

## **SURRENDER**

***Rabbi Marc Margolius***

***West End Synagogue, New York NY***

***Kol Nidrei 5771***

I'd like to share with you tonight a story of the great and wise King Solomon.

Ever since he becoming king, Solomon had worn a magnificent ring on his finger, given to him by his father King David as he lay on his deathbed.

"Solomon," King David whispered to his son, "this is a very special ring, a very holy ring. It symbolizes the kingship of Israel. Once you become king, my son, you must be absolutely sure to wear it at all times. Promise me that you will never remove the ring from your finger – for as long as you wear it, it will protect you from all harm."

"I promise, father," said Solomon to David. "I will never remove it, once I am king."

And Solomon was true to his promise. Once he became king, he wore the ring constantly. And although he was the wisest of all people, Solomon became preoccupied with learning a secret he did not know. He wondered, "Who would I be, if my father had not been King David? What would I be doing now if I hadn't been born to the throne? Who would I be? Who, exactly, am I?"

There were times Solomon enjoyed his role as king and all the goodies that came with the job – making his own hours, the beautiful robes, the royal chef, the ribbon cuttings, the state dinners, the adoration of his people -- though he often wondered, "Is this all real?" At times, Solomon fantasized about assuming another identity altogether.

One day, Solomon called his advisors and said: "Advisors! It is true, I am the wisest of all. Still, there is a question that is beyond even my own wisdom. Perhaps you can help me. I wish to know -- the secret of illusion." "Illusion, Your Highness?" the advisors responded. "Great and wise king, we do not have the solution to your question. Only Ashmodai, the king of the demons, holds the answer you seek."

"Then I will summon him at once," the king roared. And as Solomon pressed his magnificent ring, there before him and his court stood Ashmodai, king of the demons. He was indeed a strange demon, with the feet of a chicken, the wings of an eagle, the head of a lizard, and the personality of a jackass. "Ashmodai," Solomon said, "There is something I have been wondering about for many years. I am told you may know the answer. I wish to know -- the secret of illusion."

"The secret of illusion?" replied Ashmodai. "Illusion, Solomon? Of course, I will teach you the secret of illusion – but first, you must hand me the ring of your kingship." Solomon's advisors were shocked and frightened. The ring was the main symbol of Solomon's authority, his very identity as king. The advisors spoke as one to Solomon: "No, Your Highness! Do not remove your ring!"

But Solomon wanted so badly to know the secret of illusion, the secret of fantasy, that he slipped his ring from his finger. And as he began handing it to Ashmodai, he found himself suddenly transported far from the palace, far from Jerusalem, far from his kingdom. He opened his eyes and discovered himself on the other side of the world, in a vast desert, wearing only rags instead of his beautiful robe and crown. Exhausted and thirsty, he crawled to an oasis, lowered his head to drink from a pool of water – and reflected there in the water, to his shock and dismay Solomon saw not the face of a handsome king -- but rather the appearance of a destitute, worn out old man.

For many years thereafter, Solomon tried to find his way home. He wandered the world, eking out a living in menial jobs, busing tables, sweeping streets, hauling water, washing dishes. He was reduced to begging on the streets. Everywhere he went, he told people that he was the great and wise King Solomon, ruler of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, the guy behind the famous cut-the-baby-in-half story. "Once I was the wisest and most powerful man in the world," he would tell whoever would listen. "I built the most beautiful Temple! I had the most magnificent kingdom!" But no one believed these wild claims. They chalked it up to the madness of an old man, a street person. And they pitied him or laughed at him or simply ignored him.

Solomon found it harder and harder to survive. He lost his job cleaning toilets in public restrooms. He was evicted from his decrepit SRO. His unemployment ran out. He had no friends, no family. Everything he owned, everything that had created his reputation and identity, was gone. He was alone. He had nothing. He felt as though he was nothing.

Solomon surrendered. He stopped trying to convince everyone that he was the great King Solomon. He began to wonder if that had ever been true. He built a makeshift raft and set out on it to sea, letting the currents carry him where they would. Drifting in the ocean, lost in the middle of nowhere, hungry, he dropped a piece of string with a hook into the water. Immediately he felt a tug and pulled up a fish.

And as Solomon sliced open the fish, he noticed something shiny in its belly -- a magnificent gold ring, Solomon's own ring, the ring given to him by his father David, the ring of his kingship. As he slipped the ring onto his finger suddenly Solomon found himself not adrift in the ocean, but back in Jerusalem, in his palace, wearing his magnificent robes and crown, standing before Ashmodai and his amazed set of advisors. "My God, how many years have I been gone?" he asked. "How long has it been?"

"Your Highness," said the puzzled advisors, "you have been standing there for only a few seconds, staring into space with your ring in your hand." Ashmodai doubled over laughing. Then he stopped and looked squarely into the king's eyes. "So, Solomon," said Ashmodai. "Now do you understand the secret of illusion?" Solomon would never again take his role as king for granted. He knew that there was so much more to his identity than the ring, that there was something other than his ring that was keeping him afloat and guiding his way. He ruled his kingdom from that day forward with humility, fairness, compassion, and true wisdom.

This classic midrash – "The Beggar King" – is the signature tale of a Jewish storyteller named Joel ben Izzy. I know this story quite well, having listened repeatedly to ben Izzy tell it on a cassette tape, over many years and countless car rides with my older sons. A few years ago, I discovered that Joel ben Izzy had published a book entitled "The Beggar King and the Secret of Happiness," in which he shared how his own personal life -- in a bizarre, ironic twist -- had come to parallel the story of King Solomon. He had come not only to tell the story of the Beggar King, but actually to live the story himself.

Joel ben Izzy, who had earned a livelihood and constructed his identity by entertaining others through his vocal talents, awoke from surgery for thyroid cancer to discover he had lost his voice. In fact, the doctors could not tell whether he would ever regain his ability to speak aloud. For days, months, over a year, Joel was unable to tell stories, unsure when or if his speech would return. He fell into a depression. His marriage suffered. He became disconnected from his friends. He tuned out from his child. He had difficulty finding pleasure in anything. He had to pursue work which wasn't nearly as rewarding as storytelling – the role for which had seemed be born.

As he finally began to accept this truth, to face the reality that he would never again be able to speak aloud; as he realized that his identity as a storyteller did not completely define him; as he surrendered everything he'd one considered essential to his identity – only then did Joel ben Izzy wake up one day from an experimental operation and find that, like Solomon's ring, his voice had returned.

Each of us is, in some way, like King Solomon. Each of us at some point in our lives has some variation of Joel ben Izzy's experience. Each of us has particular gifts or possessions or jobs or people or roles we consider crucial elements of our core identity, aspects of our selves of which we are proud and which feel absolutely essential to who we are. And when -- voluntarily or against our will -- we surrender these things, when we let go of our own ring, we find ourselves like Solomon, like Joel ben Izzy: adrift, lost, and floating on a vast ocean, far from familiar terrain or landmarks. In these moments, we ask ourselves, "Who am I? What is the value of my life?"

When we've been laid off or fired from a job we loved; when we've divorced or broken up with a partner or spouse; when fire or flood or accident destroys our cherished possessions; when disease robs us of our physical or mental gifts, or takes the life of someone without whom we cannot imagine living – in these moments, we are blindsided by some deeply disturbing but critical truths.

We realize how little of our lives we are actually able to control. We become aware of how dependent we have become upon these qualities, possessions, jobs, titles or people to artificially prop ourselves up. We notice how often our need for these external sources of self-worth stems from our own trauma, our fears, our toxic shame. And as we choose or are forced by circumstances to face these truths, some of us, sometimes, begin to discover a deeper, more solid foundation on which to construct our lives.

When the water wings or life boats are gone, there is no choice but either to drown or to begin to trust that the waters can hold us up. We come to experience an unexpected freedom, a new lightness of being, a greater capacity for trust. Amidst the deep waters, to the extent we can begin to relax, we notice there are hands which still will hold us, there is a force – I call it God, you call it what you'd like -- which can keep us afloat. We begin to peel away the layers of fear and shame, and replace them with a palpable sense of faith that there is something deeper than or beyond ourselves which sustains us and can, no matter how far we have drifted, carry us back home.

We human beings are inherently forgetful by nature. For most of us, even life's most impactful, supposedly transformational experiences often change us only briefly. Great personal challenges like heart attacks or cancer diagnoses, or communal catastrophes like 9/11 lead us to make vows to ourselves, to promise that we will live differently, that we'll be kinder, more generous, more forgiving, more daring, more loving.

How often have we said, "I will never be the same again," only to fall into old patterns? How often have we promised ourselves to stop engaging in a destructive behavior only to find ourselves doing it again; how often have we promised ourselves to make good on a commitment only to notice it has fallen by the wayside. We're too busy. We're too scared. We're too set in our ways. Kol Nidrei acknowledges this inconstancy, our human capacity to forget. We know it takes hard work, repeated practice over time to shift us from a path of living which is rooted in fear and anxiety to a way of life which is anchored in faith.

Tonight and tomorrow, on Yom Kippur, we freely choose to remove our rings of kingship, all the externals which so often fashion our identity. We fast from food and from all of our daily activities and habits. We wear white, representing traditional burial shrouds. We immerse

ourselves in prayer, meditation or study. We avoid work and socializing. We say yizkor, mourning our dead. We recite the martyrology, invoking the loss of millions. We hear again the chilling words of *unetaneh tokef*, imagining who among us will live, who will die in the year ahead. And we'll end the day chanting the *sh'ma* and *Adonai hu ha-elohim*, affirming the reality of God, words traditionally spoken as part of our own deathbed confession. Yom Kippur is a near-death experience, at the end of which we climb out of our own casket and return to our life, hopefully just a little transformed and a lot more sober, a lot more real.

Today, the size of our bank account is irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether we have a country house or a rented studio apartment. It doesn't matter if we're a partner in a major firm or have been out of work for years. It doesn't matter if we have three PhDs or we're a high school dropout. It doesn't matter whether we take limousines or the Bolt Bus, whether we wear Armani or thrift store, whether we are supermodels or have been disfigured. Each of us is like the Beggar King, without rank or title, without special talent or quality, without distinguishing beauty or physical prowess, without impressive friends or partners or whatever it is that elevates us in our own view or the eyes of others. Today, on Yom Kippur, we drop our garb, and remember the naked truth: each of us here is of equal worth; each of us here is of infinite worth.

Tonight and tomorrow, we peel away the exterior layers of our identity; we discard our protective armor, our emotional defenses; we release our most destructive habits, to reveal what lies beneath all of these, at our core – our *neshama tehorah*, our pure soul, the spark of holiness which in truth is ultimately what connects us to each other and to the Oneness of all life.

Each small or large act of surrender, each time we let go of a crutch without which we imagined we couldn't survive, leads us to experience that which our heart always knows: there is a deeper well from which flows the aspects of ourselves we consider so crucial. There is something more powerful than any external aspect of ourselves which sustains and guides us exactly where we need to go. As we surrender, there is a force which eventually brings each of us, like Solomon, back home, wiser and more humble.

We began the season of turning in the heat of the summer, on Tisha B'av, with these words from the Eichah, the Book of Lamentations: *hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah*, turn us to You, God, that we might return. *Hadesh yameinu k'kedem* – renew our days, as of old. We have not come this far in the process only to become exactly who we've been in the past. We have not travelled so many years of our lives only to persist in our patterns, trapped in our habits, driven by anxiety that we don't measure up, that who we are isn't good enough.

***Hashiveinu Adonai:*** God, as you restored Solomon, as you have brought our people through every exile, carry us back as well – turn us towards our deepest, truest self, turn us towards our souls.

***Hashiveinu Adonai v'nashuvah:*** God, turn us towards our better angels; turn us towards each other that we may see each other as we truly are, created in Your Image.

***Hadesh yameinu*** – God, renew our days; help us live each day as if it were entirely new, unburdened by the past, liberated from shame and fear, unshackled from habit.

***Hadesh yameinu k'kedem*** – in this New Year, God, please help us remember as we rise each morning to look in the mirror and see ourselves as new, as you created us:

Each one of us beings of inherent, infinite worth,  
Each one of us precious children of God.