

Humankind is a single family and who serves one of its members serves them all. The truth is that the view from my hospital window was the world; and I, obscure, unimportant and of not much value, was the beneficiary of all that the world had learned, so that I might be kept alive.

Should I not be grateful? Should I not be bound to take the roses of the spirit outside and help transform mankind's winter world into a shining and everlastingly loveliness?

I think that we must. We have no right to receive and not be willing to give. We cannot let anybody's view from his hospital window look out on a landscape which is without people—nay, more, on a landscape which is without us.

In the silent procession of the generations, perhaps someone is waiting desperately for the sight of us, our hand raised in friendly salute, our lips speaking words of fellowship and cheer.

Not less than doctor or scientist or teacher, each of us, in his own way, adds his life to the view from the hospital window. May God grant that it is for good. May we help make the view a better view. It is never later than you think when people stretch out their hands, when God and man are partners in bringing roses to the winter view from the hospital window.

JACOB J. SCHACTER

Was There Nothing Worth Fighting For?

A Yom Kippur Sermon

If Israel is nothing else (and surely it is) Israel is a passionate country. I am consistently struck by the power of the passions that swirl about even matters of simple everyday life, let alone those relating to the economy, foreign policy, the religious character of the state, and more. Everyone, very definitely, has an opinion—right and left, religious and secular, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, sabra and new immigrant.

But never, I believe, has the power of passion been expressed more forcefully than it has been in the course of the emotional, bitter, and harsh debate currently taking place over the peace process. On this issue, feelings, emotions, and passions are running at an all-time high.

At the White House signing in September, 1993, the late Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin spoke with exceptional eloquence:

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We have come from Jerusalem, the ancient land and eternal capital of the Jewish people. We have come from an anguished and grieving land. We have come from a people, a home, a family that has not known a single year, not a single month, in which mothers have not wept for their sons. We have come to try and put an end to the hostilities so that our children, our children's children, will no longer experience the painful cost of war, violence, and terror. We have come to secure their lives and to ease the soul and the painful memories of the past—to hope and pray for peace. We say to you [the Palestinians] today, in a loud and a clear voice: enough of blood and tears. Enough.

On the other side of the aisle, as it were, there is equal eloquence, power, and passion. Peace, of course, claim its proponents, but not at such a high price. We are endangering the security of the State; we are putting hundreds of thousands of Jews at risk. This direction will not bring peace to the State, they argue, it will bring only further death, danger, and insecurity.

In Israel, passions run high about almost anything. But what about us? What about American Jewry? What are *we* passionate about? What do *we* really care about? What is it that engages *us*, deeply and intensely, to the very core of *our* beings?

I find the power of passion projected in an interesting detail in the ancient Yom Kippur ritual. The highlight of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple (featured in the Torah reading of that day and in the traditional Musaf service) was, without any question, the entrance and hopefully safe exit of the High Priest into and out of the Holy of Holies. Once a year, there took place a convergence between the holiest person (the High Priest), the holiest place (the Holy of Holies), and the holiest time (the day of Yom Kippur). For a brief moment, the High Priest entered this place which was off limits even to him the entire year and prayed there on behalf of the Jewish people. His concentration had to be perfect, his involvement total, and the intensity of his devotion all encompassing. One slip, God forbid, and God could take his life. And so, when the High Priest emerged safely from this holiest of places, you can imagine how relieved he and the members of his family surely were. Then, culminating his Temple Service on this great day, the High Priest recited a beautiful and meaningful prayer:

May it be thy will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that the forthcoming year shall be for thy people, the house of Israel, a year

of abundant prosperity; a year of generous decrees declared by thee; a year of grain, wine, and oil; a year of attainment and success; a year of meeting in thy sanctuary; a year of enjoyable living; a year of dew, rain, and warmth; a year of delicious fruits; a year of atonement for all our iniquities; a year wherein thou wilt bless our food and drink; a year of business transactions; a year of attending our sanctuary; a year of plenty and delight; a year wherein thou wilt bless our offspring and the fruit of our land; a year wherein thou wilt bless our coming and going; a year wherein thou wilt save our community; a year wherein thou wilt be merciful toward us; a year of peace and serenity; a year wherein thou wilt let us make joyous pilgrimages to our country; a year wherein thou wilt open thy goodly treasury for us; a year wherein thy people, the house of Israel, will not be in need of one another's aid nor the support of another people, for thou wilt bless the products of their own hands (Philip Birnbaum, *High Holiday Prayer Book* New York: [Hebrew Publishing Co.] 1951, 826).

It is a beautiful prayer because it is a real prayer, a direct prayer. It covers all the bases—personal and communal, physical and spiritual. “A year of delicious fruits” is immediately followed by “a year of atonement for all our iniquities.” It touches all of a human being's possible needs.

But there is something missing from our text, one particular detail found both in the Babylonian Talmud (*Yoma* 53b) and Jerusalem Talmud (*Yoma* 5:3) versions of this prayer: In the Babylonian Talmud, “The prayer of the travellers should not enter before you,” or in the Jerusalem Talmud's version, “Do not be swayed by the prayer of the travellers.”

The issue is a very simple one. Travellers on the road want to get home safely but, in ancient times faced a serious threat from rain—and traveller was unprotected, roads would wash away, etc. As a result, the traveller would pray for no rain. But the community as a whole needed rain; crops had to grow, food had to be produced, the harvest needed to take place. So the High Priest prayed to God: Don't be influenced by the traveller's prayer for no rain; send it anyway, to a hungry and needy world.

But I have three questions. First of all, is this so important that it was included in both Talmuds' version of this prayer? Is this on the same level as the request for “abundant prosperity,” “generous decrees,” “enjoyable living,” or “atonement for all our iniquities?” In the

Babylonian Talmud's version, this is the final, culminating prayer! Does it not seem so out of proportion to all the rest?

Second, are we to assume that a just God, who obviously recognizes the need for communal rain, will listen to a few lonely individuals on a road somewhere to the detriment of the vast overwhelming majority of Jews? Why would He even consider withholding rain from the many for the sake of just a few?

Finally, if this was such an issue, why didn't the High Priest simply issue a proclamation announcing that travellers are not allowed to pray for no rain? Simply prohibit the traveller from uttering such a prayer and all the problems will be solved!

We focus on a small, seemingly insignificant detail but herein lies a crucially important message for us during these difficult times. How does prayer work, anytime? Does God need our prayers? Does God not know what we need, and will our prayers make a difference if He decides not to grant us our desires? How do we understand the notion of the efficacy of prayer in general?

It seems to me that in order for prayer to be effective, it is crucial that we fulfill one essential condition described by the rabbis in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 32a). The Bible records that after the sin of the golden calf, Moses prayed to God on behalf of the Jewish people, but the Talmud elaborates on *how* he prayed:

R. Ababu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing. This teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his coat and said to Him: "Master of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them."

Moses grabbed God by the lapels, as it were, and said, "God, you *must* forgive them! I am holding on here for dear life and not letting go until you forgive them."

The basic principle is that prayer requires passion. You have to want what you want, and you have to want it with passion.

The traveller who prays for no rain undoubtedly prays with passion. He is very concerned about arriving home safely and, as a result, expresses himself with real feeling. This kind of a prayer—addressed to God by one who prays for what he or she *really needs*—cannot be arbitrarily outlawed. The High Priest could not possibly proclaim a de-

cree against such a prayer. A genuine instinctive expression of real inner need cannot be externally controlled. So the High Priest is afraid that if the traveller is passionate enough, if he grabs onto God's lapels, as it were, firmly enough, then God might respond to his entreaty even if it means overriding the needs of the community. The power of passion knows no bounds. So the holiest man includes a most important component to his most joyous prayer upon safely exiting from the holiest place on the holiest day—a prayer that the community's prayer be *even more* passionate, that *all* Jews pray to God always with seriousness, with solemnity, with passion. Don't listen to the traveller's prayer, he asks. May the prayers of the community be even more passionate.

We need more passion in our lives, not just in prayer but in all aspects of our lives. What *are* we passionate about? What *do* we really care about? What *is it* that engages us deeply and intensely, to the core of our beings? Unfortunately, not terribly much.

A number of years ago, my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, told me a story about the early years of Communism when many religious Jews became caught up in the ideals of that movement and rejected their own tradition; when thousands of yeshiva boys closed their Gemaras drawn by the utopian promise of this new society. Once, a number of Hasidim were sitting with their Rebbe and, in a sad and despondent mood, asked him, "Rebbe, tell us. Why is it that the Communists are so successful and we are on the defensive? After all, what we have is *emes* (truth) and what they have is *sheker* (falsehood)?" Said the Rebbe, "Yes, my children, you are right. We have *emes* and they have *sheker*. But there is also another significant difference between us. You see, they fight for their *sheker* with *emes* while we fight for our *emes* with *sheker*. They fight for their falsehood, but they do so with conviction, with feeling, with passion, convinced of the certainty of their position. We, on the other hand, fight for our truth, but we do so halfheartedly, in a matter of fact way, in a haphazard and perfunctory manner. We have the *emes*, no doubt about it, but in order to win the battle we need to fight for the *emes* with *emes*."

Indeed, we do fight for so many causes.

We are concerned about Israel, of course. But how concerned are we really? How much are we really deeply invested in the fate and future of Israel? How often do we visit and tangibly express our connection and commitment? How much do we give in support of Israel?

We continue to be concerned about Jews in the former Soviet Union as the scepter of Communism continues to threaten Jewish life in those countries. But how concerned are we really? How active have we been to strengthen Jewish life in the former Soviet Union? How much have we done to insure the ability of the Jews there to leave, whether to Israel or to other countries in the free world?

We are concerned with the rising threats of assimilation and intermarriage that gnaw away at the vibrancy and vitality of Jewish life in this country. Of course we are. But how concerned are we really? How much of an active role have we taken to stem the tide of apathy and ignorance that characterizes so much of American Jewry?

Our religious lives are a source of concern for us. But how concerned are we really? Regardless of our religious orientation, we consider those to the left of us as "lazy" (they really observe nothing), those to the right of us as "crazy" (they clearly are fanatics and extremists) and have trouble acknowledging that we ourselves are not much more than "hazy," not really committed to our observance. Is this a way to insure our future, to perpetuate our values to our children? Do we merely pay lip serve to Torah observance or are we genuinely committed to it—with passion?

We are committed to our synagogue. Of course we are. But how committed are we really? Do we do all we can to insure that it be the strong religious and moral voice in the community that we know it must be?

Surely we love our families—our spouses, our parents, our children. Of course we do. But how passionate is that love? How many other things somehow manage to intrude into the middle of that love? How much time do we spend involved in activities that do not give us an opportunity to appropriately express that love?

We are now at the juncture of the Yom Kippur service immediately prior to *Yizkor*. What do we remember most about our loved ones who are no longer with us? I would venture to say that only secondarily is it their wisdom, their intellect, or their teachings. I have no doubt that primarily it is their feelings—their love, their emotion, their passions. *That* is what made the greatest impact on us and it is *this* which will make the greatest impact on others—on God, our children, on our community.

In one of his novels, the late Alan Paton has one of his characters say: "When I shall ascend to heaven, which I certainly intend to do, I

will be asked, 'Where are your wounds?' When I will say, 'I haven't any,' I will be asked, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for,' and that is a question that I do not want to have to answer."

Confronted by such a question today, on this Yom Kippur, what would *our* answer be?

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