

**You're Wrong!**  
**Kol Nidre, 5765**  
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My Dear Friends,

Shabbat Shalom! G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

I want to begin tonight with an informal survey. Raise your hand if you've ever listened to Dr. Laura on the radio.....

I must confess, I'm somewhat fascinated by the Dr. Laura phenomenon. I don't listen to her very often. If I do, I usually find myself yelling at the radio and turning it off in disgust. But every now and then, my hand creeps over to the dial and I tune her in – I can't help myself. If you've ever listened to her program, you know that she provides her listeners with a combination of pseudo-psychological advice and Right Wing bully-pulpit preaching. She is everything I am not: anti-choice, anti-gay, pro death penalty and, truly, one of the most intolerant voices I have ever heard. And yet, there is something compelling about her show. Most people who end up calling Dr. Laura can expect a vituperative attack on their choices, morals and history. Sometimes they deserve it – often they do not. And yet, they keep calling –even though the odds are very good that she will yell at them. And we keep listening. Why? Why would someone call a nationally syndicated radio program so that they can receive a very public and very vindictive tongue lashing? And why do we find it so compelling?

I think the answer is that some people in today's society feel a need to be chastised. They want to be told that they are wrong. We live in a society that has very few limits. Outside of the framework of talk radio, there are very few people who are saying: "You're wrong." Almost everything is permissible: from "reality" TV shows that glorify wife-swapping and greed, to political campaigns that skillfully utilize character assassination as a key weapon in their arsenal, nothing is off limits.

Here's a true story. I recently had a meeting with a young couple who were considering membership in Congregation Albert. As is often the case, before joining the Temple, these prospective members wanted to spend some time with me – to understand my vision for the congregation and to determine if we would be a good fit for their family. I was happy to meet with them. I love talking about Congregation Albert! We sat around the table in my office and talked. Things were going very well until; all of a sudden I detected a radical shift in the conversation. These prospective members were suddenly very uncomfortable. At first I didn't understand what was happening. There was nothing abnormal in our conversation that I could detect. And then it hit me: They were staring at a sign that I had inadvertently left sitting on the table that stated, in large bold print:

**"You're Wrong!"** -- followed by a much smaller inscription: "Gift of the Confirmation Class of 2003."

I quickly explained to the prospective members that the sign was a private joke and apologized for leaving it out – but, the damage was done. I think that they were somewhat

unnerved by the encounter. Our meeting ended rather abruptly and I'm not sure if they joined the Temple or not, truth be told.

By the way -- if you are the couple I was talking about -- and you're here tonight, I'd love to see you after services.....

As you might imagine, the sign has a story behind it. Every year, as part of my Confirmation curriculum, I challenge my students. I ask them the following question: **"How do you distinguish between Right and Wrong?"**

They usually will tell me that they know the difference based on what they are taught.

- "Is murder wrong?" I ask.
- "Sometimes - but not always," they reply.... "You can't be convicted for murder if it's in self-defense. Sometimes you **need** to kill another person to protect yourself or to prevent a crime."
- "OK, what about the death penalty?"
- "In some states it's legal."
- "Does that make it right?"
- "It is for them....."
- "HMMMMMMMM..... You mean, society determines Right and Wrong? What about Good and Evil? Are they legislated by law as well?"
- "Well...yes."
- "And what is considered evil in one society is not evil in another?"
- "Yes"
- "Then there really is no such thing as evil." (that usually stops them for a while...)
- "Well, maybe not," they concede.
- "You're wrong," I tell them.
- "What?"
- "You're wrong."
- "You can't say that!"
- "Yes I can, you're wrong."
- "There you go again!"
- "Sorry, but you are wrong. If I follow your logic, then there was nothing wrong with what Hitler did during the Holocaust. Nazi Germany was a very legal society. Their laws systematically detailed the destruction of the Jewish people. All that they did: the dehumanization, the ghettos, the medical experimentation, the gas chambers, the Death Camps - were legal. They all were made possible by law. The same could be said of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Pol Pot in Cambodia and even the Taliban in Afghanistan. Sometimes law is immoral. Good and Evil, on the other hand, are always absolute -- we instinctively know what is right and what is wrong."

This is usually followed by a period of silence.....

At the end of the year, the students presented me with the sign -- which, I must say, is the best gift I have ever received from a Confirmation Class. They were listening to me.....

Now the reason I go through this exercise is to teach my students that all of Judaism stems from one basic concept: we are created in the Image of God. If we truly believe that there is

an essential holiness inside of every human being, then that spark of the *Shechinah* – of God’s divine presence – helps us – **forces** us – to know the difference between right and wrong. When we act morally, we are responding, not merely to what society dictates, but, rather to our essential holiness. Conversely, when we sin we are ignoring the clarion call of conscience -- the ethical imperative that resides inside our souls.

On Rosh HaShanah I spoke about the fact that **Judaism teaches us how to deal and live with conflict**. Indeed, our most sacred rabbinic texts – the Talmud, Mishnah and Midrash -- are filled with opposing views. Jewish law -- *Halachah* -- is based on a precise formula of sorting out complicated legal and moral arguments. Our tradition teaches that there can be differences of opinion – but any argument must be *l’shem Shamayim* --for the sake of Heaven. We need to understand that while Good and Evil are absolute, there still is room for debate as to what constitutes the proper application of moral principles. For example, while I disagree with much of what Dr. Laura stands for – and especially how she applies her views to her relationships with other human beings, I do not believe that she *is*, or that her **beliefs are** immoral. She believes that Abortion is always wrong. I believe that a woman has a right to chose what to do with her own body. I believe that all of us are created in God’s image. She believes that Gays and Lesbians are not. We disagree, and yet (it’s hard for me to say this.....but) at least she is operating from a belief that morality has a claim on our lives. We are not used to this. The consumer society that we have created for ourselves tries to dull our moral senses. In a very real sense, Dr. Laura represents the natural evolution of a society devoid of a moral code: a kind of Frankenstein born out of moral self-righteousness and “Reality TV” masochism. We want to be punished for our bad deeds *and it’s so much fun to watch.....* What I cannot tolerate is the hypocrisy that I perceive when she and others like her speak, on the one hand, of being a moral crusader and, on the other hand, the cavalier and manipulative way she abuses the people who come to her for help. This is not ethical teaching, it is pornography.

The Torah readings that our movement has prescribed for Yom Kippur reinforce the concept that each of us has within us the ability and the responsibility to hear God’s voice within our souls. Tomorrow morning we will read from the book of Deuteronomy:

*Atem Nitzavim Kulchem Lifnei Adonai Eloheychem –*  
**You are standing – all of you -- before Adonai your God.**

We stand before God with all pretense dismissed, with the façade of self-righteousness disintegrated. To stand before God is to acknowledge both our potential for good and the pitfalls into which we have succumbed during the course of the year.

Tomorrow afternoon we will read: *Kedoshim Ti’hyu Ki Kadosh Ani Adonai Elohechem –*  
You shall be holy because, I, Adonai Your God, am holy.

**Our** Holiness is a reflection **of** and response **to God’s** holiness. Our **ability** to understand the **difference** between right and wrong – good and evil is what makes us **unique** and capable of remarkable achievements. When we **ignore** the holiness implanted within us, we are capable of **unspeakable** cruelty and evil.

Tonight is Kol Nidre. Tonight is the antidote to both the self-righteousness of those who would assume to legislate their politically motivated moral principles upon us, as well as the relative morality that plagues our society. Tonight we join with Jews all around the world to attempt to strip away the haze of apathy that dulls our conscience, and the lack of moral clarity that blocks our ability to see the Divine source of our uniqueness and holiness. Tonight, as we stand before God, we look deep into our selves and our souls and confront the flaws, missteps and weaknesses that are part and parcel of our humanity – our mortality. For the next 24 hours, our tradition teaches, we measure our sins against an absolute ideal – not a relative abstract: the expectations of our Creator – *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* – the Holy One of Blessing. We admit to ourselves and to our God that, yes, **we were wrong** in many of our actions, beliefs, justifications and rationalizations. We acknowledge the fact that we have strayed from the path of Righteousness and that we need to return back to where God wants us to be – to follow the path of *Teshuvah* – of repentance and returning.

This is not an easy task – to say to ourselves “**I was wrong.**” Our liturgy provides us with language with which to acknowledge, address and confess our sins:

“*Al cheyt She-chatanu Lifanecha* – for the sins that we have sinned before You.....” And yet, how many times do we say the words, do we hear them chanted – hauntingly beautiful – from the bema – but they do not hit home?

**We were wrong.**

We cheated.

We Stole

We were unfaithful

We held Grudges

We withheld love – shutting out those who mean the most to us.

We turned aside when we saw hunger, poverty, crime, pollution, abuse.

We failed to help when we were asked

We failed to help when we were not asked.

The list is endless.....

The purpose of Yom Kippur is not merely to recite prayers and reconnect with our faith – it is much more than that. We should leave this sanctuary tomorrow evening with a renewed sense of ourselves and our role in the ongoing miracle of creation. We fast – not because we want to punish ourselves, but because we want to rise above our physical, daily needs and focus on the essential aspects of our humanity and our holiness. When we fast we **contrast** and transform the hunger for **food** with a hunger for **meaning** and purpose in our lives. When we fast we stand before God – all pretense gone, all excuses disintegrated – and we pray for the strength to do what we know we **must** if we are to live up to the potential for holiness that is in each of us.

The Haftarah for tomorrow afternoon is one of the most powerful and confusing stories in the Bible - the book of Jonah. If you remember the story, God calls to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh and proclaim that the city will be destroyed if the Ninevites do not repent. Jonah decides to flee. He boards a ship and sets sail for Tarshish. A great storm shakes the boat and Jonah is thrown overboard. Immediately, the waters are calmed and Jonah is swallowed

by a fish. For three days he remains in the depths of the fish until he is spewed forth on dry land - at Nineveh: the very place from which he was fleeing.

Why do we read this story on Yom Kippur afternoon? There are many reasons. Jonah, when first confronted by the size and scope of his task, flees in terror. The message of the story is that, try as he might, Jonah could not run away - for his problem was **not** that he had an onerous task to perform - no, his problem was that he was trying to run away from **himself**. The book of Jonah teaches us that, no matter how hard we try, eventually we are going to catch up with ourselves - and we are going to have to deal with the issues that plague us - one way or another.

On Yom Kippur, our tradition teaches, we are like Jonah: traveling on our own, perilous journey into the depths of our shortcomings. Like our reluctant prophet, we do not feel ready to confront ourselves. Like Jonah, we need to be prodded, coaxed and cajoled. Like Jonah, each of us sits here this evening - part of a congregation, yet very much alone with our own, private failures.

As difficult as it is for us to confront our flaws, weaknesses and sins, our tradition provides us with a pathway; a journey towards reconciliation and renewal:

In response to the difficulty of standing in judgment before God, our Machzor teaches:

***U'teshuvah, U'tefillah, U'Tseddakah Maavirin et Roa ha-gezerah:***  
**"Repentance, Prayer and Charity temper the severity of God's decree."**

**And so, we begin our journey with Teshuvah – repentance.**

Teshuvah literally means "turning." In the most basic sense, when we do teshuvah, we turn – we **RE**-turn to where God wants us to be. In our Machzor we find it written:

***"Hashivenu Adonai Elecha V'nashuva Hadesh Yamnu K'kedem.***

**Restore us, Holy One, and we will return. Renew our days as of old."**

Our first turning – our first teshuvah must be to return to our origins – to come back to those parts of our lives that we have left behind – perhaps in anger, perhaps in neglect.

To what do you need to return on this Yom Kippur?

From what have you turned away over the years?

Family? Friends? Community?

Have you done everything to maintain relationships?

Have you tried to repair breeches that have torn apart families, partnerships?

Where do you need to turn in order to acknowledge and respond to the small voice inside you that cries out: "You were wrong!"

When is it time to turn away from the self-destructive behaviors that drive us further and further away from those whom we love and from our essential holiness?

We need to turn into and towards ourselves.

But if we **only** turn and look within, our turning is incomplete.

How many times this past year have we turned away from looking at something disturbing? How have we – as individuals, as a community, as a nation – turned away from the ugliness in our world?

As I speak this evening, thousands of innocent men, women and children are being massacred in the Sudan . The crisis in Sudan is being described by human rights organizations as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. Under cover of a decades-long civil war that has taken two million Sudanese lives, government-backed militias known as Janjaweed are engaging in campaigns to wipe out communities of African tribal farmers who live in Darfur. Villages are being razed, women and girls are systematically raped, and food and water supplies are being specifically targeted and destroyed. The brutal violence and killings have resulted in over 30,000 deaths and the displacement of as many as two million Darfurians. Almost one million civilians have fled their homes due to the escalation of violence; many have crossed the border into Chad, but most are internally displaced within Darfur. The refugees and internally displaced people are in dire need of emergency health and sanitation assistance, access to clean water and nutritional supplements. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), without humanitarian intervention, as many as 1 million civilians may die over the coming months. If this happens, the Janjaweed militias will be facilitating genocide by famine—letting nature do their dirty work.<sup>1</sup>

Another situation that deserves our immediate attention this Yom Kippur is the tragedy that is rapidly unfolding in Haiti and throughout the Carribean in the wake of the devastating hurricanes that have been wreaking havoc on the lives and property of tens of thousands of people. In Haiti alone, it is projected that more than 2,000 may die. Hundreds of thousands are homeless, sick and dying. The entire state of Florida has been declared a disaster area. We cannot stand idly by.

After Yom Kippur, if you go to our website, you will find a link that will take you to the Union For Reform Judaism’s website. There you will be able to find out more information about the crisis in Sudan and Hurricane relief efforts. It tells how to help, and also provides opportunities to make donations for famine and Hurricane relief. I urge you to give all that you can to these Humanitarian efforts.

These are but two small examples of how we need to turn to others if our turning – our *Teshuvah* is to be effective. There are thousands more.

The second stage on our journey towards reconciliation and renewal on Yom Kippur is *Tefillah* – or prayer. Note that we do not **begin** our journey with **prayer** – but with **contemplation**. Prayer – true prayer can only come about when we are aware of both our blessings and our challenges in life. True prayer can also only come about when we are keenly conscious of the world around us. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook – the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel used to teach that it is forbidden to pray in a room without windows. If

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<sup>1</sup> Source: American Jewish World Service Website [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).

we shut out the real world, then our prayers are meaningless. When we pray, we not only ask forgiveness, but we acknowledge the need to be in a **relationship** with the source of holiness and meaning in our lives. If you think about it, prayer is the ultimate affirmation of that relationship. It is a dialogue, the purpose of which is to change **us**, not God. God does not need our prayers – our praise; **we** need to **pray**. It doesn't matter if you are not used to praying. It doesn't matter if you don't know the words – all that is necessary for prayer to be effective is a sense of gratitude – or if that is not possible, a desire for gratitude -- an awareness of God's presence – or, if that is not yet possible, a yearning to find God's presence, and a community in which to share both your gratitude and yearning.

The third and final stage on our journey is **Tzeddakah** - acts of righteousness, or Charity. It is not enough for us to merely concentrate on our own problems - for, although on this *Yom Kippur* we concentrate on our innermost fears and frailties, it is only when we **act** on what we have learned, that God sees our repentance is complete. When we see others in pain; when our eyes are opened, when we realize that every human being struggles with the voice of conscience and is impacted by the injustice that, all too often stifles that voice we understand that we have a responsibility to reach out: To teach, to touch, to heal, to comfort and console.

*U'teshuvah, U'tefillah, U'Tseddakah* - **Repentance, Prayer and acts of Righteousness** can lead us to search, find and respond to the voice of conscience, of holiness that God has given us all.

Let us work to hear not only the words, "**You're Wrong!**" that prod us to better our selves, our souls and our world, but also the words, "**You're Right!**" And, in doing so, may we affirm one another as we enter into this New Year.

*L'Shanah Tovah Tikateyvu V'Teychateymu* - May we all be written and sealed for a blessing in the book of life.

AMEN