

RH 5770 Day 2: Forgiving Ourselves First

Rabbi Marci Jacobs

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Back in July, Jeff and I spent an incredible two weeks in Hawaii, exploring the islands, appreciating both the breathtaking natural beauty and the kindness of the locals. On our last day there, before (sadly) heading to the airport, we spent a couple of hours at a local craft marketplace. We hoped to find souvenirs for family and friends. While we found some great gifts there, the best thing about the craft fair was the company of the artisans and shop owners.

After spending a few minutes looking around one particular stall, we began chatting with the proprietor, Mosa. He asked us where we came from—“Near Boston,” we answered. Noticing his accented English, we asked, “What about you?” “Morocco.” After chatting about what it was like to live so far from home, Mosa noticed Jeff’s kippah and said, “You’re Jewish?” Jeff confirmed this, and Mosa continued, “Are you a rabbi?”

“No,” Jeff said, pointing at me, “But she is.”

Mosa was intrigued, and he began to tell us about his family in Morocco. His mother's best friend was Jewish, and Mosa shared with us how the two women celebrated holidays together, educating each other about their respective religious traditions. He recalled enjoying Rosh Hashanah meals with this woman, and how she and her family would join them for their celebration of Eid, at the end of Ramadan.

Eventually, our conversation turned to Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Wouldn't it be nice," Mosa mused, "if the two sides could come together—like my mother and her friend, or like you and I—across a table and just talk, just hear each other out?"

If only it were that simple. Mosa's hopeful wish for Israel seems naïve to us. We simply can't imagine either party sitting down, willing to hear the other's point of view. Unfortunately, we quickly imagine such a scenario deteriorating into a shouting match, with each side complaining that they are giving away too much for too little in return, that the other is taking advantage. Reconciliation, especially of the sort Mosa envisioned, all too often seems impossible.

Today is not the day for us to try to solve the intractable situation in the Middle East. However, looking at this situation through the lens of Mosa's wish, we can begin to see how the imagined trajectory of such a sit-down—the arguing, the pain, the constant tit-for-tat—could just as easily be two people, trying to reach a point of reconciliation after a break-down in their relationship.

We've all been there. We've all caused our loved ones pain and upset or been hurt by those close to us. We've all been in situations that seem stuck in unpleasantness. Repairing disagreements, untangling and healing broken relationships—these can seem just as impossible as resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it's what we're charged with doing during this season.

Teshuvah, repentance, is not simply a matter of resolving to do better, nor is it a process reserved for the realm of religion and spirituality. Our tradition teaches that the observance of Yom Kippur helps grant us atonement **only** for wrongs committed against God; the day itself takes care of that side of things. But for wrongs, hurts, and offenses between us and other people, **we** have to seek reconciliation. Yom Kippur alone isn't enough.

Thankfully, our tradition is rich with prayers, instructions, and tools that guide us in our pursuit of reconciliation and repentance. Some, like the *Al Het* confession we recite on Yom Kippur, help us find the right words to admit where we've gone wrong. Others help us to understand what it is we must do in seeking reconciliation. Rambam, Maimonides, in his explication of the laws of repentance, explains that we are not forgiven by God for deeds against others until we appease our fellow. We may have physically injured him; we may have stolen something, or simply spoken harshly—whatever we have done, we must find a way to make up for it. It is so important to find a way to reconcile that we must make an extra effort, beyond any material restitution, and go to the person we've wronged to beseech forgiveness. If he will not forgive, we must return two more times. Rambam even suggests bringing friends as character witnesses to help encourage the person we've hurt to grant us a pardon.

Our tradition gives us concrete instructions for how to effect reconciliation, for how to achieve *Teshuvah*. Confessing our sins out loud, seeking forgiveness from those we've wronged—these are the outward parts of *Teshuvah*. They are essential, but they are not the whole picture. In order for the outward work of *Teshuvah* to succeed,

it must be built upon a solid inner foundation. Without this inner piece, these practices become empty rituals. The confession of *Al Het* becomes instead a hollow recitation of words that come from a book, not from the depths of our hearts. Seeking forgiveness from those we've wronged is transformed into an insincere and meaningless "I'm sorry."

This inner work is difficult, and sometimes we resist it. It requires us to look closely at ourselves, and we're afraid we might not like what we see. We think that the outward parts of *Teshuvah* obligate us to compromise our personal integrity to make someone else happy. Sometimes, we're not resistant to it, but we just get so far away from ourselves that we have no idea how to begin the process. But this inner work is the most essential part of *Teshuvah*. It's the starting point—before we can reconcile with others, we must reconcile with ourselves.

Yesterday, our Haftarah told us a beautiful story of this kind of reconciliation. Hannah, the protagonist, was a barren woman who wished desperately for a child. Her despair was made worse by the unfettered fertility of her co-wife, Peninah. Every year, the family

would travel to Shiloh, to celebrate and offer sacrifices to God. On one such occasion, Hannah approached the temple and poured out her heart before God. Her lips were moving as she soundlessly sent her prayers toward heaven. The priest at the time, Eli, happened upon her. He saw her lips moving, seemingly talking to herself, and he presumed her to be drunk. Offended by such *chutzpah*, Eli rebuked the woman, harshly. Hannah denied his accusations, and Eli apologized, sending her off with his wishes for God to heed her prayers.

On the face of things, this is a story about the outward work of *Teshuvah*. Here we have an incident of someone being wronged and a request for forgiveness. If we take a closer look, we can see how these outward acts of reconciliation are founded on the inner work that must precede them.

The Talmud, in Massekhet Berakhot, rereads this story verse by verse, weaving together a tapestry of midrashim that help us see its inner process. Mostly, these midrashim teach us about prayer. However, the explication of the verses detailing Hannah's interaction

with Eli give us another lens, the lens of *Teshuvah*, through which to view these events.

“So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” (1 Samuel 1:13-14) In response to Eli’s accusation “Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord!” (1 Samuel 1:15) The midrash expands Hannah’s brief comment, “No, you are not a lord, and you do not possess the divine spirit, for you already judged me guilty and did not give me the benefit of the doubt. Can’t you see that I am in pain, that I am a woman of bitter sadness?” From this we learn, says Rabbi Elazar, that one who is accused falsely must state her innocence.

“Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked.” (1 Samuel 1:17) From this, says Rabbi Elazar, we learn that one who wrongly accuses his fellow must seek her forgiveness; moreover, he must offer her a blessing, as Eli did here.

Through the Talmud’s Midrashic analysis, we see how both players here are deeply invested in how they handle the situation. In response to Eli’s presumptuous rebuke, Hannah rebukes him back,

not in the way we might expect. A more typical response would have her cause him as much hurt as his words caused her, escalating the situation. Instead, she responds by sharing of herself. “Can’t you see that I’m in pain, that I am a woman of bitter sadness?” With these words, she reveals herself to be deeply self-aware. Facing Eli’s anger, she chooses to offer herself in response, honestly and unashamed. “This is who I am,” she says. “If you’re going to judge me, judge me, but judge me based on the truth, not on who you presume me to be.”

This approach is successful, and Eli immediately apologizes. He doesn’t defend his previous actions—this was not “I’m sorry, but...(this is really your fault)” Nor did Eli respond to Hannah’s explanation with pity. He came back to her with simple, open acceptance. “Okay,” he seems to say. “I get it. I hope that you find what you need, that God answers your prayers.” Eli’s response, like Hannah’s, showed him to be aware of himself. Armed with this knowledge, he was able to hear Hannah’s criticism, to reflect on it, and to see that it was correct—without defensiveness, without denial. He was thus prepared to face Hannah, and to see her for who she was as well.

Both Hannah and Eli first had to accept themselves in order to achieve this kind of reconciliation. Both had the courage to look at themselves, to accept who they were at that moment. Both had the foresight to imagine how they could be better in the future. Having first forgiven themselves, they were now willing to hear the other openly. Their inner work allowed them to receive each other as they did, enabling them to reach a true reconciliation—a reconciliation that brought with it blessing. Incidentally, the end of the story shows how complete their reconciliation was. After the birth of her son, Sh'muel, Hannah dedicated him to a life of service of God, and handed him over to be raised by Eli.

The story of Hannah inspires us during this season. Starting with the beginning of the month of Elul, we are charged with the task of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, taking account of our souls. We look deeply into ourselves, examining our actions, our behaviors, and seek to understand more fully who we are at this point so that we can move forward. What have we accomplished in this past year? What are we proud of? Where could we improve? Through this process, which leads us into Rosh Hashanah, we come to reconcile with ourselves, to forgive ourselves for our shortcomings. Only then can

we move toward finding reconciliation in our relationships with others. Hannah and Eli show us how thoroughly they have taken account of themselves, how their inner work gave them the tools to reconcile with each other. As it was with Hannah and Eli, so it is with us--in order to heal our broken relationships with others, we have to first heal ourselves.

This past year, inspired by our rabbinic intern, Lisa Barrett, we held two healing services, with the goal of helping the participants begin to find a way toward, in the words of the *Mi Shebeirakh* prayer, *r'fuat ha-nefesh ur'fuat ha-guf*, healing of body and healing of spirit.

The words we spoke, the rituals we participated in, and the prayers we sent toward heaven opened us to the inner work we usually associate with this season of repentance and reconciliation. Though not specifically geared toward repentance, our healing services guided us into the process of *heshbon ha-nefesh*. Their structure and environment were conducive to inspiring this kind of introspection, to connecting us to the inner work of *Teshuvah*. Personally, I left the service in which I participated feeling like I had deeper insight into myself. It pushed me to examine what was keeping me from feeling whole, and helped me to accept that I had work to do. That

experience, although it took place back in the spring, set me on the path of the inner reconciliation that is necessary for the *Teshuvah* we seek during this time of year.

We see potential for the reconciliation of the self all around us. Just a week ago, we joined with Temple Isaiah to usher in the High Holiday season with *Selihot*. Coming together with Temple Isaiah is unremarkable—our communities jointly sponsor many events and programs each year. The agenda for this year’s *Selihot* program was to explore how our two communities—which both found their genesis in the split 50 years ago in the Arlington-Lexington-Bedford Jewish Community Center—have reconciled and built a renewed relationship. Hearing the recollections of members of both *shuls* who were experienced the rift, it became clear to me that both synagogues have done what Eli and Hannah managed to do—we have both achieved clarity and security in who we are; we are both constantly using that awareness to propel ourselves forward; and we are both comfortable enough in ourselves that we can truly partner with the other. As both synagogues celebrate our 50th anniversaries this year, we do so aware of how the inner work of *Teshuvah* has

helped us to thrive and confident that it will continue to do so in the future.

We focus most on the inner work of *Teshuvah* at this time of year; however, our tradition provides us with multiple opportunities to seek ourselves, to find forgiveness within. Each spring, between *Pesah* and *Shavuot*, we count the *Omer*, marking the 49 days that separate the two festivals. According to the kabbalists, each of the seven weeks of the *Omer* is inspired by one of the seven lower *sefirot*, the aspects of God we perceive in our world. Each day is further inspired by the same divine attributes. Each day of the *Omer* thus has a different quality as we cycle through the *sefirot* in our counting. Every day gives us the opportunity to contemplate the nexus of two attributes—love within love, or restraint within nobility, for example. This method of counting is not simply meant for us to meditate on God’s traits—it is meant for us to contemplate how the divine attributes are also a part of who we are. In this way, the period of the *Omer* gives us a chance to check in with ourselves, to examine where we are spiritually and emotionally, and to find ways of becoming more whole.

Our tradition gives us yet another way of pursuing the inner work of *Teshuvah*—every day, when we recite the *Amidah*. The weekday *Amidah* contains 13 central petitionary blessings, or *bakashot*. The first three focus on *Teshuvah*. The second and third blessings have us beseeching God for the ability to repent and for forgiveness—the outward expressions of repentance. The first reminds us of the primacy of the inner work. In this blessing, we ask God for the ability to think, to contemplate, and to evaluate. In order for us to be ready for the next two blessings, we must first look inward, examine ourselves, and accept who we are in that moment.

Rosh Hashanah is not the only time of year when we can focus on finding forgiveness and reconciliation within ourselves. Examining our souls, knowing who we are, and forgiving ourselves so that we can move forward--these are all things that cannot be mastered through a couple of days in shul. In order to find reconciliation within, we must let go, like Hannah and Eli did, of the defenses that prevent us from seeing ourselves honestly and from being able truly to see another person. This is a process that takes practice. As Mosa's story teaches us, finding reconciliation pays dividends, as it did with his mother and her best friend, bringing us harmony in the present

and hope for the future. Fortunately our tradition gives us opportunities to engage in this process of self-reconciliation every day, over and over.

There's no denying, though, that Rosh Hashanah is **the** time of year when we focus almost exclusively on these matters. This is a holiday devoted to the results of our *heshbon hanefesh*. Over these two days, we review the questions we've been asking all month. Where have we been? Where do we want to go? How can we best position ourselves to be written into the book of life? Even though our Jewish year abounds with opportunities to continue this inner work, Rosh Hashanah can set us off on the right path. As such, I'd like to suggest that we consider Rosh Hashanah our first healing service of the new year. Like the healing services we introduced last year, Rosh Hashanah, and indeed, this whole period of repentance, encourage us to open up our hearts. Through the majestic words of our prayers, the powerful melodies of this season, the cry of the shofar, and the warm embrace of friends and community, Rosh Hashanah fosters an environment that is conducive to introspection and self-reconciliation.

Today may only be the first of many opportunities this year for deep introspection, but it is an essential starting point. It is the first step on a journey of self-exploration and self-reconciliation. Through this journey, we will come to know ourselves better, to celebrate ourselves in the fullness of who we are--proud of our successes and resolute in our readiness to confront our flaws. Through this journey, we can come to terms with how we have mis-stepped. We can reach inward and be transformed by our vision of who we wish to become. And then we can reach outward, and work to repair the brokenness, to heal the hurt in our relationships. First we forgive ourselves, and then we can forgive, and be forgiven by, those we love. This journey will take all year, and will hopefully continue throughout all the years of our lives. And it begins today.

May the words we speak, the rituals we participate in, and the prayers we send toward heaven this Rosh Hashanah, bring us healing, wholeness, and reconciliation now, and in the coming year.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu--may we all be inscribed for a good year.