A Day Like Purim

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For a people as entranced as we are by word play, it is surprising that it took until the late middle ages for someone to notice the similarity between "Yom Kippur" and Purim,

תיקוני זוהר תקונא עשרין וחד ועשרין
פורים אתקריאת על שם יום הכפורים דעתידין לאתענגא ביה ולשנויי ליה מענוי לענ

and it wasn't until the late 19th century that someone would get around to making the pun

ר' צדוק הכהן מלובלין - פרי צדיק שמות פורים
ואיתא בתיקוני זוהר (תיקון כ"א) פורים אתקריאת על שם יום הכפורים דעתידין לאתענגא ביה וכו' וכן אומרים בשם הרבנים הקדושים זללה"ה ***דפורים בחינת יום הכפורים ונקרא יום כפורים היינו כמו פורים*** ובאמת נרמז בתיקוני זוהר כנ"ל. וכמו ביום הכפורים עיצומו של יום מכפר כן ימי הפורים עיצומו של יום עושה מחיית עמלק

That "Yom Kippurim" is "Yom k'Purim" – a day like Purim.

Though maybe it's not that surprising after all; it's hard to imagine two less similar holidays. We are – or so the liturgy tells us, engaged in a matter of life and death, facing the many, many, many things we've done wrong and the urgent need to fix what we've broken. It is the day when we are told that *things matter very much.*

Purim, on the other hand, is a time of play, a day when practically *nothing matters*: we party, we dress up, we give free rein to our most impious urges in what can be viciously funny purim shpiels.

The imaginative play isn't just the icing, it's integral to the idea of Purim, because it is the subversive power of the imagination, as satire, as mockery which allows is truly revolutionary. For whatever real power tyrants and oppressive systems may have, it is built on the myth that they matter: that they are indeed powerful, and that power is, if not deserved, real and entrenched. That's why bullies and dictators hate satire and mockery, because it reminds them that they are not in control over the imagination, and so it threatens tyrants; it threatens established systems: Purim is the festival of *nothing has to be.*

If Purim cleans the slate, Yom Kippur is a time in which we prepare rebuild, to make things better, to mend what we've broken. And here's the thing: the imagination is central to this as well.

First of all, if we want to be agents for good in the world, to act effectively, or to judge actions wisely, we have to be able to look at the consequences of actions – who's involved, who's implicated, where the ripples might be. This is what I think is meant by Rabbi Shimon's answer when asked for the most important virtue: "ha-roeh et hanolad", which is usually translated as "foresight" but which really means "to see that which is aborning" : not prophecy, but to have the imagination to see the world as pregnant with possibilities.

Second, in order to understand the import of those possibilities, one must understand what they means to *people,* and that requires empathy. But as anyone who's tried to anticipate what another will like or not like knows, you can't ever really get into the head of an other, precisely because people are so radically other. Empathy, too, is an act of the imagination.

But, as we've been reminding ourselves all day, we haven't been doing that work, not the fixing and not the empathizing. We know that, and yet we don't change. What stops us? For me, and perhaps for you, it's largely the belief that I can't. We feel ourselves stuck, bound with the bonds of habit and guilt and – especially as we get older – a kind of moral despair. In order to do teshuvah, we must be able to – yes – imagine ourselves as different, as better.

Yom Kippur is a "day like Purim" because so much of its work depends on the imagination. And, as with Purim, the imagination becomes a central part of the observance. Today, we too have a "shpiel" – the Avodah service, where we imagine ourselves in a different place, a different time, as different people. And, over and over and over again, the liturgy invites to imagine ourselves as forgivable.

But that's not just Yom Kippur, and not just Purim where the imagination is such a central part of the practice:

- On Pesach, we are famously told that we each have to imagine ourselves as having made the passage from slavery to freedom
- On Shabbat, the idea of "prohibited activities" provides an opportunity in which to imagine the world as good, as good enough that we don't need to change it.
- The blessings we might say on food, or actions, or experiences suggest that imagine the event as an extension of the Infinite into the world
- And when we pray, those words we didn't write and don't feel and don't believe, are a framework in which we can imagine ourselves as spiritually mature.

Here's the punch line: Judaism not a practice of faith but a practice of the imagination, in which we're invited to be imaginative and even playful, because it's in that playful mind and heart that we can explore possibilities; it's the imagination, I'm here to tell you, that is the central religious faculty. On Yom Kippur, the day like Purim, we begin to focus that faculty. To bring it to our view of the world, of others, of ourselves – so that we can move away from these "playing fields of the Lord" and out of the shul: caring for others, caring for ourselves, seeing the fruit of our imagination blossom, and finding the joy of play in the joy of a rebuilt world.