



Kol Nidre - Yom Kippur 5770
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Teshuvah: It's About Not Accepting The Status Quo

“How are you?” (hopefully, person responds, fine)

Funny, that seems to be the response that most people give; fine. Think about it, when someone approaches you and asks you, ‘how are you?’ what do you answer? More than likely, it’s “fine” or “I’m good, thanks” or “not bad” or something quite mundane and safe. It might even be said that to answer any other way would be not an appropriate way to answer such a question. After all, what is the question really? It’s not *really* about wanting to know how you are doing, it’s just a standard precursor to the real discourse that is about to happen. We really don’t get to the answer of, “how are you?” until later in the conversation when we have time to tell and time to listen to how someone really is.

But the answer, “fine” is about stability. To say that I am fine says to someone, ‘I’m stable, things are going as I would expect them to and life is moving along as expected.’ Even the person in mourning might answer, ‘I’m fine,’ because that allows them to fall back into their standard routine even during their personally difficult time.

How stable are our lives? How stable is our world? How stable are our expectations for the coming year? The reality that we face is that our world has changed and is in constant motion, so how do we respond to the "New Normal"? How do we place ourselves back on a path we can follow? *Teshuvah* means to return to the proper path of righteousness. How can we experience *Teshuvah* when the road is constantly shifting?

One of the steps in experiencing *Teshuvah* is being able to take action at the proper time. What do we do when we encounter suffering? What do we do when we need to make a change?

This year, we have encountered suffering – suffering at the loss of jobs, suffering at the loss of income and pensions, great suffering in our world through hunger, war and persecution. What should be our reaction? We should not say, ‘we’re fine.’ We should act.

In a few weeks we will read the first chapter of Genesis at Simchat Torah as we return to the beginning of our eternal rereading of the Torah. Hopefully this isn't a spoiler, but at that time we will hear the story of the creation of the world - God's attempt to create a stable world - a plan gone awry.

For those of you who have been paying attention during Simchat Torah previously, you may have noticed you can find in the reading two creation stories. We tend to blur them both together as one, the first listing the days of creation and what was created on each day and the second detailing how God creating Adam and Eve. When asked "What is the first commandment in the Torah" many of us may think it comes from this first story and is to 'be fruitful and multiply.' Unfortunately, despite what we may wish, I am sorry to have to tell you that this is not a commandment, rather it is only a suggestion. The first commandment truly comes from what we will call the "second creation story." It is the commandment where we read: "God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And God commanded (*va'yetzav*) the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.'" (Genesis 2:15-17)

God gives to man and woman a stable place to live – what is more stable than the Garden of Eden? Where everything is provided for them and they will live forever as long as they heed this one commandment – don't eat from the tree of knowledge. What a simple commandment, yet how tempting to break! All they had to do was take care of the garden and follow the rules – the ultimate in stability.

However, it is from breaking this commandment that the first people on earth find suffering because of their own actions, their own curiosity.

The Talmud teaches us that if suffering should fall upon us, we should take a close look at ourselves. Everything that effects our life is based on our relation to what we did. It is even suggested that we are the cause of our own suffering!

Ouch!

Others might explain suffering like this as a way to explain why bad things happen to everyone else. But, let's face it - this is a depressing model! And there will even be those who will suggest that we can eliminate all suffering as long as everyone follows all of the 613 commandments. Every wonder why we see the men on the street in Jerusalem or even at our own Israel fairs asking, "did you put on *t'fillin* today?" or offering to come over and check your *mezuzot* to make sure that what you have on your doorposts is truly kosher? Because their view is that the more of us who are fulfilling the mitzvot, the better chance that God will take notice and let us back in to the garden, back to the stable world we seek.

Still, I'm not convinced that this is what we are seeking tonight. I'm not looking to correct everyone else, seeing my own virtues as unblemished. No, this night of *Kol Nidre* I want to examine my life, seek *teshuvah* and find the path I want to be on - should be on - can be on.

Let's take a different approach. If we go back to our blurred creation story and distinguish the first chapter from the second, we read, "And God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.'" (Genesis 1:26)

Wait, isn't the role of 'ruling the world' supposed to be God's? Why is God giving up this role and handing it over to us? God is replacing God's self with someone like God, someone that is created in God's image. The story continues with God completing the work of creation, giving us Shabbat and then God...leaves. It's the end of the story. What's next? What's going to happen to this world? That is up to us.

Hmm - I'm feeling a bit unstable here.

After reading Genesis chapter one, we look back at our year, we look back at our challenges and we ask, what do we do with this? What do we do with the pain we might have endured? What do we do with the pain there is in the world? What do we do? The answer is, we don't have time to be depressed – we need that time to act, we need that time to learn and we need that time to grow. We need to be more, learn more and do more!

Our opportunity is about finding *teshuvah*. You and I have talked about the meaning of this word before. We've defined *teshuvah* as repentance. We've discussed that *teshuvah* is how we strive to **return** to the right path. But to say 'return' is to imply we find ourselves on a different path, and to continue on this direction is not the path we want to follow. *Teshuvah* is about not accepting the status quo, not accepting this path, not just to say, 'everything's fine' and go on our way. No, we must go beyond the status quo, beyond the 'fine' and ask, how do we make it better?

Our *vidui*, the confessional prayer is only that: a confession. It is a statement of what we have done wrong. However, what are the actions that we are going to take to make a change? It's not enough to just say, I'm sorry for what I did wrong. We are at a critical moment to redefine who we want to be. It's not productive to sit here and say, 'woe is me look at all I have done wrong' and beat our chests so hard that we physically feel the pain of our misgivings. After we recite our transgressions, we must ask how it is that we are going to move, really move, to change and not accept the status quo – *teshuvah* is a reminder that we are not as good as we CAN be. *Teshuvah* is about the possibilities of what we can be.

In our world, the status quo is not enough. We do not want to stand by and watch as others suffer. Lack of health care for all and the existence of world-wide hunger are two major causes of instability and suffering. We have heard the debates and discussions over the past couple of months regarding Health Care Reform. While I know there are as many opinions in this room as there are people, maybe moreso, I will be so bold as to say that we all agree that every single human being in this country deserves proper health care. All of us would agree that 47 million people without health care is too great a number. All of us can agree that the *Mitzvah* of *Pikuach Nefesh* - the commandment to save a life - is the greatest mitzvah of all.

Healthcare is a historically Jewish issue. Jews are disproportionately represented among healthcare workers - nurses, doctors, dentists, academics. Health care is a Jewish issue because we USE health care disproportionately, from mental health to in-vitro fertilization. The median age of the Jewish community is older than the rest of America. Social Security and Medicare are vitally important to us. Did you know that:

- Judaism believes in medicine. Patients have an religious obligation to obtain proper health care;
- Judaism teaches the directive of physicians to heal every patient – the poor along with the rich;
- Judaism even goes so far as to require preventative medicine;
- According to Judaism, healthcare is not simply the obligation of doctors and patients – but of the community;
- Rambam, the great Maimonides of the 12th century, lists medicine as an obligation of the community. The responsibility for healthcare is to be shared among individuals and families, physicians and other health care providers, and the people at large;
- We know that in the Golden Age in Spain, Jewish communities set up public health care systems with doctors who were required to see the poor. They even visited patients who weren't sick in order to ensure their health. This was funded and regulated by the community. ¹

Whatever our position is on the political health care reform debate, we as Jews must recognize that this is a Jewish issue and we must not accept the status quo. An unequal system is unstable, and we must help equalize it. We must reach for *teshuvah*, to go beyond the existing state of what is acceptable for individual health care, and do more for making sure that we fulfill the *mitzvah, pikuach nefesh*, to save a life. In answer to the question we ask tonight, "who will live and who will die" - it is in our hands.

"Who shall perish by famine and who by thirst". In our world, it is the status quo that every six minutes a child dies from hunger related causes and more than 1.2 billion people worldwide are undernourished. We know that approximately 10 million people died of hunger this year. Is this appropriate? Is it allowable that there is enough food for everyone, but suffers from a waste and mis-distribution? How is it that a billion people are undernourished yet a billion people are over-consumers? The system is unstable and our fast reminds us we must strive for *teshuvah* - striving beyond the status quo toward the three elements we list this Yom Kippur - *Tefilah* (prayer), *Teshuvah* (repentance) and *Tzedakah* (charity).

Tefilah / Prayer is easy - we must include those who are hungry in our prayers; prayers for healing and prayers for ourselves to seek out ways to fight injustice in the world: that there are those who go to bed hungry every night in this country of plenty. But hopefully you were listening 10 days ago when we talked about prayer - Prayer alone does not cause things to happen, nor are we imploring God to step in and make it right. Prayer is to inspire us to take action, to take responsibility on our own.

Teshuvah / Repentance: Maimonides reminds us that we need to look at our role in a system that allows hunger. "What would the world look like if our government's trade policies enabled farmers around the world to be able to grow and sell produce to support their families and be competitive in their own marketplaces? What would it look like if we reduced the developing world's dependence on foreign food imports, or if we helped protect local people's rights to the land in their own backyards? If all people had access to affordable local food, how many more families would have food on their tables? Repentance means embracing the understanding that there is enough to go around, but that it hasn't been distributed equitably yet - and thinking about how we can make that different next year."²

October 17, Temple Beth Shalom will host Ruth Messinger, the President of American Jewish World Services, as she addresses this issue of Global Hunger. She will share with us her own experiences in visiting the most devastated places in the world. She will share with us a vision for the Jewish community to address Global Hunger as well as hunger here in our own community of Orange County. TBS continues to support the Interfaith Shelter Network of Orange County and provide meals once a month for homeless families in the city of Orange.

Tzedakah / Charity. *Tzedakah* is about taking seriously the desire to care for the neediest in our community, country and world. We are always concerned about where our money goes and who we are supporting. By supporting our local farmers, farmer's markets and even companies that participate in the fair trade act, we make a statement that we want to end world hunger and that we want to support those who are providing us with the food we eat and the products we use in a respectful and ethical manner.

Through each of these actions we work toward ensuring that no one should go to bed hungry. For those who would say "Solve world hunger - great. That's too big for me to do, easier to go with the status quo." Well, here are two things that **you** can do:

1. Tonight, after services, go home and if you have not brought in your bag of canned food this evening for our High Holy Day food drive, fill a bag tonight, and put it in your car tonight to bring in tomorrow.
2. Tuesday, look at your family calendar and select a date to volunteer with other TBS members to serve food at the Interfaith Shelter Network.

There. Now you can't say that I didn't tell you how **you** can make a difference.

What will be your new path this year? In what way will you not just accept the status quo, but rather seek higher goals toward *teshuvah*? As a congregational family, we are together in this moment. We can challenge ourselves to reclaim stability and move forward toward the goals we might have put on hold or considered putting aside. As we stand here tonight, as we have listened to the *Kol Nidrei*, as we move through tomorrow and our confessional prayers and blessings for a new year, we can live in this moment and redefine who we want to be.

Remember when I asked the question at the beginning - "how are you?" 'Fine' is a stable answer. But now, tonight, we need to start answering this question with more than a stock reaction. We need to respond more with "I'm doing..." and answering with specifics: "I am fighting hunger," "I am bringing justice". We need to answer with the action we are taking to make our lives and our world that much greater; the action that makes us more nurturing and supportive; the action that will help us grow so that we may, be more, learn more and do more. So I ask you, "how are you?"

References

¹Rabbi Don Goor. Sermon: "Who Will Live and Who Will Die: The Power to Decide is in Our Hands." Rosh Hashanah 5769.

²American Jewish World Services.

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