

KOL NIDRE: UNCOVERING OUR TRUE SELVES
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Between the short confession of sins, the *ashamnu*, and the long confession of sins, the *al het*, the siddur has placed a short paragraph that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Halo kol-hanistarot vehaniglot atah yode'a.

Are you not the one who knows all that is concealed and revealed?

Atah yode'a razei olam v'ta'lumot sitrei kol-chai.

You know the mysteries of the world and the secrets of every mortal.

Atah hofes kol-hadrei vaten uvochen kelayot valev

You look into our very guts and probe our thoughts and motives.

What do we have to hide? The secret sins, the unspoken thoughts. Are these the things we hide from one another?

Just as often, we hide thoughts that might cause pain; we hold back words that we might regret. Why confess the secret wishes we have successfully held back?

Perhaps there are other secrets that we hold onto, secrets that truly reflect who we are, but are afraid to share with others? Perhaps what is hidden is what God desires for us to reveal? Perhaps by hiding these aspects of ourselves, we make our true selves invisible? How would it feel to live our lives more true to ourselves? What kind of world would we live in, if we did not have to hide those secrets?

In various times and places, Jews have had to live in hiding. Rabbi Akiva studied Torah in secret to avoid Roman persecution. The Jews of Christian Spain became "New Christians" and hid their Jewish practices from their Catholic neighbors. Anne Frank hid in an attic in Amsterdam.

Unfortunately, this strategy rarely worked. Rabbi Akiva was caught and tortured publicly, and died with the Shema on his lips. The Marranos, or converses, were sought out and tortured by the Inquisition. Anne Frank left us her diary, but was deported to Auschwitz. Hiding is only a last-ditch survival tactic.

Fortunately, living in the United States of America in the 21st century, we have not been faced with the need to hide in order to survive. Jews can be very visible, like Joe Lieberman or Jon Stewart.

Seventy years ago, Mordecai Kaplan coined the phrase "living in two civilizations." He urged Jews who were making their way into American society to embrace it, without abandoning Jewish traditions. Since then Reconstructionist Jews have proudly affirmed their dedication to Jewish civilization and to American civilization, to Hebrew culture and to democracy, to bagels and bundt cakes.

But seventy years later, many Jews live in three or four different civilizations. Being Jewish is only one component of a complex identity in our global age. Instead of two choices—segregation or assimilation—we offer our children a collage of cultures. In our congregation,

children are being brought up with family trees that reach into Sweden and Peru and and Israel and Japan and Ethiopia.

When Brian and I got married, a friend of his parents, a photographer, gave us some beautiful black and white pictures as a gift. They are truly artistic, but we have never displayed them in our home. It is always risky to give a gift of art to someone you don't know well. But this friend thought we would appreciate the photos, because they were taken of Jews in Jerusalem. They are pictures of men in black hats and black coats. For some people, this is the only image they have ever seen of a Jew. For some Jews, they are the true image of an "authentic" Jew. And against that image, who are we?

And that was exactly the problem. Because there is no one "authentic" way of looking Jewish. In fact, our congregation looks more like Jews across the world than the Jews of Brooklyn or Brookline. We look like people who have been dispersed across the globe for two thousand years; people who have married the locals, whether they were Polish or Irish or Indian or Arab. **We are all authentic Jews.**

What prompted these musings? The most important book that I read this summer, and a book that I think charts a path for our future in a multi-cultural, pluralistic society. It is called Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights. The author, Kenji Yoshino, is a Yale University law professor. He understands the many ways we hide our identities in order to fit in, because he himself has uncovered his identity as a Japanese American and a gay man. His book describes how every one of us navigates our world by denying, suppressing, ignoring our true identities, and how we all play a role in suppressing others' identities as well.

Yoshino explains that "To cover is to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream." Covering, then, is the latest stage in attempts to force people to assimilate, to fit a standard mold.

The first stage, one we Jews know well from our history, is conversion—trying to remake oneself and become something else. During the Crusades, many Jews were forced to choose between conversion and death. But not only Jews have suffered forced conversions. Not too long ago in America, gay men were routinely taken to psychologists to convert them into heterosexuals. The process may have been as dramatic as electroshock treatment or lobotomy or even castration. As shocking as these procedures were, many men supposedly volunteered for this treatment. To understand why someone might choose this path, we need only consider the Jews of Spain who chose conversion to Christianity over expulsion as Jews. Coercion, in either case, is not the same as choice.

Fortunately, we live in a more enlightened time. Jews can safely wear yarmulkes on the street, or sport an Israeli flag pendant on the lapel. Gay people receive more protections from physical abuse. But the next stage, though physically safer, is psychologically risky. It's the stage of "passing." The best explanation of how passing works is the military's "don't ask/don't tell" policy. To pass, you don't need to change. You can even fully embrace your identity—except when you shouldn't. The key is to know when you can share and when you can't. This constant balancing act can lead to awkward, if not oppressive situations. It requires that those who know your secret keep your secret; and that you must trust their discretion or face disgrace. Most important, it still defines an identity as secret.

Consider the story of Queen Esther, which the book cites. Remember how Esther, whose Jewish name is really Hadassah, hides her Jewish identity from her husband, the king Ahasuerus. When the king moves to destroy her people, Esther “comes out” to him as Jewish. That act of making the personal public transformed the king so that he was able to put a human face, Esther’s face, on the Jewish people. It forced him to change his own vicious plan.

In reading the Purim story, commentators often describe the lengths Esther goes to, to maintain her Jewish observance. Just imagine Esther refusing the pork loin at the feast, or separating herself from her husband on a monthly basis according to Jewish laws of *niddah*, or lighting candles on Friday night. Overlooking that these rituals are themselves anachronisms, not part of Jewish life in the time of the Purim story, we might well ask—how could the king not know? How could he ignore a fact about his intimate partner, a fact that was undoubtedly in plain sight. Was Esther really hiding, or was the king so blind that he could not see her for who she was?

And why does Esther come out? She is given the unenviable choice of risking her own life to save her people, or maintaining her secret identity and watching Mordechai and all the Jews of Shushan slaughtered. As long as she could pass, Esther chose to keep her identity a secret, even if some people knew her and accepted her. Passing keeps us safe, but always on guard.

But what of communities, like ours, where acceptance is our norm? In our congregational leadership, in our Hebrew School, even on the walls of the synagogue we pay tribute to the diversity of our membership. What could possibly be wrong in a congregation that is so progressive, so open, so welcoming? Prompted by a conversation about diversity one Shabbat afternoon last spring, I sought, and found, the answer to this question in this book. Acceptance, I learned, is not the same as welcome. Because people cover as a way of being accepted.

Covering is a term coined by sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1963 book, Stigma. Covering refers to a state in which everyone knows and accepts who you are—as long as you aren’t too obtrusive. When we cover, we downplay what everyone knows to be true. Why do we do this? Because of the stigma that is still associated with being “different.”

Yoshino reminds us how FDR downplayed his disability. In order to appear more presidential, he was never seen in a wheelchair; he was always seated behind a desk. Presumably, this preserved his dignity. But why would someone lose dignity because he can’t walk? What that tells us is that we consider disability a stigma, and it is the stigma we aim to avoid.

We avoid stigma by downplaying our partners and friends; we aim to distance ourselves from our true identities by distancing ourselves from others who are like us.

We avoid stigma by pretending we don’t care about issues that affect us, and holding back on advocating for ourselves. And we avoid it by the way we look, the way we dress, the way we wear our hair, so no one can accuse us of “flaunting” our identity.

I recognized this behavior. I use covering to downplay my poor eyesight. I have worn glasses since I was two years old, and I always stood out because of it. As soon as I could, at age 13, I began wearing contact lenses. From the moment I get up until the moment I get in bed, every day. For decades, the only people who ever saw me in glasses were people who were awake at

that hour, or people who saw me when I lost a lens, which I assure you, is not very often. But having a seeing disability has always been a central part of my identity. It is only recently that I have become more comfortable wearing my glasses or asking for help. It is not easy. But to be honest, my new glasses help me see better than ever.

Many of us cover as Jews. Whether out of fear or embarrassment, many Jews keep their identity hidden, as we smoothly fit in to our work or school environments. This may lead to one kind of survival, but it leads to the death of the spirit. The epigram “be a Jew at home and a man on the street” is just another form of covering. Two centuries ago, it helped Jews enter Western society after leaving the shtetl, and one century ago, it helped our immigrant ancestors assimilate and become “real Americans.” But at what cost?

Compare the story that Yoshino tells of a professor who finally took his first trip to Israel. This man had always considered himself a non-observant Jew. For years, friends kept asking him why he hadn’t been to Israel yet, and for years he resisted. Yet when the El Al plane touched down in Tel Aviv and all the passengers joined in singing “Hatikvah” he wanted to kiss the ground. For all of his protestations, he found himself and he came home.

This is much like the feeling many people relate when they come to HBT. Many of our members have avoided synagogues, or simply not found a good reason to join one before. Many of our members have tried many different congregations before they come here. And yet, when they find this community, they often describe it as “coming home.”

Being Jewish can be a solitary act—but to really experience any identity fully—whether as a Jew or a person of color or a lesbian—demands affiliation, becoming part of a community of shared identity.

At HBT, we pride ourselves on being a community that welcomes gays and lesbians; we boast of our multiracial families and feel righteous that we do not turn anyone away based on class. And we should be proud to be such a welcoming community. But we have not done enough so long as we expect everyone to cover an important aspect of their identity, as long as we imagine that everyone really is, or should be, just like us.

Yoshino contends:

“The mainstream is a myth....Because human beings hold many identities, the mainstream is a shifting coalition, and none of us is entirely within it. All of us struggle for self-expression; we all have covered selves.” (p.25)

As long as we cover, we perpetuate the idea that our identity *should* be covered. We buy into the belief that we are outsiders and we keep alive the falsehood that our identity is a source of stigma. But as long as we are in a safe environment, there is no mainstream, there is no “us” or “them.”

Yoshino discovers that, “contrary to my belief that I had to kill all but one self, it is the polyphony of selves that has been celebrated here.” In our synagogue, Jewishness is our common self, but our community should be self-confident enough to invite in a polyphony of selves. A community cannot be coerced, it must be nurtured one story at a time.

I invite you to share your stories. Stories of discrimination, perhaps. Stories of growing up in another culture. Stories of your families. I agree with Yoshino when I listen to each of you. Look around you. There is no “mainstream” here. Someone grew up with a yeshiva background and someone else grew up without any religious traditions at home. Someone lost his parents at a young age. Someone else has a very close family, where everyone lives nearby and they still get together for Sunday dinner. Someone else is a single parent. Someone has a lesbian mother and someone else has a sister who is ultra-orthodox and lives in Israel and someone else was raised in Europe and only discovered Judaism as an adult. Each of us has a story to tell, the story that made us who we are. And that story is partly about being Jewish, and partly about being American, and probably about something else that is important to our identity. We join together as a Jewish community to study and to pray and to share our lives with one another. To be a true community, we will need to make this a safe place to share those stories.

This will not always be easy, either to tell the stories or to hear them. We are bound to learn things that make some of us uncomfortable. But if we truly look into ourselves on this Day of Atonement, we will recognize the parts of ourselves that make us uncomfortable, and in accepting ourselves, we can learn to accept others too.

In Hebrew the word for atonement—*kapparah*—the root of Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, literally means covering. Some interpret atonement as “covering up” our sins. I want to suggest that true atonement is about uncovering—uncovering our true selves. When we press our hands on our hearts while recite the *vidui*, the alphabetical litany of sins, I hope that you can uncover a part of you that has been covered far too long.

Everyone has secrets, some of which must be revealed only to God. But I envision our community as a place where people can be their true selves, tell their stories, and incorporate them into our common story—the story of a people lifting up their voices and helping one another finding their way across the Sea, to freedom. Let’s work together to make that vision our reality.

Ken yehi ratzon