

## YOU CAN'T *TREIF* A TORAH, OR A SOUL

Have you ever wondered why we hold the Torah scrolls during the chanting of *Kol Nidre*? It is beautiful choreography, it is majestic and inspiring. But is there a deeper meaning? I haven't yet found any commentary on this, though I have to believe that it exists. Meanwhile, I'm free to ruminate on my own.

One possibility: the *Kol Nidre* prayer speaks of vows which we make in God's name, but find ourselves unable to fulfill. The Torah is the repository of God's word, and specifically of the commandments regarding not swearing falsely. Just as American courts have witnesses swear on a bible, so too our promises – and our disclaimers – this evening are witnessed by the Torah.

A different thought: The *Kol Nidre* – indeed the entire High Holyday season – represents our fear and uncertainty about the year to come. It speaks about promises yet to be made, or promises we may be forced to make, and our worry about fulfilling them. Perhaps, in a very physical way, holding the Torah scrolls for that length of time represents our fear. They are heavy and not so easy to carry. Will the past-presidents be able to do it? In the same way we wonder, “Will we be able to bear the burdens that the coming year brings?”

In years past – not tonight – I've watched folks holding the scrolls, and by the end of the Cantor's repetitions their arms are trembling. I know some of them – maybe all of them - are worried about dropping it. I find that our *bar* and *bat mitzvah* kids are sometimes reluctant to carry the Torah scroll around the sanctuary, for fear they will drop it. Why is everyone so afraid of dropping the Torah? You know the answer. It's not just fear of embarrassment. You know what they're afraid of. Somewhere in their Jewish childhood, some adult told them that if they drop the Torah, they have to fast for 40 days. It's a good way to make sure that people are careful with the Torah, but it's also a good way to make people afraid to come near it. So tonight I want to let you in on a great secret– the story that you have to fast if you drop a Torah is a *bubbe meise*. (I probably should have said this before you all held the scrolls for *Kol Nidre*!) People or congregations who witness a scroll fall do sometimes opt to fast out of a deep sense of reverence, but it is not an obligation.

More importantly, what you really need to know about a Torah is this- nothing you do to the physical scroll can contaminate or taint it. Dropping it won't taint it;

touching it, no matter who you are or what physical or spiritual state you're in won't taint it. If any of the letters become illegible, the scroll is *pasul* – unfit or disqualified for reading until repaired – but it is **not** tainted or corrupt. For food, the opposite of *kosher* is *treif*, which is also be unfit, but has the stronger sense of contamination. For *sifrei Torah*, the opposite of *kosher* is not *treif* – *contaminated*; it is *pasul* – disqualified. Once food is *treif* it can never be made kosher. On the other hand, a *pasul* Torah can always be repaired. Sometimes it takes a scribe just a moment to fix a few letters, and sometimes it takes days or even weeks to clean the parchment, patch holes and rewrite entire sections. But there is no Torah scroll that is beyond repair.

A Torah scroll cannot be made *treif* - tainted, and, no matter what happens to it, there is no Torah scroll that is beyond repair. On *Kol Nidre* holding the scrolls reminds us that what is true of the Torah is true of us. No matter what has happened in the past, no matter what will happen in the year to come, a human being cannot be made *treif*, and there is no human soul that is beyond repair.

How is that possible? We can all cite examples of horrible, evil people throughout history, and maybe one or two in our own lives. Surely their souls are tainted. And we can also cite examples of those who have been victimized, abused, mistreated – maybe one or two in our own lives. Surely, though through no fault of their own, their souls are twisted, damaged, tainted beyond repair. I am here to tell you tonight that this is simply not so. No matter what happens, whether through our own deeds or things that have been to us, the soul cannot be tainted. How do I know? We learn this from, among other places, the story that I tell the religious school students every year about the creation of the world according to Rabbi Isaac Luria. Some of you just heard it on Sunday morning. Here's the short version:

Isaac Luria was a mystic who lived in northern Israel in the town of Safed during the 16th century. He taught that in the beginning, there was God. Just God. God was everything and everywhere. So when God decided to create the universe, the first thing that God had to do was make a space for it. God had to contract God's self to make room for the universe.

The plan was that in that space the universe would be made up of heavenly vessels gently cradling the Divine light. So the next step after contraction was that God created the heavenly vessels. So far, so good.

The actual creation of the universe occurred when God sent the Divine light from God's self into the vessels. But (and this is the interesting part), God had miscalculated (!) and the vessels were not strong enough to hold the light. They shattered into countless shards, scattered all over the place, all mixed up with sparks of Divine light.

And this, said Rabbi Luria, is what our world, our entire universe, is made up of: fragments of the original creation, now broken and imperfect, and in each and every one there is a spark of the Divine light.

According to this cosmogony, we each have a spark of the divine within us. That is our soul. By definition, God cannot be tainted, and neither can the sparks of Divine light. And therefore, neither can our souls. No matter what occurs in our lives, the core of our being remains pure. I find this to be a very comforting and uplifting idea. It gives me hope that there is always the possibility of improvement.

Many of you know that I have been studying and teaching mussar this past year. It is an ancient Jewish spiritual practice intended to help us improve our behavior. In effect it is practical Judaism. Mussar asks that we choose one area of our life to work on at any given time, and gives small and concrete ways to do that each day. I'd be happy to talk with any of you about it at greater length, or put you in touch with folks who have been studying it.

Mussar, which literally means "spiritual ethics," predates Luria, but very much incorporates his theory of creation. In a simplified way, the image used in Mussar is this: Our soul is a pure flame at the center of our being – that's Luria's spark of the divine. Ideally the light of our soul acts as a lamp shedding light into the world. However, surrounding that flame, making up the many levels of the lamp glass arrayed around it like the layers of an onion are all of the traits, the behaviors that, when practiced in a balanced way make up an ideal human life: being generous, even-tempered, compassionate, responsible, etc. There are dozens and dozens of traits. In a perfect person, the glass representing each of these traits would be clean and clear, and perfectly aligned with the glass of the rest of the traits. The result is that the light of our soul would shine unobstructed out into the world.

However, none of us is perfect. Each of us has some glass that is a bit *shmutzik* – not quite clean; each of us has at least a few traits that are a bit out of balance, at

least a few behaviors that could stand improvement. And each of us likely has one or two traits that are nearly opaque, and perhaps twisted out of alignment. Inside at our core, the light itself - our soul - is still pure. But because we don't always behave the way we should, some of that light is blocked on its way out into the world. If we are stingy, some of the glass is dim. If we are constantly angry, some of the glass may become twisted. The more a person does wrong, the more light is blocked, and the darker his soul appears to be. The worst of these become the people we label "evil." It may be that some will never be able to change enough, to clean and align their behavior enough to ever again be labeled "good." But there is always at least the possibility. Even in those people, the soul itself is always untainted. It is what we **do**, not who we **are** that determines our impact on the world for good or bad.

And what of those whose glass is smudged and out-of-alignment through no fault of their own? What of those to whom life has been cruel, those who have been deeply wounded by the actions of others? These are the folks we see struggling each day, with relationships, with what seem to us to be unwarranted fears, the folks who have in some way been victims of life. Some of them always seem stingy, because the poverty of their childhood has marked them. Some seem untrusting, because they themselves have been betrayed too often. Surely they are not to blame if the light of their souls does not shine out into the world as strongly as that of some others. Absolutely, they are not to blame for what has been done to them. Mussar is not about blame. Their souls are certainly untainted. Nonetheless, their light is unable to shine out into the world, and the path of mussar offers healing. It does not ask "why is your light not shining fully?" Instead, it offers a way to fix that problem, to cleanse our actions, to adjust and realign our behaviors, and let the light of God within us shine out more brightly into a world that desperately needs more light.

Whether because of things we have done, or things that have been done to us, we are all in need of making changes in some areas of our lives. Mussar offers one path. It encourages us to make changes not through thought or feeling, but through action intended to invoke feeling. Tonight, just one example, a mussar story apropos the High Holyday season. It involves Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who lived in the 1800's, and is considered to be the father of the modern *Mussar* Movement. The story is told that:

“Rabbi Salanter was traveling by train from Salant to Vilna and was sitting in a smoking car holding a lit cigar. A young man accosted him by yelling about the putrid odor of the smoke. Other passengers were appalled. After all, they were in the smoking car. Despite that, Rabbi Salanter extinguished the cigar and opened the train’s window to dissipate the fumes. It was only a few seconds before the young man slammed the window down, while screaming at the elderly sage for opening it. Rabbi Salanter apologized profusely to the man young enough to be his child, and buried himself in a Jewish book of law.

Upon arriving in Vilna, the young man was mortified to see throngs of people gathered to receive one of Europe’s most prominent Rabbis. The man immediately ran to the home where Rabbi Salanter was staying. He began to beg forgiveness. “Don’t worry,” said Reb Yisrael, “a trip can make one edgy. I bear no ill will. Tell me, why did you come to Vilna?”

Put at ease, the young man explained that he was looking to become an ordained *shochet*, (slaughterer), and certification from a Vilna rabbi would be universally accepted. Rabbi Salanter smiled. “As it turns out, my own son-in-law, Reb Elya Lazer, can ordain you. He is a Rav here in Vilna. You’ve had a long journey. Rest up and tomorrow you can take the test.

The next day thought, it was apparent that the man needed more than rest, because he failed the test miserably. Remarkably, that did not deter Rabbi Salanter. He encouraged the man to try again. For the next several weeks, Rabbi Yisrael arranged for tutors who soon prepared the young man well enough to pass Reb Elya Lazer’s exam along with the tests of other well-known Vilna rabbis. He even arranged for the man to get a job.

Before leaving Vilna, the man appeared before Reb Yisrael with tears in his eyes. “Tell me, Rebbe,” he cried. “I was able to understand that such a righteous man as you could forgive me for my terrible arrogance on the train. But why did you help me so much? That, I can never understand.”

“Reb Yisrael sat him down, held his hand and explained. “It is easy to say ‘I forgive you’. But deep down, how does one really know if he still bears a grudge? Way down in my heart I actually was not sure. The only way to remove a grudge is to take action. One who helps another develops a love for the one he aided. By helping you, I created a true love which is overwhelmingly more powerful than the words, ‘I forgive you’.”

“The only way to remove a grudge is to take action.” Jewish tradition – mussar in particular – teaches that the only way to change anything about ourselves is through action. Behavior changes feelings.

On this holy evening, as the Days of Awe draw to a close, my prayer for us all is this: may you always hold fast to the truth that no matter what has happened, no matter what will happen, your innermost being is pure. May you find a path to align your actions with your soul. And each and every day may your light shine ever more brightly into the world.