

Reflections on Yom Kippur  
Amy Schneider  
September 24, 2004

Good evening. I'm Amy Schneider and I was asked to share some thoughts with you tonight.

This email was sent to me this week. It's about the upcoming critical Red Sox - Yankees series at Fenway which starts the same night as Kol Nidre. This has put our fans into a quandary. A very distressed Red Sox fan goes to his rabbi. "Rabbi," he says, "I don't know what to do. I know that tomorrow night is Kol Nidre, but the Sox are playing the Yankees and Pedro is pitching." The rabbi smiles. "That's all right. It's for nights like this that VCRs were invented." "Really?" the man says, his face lighting up, "I can tape Kol Nidre?"

Earlier tonight in our service we talked about self-evaluation. One part of self-evaluation I'd like to talk about is how you view yourself and your circumstances. And I'd like to talk about how it works in my family. You have choices about how to view yourself. You can focus on what's important and let go of what really doesn't matter. You can develop an approach, an attitude.

First, I have a prop. You can probably guess what I'm going to ask. Is this cup half full or half empty? We'll come back to that later.

Something reminded me last month of a time in the early 1970's when my Mom ran a women's group. This occurred when I was in high school. She had me come along, probably just to be with her and to see what it was like. I listened as lots of women of varying ages told their distressing stories of they had been impoverished or abused or suffered somehow. I was impressed by the harshness of their lives.

On our car ride home, I remarked to my Mom about how terrible the lives were of all of those women and how much better we had it. She told me it was all in what you focused on. I could just as easily have stood up and told my story that I'd lost my father at a very young age and also two grandparents; that I had a chronic illness, diabetes. Or I could consider that I had a loving family, a house, a good education, good doctors, what we needed. You can focus on what's sad or on what's good. We focus on what's good.

Again, a question for my Mom. How did she teach me to not feel my diabetes was a burden? She told me that she grew up with the best example, from her mother. You see, Mom's younger brother, my uncle, had polio at age 1½, but he never saw that as a problem. He still rode a bike and ran and played games. He just did it with a bit of discomfort and a bit of a limp; what's the big deal? I asked him once how Grandma had taught him to be so self sufficient and self assured. He said that when he was little and constantly at the hospital for some treatment or other, that my grandmother would be sitting with him and as other polio patients would come in and out of the waiting rooms,

she would tell him to look at that person and think about whether they were doing their special exercises. Were they getting stronger? He was. He was because he knew he had exercises to make him stronger and he did them. And because he had his mother to ensure that no one ever considered him disabled or less than perfect.

So how do you focus on what's best? You look for it. You remind yourself at midnight when your daughter finally remembers to call you and tell you where she is that she did remember. You look at the flood in your basement and think that now's the opportunity to get the big water heater so you can take long hot showers. You pick which you want to focus on. Which choice is going to let you sleep and then you deal with what you have to in the morning?

Of course, this isn't a new idea in the history of the Jewish people. To illustrate, let me share a story of Rabbi Akiba that comes from the Talmud.

Talmud (literally "study") is the rabbinic writings on Jewish law and tradition. The Talmud consists of two parts, Halacha (lit. "he went") and Aggadah (lit. "it was said"). The Halacha is the law, the rules. The Aggadah is the stories and the legends. This story is from the Aggadah.

### The Optimist

Rabbi Akiba once went on a journey. He took along with him an ass, a cock and a torch. The ass was to ride upon, the cock to wake him at dawn, and the torch to light his way in the dark.

At last he came to a village and asked for a night's lodging, but every door was closed against him. Good-humoredly, Rabbi Akiba said, "Whatever happens will be for the best."

He then went into the fields to spend the night.

As he slept a lion came and devoured the ass. Then came a wildcat and ate the cock. Finally, a strong wind blew up and put out the torch.

When dawn came Rabbi Akiba learned that during the night robbers had fallen upon the village and looted it. He then said to the hard-hearted villagers, "see, how everything works out for the best-even your inhospitality! Had I lodged with you the robbers would have caught me too. If my torch had burned, if my cock had crowed, and if my ass had brayed, then the robbers would have discovered me even in the fields."

There is always a choice. There's always a way to think about how you got to this here and now moment; that you got through a struggle and got to the other side. And you can get through the next struggle. There's always someplace to go back to to remind yourself that there is a positive choice, a good focus to help you along.

By the way, my uncle, you know, the one with the polio. Three weeks ago he and my aunt celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

Okay, now back to that cup. Is it half empty or half full? It's all in how you think about it, but overall, it doesn't matter, because if the waiter doesn't get over here and fill it all the way up, he's going to be searching for his tip.

Thank you and have an easy fast.