

Let me tell you about the second-worst sermon I ever heard. I know this might not be a charitable thing to say on Kol Nidrei, the night when we are supposed to try to seek forgiveness and extend the same degree of understanding to others that we hope for for ourselves. So I'm sure the person who delivered this sermon was just having an off-night, and it's not representative of the caliber of sermon he usually offers.

The night in question was, in fact, Christmas Eve – Aimée and I were attending a midnight mass at a church out on Long Island where we were staying over winter break. We were attending midnight mass because, in all seriousness, as a rabbi I have a deep respect and appreciation for ritual and faith and love the beauty and power that can come in observing people following their religious traditions. And so there we were on Christmas Eve, in church, and the pastor was speaking about snow. It had snowed recently and the pastor reflected that what made snow so magical was that it enveloped everything in a beautiful white blanket that covered up all the flaws and imperfections of everything that lay beneath it.

So I have to tell you as a young future rabbi I reacted very negatively to that sermon. Covering up flaws, masking them, I remember thinking to myself, doesn't do anything to actually address them. It only lulls us into a temporary sense that everything has been made right without any effort to actually fix it, and when the snow melts all those flaws and imperfections are back in plain sight.

So let me tell you why I didn't invite you to come to services dressed in white tonight for Kol Nidei, as well as tomorrow for Yom Kippur day. It's not because I think if we just cover up our usual clothing in white we'll fool God or fool ourselves into thinking we're somehow pure and free of flaws, that we've done the spiritual work that Yom Kippur demands of us. Wearing white doesn't solve our problems; it highlights them and hopefully motivates us to address them in meaningful ways. Let me explain.

First, take a moment to look around. Usually we come to services on Yom Kippur dressed formally, and when it comes to clothing in our society 'formal' usually means dark. See the people around you wearing white? It's an important visual cue that something unusual is going on – that some people aren't coming to synagogue dressed the way they ordinarily do because this isn't an ordinary day, and we aren't gathered for any ordinary task. Atonement is serious business and just the fact of creating a distinctive appearance at services already changes the atmosphere and environment in important ways that can prime us to do the work of the day. Of course that argument just supports dressing differently: maybe we could accomplish the same thing if I invited us to all come, say, dressed in plaid flannel and cowboy boots, so what is it about white specifically?

White has a number of different symbolic associations in Judaism, as in the wider culture. One of these, unsurprisingly – and appropriately for Yom Kippur – is purity. This is, in no small measure, because as soon as something gets on a white garment it is instantly visible and evident: white is a color of purity because any flaws or stains stand out starkly against the white background. And so white symbolizes that purity of intent and spirit for which we strive on Yom Kippur – that level of purity that we know we cannot maintain throughout the year but that we should at least aspire to, need to hold before our eyes so we can at least be reminded of who we are invited to be.

White as a color of blamelessness goes back to Biblical times: God declares to the people through the prophet Isaiah, "Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow;

though they are crimson red, they will be like wool.” The Psalmist declares, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (51:9) The rabbis say that in Temple times when the scapegoat that was sent into the wilderness bearing the people’s sins as part of the annual ritual for the Day of Atonement went over a cliff, a strip of crimson-dyed cloth left in the Temple would miraculously turn white, indication that they had achieved forgiveness for their wrongdoing and a clear reference to Isaiah’s promise.

There is also an explicit reference in Torah to white and Yom Kippur, and this is connected to the priestly vestments. In ancient Israel there were the priests, and there was the High Priest. The Torah describes at length the elaborate and colorful tunics the priests wore in the Temple, but then has an entire section dedicated to the special ornate and richly-bejeweled outfit of the High Priest. Clearly the High Priest’s garments were intended to help him stand out and make an impression of might and glory. On Yom Kippur the High Priest also stood out from the other priests by his distinctive dress, but this time in a very different way. The Book of Leviticus describes the very plain and simple white linen garments the High Priest wore on the Day of Atonement: “He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic, with linen breeches next to his flesh, and be girt with a linen sash, and he shall wear a linen turban.” (Lev. 16:4) This plain, unadorned white outfit was what the High Priest wore as he entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

For the High Priest, then, white was a symbol of humility. The High Priest would stand before God stripped of any of the usual finery which signaled his lofty position, wearing the plainest of garments. It is a reflection of the way we too on this day seek to stand before God without any affect or pretense, stripped of our usual excuses and defenses and yearning to be judged worthy. But for us, the white acts not only as a symbol of humility, but also of unity. Each one of us stands before God in simple white clothes, and differences of position or status melt away in the similarity and uniformity of our appearance. In our times, there is no longer a High Priest so having all of us dress in white simultaneously levels us – no one is above anyone else – and raises us. We have all been elevated to the role of High Priest, and each one of us has a part to play in securing our own expiation. Or perhaps more properly, *each other’s* High Priests, as we confess our sins communally – “we have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have robbed, we have spoken slander” – and pray communally for forgiveness as well: “For all these sins... forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.” Our individual redemption depends on our collective merit, which is to say we each hold a piece of the key to everyone else’s salvation. Dressed in white and recalling the High Priest, we seek to channel the same humility and lack of pretense, to entering whatever sliver of the Holy of Holies we may merit to find and commit to doing our part of the work.

There is still another association in Judaism with white, and it is more powerful and more central to Yom Kippur than any of the ones I’ve mentioned so far, and that is death. It’s uncomfortable to think about – it’s supposed to be uncomfortable to think about – but Yom Kippur is a day when we are supposed to view ourselves as suspended between life and death as we seek to influence how our fate is sealed for this New Year. We don’t eat, we don’t drink, we don’t bathe, we abstain from sexual relations – in other words, we refrain from the usual activities of life that nourish and nurture our bodies in order to put aside what is ephemeral and passing, and concentrate on our spiritual wellbeing.

In point of fact, in many traditional communities it is customary not to simply wear white garments, but a very specific white garment – the *kittel*, or death shroud in which a Jew is customarily buried. Rabbi Moses Isserles, an important medieval exponent of traditional Jewish law states, “It is in fact the practice to wear the kittel, which is white and clean and also serves as a garment for the dead. Through its use, a person’s heart becomes submissive and broken.” (Orach Chaim 6:10) Submissive and broken: for Yom Kippur to be able do its vital work we must put aside ego and pride, the illusion of our own power and autonomy, must accept and even embrace our limits, our fragility, our dependence in order to tap into a deeper wellspring of strength and resilience that can never be taken from us. The kittel, the plain burial shroud, seems to me the most powerful symbol of our impermanence, a reminder that this holy day is not an act or a joke but is in fact *deadly* serious.

Which might make the final connection I want to offer tonight between white and Yom Kippur all the more surprising, and that is Tu b’Av. Tu’ b’*what*? We might have heard of Tu b’Shvat, the so-called birthday of the trees. “Tu b” just means “the fifteenth of the month,” so Tu b’Shvat is “the fifteenth of the month of Shevat” and Tu b’Av is “the fifteenth of the month of Av,” which still doesn’t get us any closer to knowing what Tu b’Av actually is. In no small part it’s because it’s a holiday that doesn’t exist any more. But in Temple times on Tu b’Av, the rabbis tell us all the young women would go dancing with ecstatic abandon in the fields, and young men would join them and look for brides. This holiday, falling always at the midsummer full moon when the nights were full of light and warmth and promise was in fact, the ancient Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel declared, one of the two most joyous days of the year.

The other day, the only other one that Rabbi Shimon b. Gamliel said could compare to Tu b’Av when it came to joy, was Yom Kippur. This might come as something of a surprise to those of us sitting here. Yom Kippur is many things – solemn, intense, hopefully deeply meaningful – but joyous is not a word that probably leaps to mind. But I think that there’s an important connection between Tu b’Av and Yom Kippur that gets to the heart of the joy Rabbi Shimon b. Gamliel was talking about, and that is intimacy. Tu b’Av was about finding your *bashert*, your soulmate. Yom Kippur is about reconnecting with the original Soulmate, the Divine wellspring of souls with Whom Adam and Eve were in intimate relationship until their pride and stubbornness caused them to disobey God and opened a chasm, an alienation from God, that untold generations later we are still trying to overcome.

Intimacy. This day, this night: maybe, just maybe. The slate can be wiped clean, the chasm could be bridged and we could reconnect in that original joy – if even for a moment – with our Divine source, as we strip aside our defenses and stand apprehensive and expectant before God, like the young women in the fields at Tu b’Av.

And I’ve left out the most telling detail, which is that the Talmud says that on those Tu b’Av nights the young women would go out to dance dressed entirely in white. Tu b’Av and Yom Kippur: the only two days on which wearing white was prescribed. Tu b’Av and Yom Kippur: joy, intimacy, and possibility intertwining and amplified in a dizzying whirl of white. White *is* the blank slate on which we can project our futures, that creates a world of new possibilities – if it can help prompt us to channel and focus our prayer, if it uplifts us, and helps the words we speak and the intentions we formulate penetrate into our hearts and not simply remain on our lips. Wearing white is no panacea, any more than the scapegoat sent into the wilderness in Biblical times; but

it can shape our experiences in surprising ways, help us open our hearts, make us readier to forgive and seek forgiveness.

On that long-ago Christmas Eve, Aimée and I walked out of the church after services. While the facile message of the sermon had frustrated me, I had been touched by the beauty of the music and the sincerity of the worshippers as they celebrated. There was intention, there was humility, and there was joy. We walked out into the cold night, the chill December air a shock after the warmth of the church. And the white snow blanketing the ground suddenly seemed full of promise.