

Living in the Light

Sermon for Yom Kippur Eve

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As you know, this year our congregation will be focusing on the power of stories in our lives. Yom Kippur is a great time for telling stories.

Here is one that I love: A religious man who had reached the age of 105 suddenly stopped going to synagogue. Alarmed by the old fellow's absence after so many years of faithful attendance, the rabbi went to see him. He found him in excellent health, so the rabbi asked, "How come after all these years we don't see you at services anymore?" "I will tell you, Rabbi," the old man whispered. "When I got to be 90, I expected God to take me any day. But then I got to be 95, then 100, and then 105. So I figured that God is very busy and must've forgotten about me...and I don't want to remind him!"

The logic of this man may not make sense but his desire is understandable. He wanted to hide from the inevitable. And we must admit there are times when we would all like to hide.

Many of us are fans of the Harry Potter stories and movies. Remember Harry's Invisibility Cloak? When he throws it on he disappears during critical moments in his magical adventures. He cannot be seen by anyone and can do whatever task is required in secret.

Wouldn't such a cloak come in handy at times? How about when watching a really embarrassing movie like *Bruno*? With your kids? Or when we ask someone out and they reply, "Let's just be friends." Or when we make a joke and nobody laughs. Sure would like that invisibility cloak then!

Apparently science may be catching up with Harry Potter. Researchers have shown they are able now to cloak three-dimensional objects that redirect light around them. The light waves are deflected and the objects look invisible. James Bond had a car like that in one of the movies. But now such things are real. If you want to be invisible, all you have to do is figure out a way to bend light around yourself.

But becoming invisible is not the message of Yom Kippur. **Today we are given the opposite charge: *become visible*.** Reflect God's light. Live in the light, not the shadows. Bending light and hiding ourselves is bad. Reflecting light and being visible is good.

Think of Yom Kippur as our *Visibility* Cloak. It reminds us that we wrap this day around ourselves like the tallit we wear only one night a year -- tonight -- so we remember to show ourselves to the world. God does not want us to hide. God wants us to move from darkness to light, from invisibility to visibility, from an undercover existence to an elevated station in the world.

But exactly what does it mean for us to live in the light? To don our cloaks of

visibility?

First and foremost it means to see ourselves as we truly are. This is not easy. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has a painting by Picasso entitled, *Girl Before a Mirror*. It shows the painter's young mistress in profile, gazing at her reflection in the adjacent mirror. But here's the thing: her reflection does not look like her. She doesn't see herself as she truly appears!

Most of the year we are like that girl. We see a distorted image of our authentic selves. On this day we don our cloaks of visibility and we see the true image.

I know that seeing ourselves as we really are is not easy. Most of us have done things we regret. We have made mistakes, hurt people, failed to live up to the expectations of others.

Mario Puzo, the writer of *The Godfather* novel that became a smash motion picture, later admitted he did not try very hard when writing the book. He wrote the book for the money, not for art's sake. Ruefully looking back, he once declared, "If I'd known so many people were going to read it, I'd have written it better."

Living in the light mandates that we engage in that tough soul accounting, what the Rabbis called "*cheshbon ha-nefesh*". It means we are honest about the choices we have made, and that we hold ourselves responsible for the wrong choices.

The idea that we are defined by our choices has not been too popular in the last few years. Somehow, as a society, we imagined differently. We thought we could do whatever we liked. It's like someone on a diet who thinks they have discovered a way to eat whatever they want and not get fat. Such diets never work because there are always consequences to the choices we make.

Likewise, there are consequences to the moral choices we either make or avoid. To put it another way, as much as we don't use the old word "sin" very much anymore, it is still a useful way to remind ourselves that some of our deeds are wrong. We come to this Holy Place, reminded that we stand before God. "Know before Whom You stand" was written in large Hebrew letters before the Ark in my childhood synagogue.

But in our daily lives all too often we allow ourselves to live by another ethos, namely, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." ¹

We pick and choose our ethics. We are hypocrites. We tell our kids one thing while practicing its opposite. We cheat on each other. We lie with aplomb. And all the while we pull our Invisibility Cloak tightly around us, imagining our lives are impenetrable to God's light.

But even though we don't like old-fashioned terms such as "sin" we cannot deny the

¹ Rabbi Paul Plotkin, "Acknowledging Sin as Sin" *American Rabbi*, 2009

fact that we are untrue to our higher selves, to God's expectations for us, and to each other.

How might we define sin today? Think of the army chaplain who was with a young man dying on the battlefield. In the last moments of his life, the chaplain tried to console the soldier as best as he could.

"Son, is there anything I can do for you?"

The soldier replied, "No." And as the memories of his life flashed before his eyes, he said to the chaplain, "Sir, what I need now is someone who can *undo* some things for me."

What fills our list of things we would like to undo? My hunch is that that's where we will find most of our sins.

To live in the light means to see our lives for what they are, sins and all. And to stop pretending that the acts we perform have no bearing on the state of our souls.

And so I say, on Yom Kippur, let in the light.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, that wise man of the early 19th century, once taught that ***"truth is the light by which to find your way out of darkness. Turn on that light."***

And this is the very message I wish to share with you tonight. Let the light in and see the truth. For we cannot improve if we don't start with the truth.

One of Reb Nachman's favorite midrashim was the story of God creating human beings. The angels in heaven worried that humans would be corrupt. Some supported the creation, saying that humans would be kind and righteous. Others were against it, arguing that we would be filled with strife and falsehood. So what did God do? God took the attribute of Truth and cast it to the ground.

The angels cried out, "Why, O God, would you cast truth out of heaven?" To which God replied, "Truth will spring up from the ground." In other words, even though we will sin and make many mistakes, when we face the truth of our actions we will begin the road toward redemption.

My friends, Reb Nachman was right: the road towards redemption only goes one way: through our being honest about our true selves. This is the night for that honesty. We can wait no longer.

Let in the light.

When it comes to light, of course there is more to it than seeing our true selves. In addition to seeing ourselves clearly, I believe living in the light means reflecting God's light by our actions.

Consider this question, "Would you rather be a star or a moon?" Most people would answer that they want to be a star. Who wants to be a lifeless moon when you can shine in a blaze of glory? But another view is that none of us are stars. God is the

only ultimate source of life. We are all created to be reflecting moons. Moons are important. They reflect the light of the sun in the darkness. Think about a dark night lit up by the glow of a full moon.²

And how many ways can we reflect God's light! In this time of uncertainty, of disappointment and lack of hope in a better future, our task is to be the hope. To bring the better day.

We know that the world is a darker place than it was a year ago. All the more reason for us to work harder to reflect God's light.

Here are some things we can do in the year ahead:

- Reach out to our sister city in Russia and let them know they are not forgotten.
- Volunteer in our Soup Kitchen.
- Read to a youngster in an under-funded school.
- Participate in green-related activities and reduce our carbon footprint.
- Work to remind people of those suffering in Darfur.

We can reflect God's light by our actions. Now is the time to bring hope to our darkened world. We are the light.

God's light can shine anywhere, if we bring it. Even where darkness often is found: Hospital rooms, nursing homes, mourner's homes, these are places waiting for the light of God. And we are the very ones who can reflect that light.

Here is a thought, taught by Rabbi Donniel Hartman of Jerusalem. When God created the world, as recorded in the Bible, God gave us human beings the responsibility to take care of the world. Why does God do this, and especially on the sixth day? Here is a possible answer: Because God was planning on the seventh day to retire! As we read, on the seventh day, God "rested" or "retired". The point? Now it's our responsibility to continue the tasks begun by God. To be the moon to God's star.

All of us would agree that righteousness is a goal to which we should all strive. But how do we obtain righteousness? How can we live the lives we are supposed to lead? Simply put: *we live in the light and we reflect God's light.*

And here is the best part of all: Besides taking responsibility for who we are and living our lives as reflections of God's light, there is one other thing to remember: Wherever we go, the light of God is with us.

There is a legend about a Cherokee youth's rite of passage. One day at dusk, his father would take him into the forest, blindfold him and tell him to sit on a stump

² *Homiletics Magazine*

and remain there for the whole night, not removing the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shined through it.

The youth could not cry out for help to anyone. Once he survived the night, he would be deemed a man. He could not tell the other boys of this experience because all young Cherokee males had to come into manhood on their own in the same manner. The boy, naturally, would be terrified. He could hear noises of all sorts. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. A human might even come along to do him harm. The wind would blow the grass and earth, and shake his stump, but the boy would sit stoically, not removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man!

Finally, after a horrific night, the sun would appear and the young man could remove his blindfold. Only then would he discover that his father was sitting on the stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

I know there are many times when it is hard to believe our lives are bathed in the light of God. I also know that many in this sanctuary tonight find it hard to believe at all in God's loving presence. Most of us have doubts.

But there are also many of you who continue to inspire me with your faith in God despite illness, economic down-turn, or family trauma. Your faith transcends these troublesome times. Somehow you know that God's presence is never far away from us, especially in the darkest of nights.

In the end, of course, it's not about believing as it is feeling. We all want to feel that we are not alone. Just as we should all feel summoned to be the best people we can be. We want to let in the light, reflect the light, and find warmth in the light of a force far beyond us and yet so near.

Our visibility cloaks – our *tallitot*, worn especially on this night, remind us to act with integrity, to strive for righteousness, and to know we are surrounded by a loving, eternal presence.

At the beginning of our service we listened to the choir sing these words: *Or zarua latzadik ul'yishrei lev simcha*. "Light is sown for the righteous and joy for the upright in heart." Perhaps another way to translate these words of the Bible is like this: *Or zarua latzadik* -- a righteous person strives to live in the light. *Ul'yishrei lev simcha* - - and in so doing their righteousness brings them joy.

May we come to know such profound joy in the year ahead. Amen.