

At the very beginning of last night's *Yom Kippur* liturgy there is a surprising text. It is one that is recited in such a matter of fact, formulaic manner that it is often overlooked. I think it gets little attention because it is placed in such a way that it seems to be only a preamble to the chanting of a much bigger prayer: *Kol Nidre*. But, I believe that this text is worthy of closer examination because it carries a profound lesson that could have an impact on many aspects of our daily lives.

The text reads: “*Bshivah Shel Ma’ala, U’vshivah Shel Matah, Al Da’at HaMakom, V’al Da’at Hakahal: Anu Matirin L’hitpaleil Im Ha’avaryanim.*” Now, if you like, you could look at page 16 of our *Yom Kippur Machzor* and find this text. But unless you understand Hebrew, you would not be aware that our *Machzor’s* editors have chosen not to translate this text – and instead they have chosen to present an English paraphrase of what we might call a sanitized interpretation of the text. You would have to look to one of the footnotes to get even a partial translation.

Here’s what the text literally says: “*Bshivah Shel Ma’ala, U’vshivah Shel Matah, In the heavenly and earthly seats of authority; Al Da’at HaMakom, V’al Da’at Hakahal: with the knowledge of God and with the assent of the entire community; Anu Matirin L’hitpaleil Im Ha’avaryanim* we hereby grant permission to pray with the sinners!”

The text begs for explanation and interpretation - and leaves us with more questions than answers.

- First, (*Al Da’at HaMakom*) we might ask, “How do we know that something is done with the knowledge of God?” Or more pointedly we might ask, “Why would we particularly mention that this is done with the knowledge of God...after all, isn’t everything done with the knowledge of God?”
- Next, (*al Da’at Hakahal*) we might ask, “How is it determined that something is done with the assent of the entire community?” Who determines the community’s assent? Who speaks for the community and on what authority?
- Next, (*Anu Matirin*) we might ask, “Just exactly who is the “we” that is granting this permission to pray with sinners? And, if “they” are granting permission to pray with sinners does that suggest that “they” think of themselves as normative non-sinners while the sinners are the non-normative “other?”

- Next, (*Ha'avaryanim*) we might ask, “Who are the sinners?” What is the nature of their transgressions? Are they ordinary, run of the mill sinners, guilty of everyday sorts of sin, as are so many of us - sins like gossip, or jealousy, or little white lies? Or are they guilty of something much more egregious and reprehensible? And if the latter, why would we want them to be part of our prayer community?
- Finally, and most importantly, we ought to ask, “What lessons are we to learn, for our time and our situation, from the Machzor's proclamation: *Anu Matirin L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim* we hereby grant permission to pray with the sinners!

One possible understanding of this text is that offered by the footnote in our *Machzor*: We are all *avaryanim*, it says, we are all sinners. And yet we are all worthy to join with the community in prayer. This explanation democratizes our text – suggesting that it applies equally to all. But, to my mind, it takes away both the difficulty and the opportunity of the text.

I would prefer to take the text at face value – that there may be sinners in our congregation, or in any given congregation, who have committed egregious acts and as much as we may not like it, we nonetheless include them in our praying congregation.

I know about this first hand having once served as the rabbi for Congregation *Bet Herut* – the Jewish congregation inside the walls of the maximum-security Indiana State Prison in Michigan City. The Jewish prisoners of that minyan were not white-collar embezzlers. Most of them were serving life sentences for crimes like murder, arson and rape. And yet, I understood the teaching of our *Machzor* to mean that I could still lead them in prayer and say AMEN to their prayers. Even though I was not of them, I still had permission to join with them *L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim*. I found that I could engage in conversation with them, and teach them, and learn from them. In spite of the fact that they were *avaryanim* – both in the classical Hebrew sense of the word meaning sinners or transgressors, and in the modern Hebrew usage of the word meaning criminals – they were still human beings created in the Divine Image who could not be deprived of basic human dignity and thus it was permissible *L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim*.

But let us leave the rather extreme circumstance of a congregation comprised primarily of convicted felons and return to our everyday lives. What lessons are we to learn, for our time and our situation, from the *Machzor's* proclamation: *Anu Matirin L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim* we hereby grant permission to pray with the sinners! How can we understand this text as a metaphor for our lives?

In our time, and in much of public discourse these days, there is a readiness to label any and all of those who disagree with us as *avaryanim*, as other, as transgressors, as sinners. And then once we label, we separate and we disconnect. We choose not to engage with those who think differently than we do. This is primarily the case in the two realms that are often suggested to be taboo subjects for polite dinner party conversation, namely: politics and religion. But it seems to me that our *Machzor's* text is speaking precisely to these areas of our lives: politics and religion. And I believe that the text is teaching us important lessons.

Those lessons are not about who is right and who is wrong. And they are not even lessons about tolerance. The text does not say: we grant permission for them to pray in their way and for us to pray in our way. The text does not say: we will tolerate their misguided presence in the room while we do our benighted, correct thing. The text says: *L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim*. Not only should we say AMEN to their prayers, but we should count them in our minyan – no, even stronger, we need to include them as much as we ourselves need to be included. We need to engage and relate. We need to make our community a safe place not just for praying together but for difficult conversations – a place that celebrates diversity of opinion not by trying to homogenize it or explain it away but by respecting difference, and learning to disagree without becoming disagreeable.

We could apply the lessons of this stunning text to other aspects of our Jewish world. One obvious place is the discourse on Israel. There are few topics that are as polarizing in Jewish conversations – both in Israel and in the diaspora. There is a tendency of those on the left to demonize those on the right and there is a tendency of those on the right to demonize those on the left. There are some who argue that American Jews have no right to say anything when it comes to policies of the Israeli government because we don't live there; and there are those who say the opposite.

There are some who say that any criticism of Israel is a sin, and merely gives ammunition to Israel's enemies and to anti-Semites; and there are those who say that refraining from justifiable critique is a sin – that loving critique is not only permissible but obligatory. And in all of this there is a lot of talking but not very much listening. There is a lot of posturing and pontificating but not very much understanding. The most common feature is the denigration of the other – those who disagree are *avaryanim*. You can witness it in the proceedings of the K'nesset, the Israeli parliament, and I personally saw it in the meetings of the World Zionist Congress – a gathering of folks who all call themselves Zionists and who have all signed on to the same basic principles. What I witnessed was lots of yelling and screaming, name calling, attempts at vote tampering along with back room dealing – all with the goal of getting “our side” to win and the “other side” to lose. Would that we could learn the lesson of *Anu Matirin L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim*. Would that we could learn that permission to pray with so-called sinners, with those with whom we disagree, with those whom we find objectionable, with those who make us uncomfortable – can also be permission to talk with them, and to listen to them, - not to capitulate, or relinquish our own commitments, but to be open to the possibility of finding common cause with them.

It is one of the highest forms of pluralism – and one of the most difficult. To find a way to abide those who do not value pluralism without simply dismissing them as wrong. It is easy to converse with our friends, especially those who hold similar ideas to ours. It is much more challenging to converse, patiently, with those who hold ideas diametrically opposed to ours. But *L'hitpaleil Im Ha'avaryanim* teaches us that we need to include them as much as we ourselves need to be included.

And this lesson applies to the politics of our beloved America, as well. Let us say: enough with the denigrating and the demonizing. Let us say: enough with the polarization. Let us say: enough with only reading the news that we like and only reading the opinions with which we already agree. Let us say: enough with branding those with whom we disagree as criminal, as transgressors, as sinners, as *avaryanim*. Let us say: enough of arrogantly dismissing - as wrong or stupid - those who hold opinions different from ours. Let us learn from the text of our *Machzor* that we have permission to be less self-righteous and more open. Let us learn that our ideas become clearer, more focused and more nuanced when we engage in reasoned

discourse instead of just shouting louder. Let us learn that our community becomes whole and our country becomes great only when we include those whom we see as *avaryanim*.

Today we pray together as one community – even though we certainly have different ideas and opinions about God, about prayer, about sin, about who speaks for the community, about who we consider to be *avaryanim* about who we consider to be transgressors. Nonetheless, we pray together today as one community – but then we go our separate ways. We do not engage on the issues that may be of greatest import to us. Suppose, in the coming weeks and months we could find a way to come together in dialogue – that we could make our congregation a safe place for difficult conversations. I think that we often assume that we know what others are thinking, we often assume we know their religious outlook or political positions. And I think that we often avoid the difficult conversations because we already “know” that “we” are right, and “they” are wrong. Instead, let us learn that our ideas become clearer, more focused and more nuanced when we engage in reasoned discourse with those who hold differing opinions. Let us strive to make ours a truly pluralistic community where we engage in a respectful manner even when it makes us uncomfortable. Let us give ourselves and each other permission to make our community stronger by letting every voice be heard.

*“Bishivah Shel Ma’ala, U’vishivah Shel Matah, In the heavenly and earthly seats of authority; Al Da’at HaMakom, V’al Da’at Hakahal: with one voice God and congregation proclaim; Anu Matirin L’hitpaleil Im Ha’avaryanim let all find a place in this sacred assembly, in this diverse community, in this great country. AMEN*