

Kol Nidre Service Sermon - The Wolves of Kol Nidre

Famed soccer player Abby Wambach, at the 2018 Commencement of Barnard College, told the following story, “in 1995, wolves were re-introduced into Yellowstone National Park after being absent for seventy years. In those years, the number of deer had skyrocketed because they were unchallenged, alone at the top of the food chain. They grazed away and reduced the vegetation, so much that the river banks were eroding.

Once the wolves arrived, they thinned out the deer through hunting. But more significantly, their presence changed the behavior of the deer. Wisely, the deer started avoiding the valleys, and the vegetation in those places regenerated. Trees quintupled in just six years. Birds and beavers started moving in. The river dams the beavers built provided habitats for otters and ducks and fish. The animal ecosystem regenerated. But that wasn’t all. The rivers actually changed as well. The plant regeneration stabilized the river banks so they stopped collapsing. The rivers steadied—all because of the wolves’ presence.

See what happened here?

The wolves, who were feared as a threat to the system, turned out to be its salvation.”¹

Since reading Wambach’s words, I’ve been thinking a lot about soccer, change, and wolves.

Now please bear with me (no pun intended). Wolves often get a bad rap in culture. For example, there is the metaphor of the wolf in sheep’s clothing. There is the boy who cried wolf. There is the story of little red riding hood and the big bad wolf, which Wambach mentioned. There was even the recent Scorsese movie, the Wolves of Wall Street, which was all about unscrupulous stockbrokers. In each example, the wolf is a character either taking advantage of a situation or

¹ <https://barnard.edu/commencement/archives/2018/abby-wambach-remarks>

seeking to do harm for their own benefit. The wolf is a predator that must be feared. But can it also be respected?

To find out we have to dig a little deeper into history. There is the story of the demigods Romulus and Remus whose father Numitor was displaced by his brother Amulius. Fearing for their lives, their mother Rhea Silvia hid them in a cave where they were suckled by a she-wolf. This she-wolf nurtured the twins until they could come into their own. Eventually Romulus went on to found the city of Rome, according to ancient lore.

The image of the wolf even appears in our tradition. For example, the wolf is the symbol for the tribe of Benjamin. This is because in his blessings / curses of his twelve sons, Jacob/Israel blesses his son Benjamin with the following words, “Benjamin is a wolf (*Benyaim Z’ev*) that rends in the morning devouring the booty, in the evening, dividing the spoil.”²

As the Plaut Torah Commentary goes on to explain regarding *Benyaim Z’ev*, “Benjamin’s warlike temperament is here characterized. Two famous warriors, Ehud the Judge and Saul the King, were of this tribe. Based on this verse, many Jews have been named *Binyamin Z’ev*, among them, Theodor Herzl, the Zionist leader.”³

Thus, there is a juxtaposition between the wolf as predator and the wolf as a force for good and a force for survival. But what if the wolf is, metaphorically speaking, something else entirely?

Writing for Tablet Magazine, famed Jewish writer Dara Horn retold the story of “The Wolf”⁴ (by Yiddish Poet Leyvik Halpern. Halpern wrote around the turn of the 20th Century about his experiences growing up in Belarus and his time in Siberia during the pogroms) ... [The poem] opens with a solitary figure, known only as “the Rov” (rabbi), awakening from unconsciousness

² Genesis 49:27

³ Plaut, Gunther W., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, URJ Press, New York, 2005, pg. 313

⁴ <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/278149/message-from-a-yiddish-werewolf>

on a mound of ashes to discover that he is the only person left alive in his destroyed town. He wanders the smoldering landscape searching for other survivors, then for perpetrators, then for corpses, and then even for body parts to bury. But the victors have left, all human remains have been torched, and, as the poem keeps repeating in a haunting chorus, “the Rov did not know what to do.”

The Rov finally removes his shoes and begins to recite Hebrew laments traditionally sung to commemorate the Temple’s destruction, a central ritual of communal Jewish mourning, but “he had forgotten the words of the laments.” He then attempts to recite the daily prayers, but “he had forgotten the words of the prayers.” As night falls, he flees barefoot into the “forty-mile forest” surrounding the town.

That’s where things get interesting. Caught in a snarl of barbed wire in the woods, the Rov somehow loses his clothes and falls onto all fours, and his transformation begins. Naked and struggling, his body sprouts hair, his fingers fuse and grow claws, his neck and shoulders merge, his teeth grow sharp, his lips droop, his eyes glitter, and he howls out his pain. When this Jewish werewolf emerges from the forest, things get even worse.

Back in the destroyed town, Jews expelled from other areas move in and rebuild. Dedicating their repaired synagogue, they are celebrating their renewed life in this desolate place when they hear “a long drawn-out howl of a beast” in the distance: “At first, angry and roaring, as in a moment of devouring prey, / Then thin and desperate, as the wailing / Of a dog baring his heart to the moon, / And finally, quieter and quieter and whining, / Like the cry of a human being.”

The nighttime howling terrifies them, but more horrifying is the appearance of a stranger the next morning in a rabbinical coat and fur hat. At first they hurry to greet him, hoping he will replace their own murdered Rov. But soon they see that he is bare-chested and bloody beneath his coat,

his feet bare and his face sunken. He enters the synagogue and takes the Rov's seat beside the eastern wall. And then he speaks, railing at them for rebuilding the ruins. Soon he falls at their feet, begging them to kill him. They crowd around him in sympathy. That's when he bites someone's hand. The congregants flee.

Each night, the howling continues, until suddenly, on the eve of Yom Kippur, it ceases, without anyone connecting the sound to the Rov. The congregation rejoices, relieved. But at the very end of Yom Kippur, at the shofar's final blast, the "wolf" enters the synagogue and attacks the prayer leader. At that, one congregant takes a wooden lectern and smashes his skull. The entire congregation then pummels him until he lies dead on the floor—"And the congregation burst into great weeping / For on the floor, tortured, in a river of blood / Lay not a wolf but a Jew in a rabbinical fur hat."

As Dara Horn⁵ went on to write, "When I first encountered this poem years ago, I was riveted by the Rov, whom I understood as a person disfigured by trauma. The poem, I thought, was a call for empathy for survivors, and a warning about how "hurt people hurt people"—though the latter idea in this context felt false to me even then, a cheap After School Special idea about "prejudice" that was untrue to the survivors I knew, and also untrue to the poem itself (where only the Rov winds up dead).

But after the Pittsburgh massacre, I read this poem differently—and, I suspect, in a way much closer to how American readers in 1920 may have read it. Insert here all the insultingly obvious caveats about how a lone gunman murdering 11 people in no way resembles 50,000 dead. Those caveats don't matter for this poem, because this poem isn't about history. It is about fear.

⁵ Ibid.

The poem, as I now understand it, isn't really about the Rov, whose point of view hardly figures in the work. It's about the other Jews, whose shared emotions are intimately described—and all too familiar. These Jews rejoice in their survival, but they are also haunted by the horrific fact that other Jews have been murdered while they have randomly been spared—the defining fact of post-Holocaust American Jewish identity. The wolf's presence in their midst is an embodiment of that haunting, the deep awareness of total vulnerability that lurks just beneath the surface of their daily lives.”

We live in a time of growing uncertainty and fear, embodied by an ever-increasing sense of vulnerability as articulated by Horn in her interpretation of Leyvik. A lot of it has to do with the growing incidents of antisemitism, which we will discuss more tomorrow. However, even with the rising levels of hatred, we are also living at a moment of opportunity. Do we live with fear or do we live despite our fears? Are we Rov's wolf or are we Wambach's wolf? Are we wolves whose transformational story inspires us? Or are we the wolves symbolizing the great fear in the world.

The answer is most likely both. We stand here this evening on Kol Nidre, entering into the most sacred, the most somber day of the Jewish calendar. According to traditional theology, we are on a knife's edge, awaiting judgment and praying for mercy. We call these days the *Yamim Noraiim*, the Days of Awe. However, *Noraiim* doesn't exactly mean 'awe.' It can also mean 'fear.' Fear that if we don't get it right, we may not be sealed into the *Sefer Chayim*, the book of life.

With all of this focus on fear, are there ways we can overcome it? With Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur our tradition is providing us with a model to help us manage our fears. If I can get through this fast and this challenging time of introspection, I can and must face any challenges

that lie ahead during this coming year. Or as Nelson Mandela famously said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

To do this, we need strength. But with so much anger and hate in the world, where can we find the inspiration to draw the power needed to overcome our fears? We can certainly find it in God and in our tradition. But perhaps there is another source of strength so close at hand that we often overlook it. To borrow from our overstretched metaphor, we can look to the wolves in our midst: our children, for they are truly the ones working to transform the world.

There is Greta Thunberg, the sixteen-year-old climate change activist. Her great fear is the world she stands to inherit. When faced with the potential devastation caused by global warming, she is unafraid to speak truth to those in power by speaking just a few short weeks ago at the United Nations. True fear has made her unafraid.

There is Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman simply for the crime of getting an education. She survived and became one of the most prominent activists for the right to education, even receiving the Nobel Prize for her efforts. After almost being assassinated, Malala knows true fear and stands unafraid.

And there is our own Jadya Turner, who is part of what some has described as the massacre generation. Whether it was her cousin, who was killed in Parkland, or the multitude of children killed by gun violence while in their schools, Jadya works tirelessly, along with many of our teens, to fight for the prevention of gun violence here in the State of New York, often speaking to the most powerful people in the legislature and not backing down. When you fear to go to school every day, speaking to someone standing in your way of safety and security becomes is nothing to be afraid of. True fear has made her unafraid.

Wolves, often misunderstood, are object of derision, but they are the ones who can change the course of nature. Maybe we can learn a lot from them, but more importantly we can and should learn even more from our children. They are the ones who can teach us and remind us of what it means to know fear and stand unafraid. By incorporating this lesson, we can then stand side by side with them, speaking truth to power, and working with them to solve the endemic problems in this world that make so many afraid.

On this 5780, we have the choice, do we wish to become the wolves and face our fears. Or do we wish to be symbolized by the wolves and give into our fears? This is an hour of change; do we draw back or do we cross over? To we give into our fears, or do we triumph over them? The choice is ours.

As Wambach concluded her words so too shall we by paraphrasing them, “And who you are - on this Yom Kippur - are the wolves. Surrounding you today is your wolf pack. Look around. Don’t lose each other. Leave this sacred ground united, storm the valleys together, and like our children, be our salvation.”⁶

L’shana Tova,

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⁶ <https://barnard.edu/commencement/archives/2018/abby-wambach-remarks>