

Teshuva-Healing - Rosh Hashanah Morning, Oct. 1, 2008
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Andy was my best friend the summer I started rabbinic school. We lost touch when he and his wife moved back to Manhattan, our paths never crossing as we built our rabbinic careers, but I have always had a warm place in my heart for him. In 2002, Andy gave a HHD sermon about being diagnosed with Leukemia in the days before RH the year before. Andy E-mailed me his sermon. I printed it out, to read later because I didn't have time at that moment, sitting at my temple computer. I set it aside. It got buried. I never contacted Andy. Do you know why? I was too busy. I was too busy to read his sermon, in detail. I was too busy to be there for a friend. I rationalized that colleagues and family on the East Coast were there for him. I rationalized that he was ok now. I never reached out.

And for 6 years I have felt guilty. And ashamed of myself.

When a book filled with essays from Jewish colleagues who had experienced cancer was published this year, there was Andy's article about his miraculous recovery. I bought the book. I read his essay. I emailed him. We discovered that we were both going to the CCAR Convention in Cincinnati last March. I looked for him, he looked for me. He sat down two seats away from me, and we did a double take. His once-dark blonde hair was now artificially dyed red, to cover unnatural discoloration of chemo. But Andy was Andy. The same boyish, energetic Everready bunny I had hung out with for a year in Jerusalem, 21 years before. He called me by my nickname, and for the next 4 days we hung out together. I talked with his wife on his cell. We sat at dinners together. And on the morning that 500 rabbis streamed into the magnificent Plum Street Temple for morning services, I was sitting next to Andy, with my hand on his shoulder when he stood, surrounded by his colleagues, and offering his name for healing during the Mi Sheberach.

We can't be perfect. We can't give everything we have, all the time, to everyone who might benefit from our presence. And that is why I come to High Holy Days, to ask forgiveness of myself for the things I cannot do. To ask forgiveness of others, as best I can, for the ways I am not there for them. To ask God to let me

live with the inequity between what I want to do in the world and what I can do in the world. Teshuvah is not simply about repenting our grievous wrongs. Teshuvah is about recollecting all the small moments of human imperfection, and coming to understand what we have the power inside to change. When we honestly appraise ourselves, we know we are not fulfilling the best we can be. We will never be perfect; but if we strive for more, and are able to achieve more, how fulfilled would we feel? Could we not be more patient with our parents? Less harsh in tone with our spouse? Could we not at times be more understanding with our co-workers? Could we not try to respond to our children from a place of empathy rather than irritation? We sit, on these Holy Days, surrounded by the people with whom we live out our lives, so their faces will remind us of words and deeds and deeds-not-done that should speak to us from the quietest corners of our soul, prodding us: there is more work to be done to be at peace with ourselves.

The moments of our life where we are discordant with ourselves, with others, with God are broken moments for us, and brokenness requires healing. We are not callous and uncaring creatures, the moments that put us in discord hurt us. They keep us from ourselves, and they create space between us and others that we don't want to be there. Sometimes, in our conflicts, we entrench ourselves, building a wall of callousness, because it can be easier to turn away and discard that which causes us hurt, then to address it, unpack it, muddle through it, and hope for understanding. Rabbi James Stone Goodman expresses it this way, in poetry:

We are joined to each
other by
invisible fibers of connection,
With every sin
we cut the connection.
With every act of teshuvah, we reconnect, tie a
knot
in the interrupted connection, diminishing the
distance.

Thus it is written in the Talmud (Brakhot 34b),
in the place where the baal teshuvah (truly
repentant) stands,
not even the thoroughly righteous can stand.
When we make teshuvah
we are tying up the knots

connecting the unconstructed
ill-formed
disconnected
the discordant and disjunctive
tying up in knots
diminishing the distance.
When we make teshuvah
transform
move
become unstuck
with every movement
of return
we knot the fibers
closing the distance.
Some knots we are
untying
some knots
Tying.

Will the hours we spend in prayer here help us contemplate what needs to be tied up? What needs to be untied?

A Chasidic tale. Once there was a fire in Breslov. Afterward, Rabbi Nathan and a few others went to see where the fire had been. Rabbi Nathan saw the man whose house had burned down. The man had been crying terribly, looking to see if he could find any pieces of wood or metal he could salvage to use in rebuilding his house. He was collecting the pieces one by one. Rabbi Nathan said to his companions, "Did you see? Even though his house has burned down he hasn't given up hope of rebuilding it again. He is collecting everything he'll need when it comes to building. The same is true in spiritual life, said Rabbi Nathan. The harshness of life battles with us to the point where we are almost completely burned up, but we must never give up hope. We must pick up a few good points within ourselves and collect them together from amid the troubles we have. This is teshuvah; this is what it means to return to God."

Teshuvah heals our souls. Yet conversely, healing from our hurt can be a teshuvah, a returning to God, all of its own. I look into the eyes of my congregation, and I know that this is a time for healing. So many of you have faced illness this year; for some it has been hospital visits, extended convalescent stays, chronic pain. For some it has been

a regiment of chemotherapy or radiation or both, or visits with hospice staff. So many of you have lost a loved one- a spouse, a child; you carry a heart that is working toward healing. For some of us, it is healing from an inner struggle that wrestles within us. Perhaps it is a mindset that leads to a failure of optimism, that keeps us from possessing a generosity of spirit toward one another. Heart and soul, mind and body, we are people in need of healing, each in our own way, each in our measure. Can our process of teshuvah this year, of honest self-reflection, help us find healing and strength?

And so I share three thoughts about how we best heal. We must be with ourselves. We must let others be with us. And we must be with God.

BE WITH YOURSELF. Some of us do not live with an active inner voice; it takes great work to turn inward and open up to the voice within. Others of us live constantly with the presence of the inner voice, wishing at times to escape its unyielding monologue. We can only address the places inside that need healing by listening within and honestly assessing our pain. As Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen writes, "honor your questions about meaning." Don't imagine there is no purpose in asking, in difficult times, why did this happen? How will I go on? Will I ever feel like me again? Will I ever be happy or complete? Is there a way to go around rather than through the pain that I am feeling? Is there meaning in my suffering? These are not simple yes or no questions, they are complex and nuanced, and it takes time to find meanings that have integrity, and are not just a quick salve. When we find a meaning to our lives again then we are more able to cope with our sadness. I think of congregants Bob and Laurie Singer who started a 10K walk to benefit leukemia after the death of their son Jacob many years ago. We cannot change what is or what will be, but we can determine how we will let it give meaning to who we are.

Likewise, so much of the work of healing happens within us. Just as teshuvah happens with a turning inside to ourselves, and with an openness to empathy, to compassion, and listening, of paying attention to our own experience and to the experience of others...healing begins with these same qualities, when we listen to ourselves, and pay attention to what we

are feeling. Healing doesn't always require teshuvah, but teshuvah by its nature, always bring an inner healing.

LET OTHERS BE WITH YOU. There is a story in Talmud Berachot 5b, about Rabbi Yochanan, who was known as a great healer. He would visit colleagues and through conversation and touch, would heal them. But when Rabbi Yochanan himself lay ill, he could not heal himself. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him, and he said to the great healer, "Are your sufferings welcome you?" Rabbi Yochanan replied, "Neither they, nor their reward." Rabbi Hanina said, "Give me your hand." The two men held hands, and Rabbi Hanina was able to raise him from his sick bed. Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? The rabbis answered, "the prisoner cannot free himself from prison." It takes other to help us heal. Those of you who have felt the strong hands of physical therapists know how valuable they were in coaxing your knee, your hip, your back, your joints to recovery. It takes others in community to heal our hearts when they are broken; those friends who invite you to dinner, who drop off a casserole, who call regularly to say hi. Rabbi Kim Geringer writes of the isolation she felt when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. "One day you live in the land of the healthy, one blood test or biopsy later, you've moved to the bad side of town. In truth, all of us hold dual passports," she writes, "we just don't like to acknowledge the scary one. The most important thing I've learned is that you can never go wrong by calling. The best thing a person can say is "I'm calling because I am thinking of you, and I'd love to talk with you. If you don't feel like talking that's fine, of course I understand, but if you do, I'd really like to." I would paraphrase Rabbi Geringer like this: "I'm here. Can I listen, or can I bring dinner, or both?"

A few weeks ago, almost a dozen of recently bereaved members got together at a lovely home for luncheon. In the honesty and supportiveness of their conversation, in their humor and poignant moments, they were able to share stories that nobody else would have heard with the same depth of understanding. There was comfort in the room, a small piece of healing found its way into each soul.

If we must be present to ourselves, and if we must let others, such as friends, confidantes, therapists, and community be with us, then my last plea is: LET GOD BE WITH YOU. We who open prayer books fall into the trap of thinking that what we want to ask God for is on the written page. Prayer doesn't need to be a request. It needs to be a cry. It can simply be: God be with me. Let me call out to you as I carry my pain, as I wrestle with my soul. A prayer can just be the moan, the cry, the krechtz that speaks of pain and despair and longing and a soul in turmoil. I call to you in the middle of the night, where are you my God, asks the psalmist. Our psalms are a poetry book of our one-way conversations with God, many written from a place not of joy, but a place of brokenness, and pain.

What comfort we find in the 23rd psalm, reminding us that God, like a shepherd tending to sheep, both leads us, and is with us. We are comforted that though we are in turmoil, the peaceful promise of green pastures and still waters lies before us, and that God will restore our soul to its former wholeness. God will be with us to keep us moving on the right path, and that even though that path will take us through the valley, we will emerge on the other side of the valley, which by necessity must be a higher place beyond; we will not dwell in the valley of the shadow forever. We remind ourselves that God will continue to sustain us and bless us and that God's blessing and mercy will always be in our life. What an affirmation to read in times of darkest trial. A young local rabbi whom Jenny Flam has brought to temple, Julie Pelc, writes of crying out to God when she suffered a brain aneurysm at the age of 26. "I found solace only in the Book of Job and cherished the wisdom of crying out in pain, screaming at the God Who Creates Everything." Ultimately it was the words from Ecclesiastes, that to everything there is a season, that rang true: "In my case," she writes, "there is a time for fury and a time for gratitude." For those of us who wrestle with the nature and existence of God, there are times we reach for God from our head and there are times we reach for God from our heart; when you are hurt, speak from your soul, not your skepticism.

When healing comes, it leaves a scar; we move on to the fullness of life but the mark of our hurt still exists. So it is with teshuvah-we do not forgive ourselves or others, then move forward and forget. To

be fully human is not to erase the past, but to grow from it. What has been never becomes invisible. Rabbi Bill Cutter teaches, that healing softens us up so that we are open to inspiration, but it can also toughen us- like good scar tissue- to live with the consequences of being human. This summer, Seth and I and our girls visited with our colleague Andy and his wife Sue, meeting their children for the first time. Last week, there was an email of condolence from them upon the death of Seth's dad. We are happy to be friends even with the consequences of being human.

Gut Yuntif.

Footnote:

Images of Teshuvah and Change, Distance and Connection, In 4 Images As Derived From Zohar, Chassidut and other Sources of Abstract Truth;

Image no. 3: Knots

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