

# Knowing That You Don't Know

Yom Kippur sermon 5779

When I was in my 20's I prided myself on being an explorer of consciousness. I took LSD exactly once every six months. I was part of a group that did Astral Travel together. I experimented with lucid dreaming and ran a dream group. I went to a sweat lodge on each full moon. I was part of a women's consciousness-raising group. I was intoxicated with my search... and then I had a dream that sobered me up real fast.

In the dream I sat on the edge of a body of water and my attention was directed towards one little lapping wave. "This", an authoritative voice whispered in my ear, "is what you know about consciousness." I looked at the tiny wave and then lifted my eyes to meet a wide expansive vista of an infinite ocean.

I was changed after that dream. I was still an explorer, but my journey had a different quality from then on — my encounter with the infinite left me awestruck, humbled and inspired. And that's how I feel each year when I enter into this journey of Yom Kippur.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that "the whole purpose of our learning is to realize that we don't know." תכלית הידיע שלא נדע

In that realization we are catapulted into the awareness that this moment is new and unique and a never before and never again expression of the Divine flow. We had better pay attention.

My teacher Joel Goldsmith warns us, "Never settle for yesterday's manna." If you do, you'll miss the miraculous bounty of this moment.

The enemy of wisdom is certainty, because wisdom is a flow and certainty is dangerously rigid.

In the realization of not-knowing, we surrender the illusion of control, and step up to the challenge of living at ease in the face of uncertainty and mortality. This is the challenge of Yom Kippur — facing death and through that intimate encounter becoming more alive.

We begin by letting go, through fasting, of the everyday distractions and comforts of food, drink, sex, fragrances and shoes. Some people wear a *kittel* — the simple robe that they will be buried in. We face death by coming out of denial. We face death and don't flinch or look away.

Judaism is a path of learning... which is so very beautiful. And yet the shadow side is that there's a secret neurotic fear that we'll never know enough. As if knowing more will make me a better Jew. As if more knowledge will keep me from dying. In the months before getting *smicha* — being ordained as a rabbi, I had a series of dreams showing me a pair of open, empty hands. After having the same dream over and over, I finally got it. For eight years I had been cramming my head with knowledge, ideas, concepts, theories, stories, *halacha*, *haggada*, history. I needed to come empty-handed.

In fact, the word for ordination in Biblical Hebrew means "filling the hands." So, God was saying to me through my dreams, "You are so filled up with what you have learned, I cannot give you anything. You must come to me empty-handed."

Commenting on the Avodah service of Yom Kippur, Art Green says,

"Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice, but that does not imply that sacrifice was abolished when the sacrificial rite went out of existence. Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer is sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of sacrifice: the self takes the place of the thing. The spirit is the same... . The word is but an altar. We do not sacrifice. We are the sacrifice. Prayer is a hazard, a venture of peril. Every person who prays is a *kohen* at the greatest of all temples. The whole universe is the Temple."

The climax of the ancient Yom Kippur ritual was when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and then came out and spoke The Great Name. That moment was powerful. It was the transformative moment for our people. The sense of purity and renewal was so dramatic, such an ecstatic sense of relief and possibilities was unleashed... that at some point the leaders instituted the custom of reading the sexual prohibitions on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Before the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he would make atonement for himself, for his family, and for his community. You had to enter empty-handed, all your baggage checked at the door.

The Holy of Holies is the place between Life and Death.

Each of us is the High Priest bidden, on Yom Kippur, to enter... . To leave our ordinary lives — by praying all day by fasting from food, drink, sex, washing, and wearing leather and enter into a timeless and placeless realm. This act was essential to the well-being of each individual and for the people as a whole. It was essential then and it is essential now. So how do we do it? And what is our Holy of Holies?

The entrance of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies was a perilous journey. A rope was tied to his feet, in case he didn't survive and had to be dragged back into this world. That perilous journey is the daring passage from what we think we know, into the wide-open expanse of the unknown.

The entering of the Holy of Holies was facilitated by three sacrifices: for oneself, for one's family and for the entire community. To touch the infinite we sacrifice our smallness, the attitudes and actions that are squeezed out of a narrow perspective: our judgments, fears, pride, grudges, our attachment to a rigid identity. That is the price of admission. It seems, from the viewpoint of personality, like Everything. From the soul's viewpoint, it is the sacrifice of limitation.

We release our grip on the finite dimensions of self and lay them on the altar of the word: this is what I like, what I don't like, who I am, what I'm capable of, these are my opinions. We surrender everything upon the word of prayer.

Upon that altar we place our lives. And face our Deaths. Standing between Life and Death in the Holy of Holies, affords us a rare perspective. From this place of The Between, our priorities are transformed.

Each time a close friend of mine dies, I am pulled into that Between, and I return vowing to love each moment, vowing not to waste my time worrying, vowing to know each day as precious.

Don Juan tells Carlos Castaneda that Death, sitting on his left shoulder, is his most powerful teacher.

Yom Kippur introduces you to your own Death — the only one who knows you well enough to remind you what you are missing, who can teach you the

preciousness of each breath. As we stand between Life and Death, a cord of love ties us to this world (just as the High Priest was tied), and that cord which connects us to our loved ones and to the finite situation of our lives, is ready to reel us back in if we venture too far into the arms of Death. Death is present in order to wake us up and send us to our vitality.

“Every person who prays is a *kohen* at the greatest of all temples. The whole universe is the Temple.”

Being at ease with not knowing, allows me the freedom to try things on and see where they lead. I become not so much a seeker of **The Truth** as a seeker and explorer of what works. I notice that when I try on a stance of reverence towards this Universe as my Temple, as a sacred place of mystery, I like who I become. Open-hearted, humble, filled with a sense of adventure and humor.

Being at ease with not knowing, relieves me of the compulsion to defend my viewpoint and allows me the space to be curious about other perspectives, and maybe even learn from everyone.

Knowing that I don't know the whole of it, I can celebrate this one small wave lapping at my feet, and then lift my gaze in wonder at the vast expansive vista of an infinite ocean.