

Kol Nidre Sermon

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If you were not moved by Saving Private Ryan then you may never be moved. The movie chronicles a battalion of U.S. Army Rangers in the aftermath of the invasion of Normandy.

Viewers first watch as waves of troops arrive at Omaha Beach, one boat after another carrying anxious American sons. Endless minutes of raw, gruesome footage ensue. 2400 of our own would lose their lives that day.

Soon we meet the boys that will be tasked with bringing home one James Francis Ryan, whose three older brothers have already fallen during the war. They find him, share the tragic news with him, and will see to it that he survives and is reunited with his bereaved mother.

This movie brings me to tears. I am drawn to all of it: The theme of brotherhood and the thought of losing brothers, those we're related to and those we aren't.

I am drawn to Captain Miller, who left behind his wife and his teaching job in the name of defeating those bent on tyranny and hate in Nazi Europe.

I am drawn to a version of America rooted in profound selflessness and honor. I am drawn to the gritty heroism of the soldiers, how they are so unapologetically committed, how their patriotism couldn't possibly be more removed from partisan politics and pettiness.

All of it haunts me. Perhaps the film does the same for you.

I wonder where all of that went. I wonder when we human beings went from sacrificing our lives for each other on faraway beaches to living in never ending judgment of each other. When did we start demonizing each other?

When did we become so overly consumed with our own our own myopic world view, our own self-righteousness, our own personhood that those outside our immediate orb were promptly relegated to the status of 'other' or worse?

The brave soldiers who lived and died for us. That's self-sacrifice. The men and women throughout history who laid down their lives so we could lay down each night in peace, they are heroes incarnate.

I think about the founding of our great nation, almost two and a half centuries ago, when, bravely rising up against British rule, a ransack army with everything to lose defeated an unrivaled superpower.

I think about landmark American names like Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton. I think of JFK and MLK. I think of Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul, and Rosa Parks.

I think about my own grandfather. Upon arriving in New York, his family in shambles, Nazi Germany just barely behind him, he joined the U.S. Army to return straight away to Europe to do his part to end Hitler's reign once and for all.

He was, proudly, a Richie Boy. Maybe you've heard of them or saw the recent 60 Minutes piece about them.

I think about soaring terms like Bunker Hill and Gettysburg and Pearl Harbor.

I am thinking this week especially, twenty years later, about those two fallen towers in New York, and the many who rushed in, not to mention the many who tried so hard to rush out.

All of it speaks to a high American ideal predicated on possibility and hope, a country where we live as brothers and sisters, embracing fully a sense of shared mission.

There are veterans with us today in fact; they know all about self-sacrifice. Their presence among us is a gift.

Putting aside me for we, do we even know how to do that in 2021? Do our kids? Or are we too consumed with making the next team, buying the next video game, making over the next room, renting the next shore house? Are we too fixated on our plans, our social status, or just being right?

Exhibit A) those who refused to wear a mask, choosing to showcase an unflinching stance rather than take into consideration the wellbeing of their neighbor.

Exhibit B) those who, for reasons rooted in pseudo-science and Facebook memes, refused to be vaccinated, never mind the vulnerable, the aged, or the sick.

Deena Kastor notes that 'sacrifice' is not a very useful term; it suggests that which we give up.

She prefers the word, 'choice.' If sacrifice is about relinquishing, choice is about taking on.

You say she sacrificed her earnings to support cancer research; I say she chose to give to a cause that means so much to her. You say he sacrificed his weekend to visit his ailing parent; I say he chose to provide care to someone he loves. You say she sacrificed a night out with friends; I say she chose to stay home to help her son with his science project.

You say he sacrificed his standing with his friends and colleagues; I say he chose to support his daughter who came out as transgender.

We know what our tradition has to say about sacrificing self for selves.

In Genesis Abraham pleads on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. God threatens to destroy these places of iniquity and wrongdoing. Hearing of these wayward souls, Abraham goes to the towns themselves, begging God to withhold the harsh decree. Abraham argues that if he can find a single good man or woman there then God should be merciful.

This isn't about Abraham; this is about his choosing to believe that these people, none of whom he's ever met, none of whom are of his faith, they deserve to live too.

The prophet Ezekiel suggests that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were in fact, in stark contrast to Abraham, greed and arrogance. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, a modern-day commentator, will take it further in noting that their crime was 'hoarding resources and leaving the economically vulnerable to suffer without assistance.'

A similar story appears in the Book of Exodus. The Israelites have committed the egregious sin of idolatry, praying to a golden calf when Moses leaves them to receive the Ten Commandments atop Mount Sinai.

After forty days he returns only to witness the shocking scene. Furious and defeated, Moses shatters the tablets. In anger God vows to punish the thankless community, but Moses, through his tears, like Abraham before him, speaks up on their behalf.

He says to God: 'Let not Your anger Eternal One blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand.'

Abraham and Moses, Ruth and Esther, Theodor Herzl and David ben Gurion, Hannah Senesh and Elie Wiesel, these are figures who lived with the wellbeing of others entrenched inside their heart, constantly putting aside comfort and contentment for something larger and fundamental.

Some want to believe that that the world is gone, and gone for good, a world of altruism, of selflessness and unflagging purpose. We had the greatest generation; now we're left with millennials and narcissism. They say we've given up on that capital 'A' America, given up on democracy, some here have even given up on Israel, some have given up on God and, most tragically of all, some have given up on themselves.

Some have given up on trying to be present for people who look different than you do or live somewhere else. They say they've sacrificed enough already, for their kids, or just to get to this point at all.

I get it. I do. We've all given so much, especially this past year and a half, and we're running low on fuel all the time. Most days we're just trying to get by.

We're so tired, rabbi.

We're Moses, going up and down the mountain again and again and again, carrying not tablets but groceries and worries and the sheer weight of so many obligations and some very real stress.

And now you're asking me to go further, rabbi, to sacrifice time and self for the sake of others, for those in the margins, for those without, for those who have no voice, for those wanting for allies? You want me to go to my most generous and giving self, you're asking me to be a proud Jewish symbol of empathy for my kids and my community and future generations when some days I can barely get out of bed?

That's what you're asking me?

I am. It's chutzpah, I know. But I love chutzpah and I love all of you.

For all the reasons that our Torah urges us all to be beacons of light and bring greater light to our world, it also shows us that the way to re-ignite our own light, to move past all the skepticism and the doubt and despair we carry, the nerves and anxiety that creep into our lives every day, the way back to joy, the way forward is through self-sacrifice.

It's counterintuitive I know.

Sacrifice is all over the Torah of course. Our ancestors sacrificed their very possessions in an effort to live their values, grow closer to God, and grow closer to each other. And it worked. They came away feeling cleansed and ready for all that lay ahead.

The very word for sacrifice, '*korban*,' comes from the root, '*karov*,' which means 'close' as in 'to draw close.'

Terrified and unsure, they wanted to know that they were close to something, or could be, that they weren't wandering a sprawling desert alone and without reason. That's us. That's all of us.

If our ancestors faced an uncertain future, so do we. If they faced upheaval and storms outward and inward, that's us too. As they often felt like they just couldn't go on, so do we.

They could have turned inward, chosen 'me' over 'we.' They could have abandoned the people, walked away from God, turned from Israel outright. But they didn't.

The antidote for them, and for us, was in doing just the opposite. They leaned in. They chose, *lhakriv*, to bring themselves closer. By re-committing themselves to their community and their God and this Jewish life of tzedakah and *tikkun olam*, they found themselves.

You and I are not about to ship off to France. Nor is this the time of the Second World War, thank God. But we do live in a time that would pull us to dire sadness and pain. If we're not going to find Private Ryan and save him, then maybe we can finally find our way back to purpose and meaning after simply trying to survive these past 18 months.

In the movie, when he issues the order to go save Private Ryan, General Marshall references President Lincoln's Bixby Letter, a now famous document. President Lincoln wrote the letter on November 21, 1864, consoling Miss Bixby, already a widower, on the loss of her five sons who fought for the Union Army.

The letter is brief and timeless:

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.

It is a different time and the landscape has certainly changed. But we too have loved and lost.

We feel anguish. We do. And we've each laid a great deal on the altar. The question is what goes on the altar now. What will we place on the altar this year? What sacrifices, what choices, will we make in this new year staring at us as no year in recent memory has, a year of new beginnings and possibility?

What will your choices, your words say about you, and say to the world around you? What will they say of you when your time comes? What will they say of all of us?