



SERMON YOM KIPPUR MORNING: HAVING A BALL

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 25 September 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 If we were living in the 1890s, we might be marking today very differently. We might be going to a party.

2 Towards the end of the 19th century, a new phenomenon arose in the British, American and Canadian Jewish communities: the Yom Kippur ball. Professor Rebecca Margolis recountsⁱ how it “*featured antireligious lectures, music and refreshments, for the duration of Yom Kippur, from Kol Nidre to Neilah*”. The first such event took place in London in 1888, and was advertised in Yiddish newspapers as follows:ⁱⁱ

We hereby notify all our friends that we are preparing a dinner to be held in our club. This will take place in honour of the great festival of Yom Kippur, when all asses and hypocrites repent of the sins they have committed, and fast. For one shilling you can receive a good dinner and spend a most enjoyable day in fine company. The dinner will be followed by singing and dancing. We will post advertisements for those who, sitting in synagogue and sneaking out now and then for a smoke and a bite to eat, may also be interested. Down with superstition! Long live the spirit of freedom!

It actually sounds like a rather wonderful event. A mob of angry, devout Orthodox Jews picketed the hall, but even so, an extraordinary number of people – mainly younger peopleⁱⁱⁱ – attended: so many that the organisers had to send out for more food.^{iv}

3 These balls, which took place every Yom Kippur for around 20 years, were deliberately iconoclastic. As Professor Margolis observes, they marked a moment when, for the first time in many

ⁱ Rebecca E Margolis, “A tempest in three teapots: Yom Kippur balls in London, New York, and Montreal”, *Canadian Jewish Studies* 9 (2001), 38-84: 38.

ⁱⁱ Quoted by Margolis, *ibid*: 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ Margolis, *ibid*: 55.

^{iv} *Ibid*: 43.

younger Jews' lives, "*traditional power structures were being challenged by new ones*".^v

4 The protesters complained that the balls were disrespectful. But what a way to miss the point. Of course the balls were disrespectful! That was the whole idea! And the irony is, that while the protesters were doing everything they could to stop their community's young people from attending – pickets, mobilising the police, even demanding that Parliament ban the gathering^{vi} – all the youngsters were actually doing was marking Yom Kippur.

5 Granted, they were marking it with eating and merry-making and antireligious thought. But they had nonetheless set the day aside to commune with other Jews and think about Judaism. That, at its heart, is what Yom Kippur is all about. If they weren't at the ball, they would probably have done nothing at all to make the day different from every other.^{vii}

6 Where else in Jewish history have we found a fringe group espousing a radically, disruptively different way of being? Everywhere! That is Jewish history. Monotheism was radical nonconformity in the days when every neighbouring tribe had huge groups of gods. The substitution of animal sacrifices for human sacrifices was radical nonconformity in the days when the latter were standard practice. The substitution of prayer for animal sacrifices was radical nonconformity when others were still doing burnt offerings. Progressive Judaism was radical nonconformity in the days when all synagogues made women sit at the back.

7 What did all of these innovators, from the first monotheists to the anarchists who organised the Yom Kippur balls, get out of their 'heresies'? Self-exploration, for one: the opportunity to experiment with different ways of being and to discover what was, and wasn't, meaningful and fulfilling. Also, there was the opportunity to promote change. Some novelties caught on – sacrifices are now generally frowned upon, for example – and some, like the Yom Kippur balls, fizzled out.

^v Ibid: 47.

^{vi} Ibid: 48.

^{vii} Ibid: 47.



8 Yet all of these pioneers took a risk, if only for a brief moment, to create something different out of their Judaism and out of themselves. And in doing so, they were doing Judaism. Disruption is a form of religious practice. Challenging the *status quo* helps the disruptor in their quest for self-discovery, and it helps the wider community to find where their true sentiments really lie.

9 In our haftarah reading this morning, we actually got a small glimpse of an idea that God might have preferred to dance at the Yom Kippur ball, rather than being in the company of the “asses and hypocrites” repenting in shul. Through the prophet Isaiah, God asked:^{viii}

Is this the fast-day I desire, a day for you to starve your bodies? Do you call that a day when the Eternal One is favourable? No, this is the fast I desire: unlock the manacles of wickedness. Let the oppressed go free. Break off every yoke.

The anarchists’ decision not to starve their bodies, but instead to talk about ways of improving the world, was, thus, a perfect way of doing Yom Kippur.

10 We’re not faced with that bald choice. Our synagogue is not just a place of prayer but also has a social justice group, a green team, and more avenues through which, as well as fasting in accord with the Yom Kippur tradition (for those who can do so without endangering their health, and who find it meaningful), we can fulfil the rest of the prophecy. The fact that we have a varied conception of Judaism is itself a radical nonconformity, and one that began with Isaiah’s disruptive rallying-cry against self-satisfied fasting.

11 I look forward to spending the next year of disruption with you. גמר חתימה טובה: may we all be inscribed for good in the Book of Life.

^{viii} Abridged from Isaiah 58:5-7

