

Congregation B'nai Brith
Kol Nidrei 5778 – Even Higher

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא

May God's great name be magnified and sanctified in the world that God created to God's will. Let God's sovereignty be established in the world in our lifetime, and let us confirm this by saying: Amen. ...

It was 1857 when the first safety vertical transportation system was installed in a building on Broadway in New York. And 160 years later, just off Broadway in Somerville, that very same Otis vertical transportation company installed our very own elevator. Theirs was a miracle of modern technology, ours a miracle of communal persistence and dedication. Theirs climbed a then staggering 5 floors. Ours only two. But if we pay close attention, it can transport us from mundane life on Central Street right into the sanctuary of God.

In the time it took us to turn our dream of accessibility into reality, some of our loved ones that we envisioned using this elevator passed away. To name just a few: Helene Ragovin's mom. Mort Landy. Susan Fendell's dad. Marshall Shulman. Bev and Beth Schwartz's mom. Dottie Greee. Lily Varon. I know I am not nearly close to naming everyone. Please share your names with us. [Go around and wait for people to add names]

It is in their memory and in honor of the new elevator that I'd like to speak tonight about getting high.

May the name of the Holy One be acknowledged and celebrated, extolled and exalted, adored and acclaimed, though God it indeed higher (or above) all the praises hymns and songs of adoration which are uttered in the world, and we say: amen.

The kaddish is one of the most familiar prayers. We say it at the transition between services after the silent meditation. We recite it for 11 months when a parent dies and for a shorter period when other relatives pass away. One day someone will say it over our grave.

What people don't always think about is the function of the kaddish prayer in our service. It is a type of a spiritual elevator. When we recite the mourner's kaddish, we are elevating the soul of the departed. To quote: "Higher and higher the immortal soul climbs in the afterlife" every time we say the kaddish – and even if I don't know how I feel about this imagery of the afterlife, like many, I find comfort in this idea.

The kaddish that we say after the Amidah is an elevator of prayer. תתקבל צלותהון ובעותהון – we say: "may our prayers and pleas be received by our parent in heaven."

But the kaddish, we are told, is primarily a way for us to elevate God's name. Each affirmation of this prayer, by our saying amen, lifts and elevates God's name, say the rabbis. And they urged people to respond loudly at the recitation of the kaddish, and not just mumble a quiet amen.

During the days of awe we add a second "l'eila" to the kaddish. Instead of saying "May God's name be praised above all praises", we say "May God's name be praised above and further above all praises."

Of this extra l'eila the rabbis taught that it is added because during the days of awe we pray the hardest, and therefore with the repetition, God's name is elevated higher.

Elevators, even today, are pretty much just fancy pulley systems – we might not see the weights that carry the equivalent weight in the other direction – down when we go up, and up when we go down, but they are still there. The rabbis believed the world likewise was a complicated mechanism. Like a system of ropes and pulleys, the formula of a particular prayer had an effect. When we say the words, we are pulling on “spiritual ropes” that elevate God. We might not see or understand the complex mechanism operating behind the scenes of our existence, but our actions still operate it.

This is a way of thinking that puts *performance* of mitzvot above *kavvanah* (having a particular state of mind or intention while performing them). It works pretty well for God fearing people who are amenable to doing things/saying prayers simply because God commanded it. It might even be a relief to know that we are getting the same results whether we light Shabbat candles out of joy, out of sadness, or while silently composing our next week's to do list.

But I think it does not resonate so well with many of us today. Because if we are not doing what we are doing because God commanded us to, then why are we doing what we are doing? How does our spiritual elevator work? Or do we not have an elevator at all?

A chassidic story (that most of you probably know).

Early in the morning at the time of the penitential prayers, the rabbi of Nemirov vanished. The Hassidim wondered: “Where could the rabbi be? If he isn't here, he must be in heaven arguing on behalf of our community to mitigate our judgement.”

But once a Litvak came to Nemirov, and he laughed at their foolishness.

But the hassidim remained convinced that their rabbi must be in heaven during slichot, and the Litvak, determined to show the folly of their thinking, decided to sneak into the rabbi's bedroom, hide under his bed, and follow him the next morning to prove once and for all that he does not in fact ascend to heaven.

The Litvak hid under the bed all night and in the morning he saw the rabbi dress up in old peasant clothes. He saw the rabbi take an ax and leave the house. The Litvak followed the rabbi out of town and into the woods where the rabbi took the ax, fell a small tree and chopped it into logs and sticks. He bundled the wood, and with the bundle on his back returned to town.

There he walked towards a small shack and knocked on the window. “Who is there?” asked the frightened voice of an old woman.

“I” said the rabbi, “Vassil”

“Who is Vassil, and what do you want?” called the woman.

“I have wood to sell. Very cheap” the disguised rabbi answered, and without waiting for response he went into the house.

The Litvak peeked through the window and in the grey light of dawn he saw an unfurnished room and a sick woman wrapped in rags lying on a bed.

“I have no money to buy wood” the woman said.
“I will lend you the money. It’s only six kopeks.” The rabbi replied
“But how will I ever be able to pay you back?” the poor woman continued.
“Foolish woman”, said the rabbi. “I who don’t even know you am willing to trust you with some wood, and you have such a great almighty God, and you won’t trust God for six kopeks?”
“But who will kindle the fire?” the woman said, “have I the strength to get up?”
“I’ll kindle the fire” said the rabbi.

And as the rabbi put the wood into the oven he recited the first portion of the penitential prayers. And as he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited a bit more joyously the second portion of the penitential prayers.
And when the fire was set, he recited the third portion and closed the oven door.

The Litvak who saw all that stayed in Nemirov and became a disciple of the rabbi. And ever after when the hassidim would tell how the rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven, the Litvak would not laugh, he only added quietly, “if not even higher!”

I share this story with the family service crowd almost yearly on Rosh Hashanah. Then I go home and spend the following week wondering if the kids actually understood the message of the story. At a minimum, I hope they understand the message that doing a good deed is really important. But I hope that’s not all they get from it.

In Israel as a child. I was taught that this story is about how God cares more about good deeds than prayers. (This was the secular Israeli version of hassidism).

We were also taught that we have two relational obligation in Judaism. A horizontal one – between a person and his/her fellow human beings – and a vertical one – between a person and God. It was emphasized to us that the relationship between a person and their fellow human beings is the one we need to take care of first, and only then should we worry with the second tiered relationship, with God. (This was the secular Israeli version of hassidism AND the secular Israeli version of teaching children about God). It is a valid Jewish view – we are told on Yom Kippur that we have to ask forgiveness from our fellow humans before we come before God for forgiveness. It is a world-view backed by many of the prophets too, including in the haftarah for Yom Kippur – in which God says I don’t need the kind of fast of coming to my temple and calling out to me. I want the kind of fast that is made of treating each other well of caring for the weak and the poor.

NOW THIS resonates with us. Our Judaism is rich in tikkun olam and social action. But did we in effect find a way to keep the ethics of Judaism going while discarding God?

When we say the relational obligations towards fellow beings comes before our relational obligations to God, are we not sort of saying that as long as we still have unfulfilled obligations to our fellow beings we don’t need to worry about God?

This is certainly not the message of the story about the rabbi of Nemirov. The rabbi of Nemirov does not discard prayer, or God while taking care of his “for fellow beings” good deed. Rather, he is bringing his prayer and his actions together. He was bringing “God awareness” into his

actions, and by doing that he elevated his actions from mere actions, to a moment of what we refer to in Judaism as “elevating and sanctifying God’s name.” – קידוש השם.

The Hassidim say God is everywhere; there is no place vacant from the presence of God. Rather, it is us who sometimes walk around with unseeing eyes. We might even be walking around doing really nice menschlik things, but to truly connect, to truly elevate our actions, we should strive towards God awareness.

This is an alternative view to the one presented in the beginning of my words about how the spiritual elevator works. So this is the second take on a spiritual elevator. Say now, we need to do mitzvot, to do good, but our state of mind **does** matter. We need to say the right words, or do the right deed, but we need to do it also with awareness of God.

So you might ask what would God awareness be, if I am not quite sure what I believe and whether I believe in God?

I like to think of God awareness as mindfulness of our place in the world. Of a sense of wonder and appreciation of our bodies, of our surrounding, of the glory of nature. A sense of awareness that everything and everyone around us has equal claim to this world.

Then for those who are ready for God language: I like to think of God awareness as a sense of createdness – of recognizing that I am a tiny part of creation. A sense of humility because all people I encounter were also created in God’s image. A sense of compassion, because we are taught to strive to be like God, compassionate and caring.

A sense of creativity – because God is the creative force in the universe. And also to me, God awareness is deeply connected to our ability to dream, and to want and manifest those dreams, while being aware of everything I mentioned before.

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבה בעלמא דברא כרעותיא

God’s name is magnified and sanctified in this world that God created. It is in this world that we elevate and sanctify God’s name. Not up in heaven. We don’t need an elevator to get there. We can do our best here, and our actions will rise on their own. Jewish congregations are called in Hebrew kehillot kodesh, holy communities. What makes a community holy is its coming together with an awareness of God in its center, to do good in this world. We do it by caring for each other and by caring for the world. We do it when we see and are aware of the connection between our actions and that which is bigger than ourselves, that which we sometimes call God.

It happens when we don’t choose our relationship with *people* over our relationship with God but rather when we see our relationship with God reflected in all our interactions with fellow beings.

I do believe we have done it when we decided to dream the big dream of an accessible to all sanctuary, and while we worked these past 15 years to make it come true.

And now on this holy night when we come together, I look at your faces and I wonder what amazing dreams of a Godly community we will dream together in the coming year.

And those who are not with us today? They are with us today. They are with us when we recite the kaddish. They are with us when we ride our new elevator. And they will be with us as we dream our next dreams on how to be a worthy link in the chain of the generations, and a holy community. Yehi zichram baruch, may their memory be a blessing always.