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Finding Our Fourth

Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky

We plead for life, yet the Talmud teaches there are three circumstances under which we must be willing to give up our lives. If we should be forced -- on pain of death -- to worship pagan gods, to murder an innocent person or to engage in incest or adultery we are instructed to relinquish our lives rather than sin. To violate our relationship with God or with fellow humans in any one of these three ways would utterly destroy our souls, which we are better off submitting to death.

Or maybe four things.

Rav Mordechai Yosef, better known as the Ishbitzer Rebbe, wrote something stunningly remarkable on this topic. Using a complex kabbalistic interpretation of a verse in Deuteronomy, he taught there is a fourth circumstance, in addition to the three mentioned in the Talmud. The reason that this "fourth" is not specified in the rabbinic literature is that there is only one person who knows what it is. And that person is you.

"For every person, there is one mitzvah ... that is attached to the very root of his soul. And for this mitzvah [too], he must be prepared to give his life."

I don't think the Ishbitzer meant those last words precisely literally (that would constitute quite an earthshaking halachic ruling). But he certainly meant that just as the three values specified by the Talmud are essential to our collective definition of what living is all about, there is one value, one passion, one particular mitzvah that is essential to each individual's personal definition of what living is really all about. There is one mitzvah that has our soul's name written on it, which we alone are uniquely equipped and destined to do. And once we discover what it is, we are called upon to devote our very life force to it, to pursue it with a passion that bubbles up from the root of our soul, because it is for the sake of this mitzvah that God has blessed us with life.

We can all think of people who have found their "fourth of three."

I think about people like Robert Berman, who discovered that his "fourth" is encouraging Jews to become organ donors, and who went on to found the Halachic Organ Donation Society.

I think about a woman named Rachel Shoretz, who became passionate about providing emotional support for young Jewish women with breast cancer, and who founded Sharsheret, an international network that links cancer patients with cancer survivors.

I think about Barbara Ribakove who, years ago when no one had even heard of Ethiopian Jewry, created the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, which has aided in every aspect of Ethiopian aliyah, or immigration, to Israel.

And I think about people within the walls of my own synagogue who are so passionate about bikkur cholim (tending to the sick), daily minyan, educating the kids or creating a space of dignity for the homeless that they ordinarily do extraordinary things. They do things that are inspired not by their minds, but by their souls. They give their lives for these things.

On Yom Kippur we plead for our life. Essential to this plea is knowing what makes this life of ours invaluable, irreplaceable, worthy of blessing and pardon. Yom Kippur is our designated day for discovering the mitzvah at the root of our soul, our "fourth of three."

There's a piece of the Yom Kippur liturgy that begins, "My God, before I was created, I was not k'dai (of worth), and even now that I have been created, it is still as if I were never created."

This dramatic expression of humility is followed by a plea that God see our fundamental human weakness, and in recognition of this, forgive us our sins. But these words have resonance well beyond their immediate context. Other than at the moment when we are desperately seeking pardon, it is not acceptable to be "not k'dai." God expects us to be worthy of the human station that he has bestowed upon us, and we expect this of ourselves as well.

Somewhere out there is a mitzvah with our name on it. And when we discover and pursue it, we become fully k'dai -- fully worthy of the energy and intellect and vision that God has uniquely bestowed upon us.

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