *Moment Magazine*, reprinted in the *Baltimore Jewish Times* (Oct. 1, 1976), "Can We Forgive God?: A True Story on Yom Kippur in Baltimore 5707 (1946)."

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbes from Sept. 9.

^{iv} Elie Weisel, *A Jew Today*, 6, cited in Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God*: 223.