

Kol Nidre
“All of the above”
5773/2012
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Picture the following scene. Nearly 100,000 Jews packed into Met-Life Stadium in the Meadowlands – a sea of black coats and fur hats – frumme yidden who have gathered to commemorate – *Siyum Hashas* – the completion of a cycle of the study of the Talmud; to participate in what may have been the largest celebration of Jewish learning in centuries – if ever. And I suspect that very few of us here today, were there a little over one month ago. And if gathering 100,000 Jews in Met-Life Stadium, was not in itself a remarkable enough achievement – the event that brought them together is even more remarkable. Many of those 100,000 were participating in *Siyum Hashas* – the completion of a cycle of the study of the entire Talmud.

One cannot help but be impressed by this achievement and by the community that achieved it. It is, if nothing else – a remarkable commitment to torah learning, Jewish commitment and belief. It says an enormous amount about the people who were there – and it says an enormous amount about us – who were not there.

What would it take to get 100,000 of our yidden – our kind of Jews to assemble at one moment, on one occasion – in Met-Life Stadium? What would it take to get 100,000 of you there?

When I posed this question recently – one of our members was quick to respond, “But rabbi - - we do get our Jews to assemble in remarkable numbers in Met-Life Stadium and it happens on a regular basis – any Sunday when the Jet’s or the Giants are playing there!”

So let me see if I have this right: 100,000 Ultra-Orthodox Jews gathered on August 1 in Met-Life Stadium to commemorate a celebration of Talmud Study – an event that did not resonate with many of us and which few of us attended. The last few of Sundays many of us were in Met-Life Stadium – for a Jet’s or Giants game – an event that did not resonate with those black coated, and fur-hated – frumme yidden who filled Met-Life on August 1st.

What are we to make of this contrast?

Well here is what my good friend Dr. Alisa Kurshan, Senior Vice President of UJA-Federation of New York makes of it – as she analyzed this same reality as it emerged, not from Met-Life Stadium but from the results of the recent population study conducted by our New York Federation

“Many Jews in New York are embracing modernity – they are thriving and prosperous—but at a cost to Jewish Identity. At the same time, there is a large and growing sector resisting modernity, at a cost to economic prosperity, but with strong Jewish Identity. These are each challenges for the New York Jewish community and they require different responses.”

I think that Alisa is correct. Look - it does not take a genius to understand that when you have a small but fervent community that is committed to marrying and having children by the time they are 18 - 20 and then when they do start having children they have families in excess of

10-15 children – well, you do the math. Growth is exponential – and dramatic - -and that is precisely what we are seeing in the recently released Jewish Population study. It is not that thousands are converting to Ultra-Orthodoxy – on the contrary - -they are a highly insular part of our community, but their ability to produce Jews – both physically and spiritually is nothing short of amazing.

But, as the study points out, it comes at a cost. They achieve this identity by shunning modernity – they isolate themselves from the modern world in ways we would find unthinkable. This may be good for a certain kind of Jewish Identity but it is disastrous when it comes to making a living and creating a certain kind of life we call modern. The poverty level and the inability of this community to provide for those large families are problems and challenges of crisis proportions. It is unsustainable – here and in Israel. One of the critical challenges that emerges from this population study is how do we get those Ultra-Orthodox Jews who filled Met-Life Stadium more integrated into the modern world.

But today, for the remaining few minutes I have to speak with you on this most sacred of evenings, I hope you will understand that the question I wish to dwell on – is not *that* crises, not the challenge of how to get *them* into modernity but the other one that emerges from Met-Life Stadium, the question of how to get *you, my yidden, my Jews* more integrated into the *Jewish* world – because the success of Judaism depends on the answer to *that* question as well. It is not us vs. them. On the contrary, it must be us *and* them. We have to find a way for us *and* them to succeed. The future of the Jewish enterprise depends on it.

Their success will come in figuring out how to better integrate them into modernity. Our success will come in figuring out how to get more of us into Jewish learning, and Jewish living – into synagogues like ours.

But you, you do care. I am not speaking to a random sample of Jews right now. After all – you are here, in shul on Kol Nidre. *Something* drew you here – *some* connection, *some* level of identity and commitment. But is it enough? Is the level of commitment that fuels our generation, the learning and observance we embrace, is it sufficient? And for each and every one of us who are here tonight, in shul – there are many, too many, who are not.

Do you know what the fastest growing Jewish group is in 2012? No, it is not Orthodox, not Reform, not Conservative. When asked in the recent population study to identify with one group – the fastest growing segment in contemporary Judaism – far outpacing all of the others is: none of the above.

As sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Jack Ukeles recently commented in their analysis of the recent population study, “The meaning of “being Jewish” is increasingly complex – here are some randomly selected voices from the study that illustrate this: “when I’m with my father, I’m Jewish; when I’m with my mother, I’m Catholic.” Or, “the rest of my family is Jewish; I just choose another religion.” Or, “I was born Jewish and years ago converted to Christianity, and then practiced Judaism again for my children.”

What did Tevye say to his wife toward the end of “Fiddler on the Roof?” – “It’s a new world Golda!” Indeed it is. This shul was founded in 1951 by a generation of Jews who were returning from war, marrying and moving from the city to the suburbs. The people who founded this shul were a pretty homogeneous bunch – and it is not unusual when listening to

our founders reminisce about those days – that they speak of the shul less as a small institution than as a large family. You their grandchildren and their grandchildren's generation – you are a much more diverse group of people – and for better or worse – if we want to engage you, if we want to attract you – if we want to appeal to you – the same old, same old is just not going to cut it – not even close.

Here is my favorite statistic that emerged from the population study: roughly twice as many people consider themselves members of synagogues as the number of people that actually pay dues to those synagogues. The study asked people if they were a member of a synagogue. And then they tallied up the number of people who said “yes.” Now these are objective statistics – we know how many people join our shuls – our organizations keep track of these statistics – and when they compared the number of people who *said* they were synagogue members to the number of people who actually paid dues to a synagogue – they found this incredible fact – twice as many people claimed to be members as actually were.

Now – this was no surprise to me – as I experience it in very real ways each and every day. Come to our daily minyan on any given day and you will find people who come to say kaddish – to observe a yahrtzeit – people who at one time were a member of this congregation but for one reason or another choose not to continue their support of the synagogue – but when it comes time to say kaddish – this is their shul, this is the place they come. And we welcome these Jews we are happy to see them.

I get calls all the time from people who used to be members – but stopped their formal relationship with us years ago – and then when a loved one dies or a child is ready to get married calls me and asks me to perform the funeral or the wedding. “You’re my rabbi – you will always be my rabbi!” they insist with great pride and affection. But the fact that I am here – available for them to call when they “*need*” me is because others, you, continued to support the synagogue and pay my salary long after they had stopped– a fact that somehow escapes them completely.

I recently had an exchange with a former member who was indignant that I would not be available for their daughter’s wedding because I was already committed to doing another wedding on the day and at the time they wanted me. They actually asked me to see if I could somehow “get out” of the other wedding – “Rabbi you Bat Mitzvahed our daughter! You are the only rabbi she has ever known.” “But you are not even members anymore!” I say. “Don’t all those years we were members count for anything?” they ask. And I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

Here is the good news – when more people claim membership than actually are members – twice as many – well that tells me something. When people keep coming to shul after they have stopped paying dues, when they call me years after they left asking me to perform a wedding or a funeral – this tells me that they still care, in deep and significant ways.

It is what I call the Birthright phenomenon. You know what Birthright Israel is – the incredibly successful program that takes young people 18-26 on a free trip to Israel for the first time. Since its inception it has taken over 300,000 young Jews from around the world– more than 200,000 from America on a free trip to Israel. These 10 days trips have transformed a generation and impacted their Jewish identities in real and profound ways. Before Birthright – we thought that all these young people who were not going to Israel didn’t care enough to go.

What Birthright demonstrated was that they cared very much – they just weren't willing to pay thousands of dollars to go. Once we made it possible – we couldn't find enough places for them and still the lists are long waiting for their chance to participate on this amazing program. "Once we made it possible" – remember those words.

I suspect there is something similar at work with synagogues. It is not that people are no longer interested in what we do here – I think they are very interested but as the price of affiliation keeps getting higher more and more are not willing to pay what we are asking.

Now for some of you – shul membership is a bargain. You understand that for what you and your family get out of this place – it is a bargain. Some of you – many of you pay much more than the "minimum fair share" and we are not only appreciative – we depend on your generosity for our survival. But as the unaffiliated, the "none of the above" Jews continue to increase in numbers – more and more of your contemporaries are beginning to opt out of paying dues to a shul – even as they continue to opt in when it comes to the Holidays, saying kaddish or needing a rabbi for a life-cycle event. Most of you know these Jews – they are your friends and neighbors – they are the ones who ask you if there is any way you can get them a ticket for the High Holy Days. They are the ones you call me for and say, my friend needs a rabbi – can you help them?

The financial model of the American synagogue was developed in the 50's and it is no longer viable in the 21st century. It has been under strain for a number of years now – but the recent financial crisis put it over the edge. What we are wrestling with – is the same as Reform, Conservative and even Orthodox shuls all over are wrestling with.

Some of you come to us and say– I want to be a part of this great synagogue – but I just can't – my financial situation is such that I cannot afford to support the synagogue at the level you expect. You are easy – we love you and we value your presence in our community and our leadership is glad to meet with you and work out an arrangement that works for you.

Many of you value your participation in this synagogue and gladly pay your fair share to maintain and support its operation. Some of you pay far in excess of what we call "minimum fair share" – you are part of our Rabbi's Circle – we love you too and we value your presence in our community and your generosity is what makes it possible for us to exist as we extend a helping hand to more and more who want to be a part of our community but in these difficult times need some financial help to do so.

And then there is that other group: "none of the above." How do we say to our "none of the above" Jews that we love you? How do we say to our "none of the above" Jews that we have a place for you? That we want you to be here, with us? Because as more and more of those "none of the above" Jews opt out of synagogue membership the burden on the rest of us – is becoming unsustainable.

We could just wait –for them to recognize what you know – that this place is worth it. That Jewish learning and Jewish living is worth the investment. How's that been working for us? Or like the Birthright program transformed a generation of our youth, we could ask: how do we make it possible for these "none of the above" Jews to find their way back to us, to find their place here with us? I believe this is the most crucial question that confronts us today. And since these "none of the above" Jews are the fastest growing group of Jews in America we need some answers and we need them fast.

So let me tell you a story – and then I will tell you what I think we should do and why I need your help to do it.

First the story, it is a Hasidic story, some even attribute it to the Baal Shem Tov himself, it is a story I find helpful whenever I am not sure which path to follow.

A man was once walking through a forest and lost his way. Hour after hour he wandered among the trees, cutting his way through the dense foliage and intertwining branches, but he could not discover a path which would lead him out of the woods. For three whole days he continued to search, imagining time and again that he was approaching the edge of the forest, but each time discovering that he had only penetrated even more deeply into the gloomy woods. As he wandered on, his legs weary, his back breaking, his mouth parched with thirst, a man suddenly appeared before him. Everything about the stranger showed him to be a man of the forest -- his clothes were woven from bark, his beard was wild and unkempt, his feet were bound in rags, and in one hand he held a gnarled stick.

The man who had lost his way was overjoyed at the sight. He ran towards the woodsman crying aloud: "My dear sir, you've no idea how delighted I am to have found you, how wonderful it is that we have met. Now you can show me the way out of this maze-like forest. I've been wandering through it for days, unable to discover the right path." The woodsman gazed back at the man with a wry smile: "How long did you say you have been lost in the forest, my friend?" "Three whole days," the man cried. "For three days I've been searching for a path out of the wood, but to no avail! Please - I beg of you - show me the way out of the forest."

"Three days?" sighed the woodsman. "Just look at me! For ten years I've been wandering in the depths of these woods, unable to find my way out of the maze." At this, the man who had lost his way burst into tears. "When I saw you, I felt sure that I was saved, and that you would show me the way out of the woods. Now I see there is no hope- we are doomed."

The woodsman then said with a gentle smile: "Still, we have gained two things of great value by meeting each other. From my experience I can show you which are the paths that do not lead out of the forest and you can show me the ones that did not lead you out – and secondly, we now have each other – we are no longer alone and I have no doubt that together, we can find our way out, we can find the right path together."

I have to admit – there was a moment when I was a bit dismayed over the realization that I could never fill Met-Life Stadium with 100,000 of my Jews dedicated to the study of Talmud. But then a few things began to dawn on me.

First I realized that many of those Jews were made possible by many of my Jews. That the support and commitment of many of our Jews is what maintains the UJA/Federation, that organizations like UJA and Meir Panim – places that literally provide food and clothing for the poor in Israel and right here in New York – these are the work of your hands. Jewish Hospitals and Jewish Agencies of Social Work, Jewish Institutions of Higher Learning – you did that – you built them and you maintain them – you my Jews.

We are all truly interconnected. We will all succeed together, or we will all fail together. And the future of the entire Jewish enterprise begins right here, right now – in this synagogue and with you, my Jews.

Like that man in my story who was lost in the forest – I began to feel better because I realized I had you. We have each other.

So here is what I think we, you and me, what WE need to do:

First and foremost I need to say thank you – to YOU our loyal members – you who understand and appreciate the value of what we do here and what we mean to the future of our people. I need to say thank you to those of you who give us a lot and to those of you who give us more than they can easily afford – and that basically means every one of you who is here tonight – thank you. I don't think we say thank you enough.

Secondly, you need to make this Yom Kippur Appeal successful in order to bridge the financial gap for this year. So if you can help us out – it will mean a lot. It will make all the difference in the world.

Our president Marc Magid has appointed a strategic planning committee and challenged them with coming back with ideas this year – I have some ideas of my own, and I know in this remarkable community – some of you must have some out of the box ideas as well. We will be initiating a synagogue-wide conversation. We will invite you to the Board Meetings when this strategic committee makes its report – I hope you will participate in this process as we search for a way out together.

I know you care, I know you value what we are doing - we just need to solve the equation of how to finance it in this new world. We have some very smart and savvy people in this room and we need our best minds to help us lead the way – and be a model for synagogues all over America who are wrestling with the same realities we are. Some of them have some good ideas and we should be incorporating them as well.

By all definitions, we are a phenomenally successful shul – but what can I tell you – I am Jewish – I worry, I worry about our future. I worry about the challenges that confront us if we hope to keep this synagogue filled with Jews. The demographics of Long Island, the cost of affiliation – the fact that more and more of your contemporaries define themselves as “none of the above” Jews – these are the things that worry me.

But just as I was about to be overwhelmed with worry – I came to shul and I see you. And, well, thanks to you – I feel better. We might not be filling Met-Life Stadium – but we do fill this synagogue with life and learning every single day of the year. I have you – and because I have you, like that man in my story – I feel so much better and I am confident that we will find our way together.

Because I have you - I am confident about tomorrow. Each time I teach a torah class and you turn out in large numbers I realize we are succeeding. Each time we hold a Shabbat service and hundreds come to worship with us, each daily minyan, each day of Religious School and every night of Machon – our Hebrew High School – maybe we don't yet fill Met-Life Stadium – but we are here today – filled to capacity, we will be back here in a few days and will fill our sukkah with joy and celebration. We are succeeding.

Week after week our social hall is filled with sounds of joy as we dance at Jewish weddings, and we fill our homes with love and support as respond as a caring community to comfort each other in times of loss. We have travelled to Israel together and learned together, we pray together and laugh together and cry together - together we are a vital and vibrant community. Together we will find a way to reach those "none of the above Jews." How can I be so sure? Because I have you – my "all of the above" Jews, my above and beyond Jews, my kind of Jews.