"Have it *yourrrrr* way! Have it your way!"

I'm not proud of it, but sometimes I indulge in some real bottom-feeder nostalgia. I go to YouTube and watch — on purpose — videos of old commercials from my childhood. They have all the elements you'd expect. Outrageous hairdos, cheesy music, incessant, relentless earnestness.

How do those Doublemint people simultaneously chew gum and smile so widely, and *so often*? If someone gushes over boxed rice and calls it *the* San Francisco treat, that's a sure-fire way to know someone has never been to San Francisco. The wild paroxysms of ecstasy experienced when one learns that *when pizza's on a bagel, you can eat pizza anytime*!

A, I already felt fully within my rights to eat pizza anytime. B, a pizza bagel is *not* pizza. And C, how dare you call that frozen processed monstrosity a bagel?

Talk about a *hate crime*. Haven't the Jews suffered enough?

Watching those commercials throws into high relief just how much flattery goes into marketing.

If you have nothing else to do, go look at that old "Have it your way!" burger commercial.

In the ad, a WASPy nuclear family asks for some modifications to their order. Behind the counter, a woman wearing what looks like a multicolored ottoman on her head sings, in demented euphoria, "Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us."

Despite working for minimum wage and going home every night smelling like a grease trap, this woman positively *lives* to get *your* burger order right.

"ANY WAY YOU THINK IS PROPER, HAVE IT YOUR WAY."

Any way?

Walking away from the counter the man remarks in an undertone to his TV wife, "Now that's the way to do things — OUR way."

Watching him, I wondered: my man, why the low voice? Shout it out! *Things are finally being done our way!* The woman behind the counter would *surely* be transported to the outer orbits of her bliss knowing of his deep satisfaction. And hell, let everyone know:

Things are being done our way! And isn't it about time??

Having been exposed to this so intensively and so often, is it any wonder we Gen Xers are so messed up?

These commercials tell me that I — *individually* — am the most important person in the world. The motto is *the customer is always right*. I demand service, and not *just* service. Service with a *smile*.

Of course, demand that you get your way often enough? Chances are you'll end up eating alone.

Turn *off* the TV — or the personalized ads on your social media feed — and we confront a world of *competing* needs, *conflicting* interests. The person into whose eyes you look may *not* in fact find it intoxicating to comply with your every wish.

Shockingly, they may not want to comply *at all*.

Marketers like whoever made that old burger ad know this, and they flatter us by saying, sure the world demands compromise *out there*, but *not in here*.

Don't you deserve to get everything you want?

And in our real lives, you find people who don't want to hold the lettuce, ladies who really love lettuce. You might even live with a guy who likes *extra* lettuce.

And, *gott in himmel*, frozen "pizza bagels."

But this "have it your way" mindset has infiltrated almost every aspect of our lives — with depressing consequences. People persist in drawing their circles of inclusion smaller and smaller. Political movements and nonprofits, friend groups and families, often splinter when people demand ideological purity. *I can't vote for her, I can't work with him, I can't visit them. Do you know what they said?*

You want me to sit with that person?

If you yourself feel that way, I have some bad news for you. The Kol Nidre service says you *will* sit with that person. Whether you like it or not.

These are the last words we say before Kol Nidre itself:

Anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim — "We allow it! To pray with sinners!"

We already said it. You already clicked *yes* on the user agreement. If you didn't catch that — Sorry!

The origins of this *anu matirin* line are murky. Who exactly were these *avaryanim*, these sinners? Were they heretics? Informers, Jews who had told the gentile authorities where to find other Jews, exposing the community to persecution?

According to one theory, *avaryanim* sounds a lot like the English word "Iberian" — perhaps a reference to 15th century Spanish and Portuguese Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, who had to publicly denounce their Jewishness, lest they be put to death, as in the Inquisition.

Whoever we used to think of as sinners, whoever we think of today as sinners, we're invited to look past their sins. *At least* for today.

Anu matirim. We allow them to stay in relationship with us.

But here's the fun part. The prayer is vague. You can read into it whoever you want! The people *I* think are the misguided ones, the wayward ones, the sinners, the *avaryanim*? There's a decent chance that they think the same about me. When people we think are *totally* wrong read that *anu matirim* prayer, they're most likely thinking the same thing about US.

Whatever US we think we're a part of.

Yehuda Kurtzer, the head of the Shalom Hartman institute, looks at this text and notes that Jews don't tend to call each other sinners so much these days. Instead, he says, they usually point to the people they think are wrong and say, "They're an existential threat!"

"*Nah*," he says, "they're probably not." Despite our arguments, Jewish community continues. We keep studying, praying, marching. In all kinds of shuls, for Jews with no shul, in Israel, in the diaspora — life goes on.

Calling a group of people an "existential threat," Kurtzer says — well, it's easier than saying. "I just hate them."

Or, probably more accurately, "being in their presence — I feel tainted by them."

And that's real. We don't do anyone any favors by pretending *not* to feel what we feel.

But that ship has sailed. We already gave permission to pray with people we disagree with. And we're all already here.

So as long as we're here, we might as well ask: how do we *stay* here? How do we live with decisions that DO upset us, the people whose opinions we really do feel taint us?

Let's start with the prayer itself. The text of Kol Nidre digs into the human reaction to difference, though I think it does so in a subtle way. It's essentially a declaration before a court.

Uh, Your Honor, we took some vows, they didn't work out. Please give us probation rather than punishment.

The early Reform rabbis didn't like that, rejected Kol Nidre as insufficiently spiritual, too legalistic. The people had other ideas, demanded that it be brought back.

And, truth be told, Jews often express our spirituality *best* in our laws. Since we're talking about a court, consider our laws about courts. The Torah teaches that you can't convict a suspect based on the testimony of just one witness.[1] For a charge to stick, you need at least *two* witnesses to independently say that they saw the *same thing*.

Makes sense — you don't want to base a decision on one person — who's maybe made a mistake, or is holding a grudge, or is biased in some way.

[1] Deuteronomy 19:15

In Talmud, the rabbis expand this regulation. The two witnesses, they teach, can't be related to the litigants — or, for that matter, to each other.[2] This also makes sense — you don't want family drama to affect a court of law.

If a Jewish court can't convict a person unless there's two witnesses who agree, think about what that means for community. If I'm upset with someone for something, could I get two people to agree that what that person is guilty of is *exactly* what I say it is?

Maybe two people.

Could you really get two JEWS to exactly agree with your version of events?

In the world of criminal justice, "eyewitnesses make mistakes," reports Salk Institute neuroscientist Thomas Albright, "often with serious consequences."[3] In moments of uncertainty, our brain's mechanism for keeping us safe sometimes "fill[s] in the blanks with the wrong information…. The coat rack may be experienced as an intruder in the hall," Albright continues, "the shrubbery is mistaken for a police car, or the woman at the rendezvous point is wrongly identified as a friend."

As in the criminal justice system, so too in our relationships. In deciding who's the good guy and the bad guy, we're just as susceptible to bias.

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[2] Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 3:4
[3] Albright, "Why eyewitnesses fail," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* July 25, 2017, 114:30

After a disagreement or angry-making interaction, we recreate the sequence of events in our minds, inserting details into the narrative. And — more importantly — sometimes motives.

What usually *doesn't* occur to us is maybe we got some details wrong. Maybe the slight wasn't because of what I think it was? Maybe the person is reacting to something in their past, that has nothing to do with me. Maybe I'm nursing the conflict cuz it feels good to be right, or feels right to be good. Maybe I'm just the guy in the burger commercial. "The way to do things is OUR way."

Or maybe *nobody* was there to be a witness, because nothing actually happened, and I'm angry based on unfounded assumptions I made about the other person.

Maybe the other person, or group of people, is just as upset as I am.

Maybe we're just people, who look at the world, and feel hurt.

And maybe, instead of walking away — because we *didn't* get our way — we stay. We ask questions.

Instead of condemning the worst, we assume the best.

There's a phrase in Talmud for this. Like the idea of *machloket l'Shem Shamayim* that I talked about on Rosh HaShanah, argument for a higher purpose, it comes from *Pirkei Avot*, "The Sayings of the Ancestors." Joshua ben Perachya taught, *dan et kol ha-adam l'chaf zechut*. "Judge every person on a scale weighted toward merit."[4]

[4] *Pirkei Avot* 1:6

As we'd say today, "assume good intentions."

Notice a couple of things about this idea of *dan l'chaf zechut*, assuming good intentions. First, Joshua teaches us to judge *every* person this way. Not every Jew. Not every Reconstructionist. Not every person in the DSA, or every person who *condemns* the DSA.

Every human being.

And second, note the word *dan*. "Judge." It's not just in a civil court or a heavenly court where we find a judge. Each one of us, every day, is a judge.

And whether we judge people harshly, or compassionately? That's up to us.

When we encounter people who we think have chosen wrong — even *very* wrong, terribly and awfully wrong — can we have compassion for their choices? Assume that *they* think it's a good choice? Even if we vehemently disagree?

The founder of modern Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, is quoted as saying how important this mitzvah of judging other people favorably it is. It comes, he taught, out of our obligation to love each other. After all, he said, "you always find excuses for your *own* misdeeds — make excuses for your fellow person!"[5]

Think about a person you can't stand. That really bothers you. Got 'em?

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[5] *Derech Emunah U'Ma'aseh Rav*, Warsaw, 1898, p.59

Now, think about a good quality they have.

(It's annoying, isn't it? I'm sorry. Sorry not sorry.)

You know the pomegranate is a Jewish symbol, yeah? There's another Talmudic teaching that asserts that even the "emptiest" Jew possible is still "full of mitzvot like a pomegranate."[6]

And I'd add, *every person*. All of us.

We're all full of mitzvahs. And we're all full of… something else.

We're all *mentshes*. And, we're all *avaryanim*.

Not "sinners in the eyes of God," like in Evangelical Christianity. But worse — sinners in the eyes of the lady sitting next to us!

And tonight, we all give ourselves permission to sit together, and do Yom Kippur together. We enter, and fulfill, this religious experience, together.

In the *Vidui*, the confession, we say ashamNU, BagadNU, gazalNU. *We* have sinned, *we* have been blind to goodness, *we* have corrupted the best in us. There's no "I" in *ashamnu*.

Which leads to an even *more* surprising teaching, a *more* radical idea, elsewhere in Talmud. In tractate *Kritot*, we learn: "Any fast day which does not include everyone — even the sinners of Israel — is not considered a fast day."[7]

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[6] *Megillah* 6a
[7] *Kritot* 6a

Meaning that our fast isn't really a fast, our Yom Kippur really isn't Yom Kippur, unless we're all here.

We say *we*, meaning *all of us*. Meaning this whole thing really doesn't work unless we do it together.

How can I say *we* if I'm all alone?

And if we can't be alone, that means we have to find each other.

That might mean finding our friends, and addressing the bad. And that might mean finding our adversaries, and recognizing the good.

And recognizing that, over time, who's in which category can change.

I talked on Rosh HaShanah about the Talmudic tradition of debate, the freewheeling arguments in which Jews work out our ethics and values. There are no permanent winners and losers in Talmud. Talmudic argument attests to the fluidity in our categories of good and bad — quite possibly the first "yes and" text in human history.

I have a friend named Julian, who absolutely loves live performance — music, dance, especially theater. Living in New York with so many choices on so many nights, he's sometimes forced to rush from one performance to another. In his words, "Given the choice between A & B, my answer is 'both.'"

In any Talmudic argument, you'll frequently find the rabbis employ the same logic.

Should a mezuzah be affixed upright or sideways? Both. *Why not make it diagonal?*

Does Judaism believe God is a tough God of strict justice, or a warm, fuzzy, loving and forgiving God? Both. You'll find High Holy Day prayers in the book in your lap that refer to both.

Does Judaism prioritize the welfare of the Jewish people or the welfare of all of humanity? Yes.

Both.

Arguments shift and change. Viewpoints evolve. People change. Our thoughts are not permanent. I would hate to be forever judged on everything I believed when I was 18.

We live, we try things out. God willing, we grow. Things are rarely simple.

Let's say it out loud: It's hard being a person. We're surrounded by craziness and complication. In the words of Henry, my bar mitzvah student: "It's a dark world out there."

We ask ourselves: how can I *live* in this broken world? Rest assured: the person next to you is asking the same question.

That's why we come here. To make *teshuvah* means to entertain other voices — in other people, and in ourselves. To have compassion. For the prickly pomegranate that's nonetheless full of mitzvahs. For the annoying guy who wants extra lettuce.

I'm being playful here, but it needs to be said that the compassion I'm talking about is not a compassion that excuses abuse. That is never acceptable.

It's not even compassion that excuses bad behavior. It's not really compassion for the sake of making excuses *at all*. It's a compassion that honors the rage and fury and sorrow this world has put in me — but still insists on seeing the humanity that God has put in you.

You can have compassion for a soul, even as you are repulsed by their actions. In fact, I can have compassion for the soul next to me that repulses me, and for the soul that repulses me *that's inside me*!

Know that both those souls can change, and just might, with love and support.

It's compassion that rejects the forces that would divide us — as Jews and as human beings — forces that take advantage of our anger to pit us against each other, forces that leave us more anxious and less connected, more vulnerable and more isolated and less safe.

People come to Dor Hadash because they *value* a community of nuance. Because they *appreciate* a community that heals what's broken**.** Because they *align* with a community that looks out there, and asks who can be brought in here. Because they believe there are things that motivate a person *besides* self-interest. Because they feel *blessed* by a community that honors all people as *b'Tzelem Elohim*.

Because they know ***We*** is always stronger than ***I***.

Even if we disagree on the fine points, that's a mission worth sustaining and uplifting.

I promise you — you cannot do any part of that mission by yourself, not nearly as well or for as long as we can do it together, here, in community.

In 5787, let's *build and rebuild* that community together, a community that doesn't cut down who it hates, but raises up what it loves.

A community that honors all the people, the good and the bad, the righteous and the *avaryanim*, knowing we probably disagree on who's who.

Knowing that we have both within us at all times.

Even if we don't always "have it our way."

And even if you think — God help you — a pizza bagel is really pizza.

G'mar chatimah tovah.

May we all be sealed for a sweet year.

Together as one.