

Who am I?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Our task on Yom Kipur is to spend time thinking about where we stand in this world. Who are we? What are we? Every year we should go through this cathartic experience. This painful process of self-examination. In my case, it is all the more necessary and painful, because I really am a crazy, mixed-up kid. I live in two cultures: Jewish and non-Jewish. Within Judaism I exist in my own cocoon, part conformist and part anti-establishment. I can recognize the need for authority, and I rebel against it. I am a rootless cosmopolitan and proud of it. Yet I am passionate about my homeland, for all its problems. Of course, I reflect on this a lot of the time. But somehow Yom Kipur gives it an added urgency and time without distractions.

I had a modest but privileged and isolated upbringing. My father received what we would call a Haredi yeshiva education and lived an Orthodox life. He became the Principal Rav of the Federation of Synagogues in the UK, which was to the right of the mainstream Orthodox United Synagogue. But he was also brought up in the Fabian political climate between the two World Wars, which gave him an anti-establishment, intellectually curious, socialist outlook on life. He was charismatic, an outstanding orator, had a great sense of humor and wit, and a love for sports, art, and music.

He left the rabbinate, turned his back on the Anglo-Jewish establishment, to found his own public school out in the English countryside, where boys from 11-18 were given a first-class secular liberal education. The Jewish education was not as successful; but the atmosphere of the school was based on his religious, Orthodox way of life, which was tolerant, mystical, and attractive. Song, joy, and emotion played an essential part. I grew up in his world, beyond the Anglo-Jewish community.

As a pupil in his school, I worshipped him, feared him, and loved him. But as his son I suffered twice. He punished me as a headmaster and then a few hours later as a father. And I had to share my father with three hundred other boys. I became an outsider, the son of an outsider.

I was not a good student. My father sent me as a sixteen-year-old to yeshiva in Israel. After a period of difficult transition, I came to love the yeshiva world with its intensity, spiritually and intellectual rigor. However I remained the son of a liberal, critical, rational father. Fundamentalism never made sense to me. In the several yeshivas I attended off and on over the next ten years, my intellectual life was on hold, while my Jewish life flourished. Then at Cambridge studying philosophy, my secular world flourished while my religious life marked time. Where did I belong? Who was I? An Orthodox Jew or a liberal intellectual?

All of this left me a maverick with a strong distaste for establishments, which I had experienced at first hand. Whether in the English or the Jewish worlds, universities as well as yeshivas tried to suppress dissidents and

rebels. To make matters worse my father died at the age of 48, when I was just 18. I lost my paternal guidance, the benefit of his counsel, and the restraints of his authority.

The result was that I combined the characteristics of a well-educated, successful Jewish leader with the willfulness of a naughty and even lost child.

The path of my career exploded from the start. When I decided to devote my life to the Jewish world, I sought out jobs that offered me freedom and independence. No one was going to tell me what to do. I enjoyed every position I have occupied. From the largest Orthodox synagogue in Scotland to Principal of my Alma Mater, which at that time was by far the most impressive secondary educational institution in Anglo-Jewry and possibly the Diaspora. I had enormous freedom to say and do as I pleased. Most of the time I believe I succeed beyond my and others' expectations. But of course, I also made mistakes, some institutional and some personal. I always looked around for a father substitute, but I could not find anyone who came close to replicating my father on any level. I was left to my own devices. I withdrew into myself.

The minute I stopped enjoying it I simply upped sticks and left, waiting for the next opportunity. And there always was one. The benefit was that I remained excited, enthusiastic, and positive, while many of my contemporaries became jaded and frustrated, wedded to their jobs rather than their morality or their souls. But the downside was that I became more and more self-centred. And I automatically excluded myself from the trophy positions in Jewish life precisely because I did not want to accept the constrictions, limitations, and compromises one would have had to make.

Did this matter? In one way, it did not. I have done my bit. And the Jewish world, in my lifetime, however fractured and alienated, has taken care of itself very well. Like a hydra, you cut one part off, another grows stronger in its place. There are nowadays, more than in my youth, many young, highly educated, and talented rabbis, scholars, experts, and teachers serving the Jewish community worldwide. More institutions of higher learning, outreach programs, rabbis, and evangelists all spreading the word and ensuring that we survive and thrive (not to mention snake oil salesmen peddling religious superstition, but catering to needy). As the Talmud says, "When others go out into the world (to teach, preach, and encourage others), you may turn inwards. And when others are concentrating on themselves, then you should go out."

I was educated in a Mussar yeshiva. Mussar is the movement of strict self-analysis and self-discipline in the pursuit of spirituality that Rav Israel Salanter felt the religious world lacked. In my yeshiva I was taught to be introspective, self-critical, to strive to improve all the time. I always felt I was not doing well enough. The trouble was that I was indulging myself without pushing myself enough to change. It's the action that counts, more than the thought.

My Yom Kipur is not concerned about my material life or career. It is concerned with my soul. And although my spiritual soul has flourished over

the years, I am ashamed at the opportunities I missed, the people I have let down and hurt, the betrayals of friends, loved ones, pupils, congregants. I often think of how I was not a good son to my late mother, because I was too wrapped up in my own struggles. We all have our regrets.

I know some will want to reassure me and say I should look at the positive side, at all the good things I have done. All the people I have helped. And I thank those who would tell me this. But that's too easy. It avoids the issue of Yom Kipur. Which is precisely to recognize one's failures and try to do better, all the time. Some cry during the services on Yom Kipur; some don't. I do cry. I recognize and acknowledge my failings and the people I have hurt, intentionally or not.

Every Kol Nidrei my father would get up before the whole school and ask them for forgiveness. And you could see that he meant it. I wonder what my father and mother (who shared everything with him at home and at work) would think and whether I would have done better or worse had they stayed on earth a little longer.

This is a really painful process. But it needs to be done. I hope others try it. So, thank you, God, for Yom Kipur and for the good pain that comes with it.