

From Ultimate Insights to Ultimate Commitment

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Less than ten years ago, while visiting a small tourist town in the vicinity of Geneva, I was fortunate to receive a ticket to a very private and intimate piano recital in a small gallery hall. There were less than fifty people in attendance. The gallery hall was about a quarter the size of this sanctuary.

Shortly after the recital began, I remember closing my eyes and getting lost in the music. Emotions, feelings, ideas, thoughts, and beliefs I was not aware of, were suddenly released. My heart and mind became clear. In that single hour, I had found a new sense of purpose and meaning in my life.

As soon as the recital ended I wrote two short notes in my traveller's diary. The first note: "Today my life changed." The second note: "How do I remain committed to this life changing event?"

How many of us experience life changing events that turn out to be not so life changing after all?

We say: "I will always remember this moment" and then we forget. "Life will never be the same again" and then again, it's the same.

In 1913 a young European Jewish man decided to become a Christian. As Nahum Glatzer notes: "Systematically minded and history-conscious, he made only one provision, a procedural one: He wished to enter Christianity as did its founders, as a Jew, not as a "pagan."" (Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig – His Life and Thought*, p. XVII) That year he attended the Kol Nidrei services of Yom Kippur in preparation for the church. But he left the services a changed man.

The German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rozenzweig became one of traditional Judaism's leading thinkers of the twentieth century.

Rosenzweig however never mentioned this event to his friends and never presented it in his writings.

His close friend, Nahum Glatzer confides: "The very communicative Rosenzweig, who was eager to discuss all issues and to share all his problems with people, did not wish to expose the most subtle moment of his intellectual life." (ibid. XVIII)

One might say that a single event changed the life of Franz Rosenzweig and the course of Jewish philosophy.

But I would like to express it differently: A single event changed the life of Franz Rosenzweig and the course of Jewish philosophy because Franz Rozenzweig devoted his entire life to that single subtle event.

How do we remain committed to life changing events? How do we ensure that transformative moments truly transform us and truly last?

In the book, *God in Search of Man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, tackles this very question.

Heschel writes: "In conceptual thinking, what is clear and evident at one moment remains clear and evident at all other moments. Ultimate insights, on the other hand, are events, rather than a permanent state of mind; what is clear at one moment may subsequently be obscured....Flashes of insight "come and go, penetrate and retreat, come forth and withdraw."...The immediate certainty that we attain in moments of insight does not retain its intensity after the moments are gone. Moreover, such experiences or inspirations are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched."

And the next part is critical:

“The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith. In this sense, *faith is faithfulness*, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.” (Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pp. 131-132)

“Faith is faithfulness, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.”

This sentence captures one of the most important aspects of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is our time to recommit, and to become faithful, and loyal again, to ultimate insights, to life changing events, and ultimately to God Himself.

While Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur is the day of commitment.

If you were to ask me - What is the liturgical heart of Yom Kippur? - I would have to say that it is not the Kol Nidrei service, despite its beautiful and haunting melody. Nor is it the drama captured by the re-enactment of the Temple service led by the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest). Nor is it the exalting Neilah service. All these services form a critical part of our liturgical and prayer experience. They do not however represent the heart of Yom Kippur.

The heart of Yom Kippur lies in the recitation of the Shema prayer.

Let me repeat: The same exact prayer that we recite twice daily forms the heart of Yom Kippur. The words “*Shema Israel Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*” —“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One” and “*Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto L’Olam vaed*” —“Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and ever” are Yom Kippur’s ultimate statement. That is why we recite them at the very conclusion of the Neilah service, at the very end of the day. Indeed, Rav Kook argued that all of Yom Kippur is merely a preparation to proclaim these very words.

What is the significance of the Shema on Yom Kippur?

I believe that the Shema offers us a map of faith and faithfulness. In short, the Shema teaches us how to transform ultimate insights into committed lives.

The statement “*Shema Yisrael*” — “Hear O Israel” is Judaism’s most basic, fundamental, and original religious insight. The “Shema” captures our people’s quintessential life changing event—our transformative God encounter.

Do you recall the moment you realized the deepest truths about who you are, what your life means, and where your life is heading?

Do you recall the first time you met your closest friend or companion or spouse? Do you remember falling in love for the very first time?

Do you recall the moment you saw a baby being born or a baby being named?

Do you remember a melody or a book or a natural scene that transformed your relationship to the world?

Do you remember an occasion that you prayed or danced or cried and you felt the presence of God?

That is the Shema. That is that ultimate moment.

But ultimate insights can slip away if we don’t ground them in the everyday. That is the very meaning of “*Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto L’Olam vaed*” — “Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and ever.” Do you know what forever and ever means—it’s not something abstract or poetic! It’s actually very concrete. Forever and ever means every single day. “*L’olam vaed*” — “forever and ever” is today, and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and for the rest of my life.

The second line of the Shema challenges us to integrate one ultimate, life changing moment, into every single moment of the rest of our lives - forever and ever.

Think about it—that is the very message of the three paragraphs of the Shema.

“Bechol levavcha, u’bechol nafshecha, u’bechol moedecha”—“with all your heart, and his all your soul, and with all your resources.” *“B’shivtecha b’bhitecha, u’blechtecha vaderech, u’bshochbecha u’bekumecha”*—in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise.” Bind them as a sign on your arm and let them be *teffilin* between your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates. Teach them to your children, discuss them, and learn them.

One of my teachers, R. Aryeh Ben David, who will be joining us this year as a scholar in residence, often says: It is much more probable that a person will act upon an idea if he or she articulates it in his or her heart. There is a higher probability if he or she writes it down as a personal reminder or testimony. A higher probability even still if he or she discusses it with a friend. And there is an even higher probability if he or she shares it with a family or a community.

“With all your heart, in all your ways, to everyone you know.” That is the very secret of the Shema. It is our people’s way of preserving our most subtle religious experiences.

Yom Kippur is less a time of ultimate insight, as it is a time of ultimate commitment. Today is not only about feeling it. It is mainly about learning how to make it last for an entire year or a lifetime—forever and ever.

On Yom Kippur we need to ask ourselves the following question:

As individuals and as a community, what have *we done* with our ultimate insights? How have we succeeded in integrating them into all aspects of our lives?

Over the last few days many of us may have had significant, meaningful experiences.

It could be that we gained an important insight about our profession or vocation. Hold on to that insight—make it forever and ever.

It could be that we realized something essential about our children or our parents or our close family and friends. Hold on to it—make it forever and ever.

It could be that for a moment we felt God comforting us as we remembered a loved one who is no longer with us. Hold on to that moment—make it forever and ever.

It could be a prayer or words of Torah that deeply struck a chord. Hold on to those words—make them forever and ever.

It could be a conversation that made us see things in a different way. Hold on to it—make it forever and ever.

Some of us may not have yet experienced that moment. Keep your heart and your eyes open. And when it comes, hold on to it and make it forever and ever.

Over the last few days, I heard several members of our community say the following words: “During Neilah I know that God is present.” If God is present at Neilah, then God can be present forever and ever.

Hold on to that moment. After Yom Kippur, write it down, speak to a friend about it, share it with your community, family, and friends, and integrate it into every aspect of your life.

We all have ultimate insights. Let’s not let them slip away. This Yom Kippur let’s turn them into ultimate commitments.

As we prepare to shift our focus to the Yizkor service, we are reminded that every person has his or her insight, has his or her Shema. Every person has a unique truth that defined his or her life. Take a moment—remember their Shema. Remember them in your heart and in your soul. Remember them in their homes and on their way. Remember them—the signs that they left behind, a watch, a hat, a photograph. Remember their words, their teachings, their triumphs, their pains. Most of all, remember them by their Shema. Remember them by the subtle insights that only their mouths could utter and only their ears could hear.

Towards the end of his life Franz Rosenzweig suffered from ALS - the same disease which struck Stephen Hawking and he had to write with the help of his wife, who would recite letters of the alphabet until he indicated for her to stop, continuing until she could guess the word or phrase he intended.

Rosenzweig's final attempt to communicate his thought, via the painstaking typewriter-alphabet method, consisted in the partial sentence: "And now it comes, the point of all points, which the Lord has truly revealed to me in my sleep, the point of all points for which there—". The writing was interrupted by his doctor, with whom he had a short discussion using the same method. When the doctor left, Rosenzweig did not wish to continue with the writing, and he died in the night, the sentence left unfinished.

(Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig – His Life and Thought*, p. 174)

"And now it comes, the point of all points."

Until the very end of his life, with his very last breath, Rosenzweig remained committed to his original insight, the subtlest moment of his life.

What is your point of all points? What is the subtle moment that changed your life, the subtle insight that defines who you are? Find it, commit to it, and recommit to it.