

“Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word”

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Kol Nidrei Sermon

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Shanah Tovah

Those of you who were with us for Rosh HaShanah remember that I established the theme of travel in my sermons, exploring different spots on the globe with lessons to bring into the New Year. I recalled my adventures in Greenland, where I learned about **Humility**, and in the jungles of Costa Rica, where I truly experienced the concept of **Wonder**.

But on this Kol Nidrei evening, I’m focusing on a different kind of travel. We’re moving from external landscapes into human history. Tonight, instead of trekking the natural wonders of the world, we will visit monuments to humanity, erected for the very purpose of **T’shuvah**.

T’shuvah is translated as “repentance” or “atonement,” but it literally means much more than that. The Hebrew root of **T’shuvah** – *shuv* – means to return. **T’shuvah** means a return to one’s true self, a re-alignment with one’s authentic soul.

The Mishneh Torah teaches us that, “Yom Kippur atones for sins done *bein adam leMakom*, between man and God. But for sins done *bein adam la-chavero* -- between man and other human beings, these are not forgiven until he gives his friend what he owes him and until the other person has been appeased.”

Our personal relationship with God is only half the story of Yom Kippur. On this night, we also recognize that we are not an “I” but a “We” – that it’s not just our personal transgressions that we atone. It is fully deliberate that everything we have said in our Ashamnu and Al Chet is written in the 1st person plural – WE have sinned, WE have transgressed.

Rabbi Anna Boswell-Levy explains: “In Judaism, we recognize there is something beyond individual sin – there are societal and communal and institutional wrongs, sins that we permit or overlook in others, sins of prior generations that stain our present. These ... require communal recognition and apology. ... Judaism has ancient mechanisms for reflecting on and addressing the sins of the past - sins we ourselves did not commit, but which continue to shape our lives and our world currently.”

I bring up this topic tonight, the holiest day of the Jewish year, because I experienced the true meaning of **T’shuvah** in Germany. In Germany, friends, I came to understand how **T’shuvah** is not just possible on a personal level but on a collective one.

More than any other country I have ever visited – including my own - Germany is actively willing to look back on its terrible history and tells the truth about what it did. It’s more than the fact that every large city and small town has a public acknowledgment of the Shoah – plaques, signs, statues, and memorials. The acknowledgment goes beyond museums and study centers, and even beyond the concentration camps, which are preserved and laid bare, with all the unspeakable truths out in the open for everyone to see.

Germany makes no attempt to downplay, suppress, or minimize what they did. What strikes me most is their forthrightness – their deep confession — their collective willingness to openly bare their guilty past.

Ashamnu. We have sinned.

There is a Holocaust museum in Berlin, which is frankly called Museum of the Murdered Jews of Europe. The museum holds stark and stunning exhibits which rival Yad VaShem's in their clear admission of how the Shoah ruthlessly annihilated six million sacred souls. I was especially moved by one map of Europe, which labeled the nations not by the names of the countries but by the names of the families who lived there. Outside Paris lived the Familie Hofman; in Austria was Familie Turteltaub; in Russia dwelt Familie Krelitz. We saw their photos, eyeglasses, baby dolls, and Kiddush cups – all displayed without duplicity or deception, right in heart of the German capitol.

Chamasnu. We have been violent.

But what shook me to my core was the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, an elegy in stone, which spans a huge city block, in the busiest part of Berlin. I will attempt to describe in words what can barely be taken in by the eyes.

Standing on the sidewalk looking in, the area is covered with large gray cement blocks.

Faceless, cold structures. You're reminded of a million different images: Rows of headstones.

Stacks of coffins. Blocks of a prison wall. You take slow, reticent steps into the labyrinth of cement blocks, almost two thousand of them. But as you walk, you don't realize that the ground beneath your feet is angled down. You get lower, and the blocks around you grow taller. The more you descend, the taller they grow; the lower you are, the more lost you become.

You are then aware that life is different from how it was. The horizon disappears; you see less of the sun. Now there are tall gray blocks on every side. You are lost, disoriented, and confused.

You don't see your travel companions. You don't know where they are; everyone is now isolated in their own part of the labyrinth. You can't go back up. You can only walk further and further in, hoping for a way out on the other side, but totally unable to see where and when and how that comfort will come.

Tzararnu. We have been hostile and filled with hate.

I have visited Holocaust museums in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., London, Copenhagen, and Jerusalem. They are all sad, beautiful, important – but they took me journeys that were intellectual and emotional. This was physical. Visceral. We were small, insignificant, unseen, and scared. Even terrified. And that was exactly how we were supposed to feel. “It's right here,” Germany seems to say. “That sick feeling of fear, disorientation, terror, loss, hopelessness: that is what we did to eleven million people not a century ago.”

Hirshanu. We have acted wickedly.

And even this incredible example of **T'Shuvah** is not unique in Germany. Allow me to describe the day I spent in the city of Wittenberg, where Martin Luther, the Catholic priest, broke from Rome by nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in 1517. I was astonished to see that even now, the Stadtkirche Church in Wittenberg still displays the “Judensau”: an unthinkable offensive concrete frieze at the top of the church’s exterior wall, dating to 1307. “Judensau,” meaning “Jews’ sow” is a massive depiction of a huge pig. Behind it, a rabbi is lifting up its tail, facing its anus. Underneath the sow are Jews crouching in the mud, trying to nurse. The frieze existed for two hundred years until words were added: “Rabini,” a nonsense word referring to the Rabbi, and other incorrect Hebrew words which purposely misrepresent a sacred Hebrew name for God. These words were added after Martin Luther referred to the frieze in his book in 1543, *Vom Schem Hamforash* (which also misrepresents the name of God). This highly Anti-Semitic volume compares Jews to devils and was an instrumental text not only to catalyze Protestantism in Germany but was also used by the Nazis centuries later. This frieze - in place now for 719 years – has loomed as a sickening display of hate throughout centuries of Anti-Semitism.

Latznu. We have been contemptuous.

You must be asking yourself: “I thought you said that Germany has done communal **T’shuvah**?! How is it possible that Germany allows this frieze to exist even now? Where’s the **T’shuvah** in that?”

I want to tell you about the memorial embedded in the ground directly below the terrible frieze, built in 1988, on the 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. A large bronze square is nestled within

the cobblestones right in front of the wall. On the four sides of the square, the words in German say: “The proper name of God, the maligned Shem-Ha-Meforash, was held holy by the Jews long before the Christians.”

Alongside those German words are the Hebrew words,

מִמְעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה:

the opening line of Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry unto You, Adonai.”

Already a heart-wrenching confession. A beautiful act of **T’shuvah**. But what’s inside is the most significant part: This large square borders the sign of the cross in the middle, but the lines of the cross are broken. In the cobblestones directly adjacent to the wall of the State Church: a broken cross. Further, the square does not sit flat in the ground: the middle is pushed up from underneath, breaking that cross. It gives the appearance that something is bubbling up from underground – it cannot repressed or ignored. As if someone had tried to cover something up but is totally unable to suppress what is there. And this is what the German words around it say: “Six million Jews died underneath the sign of a cross.”

“Six million Jews died underneath the sign of a cross.”

I read those words again and again, asking myself: Which cross do they mean? The crucifix of Catholicism, under which had already occurred the Crusades and the Inquisition? Martin Luther’s vitriolic Protestant cross? The broken cross of the swastika of the Third Reich?

Yes. All of these.

When the memorial was placed, clergy from around Germany explained this national act of **T'shuvah**. Pastor Friedrich Schorlemmer said, "You can't cover up injustice." Pastor Johannes Block said, "The sculpture ... no longer speaks for itself as a solitary piece but is embedded in a culture of remembrance ... We don't want to hide or abolish history, but take the path of reconciliation with and through history."

Selach lanu, Avinu, ki chatanu ... Forgive us, Our God, for we have sinned.

An article about the memorial in *Smithsonian Magazine* states: "English has two words – "monument" and memorial" to describe a structure meant to remind viewers of a certain person or event. The two are used so interchangeably that it's hard to tell the difference. But there's no English words to describe an installation that apologizes for the past – perhaps because, until recently, America and Britain tended not to build them. The memorials for Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington, D.C. both recognize shameful episodes in American history - slavery and segregation – but only in the course of celebrating great men.

... In Germany, there's less ambiguity around that question. German has several words for memorials. An *Ehren-mal* is a monument built to honor its subject. A *Denk-mal* commemorates an event, and a *Ge-denk-staate* is a place of contemplation and reflection. Both of these words contain the root DENKEN, to think."

And the verb GEDENKEN means to remember, to memorialize.

The broken cross is not a monument to Martin Luther, to Anti-Semitism, or to German nationalism. It is there as a stark admission of centuries of hate – and as a devastating reminder, bubbling up from the ground, that burdens every person alive today to think. Hard. About the past. In order to never repeat it.

Tzararnu. We have been hostile and filled with hate.

Because let's be honest: Just as not every Protestant in Luther's day was Anti-Semitic, and not every German in 1940 was a Nazi, it remains true that not every German today has done **T'Shuvah**. We know that there are fascists, Anti-Semites, and haters in Europe as there are in our own nation and around the world.

The election in Germany earlier this month proves this exact point. A few weeks ago, Germany's far-right party, AfD or Alternative for Germany, won a comfortable victory, with exit polls showing them winning 44.6 percent of the vote, far ahead of their rivals. One publication claims that this victory "marks the strongest performance by a far-right party in a German state since World War II."

And the parallels between the Nazi Party and the AfD are uncannily close. The AfD's founding in 2015 came out of the refugee crisis in Europe. The party's ideology champions the causes of German- and ethno-nationalism, right-wing populism, and national conservatism. Its policy focuses on opposing immigration into Germany (especially Muslim immigration), opposing

Islam in general, Euro-skepticism (meaning it deems the EU as too liberal), a denial of human-caused global warming, and supporting closer relations with Russia.

With that being true, how assured can we be about this new party's commitment to uphold Germany's open efforts toward **T'shuvah**? Of course, it's much too soon to say, but history has shown us again and again that like-minded governments attempt to commandeer the press, the courts, the media - the history books themselves - in order to rewrite the story to fit their agenda and beliefs. I have to ask: Will the AfD remove the monuments? Revise the museums? Will Germany remain committed to their apology?

And more importantly, will Germany remain commit to acting with **T'shuvah** to everyone in the land? Everyone? Today?

Isn't the real reason that nations attempt to rewrite their history because they're appalled by how they have treated other people? Because they don't want to honestly acknowledge what actually happened? When I read that any nation takes steps to discredit the truths of history and deceive its citizenry, I have to ask the same questions again: Will the humanity remain committed to **T'shuvah**? Or will they disregard the voices of the past?

Titanu. We have purposely misled others.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “A nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”

Roosevelt’s quote tasks a nation almost exactly what Maimonides wrote about **T’shuvah** centuries before: “What constitutes teshuvah? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart never to commit them again.”

I think of William Faulkner’s haunting words: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

I am often asked why Rosh HaShanah does not come after Yom Kippur. “Yom Kippur is so solemn,” people say. “Can’t we just complete the task of atonement for last year and then close the books on it? Get the atonement out of the way first, so we can focus on the sweet New Year after that?”

Why not observe Yom Kippur first to get it out of the way? The answer is right there in the question. We are not tasked to atone simply to get it out of the way! We miss the entire purpose of Yom Kippur if we fail to constantly re-examine our failings. We don’t put them behind us. When Germany built those important museums and monuments, could that mark the official end of their apology? Of their commitment to **T’shuvah**? Having checked that box, are they off the hook?

This is why it bothers me when Jews greet each other on Yom Kippur saying, “Wishing you an easy fast.” The implication there is: “As long as you are meeting your halachic obligation of fasting – checking that box – I’m hoping it will be as painless for you as possible.”

Absolutely not. Nothing about Yom Kippur should be easy. Your fasting should be hard.

Scrutinizing yourself should be hard. And saying you’re sorry should be hard. The hardest thing about **T’shuvah** is that you can’t put it behind you.

The museums and monuments in Germany are courageous and honorable admissions of what past generations have done. But the work is never complete. The real test is whether the world will utilize the knowledge that it has gained firsthand to not make the same mistakes again. No nation, no government, no person is free from this obligation. Beyond any physical museum or monument, let us allow the lessons of history to guide us toward dignifying every person on earth. To treating every human soul as b’tzelem Elohim – to recognize the image of God in every inhabitant of this world.

Selach lanu, Avinu, ki chatanu ... Forgive us, Our God, for we have sinned.

Our Sages taught that **T’shuvah** was created before the creation of the world itself. That **T’shuvah** is as fundamental as gravity. That **T’shuvah** is a primal, human need.

Return today. This year. Every year and all the time.

For failing to actively atone for our transgressions turns us ourselves into museum pieces.

As dead as the people we claim to remember.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah

May you be sealed for goodness in the Book of Life