

“After the Hurricane”

Part Four

“How About Some Joy?”

A Sermon for the Day of Atonement 5766

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“After the Hurricane” has been our overall title for the High Holy Days. Last night we asked how much are we worth after the hurricane. This holy day, let’s talk about something a little less on the dark side – joy – our celebration of the holy and healthy pleasures of life, including, yes, our sexuality, in the context of not only the post-hurricane world, but also on this, the most sacred of days of the Jewish Calendar.

### I.

Sometime back, *The New York Times* elaborated upon what the author labeled as the four rungs of contrition. The author insisted that the lowest rung on the ladder of contrition is that one popularized by Richard Nixon during Watergate.

Some of you are old enough to remember how, ever so grudgingly, he finally acknowledged, “mistakes were made.” However, by saying as much, Nixon implied that, however regrettable the mistakes, no one was individually responsible.

### II.

The next highest rung on the “I’m sorry” ladder shifts from the passive to the active voice, personalizing the offense. It goes, “If what I said offended you, I apologize.” Dating and married couples might especially recognize that little maneuver, which really says:

You shouldn’t have been offended in the first place,  
so there’s really nothing for which to apologize, but  
I will anyway, just to placate oversensitive you!

### III.

The third rung is especially popular with children and politicians, if you can differentiate between the two! The wrongdoer admits: “I was wrong,” and then adds, “...but so was everybody else!”

In other words, each error so trivialized, ought to be divided up among the number of people who made it, leaving everyone barely culpable for anything.

### IV.

Well, the top rung is reserved for a full-fledged, no-nonsense form of contrition that sounds very, very different from the preceding halfhearted efforts. We call it repentance and it necessitates:

- 1) Acknowledging and owning our past, which, once committed, cannot be undone. After all, our actions have consequences: harsh words, thoughtless omissions, betrayals, and infidelities.

- 2) All right, everybody **wake up** and listen to this second point! Repentance is far more about the future than it is about the past. It is the future which stands open before us. Don't despair and don't consign yourself to helplessness because of a past failure. Today, we have another chance! The future calls to each one of us: claim me! Redeem me!

And here is where the sex comes in. My supposition is that probably no area of our lives casts such a painful shadow of guilt, embarrassment, or even shame (some merited, some not) as we gather on this Holy Day. So, let's talk about this -- a sensitive, but also joyful issue. You know, this is the one day of the year when Judaism actually says sex is a no-no, but the ancient sages never ordered us not to talk about it!

As a matter of fact, in traditional synagogues all over the world today, the Torah portion from Leviticus 18 includes reference to sodomy, transvestism, and adultery. Our 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reform Jewish Predecessors, showing the utmost of German gentility, chose to skip all those parts.

But, here's the point: in Judaism, there is no shame in the physical body and no sacred precinct – including this pulpit – in which discussing our sexuality is inappropriate or, God forbid, obscene.

In Judaism, the marital relationship remains sacred and primary. Our Torah addresses it right away in Genesis 2:24:

Thus a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, so that they may become one flesh.

And do you realize that both Jewish men and women have the right to divorce their spouses if they refuse to participate in this joyous and sacred aspect of their lives in a loving, romantic, satisfying manner? The Christian world has always had far more hang-ups on such subjects. No less a “rabbinic sage” than Dr. Ruth Westheimer writes,

What did the Victorian mother tell her daughter on the night of her wedding? Grit your teeth and think of England! But in Jewish tradition, there are hints, incentives, and even legislation for (satisfaction) – yes, a woman's, too.

Yes, our Judaism is intensely sexual. No less than the great Maimonides declared:

When sexual intercourse is done for the sake of Heaven, there is nothing so holy and pure...God did not create anything that is ugly or shameful.

Now, one more statement on Judaism's view of sexuality. To a Jew, libidinal energy – sexuality included (which we traditionally call Yetzer) is an ambivalent power, one not condemned as irredeemably evil.

Celibacy (for clergy or non-clergy) is not a mitzvah in Judaism. It is an aberration! The righteous person in Jewish eyes is not the one who suffocates his or her libido, but the one who controls it and enjoys it in proper moderation.

Yes, there were those who advised me, “Don't talk about sex, Rabbi. Don't do that at Temple and, besides, the old folks won't like it.” All right, first, Rabbis have indeed spoken of such. Rabbi Max Heller referred to our sexuality in both his Rosh HaShanah and Kol Nidre Eve sermons of 5685 – that's 1924. On the New Year, he wondered:

Are we nothing more than glorified animals with  
lusts and appetites like those of brutes...with  
passions and desires more shrewdly and ingeniously  
served than those of the animal world?

Now, what about these “old folks” who some counseled me “won't like such talk”? You've heard of the two old guys who collide while pushing their carts through the aisles of Wal-Mart? The first guy apologizes to the second fellow, explaining that he is preoccupied because he can't locate his wife in that big store. The second old guy reassures him, “That's okay. By coincidence, I'm looking for my wife, too, and frankly, I'm feeling a little desperate.”

The first fellow suggests, “Maybe we can help each other. What does your wife look like?”

The second old guy replies, “She's 27, tall, red hair, blue eyes, long legs, big bust, and she's wearing short shorts. But, what does your wife look like?”

To which the first old guy says, “Doesn't matter. Let's look for yours!”

On a recent Saturday evening, I sat with my 91 year old Mom and her friends at their dinner table at the Poydras Home. I mentioned that I was on my way to marry a handsome couple who had only met two months ago!

“Tell us more,” the ladies urged me, now starry-eyed.

“Well,” I said, “he's a doctor and she teaches Yoga, and they are deeply in love. They want to be married under the Oaks at Audubon Park with only two witnesses. They feel as if God was their very own Matchmaker.” Then, I asked the four women, “So, what's new here with you?”

One of the ladies replied, “Compared to what you’ve just told us, nothing can hold a candle! If I was only younger, I’d put on my best dress, pick a bouquet of flowers, and go with you to watch them be married. Won’t you come back tomorrow and tell us all about it?”

The point is that our sexuality is a lifelong and vital facet of our personalities. We do not become asexual because we are eligible for membership in the AARP or when that first social security check arrives. And if you believe that, well, you’d better wake up and smell the Viagra!

Our Judaism has a long history of sexual ethics and mores. Some acts and behaviors are deemed un-ambivalently wrong and sinful. For instance, there is no way to get around the Seventh Commandment, “Lo Teen-af/You shall not commit adultery,” because Judaism unites our spirituality and our sexuality. So, coveting one’s neighbor’s spouse is forbidden because profound erotic intimacy demands a long-term commitment to your own spouse. Lust, while not a sin in and of itself (so don’t worry!) may easily lead any one of us to act upon mutual desire, and that is known as adultery. Jus ask King David and Bathsheba. It didn’t turn out well for them, and it doesn’t lead to happiness or goodness now, either!

Still, I don’t want you to conclude that the Jewish Bible perpetuates an anti-sex bias. Not true: just take a gander at *The Song of Songs* – a PG-rated Biblical book for sure!

As I said at the outset, though, we sometimes feel inappropriately guilty about our sexual thoughts and actions. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* refers to a 10-or-11-year-old boy who was convinced that his newly diagnosed need for eyeglasses was Divine punishment for his having looked at an issue of *Playboy*!

Sometimes, we sin but refuse to atone and be restored to wholeness. Endless guilt is unproductive. In *The New England Journal of Medicine* last March, Dr. Jerome Groopman told of an Orthodox Jewish woman he met many years ago who, in her 20s, was admitted for surgery on a large breast mass – a tumor, I mean. The doctor wondered why this obviously intelligent woman had waited for so long before seeking treatment. She finally confessed to having had an affair many years back with her employer. And she embraced that tumor as God’s punishment for her sin. She was adamant that her death was God’s will.

In his fine book *Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy*, Dr. Frank Pittman makes the case that a marriage can survive either a husband or a wife’s infidelity if it is stopped, if it is brought into the open, and if it is dealt with. That means dealing with the underlying reasons that prompted one or both partners to stray. Here’s a point to underscore on this day of days: there is a road back from betrayal to trust. It is not an easy one, but it can be the most productive and sacred journey you’ll ever take!

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a man once asked the Baal Shem Tov – the founder of Hasidism – how a person could discern a true religious leader from a false one. The Baal Shem Tov answered,

Ask him if he knows a way to prevent impure thoughts. If he says he does, he is a fraud.

Here is a letter I received last November from a man I've never met. His name is Owen Allen of Lake Villa Drive in Metairie. It began, "Dear Rabbi Cohn: W.W.M.D...I am asking you 'What Would Moses Do?'" Mr. Allen was referring, of course, to our openness to and welcome of gays and lesbians. His letter addresses some of you when he charges,

Your congregation's open embrace of homosexuality is one that is clearly against thousands of years of history...

Well, Owen, that's exactly where we want to be. During those "thousands of years of history," people (often Jews, by the way) have been burned and bled; exiled and enslaved; branded and condemned for just being themselves – that is, different: just as God created them. Many of the laws of Moses' Torah are commonly overlooked today. What would Moses do? I have every reason to believe that fresh from the best Ivy League grad school education, Moses would be, in our time, as he was in his own – way ahead of the slow learners in his thinking. Of this I am certain: gay and lesbian equality is the civil rights test of our own day. As Rabbi Steven Greenberg, author of *Wrestling with God and Men* has made clear,

A religion that excludes 4% of its people because they do not fit the box cannot be a vision for humanity. Homosexuality is an issue of self-character and innate genes in people's makeup. There is no reason to exclude people for the basis of sexual orientation.

I believe that! I know that the overwhelming majority of you believe that, and what's more, I believe (Mr. Allen), that Moses in 2005/5766 would believe that, too!

So when your friends from the other synagogues ask you, "Hey, what did Cohn have to say on Yom Kippur Day?" you tell them, "He spoke about sex." And then watch how attendance here at B'Nai Israel improves on Succot!

Finding moral truth is never an easy process. There are changeless verities that remain immutable for all time. All is not relative. But there are also unprecedented realities, newly glimpsed because of heretofore unimagined advances in scientific and psychological disciplines which must reorient our attitudes and practices. Such changes are not made lightly or without reference to that which is higher than ourselves and our own wanting.

At its essence, our Torah presents us this sacred day with the timeless religious task: “choose life and Blessing.”

After the hurricane, we need all the more, the wholesome joys and pleasures of life. And here’s the great news: you and I are bigger and better people than the lives we lead might sometimes indicate.

So, hear us, dead God, on this Atonement Day:

Come with the light that we may see  
once more across this earth’s  
uncomfortable floor,  
the Kindly Path, the old and loving way  
Let us not die of evil in the night.  
Let there be God again.  
Let there be Light!

Amen