

Yom Kippur – 5768 – Kol Nidrei Drush – “Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?”

By Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Little Tommy (who was Jewish) was doing very badly in math. His parents had tried everything: tutors, mentors, flash cards, and special learning centres, everything they could think of. Finally, in a last ditch effort, they took Tommy down and enrolled him in the local Catholic school.

After the first day, little Tommy came home with a very serious look on his face. He didn't even kiss his mother hello. Instead, he went straight to his room and started studying. Books and papers were spread out all over the room and little Tommy was hard at work. His mother was amazed. She called him down to dinner and to her shock, the minute he was done he marched back to his room without a word and in no time he was back hitting the books as hard as before.

This went on for some time, day after day, while the mother tried to understand what made all the difference. Finally, little Tommy brought home his report card. He quietly laid it on the table and went up to his room and hit the books. With great trepidation, his Mom looked at it and to her surprise, little Tommy got an A in math. She could no longer hold her curiosity.

She went to his room and said: "Son, WHAT was it???? Was it the nuns???"

Little Tommy looked at her and shook his head.

"Well, then", she replied, "Was it the books, the discipline, the structure, the uniforms???? WHAT WAS IT ?????"

Little Tommy looked at her and said, "Well, on the first day of school, when I saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew they weren't fooling around."

Last August, the Catholic world saw a very unusual sight when a sacred Jewish prayer read beneath the sculpted saints of Notre Dame Cathedral, opened funeral proceedings for Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, archbishop of Paris. This was Lustiger's grandnephew reading Psalm 113 in Hebrew and French, and placing a bowl of earth gathered from meaningful Jewish and Christian sites in the Holy Land. Stranger yet, an 83-year-old Nazi death camp survivor and cousin of the cardinal, Arno Lustiger, then led the reading of the Mourner's Kaddish, among a series of prayers central to Jewish worship. "To say Kaddish was one of the last wishes of my cousin," Arno Lustiger, said. This was the man who, if not for his advanced aged, would have replaced the last Pope who died! What is the story here?

It seems that Cardinal Lustiger, rather, Aaron Lustiger was born in 1926, on Yom Kippur, in Paris, to Polish immigrant parents, who had started selling goods from a street stall before prospering and taking French citizenship. The family spoke French at home, but the parents spoke Yiddish if they did not wish their children to understand. As an adolescent, he was sent to the town of Orleans, 80 miles south of the capital, to take refuge from the occupying Nazis. There, Lustiger converted to Catholicism at the age of 14, taking the name Jean-Marie.

After the war, Lustiger's father, assisted by the Chief Rabbi of Paris, tried to get his son's baptism annulled on the ground that Aaron had converted for empirical reasons, an argument that Jean-Marie strongly denied.

He was ordained a priest in 1954, and served as chaplain to students at the Sorbonne University. Lustiger climbed up the church hierarchy before becoming archbishop of Paris, a post he held for 24 years before stepping down in 2005.

But with the pope's death that year, the cardinal was frequently mentioned as a potential successor. He countered such speculation with characteristic humour. Asked by a Jewish friend over dinner whether he thought he might become pope, the cardinal responded in French-accented Yiddish, "Fon Dine Mole Tzu Guts Eir" - "From your mouth to God's ear."

Charles Lustiger, who had watched his son's progress without great enthusiasm, died in 1980 one year after Jean-Marie was made Bishop of Orleans by Pope John-Paul II. At the time, Archbishop Lustiger asked a cousin to say the Kaddish over his father's grave in the cemetery of Montparnasse, although the funeral service had to be cut short because of a bomb warning.

However, as a former chief rabbi of France recounted to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, ***the nation's ranking Catholic was often found at the City of Light's main synagogue saying Kaddish for his mother, Gisele, who lost her life in Auschwitz.***

He once declared: "I was born Jewish and so I remain, even if that's unacceptable for many. For me, the vocation of Israel is bringing light to the goyim. That's my hope and I believe that Christianity is the means for achieving it."

"For me, it was never for an instant a question of denying my Jewish identity. On the contrary," he said in "Le Choix de Dieu" (The Choice of God), conversations published in 1987.

Before his death, Lustiger asked that a commemorative plaque be placed inside Notre Dame reading: "I was born Jewish. I received my paternal grandfather's name, Aron, I became Christian by faith and baptism, and I remained Jewish like the Apostles did."

There were a great number of rabbi's who consider his conversion a betrayal; especially after so many European Jews had so narrowly escaped extinction. Cardinal Lustiger replied, "To say that I am no longer a Jew is like denying my father and mother, my grandfathers and grandmothers. I am as Jewish as all other members of my family that were butchered in Auschwitz and other camps."

This story would really be very funny if it weren't so true, and if it was not about an obviously otherwise brilliant Jew. That a child holocaust survivor stubbornly clings onto his native religion, even though the very act of baptism rejects his Jewish religion. And of all things to want – is that Kaddish!

The saying of Kaddish was instituted long ago. The idea behind saying Kaddish is that every Jew has the responsibility to conduct his/her life in such a way that will ever be a glory to God, as G-d has instructed us. Inevitably, throughout our lives we all do things that fall somewhat short of that goal, and these misdeeds detract from that glory.

Part of the power of the Kaddish lies in the fact that it is always recited in the presence of a congregation of at least ten adults (a *minyan*), thereby ensuring that the declarations contained in the prayer are made in public. Each time a mourner recites Kaddish, which provokes the congregation to respond with the words *Yehey sh'mey raba mevorach le'olam u'le'olmey olmaya* - May His illustrious

name be blessed always and forever - the negative effect of any misdeed is counteracted, and the soul of the departed is elevated to ever-higher celestial realms. The message of the Kaddish is that we yearn for the day when the Moshiach will come, and G-d's truth, as He explained it to the Jews, will be revealed to the entire world, thereby bringing the ultimate Tikun Olam.

What can be more ridiculous than a person saying Kaddish in order to sanctify G-d's name, when his very essence, being, and modus operandi is in total contradiction to sanctifying G-d's name? We aren't just talking about a sinner – but one who has rejected Judaism and the concept of the Jewish G-d!

This hypocritical behaviour and obtuse logic are so extreme that even the Conservative movement took note of this as Rabbi Joel Roth, an expert on Jewish law at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, acknowledged that it is "highly unusual" for the Mourner's Kaddish to be read among mourners for a convert from Judaism ***"It's important to emphasize that it's not possible to be both Jewish and Catholic,"*** he said. "That is what this could suggest to some people." R' Aharon wanted to have his cake and eat it too.

It is not our place here to judge R' Aharon – that is left for the Almighty. But we need to see how such a thing can happen! As I pursued this story further, I began to understand how a person could live such a life. In his biography it says: ***"Although the children's grandfather had been a Rabbi, they were given no religious instruction and had a secular upbringing."***

That is one of the critical keys – ignorance. G-d brought us into this world in order to make the correct free will choices in life – but how can a person do that if he is ignorant? If you are not raised with a Shabbos, with a Shema, with a Jewish understanding of what G-d really is, 13 principles of Jewish belief, with the Creator's understanding between right and wrong, what is man's purpose in life – as G-d ordains it – then how can we expect you to make an informed choice?

It reminds me of the teacher who once asked a highly intelligent but rebellious student: "Bob, what's the difference between ignorance and indifference?" He shrugged and said, "I don't know and I don't care!"

It is amazing how I meet people who are older in life, and have made their major decisions in life, and regret many of the mistakes they made which led to failed marriages, poor relationships with family, loneliness, children marrying out, etc. They come to our Shul and Learning Centre, and start to learn Torah. They learn amazing concepts about G-d, what Shabbos really is, what relationships are all about, and then bemoan: 'How come my Rabbi never taught me that!' Maybe the Rabbi never taught them that or maybe they did not attend the Rabbi's sermons and classes – who knows? But all the heartache and mistakes could have been avoided had he/she received a proper Jewish education to begin with.

The Jewish people have traditionally been known as the people of the book – and that is what has kept us going on a relatively stable course. However, in this generation of so many seductive alternatives to Jewish wisdom, Jewish illiteracy is reaching alarming levels – even among the practicing so called religious Jews, who appear externally to be observant. How many children do not receive a Jewish education at all – or at best one of Talmud Torture?

That reminds me of the time when Johnny Carson once asked Yogi Berra how he liked school, and Berra replied, "Closed!"

How many children get a Jewish education, but it is not followed up seriously on a post secondary level? It is astounding! What parent would be satisfied with a child's high school diploma in terms of future opportunity for employment that can bring financial stability? Very few! Yet the same parents, who have invested 12 years of Jewish schooling at a cost of over \$150,000 per child, are satisfied that they go through the rest of their lives as spiritual adolescents – never maturing to a sophisticated understanding of what Judaism – and for that matter – what life is really all about? At age 17, or 13 for that matter, when the mind is finally ready to absorb mature wisdom – the adolescent is focused on one thing and one thing alone – how to make money. And their Judaism is a nice feather in his cap or a cherry on top of the cake of life! How many adults do not make time in their schedules to learn more about their Judaism on an adult level, and are satisfied with their childish notions of what Judaism is all about? They may know some of the traditions, but don't know why we do them and why they are so vital for our true happiness and fulfillment in life?

As Vernon Law used to say, "When you're through learning, you're through."

This crisis was so dramatically shown with the following: Maybe you've heard of Jaywalking, wherein late-night talk show host Jay Leno takes to the streets to find out how much people know (or don't know) about their own history or culture. But imagine taking to the streets of a densely Jewish neighbourhood—let's say the Upper West Side—and camping out in front of the JCC and Zabar's trying to find out what New York's Jews and Judeophiles know about Judaism...Thanks to the National Jewish Outreach Program and New York-based writer/funny person Simmy Kay, you don't have to imagine it anymore.

Simmy Kay asked adult Jews some fundamental questions about Judaism, and found out that:

1. More Jews know the name of the mother of Jesus than the mother of Moshe.
2. More Jews know the niggun (tune) to "Deck the halls with holly" than "Maoz Tzur."
3. More Jews know the Lord's Prayer than Shema Yisroel.
4. On average, Jews only know of 4 of the 10 commandments.
5. Not much different with the ten plagues – and for some reason many of them think that one of them was a flood!
6. That many think that Passover is a holiday in the spring and Pesach comes every Friday night.
7. More Jews know how many letters are in the English letter, but not in the Hebrew Alphabet.
8. More Jews know what "organic" means, but not what "kosher" really means.
9. More Jews know what Hava Negila is, but not what Hagbah & Gelila means.
10. Most Jews know who Brad Pitt's wife is, but not who Isaac's wife was.
11. Most Jews know what LOL means, but not what Elul means.
12. Most Jews don't really know why we don't eat on Yom Kippur.

Ok – those are the real ignorant ones. What about us?

1. How many of us really feel and experience the rapture of prayer?
2. How many of us can even relate to the concept that Shabbos is more pleasurable than anything else? That it is not a day of repression – but one of total freedom.

3. How many of us know what Loshon Hora is, and that your life is so petty if you are always involved in it?
4. How many of us can logically explain to our children why they should not intermarry?
5. How many of us can resolve a good G-d with a world of so much suffering?
6. How many of us know G-d's definition of a good person?
7. How many of us can explain what the purpose of life is to our children.
8. How many of us can honestly say we are an ideal role model for our children?

I can go on and on and on – but the point is clear – the Jewish people, as a whole, are suffering from one of the greatest Jewish intellectual droughts in our history!

There is a popular TV show called “Are you smarter than a fifth grader?” It is so popular because it shows you how little adults remember from their schooling. I think it proves that you can be successful in life without knowing how many feet are in a yard. This is not the case about Jewish knowledge. Jewish knowledge, beyond the facts and figures, that maybe we could live without, but we can not live without the instructions for living, which are so critical to having lives filled with meaning and purpose. What if we had a Jewish version of the show? How would we fare?

Today is Yom Kippur. What happened on this day 3,330 years ago today? Moshe came down with the second tablets of the Torah and we were forgiven for the Sin of the golden calf. We see that forgiveness and Torah go hand in hand. G-d can forgive any mistake we make provided that we are committed to correct those errors through a commitment to understanding what life is all about – what our relationship with G-d is all about – that is Torah – That is Yom Kippur. Today we are seeking G-d's forgiveness for all our errors. G-d is ready and willing to forgive, as long as we are prepared to make a commitment to learn from our mistakes of ignorance and apathy. That change begins with a commitment to mature, adult torah study, and a commitment to our children's torah study. The fact is that the Torah is not just an interesting book – it is G-d's definition of life itself and how one should live it in a productive fashion.

So where do we start? There are so many choices;

- Our Shul and Learning Centre offers so many torah classes every day of the week at different times.
- Hundreds of our classes are online.
- We can set you up with learning partners who can learn with you 1 on 1
- Call me and I will be happy to recommend a course of study. As the old commercial used to say – “Try it, you'll like it!”
- Keep your kids in school as long as you can.
- If you are knowledgeable in Torah, share it with others.
- ***Vote in the upcoming provincial election for the party that will make private Jewish schooling affordable for all Jewish families.***

As Confucius say: “If your plan is for a year, plant rice. If your plan is for a decade, plant trees. If your plan is for a lifetime, educate children.”

Let me close with another story about Kaddish.

Reb Chatzkel had not been feeling well for a while. It seemed his chest pains were more than just that. Walking up and down the stairs left him short of breath. Following the urging of his wife, he decided to take a complete physical – blood work, x-rays, and all. It had been three years since his last one and back then Dr. Weiner had pronounced him as healthy a 65-year –old as he had ever seen. So he expected nothing different this time around. However, this time things did not go so smoothly.

“I’m afraid that we have a small problem,” Dr. Weiner announced, holding up one of the chest x-rays to the light. “We’re going to have to perform surgery immediately. You’re going to need a triple bypass. It’s a good thing you came in now because in another week or so I don’t know if you would have been able to walk in on your own two legs.”

Chatzkel could not believe what he was hearing, His wife stood close by, wondering just how serious it was. The doctor had seemed terribly concerned. She walked out into the hallway and called her three sons, Yankel, Yisroel, and Reuven, or Robert as he was now known.

The Morgenstern’s had raised three wonderful sons – loving, respectful, and caring. Yankel and Yisroel’s families were involved in every aspect of the community’s needs and their children were well-respected, fine members of their communities. However, Robert, now a successful businessman, had chosen as a teenager not to be religious. He lived far away, in Phoenix, Arizona. It had been over ten years since he had kept Shabbos and this had caused his parents a great deal of aggravation and pain.

The three boys came as quickly as they could; Robert had taken the first flight out. Within several hours they stood around their father’s bedside hoping they had not spoken to him for the last time. Unfortunately, the surgery had not gone as well as been expected. Chatzkel’s chest pains had increased and his breathing was more laborious than ever. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and called his three sons closer.

One by one he gave over his responsibilities to his children, appointing Yankel to assume the position of Shul Gabbai and Yisroel as interim president of the Yeshiva. Ignoring their pleas to stop, Chatzkel sensed that his end was near.

“And Reuven, I have a special favour to ask you,” Chatzkel spoke slowly, short on breath.

“Anything, Father. Anything. Whatever you ask me to do, I promise to do it.” Robert begged his father to entrust him with a mission as he had done for his two brothers.

“But you have to promise me” – Chatzkel’s weak hands reached out for his son’s. “I do, father, I do,” Robert reached out, sensing it was his last time he would be able to hold his father’s hands. His heart was pounding, and he stared intensely into his father’s sad, old eyes.

“Reuven, promise me that after I die...” “Yes, Father. Speak. Anything. I promise.”

“Promise me that after I die, until you mend your ways, you...won’t...say...Kaddish...for...me.”

For a moment, Robert could not move or speak. He stared at the father he loved so dearly, at once pained for himself and for the elderly man. There was nothing he could say but – “I...I...promise.”

Silence. Shock and sadness permeated the room. They had all heard their father's last requests, and had witnessed him taking his last breath.

The Chevra Kadisha was called and arrangements were made for the funeral to take place early the next morning. The boys stood with their mother, hugged her and each other, and turned to go home to their families. Robert had barely said a word. He had hugged his mother but felt, in many ways, inconsolable.

He took time to ponder his father's request; never once, since he had given up being an observant Jew, had he considered that he would not be able to say Kaddish for his father. He knew that his parents were displeased with his life choice, but they had always been so loving, so caring about him. With this one, final request, his father had declared a judgment on Robert and made it clear – you may not participate in this final mitzvah to honour me until your life changes. Robert was truly stunned, shocked, and – finally – angry.

It was his right, he felt, to say Kaddish for his father, and no one could take that away from him. Religion aside, he had always been respectful toward his parents. His lack of performance in regard to Torah was his own personal decision, not an outgrowth of hatred he had towards his parents. And if he chose now to observe the custom of Kaddish then he should be allowed to do so.

All of the arguments swirled inside his head, but he kept coming back to that moment that would forever be etched in his memory – his father's intense stare, his cold but firm hands and his strong words. A promise was a promise and Robert knew he had to keep his word. He felt utterly confused and lost, but he had no choice.

The next day, eulogies were given by many of the respected members of the community. All the brothers sat next to each other but Robert could not have felt further removed from his family. Finally the eulogies came to a close and the procession proceeded to the cemetery where Chatzkel was buried in a plot he had recently purchased, a few rows in front of his mother.

It was a bitter cold day and the gusting wind cut into their faces, freezing their tears against their cheeks. After the final shovelful of earth was thrown onto Chatzkel's grave the Rabbi motioned to the brothers to say Kaddish. Yankel and Yisroel stood next to each other and slowly began to recite, "Yisgadel Veyiskadesh Shemai Raba."

The words sliced through Robert's heart and for the first time he broke down, crying uncontrollably. His heart longed to join with his brothers and speak the words that had been designated millennia before as a comfort to one's soul.

"Pleas, Father, how could you have done this to me?" Robert thought as, together with his mother, he watched his brothers finish the Kaddish. The friends and family watching wondered why Robert did not say Kaddish for his father, and Robert could almost feel their stares and hear their whispers.

All through the Shiva the scene repeated itself again and again. The brothers would recite the Kaddish and Robert would quietly watch and answer together with the rest of the minyan.

Shiva finally ended. Robert bid farewell to his mother and brothers and returned to Phoenix to resume his life. The colleagues in his law firm noticed that he was acting differently than before and

understandably attributed it to the loss of his father. However, Robert could accomplish very little at work or at home. And although he did miss his father, that was not the main reason for his pain.

His insides twisted and turned. His wife tried to console him but nothing seemed to help. His lack of sleep was beginning to affect his health and so he decided to take a few days off of work. His partners would surely understand.

That afternoon, his wife came home and found Robert crying softly on the couch. She sat down next to him and tried to comfort him. Suddenly, he turned to her, his face contorted with grief, and cried out, "I can't take it anymore! I have to say Kaddish for my father! Everything feels wrong now!" He turned to his wife and looked into her kind, understanding eyes, declaring, "If this means that we have to change the way we live – then so be it." His wife saw the fire in his eyes, and felt the pain in his soul; she knew at that moment that their lives were about to change.

Robert, or Reuven, as he was now called, and his wife returned for his father's Yahrzeit and together with his brothers made a Siyum [a celebration of learning Torah] in memory of his father. As the last piece of Talmud was read aloud, the closing words on conclusion were recited and together with his brothers Reuven declared in a strong clear voice, "Yisgadel Veyiskadesh Shemai Raba!"

Ladies and gentlemen, Aharon Lustiger could live a life full of contradictions; but Reuven could not. What Hitler could not destroy, Western culture is destroying. Some people have more clever parents than others. The choice is ours – but before we choose, maybe we should try learning some Torah next year, and make an informed decision!

May G-d bless us all with the courage to learn, grow, and make informed decisions.