I want to begin by telling you about the greatest theological embarrassment of my life. It really happened many years ago, but was revealed to me only this summer.

In 1972 (I was 31 years old!) I had the privilege of attending a great interfaith gathering. It was called the “Word Out of Silence” seminar. Organized by Father Raimundo Panikkar, a very progressive post Vatican II Catholic intellectual, it was an early attempt at deep level interfaith, especially East/West spiritual communion. Attending were figures involved in the inner spiritual life of many religions, including priests, yogis, sufi masters, and so forth. Shlomo Carlebach and I were the two Jews participating; I was probably one of the youngest people there. The conference was held at a Benedictine monastery in upstate New York, the monks serving humbly as our hosts. The event is lodged in my memory primarily because of the following incident. At the end of the first day, one of the monks approached Father Panikkar and asked him, with some astonishment: “Why are you talking about meditation, spirituality, and religious truth with these people? They are outside the church, unbaptized, and going to hell. What could you possibly have to learn from them?” Panikkar very wisely brought the question before the plenum. It turns out, you see, that ALL of us had people back home in our own traditions who could ask the same questions. Shortly after the conversation began, the Zen monk in the group got up to speak for the first time. I remember clearly that he was announced as the founder of the new Mount Baldy Zen Center in California. (I recall that the name went so clearly well with his shaved head!) He got up and said “For a Christian to say ‘Christ is the only God is like a man who says: ‘My wife is the only woman!’;” He abruptly sat down.

This comment struck me so deeply that I’m sure I have quoted it a hundred times. Nearly every time the question of the Chosen People comes up, I respond by quoting this monk. Yes, I am fully engaged in this single relationship with God, this marriage-like covenant. I can know no other, nor do I need to. I will never know what another marriage – or another intimate relationship with God – feels like from the inside. (Here I was in long-standing *mahloket* with my dear and much-lamented friend and teacher Reb Zalman, who believed in *Ta’amu u-re’u*, wanting to taste them all.) For me Judaism is exclusive and all-embracing. But I’m glad to know there are other good marriages out there. I couldn’t imagine limiting God to only one exclusive covenant.

So what’s the embarrassment? This July the New York Times carried an obituary for Sasaki Roshi, listed as founder of the Mt Baldy Zen Center in 1972, just as I recalled it. He died at age 107, a lot of years of healthy living, I guess. The obituary went on to say that his career was marred by the fact that he was a notorious womanizer who seduced many of his female students over the years.

Get it? He understood that “my wife isn’t the only woman.”

This is what my friend Reb Moshe Waldoks calls “My Kol Nidre joke.” But this one’s on me.

So where does that leave me? Is my openness to universalism unmasked as promiscuity? Indeed, if I am fully engaged in this single covenant, how can I know what’s out there?

Does this embarrassing revelation inevitably take me back to back to an exclusive sense of Jewish chosenness, the *mi-kol ha-‘amim* part of *asher bahar banu*, the part that you’ve heard me change in my Torah blessing? Of course, if you have read some of my writings, you’ll understand that I do not take divine choosing literally; that would be too anthropomorphic for me. But I do understand that we have chosen to depict our relationship with God in that way, and I have come to accept it. We are *nivharim*, “chosen,” I like to say, in the same way that we describe God as *ha-boher be-shirey zimrah*, One who delights in song.” In an entirely subjective unproveable sense, we feel that God takes special, unique (note that I did not say “exclusive”) delight in the prayers and devotions of Israel. We are therefore committed to that devotional life. Yes, we are, as the Talmud says, *mushba’im ve-‘omdim me-har Sinai*, “under oath since Sinai” to the obligations of that covenant, even if we initiated it. That is not because God came down upon the mountain and said: “You!” but because we stood beneath that mountain and said: “Us!” The result is the same; the distinction is mere theology.

Ultimately I think I am not, and cannot be, led back to Jewish exclusivism. I study comparative religion; I read and listen to the testimony of others and I respect it enough to take it seriously. Through other people I come to know that their paths of relationship to the One – Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, to choose some where I have encountered such testimony - are quite real. But for tonight I want to work with the premise that indeed all we can really know is this covenant. If we are indeed a chosen people, that is one dedicated by a divine covenant to be a uniquely holy nation, that choosing can only be for the sake of service. The Torah’s language of chosenness, “You will be a peculiar treasure to Me,” in the old translation, comes right after we are described as a *mamlekhet kohanim* (“A kingdom of priests”) and a *goy kadosh* (“Holy people”) in the Torah; there is no chosenness without both holiness and priesthood..

So at Sinai the people Israel is chosen – I intentionally use the present tense for what is described as an eternal moment - to become priests, dedicated to a life of service. Indeed we were brought forth from Egypt for that purpose, as the Torah makes abundantly clear many times. I think my very favorite articulation of it – perhaps among my favorite Torah verses of all – is Exodus 29:47: “Let them know that I am Y-H-W-H their God who has brought them forth from Egypt *le-shokhni be-tokham*, so that I might dwell in their midst.” (Of course *be-tokham* means both “among them” and “within each of them.”) It also means that every time God takes you out of another Egypt, among the many “Egypts” of our lives, it is always for that same purpose – because the Holy One wants you to become a *mishkan*, a dwelling-place for God. That is the only reason we are brought out of Egypt, again and again. Pay attention.

But a *mamlekhet kohanim*, a kingdom of priests, only makes sense if there is a community to serve. Priests are there to minister to others. *Eyn kohen be-lo ‘am*, to paraphrase something originally said about kings. Our community for service, apparently, is supposed to be that of *kol ha-‘amim*, the whole of humanity.

Yom ha-Kippurim is a good time to think about this. It is our most priestly holiday. The Torah describes it in great detail, but wholly as the act of the high priest. Everything we do here is an imitation of that. We are here doing in prayer what the high priest did of old, in the five services of the day. The climax of Yom Kippur is the *‘avodah* service, a kind of verbal re-enactment of priesthood itself. On Yom Kippur each of us becomes the kohen gadol, going into our holy of holies, doing what we need to do there. Kippur really means a sort of cleansing; this is the day when we each clean up our act, cleanse our *mishkan* or our inner altar, taking it out from behind all the things – ego needs, anxiety, ambivalence, and lots more – that block it up, so we can serve well again in the coming year. We have offerings to bring, gifts we want to give, but we somehow cannot. We are unable to approach our altar. The way is blocked; perhaps the altar itself is even defiled. This day of purification, if it works well, should allow us to go forward with our best acts of giving. We should come out of it with our faces shining, like that of the priest at the end of the ‘Avodah.

The word *‘avodah* is a wonderfully complex one in its associations. Yes, it means service or devotion, sometimes specifically the Temple service, but it also means “work.” *‘Avodah ‘ivrit*: a Jewish labor force or transcendent devotion? The point is that we have spiritual work to do. The Kotsker rebbe was asked what it means to be a *hasid* and he replied *arbetn oif zikh*, “to work on yourself.” Or, in another version “to drill a hole in your heart.” This is *the* day for doing that work, called by the Talmud simply but dramatically Yoma, “*the* day.” The Mahzor is supposed to help us do that, to give us the language we don’t have on our own. The confessionals, the repeated calling out of the 13 *middot*, are aids for that work. If they do not help, I urge you to let them serve as background music as you approach the task in your own way. Certainly they should not become obstacles, as is sometimes the case.

The various prayerbooks we have used in this community take a multiplicity of positions regarding the sacrifices in Mussaf. Should we recite them? Past tense or future? What should replace them? Prayers for peace? Prayers for our fellow-Jews? Is that really enough? As you might imagine, I do not generally identify with those Jews interested in rebuilding the Temple and re-instituting sacrifices in pre-messianic times. But the Temple model of *‘avodah* remains important to me, even as transposed into the form of *tefillah bi-mekom korban*, prayer replacing the offerings. Sources in the Talmud and Midrash refer to our prayers forming a crown for God’s head, even to an angel who goes around to all the synagogues every morning and collects the prayers to then weave them together into a wreath-like crown. This may be a transposition of the rings of smoke that once rose from the altar, reaching into some invisible place in the heavens. Even though I tend to see “heaven” in a spiritualized way, therefore more internal than vertical, the metaphor still retains its power.

I want to share something with you of my own personal prayer-life. When I daven in the morning – which has become regular practice again after many years when it was not, I find great meaning in reciting the *korbanot*, the sacrificial instructions, a section even our very frum minyan skips over. In the Sephardic rite there are four short passages said each morning. The first, *parashat ha-kiyyor*, is about the basin where the priest is to wash before the offering. This for me is about preparation, the moral life you have to live before you dare to pray, cleansing yourself before you approach the altar. Next is *terumat ha-deshen*, keeping the fire burning constantly and removing the old ashes. *Esh tamid tukad ‘al ha-mizbeah* (“Fire must burn continually upon the altar”) ; this is about intensity and passion, *hitlahavut*, the fire of prayer. Then there is *parashat ha-tamid*, about steadiness. Two offerings every day, sunrise and sunset, always the same. Spiritual life is all about the interplay of these two: intensity and steadiness, passion and discipline. Finally there is *parashat ha-ketoret*, the incense offering. This is about the aroma that is to last long beyond the hour of prayer, that which is to linger with you through the day. These somehow set the structure of the prayer that is to come.

But of course our *‘avodah*, our service to God, is at least equally defined by our service to people, and also to God’s creatures more broadly, to God’s world in which we live. That is why this day of *‘avodah* is also about *‘averot beyn adam le-havero,* ways in which we have transgressed in relation to our friends, our fellow-humans. Our real obligations to God are played out mostly within the human community. We can’t cleanse our altar unless we deal with others. Prayer is to help fashion us into the human beings we want to be. This is what my teacher Heschel understood so well, that God is in search of us first and foremost to fulfill our obligation to serve others, to embody the life of holiness in the way we act in our daily lives and encounters with others.

So it is appropriate to ask on Yom Kippur: “Whom am I here to serve? What is the nature of that *‘avodah*?” How am I doing at it? The question arises first on an individual level. Yom Kippur, more than any other day on our calendar, is about each of us as individuals and our own spiritual and moral lives. Our spring holiday cycle, Pesah to Shavu’ot, is mostly about the Jewish people and our collective memory. But Rosh Hashanah is bigger; it is about the world, not just the Jews, and Yom Kippur is smaller, or focused in a more lasar-like way – it’s all about you. If I ask myself this “Whom am I here to serve?” question, of course Kathy comes up first. I have been called upon - by God or by life circumstances, as you prefer – to be a caregiver. The *‘avodah* in this couldn’t be clearer or less ambiguous. I rejoice in that task precisely because of its clarity. It is a great gift to have a simple chore in which there is no room for ambivalence. But I am also here to serve my students. I feel that my role in life, very much that of student and teacher, is now bringing the legacy of my own teachers and mentors, filtered and changed through me, to be sure, to my students who did not have the privilege of knowing them.

Every human being lives as a bridge between generations; each of us is the child of our parents and grandparents and the parent of our children and grandchildren. When we think of whom we are here to serve, of course we think first of family. For us as Jews, this especially means the handing down of legacy, the commitment to *ve-limmadetem otam et beneykhem*, “teaching them to your children.” This is so strong among us partly because of a long history of persecution, but also because our exilic history very early caused us to exchange the patrimony of land for the patrimony of culture. What we have to pass on is all about cultural legacy. So we serve by the act of passing on the tradition, by education.

But that form of service leads us beyond family. There are others for whom we take it on. We are not very good priests, after all, if we are serving only our own families, only the ones we already most naturally love. (Indeed, that’s why there are thoughtful people in the Catholic Church who question what seems like the obvious good of ending the requirement of celibacy. Can you be a good priest if you need to put your own family first?) Our job is to extend that love beyond the gates of our own homes. It may be the kids in Roxbury some people here are teaching to read, sick people you visit in the hospital or at home, students like mine whom you help with scholarships, so that they can delve more deeply into our tradition, people you serve through acts of *tsedakah*, even the deceased, for whom you perform the *hesed shel emet*, the final act of giving, through the Hevra Kadisha.

It is not easy for us moderns to commit ourselves to lives of service. *“Ana ‘avda de-kudsha brikh hu,* “I am a servant of the blessed Holy One,” does not roll easily off the tongue of most moderns, and not only because it is in Aramaic. “Service” and “servitude” are not easily distinguished by us. Service requires submission. “The yoke of the commandments.” But are we ready to wear a yoke? What of our hard-fought freedom? Do we not betray our best and most courageous selves by submission? In a new little book of mine called *Judaism’s Ten Best Ideas: A Brief Guide for Seekers*, I tell a story about R. Meir Margulies, a contemporary of the Ba’al Shem Tov. It goes like this:

It is a pious custom to bake special *matzahs* right on the eve of Passover, in order to be engaged fully in the celebration of our freedom. To make *matzah* properly, you need to use water that has been left standing overnight, to assure its absolute stillness. Once on the day before Pesach, R. Meir was walking up from the river carrying two heavy buckets full of water tied to a yoke around his neck. A neighbor, riding by in a horse-drawn cart, saw him and said “Come here, rabbi! Put your buckets on my wagon and we’ll give you a ride.” The rabbi looked up, smiling, and said: “I have the joy of doing this *mitzvah* only once a year, and you want me to give it away to a horse?

That’s the kind of yoke, *‘ol mitsvot*, that I’m talking about, one that we bear with joy.

But then the other piece of Yom Kippur comes and hits us over the head. Yes, it is also about mortality. I recall this day that my days are numbered. I heard Rabbi Soleveitchik say once that the whole of Yom Kippur is contained in the “Amen” of the *she-heheyanu* (“Who has kept us in life”) blessing that follows Kol Nidre. Recalling a conversation with Larry Kushner of many years ago, I remember that this day is an annual event in each of our life cycles, not only in our year cycle. It is the day to notice that we have lived another year, however unworthy of that gift of life we may feel ourselves to be. Whether I will be here on *yom ha-kippurim ha-ba’ ‘alenu le-tovah*, next Yom Kippur, is not in my hands. To accept that truth is a call to submit, a confession that I do not have all the answers, and then is ultimately to say that while I am here by God’s grace, I am willing to serve. For us the reminder of mortality is not a rush out to do your bucket list, but a call to service.

This life of ‘*avodah*, of service, does not apply, however, only to individuals. We are constituted as a *minyan*, which is to say a community whose primary activity together is that of prayer, what the rabbis call *‘avodah sheba-lev*, service within the heart. We are here, presumably, to facilitate and strengthen one another’s prayer lives. How strange, then, that we never talk about what prayer means to us, about why we *daven* and what place prayer has in our lives. We are called upon to show up at *minyanim* when needed, to prepare Torah readings, to serve as *shelihey tsibbur*, all of which somehow must be about helping others to pray. Yet we never quite talk about it that way. It is time we tried. I mean this as a challenge to initiate that conversation.

But beyond that, if service cannot be defined as just what we do for ourselves, we as a community should be thinking about how we minister to others, to those beyond our own membership. Yes, we have a tsedakah fund and I think we do that well. But are there other ways in which we might be serving? Jews all around us do not have our level of comfort and knowledge with tradition. Are there not ways in which we could and should be more welcoming, more giving, to Jews who might seek such knowledge? “If we are just for ourselves, what are we?” to paraphrase Hillel. Is outreach not an obligation of a Jewish congregation in our day, especially one that has such a high level of commitment and knowledge? Should only Chabad be doing that? Do we have nothing to offer? I must say that I had to reassure my students, who were coming to dinner on *Erev Rosh Hashanah,* that they would be welcome at the Minyan, despite what they took as rather unwelcoming words they found on our website about visitors showing up on the *Yamim Nora’im*. How about Jews who are somewhat different, who might not fit in easily? Do we give off a “not welcome here” message? Could even Newton be quite as white and straight as we seem to be? I think also about reaching out beyond the Jewish community. All kinds of interesting things are happening around Jewish/Christian/Muslim interaction, some even here in this building. Typically it is congregations, not just individuals, who get involved. In our insistence that we are not a synagogue, perhaps we forget sometimes that we indeed are a congregation. We invoke prayers upon *kol ha-kahal ha-kadosh ha-zeh ‘im kol kehillot ha-kodesh,* “for all this holy congregation, alongside all the others.” Who are those others? Just Jewish congregations, or does our sense of *kol kehillot ha-kodesh* reach beyond those borders? Do we even begin to have language to talk about that?

*Mamlekhet Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Of course the Torah applies in the first place to the Jewish people as a whole. We only bring it down to the level of the individual and the small community. The Jewish people continues to exist through history, we believe, to bring a message of holy living and divine compassion to humanity. In many generations we have been given the rough task of doing this in the face of terrible adversity and persecution. How are we doing this year? No politics here, folks, just the question: “How are we doing?” in our priesthood of holiness and compassion this year?

So this is our day of cleaning out the *mishkan*, setting ourselves up to be better at our priestly task in the course of the coming year. Our *mishkan* is that of the heart, the one we are here to examine in the course of these twenty-five hours. But it is also the *mishkan* of our deeds, how we go about living lives in which that witness to God’s presence is to be seen. This cleaning job involves confronting and removing the obstacles that get in our way and defining the goals of *‘avodah* for ourselves, knowing whom and how we want to serve in the year to come. The Zohar describes Torah as *TaRYaG ‘Ittin*, a series of 613 counsels, pieces of advice on how to serve. Reb Zalman used to talk about the Torah as a toolbox, filled with various sorts of implements to help us do the work, both inner and outer, that we are called upon to do. Of course a toolbox is useful only if you open it and figure out how to use what’s inside in a helpful way. Or perhaps to use the old tools to help fashion new ones that will work better for you.

Perhaps we will be inspired by this year’s number. This is Yom Kippur of 5775, *tav shin ‘ayin heh*. Those letters can also make it *shnat ta’aseh*! This is the year to do it. Let’s get to work.