

KOL NIDRE APPEAL 2005

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Woody Allen once said that 80% of success is just showing up. If that is true (and who can prove that it isn't?), then tonight, each of us is more than three-quarters of the way to Atonement. But is 80% enough in life? Do we want our children to leave college with 80% of their coursework completed? Would we accept a spouse who is faithful 80% of the time? Would our nation want a president who is only 80% competent? Hmm. Are you thinking that maybe 80% would be an improvement? 80% is okay on a math test when you haven't done much studying. In the Atonement game, my guess is 80% just doesn't cut it.

So what's with the remaining 20%? Like the answers to many of life's questions, our quest begins in...**BROOKLYN!** The late great writer Bernard Malamud was a graduate of Brooklyn's famed Erasmus Hall High School, like myself. In many of Malamud's stories and novels he implies that the Jew is an everyman. In his novel *The Assistant*, an Italian American drifter and petty criminal named Frank Alpine eventually assumes the mantle of Jew. In the *Angel Levine*, the celestial Yiddish-spouting Levine is an uptown African American. And in Malamud's classic short story *The Jewbird*, a scraggly, unkempt black bird named Schwartz abruptly flies into the apartment of a terminally impatient frozen foods salesman named Cohen, his ever-tolerant wife Edie and their nice, but not too bright son Maury.

Schwartz is no feathered friend to Cohen, who takes an immediate dislike and distrust of the creature, who explains that he is a Jewbird fleeing what he calls Anti-Semeets.

"A Jewbird?," Cohen says skeptically.

"Please," Schwartz pleads, "Could you spare maybe a piece of herring with a small crust of bread?"

Despite Cohen's antagonism, Schwartz moves in, but sleeps on the terrace. Still, he makes himself part of the family, at least to Edie and Maury. Cohen, however, resents the intrusion.

"All in all you are a pest and a freeloader," Cohen tells him. "Next thing you'll want to sleep in bed next to my wife."

"Mr. Cohen," answers Schwartz, "on this rest assured. A bird is a bird."

Schwartz takes over the tutoring of Maury, whose grades begin to improve. Cohen barely tolerates him, but Maury is entranced and Edie gives the Jewbird credit for his transformation.

"If he keeps up like this," Cohen declares haughtily. "Ill get him into an Ivy League college for sure."

But Schwartz shakes his head. "He's a good boy—you don't have to worry. He won't be a shicker or a wife beater, God forbid, but a scholar he'll never be, if you know what I mean, although maybe a good mechanic. It's no disgrace in these times."

The relationship between Schwartz and Cohen deteriorates rapidly and Cohen begins a campaign against the bird by mixing watery cat food with the herring slices in Schwartz's dish. He also blows up and pops numerous paper bags as the old bird sleeps. Finally it disintegrates into violence.

One winter's day when Edie and Maury are out of the apartment, Cohen attacks the bird. He swings the squawking Schwartz until the bird grows dizzy, then with a furious heave, flings him into the snowy night. When Edie and Maury return they ask after Schwartz. Cohen describes a fierce battle, but claims the old bird attacked him first.

"Where is he now?" Edie asks, frightened.

"I threw him out and he flew away," Cohen lies. "Good riddance."

"Nobody said no," Malamud wrote, "although Edie touched a handkerchief to her eyes and Maury rapidly tried the nine times table and found he knew approximately half.

"In the spring," Malamud continued, "when the winter's snow had melted, the boy, *moved by a memory*, wandered in the neighborhood looking for Schwartz. He found a dead black bird in a small lot near the river, his two wings broken, neck twisted and both bird-eyes plucked clean.

"Who did this to you, Mr. Schwartz?" Maurie wept.

"Anti-Semeets," Edie said later."

Malamud's disarmingly simple fable addresses what in 2005 has become an even more critical question than it was a half century ago when *The Jewbird* was written. What is the responsibility of each Jew to each other Jew and of course, ultimately, each Jew to the Jewish people?

In sports terms, that translates into what is the responsibility of each player to each other player, and of course ultimately, of each player to the team.

Frank Layden, the former coach of the Utah Jazz basketball team told the story of confronting one of his underachieving, yet potential star players.

"Son," Layden said, "I don't know what's with you? Is it *ignorance* or is it *apathy*?" "Coach." The player answered, "I don't *know* and I don't *care*."

"I don't know and I don't care." Can a team or a religion survive if its players or its people at worst profess ignorance or apathy or at best, the idea that someone else will do the job anyway or that I'm too busy to do the job in the first place. Can the Jewish people live up to its potential, a "Light unto nations," or even unto itself if each Jew is Jewishly, an underachiever.

The writer Michael Cunningham said of Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, that Woolf showed that "The whole human story is contained in every day of every life, more or less the way the blueprint for an entire organism is present in every strand of its DNA."

Something similar can be said if we look at the life of a synagogue, our synagogue. Within these walls, lies the blueprint of an entire system of Jewish history and beliefs, practices and people. We celebrate life in baby namings and b'rit millah, bar and bat mitzvahs, holidays and special occasions, even funerals. We say prayers for the sick, and kaddish for the dead. We laugh and we argue. We wish "Shabbat shalom" to strangers who may some day become our friends. We learn, we daven, we praise, we confess, *and* we seek Atonement.

In our synagogue lie the faces and experiences of 5000 years of Jewish peoplehood. Look around. Take a look at the people next to you, across from you, behind you. These are the faces of *your* people, *our* people. These are the players on Team B'nai Israel. They are among the finest, kindest, most committed people I've known in my life. Come to shul, offer to help, give generously this evening so that each Jew can reach his or her Jewish potential, including each of us.

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "*That you need God* more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know *also* that God needs you."

By being here we form a community. By giving tzedakeh we *build* a community. Each of us, by our being here, is 80% to Atonement, but we're not out of the woods, yet. Tonight, each of us sees the same trees. The question is....which of us....sees the forest?