

**Wikejewdia:  
Objectivity, Obligation and Community  
In a get-what-you-want world  
Kol Nidrei 5768  
September 21, 2007**

You know, you can't always get what you want. Some requests are perfectly reasonable. Others are a bit of a stretch.

Consider several political bumper stickers, seen over the course of time. The first sentiment I agree with, although I don't know how to accomplish it immediately. The second sentiment I agree with as well, even if it's stated a bit bluntly. The third one, though, the third one I'm not sure what to make of... A little bit extreme, and little bit difficult...

The first bumper sticker reads: "US out of Iraq."

The second bumper sticker reads: "US out of my uterus."

The third bumper sticker reads: "US out of North America."

**You can't always get what you want. Because our wishes must be balanced against what is *possible*, and what is *necessary*. Because there is something out there, beyond our own desires. And because constraints emerge... out of the connections in our lives.**

When he was four years old, my son Daniel suddenly blurts out the following bit of back seat wisdom: "Because counting never stops," he informs me, "all the numbers in the world are really tiny." As I try to drive straight, I'm thinking, wow, not a bad grasp of the concept of infinity for a four-year old. Or a forty-year old.

So we start talking about numbers. And I shared with my children what I know about the largest named number in the world.

You see, my cousin, Mark Feshbach, [who is here with us tonight] is a mathematician. His father, Herman Feshbach, was a physicist. And *his* relative, on his wife's side, was the mathematician Edward Kasner. Kasner once wanted to get a handle on a concept he was working on, a very large number. He drew a picture of a one with a hundred zeroes after it. One day, Kasner showed the picture to his young nephews, and asked them to give it a name. One of the boys responded with the word "googol." [G.O.O.G.O.L.] And thus was named a very large number.

Unfortunately, my family connection is with the *number*, not the *company*. The company, though, is a letter or two off, having simply slipped up, and *misspelled the number* in naming the search engine. Which is pretty ironic, given that the *purpose* of a Google search, is to obtain information.

As we heard from Rabbi Serotta last week, these days, as often as not, when you use Google, one result comes up, before any others. That result... is an entry in the online encyclopedia called Wikipedia.

What is Wikipedia? For those not familiar with it – and I didn't really realize what it was until fairly recently – it is a free online encyclopedia, which anyone can edit. As of now, there are over two million articles.

A free encyclopedia, which *anyone can edit!* Think about that. What a notion! What faith, in humanity, in the group, in the idea that a collective outlook can result in...something real. That subjective opinion... can lead to objective fact.

Here's how it works. Someone posts, an article, on any subject. You can even write about yourself. And then it is out there, for anyone to add to, and anyone to change. Corporations have been caught editing entries to put a positive spin on their products. Politicians polish their own profiles – and this was even before last Monday's front-page article in the Washington Post, detailing such activities. But anyone can edit the article again. It is an invitation to shape reality, to change the word, open to anyone, just a click away. (My own most recent experience with Wikipedia came in my attempt to explain the imagery in Don McLean's lyrics of "Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie" to my children. Which led to a link on folk music. Which led to Bob Dylan. Which led to the iPod. Which led to a lot of work, not getting done...)

Now, I've heard our own Temple member, Ben Bederson, a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Maryland, share studies which indicate that Wikipedia is, arguably and in some respects, *every bit as accurate* as a specialist encyclopedia written by experts. That the ongoing revisions have a kind of watchdog efficiency, democracy at its best. So the *content* may, after all, be relatively reliable. But I am still sort of shocked by the *concept*.

To me, the idea that an article can be edited by anyone, no matter what their qualifications, remains a metaphor for a consumer culture gone crazy. After all, television studios can't seem to produce "real" "drama" anymore. They have blurred the line between fact and fantasy, inundated us with staged and fake-feeling "reality." Now viewers even get to vote, wishing the outcome we want onto the screen. Opinion outweighs character development; polls trump art. And I won't even *begin* to address *American Idol*.

Apparently we Americans *really* want know what other people are thinking. I remember tracking surveys asking us when we *thought* the war in Iraq would begin. As if public opinion had *anything* to do with it! And I remember this item, from a few years back: 80-some% of Americans believe in life after death. This is an increase of 10% from the number who believed the same thing a decade earlier. But what you never get, in all these reports, is that, 80% of Americans believing something, in contrast to 70%, *still doesn't make it x% more likely to be true!!* There is a *difference* between belief and reality. Between our mental construct of the world, and the world the way it really is. There is a difference. Or, at least, there should be.

***Our wishes must be balanced, against what is possible, and what is necessary. If we have elevated opinion on the altar of the all-powerful, if we have sanctified the subjective, is there any room***

**left... for the call that comes from outside of the self? If we worship only the *what-we-want*, what becomes of the *what we must*? If we always choose *choice*, what has happened to obligation?**

Think of a child, being told to clean up a room. What is going on, at the moment of parental command? Do we want our children to *want* to clean their rooms? Or do we want them to bring into their lives a sense of order, of “supposed-to,” a lesson learned about duty and commitment and communal life? We may want them to have already cleaned up, before we had to ask. But at the moment of the mess, don’t we just want them to act... because we said so?

A number of years ago, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolfe wrote the strange sentence that “only something that offends us will define Judaism.” He was, I believe, trying to set up his next statement, one in which he contrasts the will of the self, with the concept of commandment. The essential insight of Judaism, he believes, the idea that is unpleasant and uncomfortable and yet, to him, nevertheless definitive, is the notion that... “it is better to do something under command than by choice.”

My friends, in some ways this is the single most difficult concept I have ever attempted to teach. Try telling this to a teenager. Forget teenagers; try telling it to someone who survived the Sixties. Duty! Compulsion! “Have to!” What horrible things to say!

And yet, at some level, I believe that Rabbi Wolfe is right, and this is an insight upon which the survival of Judaism depends – and a message which Reform Judaism needs to take to heart.

*Why* is the notion so offensive? Because, as Wolfe writes, “to all of us North Americans, autonomy and choice – freedom and the ability to decide for ourselves – are crucial. But to Judaism,” he continues, “as I understand it, against my inclination, the *opposite* is the case. What is done out of choice is *inferior* to what is done out of command... All of Judaism is mitzvah.” [And remember: the word “mitzvah” means “*commandment*.” It does *not* mean “good deed.”] “All of Judaism is mitzvah. There is nothing else...” And Wolfe, citing another colleague, translates the word mitzvah as “response.” An answer to something that is not us. Even if, sometimes, the answer is no.

***There is something out there... beyond our own desires.***

**To assert that there is something... beyond the self... is a notion at once both ancient and radical. For in a postmodern world, where all facts are thrown into question and all perspectives revealed as personal, and therefore, we erroneously presume, equally valid... that sense of being called from beyond is a profound challenge to us.**

Have you ever had the occasion... to drive in Boston? Now, maybe it's different now, and maybe I'm being unfair, especially considering the

aggressiveness of drivers in this area, and the bad habits I've fallen into myself... [Since it is Yom Kippur I will add my own confession here. Several years ago, and miles away from here, running really late I once honked aggressively at a very slow moving car in front of me. And, of course, it turns out that the driver of the other car... was a member of the congregation! You never know! You just never know.} So, in any event, when I lived in Boston stopping for a red light appeared to be sort of a... "suggestion." A kind of... civic recommendation. At least, that's the way it seemed to me.

Every year, within a framework of set parameters, our Confirmation Class composes the content of their own service. They do so by writing down their reactions to each of the major prayers, and each of the Ten Commandments. And every year, in reaction to one or two of the big Ten, we get something like this, from the pen of a Tenth Grader: "Do not murder. I agree with this one..." And I'm thinking: great, thanks! The tradition is so relieved!

Yes, it is true: customs, habits, cultural mores shift over time. Sometimes these shifts can be quite profound. Behavior sanctified in one age is an abomination in another. For our freedom, our conscience, the chance to change, the opportunity to choose, thank God!

But are there not some things that are so basic, so important, that they are not subject to surveys? Nor even majority rule?

My friends, remember. The Nazi party was voted into power. It wasn't a fully fair election, intimidation techniques were used, some ballot boxes were stuffed, but the fact is, more people voted for the Nazis... than for any other party.

And I *need* a world in which the Nazis were wrong. Not just wrong because they were eventually beaten, but deeply, profoundly, existentially wrong. Wrong, even though they were the majority.

Slavery, segregation, secrecy in the name of security. Internment camps, red-baiting, the abrogation of treaties with Native Americans. The list goes on and on. If opinion is all that counts, if perception is all that matters, if masses and mob rule shape reality, where, in this chaos, is a touchstone of truth, a standard that abides? From where comes the commandment that says: this is *wrong*, whatever your own will and wish may be?

***Constraints emerge... out of the connections in our lives.***

**The external voice. Where does it come from? On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about identity. This Yom Kippur the question I ask... is about obligation. For me, with the late, great philosopher Martin Buber, I believe that the concept of obligation emerges... out of our experience in relationship.**

Relationship. And the demands it places upon us.



An insight I learned from another colleague [Rabbi Les Bronstein?]: There is a book in the Bible that was almost banned. It is so provocative, so hard to understand, that many of the ancient rabbis argued against it being in the Bible at all. And when our fundamentalist neighbors assert that all we need to do is read Bible in public schools and it will somehow cure all the ills around us, I don't think they had this book in mind...

The book, of course, is *Shir HaShirim*, Song of Songs. It is a collection of love poetry drenched in explicit imagery which... well, if I made it into a movie, and gave the film a rating based on current criteria, I don't think it would be PG-13. If done faithfully to the text, I'm not even sure it would be R-rated. The only reason that Song of Songs was eventually included as Scripture, I believe, is that the rabbis viewed the poetry as a metaphor, for the love between God and the Jewish people. A metaphor! Well, read it yourself, and you decide.

Whatever its original intent, however, the imagery is beautiful, provocative, and very powerful. One verse, in particular, calls to me at the moment. From *Shir HaShirim* we read: "*kol dodi, hinei zeh bah*; the voice of my beloved, behold, it comes!"

Think for a moment, if you will, of the early days of love. The thrill of a connection! The sound of a lovers' voice! The racing heart! The hope, then the hint, then the promise of nearness. "The voice of my beloved; behold it comes!"

But time goes by, and things change. We hear, now, the same words, in a very different way. “*Kol dodi, hinei zeh bah...* The voice of my beloved... *here it comes!*” What did I do now? What do I *need* to do now? What needs to get done?

Look, I don’t want to leave the wrong impression here... [And Julie will be coming to the late service today/is right here in the congregation with us today...] Unlike in the song I cited last week, for most of us, thank God, the thrill never fades, the attraction stays fresh. But now an added task is ours, not *just* to draw near to one another, but to build and shape a life together. Intimacy, balanced with maintenance. And the details of daily life.

Sometimes that means hard work. Sometimes that means mowing the lawn, or cleaning out the garage. Sometimes relationship means responding, even when we’d much rather be doing... anything else.

As with a lover and partner, as with the pull of a friend and the expectation of a co-worker, so, too, with the voice of God.

Now, I believe that we cannot say with certainty very many things about God, the way God really is. And I believe that most statements human beings make about God – and confident claims of almost all religions – are at the most models, metaphors, simply the best we can do to translate instinct and experience into language which is flawed, incomplete, and symbolic.

But as subjective as it may be, out of the model I use, and the experience I know, let me ask: Have you ever felt pulled, to a place you would not have chosen to go? Have you ever felt called, to a cause that was not your own? Have you ever felt bound, to a people you would rather not be bothered with at all?

The ground of our being, the source of morality, the maker of mitzvot, the call of the commandments... that... is who God is to me.

Who is God, to *you* and *for you*? What role does God play, what room is there for God in your life? What names you most truly, most accurately, most objectively, when you look in the mirror, in the middle of the night?

Which voice comes from within? And which comes from somewhere else?

We are born into this world and it seems as if there are infinite possibilities before us. But definitions descend with our first breath: geography, gender, and genes, birth order and economic constraints. Brit Milah, Bat Mitzvah, the strings of the tallit, the boundary of the chuppah.

This night we remember: “in our choices, we are not always free.” We are caught up, in a web of connection, a nexus of communal life. Our choices and our commitments, our identity and our obligation, the inner voice and the outer pull, *together, that* is who we are.

**The telling of our tale, the counting of our deeds never stops. And if we were to look you up, in some online Wikijewdia, what would it say?**

**Last week I asked, in different words, what you would write about yourself. Now, though... now comes the tough part. The entry is not complete. The article is not done. The editors have not yet had their say: loved ones and enemies, acquaintances and colleagues, strangers and friends. What changes would the people around you make, in what you say about yourself?** With Robert Burns: “O would some power the giftie gie us, to see ourselves, as others see us.”

**And this night, this season we assert, even God gets into the act... the ultimate entry in the eternal encyclopedia. The true judge, the external voice, the editor-in-chief... of the Book of Life.**

**Live well.**

**Write well.**

**And remember...**

**that the truth is out there...**

**as much as it is in here.**

*L'shanah Tovah.*