

**“TO EVERYONE A SEASON”**  
**Part Three**

**“THE SOUL IN WINTER”**  
**A Sermon for Kol Nidre Eve 5772**  
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Believe it or not, it used to be that folks predicted that the Internet would provide an asylum for the anonymous. How wrong they were! Far from an asylum, the Internet has proven to be the place where all is magnified and revealed. Just ask Former Congressman Anthony Weiner or the once indomitable Rupert Murdoch and they will tell you, everything is attributable to its source! Nothing is hidden!

In the midst of last June's rioting and looting which took place following Vancouver's loss of the Stanley Cup, a freelance photographer happened upon a young man and woman, totally oblivious to the tear gas and buildings on fire which surrounded them, who were instead prone upon the street (and one another!), locked in a passionate kiss. Their photo, which appeared upon front pages all over the world, inspired a furious effort to uncover their identities. It took only two days before the "Kissing Couple" were named and comfortably seated upon the couch on the set of The "Today" Show.

One thing we can say about our technological advance is that yes, **we see!** From the height of outer space, our technology can and **does** locate even the smallest object upon the earth, but what we make of it, how we use our vision and assess its worth or threat, depends entirely upon the viewer's moral code – stated or unstated – worthy or unworthy. The tiniest, most inconspicuous drone, hardly the size of a New Orleans cockroach, can be manipulated anywhere in the world to target a would-be enemy. Yes, we can see!

This Kol Nidre Eve, however, it is **God's Eye**, God's view of us, which is uppermost on our minds. The Talmud reminds us:

Know what is above you –

A Seeing Eye and a Hearing Ear

And all your deeds written in a book,

I think of this night as "THE SOUL IN WINTER." We have been viewing these High Holy Days from the perspective of "To Everyone A Season," and distinguishing the term **Season** from those of Mother Nature. We have likened the seasons to those moods and manners which derive from the human soul in its unique conditions and which we encounter at our most personal level.

Summer and Autumn, Winter and Spring are seasons of one's soul which you and I might experience at one or two or even three occasions all at the same time. But this Holy evening we turn our attention to "The Soul In Winter."

Spiritual reflection on the cycle of the seasons is nothing new and, in our Judaism, enjoys a long history. For instance, the Psalms are full of references to all four of nature's seasons, and as to winter, mention is made of the snow as white as wool, or the snowy peaks of Mount Hermon, and the numbing cold of scattered frost.

Winter, in Scripture, is emblematic of human hardship, our times of loss and struggle, a troubling sense of diminishment, physical or ethical, but even more, the scouring hardship of our lives, when by our own actions, we have chosen to cut ourselves off from our Creator's loving will. Said the Old prayer book:

“Thine eye is ever upon us and  
Thine arm still guides us.”

Winter is a time of hardship, but also an occasion in our lives when God preserves and sustains. Metaphorically, even in the very depths of winter, hunkering down to ride out the harsh season of trial, Jewish tradition insists that forgiveness and atonement are readily available.

A very down-to-earth Benedictine nun once captured both the challenge and the possibility of this very night of heightened spiritual urgency, when she observed (Listen!):

“My soul sings Psalms to God unceasingly,  
even if that means  
I pray best in the dentist's chair.”

Yes, our tradition is unambiguous; God sees and God **knows**. And for a good number of us, that is precisely why we are here to answer “present” at this Roll Call for Sinners.

Rabbi Harold Kushner taught me this one.

A man dies and then, as if a moment later, finds himself waiting in a long line. At the front of the line he could make out two doors, one marked heaven and one marked hell. The fellow calls over an usher who tells him to just keep the line moving, choose either door – heaven or hell and walk through.

But, the man says . . . Hey, wait a minute; what happened to the last judgment? . . . Where are all my actions weighed and examined? Where do I find out if I was an ethical person or a corrupt person?

The usher replies, “You know I don’t know where that story ever got started . . . we don’t do that here . . . we’ve **never** done that. We don’t have the staff to do that. I mean look, you got a thousand people arriving every minute. I’m supposed to sit down with everyone and go over his life day by day? You’d never get anywhere. Now move along, choose either door . . . heaven or hell and walk through . . . I don’t want to see you again.”

And the man walks through the door marked “hell.” Why? I think we understand why. It’s not because he thought he had been a bad person and deserved to be punished. It’s because he knew he was **a human being** and needed to be taken seriously as a moral agent.

He **needed** to be judged. **We** need to believe that the universe cares if we are good or bad, if we are truthful or deceitful, if we fulfill our potential or waste it, if we are faithful or betray our most sacred vows and covenants.

Be absolutely clear as to this point. This evening we are not desperate supplicants of the Puritan, Jonathan Edwards’ variety, you know, remember freshman English – “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Our Judaism underscores our kinship with our Loving Creator Who knows our frailties and hidden soft spots, and Who, when we take but one step forward, will come the rest of the way toward us in order that we be reconciled.

God can thaw the spirit’s frozen winter of the soul, and melt the coldest icy chill of guilt resulting from our wrongdoing, from our moral indifference, from our tragic disconnect from dear ones.

People sometimes ask, “Ed, why’d you decide to become a rabbi?” Of course, a question like that can be answered in many ways, but perhaps here is the most direct.

Many years ago, I heard a Midrash, a Jewish teaching, about two legendary pieces of paper which everyone of us carries throughout our lives, one in either pocket. I’ve always found the simplicity and the promise of this Jewish view of our human nature most impressive and inspiring. Two pieces of paper – one in either pocket.

On the first piece of paper that we carry is written:

Here I am, a **mortal human** made of flesh and blood,  
destined, sooner or later,  
to return to the earth from which I came.

**That** goes into one pocket. I'll get to the second pocket in just a moment, but linger with me on that first one.

Dennis Campbell, former dean of the Duke Divinity School, used to tell the story of the state funeral service for Zita Maria delle Grazie, who happened to be the last surviving empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary and Queen of Bohemia. Talk about blue bloods! At age 96, this last of the Hapsburg's, died in March, 1989.

Her splendid funeral cortege arrived at the great west doors of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, with thousands both inside and outside the great Cathedral.

The Master of Ceremonies took his great cane of office and banged three times on the cathedral doors, demanding entrance for Zita, Empress of Austria, Princess, and Mother of Sovereigns. But the doors remained shut.

He banged a second time, and repeated his demands with even more force and fury. Again, only a great silence.

Finally, a third time, he knocked with his open palm on the great cathedral door, and said:

**"Please,** admit the earthly remains of Zita,  
a poor sinner who desires the mercy of God."

And immediately, (as it is according to Centuries of custom) the doors were flung open, and the service proceeded. That true account of a royal's funeral responds well to that first piece of paper in our pockets. Who are we?

Here I am, royal or not,  
still a mortal of flesh and blood,  
destined to return to the earth  
from which I came.

## THE OTHER POCKET

But then, my dear friends, don't forget, there is that **other** pocket. And what does the note therein disclose of us? Says the Midrash:

“Behold, here before you walks one  
who is fashioned B'tzelem Elohim –  
in the very image of God, and  
blessed to be but little lower  
THAN THE ANGELS.”

Wow! I like **that** pocket because that's a pretty heady description of who we are!

In 1896, a black man in this very state of Louisiana (God help him) paid his fare and sat himself down in a railway car. He was asked to move because the car was reserved for white people, but there was another car available where the colored people were expected to sit.

Not only did he refuse to leave his place on the train, but he filed suit. In answer to the surely often asked question, “Just **who** do you think you are?”, he doubtlessly replied:

“I am equal to **anyone and everyone else**  
on this train, and I insist upon being treated the same.”

He was, of course, to be denied, but the famous case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* decided by the Supreme Court in 1896, remained the law of the land until the truth finally won out in *Brown v. the Board of Education* and the modern civil rights movement was forwarded.

“Who do you think you are?”

Our nature, dear friends, is the profound and magnificent amalgam; a combination of those descriptions contained in **both** of our pockets. **Sometimes we let ourselves down**, whether or not we embrace a belief in the Creator. And I'm not so out of touch that I am unaware that there are many in this room who struggle with their belief in God or who simply do not believe. That's a well accepted Jewish position.

But I desperately hope, that every one of us is a believer in **our own** better self. You are not off the hook tonight even if an atheist or traditional Jewish agnostic!

So here's the point. Do not allow the winter of despondency and despair that can, at any time of the year, come over us, to freeze your confidence in your own decency and innate ability to turn your life around! The power to do so is in your hands!

The Reverend Peter Gomes, of Harvard's Memorial Church, was my teacher and mentor, a man whose recent passing this year I dearly grieve. Dr. Gomes taught me **this** and I want to share it with you. Listen.

We do not do virtuous things,  
in order to be happy;  
rather, we are happy because we do virtuous things,  
and we are only truly happy when we  
are **doing** what we are meant to do,  
and **being** what we are meant to be.

Kol Nidre – it's the song of the Soul seeking to crack the icy cold of winter hopelessness. Kol Nidre's timeless melody comforts and reassures. And may it also open our eyes and instruct that . . .

As to **your** life and mine –  
The last word has not been spoken.  
The last sentence has not been written.  
This pocket! That pocket!  
You tell me –  
Who do you think you are?

Amen!