

A Day Like Purim

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*The following essay was written to be read at the Student
Conservative Minyan's Yom Kippur morning service.*

This year, for the first time I can remember, I did not attend services on Rosh Hashanah.¹ I was feeling overwhelmed with assignments, I told myself. I'll go to the library and then to the holiday dinner. And to the library I went, sat down, and began to cry. I was not trying to catch up on work, I realized a few minutes too late. I was trying to avoid something.

And yet, as I sat down to write this—to think about what it is I was trying to avoid—I have come to feel like Yom Kippur is a bit of a farce. What I mean to say is: What are we doing here?

Aaron is about to take two goats from the community and draw lots. One will be sacrificed to God, the other will be set free. Then Aaron, the High Priest whose sons Nadab and Abihu have just died for offering a sacrifice incorrectly—not for idol worship or making war, but for sacrificing *to God* the wrong way—Aaron takes a bull to make a sin offering for himself and his household. Because surely Aaron is the one who needs to apologize to God.

And the message here, as far as I can tell, is that God, like us, is obsessed with order. That maybe, if we could just control the randomness (whatever that would mean), it would all be okay. Even though it is hardly ever okay.

On Monday, I walked into Rav Jason's office. He had called me back in August to ask if I would speak today. I was distracted; the fastest way off the phone seemed to be to agree. But now, I said:

"I don't know how to write this. I feel mad at the holiday."



He said, “Okay.”

I continued: “It all seems like a bit of a joke. We’re going to ask God to give us another year of life because we’ve apologized for our sins—which is to say, because we’ve tried to be good? Because all the people who died in the last year—that was on purpose? And the important part is the apologizing to God, not to the people we’ve wronged—sure, we’re supposed to do that too, but people aren’t really saying these days *wow, the Jews are so good at realizing when they’ve done wrong and making amends*. I guess there’s that as well—we have a lot of repairing to do. But who is this we? I think it’s more Netanyahu’s fault than mine that he’s speaking to an empty room at the UN. But I bet we feel more guilt about it than he does.

But who knows? Maybe he trembles for his country when he thinks that God is just.”

And even though that’s a pretty cliché speech, and I said it less coherently on Monday, Rav Jason was kind to me because that is his job.

And he said: “Well maybe that is why Yom Kippur ² is like Purim.”

Because the Rabbis love word tricks, right?

And Yom Kippur, if you separate out the first letter, reads: **פּוּרִים** - **יּוֹם**—a day which is like Purim. There are several explanations for this. According to one, most holidays are half for you and half for God, but Purim is all for you and Yom Kippur is all for God. But this strikes me as a bad explanation. That is why Yom Kippur is *not* like Purim. Or, the Zohar says that in the future, we will celebrate on Yom Kippur like we do today on Purim.

What I’m trying to say is: maybe Yom Kippur is like Purim because it is, in essence, a farce.

We’re pretending the world is not what it is, that somehow we could order it. Or that God will order it. Or that the Jews might actually respond to their collective guilt. Or that the interventionist God will intervene, that this year, everything will be just. And, as on Purim, we dress up and pretend we are people other than we are.

Eli Wiesel tells a story about Yom Kippur in Auschwitz. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a man he knew, who had been the head of a yeshiva before the war and was now very clearly dying, told him: “I will not fast on Yom Kippur. Not because here, we fast every day, but because how could I plead any more to God?” Then the holiday came around, and they davened Kol Nidre ³ separately, and Wiesel did not see the man until after the fast had ended.

Later that week, the man confessed: he had fasted. Not to please God, but rather to spite him. “The only way to accuse him is by praising him.” Because the most spiteful thing one can do is say to God *I believe you will do the right thing, I believe you will make it better. Either you are choosing to prolong this suffering, or you do not have the power to stop it.*

It is not the 1940s and, thank God, we are free. Indeed, we are the ones forcing others to live every day like it is Yom Kippur. But I think this rabbi’s point stands. After reading Wiesel and talking to Rav Jason, I had an occasion to email many of the professors who I have known well, and so I solicited feedback on my unfortunately angsty “this all seems like a farce” theory.

While many of the Jewish professors I emailed said something along the lines of “I stopped believing in God in the last century, what do you want from me?”, the only Christian I queried had something more helpful to say. This professor directed me to the index of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard). Kierkegaard is concerned with this aspect of faith that approaches farce.

He writes, “What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up.”

I haven’t forgotten where I am or what day it is. And I don’t mean to hold on to the particular absurdity of the idea that God—omnipotent, omniscient and maybe omnibenevolent—could really be born on earth and do things like teethe. But I still want to think about most of Kierkegaard’s notion of the absurd here: the idea that He is here, able to intervene and doing so, while also keeping my eyes open to the world around me, where perfectly good people die for no reason all the time.

Kierkegaard goes on:

“So, then, there is a man who wants to have faith; well, let the comedy begin.

He wants to have faith, but he wants to assure himself with the aid of objective deliberation and approximation. What happens? ... Now he is all set to believe it, but, lo and behold, now it has indeed become impossible to believe it.”

And I don’t want to suggest that we’re doing Pascal’s wager here, Jewish or otherwise. I cannot believe for a reason, because it makes sense, or because I have decided to. As much as another professor told me to talk about how good it is that we all get together to think about how “we, emphasis on the collective, have failed other mortals,” I do not know how to pray void of the possibility I might be praying to someone. It’s absurd. It’s farcical. I’ll do it only out of spite. And I have no spite for you, so the spite must be for God.

And so I (or we) resort to farce by way of ritual. Because this way, it can be controlled. I pray and pound my chest with sincerity one year, and not the next, but I will still do it. And because you will still do it too, and all of these people that I cannot have a single thought without—because I am not a person except constituted in the eyes of some community—will do it too.

Or we will at least take the question seriously. And that seriousness will be urgent and it will be part of the absurdity. In any event, I will still present the possibility to God of trying to behold Him. Or the possibility that He beholds me. I will still play my part. In spite and in earnestness, in belief and in doubt, and in anger and in absurdity. G’mar chatima tova.⁴

¹ The Jewish new year, 10 days before Yom Kippur.

² The holiest day of the Jewish calendar, or “Day of Atonement.”

³ The prayer service on the night Yom Kippur begins.

⁴ May you be sealed in the Book of Life. (Traditional greeting on Yom Kippur).