

All of You: Lessons for the Journey of Teshuva

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Rabbi Adam Feldman, may his memory be for a blessing, told his congregation the following story one Yom Kippur:

“[Rabinowitz was] a man who lived a righteous life – a true tzadik – free from sin. He goes up to heaven and is greeted with open arms by God, given a seat at the head of the table.

His meal comes: a slice of bread, a can of schmaltz, some herring and a glass of water to wash it down. As he is eating,

out of the corner of his eye he sees through the partition, to the other side, the dining room where the sinners go. To his

shock he sees a feast taking place – soup, kugel and

[miraculously vegetarian] turkey, brisket, French fries, wine,

cakes and pastries – all sorts of delicacies. This goes on and

on, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Rabinowitz sits down for dinner – slice of bread, schmaltz, herring and a glass of water – and every day, he sees in the other dining room these no-gooders feasting away. Finally, Friday comes, and Rabinowitz musters the courage to approach God. Summoning all his strength, he says, “Please don’t take this the wrong way, I mean no offense, God, but I lived my whole life in righteousness. I get to heaven and every meal I get my schmaltz, my herring, my bread and water, and every meal I watch [those less righteous] enjoying a gorgeous feast... God, I have to say, it just doesn’t seem fair.”

God turns to him and says, “Well to tell you the truth Rabinowitz, it’s just not worth cooking for one.”

Here we are again on Yom Kippur facing our flaws, our inadequacies -- the pain we have caused others and the pain we have caused ourselves. Buffeted by the storms of this year, we may feel distant from God's presence from a connection to the Source of all Life. Given our imperfect humanity, we understand why in this story Rabinowitz is alone at the table. Yet, even amidst the tumult of the past weeks and months, we seek again on Yom Kippur to do a bit better, to be a bit wiser, to grow, to change. So this morning, I want to distill just three lessons that we may take with us in this ever evolving journey of return, repentance, of *teshuvah*:

Lesson #1 – Teshuva is about you.

An acquaintance once approached me for advice about a letter he was planning on sending to his daughter by Yom

Kippur. He wanted to get everything off of his chest – to lay out the full history of their relationship, describe his daughter's missteps and cruelties, and then offer that this was all in the past and that he would like to have a warmer relationship with her. He assumed that a full accounting of the daughter's behavior, if accompanied by his offer to forgive, would lead to reconciliation. I listened to his pain and to his genuine desire to repair the relationship, and found myself thinking, "This is not going to work -- for this is not true teshuvah. True *teshuvah* in relationships is concerned with others, but it must begin with and focus on oneself.

It may be a familiar experience during these Days of Awe -- we wish to ask someone for forgiveness and begin with "I'm sorry if what I said or did hurt you, but...." This is where our apology goes off the rails. What spills out after the "but"

is a clumsy attempt to rehabilitate the other person's soul. It might include elucidating their contribution to the problem or explaining how we had no choice but to respond as we did because of their behavior. Because our apology ends up being wrapped in accusation or blame, it fails to heal the relationship. And it fails us, as well, because we've missed out on the most important, essential promise of *teshuvah* – self-transformation. *Teshuvah* is ultimately about taking responsibility for one's own actions, not about trying to justify them, or to change other people.

In many ways, *teshuvah* reminds us of how little control we have over others. Even when we approach someone with true forgiveness, we get no guarantee of their response. And while we hope to repair relationships, we may not be able to do so. The only thing we can really do for sure is take

responsibility for our role in a relationship -- and this is no small thing: at the very least, it allows us to repair our relationship with ourselves.

Lesson #2 – It’s not only about you, it’s about all of you.

Distancing ourselves from our own failings can be a natural, almost reflexive act of self-protection. We tell ourselves that it is not our fault when someone is hurt by our actions; we didn’t really mean the harm we caused, or maybe we were just having a bad day. “That is so out of character, so not like me. What got into me?” we may say to ourselves. As if in that moment we had briefly become someone else. In doing so we are playing hide and seek with ourselves. We don’t own up to the complexity of our own nature, motivations, and

potential to cause hurt. We become disconnected from our fallibility and, as a result, from the fullness of who we are.

Teshuvah challenges us to own our whole selves, including our brokenness and our failings. It can be tremendously painful to shine the light of *teshuvah* on the parts of ourselves we're most uncomfortable with. But, paradoxically, only when we recognize our brokenness can we become whole. Recognition alone does not absolve us: our tradition teaches that we must feel regret, approach those we have harmed to sincerely ask for forgiveness, and commit to behaving differently in the future. None of this can begin, though, without accepting the difficult, painful parts of ourselves -- taking

full responsibility for our behavior. When we do so, we are embracing our essential humanity.

Lesson #3 -- Teshuvah is about love

There is gentle, poetic beauty to the final Torah portion that we read this year prior to Rosh Hashanah. In Nitzavim the root word “shuv” (meaning to turn or restore – the root of teshuvah/repentance) appears 5 times in just a few verses. The people have strayed from the path of blessing, but when they return to God, God will take them back in love and compassion. Take us back in love and compassion. These verses express the mystical alchemy of divine and human love that is the essence of *teshuvah*.

Forgiving someone for past wrongs, ultimately, relies on love and a desire for relationship taking precedence over past

pain and anger. Love strengthens us to transcend past hurts and find compassion again for those who seek forgiveness.

A belief in God's love for us can help us face ourselves even when it is painful to confront our darker natures. And it is a love of life and a recognition of how precious it is – foremost in our minds as we turn to the Yizkor service -- that can help us to seize the opportunity for teshuvah, for reclaiming what is of greatest worth. Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg writes:

Yom Kippur is the touchstone; it has the power to restore us to the consciousness that matters most. Of course, it is a day of atonement and reconciliation, when we determine to make good the past and do better in the future. But

more than anything else, Yom Kippur is a day about love. When we seek the core and wellspring of our own self, when we reach out for others to reach us, when we call to God and God calls to us to draw close – what else is at the heart of this, if not love?

Today is the day; teshuvah is the goal; and love is how we get there. And while it may be unusual on Yom Kippur to turn to a Presbyterian minister to summarize the message, I firmly believe that there is seldom a wrong time to look to Mister Rogers for wisdom. He said:

The greatest thing we can do is to help someone to know that they are loved and that

they are capable of loving. From the time you were very little, you've had people who have smiled you into smiling, who have talked you into talking, sung you into singing, and loved you into loving.

On this Yom Kippur may we open ourselves to divine and human love. As we remember those we mourn this Yizkor, may we honor the love we received and carry it forward in how we chose to live our lives. As we continue the process of *teshuvah*, may we learn to embrace even our brokenness, the fullness of who we are. May it be a Yom Kippur that brings wholeness, return, and the comfort and beauty that love provides.

Gemar chatimah tovah. May we sign and seal our names in the book of life. Tzom Kal -- For those who are able, may it be a meaningful fast.