

Sermon: Finding the Strength to Forgive Ourselves

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An annual Holy Days highlight for me is time spent with the preschoolers in our Children's Center. Each year at this season, Rabbi Todd and I have a play-date with the kids in their classrooms. We make a big circle on the rug and talk about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They smile at the mere mention of apples and honey. And laugh as we think of gifts that we would give the world on its birthday. But the biggest hit of the Holy Days – hands down – is the sharing of the shofar. Wide eyed, the children look upon the instrument with the awe that these days are supposed to inspire. And before I make its sound – gently for gentle ears – the kids reach out and touch its rough and smooth surfaces - taking in the texture of the ram's horn. It is a time of sweet wonderment.

A couple of weeks ago, during a visit with one of the classes, something happened that had never happened before. The shofar's sound brought the same preschool giggles. Except this time....after hearing the call.....a little girl quietly raised her voice....and said, "Rabbi Jay....It sounds like someone is crying."

At that moment, it was I who experienced wonderment --- at how this precious four year old had intuitively heard in the shofar's call, what the rabbis describe as one of the most deeply moving symbols of this season. Some have said that the cry is that of Isaac....ultimately saved by the sacrificial ram atop Mount Moriah – but devastated still by his father's fateful choice. Others have pointed to the tears shed by Jewish men and women throughout the generations – victims of persecution – and remind us that their struggles are our legacy. Yet other Sages still have taught that the cry of the shofar on this day is more personal.

On Yom Kippur, each of us is called upon to look upon the darker side of ourselves – to examine our lesser-deeds – and how it is that we have caused pain and disappointment in others during the past year. While this idea is introduced through the entire Hebrew month of Elul – and is part of our observance of Rosh Hashanah – on Yom Kippur we reach a crescendo – both in terms of awareness and emotion. This day, we recite a long litany of *Al Cheit SheChatanu L'fanecha* -- noting sins and transgressions. During *Ashamnu* we slowly chant each offense and we beat our chest as we do. Our fast removes us from food – the source of physical sustenance – so that our feeling diminished strength might move us to repentance. And last night, during Kol Nidrei, we stood as a congregation before an empty ark – symbolizing our being completely separated from Torah – our source of spiritual sustenance. Our awareness of this distance is intended to motivate us – through word and through deed – so that we might re-embrace its values – to rededicate our lives.

On Yom Kippur the cry of the shofar is heart's cry – lamenting the gap separating how we have lived and how we should have lived.

Yet such sorrow – as inspired by our tradition – is intended to be healthy. For us, Jewish ritual at this season is supposed to help us return our focus to life's larger landscape – to see our lives as something that we craft each day – and to recognize our ability to both repair what has been

broken and to rejoice in our accomplishments. According to the Hasidic master Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, the essence of living a spiritual life is constantly working on yourself.

A challenge, however, for many, comes when the sadness in ourselves becomes more deep than is healthy. If we find ourselves so immersed in disappointment with how we have been and where we are in our lives that it starts to define how we see ourselves.

I meet with people struggling in this way, often. They look upon the cracks in their lives --- the mistakes made.....the brokenness in their relationships.....their poor business decisions ...and they hear repeated in their heads – even years later - insensitive words of judgment and disdain.... and they can't help but feel worn down and diminished. As Rabbi Harold Kushner has taught: "There seems to be something in the human soul that causes us to think less of ourselves every time we do something wrong. It may be the results of parents who expected too much of us or of teachers who took for granted what we did right and fastened instead on everything we got wrong. And maybe" – he continues – "maybe it is good for us to feel that way. It may make us more sensitive to what we do wrong and move us to repent and grow. But it may also lead to our setting unrealistically high standards for ourselves and for others."

Here....the soul and science are actually on the same page. Researchers have known for some time that our brains operate with, what they describe as a "negativity bias." In a paper entitled, "Bad is Stronger Than Good," published in the "Review of General Psychology" – Professor Roy Baumeister – explains that the mind, as a way of protecting itself, naturally finds and then dwells upon negative feedback and information. As one researcher described it: "Just as our attention gravitates to loud noises and motion, our minds glom to negative feedback."

Furthermore, studies show that because negative emotions generally involve more thinking – oftentimes causing people to ruminate – they make a more significant imprint upon us than do positive experiences. Researchers conclude that while different people will naturally respond in different ways, the 'negativity bias' is a universal part of human nature.

When I first learned of this it immediately reminded me of a conversation that I had with Emily's dad, who – for years – has been a successful public speaker. He shared that, throughout his career, even if he is making a presentation to room filled with 500 people – and all is going well - for whatever reason, he finds himself fixating upon the one person.....sitting off on the side.....with his arms crossed over his chest and an unhappy expression on his face. These studies in negativity also reminded me of how hurtful words and experiences – even over many years - remain with us.

Yet despite the effect negative ordeals may have on us, psychologists also tell us that it is possible for us to heal....that the mind – through regular positive reinforcement – has the capacity to be taught to process the negative and help us to emerge emotionally healthy and whole.

October, 1986.....It seemed that, at long last, the gods of baseball were going to smile down on Red Sox nation. It was Game Six of the World Series in Shea Stadium – Sox versus the Mets. Just in case a painful reminder is necessary....(and during this season of apologies, I apologize

ahead of time for this!)....the Red Sox were leading the series three games to two. In the tenth inning of the sixth game, the Sox seemed to be on the cusp of victory. They held a 5-to-3 lead....with two outs.....and two strikes on what seemed likely to be the final batter of the Series. Players were making post-game plans. The scoreboard operator had typed a “Congratulations” message for Boston team. Most fans were absolutely certain that what had been a 68 year World Series drought would be over. But then everything unraveled. Three straight singles....a wild pitch.....and then, Mookie Wilson hit that fateful slow dribbler up the first base line. Many of us can still see it in our minds: The ball softly making its way up and then skirting through the ailing legs of first baseman, Bill Buckner - scoring the unbelievable winning run for the Mets....and changing the tone of the entire series.

The play has gone down in infamy as amongst the ultimate – if not the ultimate error in professional sports. For years, Bill Buckner was brutally treated by many in the media and by many Boston fans. To Sox fans, the error – his error - epitomized the Curse of the Bambino. In fact, so epic did the play become, that in 1992, someone bought that ball for just over \$93,000.....and, more recently, in 2012, it was sold for almost \$420,000.

For many, the story of Bill Buckner ends there. And if anyone could have come to see his life as being defined by his most disappointing moment, it was him. However, remarkably, Buckner – while disappointed by and angry at what had happened – never saw himself as being solely responsible for the loss. And certainly the loss was not who he was. Many people forget that over Buckner’s 22 year career, he had a .289 batting average....hit .300 or more seven times and recorded over 2,700 hits. In 1986, Buckner knocked in 102 runs.....And in 1985 – the year before - in 718 plate appearances he struck out a miniscule 36 times.

Soon after the error, Buckner was quoted as saying, “I couldn’t believe (all of the criticism I was receiving). It’s like I did nothing in my career except commit that error.” Later, back at his home in Meridian, Idaho, Buckner said: “All I have to do is live with myself. I have to like myself. If I can do that, whatever they do or say, I can laugh it off.”

Buckner knew the truth.....And reminding himself of it regularly helped him to recognize who he really was.....what was most important.....and to accept his past as part of a larger whole.

There is a teaching about hand-woven oriental rugs – the kind that are found in many homes. ‘Usually, when they are being made there will be a group of people weaving a single rug together under the directions of an artist who issues the instructions to the rest. It is the artist who determines the choice of colors and the nature of the pattern.

It often happens, though, that occasionally one of the weavers will insert the wrong color thread. The artist may have called for blue and instead black was used. If you examine an oriental rug carefully, you may be able to detect such irregularities. But what is significant about these errors is that they were not removed. The skillful artist just proceeded to understand their place and to then weave them into the pattern.

The teaching concludes: ‘This is a wise procedure that we can follow in life. We might like for the patterns of our lives to be woven exclusively of bright-colored threads – of wonderful

successes and accomplishments. But every now and then, a dark thread steals into the fabric. To be a true artist of life is to weave even this thread into the pattern and somehow enable it to help us bring our share of beauty to the world.’

For us, Yom Kippur is our opportunity to consider those darker threads – to identify them – to seek forgiveness from others for those things where forgiveness is necessary.....and then, to find a way to forgive ourselves.

Echoes of this message can be found throughout Jewish tradition.

While today is called the “Day of Atonement,” it is noteworthy that the word: “Kippur” comes from the Hebrew root letters which mean “to cover over.” Our misdeeds – we are taught – do not disappear. Rather they become ‘at-one’ with – no longer prominent in – our life’s larger whole.

As well....according to rabbinic legend....it was on Yom Kippur that Moses received the second set of tablets of commandments from Gd atop Mount Sinai. It is often asked, ‘Whatever happened to the first set of commandments – the shattered pieces that Moses had broken upon witnessing the people’s sin of the Golden Calf.’ According to our Sages, the broken tablets were collected and then gently placed into the Holy Ark, right next to the new whole set. They too, we are taught, would come to teach important lessons about falling and getting back up.

In Jewish history, there is a particular Sage who was known for the guilt that weighed heavily on him. Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav lived in the Ukraine during the 19th Century and was known, among other things, for being a direct descendant of the great Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov. In his life, Reb Nachman struggled to forgive himself for his own misdeeds and failings and so, he crafted a teaching that would enable him to help himself.....and also to help his students.

Based on a text from the Book of Psalms, Reb Nachman taught that there isn’t anyone who doesn’t have within him or her at least – quote: “the tiniest bit of goodness.” And so – with this in mind - whenever we look upon another person – no matter who he or she is – we are supposed to look for even just that tiny little bit that is good. In doing so – he taught – we are then able help them build upon that dot – to make it bigger – and eventually to bring that person to repentance.

Reb Nachman continued his teaching from here with a moving and beautiful passage that made it more personal both for his students and for himself. This translation of the Hebrew by Rabbi Art Green brings Reb Nachman’s voice to us. Let’s listen:

“So now, my (dear) friend – now that you know how to treat (others) and find some good in them....Now go do it for yourself as well! You know what I have taught you; ‘Take great care and find happiness!’ Stay far from sadness....” I know what happens when you start examining yourself, ‘No goodness at all,’ you find. ---- ‘Just full of sin.’ Watch out for (this), my friend!.....You too have done some good. All you need is to find just the smallest bit – a dot of goodness....“That first little dot is the hardest to find – or the hardest to admit that you find. The

next one though will come a little easier.....and then another...and another. Each one becoming joined to the one before.....Gradually bringing you back to life!”

Though Reb Nachman predated the psychologists and the scientists by more than a century, he taught precisely the same lesson. On this Yom Kippur morning, with our bodies weak....and our souls yearning for strength – each of us in our own way is in need of the redemptive strength that self-forgiveness can bring. And so, while it is that we consider past misdeeds and the spaces in which we need to grow, we are also called upon to remind ourselves of our abiding worth – of the good we have done and the good we bring.

Words from the pen of the teacher and poet, Rabbi Karyn Kedar, :

Be aware of what you let define you.
You are not the curses or the failures of your life.
Rather define yourself by blessings and strength.
Do not let the power of what is harsh and negative be all-powerful....

There is power in blessing and love,
though it is, at times, gentle, quiet and subtle....
let it be all-powerful.

Pain can be a powerful teacher and
love can be a gentle healer.
We are forever students yearning to learn
to live a life of enduring good....

May the blessings we discover in ourselves inspire us in the year ahead to turn our tears in laughter and to craft lives of even greater meaning and joy. Amen.