

Rosh Hashanah: Kennedy and Kapparrah

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Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah.

There are significant dates that everyone knows like July 4, 1776 or for us in Massachusetts: April 19, 1775. For those of you new to the area, that's Patriot's Day... the shot heard round the world, etc. While those dates resonate positively, at least for those of us who are not British, sometimes well-known dates recall tragic events: 9-11, November 22, 1963... JFK's assassination; June 5, 1968... RFK's assassination. The deaths of the Kennedy brothers were major events in this country and most people who remember back to that fateful day in Dallas, know where they were when they heard JFK was killed. Similarly, we all know where we were on September 11th. These events were all on a scale that commits them to memory. In addition, the depth of their tragedies and the suddenness of their impacts preserve them in our minds.

But while most who were alive know where they were when JFK was shot, many fewer will remember when they learned of his youngest brother Ted's death. He had been battling a brain tumor for a year when he died of his cancer in the middle of the night on Wednesday, August 25, 2009.

When I woke up that morning, I read the headline in the Globe: "Edward M. Kennedy, Senate Stalwart, Dies at 77." But I will remember Teddy's death because of our minyan. At minyan that morning, Hal Miller-Jacobs asked a thoughtful question before leading us in the davening.

Hal asked us to think of places in the davening, in the text of the *siddur* – our prayer-book – that remind us of Ted Kennedy. As I davened that morning, Kennedy's life illuminated the *siddur*. This morning I will share some of my reflections on Hal's question which I hope will add to your understanding and appreciation of our tradition and can serve as a method of interacting with timeless texts.

Whatever you think of Kennedy – love him, hate him, supported his politics, opposed his policies, think he was guilty of manslaughter at Chappaquiddick or not, Kennedy had a monumental impact on this country. In his 46 years in the Senate – he was elected nine times – he was the author of over 2,500 pieces of legislation.

As he wrote in his just released memoir, *True Compass*, through persistence, patience and determination, Kennedy was able to leave the world a better place. There are a number of areas where Kennedy excelled and his overall life, filled with tragedy and transformation, can serve as a model and a cautionary tale for all of us.

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As I opened the siddur that morning, I was struck by an opening *kavannah* or intentionality that helps us prepare for the experience of prayer. It reads: *Hareini mekabel alai mitzvot ha-borei: v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha* – I hereby accept the obligation of fulfilling my Creator's mitzvah in the Torah: love your neighbor as yourself. Eight simple words, a way to prepare the heart for the act of prayer.

Placed just before the daily morning blessings, these words represent the fusion of what prayer can accomplish and how we are supposed to live. Love your neighbor as yourself is a basic idea – found in many cultures and civilizations – but yet so extraordinarily hard to fully fulfill.

We are not made to love others as ourselves; we love ourselves first and more than others. That's basic biology and evolution. But Judaism makes it a *mitzvah*, a divine command, to move beyond our nature, to go beyond the instinct of self-preservation.

Here is the basic Jewish approach to life, while we should care for ourselves first, as Hillel, our great first century sage taught: *Im ein ani li, mi li* – if I am not for myself, who will be for me? But Hillel also added: “*U'kh'she'ani l'atzmi, mah ani* – but if I for myself alone, what am I?” We must move beyond ourselves and engage with others in a loving manner.

Now, even if you grew up *davening* – engaged in traditional prayer, you might not have heard of this *Hareini mekabel* line – it is not found in most traditional *siddurim*. It was composed by the 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria in his *Mahzor*, his prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Luria was building on our great teacher Rabbi Akiva who considered ‘*v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha* - loving your neighbor as yourself’ to be **the** fundamental teaching of the Torah. All of the *mitzvot* in the Torah are intended to cultivate within us the ability to act in loving ways toward others. The *mitzvot* become a training ground that hones our skills.

Luria and other Kabbalists believed that we live in broken world. However, they also believed in the cosmic power of human action. Even a small act of *hesed*, a small kindness can transform the entire universe.

The *mitzvot*, the Kabbalists believed, are the real key – by performing *mitzvot*, we are piecing together the world. Each *mitzvah* from redeeming captives to visiting the sick not only fulfills a divine command, bringing blessing to the one who performs it and to the one who receives the benefit, but it also creates a ripple-effect with goodness cascading out, repairing the world.

We all have experienced this in our lives. Even the mundane act of driving: someone stops to let us make a turn and then we do the same for someone else. Luria wanted *v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha* – loving others to be his mantra as he entered into these days of awe. If he could maintain that ideal and keep it in front of him, he could

maximize the potential of the prayers he was to recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Some 400 years later in 1972, the Conservative Movement picked up his idea, placing this passage at the beginning of the High Holy Day *Mahzor*. In 1985, it was added into *Siddur Sim Shalom* so that we could have it before us every single day.

Some of us know the story in the Talmud about a potential convert who approached the two great sages Shammai and Hillel and asked them to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai, who was not that flexible, turned him away. Hillel said OK and replied with a variation of *v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. The rest is commentary; go and study."

Nahum Glatzer, may his memory be blessed, a Brandeis professor and a member of Temple Emunah explained Hillel's answer:

"The first part of the answer sounds like a short-cut to the core of religion, to a happy morality, and to the good life. The addition "Go, study" points to the long way that has to be taken, patiently and persistently. In order to recognize the other fellow as my neighbor, as my equal, as one who is like me, my naked, undirected Ego has to undergo radical change. Training of will-power, self-renunciation, loving understanding, is needed before a person will be ready to make room for the other. Such training is part of the study which cannot be done while one stands on one foot. The goal is love, all men are brethren."

Glatzer reminds us that prayer can help lead us on this path towards caring for our fellow person.

Ted Kennedy devoted his life to this, to the service of others. Even his opponents in the Senate praised him for who he was and his good intentions. Senator Orrin Hatch once said "I love him like a brother."

His efforts in his almost five decades in the Senate include: human rights in places like Chile, revising immigration laws, making a college education more affordable, workers rights including raising the minimum wage and creating equal opportunities regardless of race, gender, disability or genetic background – something those of us who of Ashkenazi descent really appreciate so that we are not discriminated against because of Jewish genetic diseases.

His work on civil rights culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a major breakthrough in the history of this country. And the State's Children Insurance Program of 1997 helped poor children get medical treatment. Overall, his work to help the poor and the disenfranchised and those with disabilities won him recognition as one of the foremost legislators in American history.

Senator Kennedy's care for the poor and for those on the fringes, reflects core teachings of our Torah which exhort us again and again to look out for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. His was tough with Supreme Court justice nominees whom he felt did not live up to his standards of protecting outsiders.

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Later in my davening, my eyes fell upon “*Refaeinu Adonai v’neirafeh* – Heal us Adonai and we shall be healed; help us and save us, for You are our Glory. Grant a *refuah shleymah*, a perfect healing for all our afflictions, and may it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of ancestors, to send complete healing, of body and soul, to

Then there is a space to insert names – as I try to do at each Amidah, I thought of those in my family, members of our community, and others that I know who need healing, reciting their names in English or Hebrew. As I said the names, I was struck by two ideas.

The first is the power of prayer to help us connect with each other personally. Here, I was at 7:20 AM, waking up to the day and trying to pray for those in need. Even though I could not touch them all, nor be present for all them at that moment, as I closed my eyes and recited their names in my mind, I felt as if they were before me and I could send my caring and somehow, some healing to them...

We all know that Kennedy was an advocate for health care reform, perhaps it was caring for two of his children through the ordeal of cancer that led him to this involvement. As he was struggling with a brain tumor over the last year, Kennedy had access to the best health care; he was wealthy and as a senator, he had excellent care. There were no caps on his health care.

But he tried to fulfill the Torah’s dictum: *v’ahavta l’reiakha kamokha* – just as he took care of himself with medical care so did he love others enough to make sure that they have access to this. Health care is the area of legislation that he did not finish.

That brings me to the second idea – the *refaeinu* prayer in our *siddur* invites us to include those whom we know who are ill by name, personalizing this prayer experience. That is *v’ahavta l’reiakha kamokha*, thinking and reaching out to someone personally.

Kennedy touched people personally. Like a shepherd, he took care of his flock – visiting the sick, attending funerals of Massachusetts armed servicemen killed in war, responding to letters of those in need and taking care of his constituents in a very personal way.

His individual touch brought thousands into his circle. A woman whose husband was killed on 9-11 said “He taught me how to put one foot in front of the other and do for other people. ... I really think that he’s my hero.” These personal relationships often helped others: Brian and Alma Hart of Bedford lost their son in Iraq who died because his unit was not given the proper armor. They worked with Kennedy to improve military equipment, saving lives.

He brought that same approach to his work on the behalf of Soviet Jews. “No American politician had ever personally met with refuseniks in the former Soviet Union until he did.” The legendary Soviet refusenik and now Israeli politician, Natan Sharansky, spoke of a 1974 meeting. “It was late at night, they had all gathered, [Kennedy] (he) gave the driver the address and the KGB didn't have time to stop it. Kennedy was the first who broke this wall that existed. After Kennedy's visit, such direct contact between American politicians and refuseniks ‘became normal.’”

Whenever Kennedy met with Soviet officials, in Washington or in the Soviet Union, he would bring the list of names of those he wanted released. Mark Levin, an advocate for Russian Jews, summed it up: “He never forgot we were talking about individuals and families.”

Steve Grossman, a longtime Boston-area Jewish and political activist and a former president of AIPAC, said that each year on Rosh Hashanah, the phone would ring and Kennedy was on the other end. The senator got a kick out of being the first non-Jew each year to wish the Grossman family a happy new year. “You could almost see through the phone the twinkle in his eye,” Grossman said.

Rabbi David Saperstein, who was befriended by Kennedy when he came to the Reform Movement’s Religious Action Center in 1973, said the senator was “supportive in good times and bad times” – Kennedy called him when his parents died and when he got married.

It was these small and large connections and gestures that endeared him to many and serve as a model for us in following *v’ahavta l’reiakha kamokha* – loving your neighbor as yourself means how you care for them personally.

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I went back to my davening that morning; the mourners recited the final Mourner’s *Kaddish* and naturally, I thought of Kennedy’s death. It seemed like many in the country would be feeling his absence; a *kaddish* of sorts. But then as I started to take off my *tefillin*, I was shaken by the loud wailing of the shofar.

I was so caught up in the davening and my interior journey about prayer and Kennedy, that I forgot that we sound the shofar at the end of services during the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah. This practice is supposed to wake us out of our complacent states, moving us towards repentance and self-transformation.

Maimonides writes about the shofar: “Awake, awake, O sleepers from your sleep! Arise, slumberers, from your slumber! Examine your deeds and return in repentance and remember your creator! Those of you who forget the truth in the follies of time and go astray, the whole year, in vanity and emptiness, which neither profit nor save, look to your souls; improve your ways and works. Abandon, every one of you, the

evil course and thoughts that are not good.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Teshuvah*, chapter 3)

While I had been cognizant of Kennedy’s short comings while I was davening, the shofar really struck the chord. After davening, I sat and thought about his great missteps from alcohol to his “bachelor behavior” to Chappaquiddick.

His actions on that terrible summer night forty years ago led to the death of Mary Jo Kopechne. He made choices that night and they were the wrong ones. Leaving her after his driving accident without reporting this for hours was an egregious act of negligence. He was guilty of manslaughter.

It seems safe to say that, had his name been Smith or Cohen and not Kennedy, he would have been charged; probably found guilty and jailed, ending his political career. What happened was a terrible perversion of justice, violating also our Torah’s precept: *Lo takiru panim bamishpat* (Deut. 1:17) – don’t show favor in administering judgment.

Of course, had he not been a Kennedy, would he have lost his oldest brother to a secret mission in WWII and his other two older brothers to assassins’ bullets. Coping with those losses and other personal tragedies may have contributed to his destructive and self-destructive behavior. On some level, Kennedy did 40 years of community service as his personal penance. Today, as we stand before God in judgment, we know that only the Ultimate Judge knows exactly what happened and all the appropriate consequences.

Looking at Kennedy’s life, I believe that over time he was able to transform himself. While it may have taken another decade or two, it is clear he worked on himself, especially over the last 18 years. It seems to me that he felt his political work and his efforts on behalf of others were a form of *kapparah*, of atonement. While he could not fix what he did wrong, his work and his life helping to repair our world and our society were a form of *tikkun* – a way to put some of the world back together again.

Elie Spitz, a Conservative rabbi and author, cites Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s teaching that we should live our lives as if painting a work of art. Spitz writes:

“When I first read this as a new rabbinical school student, I felt troubled. Before beginning my studies, I had wrestled with thoughts of suicide. I was aware that my compulsive self-endangerment and lies had caused enormous pain to those closest to me. Now, out of the hospital and on the slow path of healing, I felt like damaged goods. My artwork had smudges.

“Years later, I read that infrared photographs of the Mona Lisa revealed that Leonardo da Vinci had repainted parts of his masterpiece. “Aha,” I thought, “we can repaint.”

“Each relationship provides a canvas. Where we have failed our children or our life partners, we can repaint or fill in the canvas. [...]

“The meaning of the word *teshuvah* is “to return.” This is the season for *teshuvah*. We can re-envision, revise and augment the canvases of our lives. We

can make them more whole, more holy, more evocative of an embracing smile with each act, with each stroke of color.”

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In Ted Kennedy’s memoir, we see Teddy, working in pursuit of atonement. He demonstrates that over time, there is the possibility of redemption.

Kennedy wrote that his choices in 1969 at Chappaquiddick were “inexcusable.” He shares that the death of Mary Jo Kopechne’s “haunts me every day of my life” and how “atonement is a process that never ends.” Kennedy’s father died a few months later and Kennedy felt that his own actions may have shortened his father’s life from “the shock I had visited on him with my news of the tragic accident on Chappaquiddick Island. The pain of that burden was almost unbearable.”

The word that Teddy used was “atonement” or in Hebrew, *kapparah*. While we find that word in our liturgy on Yom Kippur – *slah lanu, m’hal lanu, kapper lanu*, this process must begin before Yom Kippur. We ask forgiveness and seek atonement by acknowledging our mistakes, asking others for forgiveness, coming before God in contrition and then doing better. That process continues throughout the year, though most intensely, it begins today on Rosh Hashanah as we usher in a new year and the Ten Days of Repentance culminating in Yom Kippur. *Kapparah* can never erase the past, but it can help move beyond errors, repairing the world for tomorrow.

That is the message of the shofar and Rosh Hashanah. These days and the sounds that we will hear tomorrow are our wake up call to do better, to turn our lives in a better direction.

While I hope we are not faced with tragedies as Kennedy was, nor, God forbid, terrible episodes like Chappaquiddick, we all have areas where we can change. I find our tradition and the great texts of the *siddur*, move me towards *hesed*, towards loving others and towards repentance and self-transformation.

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As I was driving the next day, I noticed that the highway signs did not mention the usual summer construction, but said “Thanks Ted – From the People of Massachusetts.”

Thank you for showing in your life that people can change and repent.

Shabbat Shalom and *Shanah tovah*.