

Kol Nidre Sermon 5785: A World Turned Upside-Down

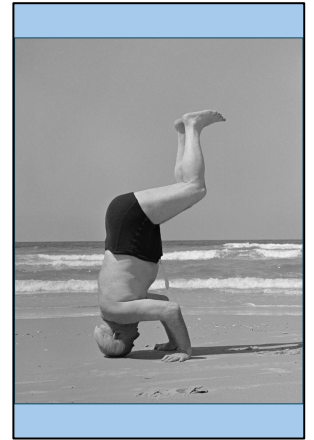
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[Start in a headstand – with help!] – G'mar Tov (x2)... People help me up for Aleinu, but.... Some hagbah!...

And *thaaaaaat's enough* of that for me... though the **perspective** is... *refreshing*.... You should know, I'm **not** the **first** Jewish leader to try to **understand our world** by **standing on my head**. Most famously [**POSTER**], **David Ben Gurion** believed in the health benefits of standing on his head – for long periods of time (*much longer than I could do it – and without help!*).

It makes me **wonder**: In *addition* to his health reasons – maybe Ben Gurion *also* spent **so much time on his head** because he was **trying** to **see the world... correctly**. He lived in a **tumultuous time** – and coming out of Holocaust, maybe the **only way** he could envision a **better world**, when *HIS* world was **SO upside down**, was to **flip** himself, to see it better, to see the upside-down world... *right-side up*....

From a **Jewish perspective** – it's **not so crazy**: The **full name** of this sacred day is *not* “**Yom Kippur**” – but “**Yom HaKippurim**” – which has been interpreted as [**POSTERS**] “**Yom... k'PURIM** – A day like Purim.” You know Purim – the crazy Jewish holiday, when we laugh and shake our heads at a world turned upside-down. The words in the **Megillah** we read on Purim summarize this feeling – we read “*v'nahafoch hu*” – our fate was all **upended, turned on its head**. Mordechai and the Jews were *meant* to be annihilated; instead, we are celebrated – and vice versa for Haman... Haman... (**BOO!**) and his followers.



Ben Gurion saw a world upside-down – and asked: What do we do? He **changed Jewish history** – building the Modern State of Israel, enabling Jews to determine our own fate and path for the first time in two millennia. *Not bad*.... But for **US**, in our **current mess**: **What do we do with a world upside-down?**

Well, the **first step** is that we must **acknowledge** that the world IS, indeed, upside-down. It reminds me of a story by the Chassidic Rebbe, **Reb Nachman** – the story of the **Tainted Wheat**... In which a King's advisor comes to him, in a panic. He says, “This year's **harvest** of wheat is **tainted!** Anyone who eats bread from this wheat will go **insane!** But **without** the wheat, we will all **starve!** What should we do?” The King calmly asks: “Is there **any** of the **old wheat**, from **last year's harvest**, left?” - to which the advisor responds: “Yes, but **only enough for two people** to last until the next harvest.”

The King nods: “Fine – then **you and I** will eat bread from the **old wheat**.” The **excitable advisor** balks: “But if **everyone else** is insane – how will we convince them that **WE'RE** the sane ones, an island in a sea of insanity? They will **revolt** against us! And we may even start **doubting ourselves**, with such **overwhelming noise** of insanity! **What shall we do?**” To which the King advises, “Here's what we'll do: We'll each **put a mark** on one another's **forehead** – the **one place** on our bodies where **another person can see it** while facing us, but **we cannot** – and **when I look at you, and you look at me** – we'll be **reminded, re-affirmed, reassured** that we're **not crazy**, but that **WE** are the ones who must **lead the world back to rightside-up.**”

Right now, in our world – I think *that's* our **biggest danger**: That we **might get OKAY** with **how upside-down** the world is right now. That we **might fail to RECOGNIZE** how **messed up** things are. We must **constantly push against complacency or acceptance** – and **remind** ourselves: It **doesn't have to be like this**. We can do better.

And isn't THAT the **purpose of Yom Kippur**? To **REMINd** ourselves – to **REMINd** the **WORLD** – that we are **off-course**. EVERY YEAR, we acknowledge it: We say – **WE ARE NOT OKAY. WE NEED FIXING**. So much so – that right now, as **THIS Yom Kippur** is just beginning – I *already* have **on my calendar, NEXT Yom Kippur**: It's the 10th of Tishrei, 5786 – mark it down – next Kol Nidre is October 1, 2025. We **just sang** in the Kol Nidre prayer: "*Mi-Yom Kippurim zeh, ad Yom Kippurim ha-ba aleinu*" – from this Yom Kippur until next Yom Kippur" - I **KNOW, right now** – that we're going to **need another fix**, another tune-up, by next year!

So THAT's the **IMPORTANT FIRST STEP** – to **call it out**, to **recognize** that the world is upside-down. So I'll ask: Is there anyone here who does **NOT** believe that, in some way, the world is on its head?!

Let's **look** at the **evidence** that we're **upside-down** – let's see those **marks on one another's foreheads**, to **remind** us that the world around us is **topsy-turvy**:

First of all – on a **lighter note**: the world is upside-down when I can say this, for the **first time in history**: The **Washington Commanders** are atop the division. (*For those of you who don't get that – the Washington Commanders are a football team.... Well, they're *kinda* a football team...*)

But more seriously – **not** just in **sports** reporting, but in **all** the ways we **receive** and **process** information, it's **almost impossible** to discern **what is "fact"** and **what is "spin."** The internet is populated with **"deep fakes"** and **purposeful manipulations** of how we perceive the world around us. We really don't know **which end is up!**

And the **effect** of our information being **unreliable** – is that we **start to doubt** our foundational stories: The story of the **American Dream** has been **turned upside-down**. The idea that, *though* we'll hit **rough patches** along the way, we are **generally** on an **upward trajectory** – this is **now in doubt**: For the first time in American history, *this generation* of **young adults**, when polled, **do not believe** that they will have it **better off** than their parents. This **breeds uncertainty, futility**, and even **unkindness** to one another – on a personal level, and on a global level.

Global friendships and alliances are **upside-down**, as well: **[TAP CHEST]** We are **guilty of inverting** who our **friends** are, and who our **enemies** are. Can you imagine the **evil dictators** and **Fuhrers** of **past generations eulogized** in the media as **"charismatic orators"** - ?! This was said of **Nasrallah**, the head of Hizballah. Nasrallah was **responsible** for the **deaths** of hundreds of Americans AND Israelis, people of all backgrounds – not to mention the way he **victimized** his **own people**. Our same enemies call for the death of our ally Israel, and in the same breath, call out "Death to America." As Elie Wiesel said, "When **someone says** they want to **kill you, believe them.**" We should **believe** their murderous intentions, **not explain their words away, not criticize** when **Israel** makes the world a safer place, *without* them.

Indeed, **Israel's vilification** on the world scene and in the media is perhaps the **greatest symptom** of an **upside-down world**:

Calling Israel **"genocidal"** – is **upside-down**: The **Palestinian population** has **multiplied** many times over, *despite* their antagonism and terrorism toward the Jewish State. Iron Dome has protected Arab and Jewish villages alike from rockets. Is there **loss of life in all war**? YES. But the IDF takes **efforts** to **minimize** such casualties, **not** to **eliminate** a people: They offer **advance text-message warnings** before taking out the rockets and weaponry, that are stored in Palestinian homes and mosques.

The **reporting on humanitarian aid** is **also upside-down**: Try to recall a war when the **more powerful side warned** their less-powerful attackers, and the civilians among them, **where to go** to access a **safer humanitarian corridor**... Was there ever a war where **one side** was **responsible** for **delivering humanitarian aid** to the other side?! Israel has facilitated almost a *million tons* of aid – some **3000 calories per Gazan, if only Hamas** did **not steal** the food and fuel and medical supplies from their own people. **Hamas** are the **persecutors**, but they are given a **free pass**, in this **upside-down world**.

Calling Israel “apartheid” is *also* upside-down: Arab citizens are represented in K’nesset, in the Supreme Court, in all professions, in the Army... Is there **work to be done** to reach **full equality**? **YES** – but **what nation** on earth **DOESN’T** have **such work** to be done? Can we, *here*, really **throw the first stone** when it comes to equal opportunity and outcomes? Israel is **not perfect** – but does it make sense that the United Nations condemns Israel at more than **double the rate** of all other countries, *combined*?! Maybe, *more likely*, the UN is **upside-down** – that they have **eaten** of the proverbial “**tainted wheat**” in the Reb Nachman story, and **WE** are just trying to **hold it together** until the **next harvest**?!

So *too*, it is **upside-down, false and deceptive**, to call Israel “**imperialist, colonialists.**” When the world partitioned the British Empire’s mandate in 1947, offering a Jewish State *and* an Arab State in Israel, it actually **REVERSED 1900 years of imperialism, against the Jews**. The **Jews accepted** this plan, the **Arabs chose war** – and have chosen war over a dozen other times that Israel and the world offered homelands for the Palestinian People. Calling a **Jewish People returning** to *part of* its ancestral homeland – calling *that* “**colonialist**” is... you guessed it, **upside-down!**

And perhaps the **WORST “upside-down”** deception is the one that, this year, **fueled the antisemitic animus** on college campuses, against Jewish students and professors (regardless of their Israel politics).

I am speaking of the **upside-down, false binary**: That one is **EITHER oppressed** – and therefore **blameless, not responsible**... **OR else** one must be the **oppressor – powerful**, and therefore, by definition, **evil**. This **false binary of oppressed vs. oppressor** has **labeled and libeled** Israel ever since we had the **temerity** – the **chutzpah** – to actually **succeed** at building a Jewish State, against all odds.

I *understand* why people **like an underdog**; I’m a huge **Eagles fan**, and I still smile about the Super Bowl season. I understand how much of the **Jewish Story** has been **defined** by “**David vs. Goliath.**” But I **don’t** want us to **over-romanticize** the idea of a **disempowered underdog**. Yes, I want us to be **hungry**, to **strive**, to **push ourselves to be better**, to **go beyond** what we thought was possible. But I’d much rather be **secure** in the **goodness** of the world, and in the **goodness** of those who are **powerful**.

The **REAL Jewish lesson** of **David and Goliath** is that being **threatened** and being **strong** are **not mutually exclusive**, that the **either-or** of the **underdog oppressed versus the powerful oppressor** is a **false dichotomy**.

But the **worst** part of the **upside-down, false-dichotomy** world of the saintly oppressed versus the powerful oppressor: It is a **vision** for a **TERRIBLE WORLD!** I **don’t want** to live in a world where the **good are powerless**, and **just barely survive!**

I **don’t want** to define **power** as **automatically evil** – **NO!** I want **GOOD** to be **POWERFUL**, **AND** to **use** our **POWER** for **GOOD!** **Join me** in that **vision for the world, will you?** It is a **relief** to me that, *even if* our world is **upside-down** right now... *Most of the time*, we live in a **world** where the **GOOD** side is **stronger!**

That’s why we **need** to **call it out** – to **SEE** that the world is upside-down right now, that this is a **Yom K’Purim** – a time more like the **upended world** of **Purim**. And **therefore**, to **plead** for a **world desperately in need** of a **Yom HaKippurim**, a **Yom Kippur**, to **re-stabilize** us.

We have to be **clear-headed, purposeful**, about just **what is upside-down, what needs righting** – because we cannot ignore the **ramifications** of **obfuscating, confusing, and accepting** an upended world. It is a **purposeful blindness** to the **immediate and unavoidable and disastrous consequences** of **inverting good and evil**. Judaism has a **folksy law** to **counter** this – called **psik reishet** – which means, “if you **cut off the head** of the chicken, you **cannot say** you ‘**didn’t mean**’ for it to **die.**” *Similarly*, you can’t say, “**Give back** the **Philadelphi corridor**, the main way that **Hamas smuggles arms**” and **THEN** say, “Oh, I **didn’t MEAN** that Hamas should be **allowed to re-arm** and **plan** the next October 7.” That, too, is **upside-down logic** – to **refuse to see** the **natural, logical, automatic consequences** of our **actions or advice or demands** of our friends and allies, *Acheinu*, our People.

But here’s the **good news**: **If** we **see**, if we **call out** the **consequences**, a **world upside-down**, like **Purim**, we can **then right this wrong**. On **Yom Kippur**, according to tradition, Moses comes down Mount Sinai with the **second set of tablets** of the Ten Commandments. Remember, he **smashed the first set** when he saw that we had **turned our world, our relationship with God... upside-down** – by building and worshiping a Golden Calf. Moses goes **back up the mountain** to figure out what to do with us, when we’ve **turned the Covenant upside-down**. And it’s **not until**

TODAY, Yom Kippur, that Moses comes **down Mount Sinai** with the *second* set of **tablets** of the Ten Commandments, and we **re-affirm the covenant**, we **set the world aright**.

Are there **modern-day Golden Calves** upending us, now? **[TAP CHEST]** For the **sin**, the **idolatry**, of **going astray**, **believing the lies and libels** of those who seek to harm us.... For the **sin**, the **idolatry**, of **misleading ourselves** and others.... **YES** – these are **enticing, self-destructive idolatries!**

But on **Yom Kippur** – We **get the second set** of tablets. We **pick up the broken pieces** of the first tablets – we **collect ourselves**, our **brokenness**... and we **start to rebuild** – more **AWARE** of the **stakes**, of the **threats** we face, than ever before. **Leading up to October 7, 2023**, Israel was **vulnerable, fractured**, and **[TAP CHEST]** **too self-assured** when it came to defense on the Gaza border. And **here**, we **too** got **too comfortable**, **ignoring or explaining away the growing antisemitism and antagonism** – in a way that, *history teaches us*, often leads to the **world peeling back the façade of safety and power**...

Now, the **scab is off**, the **wound is still there**: Our **nightmare**, our **shock**, when a **pogrom in Israel** was **celebrated** in the **quads of universities** and the **streets of cities**.... People and Peoples we **thought** were **allies and friends** – but who, in a **world upside-down**, turned away from us.

What **gives us our voice** to **call out a world upside-down**? A **strong Israel**. An Israel that sees its **mission to ally** with us **against antisemitism** (*I've shared before - when I went to Israel twice this year, Israelis asked how about WE are coping, as Jews in America!*)...

Israel is **not the cause of antisemitism** – that is **not only upside-down**, but really, it's **Jewish self-hatred** to say that **Israel causes antisemitism**. Rather, Israel is the **only viable RESPONSE** to **antisemitism!** It gives us a **strong Jewish voice** – even when we sometimes **use that voice** (*as Israelis DO!*) to **criticize a given government or policy**

We **NEED Purim**, to see our world with **clear eyes**, and to **plan our resurgence**; **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks** once reflected about **Purim**: “A people that can **know the full darkness of history** and yet **rejoice** is a people whose **spirit no power on Earth can ever break**.”

Purim is the moment when we **laugh**, and we recognize that the **world is upside-down**... And **now**, **Yom Kippur**, is the moment when we get **serious** about **turning it back, right-side-up!** We do **not** use it as **proof** of our **downfall**, but as **proof** of our **resilience!** Of our **timelessness**. Of our **secret sauce** for our **survival**. We **take a world on its head** – **k'PURIM** - and we **set it aright, again**... **one act of goodness**... **one STONE**, at a time.... **Reaffirming that Covenant**, at the **VERY MOMENT** we are **most vulnerable, most insecure, most in doubt** – as **Americans** and **certainly as Jews**.

The **world is upside-down** – but like **my feeble headstand attempt**, and even like **Ben Gurion**, who was **better at it** than I am – the **world cannot stay on its head forever**.

Like the **King** and his **advisor**, **eating the only untainted wheat** – we **WILL reach a day** when we **look at one another** – **or look** in the **spiritual mirror** - in order to **see the mark that reminds us: THIS reality is NOT OKAY**. And it **DOES NOT** have to **stay this way, this “not-okay.”** In a world that is **spinning out of control**, a world that is **upside-down** – it is **our job** to call that out... to **start to fix it**, to **be the light unto other nations and other humans**.... And **someday**, whenever a new harvest comes along, allowing **others** to **break through the fog** and the **perverse, mental bondage** of this **collective insanity**, may we **all** eat **new bread**, that lets us see a **better way**...

Where **GOOD overpowers EVIL**, where **HOPE vanquishes HATE** and **despair**, where **FAITH** in a **better world** puts us on the **path** to that better world. We put a **Yom Kippur** on the **calendar** each year – so that we can **see** the world of **Purim**, see it as **crazy**, as in **need of fixing**, of **righting** – and then, **slowly**, start to **“rightside-up it.”** **One pebble** at a time **[SHOW]**, we start to **solidify the ground** under our feet.

[Sing, softly] *Mi-Yom Kippurim zeh, ad Yom Kippurim ha-bah aleinu* – from **this Yom Kippur**, to the **next**, when we **pick ourselves up** and do the work again... **[Sing, softly]** *l'tovah*. – May we **bring goodness back** to a world that is, by next year, a **little more tov**, a **little more righted**, a **little more righteous**. **AMEN**.