

Kol Nidre - 5783
Temple Sinai - Dresher, PA
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Changing Your Name for the Book of Life

It was just an ordinary day in August. After finishing the work day at the synagogue, I began my short walk home. Stopping at the mailbox, I checked if there was any new mail. There was a postcard reminder to vote in the upcoming November elections, a letter from an insurance company claiming that they can save me 20% annually on my car insurance, and then I saw it. The letter that no one is ever excited to receive.

Written on the outside of the envelope were the words, “Official Jury Summons Enclosed.” I felt a pit in my stomach. I looked down to see to whom this was addressed. It was not my name written on the envelope. It was far worse. The letter was addressed to Amanda, my wife. Once again, I felt a pit in my stomach. If there is anything worse than receiving a jury summons with your name on it, it is the burden of now needing to tell someone that they have a jury summons waiting for them at home.

I know many of you can relate to the experience of opening a jury summons. While serving as a juror is a civic duty and an honored privilege in our democracy, the truth is... jury duty is a privilege many of us hope never to experience. Even though we may enjoy watching episodes of “Law and Order” that are conveniently always airing on TV, when we are called to serve in an actual court of law, it is never convenient. It is never a good time. When receiving a jury summons, the first thought is always, “How can I get out of this? What excuse can I use this time?”

That evening in August, when I handed the summons to Amanda, she immediately scanned it for the date. It requested her to serve just before Rosh HaShanah. Not a great time for any Jew to serve on a trial, especially a Jewish educator. The next day Amanda called the courthouse and explained the situation. The clerk asked Amanda to hold on the phone, while she reviewed her list of Jewish holidays. Seeing that there was indeed a Jewish holiday every other day for about a month, the clerk issued Amanda a new date three months later. Case closed. Amanda resolved the situation.

The interesting thing about this whole situation was that the name on this jury summons was not Amanda at all. This letter was addressed to Amanda Phillips, but as of June, Amanda legally changed her last name, from Phillips to Hollander. Could changing one’s name be the ultimate excuse to get out of jury duty?

I googled this question. The answer is no. Changing one’s legal name does not avert the decree, it does not *ma'avirin et roah' hagezerah*, it does not cancel the obligation to show up for jury duty when summoned.

However, while changing one's name is not a legitimate excuse in the American legal system, for the heavenly court that is assembled here this evening on Kol Nidre, according to the Talmud, changing one's name is the ultimate shortcut. So tonight, while I cannot tell you the secret to getting out of jury duty, I have discovered the loophole, the shortcut for *teshuva* in the heavenly court assembled on Yom Kippur.

On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we recite:

U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roah' hagezerah
Repentance, prayer and charity avert the harshness of the decree

If we engage in these three actions, we can transform our fate. We recite these words in the *piyut*, Unetaneh Tokef, but this concept of *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah*, that repentance, prayer and charity can cancel the harshness of the decree is first found in the Jerusalem Talmud. I know I promised you this loophole, a shortcut to being excused so that you can be dismissed from standing before the heavenly court this evening. Engaging in *teshuva, tefillah* and *tzedakah* are actions you already know about. I promise, I am about to share with you where to find this secret, but we are going to have to search for it because you will not find the answer in our mahzor. That is because the author of Unetaneh Tokef was very familiar with Talmudic texts, but only the version of Talmud compiled in Israel. We have two versions of the Talmud. While the rabbis living in Israel compiled what is known as the Jerusalem Talmud, a more authoritative version was compiled in the diaspora, in Babylonia. When people speak of "the Talmud," they are usually referring to the Babylonian Talmud. While these two versions of the Talmud share similarities, they do differ in content.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, the three ways to avert the decree are:

Tzedakah, charity

Tza'akah, crying out in prayer

And *Shinui Ma'aseh*, changing one's deeds for the better

While the Babylonian Talmud may use different words to describe these three actions, they are ultimately the same as *teshuva, tefillah* and *tzedakah*. But wait, the Babylonian Talmud records a fourth action. What is this additional step a person can take to *ma'avirin et roah' hagezerah*, to lessen the strength of the decree? You can *Shinui haShem*, you can change your name.

This is the location of the big secret I want to share with you tonight. If you are looking for a quick way to avoid repenting for one's sins, if you want a fast way to be dismissed from appearing before the heavenly court assembled on Kol Nidre, all you need to do is change your name.

Are you willing to change your name tonight? Having helped Amanda through the process of legally changing her name – the hours spent in line at the Social Security office, the DMV, the bank and the post office – legally changing one's name each year before Yom Kippur just does not sound practical.

There is a tradition of *Shinui haShem*, of changing one's name, not for avoiding repentance, but as a cure to illness. In extreme cases, there is an ancient custom that a person who is very sick can change their name. The hope is that when the angel of death comes to summon this sick person by name, the angel of death will be confused because the name has changed, thus saving the life from being taken. Changing one's name leads to changing one's fate.

Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, known as the Marasha, explains that changing one's name has nothing to do with repentance from sin; rather, it is a means of changing one's *mazal*, luck. He explains that name changes occur throughout the Torah- Avram to Avraham, Sarai to Sarah- but these name changes were not to absolve the people of their sins but for a change in *mazal*, luck, to help them have a child.

There is a Hebrew expression, "*Shinui makom, shinui mazal*," which means "change your place, (and you will) change your luck." While changing your home address every so often might lessen your chances that the court will summon you to serve as a juror, eventually they will find you. The same is true for luck. While having added *mazal*, good luck on your side is helpful, sooner or later we need to do the work.

Maimonides in his law code on *teshuva*, explains that *Shinui haShem*, changing one's name, is not an actual shortcut or a loophole in the process of *teshuva*. Instead, changing one's name is a metaphor for the essence of what *teshuva* is meant to be. According to Maimonides, when the Talmud teaches that you can "change your name" as a way to repent for your sins, the action you really are doing is saying to yourself, "I am a different person and I am not the same person that performed these deeds."

What an important lesson for all of us on Yom Kippur. If you are able to say to yourself, "I have changed and I am not the same person as I was before," then you are a new person. Since you are no longer the person you were when you had sinned, who is this new person? What is your name?

There is a midrash, a rabbinic teaching, that each of us acquires three names over the course of our lives. The first one is the name we are given at birth by our parents. The second

one is the name given to us by those who know us. And the third one, is the name we acquire for ourselves.

I received the name Samuel at birth from my parents, but I quickly acquired my second name, as those who knew me as a baby called me Sammy. Before entering Kindergarten my mom needed to let me know that on the first day of school, the teacher was going to read the attendance list and that I should respond to the name Samuel, since my given name is actually Samuel, not Sammy. As a kindergartener, my world was turned upside down as I experienced an identity crisis, and from that day forward I always introduced myself as Samuel. That was, until high school, when I would write Samuel on my audition forms for the fall play or spring musical, and every time I looked at the cast list, my high school drama teacher would write Sam. So I gave up on telling people my name is Samuel because everyone called me Sam, and from that point on, my second name, the name I am called by friends and family, is Sam or Rabbi Sam. But my third name, the name I acquire for myself, is constantly changing.

I remember the experience of coming back to the United States after living abroad in Israel for 14 months. I knew living in Israel changed me in many ways, but I never expected this. A few days after depositing a check at my local bank, I received a phone call from the bank. The bank informed me that my signature had changed since my last deposit 14 months ago, and that I needed to come to a branch to update my signature on file. My name did not change, but I did change, and my signature evolved to reflect the new me.

In many ways, our signature is our third name, the name we acquire for ourselves. Our signatures are more than just a name, they express who we are, and as I discovered myself, even our signatures can evolve over time. We say, “on Rosh HaShanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.” On Yom Kippur as we seal our names into the Book of Life, what does your signature look like? How has your signature changed since last year?

Yom Kippur has a unique tradition for reciting a name that is both familiar and yet unknown. It was on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, that the High Priest, the holiest person, would enter into the Holy of Holies, the Holiest place, and while atoning for the sins of all of Israel the High Priest would say out loud the holiest name of God. Upon hearing the name of God spoken by the High Priest, the Israelites gathered in the courtyard of the Temple, bowed, and said, *Baruch Shem K'vod Malkhuto L'Olam Va'ed*, “Praised is the name of the One whose glorious sovereignty will be forever and ever.”

It used to be that this holy name for God was spoken in the Temple, but as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explained, “as people began to abuse its sanctity, its use was progressively restricted until it was used only by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, and was said so softly that

others could not hear it. Its pronunciation became a secret passed from High Priest to High Priest until with the loss of the Temple and the passage of time the secret was forgotten.”

Today when we see the letters, yud-hey-vav-hey, we do not attempt to pronounce this name, instead saying *Adonai*, my Lord. While we no longer know how to pronounce this special name for God, on Yom Kippur we as the congregation still continue in the tradition from the time of the Temple by saying on Yom Kippur out loud the words, *Baruch Shem K'vod Malkhuto L'Olam Va'ed*.

Of all the names we use to call God, why is this name so unique and holy? When Moses encounters God for the very first time at the burning bush, God tells Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” But this name does not satisfy Moses. Moses asks, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

And God responds to Moses saying, “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*.” This name of God is difficult to encapsulate in a singular translation, “I Am That I Am;” “I Am Who I Am;” “I Will Be What I Will Be.” This unique phrase gives us insight into God’s holy name, the four letter name, yud-hey-vav-hey. This phrase teaches us that the four letter name of God is derived from the Hebrew verb “hoveh,” hey-vav-hey, meaning “to be.”

The commentary of the Etz Hayim Chumash notes, “it is significant that this name of God is not a noun but a verb. The essence of Jewish theology is not the nature of God (“what God is”) but the actions of God (“what God does,” the difference God makes in our lives.) What then, does God’s name mean? It may mean any or all of the following: God exists. God is more than we can comprehend. God, or our understanding of God, is constantly growing. God is present in our lives. God is with us in our efforts to do what is right but difficult.”

Tonight on Kol Nidre, it is our task to acquire a new name for ourselves. If you are to take on Maimonides’ definition of *Shinui haShem* and honestly say, “I am a different person and I am not the same person that performed these deeds,” then I challenge you to consider, who is this new person? What is the name you have acquired for yourself?

Like the secretive and holy name of God that is not a noun, but rather a verb, let the name you acquire for yourself be a verb. A name that does not say, “What am I?” but rather “How do I make a difference in this world?” A name that recognizes that you are constantly evolving. A name that represents who you currently are, and a name that represents who you want to be.

Tonight, as we sit before the heavenly court on Kol Nidre, we are not the same people who gathered here last year. Tonight, if the name on your summons to the heavenly court is

different from the name you acquired for yourself, well then, you have done something right. On Yom Kippur, whether our names have legally changed or not, on this holy day, we should feel like a different person, a person with a new name.

On this Yom Kippur, what name will you acquire for yourself?

G'mar Chatima Tova! May this new name be sealed for good in the Book of Life.