

Kol Nidre 5779
The Gift of our Faults
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This past winter, we took our kids to see the movie adaptation of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a much beloved childhood book of mine by Madeline L'Engle.

It was a gorgeous film with an all-star cast including Oprah Winfrey, Reece Witherspoon and others. Although it got mixed reviews, the power of L'Engle's tale came through, and I left the theatre thinking fairly somber thoughts about how easy it is to get sucked into a spiral of self doubt and pessimism, how quick we are to ignore the light of goodness and generosity that resides within us all.

In the film, Meg, along with her younger brother Charles Wallace and a schoolmate Calvin, travel through multiple dimensions and worlds to rescue their scientist father, Alex, who had mysteriously disappeared several years before. And is being held captive on a planet called Camazotz. The home world of the nefarious IT, Camazotz represents all the greed, anger, pride, selfishness, and low self-esteem in the world. Meg, we soon discover, is the key to fulfilling the successful rescue mission to bring her father home. But she is full of insecurity, anger and sadness. She wants nothing more than to NOT be herself.

Haven't we all felt that way? Wanted NOT to be ourselves? Overwhelmed with family responsibilities or expectations at work. Underwhelmed with what we perceive our life to be. When we look at ourselves in the mirror Are we satisfied with what we see? Or is the reflection looking back at us the image of a stranger?

On Kol Nidre we are compelled to seek the answer to this challenging question.

וְנִסְלַח לְכָל-עֵדוּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם כִּי לְכָל-הָעָם בִּשְׁגָגָה.

All shall be forgiven- the entire community of Israel, And the stranger who lives in their midst- For all have gone astray in error.¹

These words highlight the purpose of the Yom Kippur ritual. Indeed, Rabbi Yergin read them earlier tonight. The text reminds us that each one of us is guilty of sin. But while we have all sinned- we will also all be forgiven. Jew and non-Jew....Israelite and stranger we are in this together. And yet the text reveals a more personal truth as well.

As Rabbi Hayim Herring suggests:

“Don’t read: v’lager hagar b’tocham...As the stranger who dwells **b’tocham** in your midst, but rather, the stranger who resides **b’tocham** within themselves.”

As Herring reflects:

“As the years pass, we become estranged from different parts of ourselves. Some parts go underground, like a dream or an aspiration that we once held. Some aspect of our personality changes so that we surrender to dishonorable instincts instead of rechanneling them in a positive direction.” Understood in this way, the stranger in our midst is not only sitting beside us but is within us. And until we learn to embrace ourselves in our totality our Teshuvah will never be complete. For as much as we might wish it to be so, we cannot be someone else. We can only be more of ourselves.

In a *Wrinkle in Time*, three astral travelers Mrs. Watsit, Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which join forces to help Meg, Charles Wallace and Calvin. And though their light is not strong enough to accompany them on their journey through Camazotz they bestow gifts upon Meg to aid them on their mission: Mrs. Who’s glasses, the knowledge of Meg’s faults, and the command to never separate.

¹ Numbers 15:26, Mishkan HaNefesh p20

Each gift bestowed- is an essential tool for Meg, meant not only to help her rescue her father, but also to rescue herself. Tonight these gifts serve as a metaphor for our own rescue mission as well.

The 1st Gift- Mrs. Who's Glasses

In our story, our heroine Meg, wears glasses because as she explains to Calvin, she is as 'blind as a bat.'" But her poor vision also represents the myopic outlook on the world that she must overcome. She must come to realize that like a bat that apprehends the world through other, perhaps richer, senses than sight alone, she too has the power to see beyond the surface.²

Mrs. Who's glasses are different than Meg's. They are not corrective in the traditional sense. Mrs. Who's glasses give Meg the ability to see what others cannot. And they give her the confidence to use her own talents and intellect to find her father in the astro-physics maze that has become his prison. She not only sees the world around her more clearly for the first time in a long time, she is able to apprehend the worth of her true self.

It would be convenient if all it took was a change in lens prescription to automatically result in this sort of self affirming clarification. Since most of us, brush off compliments no matter how genuine, but internalize criticism and critique no matter how minor. We see the world- and our place within it through clouded vision.

Which is why, for our Board retreat last month, we asked our trustees to take the CliftonStrengths assessment. Created in 2001 by psychologist and business executive, Donald Clifton, this hour long online questionnaire

² Sarah Mesle, Los Angeles Review of Books, Meg Murray's glasses, March 19, 2018

shows you around 200 paired statements and asks you to choose the one which describes you best.

The assessment is meant to measure your natural patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving and share with you the innate talents you possess.³ Meant to help you succeed in the business world, the general theory behind Cliftonstrengths finder is that we spend too much of our time trying to overcome our deficits rather than emphasizing our talents.

How much more productive would we be if the majority of tasks and responsibilities we faced each day played to our innate abilities. How much more satisfied with life would we be if we could articulate our own talents, hone them into strengths and even see how other people's gifts might be used to complement our own?

Seeing your 'talents' listed and described in a print-out is a funny feeling. It seems like one of those BuzzFeed quizzes. The person they describe is so gifted, so confident, so TALENTED. You just assume that everyone's report says more or less the same thing. But here, this is definitely not the case. As our wonderful facilitator, congregant Debbie Roos explained that while over 19 million people worldwide have taken the strengths assessment test, the likelihood that someone has your top 5 talents in the same order as you is 1:33 million. Our combination and order of talents and strengths is rare. Each of us is unique...a rather ancient Jewish concept.

As the 2nd Century rabbis of the Mishnah understood, "whereas when man prints many coins from one die, each one is a replica of the other...the Holy One blessed be God stamped every human with the die of Adam and yet no one exactly resembles his fellow."⁴

³ Gallupstrengthcenter.com

⁴ Mishnah Sanhedrin 37a

As much as we might have in common-Your special blend of talents and insights are uniquely you. Making you priceless to God and to the people who know and love you.

When you read your Clifton strengths report it feels like putting on Mrs. Who's glasses for the first time. Seeing your innate preferences, behaviors and quirks framed in a fully positive light- is indeed an eye-opening experience.

My top 5 talents are: Achiever, relator, responsibility, woo (winning others over) and communication.

Which explains why I greatly enjoy starting friendly conversations with complete strangers I meet on line at the grocery store, (embarrassing my children to no end.) And why I feel compelled to clarify and simplify complicated statements. And why I have a hard time saying no to compelling projects. And why I have to be able to check multiple things off of my to do list every day- even when I am on vacation to feel like all is right in the world.

This is not an advertisement for Clifton Strengths (though Debbie is an amazing coach). But the process highlights how empowering it can be To better understand our own self worth....to figure out what it is we value most about ourselves. To think about what is right with us rather than fixating on what is supposedly wrong. To open our eyes and be able to see.

The 2nd Gift- Meg Murray's Faults

When Mrs. Whatsit, gives Meg 'the gift of her faults', she is confused. How could her faults possibly be an asset? She, like most of us, sees her faults as her greatest weaknesses. But our faults teach us about ourselves in ways we don't always want to face. And every obstacle we encounter can also be our greatest opportunity for growth.

Only when we acknowledge our faults and come to terms with them, are we able to transform them. When we own our imperfections they cannot be weaponized against us by others. We are able to transform them into our greatest powers instead.

A Talmudic tale from Tractate Taanit makes my point:

One day the daughter of the great Caesar approaches Rabbi Joshua ben Hananya and says, “you are so glorious in your wisdom. It’s a shame you have to be so ugly.” (Rabbi Joshua was well-known for his unappealing looks.) Unfazed, Rabbi Joshua replies, “even the most expensive wine in the Caesar’s wine cellar is kept in rough earthen ware vessels.”

(in other words, many precious things can be found in humble containers.)

“Maybe, the wine of nobles should be kept in gold and silver vessels instead?” he teases. But, the emperor’s daughter takes Rabbi Joshua’s suggestion seriously. (He is gloriously wise after all). She orders all of the wine to be transferred to gold and silver vessels. After a short time it has all spoiled. The emperor summons Rabbi Joshua and asks why he had given his daughter such poor advice? Everyone knows it’s best to keep wine in an earthenware vessel. Rabbi Joshua replied, “I answered her according to the way she spoke to me.”⁵

How rude of the emperor’s daughter to tell Joshua he was unattractive! But since for Rabbi Joshua his appearance was of little consequence he wasn’t hurt at all. What mattered to him was intelligence, insight and wisdom. External beauty has its place, the Talmud seems to be teaching, but it is not everything. Each vessel has its role to play.

Physical beauty may seem like a superficial example. But, considering the amount of money and time people spend on hair, skin, clothing and shoes –

⁵ Babylonian Talmud- Tractate Ta’anit 7 a-b

men and women alike....it should still hit home.

All of us want to be seen as attractive. Yet that is not because we dream of being on the cover of a magazine. It is because at the core of our being we want people to want us....to be drawn to us. We want them to want to be with us. We want them to want to listen to us, to want to take care of us, to want have us in their lives. We want to be loved.

For those of us with strong opinions, unique talents or quirky personalities Its not always so easy to fit in and get along. People are not always willing to make the effort to recognize our inner beauty. People can be cruel, impatient, dismissive.

And on our darkest days- do we not each worry that our faults override our talents? Do we not worry...that perhaps we cannot be loved?

"I know my faults," says Meg to her brother Charles Wallace as she fights against the overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, loneliness and fear that the ITS darkness brings out.

"I'm messy, uncoordinated and most days I hate myself. I'm impulsive, suspicious and yet...you love me."

By acknowledging her faults and weaknesses, Meg defuses them. Admitting she is less than perfect, accepting that despite her imperfection she is worthy of love gives Meg the power to vanquish the evil that surrounds her. Her self awareness enables her to love herself and remember that she is worthy of love from others as well. She is a stranger to herself no more.

The 3rd Gift- Do not allow yourselves to be separated

Before Mrs. Which, Mrs. Who and Mrs. Whatsit depart. Mrs. Which sternly advises Meg, Charles Wallace and Calvin to stick together.

But it isn't long before they realize how frequently obstacles- both real and imagined will materialize How their trust in each other will be challenged. How the IT will plot to pull them apart—by playing on their insecurities and fears. For well he knows how much stronger, resilient and successful they will be if they face him united together.

V'nislach l'chol adat bnei Yisrael,

All shall be forgiven- the entire community of Israel...

“The subject of every verb in the litany of [Yom Kippur] confession is “we” not “I”... We Jews join in a communal confession, regardless of whether we ourselves are guilty of each and every individual sin articulated, because,” Rabbi David Stern explains, “we believe in communal responsibility....If I am part of a community that has exhibited greed, then I bear accountability for that greed. If I am part of a community in which some have exhibited arrogance, then I bear some responsibility for that arrogance.”⁶

But this practice of communal responsibility goes even deeper. Studies in cognitive science show that each interaction we have makes a lasting impression on who we are. Even the most miniscule encounter changes us. So how you see yourself---effects how I see myself. And how I act in the world- effects your outlook as well. ...and everyone we meet (for good and for bad) impacts us by changing who we are, in small or big ways. Some interactions shape us minimally, others fundamentally. Nevertheless, a ripple effect exists for them all.

So, while we are each unique and distinct individuals, we also overlap. I am

⁶ CCAR News, September/October 2018, Vol 66; Issue 1

changed by what you say to me, by how you embrace or shun me...When your life intersects with mine, I am transformed. Knowing you makes me a different person.⁷ This doesn't mean that if I am in a good mood- you will be too or that your act of generosity will automatically compel me to do good as well. But over time it makes a difference.

Kol Adat B'nei Yisrael...The entire community stands before God.
We are all in this together.

At the conclusion of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg, Charles Wallace and Calvin are able to overcome the evil IT, by opening their eyes to their own gifts and talents, acknowledging their weaknesses and relying on each other. They rescue Alex, bring him home and reunite their family once again. Meg is no longer an angry, difficult child. She has accepted the complexities of her own character. Yes, her faults but also her talents and strengths. She is ready to acknowledge other people's love and love herself as well. She radiates peace and light.

There is a certain calmness that occurs when we are truly comfortable in our own skin. Its hard to be there all the time, but if we work at it we do occasionally succeed. We find ourselves more patient with those who are different than us- the stranger in our midst. We are more open to dialogue- - to compromise with others. We are more confident, more forgiving, more kind. We are now reacquainted with our best selves.

V'nislach l'chol adat bnei Yisrael,
v'lager hagar b'tocham- ki l'chol-haam bishgagah.

All shall be forgiven- the entire community of Israel,

⁷ Eisenberg, Sasso, Sandy, "A Soul-ar Eclipse", *May God Remember- Memory & Memorializing in Judaism*, Rabbi Lawrence A.Hoffman, Phd., Ed. p. 206-207

And the stranger who lives in their midst-
For all have gone astray in error.⁸

In the year that has past, we have each in our own ways sinned. Yet if we are able to hone our talents and harness our weaknesses we too can re-acquaint ourselves with our better selves....We are strangers no more... And in this way---all shall be forgiven.

Kain Yehi Ratzon May it be God's will...AMEN

⁸ Numbers 15:26, Mishkan HaNefesh p20