

The Rest is Up to Us
Yom Kippur 5767 (2006)
R. Yonatan Cohe, Congregation Beth Israel

In his popular book, *Kaddish*, Leon Wieseltier, writes:

“It occurred to me today that I might spend a whole year in Shul, morning prayers, afternoon prayers, evening prayers and never have a religious experience. A discouraging notion. Yet I must not ask for what cannot be given. Shul was not invented for a religious experience. In shul, a religious experience is an experience of religion. The rest (writes Leon Wieseltier) the rest is up to me.”

How many Jews, how many of us, walked into Shul last night, thinking to ourselves: “I might spend the next twenty five hours in Shul and never have a religious experience.”

Leon Wieseltier suggests “the rest is up to me.” The rest is up to the lone individual. The religious, moral and spiritual, content of a person’s life is solely dependent upon that individual. That is the message of “the rest is up to me.”

There is a lot of power to this message. And we can spend many hours discussing the positive outcomes of having such an outlook on life. Yet today, I would like to suggest a different philosophy, an alternative path towards the creation of a life worth living—a religious life of worth.

My message like that of Leon Wieseltier can be summed up in one single sentence. Instead of saying: “the rest is up to me” imagine saying “the rest is up to us.”

“The rest is up to us.”

On Yom Kippur Moshe Rabeinu and Yona HaNavi introduce two different models of Teshuva and Kappara, of repentance and forgiveness.

Yona HaNavi says “the rest is up to me.” My story is not connected to other people’s story. Why should I care about the people of Ninveh? How does their spiritual connection affect my relationship with God?

And so, every year we read how Yona tries to flee to Tarshish on a ship. The description here is so powerful and so telling. The boat is caught in a deadly storm, and all the sailors pray to their gods. Yet Yona descends to the ship’s hold, and falls fast asleep. “*Ve’Yona yarad el yarketei hasfina vayishkav vayiradam.*”

This description always reminds me of the midrash: Reuven and Shimon are on a boat, Shimon comes to Reuven and says: “We found a hole, the boat is licking!” and Reuven looks at him and says: “Nu, and how is that my problem.”

“The rest is up to me.” I will survive—I know how to swim, I have insurance, God loves me. I’m the rabbi. It’s not my problem. “The rest is up to me.”

In contrast to Yona HaNavi, Moshe Rabbeinu, the real hero of Yom Kippur, and the first teacher of teshuva, introduces a different model of repentance. I would like to focus our attention on that model. The model of “the rest is up to us.”

One of the most dramatic scenes in our Torah is the standoff between Moses and God after *Chayt HaEgel*, after the sin of the golden calf. God tells Moshe “*veata hanicha li, veyichar appi vahem vaachlem ve’e’e’she otcha legoy gadol.*” “Now, let me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and I may destroy them, and make of you [Moshe] a great nation.”

God gives Moshe a way out. “You are not one of them,” God tells Moshe. Their story doesn’t need to be your story. You, Moshe, can start all over again, without them.

Less than twenty verses later, we find Moshe’s decisive response. “*Veata im tisa chatatam veim ayin mecheni na misifrecha asher katavta.*” Moshe tells God: “Now, if You [God] will forgive their sin [well and good], but if not, erase me from the book which You have written.”

Notice that God’s offer to Moshe begins with the word “*ve’atta*” “and now” and Moshe’s response also begins with the same word “*ve’atta*” “and now.” It’s a key word. It indicates a symmetrical argument. God’s offer meets Moshe’s ultimate counteroffer—Moshe tells God, it’s us, all of us, or nothing.

“*Macheini na misifrecha*”—“Erase me from Your book.” What book is Moshe talking about?

According to Chazal, our rabbis, this book is none other than the book of life. Every Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur we wish each other “may you be inscribed in the book of life.” The book of life.

“*Macheini na misifrecha*”—“Erase me from Your book of Life.”

How many books of life do you think God has? How many books of life open between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur? Ten billion? A gazillion? As many books of life as there are living creatures?

There is no doubt in my mind that if you were to ask Yona Hanavi how many books of life there are, he would answer that each human being has his or her personal book of life. Each one of us has their own story, disconnected and unaffected by the life stories of others.

But Moshe’s reply changes all that. For Moshe there was only one book of life, and if Israel was not in that book, if *all of Israel* was not in that book, then he could not be in that book either. “*Macheini na misifrecha*”—means there is no room for me in your book, if there is no room for the rest of them.

In other words, Moshe tells God—nobody is forgiven unless everybody is forgiven. We share our story from beginning to end.

For twenty-five hours on Yom Kippur we stand in front of God and we tell God our story. We tell God everything that happened to us in the past year. It is so tempting and easy, during

this time, to slip into a Yona mentality, “it’s all up to me,” forget the rest of the world. Seal *me* in the book of life, turn *me* into a great nation.

Yet the challenge for all of us is to reach beyond the needs and aspirations of the selfish I. The challenge is to move from a me-mentality to a we-consciousness; from extreme independence to communal co-dependence.

Doesn’t the Machzor itself teach us this lesson? “*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi.*”—“We are guilty, we betrayed, we stole, we spoke falsely.” In the words of Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins: “*Al Het* reminds us, in its plural formulation, that we live as a community, in our glory and in our shame, and when we forget that, we lose everything.”

We are responsible for the moral, spiritual and religious, content of each other’s lives. It’s up to us to make each other’s lives more meaningful, and at times more bearable and more worth living.

We all depend on each other. Ask any one in this room who became ill in the past year and they’ll tell you. Ask anyone in this room who lost a loved one this past year and they’ll tell you. Times of tragedy over and over again teach us that the lines between our homes are merely artificial. Inevitably, at some point or other, my story becomes your story, and your story becomes mine.

Moshe understood that from a religious perspective, there is no “my story” rather there is only “our” story—there is only one Book of Life. It is Moshe’s un-compromised stance of a united we, a connected we, that ultimately forces God to forgive *Benei Yisrael*, the Jewish people.

Imagine, the kind of story we would tell God if we had to tell a collective story. What would our questions be on this day if we knew for certain that “the rest is up to us”?

Let me suggest a number:

We won't ask what we did to help ourselves, but we might ask what we did to help others.

We won't ask how many promotions we received, but we might ask how we promoted others.

We won't ask what we did to protect our rights, but we might ask what we did to protect the rights of others.

We won't ask in what neighborhood we lived, but we might ask how we treated our neighbors.

Let's think about it—We spend so many hours trying to connect to God, who is ultimately beyond us. Twenty-five straight hours on this day alone. When was the last time we spent twenty-five straight hours trying to connect with each other?

This message is not foreign to the people here today. “*Lo ba'shamayim hie*” it is not in heaven.

But the message of “the rest is up to us” doesn't only concern those of us standing here today. It goes above and beyond. It concerns those who are not yet born, as well as those who are longer with us.

Albert Einstein once wrote:

“Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. There is one thing we do know definitely...”

“There is one thing we do know definitely: that we are here for the sake of each other.”

He continues and writes: “Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labor of others, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.”

The story of teshuva and *kappara*, of repentance and forgiveness, did not begin with us. It is a gift from Moshe Rabbeinu, and it is a gift from our ancestors. We can do teshuva because our forefathers and foremothers did teshuva. Because our own grandparents and parents did teshuva.

“The rest is up to us.” Their journey continues in our life. Their on-going teshuva depends on ours.

We are all, each in our way, returning to the ultimate source of life. We are on a perpetual journey of return. There are many roads, but only one way. There are many paths, but only one direction. The memory of the past pushes us forward, the dreams of the future call us ahead.

All voices whisper to us from within: “the rest is up to us.” “The rest is up to us.”