

Yom Kippur 5771

“No More Ring Around the Collar! Change Your Clothing, Change Your Life”

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Imagine an ordinary woman busy packing a suitcase. She places a stack of neatly folded shirts in her bag, closes the cover and latches it. But, to her horrified surprise, the suitcase suddenly springs open and a taunting voice is heard: “Ring around the collar! Ring around the collar!” Those dirty rings . . . you tried soaking them out . . . you tried scrubbing them out . . . but you still get: “Ring around the collar! Ring around the collar.”

Aficionados of 1970s TV will remember this well-known commercial for Wisk Detergent. Of course, long before Wisk came along to get rid of stubborn stains, there was a cleanser called “Repentance” manufactured by God Enterprises, and touted by a group of traveling salesmen known as “the prophets.” According to one of God’s top drummers, a salesman by the name of Isaiah, the detergent power of repentance was so powerful that, “אִם-יְהִיוּ חַטָּאֵיכֶם כַּשָּׁנִים כְּשֶׁלֶג יִלְבְּנוּ -- Though your sins are like crimson, they shall turn snow-white; אִם-יֵאָדְמוּ כְתוּלַע כְּצֶמֶר יְהִיוּ -- be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece” (*Isaiah* 1:18). Of course, repentance only launders the fabric of the human soul; it’s far less effective on delicates or permanent press.

Perhaps that’s why the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, had to change clothing on Yom Kippur five separate times, according to the account found in the talmudic tractate of *Yoma*. Not so surprising if one considers that slaughtering animals for the atonement ritual was bloody and messy work. Sacrifice may cleanse the soul, but it’s sure hard on the robes . . .

Yet I’m not so sure that’s why the High Priest changed his garb so frequently on Yom Kippur. Clothing proclaims identity, it both shapes and reflects the context in which we find ourselves on any given occasion -- a jacket and tie at the gym would be as ridiculous as a sweat suit and sneakers at a black-tie wedding. During the course of a single day we might easily change our clothing almost as many times as the *Kohen Gadol*: from gym wear for morning exercise to business attire at the office, to casual dress around the house after work, to formal wear for an important evening function.

In a very real sense our emotional responses to the rhythms of daily life are like clothing; they, too, proclaim who we are, and how we think. The choice of attitude we wear -- no less than the clothing we pick -- both reflects and actively fashions the vibes surrounding us at any given moment. Maybe there's more truth than we suspect in the old saying about a person wearing his heart on his sleeve.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer of the High Holiday *Musaf* insinuates that disaster is punishment for sin. I have great difficulty accepting that theological premise. Some of what we suffer we inflict upon ourselves, some of it is intentionally caused by others; at other moments we just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet at the heart of the *Unetaneh Tokef* we encounter its most important assertion: "ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעברין את רוע הגזרה" -- But repentance, prayer, and acts of righteousness have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny."

Life is a messy business. Garments pick-up dirt, while thinking patterns can also get soiled, stained by resentment, conflict, stress, thwarted hopes, and broken dreams. Forest Gump tells us that "Life is a box of chocolates," but sometimes, life is more like a ketchup bottle squirting adversity on our best-laid plans . . . or the front of a rabbi's nice, clean robe (JL now squeezes ketchup on the front of his *kittel*). We don't have the power to avoid the dirt and grime of existence. The most important question, spiritually speaking, is what do we do when living life stains the garment of our soul?

Well, if we were the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, the answer would be easy -- we'd simply change our clothing (JL removes stained *kittel* to reveal clean white robe underneath). "Very funny, rabbi," you might say. "A nice sermon *shtick* to keep people engaged. Sure, changing our clothing is simple; recasting how we deal with life's vicissitudes isn't." But maybe altering our lives for the better is daunting only to the degree we are unwilling to undertake the task.

Each and every morning we get out of our PJs and put on clothing; each night we undress. We understand that no one gets dressed once in life and thereafter continues to wear the same clothing over and over. And so it is with choosing from the wardrobe of our emotions, the approaches in which we attire our reactions to the challenges of being. Attitudinal adjustment isn't something we do once in some grand fashion, a kind of epiphany that permanently scotch-guards the emotional fabric of our

beings against existential messiness. As socks get dirty and sweaty and need to be changed daily, so too, our responses to the challenges that constantly arise. Amidst all the joys and blessings we experience, from time-to-time life's ketchup bottle will continue to squirt on us a paste composed of failures, disappointments, mistakes, and frustrations. The message of Yom Kippur is that, while we will get dirty, we need not wear the stain; we *can*, like the High Priest who changed his garments throughout the Day of Atonement, robe ourselves in a new state of mind.

Let's create a virtual laboratory of life's dirt and grime. Setting aside catastrophic illness and natural disaster, let's compile a brief catalog of more common emotional stains, the kind that can happen multiple times over the course of a lifetime: The boss calls you into her office to complain about the quality of your work; the kids run amok, show you disrespect, and ignore the rules of the house; you find yourself sniping with your spouse, resentful of his constant criticism; you have a tense relationship with your sibling and can't seem to communicate civilly; you experience a major disagreement with your business partner; one Friday there's a pink slip from work waiting in your inbox. What's your initial reaction? More important, what do you do next? Where do you go from there?

Several years ago, author Bruce Schneider published a book entitled, *Energy Leadership: Transforming Your Workplace and Your Life from the Core*. Schneider's basic premise is that all of us are leaders, whether by default or choice . . . if you think about, we're all the leaders of our own lives, and in so being, make daily decisions that impact on ourselves and everyone around us. At any given moment, our perceptions either generate positive or negative energy. It's a given that our state of energy will be in constant flux -- or, as an old African-American spiritual once put it, "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, sometimes I'm almost on the ground." Schneider's thesis is that it matters less how we initially respond to challenges and dilemmas; what's critical is what we chose to do with our emotional response next -- do we allow it to engulf us in a never-ending spiral of conflict and anger? Or do we consciously direct our energy toward understanding, forgiveness and compassion, perhaps even glimpse hidden opportunity in the midst of trial and tribulation?

I became acquainted with the theory of Energy Leadership through my rabbinic coach. No, a rabbinic coach isn't a person who helps rabbis prepare for the Talmudic Olympics. But inasmuch as clergy are CSOs, Chief Spiritual Officers, we aren't only teachers, preachers and pastors, but also human resource managers. The medium and the message of synagogues may differ from the work of a

Fortune 500 company, but rabbis can benefit from coaching for many of the same reasons that executives do. For this reason, I engaged a rabbinic coach, and began meeting regularly by phone (oddly enough, I couldn't find any local rabbinic coaches in Jacksonville's Yellow Pages).

As our work progressed, Natalie, (that's my coach) asked me an important question: When the challenges of leadership squirt ketchup on your rabbinic aspirations, or for that matter, your personal hopes, how do you handle it? Believing as I do that a successful rabbinate requires self-awareness of one's own response to stress and adversity, I agreed to undergo an Energy Leadership Assessment. One quiet Sunday a few months ago I sat down and answered all seventy of the test's questions. What did I discover about myself? Well, that I'm really no different than most people.

At the lowest energy level, "Why me?" is the operative question; we tend to see ourselves as victims, held hostage by forces and circumstances beyond our control. Guilt, self-doubt, fear and worry are constant companions. Our imagination rehearses worst-case scenarios; confronted by the Murphy's Law that seems to govern our lives, we're a little like the Comic Strip character Charlie Brown, convinced we're powerless to alter our destiny. I'm sure we all know people who feel helpless when confronted by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare's Hamlet once said.

Climb one rung higher on the energy ladder, and we encounter emotions like antagonism, resentment, and conflict; we respond to perceived challenges with anger and assert a kind of territoriality. For us to win, someone else must lose. A man is taken to task by his employer and he complains bitterly about the boss, or shifts blame to a co-worker. Your children argue at home about who gets to . . . (you fill in the blank) -- that one child appears to get her way signals the other that he's lost by definition. A couple has a spat and the disagreement heats up because each spouse can't seem to let go without winning the argument. This sort of negative energy serves as the default level for most of us, and not just in our personal lives. Turn on C-Span and listen to the politicians who, more than anything else, blame the partisanship of the *other* party. Listen to talk radio, and there, too, it's always someone's else fault. By the same token, those who are quick to blame others are often reluctant to cooperate or share credit; jealousy and suspicion simply doesn't allow for both sides to win.

There's nothing pleasant about these feelings, but all of us have felt them at one time or another.

Hey, there are times in life when we are victims, why shouldn't we feel like one? And there are moments when someone else really is to blame for our problem, so why shouldn't we get angry? Just as pilots are sometimes forced to descend to a lower altitude to escape turbulence in the sky, so, too, when life's storms confront us, we may need to climb down a few notches on the gallantry scale, at least temporarily..

The great Rabbi Akiva taught: **הַכֹּל צָפוּי, וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה** -- "All is foreseen, yet free will is given" (*Avot* 3:15). That God allows us to choose our path in life is a cornerstone of Jewish belief, the bedrock on which human freedom is predicated. It is the purpose for which Yom Kippur exists, and the reason you're here today. Whatever our initial impulse may be to any challenge, where we go with our response is no one else's call but our own.

We *can* consciously choose to embrace positive, rather than negative, energy. As we do so, we find ourselves beginning to break down the walls of suspicion and resentment, we move outward toward others. Constructive criticism of our flaws is no longer an attack, but a gift because we don't allow ourselves to feel threatened by someone else's observations. We start to take responsibility for our thoughts, emotions and actions, and increasingly realize we are the captains of our own fate. Resentment is transformed into empathy as we better understand where our adversaries are coming from, even if we don't ultimately agree with their conclusions.

As we continue to climb into higher realms of energy, we become more and more aware that many of life's problems and dilemmas offer unseen opportunities -- a marital crisis the chance to rebuild the stability of a life-long partnership . . . if we choose to; the loss of a job an opportunity to reflect and explore a new career path . . . if we choose to; a child's behavioral challenges a chance to get more of a feel for one's child from her perspective . . . if we choose to. We start to think in terms of synthesis and synergy, and see the possibility of forging connections to everything and everyone around us. At higher levels of energy, intuition and creative genius come alive because we're now capable of thinking far beyond the invisible box in which we so often exist without question, and grasp that, as Bob Dylan once put it, "And but for the sky, there are no fences facing".

A story is told about a talmudic sage, Naḥum of Gamzo, who was born a generation after the Second Temple's destruction. According to the rabbis, Rabbi Naḥum's nickname, "Gamzo," was

actually a shortened form of the Hebrew expression “*Gam zu l’tovah*”, meaning, “This, too, is for the good.” The Talmud then goes on to tell us how Nahum earned his moniker. Once, the Jewish community appointed Rabbi Nahum to bring a tribute on its behalf to Caesar. He travelled to Rome with a chest filled with precious gems, gold and silver.

At an inn along the way, however, the dishonest innkeeper removed the precious jewels and replaced them with soil. When Nahum arrived in Rome and presented the chest to Caesar, the latter grew angry when he discovered it held nothing but dirt. “How dare these Jews mock me!” he exclaimed, and immediately ordered Nahum’s execution. “*Gam zu l’tovah* -- This, too, is for the good,” replied the rabbi. Just then the prophet Elijah appeared before Caesar, disguised as one of his ministers and remarked, “Perhaps this is magic earth, O great one, and can be used to Rome’s advantage.” Caesar’s army took some of the earth and flung it in the faces of its enemies, whereupon the dirt turned into deadly arrows, causing Rome to carry the day in battle. Not only did the Roman emperor then rescind Nahum’s death sentence, but he bestowed upon him great honor, and sent him back to Judea with much treasure (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 21a).

The story is fanciful, of course, but true at a symbolic level. If we believe that God endows us with great potential we, too, can say *gam zu l’tovah*, and in the process, discover a hidden Elijah inside our psyche who’ll help us reframe reality, and grasp the opportunity that only masquerades as frustration.

Let me share with you one small example of energy leadership in action: This past week, my wife Susan had surgery on her hand and needed extra help, especially with our kids. Keep in mind that the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is, so to speak, my retail season, it’s the busiest week of my year. I needed the stress of adding tasks to my to-do list like a *luch in kop*, Yiddish for “a hole in the head.” When I complained to a friend about the extra responsibilities of having to take care of the kids, she said, “Why not change the way you’re looking at this: Instead of saying, ‘I *have to* take care of my children,’ say, ‘I *get to* take care of my children this week!’

By switching one thought for another, a source of stress became a privilege. I am always feeling guilty I don’t spend enough time with my kids; isn’t this a period of the year when we reflect on how to change our lives for the better? Nothing was different in the external reality, but I had reshaped my

inner landscape; I took off the robe of soiled thinking, and opted instead for a fresh garment of possibility.

According to *Yalkut Shimoni*, a work of *Midrash* dating to the early Middle Ages, when the Messiah comes all Jewish holidays will be abolished with the exception of two: Purim and Yom Kippur. As diametrically different from one another as these two holidays are, there is at least one important nexus between the Day of Atonement and our celebration of Haman's downfall: both pay close attention to clothing, or more specifically, changes in clothing.

On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest changed his ritual garb five times, and we are encouraged to wear white robe. In the book of *Esther*, there are five instances in which a change of clothing signals a change in attitude or fortune. When Mordecai hears of the edict decreeing genocide for Jews, he wears sackcloth, he then deliberately refuses Esther's request that he not appear near the palace in mourning garb; when Esther risks her life to approach Ahasuerus she dons her best apparel; when Haman is forced to parade Mordecai in triumph through the streets of Shushan, he dresses him in the king's own robes, and when appointed as Ahasuerus' new viceroy, Mordecai puts on "royal garments of blue and white . . . a mantle of fine linen and purple" (*Esther* 8:15).

Esther didn't set out to be a queen or to save the Jewish people, Mordecai never planned to become King Ahasuerus' right-hand man. Yet in confronting life, they transformed fear into feasting, mourning into joy. They removed the garment of self soiled by despair, and opted to dress themselves in robes fresh with hope, robes cleansed by faith in a God who gives us the strength to say *gam zu l'tovah*, this, too, can be for the good . . . if we can see beyond life's stains.

"Out, damned spot! out, I say!" Lady MacBeth once cried, but to no avail. But we won't allow hers to be our fate. Once upon a time, a man and a woman in a garden far away became ashamed of what they had done, and tried to hide themselves behind a fig leaf. So, too, on this day of Atonement, we removed our soiled thoughts, and stand with naked truth before God, the same God that provided Adam and Eve with clothing; the same God that will furnish us with the cleansing power of repentance, an Eternal Presence who'll help us bleach out the stains that come from human frailty: כִּי־בָיִים הַזֶּה: יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהֳרָתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תְּטַהָרוּ -- For on *this* day, atonement shall cleanse you from all your transgressions, in God's presence you shall be cleansed" (*Leviticus* 16:30).

“Ring around the collar!” is only a state of mind; in life’s laundry room we can choose to put on a new shirt, we can make a fresh start. Like the High Priest once did -- we shall the change the clothing of our soul, we shall alter the ways of our lives, we shall give ourselves the chance to be better, happier, more giving and joyful human beings. *NO MORE RING AROUND THE COLLAR!*