

Yom Kippur Sermon 5784

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Make sure your water bottle is empty,
You don't use flash photography
and most importantly
do NOT remove your shoes.

(REPEAT)

Make sure your water bottle is empty,
You don't use flash photography
and most importantly
do NOT remove your shoes.

Hm.

Odd instructions.

Let's see where this goes.

We dutifully emptied our water bottles
into the nearest plant,
pocketed our phones
and looked down,
checking that our birkenstocks were
in fact
still strapped to our feet.
Once we appeared ready,
the guide nodded approvingly

and we entered the Cathedral.

A few minutes later,

a woman in our tour group

ventured tentatively,

“What’s the deal with the thing about shoes?

Is it a problem for people to be barefoot here?”

The guide shifted uncomfortably,

eyeing each of us slowly before answering.

“Well...you know, this church...wasn’t always a church.”

Our group, two Jews, and four Muslims, all from New York City, stared back at her.

“And?” the woman asked.

“Well...you know the name of this church,

La Mezquita,

means mosque in Spanish.

This church used to be a mosque...

and before that, something else.

So, um, the shoe thing.

It’s about prayer.

If visitors keep their shoes on, they won’t pray here.”

As the guide said this,

our group was quiet,

absorbing the mix

of beauty, destruction and erasure

present when visiting religious sites
in Spain.

*This past August,
my mother and I went
To visit the remnants
Of the once vibrant
Jewish communities of the Iberian Peninsula,
Before the expulsion from Spain in 1492.*

Perhaps you've heard the refrain,
sometimes used to describe Jewish holidays:

They tried to kill us, let's eat.

While in rabbinical school,
I finally heard someone name this,
calling it
the lacrimose theory of Jewish history.

Essentially,
this is the idea that we perceive Jewish history as a horrible,
depressing story
of constant oppression,
death , torture and tragedy
Which we counterbalance with food,

celebrating our continued existence through eating.

At first,
this description seems to work well
for Yom Kippur.

We spend a 25 hour period
self-afflicting, fasting, repenting
and at the end,
we feast.

But Yom Kippur is not based
on historic oppression or violence.

It comes straight from the Torah.

Mentioned three times,

Yom Kippur appears as a special day

When we are cleansed of our sins.

The holiday is not presented
with a specific emotional veilance.

It's not obviously sad or frightening or about suffering.

Instead,

Yom Kippur has often been classified by our sages
as a top two joyous Jewish holiday!

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl teaches:

*The 18th Century scholar,
the Vilna Gaon,
explained
the biblical name for Yom Kippur is Yom Ha-K' Purim.
Literally meaning: Yom Kippur is a day like Purim.
On the surface,
the holidays couldn't seem more different—
one is the Day of Atonement
and the other,
a Slivovitz-filled,
Jewish mardi gras.
But beneath the surface,
the holidays are similar at their core:
On Purim,
when we glimpse our gallows
and Yom Kippur,
when the gates are closing,
we are forced to confront our mortality.
And this is precisely why
these holidays are considered
our most joyful.*

The Vilna Gaon

compares Purim
a holiday almost universally recognized
as joyous
with Yom Kippur,
a holiday considered
the opposite,
tying the two together through language.
Through this connection,
the two are related.
Both are joyful
because they force us to confront death
causing a deeper appreciation for life.

Why draw out this connection?
What does it matter if Yom Kippur is somber or joyful?
It comes back to the lacrimose theory of Jewish history.
Without recognizing the joy embedded
within our texts, rituals and holidays,
the lacrimose takes over.
Without uncovering joy,
our history and Jewish identity
can too easily focus
on violence, destruction and erasure only.

Through drawing out Yom Kippur's
Purim-like qualities,
we are able to rejoice in life,
encouraged by the knowledge that
although life is finite for the individual,
for a people, life goes on.

Another tradition teaches
that it is because of the potential for forgiveness
made possible by Yom Kippur
that the holiday is joyful.

In the Talmud in Bava Batra
we learn that the last tablets of the Torah
were given on Yom Kippur,
and that these tablets are our greatest gift from God.

These tablets,
replacements for the original set Moses smashed
upon seeing the Golden Calf,
are God's proof of love and forgiveness
because God returns to us
and gives us a second chance
to receive the Torah...

Today,

Yom Kippur is still proof of God's love
and of our own capacity to hold
joy and sorrow, loss and hope.

The night before we visited La Mezquita,
My mother and I roamed
the burning hot August streets of Cordoba
Getting lost in La Juderia,
The Jewish quarter.
There,
On synagogue street,
stands a sculpture of Maimonides
Jewish philosopher, doctor and theologian,
Born there, in 12th century Jewish Cordoba.
Half sitting
with sandaled feet and turbaned head,
frozen in time,
This ancient sage
forever poses for selfies with passerby.
Some even touch his feet for good luck.
Cast in bronze,
We felt his gaze on us
Warm and welcoming.

Built in 1964,
this sculpture was a turning point in Spain,
when local governments began to mark
the Judaism that had been removed
from their cities, towns and villages
via the Inquisition and expulsion.
Following Maimonides' gaze,
we arrived at Casa Sefarad,
a small museum revealing the Sefardic Jewish life
that had once flourished in Cordoba.
Filled with
with sacred objects,
clothing,
prayer books
music
and descriptions of history
This museum offers us a precious glimpse of the golden age of Spain
Where Christians, Jews and Muslims thrived together.
That day, one of the museum founders,
a Sefardic man in his thirties,
stood in the courtyard.
A musician by trade,
he sang in Judeo Arabic and Judeo Spanish,

Temporarily reviving this destroyed Jewish world
through using its surviving languages.

Listening to him sing

I felt the pain of what was lost
and the power of this sliver of continuity.

While places of destruction of Judaism
are not hard to find in Europe,
somehow this felt different.

This was both memory and celebration...

Visiting these sites of former Jewish life in Spain past August,
I came to understand Yom Kippur better.

Through listening to the music of Sefardic Jewry in Sefarad,
I was better able to hold the emotional complexity of this holiday,
which combines somber reflection and joyous celebration.

Perhaps the goal is not to understand Yom Kippur
as all somber or all joyous,
displacing one interpretation with another.

Like our history and lived reality, it offers both.
it is our task to knit the two together.

The Baal Shem Tov,

An 18th century Jewish sage from Ukraine,

who struggled with depression his entire life,

taught:

Finding true joy is the hardest of all spiritual tasks.

If the only way to make yourself happy is by doing something silly,
(please, God!) do it.

Back at La Mezquita,

I slipped off my sandal,

humming the musician from Casa Sefarad's Judeo Spanish tune.

As my red toe nails grazed the ancient stones,

I looked up,

noticing the other woman from my tour group

A religious muslim from Bay Ridge

a few feet away,

eyes closed,

quietly praying.

Gmar chatima tovah, may you be written into the book of life.