

Justice and Mercy

Yom Kippur Morning 5779 – September 19, 2018
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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When I was a junior in college, I spent the year abroad studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I did not live on campus on Mount Scopus. Instead, I shared an apartment in town with three other people.

That year, on the evening of Rosh Hashanah, my housemates and I gathered together to welcome the New Year. We made a special festive meal. We lit candles and then I lifted up a cup of wine for Kiddush. Without looking at a prayer book, I sang the blessing I knew by heart. I felt joy as I offered the bracha that concluded, *Baruch Ata Adonai, M'Kadeish HaShabbat*.

Two of my housemates sang Amen and drank their wine. But the fourth member of our household, Jerry, was clearly upset. He said to me: "You sang the wrong blessing. What you sang was the Kiddush for Shabbat Evening. There is a completely different Kiddush you are supposed to sing for Rosh Hashanah."

At that time in my life, I had no clue there was a special Kiddush for Rosh Hashanah.

After informing me of my error, Jerry insisted on offering Kiddush a second time, using the blessing printed in the machzor. I stood by silent and angry. I resented Jerry for critiquing my Kiddush which I had sung with such sincerity. I thought to myself, "Who cares if I got the words wrong?" I was too angry to admit that maybe Jerry had a point. Clearly he was upset with me for my ignorance and irritated that someone had offered the wrong blessing on the night of Rosh Hashanah.

Hearing this story, you might be deciding for yourself: Was I right? Or was Jerry? But before you make-up your mind, let me ask you to consider a different question: Which of our blessings did God prefer: the incorrect Shabbat Kiddush sung with sincerity or the correct Rosh Hashanah Kiddush offered in accordance with tradition?

When I think about it, the answer is: God did not prefer one Kiddush more than the other. God favored neither the sincerely offered prayer nor the properly worded blessing. God preferred both.

To speak of God preferring both is to acknowledge something fundamental to a Jewish understanding of God. There is an aspect of God which is strict and judgmental. In God's view, there are right and wrong standards by which we are measured. From the perspective of God's Judgment, Jerry was right. There is a correct blessing for the evening of Rosh Hashanah and I blew it.

Yet, in Judaism, we also speak of God not only as the Righteous Judge but also as being All Merciful. God has compassion for us even when we make mistakes. Whether or not we say a prayer correctly, the sincerity with which we offer our thanks to God has merit.

So as I said, it is not a case of Jerry being right or me. From the viewpoint of God's as Judge, Jerry was right. From the perspective of God as Merciful, I was right.

And, if you ask, is it possible for God to be both Judgmental and Merciful, I would respond: You are right, too!

In Judaism, it is central to our faith to proclaim Adonai Echad; that God is One. Yet our tradition affirms that there are different aspects to God's Oneness. During the High Holy Days, two of God's attributes, Justice and Mercy, are front and center.

Throughout the High Holy Days, we call God the Righteous Judge, Sovereign of the Universe. We envision God as transcendent, judging us, critiquing us, and weighing our merit for the coming year.

During these Days of Awe, God evaluates our actions during the past year. Our lives are in the balance. "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die; who will reach the ripeness of age, and who will be taken before their time." God counts and weighs our deeds on the scale of justice and determines our length of days for the coming year.

Yet, God as Supreme Judge is not the only attribute central during the High Holy Days. For God both evaluates us according to strict standards and yet is also filled with infinite Mercy.

At the beginning of our Torah service this morning we affirm God's compassion as we proclaim

*Adonai Adonai El Rachum V'Chanun, Erech Apayim V'Rav Chesed V'emet
God, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true;
Showing mercy to the thousandth generation;
Forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon.*

God has Rachmones, compassion, for us. God did not make us like the angels who are without sin. God knows that we are flawed and imperfect. So does it matter to God if we pronounce every Hebrew prayer flawlessly?

I'm reminded of the story of a Jewish boy who grew-up on a farm. He never learned to read the Hebrew alphabet. Nor did he know how to say the prayers. His father almost never brought him to synagogue.

On the farm, the boy's task was to take care of the sheep. While he roamed the fields, he would play a little wooden flute. He loved playing the *chalil* and drew out of it beautiful melodies.

One day, on Yom Kippur, the father decided to bring his son to shul. Excited to be going, the boy took his flute and hid it in his coat.

The boy sat quietly in synagogue while everyone else prayed. During the morning service, the boy whispered to his father, "Daddy, I want to play my flute." Angrily, the father scolded him and warned him not to do such a sacrilegious thing on the holiest day of the year.

As the day went on, the boy repeated his request to play his flute and his father continued to forbid it. But then came time for the concluding service, Neilah. As his dad rose to

beat his chest and confess his sins, the boy drew his flute out of his pocket and played with all his heart.

The Neilah service stopped. Everyone remained still. The congregation listened, astonished.

The sun began to set. The Gates of Heaven were closing. And still the boy played on and on – and no one said a word.

Finally, it was dark. The boy stopped playing. The rabbi arose before his congregation and spoke:

“This child’s flute spoke to God in a voice greater than our prayers. In this boy’s heart, although he did not know how to pray in our customary way, there burned a desire to serve God with prayer. His pure heart offered a prayer which God received more readily than all of our prayers together. For the prayers of the innocent are mightier than all others.”

I love this story, for it illustrates that if we offer our prayers with true emotion, then our prayers are acceptable to God. Even if we do not say the prayers exactly as written down, God is moved by the purity of our hearts.

So if we offer our prayers with sincerity and heartfelt emotions, are they not acceptable to God?

Yes, this is true. But it is not the absolute truth. For God desires not only the prayers of our hearts but also the best offerings of our mind. God is compassionate and hears our souls’ stirrings. Yet God also desires our thoughts, our reflections, and our self-judgements.

Heart and Mind. Chesed V’Emet. Justice and Mercy. Both attributes of God are essential to this day of Yom Kippur.

It can seem paradoxical to depict this polarity in God - that God is Judge and Merciful. Yet, lest you think that this is abstract theology about God in Heaven – know this: we are created in the image of God. Just as God is capable of offering judgment and showing compassion, so are we. This polarity is baked into human nature.

We are all endowed with the capacity to judge – to establish standards of right and wrong. We look at ourselves and if we are honest, we see our flaws, our mistakes, and our errors. In Jewish parlance, we most often use the word Cheit to describe a sin. Cheit comes from a Hebrew word that means to miss the mark; to let fly with an arrow that misses the bullseye. The concept of Cheit would not make sense unless there was a target in mind, a goal at which to aim, a standard of excellence to strive for.

On Yom Kippur, we are to judge ourselves with honesty and humility. We are to ask God to forgive our sins as we also seek forgiveness from those we have harmed.

Yet judgement, when taken to an extreme, can be ungodly. It can lead us away from God and alienate us from those we care about. There is a passage in our machzor which characterizes the price you pay when you judge everyone else as failing to measure up to your expectations. It reads:

“I’m surrounded by imperfection

Everyone I know falls short
Of my exacting standards.
Sometimes I wonder what it would be like
If all of them were acceptable to me:
The words of their mouths
And the meditations of their hearts.
Maybe then I'd finally find peace."

Just as it is possible that being too judgmental can cause harm, is it possible to go to the other extreme? Is being too compassionate harmful in our relationship with God and with others?

The Torah tells of such a possibility. In Exodus, after the Israelites received the 10 Commandments, Moses ascends Mount Sinai once again to commune with God. Days and weeks go by and the people grow more anxious about who will lead them. Restless and agitated, they threaten rebellion. So Aaron, Moses' older brother, tells the people to give him their gold so he can fashion a calf for them to worship.

We all know that Aaron's action did not turn out well. Moses descends from the mountain. Filled with righteous anger, he rebukes his brother, destroys the Golden Calf, and orders his fellow Levites to take vengeance, slaying 3,000 Israelites.

Aaron erred on the side of having too much compassion for his fellow Israelites. He took pity on these former slaves trying to survive in a hostile environment. His Rachmones overcame his better judgment; enabling the Israelites to commit the sin of idolatry.

Judgement and Mercy are godly attributes. They are aspects of our human nature. Are we capable of striking the right balance between the two?

The two Haftarah portions for the mornings of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur inform us of the errors we make when we err too strongly on either the side of Judgement or Mercy. In the Haftarah portion on Rosh Hashanah, the high priest, Eli, sees a woman praying in the sanctuary. He sees her lips moving and accuses her of being drunk.

"Oh no," Hannah says, "I am a very unhappy woman," and she explains to him her anguish due to her infertility.

Eli was wrong to misjudge her. God shows compassion for Hannah's plight and nine months later she gives birth to a longed for child.

Contrast that story to this morning's Haftarah portion. The people judge themselves favorably. They are convinced they are doing the right thing, offering the proper prayers and sacrifices as prescribed by tradition. But along comes the prophet Isaiah who chastises the Israelites for their lack of compassion for those who are vulnerable in the community. It's not enough to follow the right rules. God wants us to show mercy: As the prophet Isaiah righteously proclaims, "Do you call this a fast, a day worthy of the favor of Adonai? Is not this the fast I desire: to break the bonds of injusticeto let the oppressed go free... to share your bread with the hungry... and to take the poor into your home?"

How do we find the right balance between Justice and Mercy? How do we keep from neither tipping too far in our judgments nor being too quick to forgive the faults of others?

A story is told in the Midrash of a king who had two empty goblets. Said the king, "If I pour hot water into the goblets, they will burst, and if I pour cold water in them, they will crack." So what did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water together and poured the water into the goblets, and the goblets did not break.

Similarly, said the Holy One, "If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, it will be overwhelmed with sin. If I establish it on the basis of justice alone, the world cannot exist. So I will create the world with both justice and mercy that way life on earth can endure."

Combining the attributes of justice and mercy in the right proportion is our aspiration for this Day of Atonement. Let us hold ourselves accountable for our failures. Let us judge ourselves with honesty and humility. In turn, may we be quick to offer forgiveness when our family and friends sincerely ask us. May we be merciful toward a world in need of our compassion.

Finding a balance between justice and mercy is our task not only on this day of Yom Kippur, It is our challenge each and every day. To find the good in each person and yet not be blind to injustice. To show mercy for humanity yet to bring to justice those who cause harm.

We, who are created in the image of God, have embedded in our souls equal measures of Justice and Mercy. Do we find ourselves exercising too much justice, when mercy would be better? Are we too quick to excuse bad behavior, reluctant to hold others accountable? Let us remember the words of the prophet Micah who taught us long ago:

*God has told you what is good and what Adonai requires of you:
Only to seek righteousness
To value compassion
And to walk modestly with your God.*

*Heegeed L'cha Adam Ma Tov
Kee Eem Asot Mishpat
V'ahavat Chesed
V'hatznea Lechet Eem Eloheicha*

On this holy day of Yom Kippur and in all the days to come in this blessed New Year:
Let us do justice
May we love mercy
And let us walk humbly with God