

Kol Nidrei 5783
I Believe in You
Rabbi Betsy Forester

(Rabbi opens the story at center podium- not regular Rabbi's podium)

Yom Kippur eve fell on a crisp Fall day in Nosidam, the small city of scholars and dreamers in southern Nisnocsiw, a majestic, yet weary, lake-filled land in search of its soul. In the afternoon, the Rabbi looked over her notes on the bimah one last time before heading home to prepare for the holy day. She felt wistful as she imagined wishing her people a *G'mar Chatimah Tovah* that evening. "May you be sealed in the Book of Life," she said out loud, wishing it with all her heart. Yet the notion of everyone's fate being sealed in one book or another—vitality or suffering—felt harsh, and rang a bit hollow this year.

The Rabbi well knew how the metaphors of the holiest day of the year are designed to set a serious tone—scales of justice, God enthroned as a King setting the fate of His subjects, or as a shepherd whose hapless flock passes before Him, the book of life or...not life. The Rabbi looked forward all year to the marathon of Yom Kippur, especially the last, big push at Ne'ilah, when she and her kahal would stand together before the open Ark, egos banished and hearts open, in pure and earnest hope.

And yet, this year, she wished for new images—less King and more Divine feminine, maybe angels helping people. She struggled to identify with hapless sheep. In her sanctuary, surrounded by her kahal, she wanted fewer lofty proclamations and more room for the "still, small voice." She would trade a handful of medieval poems for a Book of Life that would remain open.

"Oy," she said, as she picked up her keys and headed for the door.

"Rabbi," a woman's voice called. She was sitting outside, on the stone garden wall. It was Ora, new to Nosidam, a scholar in her forties, maybe—it was hard to tell. Her hazel eyes looked older than her cheeks and jaw. Her hair, in a loose ponytail, wasn't exactly gray or not gray, sort of how hazel is not exactly brown, green, blue, or gold but rather a knowing, gentle mix ready to meet a person wherever they are.

"Hi, Ora," the Rabbi said, stopping and noticing that Ora was using the ledge as a footrest, having seated herself well into the fading blooms of last summer's wild and exuberant garden.

“Do you have a minute?” Ora asked.

“Nope,” thought the Rabbi.

“Sure,” she said, taking a seat on the ledge edge. Neither spoke for several seconds. A chipmunk darted from under their feet, ran across the sidewalk, and scurried up a tree. A door closed somewhere.

“Rabbi, can I ask you something?” Ora said. “Of course,” said the Rabbi.

“How important is it for me to say the *Vidui*?”

“You mean the confessional prayer that we recite 10 times between Mincha today and Neilah tomorrow night?” the Rabbi asked.

“Yup, that one,” Ora nodded.

The Rabbi cocked her head. The ancient, brilliant *Vidui*, cornerstone of our Yom Kippur davening—that merism, Aleph to Tav confession of all of possible wrongdoings, where we acknowledge to ourselves and to God that we have done things we deeply regret; the *Al Chet* pointing each person to their own blind spots and misaligned actions, the beating of chests, plaintive melody, artful weaving of communal and personal introspection—how *important* was the *Vidui*?

“Actually it’s not just the *Vidui*,” Ora went on, “It’s the intense pulling myself apart, interrogating the gazillion ways I could have done better, and the idea that if I don’t do it well enough my fate will be sealed for the worse,” Ora attempted to clarify.

“Wow,” said the Rabbi.

Ora continued: “Don’t get me wrong. I’m into *t’shuvah*, accountability, personal growth, recentering, all that. And if I’d done something really horrible, then of course, I’d want to atone for it. But I’m not really bad. I’m just imperfect, just human, trying to do my best most of the time. I’m planning to do all the Yom Kippur stuff like I do every year, fasting, gym shoes, praying. I want to make myself better. But I’m stuck on how to do that on Yom Kippur this year. I’m afraid that when we get to the *Vidui* tonight I will want to leave.”

“I’m sorry if this offends you,” she rushed to add.

“On the contrary, Ora” said the Rabbi, “I’m intrigued. Can you tell me more?”

“These thoughts started a few months ago,” Ora continued. I was leading a morning *minyan*, and we were doing *Kaddish Shalem*. I got to ‘*L’eilah mikol birchata v’shirata*,’ you know, the part that says that God should be elevated above all possible praise, all the way to the upper realms, where no human word or song can reach. As I chanted the words, I got this awful feeling. I felt like my words might let God to slip from my grasp, like letting go of a helium balloon and watching it float up and away, but much more frightening. I was gripped with a sense of smallness and aloneness, a fear of being disconnected from the Divine presence that drives my faith. And of course, during these holy days, every Kaddish doubles down on this idea: we repeat the word “*leilah*”--to the upper realms—we say “*l’eilah l’eilah*.” Up, and up! I don’t want God to be where my voice cannot reach. “Higher and higher”--that’s not where I live.”

“So, the idea of an exalted God makes you feel lonely and small and disconnected,” said the Rabbi. Do I have that right?”

“Yes. And what I really need is for God to support me, you know, to have my back, be the wind in my sail, that sort of thing, you know?” added Ora.

“Yes, I do know,” said the Rabbi, “I can relate to that. Do you have any idea why your *Vidui* problem is coming up for you this year in particular?”

“Do you really have time for this?” Ora asked, glancing at her watch. I mean, Kol Nidrei starts in a few hours. “For this,” said the Rabbi, “I’ve got nothing but time.” And she meant it.

“Okay, then I’ll answer your question,” Ora said. “Here’s what’s going on. The world around me is so unstable,” she said. “I am afraid for our democracy. I am alarmed by the normalization of antisemitism and white supremacy at the highest levels of our society and I worry about it here in Nosidam. I feel unsafe and abandoned as a woman with the right to control her own body. Our planet needs rescue; I fear we are destroying it. I am concerned about Israel and that my students and colleagues will reject me because I am a Zionist. I wanted to combat racism and I feel like I’m getting nowhere.” Ora paused. “Look, I know that the world always has problems,” she said. I know it doesn’t sound like it, but normally I’m an optimist! And a do-gooder! But this year feels different.”

“What has changed for you? asked the Rabbi, and Ora answered:

“What has changed for me is precisely this: the very foundations I have relied upon for a sense of safety, security, and belonging are fracturing, and I feel like I am not standing on firm ground. I want to do the personal work of Yom Kippur. I don’t need it to be easy. I know that change is not easy. But I’m afraid that the approach of self-flagellation, and fear of being sealed in the wrong book will strip me of whatever integrity I have left.”

“Mm,” nodded the rabbi. “I’m curious, what helps you get through these times, besides the thought of walking out on *Vidui*?”

“I live with good people,” Orah said. “I have fun, I eat good food. I study things that interest me. I take walks. I’m in touch with my family and I know they love me. I think I’m making it like most people I know. By nature I’m a pretty content person. But the wobbly ground under my feet has me on edge.”

The rabbi nodded. She sure could relate.

“Living through major shifts in society as we are, the uncertainties, and destructions are making many people anxious” the Rabbi said, “I, too, feel like my docking places are a straining at the tethers,” the Rabbi said.

“Yeah.”

For a long minute, Orah and the Rabbi sat together quietly. The Rabbi hoped someone at home would think to turn on the oven and make a salad.

“So, Rabbi, what do you recommend?” Ora asked. “Because I have to tell you, I need a new angle. I want to do *t’shuvah*, but I don’t have the wherewithal to pick myself apart.”

The Rabbi spoke slowly: “I do think there might be another way into the work of *t’shuvah*.”

“I am all ears,” Orah said.

The Rabbi took a deep breath.

(End of scene. Rabbi leaves the story and moves to the Rabbi podium.)

For the past 500 years or so, Jews have been reciting Psalm 27 from the beginning of *Elul* through this holy day season. You can find this rich and powerful text on page 44 in your Machzor. I am drawn to verses 8 and 9, which say:

לֵךְ אָמַר לְבִי בְקֶשׁוֹ פָּנֵי אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ " אֲבַקֵּשׁ:
אֶל־תִּסְתֶּר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי אֵל תִּטְבֹּאֵף לְעַבְדְּךָ עֲזָרְתִּי הָיִיתָ אֶל־תִּטְשֵׁנִי וְאֶל־תַּעֲזֹבְנִי אֶ־לֵהִי יִשְׁעִי:

The words are so raw that translators cannot help but poeticize. Literally, the words mean something like this:

My heart says to you (the Eternal One): "Seek My face!"

I seek Your face.

Do not hide Your face from me;

do not thrust aside Your servant in anger;

You have been my help.

Do not forsake me, do not leave me, my God, my deliverer.

These words that we have been saying twice each day ask for mutual seeking. We want to seek the Divine, Eternal presence, we want to be seen for who we are, and we want to be helped and supported. These are fundamental human needs. And this is the *opposite* of *L'eilah l'eilah*, of wanting God to go up, up, and away to a place our words and songs and hearts and minds cannot reach. We ask God to stay with us and see us in our totality.

We want to be seen for who we are. We need to feel we are supported when we strive to do better. Yes, we need help to see where we have strayed. But we also need to be seen in the places where we are doing things right. Hope that we can do better rests on our belief that we really *can* do better— because somewhere within us we *are* better than the things we have done. It is from *that* place that we can grow.

Just as there is humility in laying bare our mistakes and unkind inclinations, there also is humility in asking God to see and help us lift up what glimmers amidst the dust of our complicated lives.

When I feel seen and held by the Eternal One, I feel more able to bring forth the goodness that is planted in me. My first prayer each morning expresses gratitude for God's faithfulness in my ability to use each new day for good. I say, "*Modah ani...Rabbah emunatecha*," I am grateful for Your great faithfulness. It really is quite profound that those are the first words of prayer Jews say upon waking, making ourselves present to a God who sees us at our most vulnerable, when we sleeping, and just waking up, before we orient ourselves to who we are in the world. We are saying

that God is watching and waiting for us to get up, go out there, and do some good. And we're grateful. Sometimes I really need that boost.

We believe that God knowingly works through human beings despite our imperfections. We believe that God wants to help us rebuild our lives so that we can help God rebuild the world we share. But if we've beaten ourselves to shatters, we have less to work with, and God has much less to work with. We need to have faith that fundamentally, we are worth the trouble because we are each invested with the potential to do world-altering good, and God is on our side.

From that perspective, the question of this day is not "how bad am I, really?" but rather, "how can I bring my bit of goodness to bear on my relationships and the world around me, better than I have been doing?"

This approach resonates with what I have learned about best practice in professional mentoring. Scientists have documented that professionals across many fields improve their performance more by focusing on figuring out how to replicate the good they already do and take it to the next level than if they receive constructive criticism. We actually grow more and perform better when we understand and build on our successes. It makes intuitive sense, doesn't it? Most of us thrive on getting "closer to fine."

That is not to say that we should not also try to understand our mistakes and misperceptions. It is important for us to do that as well. We must acknowledge and take responsibility for the messes we create. That is part of what helps us be better, but insufficient on its own.

All of this begs the question of whether we are, fundamentally, good. One of Europe's most prominent young thinkers, the historian and writer Rutger Bregman, explores that question in his fascinating book *Humankind*. And his answer is, yes, human beings are fundamentally good. He methodically debunks every study to the contrary in light of data previously unavailable—even the most demoralizing studies that were thought prove that people will do terrible things if they're threatened, or following orders, or if there are no rules.

Tracing human history from the emergence of Homo Sapiens all the way through humanity's most stupendous failures, including the Holocaust, Bregman compellingly makes his case: We do make mistakes, but we are not fundamentally inclined toward evil. In addition to the behavioral studies, Bregman also traces civilization's twists and turns through the lens of every philosopher and scholar who has argued to the that we

are fundamentally selfish, or brutish. He overturns their arguments and shows that our failure to live up to our human potential is not predetermined by our being imperfect. Yes, we do take wrong turns that bring out our worst, and that is because we are complicated. But over and over, the author shows that people are far more likely to choose selflessness, cooperation, and kindness over callousness, greed, or blind obedience.

I must say that reading *Humankind* was a little hard for me to take. The author's arguments were well supported, but it was hard to swallow his optimism in light of the daily news. It was hard to believe that human beings are basically good and that acting on our goodness is both contagious and self-motivating.

But what if he is right?

This is where those who are willing to hope divide from those who are afraid to hope. If you are willing to hope, then you will be willing to act as if you believe you are capable of living like you are created in the Divine image. And if you are afraid that acting like that will only get you hurt, then you run the risk of becoming a cynic. Cynicism happens when we tell ourselves there's no point in making ourselves vulnerable because forces greater than us will only threaten us if we do. And that attitude gets in our way.

I mention this because I have found that it's especially tempting for smart people to become cynical. Hope comes from the heart. Many of us are more comfortable staying with our intellect—staying in our heads—because that is where we feel most comfortable. But the mind can trap us in webs of words and facts that distance us from what we feel. When we take on cynicism, we impair our ability to see ourselves honestly, because the challenges we face are everyone else's fault.

Acknowledging that we have done wrong and naming it, *and* drawing on our potential to do better: *that's* the whole package. We must be willing to put everything on the line if we truly want to flourish.

(Rabbi returns to the story and to the center podium.)

It was getting close to time for Kol Nidrei, and the Rabbi chose her words carefully.

“Ora,” said the Rabbi, “I want to tell you two things. The first is about God drifting out of reach, *l’eilah l’eilah*, up an up, like a helium balloon. The second thing I want to tell you is about the imagery of the holy day we are about to enter, and the Vidui.”

“I want to start by acknowledging that God really is bigger and more than we can understand. But instead of the image of a balloon flying away, I wonder if you could find a more helpful image in Moses after he sees his people rejecting the Covenant and worshiping a golden calf. Moshe yearns to be close to God, to trust that God is working through him despite what he sees before him. He wants to believe that he and God can look each other in the eye, so to speak. “Let me see your face,” Moses tells God. And do you remember what God does?”

Ora nodded. “God places Moses in a cleft of the rock and passes by him, and Moses sees God’s back, right?”

“Exactly,” said the Rabbi. And it’s just steps away. We cannot fully know God, but we can experience God’s presence. Ora, there is a cleft in the rock for you. Call out from there to be seen and heard and known. And then—and this is very important—step into the space God leaves for you. It will be right in front of you.

And that is what we do on Kol Nidrei night—together, we step into that sacred space where we strive to make ourselves better, our relationships warmer, and our world more habitable. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said it well: “...we do not have to bewail the fact of [God]’s being so far away. In our sincere compliance with [God]’s commands, the distance disappears. It is not in our power to force the Beyond to become Here; but we can transport the Here into the Beyond’ (“No Time for Neutrality,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 79). Ora, our task is to move ourselves closer to the goodness we seek.”

Ora smiled.

“And second,” the Rabbi said, “Don’t worry about a book being sealed. If you work to align your actions with your best intentions, you will write your story in the book of life. This day gives us a chance to write our story together. Were it not for this day, most of us might never do the soul searching we need to do.

As for the *Vidui*, we’ll keep it around. I mean, it’s the *Vidui*. It is very important for us to name what we have done wrong. That is an opportunity for us to look at a rough draft as

we write the stories of our lives. Even as we aspire to live into our strengths, we need to work out the more problematic aspects of our character. My advice is to use the Vidui as much as it helps you. It may surprise you, or it may not. And that's my advice for all of the imagery of this day, too. Because here's the thing, Ora: The essence of this day is not about being sheep or subjects of a King on high, or whether books are sealed or open. You, and I, and the Eternity planted within us—that is the essence of this day. Every open heart, a community standing together in our earnest desire to be better, and committing together to raise lives and our world higher and higher—*l'eilah l'eilah*: that's what it's about."

Ora and the Rabbi went their separate ways, each ready in her own way to welcome this holy day. When they came here tonight, each felt about as ready as a person can be for the awesome and holy process of change.

(Rabbi leaves the story and returns to her regular podium.)

May we find the humility and the strength we need to do our inner work so that we may transform ourselves, and our world, higher and higher, in the sacred space God gives us to live.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.