

KOL NIDRE

Forgiveness

Friday evening, September 13, 2013

Intro:

The re-emergence of Anthony Wiener and Elliot Spitzer in the New York City political scene has been a gift to journalists suffering from a summer news slump. What could be more juicy than to replay two sex-related stories that marked the downfall of two prominent New York politicians. They have been able to resurrect old stories about sexual tastes of two prominent Jewish New Yorkers.

Alas, both have now vanished again from the New York political scene.

But, to tell the truth, Anthony Weiner and Elliot Spitzer have also been a gift to rabbis, anxious about their High Holy Day sermons. The High Holy Days in general, and Yom Kippur in particular are about sin and atonement. And these are terms, which journalists and other media types have been bandying about these last several weeks.

Since their focus has been more about titillation than about theological considerations, I would like to talk about sin and redemption as ideas that undergird religious understandings today.

1. SIN AND REDEMPTION

Sin is a topic that Christians think about very frequently.

In the second century, Christians thinkers took the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, and made it into a central theme of Christianity.

In our Jewish understanding of the creation stories, the writers of these early sections of the Bible were trying to figure out how humans made the transition from an early state of bliss to the rough and tumble world in which we live.

For Christians, the banishment from Eden became the punishment for a first sin, an “original sin”. The sin was rebelling against God’s instructions, and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For Christians, the banishment from Eden became the central focus of their theology. Getting back to Eden, or Paradise, is the goal. It is only through Jesus, the Redeemer, that they can return to Paradise.

This is the central and significant role that Jesus plays in Christianity.

Over the centuries, many Jewish thinkers and writers have tried to create a place for Jesus in Jewish thinking. They emphasize the fact that most of the teachings of Jesus are fully in line with Jewish theology in the first century. This is true.

They also make the distinction between the words of Jesus, however scant they are, and the teachings of Paul, which move more in the direction of Greek and other pagan theologies of

the time. This is understandable, because Paul was trying to bring a pagan world into the orbit of early Christianity. So, it was natural that Paul taught as he did.

None of the efforts to introduce Jesus into Judaism has been successful. This failure has not been because the efforts of these teachers have not been unintelligent or thoughtless. The failure is the result of Jesus having no role in Jewish thinking. Since we are not essentially sinful, Jesus has no role in Jewish thought.

Under the influence of Greek thought, early Christians began to think of the world as a sinful place, with the concomitant need for redemption from this sin. Christian thought began to emphasize the essential sinfulness of human beings, which needed redemption and atonement. Jesus, and his teachings, became for them the sole vehicle for redemption and atonement.

II. THE JEWISH WORLD VIEW

For us Jews, and this has been true for two thousand years and more, the world is not an essentially bad place, nor are its inhabitants essentially sinful.

We Jews have taken a realistic look at the world and its inhabitants. For us, people are neither all good nor all evil. We are a combination of both possibilities.

Traditional Jewish thinking speaks about the Yetzer HaRah and the Yetzer HaTov. The potentiality for evil, and the potentiality for good, both of which reside in every human being.

Translated into everyday language, each one of us in confronted every day with choices. Some days the choices are consequential and massive. On other days, the choices we have are less significant. But every day, we are placed in a position of choosing.

Choosing is what the High Holy Days are Judaism is all about.

Choosing may seem easy, and fairly straightforward. It is reasonable to say that choosing brings with it all sorts of other issues.

For Christians, the difficulty of choosing is personified in Satan, the anti-God. For many Christians, Satan or the Devil is a real force in their lives, and in the lives of all others. Satan is the

personification of all that is weak in them, all that challenges them in profound ways.

Satan is force in which all negative tendencies are coalesced.

The force of evil, cast in the persona of Satan, or Lucifer, has been a popular literary theme. Beginning with Dante's Inferno, Milton's Paradise Lost, and continuing to contemporary authors, the Devil and battles against him, are a major literary theme.

Many composers have found the Satan-theme attractive enough to build significant pieces of music around. Be it Gounod's "Faust," or Berlioz's "The Damnation of Faust", or Boito's "Mefistofole" .

In one very important sense, personifying evil as the Devil or Satan removes the onus from us humans. We become pawns in a larger conflict, a heavenly battle between the forces of good and evil. We effectively have no role. The decisions are made elsewhere. We are merely players.

III. THE RESULTS OF SIN

I suspect that both Elliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner would love to blame their sexual exploits on the Devil. “The Devil made me do it!” But this was not the case.

For Christians, the result of unrepentant sin is the damnation of the soul. Traditional Christians do really believe in Heaven and Hell and Purgatory. Yes, they do. Jews really do not understand these ideas. We have no notion of heaven or hell as actual places. While these ideas were developed by the Church in the Middle Ages, they still are dominant today. (To make that what I am saying is correct, I re-read the Catechism. This is what it says:

1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “.)

Now you might assert that the loss of office for a politician is indeed an eternal hell!

For us Jews, there is no such punishment or reward in heaven or hell. These are ideas that are non-biblical, and they are never developed in Jewish teaching. The Bible speaks of Sheol or Gehenna, but these are ideas that are never developed. The closest we get to any sort of development of these ideas are in the folklore of the Jewish people.

There is a rabbinic story that I know that you’d heard. I have told it many times, but I will repeat it again here. It is germane to understanding where Judaism stands on this matter.

A saintly, quite elderly rabbi was near to the end of his life. An angel from God came to tell him that the reward for his saintly life was that he would be granted any wish.

The rabbi had always been intrigued by the notion of heaven and hell, so articulated by his Christian neighbors. "I wonder if there is any validity to these ideas."

So, he told the angel that he wished to see heaven and hell. So the angel whisked him in a golden chariot to the first cloud. This, said the angel, is hell. What the rabbi saw was a long dining table piled high with every sort of delicious food. But the people sitting around the table emaciated. The rabbi looked carefully, and saw that the people sitting at the table had iron bars from their shoulders to their wrists. They could not bend their arms to feed themselves. "This," declared the angel, "is hell."

The angel then whisked the rabbi to the next cloud, and there is found a similar sight. There was a long dining table, with people sitting around. But these people looked well fed and happy. Their arms were similarly incapacitated, but each person fed his or her neighbor.

The message of this story is clear: we make our own heaven and our own hell.

One more story from our fount of Jewish folklore: There was a shtetl in Eastern Europe with one butcher shop. The butcher who owned the shop had excellent skills. His meats were all beautiful. He sold them at a fair price. He didn't even put his thumb on the scale when weighing the meat for his customers.

But, he had one problem: He was cantankerous and testy. When he was in a bad mood, he took it out on every one: family and customers alike. He just couldn't help being nasty and sarcastic. Yes, he was aware of his problem as well as his inability to overcome his problem.

Every High Holy Days period, he would become overwhelmed with regret at his inability to function amicably.

So, it became his custom each year, just before the start of Yom Kippur, to dress in his best clothing. He then went to the home of each customer to apologize for his uncontrolled tongue. Only then could he observe his Day of Atonement.

For us Jews, heaven and hell are not fanaticized places of torment or reward. They are not in some other world, yet to come.

For us Jews sin is missing the mark, and atonement is making amends to those whom he had hurt.

CONCLUSION:

So what of Elliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner? Their sins of omission and commission were played out on the public stage. Theirs was not a quiet sinfulness. Their abuse of others' human dignity was there for all to see.

For political animals, their punishment was also public. They were cast out from their Edenic world, the very public world of the elected politician. They were cast out from elected office not once, but twice.

Jews ask the question: Was their public repentance enough? It looks like it was not. Their attempts to play the contrite butcher were apparently unsuccessful.

Public sin requires public redemption.

And what about us? What were our private sins? And what, indeed, is our private redemption.

For Jews, we are our own accusers, punishers, and redeemers.

May redemption and contrition be ours on this Day of Atonement.