

**Yom Kippur 2017**  
The Jewish Center  
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**Kol Nidrei: *The Whitest Yom Kippur***

Michael and Stacy were preparing for the Bar Mitzvah of their son, Gary. They were liberally minded, but it was very important to Michael that his son use his grandfather's Kiddush cup at the Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat morning. It was a family heirloom and it held a great deal of sentimental value.

They spent months preparing for the big day, and it when it finally arrived, Gary spoke very movingly about his family traditions and then went ahead and recited Kiddush using the very Kiddush cup that had belonged to his great grandfather.

After the service and the speeches, the crowd moved to the ballroom next door. When the reception was over, the family came back into the sanctuary only to discover that the Kiddush cup was gone. The president of the synagogue mentioned that he'd seen the rabbi take the cup with him as he was leaving, but he'd already gone home. The family continued to look for it but it was no use. And then the whispering began.

After Shabbat, Gary suggested they call the rabbi, but somehow his father was reluctant. "I'm sure if he has it he'll let us know," Michael said. A day passed. A week. A month. No call. No Kiddush cup. Could it really be, they wondered, that the rabbi had stolen their Kiddush cup?

There's a widespread practice to wear white on Yom Kippur. On one level, we understand intuitively that we're trying to cleanse ourselves of sin today – so it's not the craziest notion in the world. But at the same time, we also surely understand that there must be a deeper meaning to this ancient tradition.

The answer that we all learn as children is that we wear white because on Yom Kippur we become angels.

As a rationalist and a citizen of the modern world, I have to confess that I've always found this explanation a little unsatisfying. It's difficult to understand.

In fact, we spend most of the day proclaiming that we are decidedly not angelic. Over and over again we confess our all-too-human sins. We're not in denial about who we are. We try to maintain a very realistic orientation. We're imperfect. We have lots of flaws. Maybe the other 364 days of the year we try to brush them under the rug; on Yom Kippur we put them all out in the open.

So maybe you'll tell me it's aspirational. We're reminding ourselves that we're capable of being angels...

But that's not the goal either. The Torah wasn't given to angels. Free will wasn't given to angels. לא בשמים היא. The Torah belongs to us mortals right here in our imperfect world.

So what are we doing?

The Rambam writes that Yom Kippur only atones for transgressions between man and God. For sins between and among people, Yom Kippur is only efficacious if we seek forgiveness from our friends. And then the Rambam says something extraordinary.

יום הכפורים הוא זמן תשובה לכל ליחיד ולרבים והוא קץ מחילה וסליחה לישראל.

Yom Kippur is a time of repentance for everyone – both individuals and communities – and it's the keitz – it's the finale of forgiveness and pardon for the Jewish people.

The time to do it was this past week. We have 10 days of repentance to call the people we've wronged to ask them for מחילה. But if we've fallen short – if we haven't made good on that expectation – the Rambam tells us there's one more day. In case anyone thought that by the time Yom Kippur rolls around, it's too late, the Rambam assures us that today isn't limited to examining our relationship with Hashem; today is also about examining the relationships we have with each other and making them better.

Maybe the reason we wear white isn't so that we can see ourselves as angels; but so that we can see the people sitting next to us as angels.

Summoning the energy to forgive someone who's hurt us is one of the hardest things to do in life. But if for a moment we're able to see the best in them – to see them as agents of the divine – maybe we'll be a little more inclined to grant them מחילה.

I recently chanced upon a book in our Beit Midrash that records all of the customs observed in the community of Frankfurt for the past several hundred years.

According to the compiler, on the eve of Yom Kippur before Kol Nidrei, two scholars or members of the בית דין, would be called by name to the bima to stand on either side of the Chazzan. And the trio would recite in unison three times the line we just said:

על דעת המקום המקום ועל דעת הקהל בישיבה של מעלה ובישיבה של מטה אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבריינים.  
With the consent of Hashem and with the consent of the congregation, we hereby sanction our praying along with the transgressors.

There were, the author goes on to explain, always individuals who had violated communal norms. And for one reason or another, they'd been placed under a ban – which meant that they were no longer welcome to daven in the shul. Before Yom Kippur began, the community would deploy its leadership to declare in no uncertain terms that all bans were lifted and every Jew – however grave his or her transgressions – was invited to rejoin the fellowship of the community.

Whatever grudges we hold, on Yom Kippur we let them go.

Whatever animus we've retained, now is the time to set it free.

If we want to be granted a pardon on this Yom Kippur, we have to start by pardoning others.

Fast forward to ten years after the bar mitzvah. Gary went off to college, came back home, and soon became engaged to a young woman from the community. His parents were overjoyed and the wedding date was set. Before the wedding, Gary's father suggested he set up a meeting with the rabbi to introduce him to his fiancée.

Remembering the incident of the Kiddush cup, Gary was reluctant. But his parents insisted that it was the appropriate thing to do and Gary conceded. The bride and groom walked into the rabbi's study and Gary became uncomfortable. When the rabbi started talking about building a Jewish home on the foundations of trust and integrity, Gary could contain himself no longer. "Rabbi," he said, "How do you have the audacity to sit there with a straight face and talk about trust and integrity when you stole my great-grandfather's Kiddush cup?!"

The rabbi was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," Gary said. "The bar mitzvah!"

"Gary, I remember your bar mitzvah very well, but I'm telling you that I didn't steal your Kiddush cup."

By this point Gary was becoming visibly agitated.

"Well then, where is it? Everyone knows you were the last person seen with it."

"Gary," the rabbi said, "I took the Kiddush cup and I put it back where I knew you would find it. I put it in your tefillin bag."

Sometimes we walk around with stories in our heads; sometimes we walk around with judgments made long ago; sometimes we hold on to grievances for far too long. And more often than not it's because we've harped on the all-too-human flaws of our friends and family.

In our hearts, we've told ourselves that a particular person

- Made a terrible decision
- They said something utterly thoughtless
- They missed something really momentous

And we haven't forgiven them because... they were too human, too flawed.

So one day a year we imagine what it would be like to gaze out on a sea of white and look at our world through celestial spectacles.... What if they were really guiltless? What if we could imagine them as angels for a day? What if we could see in them a spark of the divine?

We may not be angels, but we're certainly capable of seeing other people as if they were.