

Satan – the great Adversary – decided to retire and sell all his diabolical devices. On the day of the sale he put all his tools on display, each with a price tag. One rather plain-looking, well-worked tool was priced much higher than the others. The devil was asked what it was.

"That's discouragement," he said."

"Why is it priced so high?"

"Because," said the devil, "it is more useful to me than all the others. I use it to get inside people's minds, and once inside I can use them to do my work. It's so worn because it is my favorite tool. I have used it on nearly everyone, yet few people know that it belongs to me."

According to the fable, the devil's price for discouragement was so high that nobody bought it. And he's still using it.¹

On Rosh Hashanah I tried to make the case that the story of the Binding of Isaac is actually a cautionary tale – a warning about how fear can lead us to deviate from our moral standards. It is reasonable, at times, to be afraid. But it can get us stuck into thinking what is now always will be. That discouraging assessment is something that Jewish history says is just not the case and Jewish theology says is unworthy of us.

If we believe that evil is intrinsic and inherent in the other – if we are convinced that all Muslims seek our destruction, that the family members we no longer talk to can never change or that politics is about having our way without compromise, that we are who we are and cannot change – we are doomed. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman says, at such a point "not only will there not be peace now, but there will also be no peace tomorrow. All we can hope for is the vanquishing or destruction of the other, or the search for walls and iron domes that will create a *status quo* in which we are protected from the harm that evil inevitably hurls in our direction."²

Yom Kippur is the antidote to this despair. The message of this day is hopeful, for it says we *can* change, that what was is not what might be ... or

¹ Told by Rabbi Avis D. Miller in *On Wings of Hope* (2002), p.53

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vpu_uvtpYk&feature=youtu.be

what could be. The goal this day is to make *teshuvah* תשובה, to turn from fear and discouragement to hope. To do so takes just three steps:

- First, to turn from remembering to dreaming,
- Second, from rejecting blaming towards accepting responsibility, and
- Third, not just speaking of things being better, but through doing something to make the change we seek.

Not remembering, but dreaming

Our traditions speak of using this season to make a *chesbon ha'nefesh* חשבון הנפש, an "accounting of the soul." If we want to change, we have to start with taking an audit of our lives - and that necessarily means looking back.

Too much memory, however, can be a spiritual and psychological trap. In his short story, "Funes the Memorius", Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of a man with an unusual disability. Funes has a horseback riding accident that affects his memory – not forgetting, but remembering everything. We normally consider memory loss an awful consequence of brain injury. Borges forces us to imagine the exact opposite scenario – the burden of remembering too much. In the story, Funes recalls so much that he cannot get out of his bed. He is stuck by clinging to the past, unable to live in the present or anticipate the future.

As Rabbi Avi Weiss says, "Sometimes relationships can only go on if we can forget past slights. Sometimes a marriage can only endure if we forget how we have been wronged. Sometimes it is important to forget our children's mistakes, and they ours."³ In dealing with larger, societal conflicts, too much memory constricts the ability of those in conflict to forgive, heal and move forward. If something bad happened to me in the past, it is understandable that I might be cautious lest it happen again. As the cliché

³ New York Board of Rabbis, Sermon Seminar 5769, September 3, 2008

goes, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on you." But we too often become paralyzed when we hold on too tightly to our memories.

Yom Kippur is a goad into moving beyond remembering and to have the courage to start dreaming. It is easy to say, "that person/those people/that nation will never change", but if we can imagine something better it is possible. Are you so pessimistic about yourself, that you cannot change, that you cannot grow, that you are not different today than you were a year or 20 years ago? And if you can change, why not the brother, aunt, former partner, friend ... whoever ... you gave up on? I once witnessed the President of Germany speak at the Knesset, admitting the wrongs of his parents' generation, and pledging Germany's alliance with the Jewish State. Anything is possible. The key is not to get mired in our remembering, but to allow the imagination to soar with what might be.

After Shimon Peres died a couple of weeks ago *Wall Street Journal* commentator Bret Stephens shared a personal recollection of the Nobel prize-winning former Israeli Prime Minister. "In 2002 I sat next to him on a long flight from Johannesburg to Tel Aviv. He was reading historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's history of food. I listened intently to him wax philosophically on agriculture, then nanotechnology, then a plan to replenish the Dead Sea with water from the Red Sea. He wanted only to talk about the future, not the past. He was nearly 80 at the time, still dreaming big."⁴ Towards the end of his life Peres was asked to reflect on his greatest achievement. He replied, "there was a great painter named Mordecai Ardon, who was asked which picture was the most beautiful he had ever painted. Ardon replied, 'The picture I will paint tomorrow.' That is also my answer."⁵

Some of you may take issue with Peres' approach towards the Palestinians or with his assessment of the politics in the Middle East, but Stephens understood something important about this man. His focus was not on

⁴ "Shimon Peres: Israel's Last Founding Father", *Wall Street Journal* (September 28, 2016)

⁵ *Ma'ariv*, May 2011

remembering, but dreaming. His greatness was not getting mired in the past, but using it as an impetus to envision a different and better future.

It is the capacity to imagine something different that is the foundation for *teshuvah* (repentance). If we cannot even dream that a broken relationship can be repaired, that the wrongs we committed can be righted (not forgotten, but forgiven), that things just might be better – for us, our nation, for the world – then what are we even doing here?

Yes. Remember the past. Dredge up the pains and disappointments. Don't pretend that everything will be OK just by wanting it to be so. At the same time, do not give into the fear that things can never change. Dream.

Not blaming, but taking responsibility

Did you hear that earlier this year a lawsuit was filed by a Chicago woman against Starbucks for \$5 million with the claim that the company short-changes customers by filling chilled beverages with too much ice? A company spokeswoman, Jaime Riley, said via email, "If a customer is not satisfied with their beverage preparation, we will gladly remake it." Now I'll admit that given what's going on in the world, this may seem like small potatoes, but this story illustrates the culture of victimhood that seems all too prevalent today. It is emblematic of blaming others instead of taking responsibility for what one says or does.

Of course, the "blame game" has been around a long time. Torah opens with two stories that illustrate how all too human it is to shift responsibility. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit, both insist it is not their fault. Adam says, "the woman you put here with me – she gave (it to) me."⁶ And Eve blames the serpent. Their son's denial of responsibility is even more tragic. When God asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" his retort is, "Am I my brother's

⁶ Genesis 3:9-12

keeper?"⁷ This is not merely a denial of personal responsibility. It is an abdication of moral obligation.

The shift to blame from responsibility rests in a sense of victimhood – and it manifests itself in ways small and large. It is the parent who refuses to acknowledge when others criticize his or her child. Blame shields us from the hard and sometimes painful self-reflection that is necessary to see our part in a disagreement with a friend or family member. It is the argument of the bully who refuses to acknowledge what he or she has done, or the terrible things she or he said. Blame is the easy cushion that allows the justification of wrongdoing. "I was stressed." "Can't you take a joke?! It's your fault if you're offended." "It was long ago. Give it up." "The system is rigged against me." Blame, in the extreme, allows the wrongdoer to blame the victim. It is the excuse of those who excuse acts of violence as merely the natural outcome of one's self-righteous indignation. "He was rejected by his classmates. That's why he brought a gun in to murder eight people." "It was the Jews who were to blame" – so claimed the Nazis to deflect responsibility for the pogrom against the Jewish community in November 1938.

What can bring healing after such hate? Only forgiveness. And forgiveness has to begin with an acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. A member of our congregation has parents who survived the *Shoah* hiding for years in a sewer. His parents lived in a land where most turned aside from taking responsibility, and millions of Jews were murdered. But some – including those who saved his parents – took personal responsibility. It is the legacy of such righteousness that endures in a remarkable group of Christian Poles and Germans, who last month led a March of Remembrance and Life on the streets of Krakow, Poland to speak openly of the complicity of so many – not only the Nazi leadership – in allowing the Holocaust to take place.⁸ One of the most moving speakers on the march offered as powerful an example of what it means to accept responsibility as I've heard:

⁷ Genesis 4:8-9

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCddeqllUF4> and <http://www.fundacjapolania.pl/marsz>

Here today we are gathered before Your countenance (O God), and we stand before descendants of those who once lived in this land for many decades ... We want to confess our faults, and apologize to You for our sins as we have acted in an ungodly way. We have rejected our own brothers, and pillaged their goods and some of them we killed. God, we are put to shame for all this. We ask You for forgiveness and forgiveness from our (Jewish) brothers whom we are facing today.

Is it enough? Is it too late? Is it representative of what's really happening in Poland or Europe? I don't know. But it is representative of that man and those Germans and Poles who, even now, accept responsibility for what was done in the time of their grandparents. And if there is a way through the thicket of fear and the divisions sown by hate, it will be because of people like them.

The punishment of Adam and Eve is not because they disobeyed God. It is because, when confronted with their wrongdoing, they refused to accept personal responsibility. There is no way forward – not in our families, not in politics, not in world conflicts – that relies solely on blame. The way towards reconciliation and forgiveness is only through the gateway of personal responsibility for what we do (or choose not to).

Not words, prayers or thoughts, but action

In April 1862, during the heart of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln concluded a message to Congress [regarding the abolition of slavery] by posing the very question we face today. He said to those representatives, "It is not 'Can any of us imagine better?' but 'Can we all do better?' The answer is of course and always, yes."

Lincoln understood that it is not just enough to want to do good or even to imagine something better. Our task is to engage in action that will actually make the lives of others better. Jewish tradition comes to the same conclusion. Consider the *הפטרה* *haftarah* for this morning. Isaiah challenges us not to be lulled into thinking it is enough on this day to just fast and pray. We must act.

This is the fast I desire:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke ...
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin ...
Banish ... the menacing hand and evil speech,
Offer your compassion ...⁹

Isaiah is not speaking to us about empathy. He rails, in fact, against those who offer but "prayers and thoughts" as a response to suffering. He warned those of his time – and we in ours – that dreaming of a better world, and taking responsibility for what we do or do not do to bring it about, must culminate in action.

Most Americans believe our country is on the wrong track. So ... stop *kvetching* and get it moving in the right direction. This election cycle some have said we cannot afford to be politically correct. But what is "political correctness"? It is speaking to others with dignity. It is not defining people by their labels, but honor their unique individuality. Political correctness is not about squelching truth. It is about engaging in discourse in ways that are civil and decent. You hate the term? Fine. Don't use it. But speaking and acting with respect towards one another – in private and in public – cannot help but make things better.

There is a strange discussion in the Talmud about whether one has fulfilled the *mitzvah* of hearing the sound of the שופר *shofar* if you are in a pit, cistern or barrel. The rabbis decide that if you hear the sound of the *shofar* directly you have fulfilled the *mitzvah*, but if you are outside and only hear its echo you have not fulfilled the commandment.¹⁰ In this esoteric law the rabbis are actually teaching us something very profound about what it means to heed the voice of the שופר *shofar* – the sound that is meant to move us to change. How easy it is to only hear those with whom we agree, who do not make us uncomfortable, who are doing well. But if we do stand apart from the pain in

⁹ Isaiah 58:6-7

¹⁰ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:7

the world, we will be in our own "echo chamber". But if, our rabbis teach, we are with others them in the dark moments of their lives, in the times when they feel in the pit – like Joseph in abandoned by his brothers – then we become the שופר *shofar*, that which gives hope to those who are constrained as if in a barrel.

A popular movie this year, *Sully*, tells the story of Chesley Sullenberger, the US Airways pilot who deftly landed his stricken aircraft in the Hudson River, saving everyone on board. Sully was rightly lauded as a hero not only because of what he did, but because he stayed on the plane floating in the East River until every last passenger and crewmember was safe. A book about him suggests that this heroic sign of character can be traced to a searing incident that he recalled happening when he was a young boy – the stabbing of Kitty Genovese in Queens. He remembers hearing news reports that her neighbors heard her screams and did nothing to help.

Sully said, "I made a pledge to myself, right then at age 13, that if I was ever in a situation where someone such as Kitty Genovese needed my help, I would choose to act. No one in danger would be abandoned. As they'd say in the Navy: 'Not on my watch.'"¹¹

Why, in the end, are we here today? Some nine centuries ago the Rambam taught that real תשובה *teshuvah* (repentance) is about doing the right thing. Rav Avraham Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine in the 1930's, suggested even this - doing good - not enough. "The entire basis of תשובה *teshuvah* (penitence)", he suggested, is "to go ... from the valley of despair to the door of hope."¹² As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, "Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world

¹¹ "What we can learn from Sully's Journey," Jeffrey Zaslow, *Wall Street Journal* (October 14, 2009)

¹² Avraham Isaac Kook, *Lights of Penitence*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 113

better."¹³ The devil is still pedaling discouragement, his most expensive tool, but God gives us something even more dear – and that is hope.

There will come a time when our children and grandchildren will ask us what we did on our “watch.”

Let us live each day in a way so that we can hold our heads high and speak with pride that we were not afraid to dream.

Let us act with integrity and take responsibility for what we do or fail to do.

Let us raise our eyes to see the vision of ourselves as instruments for good in this world, acting in ways that bring about a world better for having lived in it.

Let us turn on the path to hope ... a hope we build together.

¹³ To Heal a Fractured World p. 166