

Ki Teitsei 5784

Responding to Eleanor Pitchal and Sabine Baker

First day of Yachad

Eleanor and Sabine, what creative and thoughtful divrei Torah. Amidst 70 options of mitzvot to focus on, you both chose the case of the wayward and defiant child. This is a favorite case for the reasons you both noted, which is that the punishment of the Torah is so extreme for something that seems relatively minor to us, and the Rabbinic response is so creative. It's an excellent teaching example, because what you see is the Rabbis overturning the Torah without admitting that they're overturning the Torah. They inherit a law that they cannot abide, and they make it impossible to enact. And Sabine, as you taught us, this effort they're making is related to a larger project of trying to understand evil and how to correct for it. And Eleanor as you so theatrically demonstrated, many generations of Rabbis have interpreted and reinterpreted, adopted and adapted the laws of our ancestors to meet their conscience and the best understanding of their time.

In your look at the wayward and defiant child, together you raise two questions that are highly relevant to our moment in the Jewish calendar. In less than three weeks this sanctuary will be filled for the holiest days of the year. And this month, called Elul, is meant to be entirely occupied with preparation. Not just the kind of preparation that our staff are engaged in, processing ticket orders, preparing the facility, writing sermons. But the kind of preparation that is incumbent upon every Jew, and particularly every Jewish adult, which you two have become today. So given that this is now your responsibility and the responsibility of every Jew in this sanctuary, let me explain what's expected of you.

Here are the two big ideas that you taught us this morning: 1) all humans are capable of evils, big and small, 2) just like the Torah can change, all humans can change. Judaism is less concerned with the idea that there are certain people who are evil, and more with the idea that the impulse toward

evil runs through the heart of every living person, exactly as much as the impulse toward good. In Hebrew, the impulse or inclination toward evil is called yetser hara. There's something else that's important to know. Even though you have an impulse toward evil, your soul is not ever evil. Your soul, neshama in Hebrew, is inherently pure. It comes from G d and no matter what you do in your life, it remains pure. And, the Rabbis are clear that we all need yetser hara in small doses. For example, human desire – greed, lust – leads us to build houses and create a food supply and have children. The yetser hara is a natural and necessary part of us. But for everyone there are moments every day when it is out of balance. And then we put someone down to try to be better than them, or lie or take too much for ourselves, or don't share what we have with those who need. But equally all humans have the yetser tov, the impulse toward good – the feeling of compassion and the will to act upon it with love and kindness, the desire to tell the truth even when it's difficult, the impulse toward fairness, toward justice. So we all have both of these forces in us, and the Rabbis advise us to think of ourselves as exactly 50/50, to imagine that if we tallied all of our acts from the last year, 50% would be on the side of tov/good, and 50% would be on the side of ra/evil. Because remember that some of our impact is not even known by us. Think about our impact on the earth or the global population simply because we live in a first world country and are using resources and emitting waste in disproportionate ways; and we also have ripple effects on the people around us that we are often oblivious to. So since we can never know the tally of our acts on the world, we imagine that it's 50/50, and that every act we take starting this second has the potential to tip the balance of our lives.

And the Jewish project – the goal of Jewish life is to live in such a way that we are continually tipping the balance toward the good, leaping at opportunities to, as we say colloquially, “do a mitzvah.” But we also know that even with that intent, we are far from perfect, we make mistakes and fall short all the time, we get into conflict with people we love and people we don't love, we fail to live up to the ideal image we have in our minds of who we want to be. So Jewish tradition in its wisdom includes a prayer every day for us to repent for the things we did wrong – any and every little

thing – meaning name them, say we’re sorry, ask for forgiveness and forgive ourselves. But guess what? A lot of people don’t do that every day. It’s hard to admit we were wrong. It’s hard to say we’re sorry. It’s hard to ask for forgiveness and maybe hardest of all to forgive ourselves. So we put it off, tell ourselves why make a bigger deal out of it than it is, let’s move on, but these things add up, and they weigh on us, and when we have a quiet moment they come back into our conscience. So in it’s even greater wisdom, Judaism sets aside ten days in the year that are just focused on repentance, teshuva. And that’s what this month is all about.

In this month, the Jewish tradition is inviting you to do something really good. It actually feels great. To take some quiet time, ideally an hour a day, to just reflect on the last year of your life. You can go through your calendar to remember what happened this year. And to ask, are there things from this year, moments, interactions, things I did or didn’t do, that are bothering me? That rise to the surface as unresolved, as embarrassing, as me behaving in a way that I’m not totally proud of? Or some way I let someone down, or let myself down? Could be tiny things, could be massive things, could be anything in between. But if it is still in your consciousness, it needs to be addressed. You get a whole month to reflect.

Here’s what our Rabbis recommend. You make a list. Every evening, you take some time alone and you make a list. This is known in Hebrew as *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. You do this with honesty, an attempt at clear judgment, and also with an immense amount of compassion. It is definitely not meant to be harsh, it is not supposed to feel like beating up on yourself. There’s a verse in our parasha, Deuteronomy 25:3, that talks about not punishing someone too harshly for something they did wrong. Torah says that a person found guilty by a court is supposed to receive 40 lashes and no more, lest they “be degraded in your eyes.” Last night, Rabbi Green spoke about this verse in relation to forgiveness. It also can be understood in relation to self-punishment. When we do something wrong and we realize it was wrong, we have a tendency to beat ourselves up. But the danger if it’s done to excess is that we degrade ourselves in our own eyes. This is actually counterproductive. Our

Rabbis understood that in order to change, we have to feel loved and we have to feel worthy, so gentleness is key.

Once you've got your list of mistakes and wrongdoings, the first step is Charatah, you have to understand the hurtful impact and truly experience regret; the second step is Azivat hachet, immediately stopping the hurtful action; the third step is Viddui, acknowledging what we've done out loud and asking for forgiveness. Where possible, this includes engaging in concrete repair. Is there a person you could call and say I'm sorry? Is there some kind of material repair that's possible? Is there anything you could do to make it better, to fix it?; the fourth and final step is Kabbalah L'haba'ah, committing to never repeat the destructive behavior in the future. You do these four steps for each thing on your list. As you go along and reflect more deeply, more things might get added to the list. With each one, you want to hold yourself in so much compassion, remembering how hard you try, giving yourself the benefit of the doubt for your motivation. And still seeing with the clearest possible judgment.

All of this makes it possible to show up on Rosh Hashanah having done the work of repairing your soul, of tending to your inner life, of taking your own moral compass seriously, honoring your sense of yourself, of who you know you are meant to be. (Hold up and recommend *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* by Rabbi Alan Lew. )

This is how we as a people handle evil. We acknowledge it's in all of us, and we make it our responsibility to temper it in ourselves. This is also how Judaism facilitates change. The underlying idea of the holiest days of the Jewish year is that every person is capable of change, is expected to contemplate how they ought to change, to turn themselves toward the changes they seek, and then to commit. If you think about it, it's incredibly hopeful. Judaism believes in your ability to become the human being you want to become. G d believes in your ability to change. Or else these rituals would make no sense. It's like G d can see the highest and best version of you, and absolutely believes that you can be that person more consistently

every year, by gradually adjusting and rebalancing and tending to your excesses and your shortcomings.

So yes Sabine, for Judaism evil is real and it's our responsibility. And yes Eleanor, Judaism is always in motion. The Torah is always changing, just as we always have the potential to become more and more who we're meant to be.

May this be a meaningful and productive Elul.

Shabbat Shalom.