Yom Kippur – 2025/5786

Sin – Big topic of the day! Confession – I struggle with this word. It doesn't land well in my ears. I don't know about you, but to me, it just doesn't feel very Jewish. Throughout this day, through a variety of Hebrew words, we will name our mistakes, transgressions, and wrongdoings. We will talk about missing the mark as all humans do. But when our prayerbook uses the words 'sin' and 'sinner', I'll be honest, I cringe.

A blueberry bagel – that's a sin. Taking the tag off your mattress – sin. Wearing white after Labor Day – in my family - big sin. But the offenses that most of us bring to this day of repentance are not. Idolators, blasphemers, and murderers are called sinners. I don't think that applies to most of us.

Yet, when we began our service, after having barely settled in our seats, without any time to acclimate to the themes of the holiday, these words – sin and sinners – hit us right between the eyes. Just before rising to absorb the profound, emotional, heart-wrenching melody of *Kol Nidre,* the chant that defines the power of this day, we read this ancient proclamation:

בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה.

עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דַּעַת הַקָּהָל

אָנוּ מַתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֲבַרְיָנִים

In the assembly of the heavenly court, and in the assembly of the earthly court, with the consent of the Almighty, and consent of this congregation, we hereby grant permission for all to pray with the *Avaryanim – the sinners*.

It appears we can't avoid the word nor the people –the *Avaryanim*. Some prayerbooks translate this word as transgressors, offenders, wrongdoers – yes, even some call the *Avaryanim* - sinners. According to our tradition, they are here with us in the room and, as uncomfortable as this may feel, according to our tradition, this is the way it is meant to be!

It is thought that when this text first entered our Jewish prayer books around the 13th century,[i] the *Avaryanim* were a specific group of people who had been excommunicated for some transgression of Jewish law. This doesn't happen today, but the text and its message remain.

Later it was thought that the *Avaryanim* were those Jews who converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition. They rejected their Judaism out of fear for their very existence. Some imagined that they snuck into the synagogue on the holiest day of the year to pray for forgiveness for abandoning Jewish tradition. People noticed them but, in observance of our text, said nothing. This, again, is not something that happens today, but the text and its message remain.

One interpretation of *Avaryanim* that seems most fitting right now, is rooted in the meaning of the first part of the word – *Avar* meaning to cross over, to traverse a boundary. Perhaps we are being given permission to be here with those who have crossed a line, who have said or done something that is, for us, out of bounds.

Unlike the other explanations of this text, this certainly does happen today. We live in a time when thinking differently about our community, about Israel or about national politics, can create chasms so deep and schisms so

sharp that we are unable to claim a common bond with those with whom we disagree. All too often we label those with whom we differ as *Avaryanim*, boundary crossers, transgressors, even sinners. And then once we label them, we separate and we disconnect from them. We choose not to engage, worse we leave the room, even this room, even on the holiest night of our year.

In light of this reality, I, for one, am glad that this text exists. It demands that we sit together in this sacred space, and speak and receive words of apology and forgiveness, of repentance and change. I, for one, am glad it is still here. I am grateful that the authors of our Reform prayer book were able to recognize that a seemingly outdated prayer, is, in truth, profoundly compelling and relevant even 800 years after our ancestors first proclaimed its words.

Let me cut to the chase: this text is a mandate for us, a group of people united by our connection to our Judaism and our affiliation with this congregation, to gather, pray, and even more to engage as a community with people with whom we disagree; with people who we think are wrong. And while this legal formula calls for inclusion and tolerance, and while it might stimulate our intellectual curiosity and strengthen our diversity – it is most fundamentally about survival, our survival. Centuries ago, its author, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, saw the writing on the wall. A community that cannot hold conflicting views, a community that cannot get to US because it is too busy labeling others as THEM, a community that lacks the ability to accept those who see the world differently will break apart; it will crumble, fail to survive.

We gather tonight, to resist such a calamity.

Yes, as hard as it is, we are here with the *Avaryanim*. Maybe you are listing those people in your mind right now. Allow me to name just a few I imagine some of us may be thinking about: The other dad in your carpool who is a member of J Street. The friend in your mahjong group who has just joined AIPAC. The person sitting a few rows from you who applauded the dismantling of USAID. The rabbi who signed letters calling for a ceasefire. The congregant who supports the presence of the National Guard in DC. The Jewish student who wears a Kafia in solidarity with Palestinians. The Religious School teacher who teaches that Jewish values require us to stand with immigrants against the ICE deportation campaign. Each of us pictures a different person but all of us know who we would call out, if we could. To us they are *Avaryanim* – people who have crossed a line.

Speaking about this reality on the holiest day of the year is certainly uncomfortable. Naming these divisions feels unsettling. But there is a fundamental, more essential message here that we must comprehend and embrace.

Through this prayer, Jewish tradition, both ancient and modern, asserts that no community, no true community is a monolith. No dynamic, thriving, rich, exciting community is homogeneous. And so, on this most sacred of nights, we embrace the challenge and the value of diversity and pluralism. And let's be clear. We are being asked not only to sit in the same room as those whom we think are wrong, not just to tolerate their presence here and to pray with them, even more to realize that we are not complete without them.

That, in fact, we, collectively, are strengthened by them. A Jewish community is predicated on the reality of difference. Since our earliest days, we have thrived on disagreement, debate, and even dissonance.

In the spirit of disagreement and debate, allow me to turn to the Talmud! Hundreds of years before Rabbi Meir penned his proclamation about the *Avaryanim*, the rabbis of the Talmud claimed both the importance of pluralism and the need to affirm our pluralism on Yom Kippur. They put the first stake in the ground when they proclaimed, *"any fast that doesn't include sinners is not a true fast."* (BT Keritot 6B). What's their proof? It's a bit of a strange reference, but they point to the list of herbs needed to make the incense used in the Temple. *"Behold," they say, "incense that is acceptable to God includes frankincense, stacte, onycha, and galbanum."*

While I haven't ever used any of these in my shabbat chicken soup, I recently learned that while the first three of these herbs are pleasant and tasty, the fourth, Galbanum is acerbic. It is unpleasant compared to the others, yet it is what God wants – a mixing of what some consider aromatic and others malodorous. The acceptable sacred offering is not all perfectly homogenous; it must include a flavor that challenges the palette. So too, the rabbis say, does this apply to the Jewish community. All must be included. That would be all of us! The good singers and those who are tone deaf, the Democrats and the Republicans, the Eagles fans and the Commanders fans, the Zionists and the Zionless all in the same room.

I have always thought of Yom Kippur as a very solo day; a day of deep personal reflection. How can I walk the road of repentance and change if I

don't look hard at myself, alone, my mistakes, my apologies, my forgiveness? Yet, even as we enter the Temple very much in our own heads, our tradition pulls us together, demands that we connect with the people around us and affirm what we all know deep inside - that we need to be part of something larger to be complete.

No less than 4 times on this day we will sing (sing) *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazelnu, Debarnu do'fe*... The *Viddui,* or confession, one of the central prayers of the day, is recited (you may have noticed) not in the singular but in the plural. The suffix *'nu'* is a shortened form of the word *'anachnu'* which means us, all of us. "We have all sinned; we have all transgressed..." And throughout the day don't we say over and over again - *Al chet she-chatNU l'fanecha...?* For the sin WE have sinned against you.

There is more. Our Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, paints a picture of the entire people of Israel standing as one to hear Moses' last charge. As the text says (Dt 29:1-3) "You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God: your leaders, your elders, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from the woodchopper to the water drawer - the entire body of Israel, all of you." Just like all of us - the good singers and the tone deaf, the Republicans and the Democrats, the Commanders fans and the Eagles fans, the Zionists and the Zionless. Surely all of us are, in a way, *Avaryanim,* all of us guilty of something, all of us have crossed another's boundary, yet all of us standing together, as our ancestors did, before Adonai our God.

Why am I so focused on this ancient, uncomfortable, challenging statement that opens Yom Kippur? Why am I risking disquiet here in what I

hope is our safe space? It's not really because I struggle with the word 'sinner' but rather because I struggle with what happens when such a label leads to irreparable divides; when we replace the word friend or neighbor, free thinker or dissenter, individualist or iconoclast – any of these words, or even human-being, with "sinner." Allowing us to dismiss them, maybe even to hate them, maybe even to hurt them.

I want to understand this prayer because I am desperate to create within this, my most important community, a reality of more than just tolerance, but also of empathy and curiosity, generosity and love. A reality that could and should exist in here but, I'm sure you will agree, certainly does not exist out there.

At this moment in history, the driving force of so many communities and countries, including our own America and our own Israel, is division – it is ideological and political polarization, along with isolation and separation and marginalization. What is happening outside of the walls of this Temple is weakening the fabric of our country by eroding trust, hindering governance, and fueling social division. The public square is crumbling; it's falling apart. Our influence out there is limited. But in here, we have agency. Our Judaism demands we do better.

And let me share yet another reason why we must take seriously the mandate to unite here, embracing even those with whom we vehemently disagree. We don't have to look very far to see the many out there who want to break our community. Those who want to see it crumble, disintegrate. Let us not serve the purpose of those who wish to divide us. Let us not hand a victory

to both those on the extreme left and those on the far right who would love to see us all stay home, isolated and afraid. Some people I know-and-love are not here tonight. They have chosen exile. They have stopped showing up as Jews perhaps from fear, or shame or for having views they believe others will not accept. We cannot hand this triumph to those who would have Judaism and Jews disappear. Tonight, we are commanded to embrace our complexity, our multiplicity, even our internal discord as it is key to our very survival.

Let me pause for a moment so that we can all take a deep collective breath. I think some of you may not have exhaled even-once since I began this sermon. (pause) This is a hard topic. Some of us experience this challenge of tolerance, of being accepted or of accepting others, mostly within the Jewish community – which makes me very sad. Some of us face it more in our secular world – which is so hard. Some of us struggle with it in our families – which can be devastating. As is often the case, Jewish tradition steps forward to teach us -through ritual and prayer, through proximity and practice, year-in and year-out – how to master this skill, how to model it for the world and ultimately how to employ it so that we can be together again next Yom Kippur – all of us.

Let us end where we began, with one last interpretation of *Avaryanim*. The primary root of this word, *ayin- vet-resh,* is also the root of the word *Ivri or Ivrim* – that's the name for all of us. We are *Ivrim;* we are Hebrews. The first time this title is assigned to us is when Abraham traversed the Euphrates on his way to Israel. He is our first boundary-crosser. He is much more than that really. He is an idol-smasher who was willing to stand on one side of a

philosophical divide while the whole world stood on the other. He came to define both the *Avaryanim* and the *Ivrim*. This etymology is central to our Jewish identity and history, casting us as people capable of challenging the status quo, a people willing to embrace those who might push boundaries; a people who, on the holiest night of the year, will sit and pray with those who hold different ideas or beliefs from our own.

As this long day wears on, from our very first prayer to our last, our tradition pulls us all together. It reminds us that in order to survive another challenging year, we must embrace what unites us and make that stronger than what divides us. Here we become one community. *Avaryanim, Ivrim*. They are us; we are they, and we are one.

Ken y'hi ratzon – may it be so!

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2025-5786

[i] In the prayerbook of Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rothenberg