

What if I told you that you could change the past?

You might think that I'm just trying to be provocative. You might assume that I misspoke, or that I'm trying to sell you something.

So let me say it again, not as a question. If Yom Kippur has any utility at all, it's to inspire us to change our past. And though it may seem fantastical or even un-Jewish to consider emancipating ourselves from the past, I'm increasingly convinced it's not only true but necessary that we *can* do that. Even as we enter a day in which we will attempt to recount as much of the past as possible; as we literally beat our chests to seek forgiveness for infractions big and small, examining them all as if by microscope, the proposition of this day is that the past need not define us. If, and really only if, we grapple with it sincerely, and make amends.

My teacher, Rabbi Ellen Lewis, explains that changing your past is “the emotional premise of [apology and] forgiveness. No, you cannot change what happened,” she admits. “You can change only your emotional relationship to what happened. And [that] might very well be the hardest thing you ever try to do.”¹

If indeed that's hard for us, it's equally hard for God. Toward the beginning of the Talmud, in Tractate Brachot, we read that even God struggles with the notion of apology and forgiveness. The rabbis imagine God praying to godself in an almost silly reflexive tone: “May it be My will, that My mercy suppress My anger, and that I may prevail over My attribute of din, of justice and judgment; and that I may also deal with My children according to the attribute of *rachamim*, compassion.”²

As silly as the syntax of God's prayer may sound, it's about as serious as it gets. Our sages imagined a God who knew that the past was real, but who knew, also, that if human beings were *only* judged by their worst actions...that there would be no hope for humanity. A midrash depicts God in a state of ecstasy on Yom Kippur, choosing on that day to allow human beings to change. God calls out to the mountains and rivers, saying: “Come, rejoice with me, for on this day I will forgive the sins of the Jewish People.”³

But lest we think that the joy of Yom Kippur comes as freely as that of other joyous holidays, which require only that we reach those dates on the calendar...the simcha, the joy of Yom Kippur is actually a joy of satisfaction, which requires putting in the work

¹ Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur

² Brachot 7a

³ Tanna Debei Eliyahu 1:3

beforehand. After all, as Maimonides says: God will not forgive the person who says that I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone *for me*.⁴

Rather, in order for this holiday to work its transformative magic, there is a prescribed formula for exactly how to do it. Again, in Rambam's words, "a sinner should abandon his sins...resolving in his heart never to do them again." He must also regret the past, insisting he won't return to his prior ways. And finally, says Rambam, "he must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."⁵

That is the step by step process of becoming accountable to God. Owning our actions. And trying hard to course correct. And when it comes to sins between people, there are some additional steps. The Mishneh Torah says, someone who commits a sin "will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him." Restitution is part of it. But then...Rambam concludes, "Even if a person restores the money that he owes [the person he wronged], he must appease him and ask him to forgive him." And all the more so, he has to try at least three times to seek forgiveness.

Whether we are talking about sins against God or sins against other human beings, in either case, we find a ritualized process of taking accountability. Without that measure of *din*, of justice, we know, Yom Kippur is powerless to absolve us of our misdeeds.

But with accountability, and in really no other way, it is possible to move beyond a spiral of shame about the past. Returning to our conceit, it is only by accepting that level of responsibility that we are able to build a new relationship *to* our pasts, showing compassion to ourselves by insisting that we can become stronger, healthier, more ethical human beings.

There are many things that I love about Judaism, unsurprisingly. But it may be this idea of *teshuva* that I cherish most. As a person of course, I'm grateful that I have the chance to grow and change. Recognizing that with new actions, I can redefine the course of my life. But also, as a rabbi, with a vicarious window into so many other lives, I have seen its power magnified a thousandfold. And I am convinced that *teshuva* is what allows human beings (and maybe Judaism itself) to survive. Because rupture, or failure *is* sometimes inevitable. But our relationship *to* that rupture does not need to be.

As I consider all this, I think of a friend who has struggled with addiction throughout his life, and for the past few years has been on a day by day journey to continue staying sober. Only by acknowledging his struggles, and by apologizing to those whom he hurt,

⁴ MT Hilchot Teshuva 4:1

⁵ MT Hilchot Teshuva 2

has he been able to walk this path of sobriety. We might say that the rachamim of forgiveness was only possible after the *din* of actually taking some responsibility. Even if he still has to live with the brokenness that he had previously caused, and even though he finds temptation everywhere, thereby remembering his past...he is able to live in this world, showing a new kind of compassion to himself, and hoping for the same from others.

Over the years, as a community rabbi, I've encountered so many people engaging with exactly this process. I've listened to spouses and partners attempting to heal after infidelities, getting real about prior deceptions...with the hope that they could tell a new story together. I've sat with parents trying to relate to their adult children, after abandoning them emotionally in various ways, workshoping what they could possibly say to convey that they understand what they had done. Those diverse scenarios had a wide range of outcomes, some cinematic and others less so. But as I listened to them, I did genuinely believe that they were doing something sacred – making new choices in an attempt to *change* their pasts.

Now don't get me wrong: in each of those situations, the past was very real. And the realia of those pasts remain. Which is, as you might imagine, excruciatingly hard. But in order to live, and live well, each of those individuals needed to create a new relationship to what they had done. Not by way of avoidance. Or denial. Or excuses. But through harsh, honest judgment, paired with mercy toward themselves.

According to our tradition, it's those two traits – judgment and mercy – that form not only the bedrock of teshuva, but also the blueprint of the entire world.

The rabbis taught that when God created the heavens and earth, God intended for them to be governed by the rule of *din*, which is to say strict justice, according to an order whereby any sin or infraction must be met with an appropriate punishment. But, says the famous midrash, on the very first verse of the Torah: God realized that a world governed only by the strictest of judgment could not endure. So God imbued the world with an added measure of rachamim, compassion.⁶

Teshuva requires both. It cannot happen without an honest reckoning of the consequences of our actions. But it also cannot happen if we believe that our pasts are so fixed that they condemn us to only one trajectory. In other words, even as we take our past seriously, judging ourselves and taking responsibility, we must also give ourselves the grace or compassion to build a new relationship with it all, if we are to live a different future.

⁶ Breishit Rabbah, per Rashi on Genesis 1

Though these attributes of *din* and *rachamim* were already present on Day One of creation, God doubled down on them when God created humans.

Vayomer Elohim, naaseh adam b'tzalmeinu. And God said, "let us create human beings in *our* image," famously in the plural. Commentaries abound as to why God speaks as if there are multiple Gods...but this year I was drawn to the reading of the Or HaChaim, an 18th century Moroccan rabbi. In his words, "'let us make' in the plural form also wants [to teach] that the attributes of God are many; the thirteen attributes of *mercy* and...the attribute of judgment, agreed together to create man."⁷

And it wouldn't take long for both to come in handy.

Because almost as soon as humans were created, humans messed up. I pointed to this story on Rosh Hashanah, reminding you that the word on the covers of your programs, *Ayeka*, was the question that God posed to Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit, asking: "Where are you?"

In a world only of *din*, strict judgment, that episode would've been the end of the human experiment. But thanks to *rachamim*, humanity was forgiven. In the process, Adam and Eve realized that they were naked. They became accountable for what their bodies could do. And they were forever changed. But humankind was able to live, nonetheless, and tell a different story. Precisely because when hearing the question of *Ayeka*, "where are you," they located themselves somewhere on that continuum...between *din* and *rachamim*.

On Rosh Hashanah, I used this text to ask where are *we*, as American Jews today, pondering how we might locate our sense of self amidst the pervasive alienation of Jewish life in 2025.

This evening, I want to reframe that question, and ask through the lens of Yom Kippur: where are we *collectively* on our path toward *teshuva*? When we hear the call of *Ayeka*, we are *also* invited to find the entire Jewish People between *din* and *rachamim*, between strict judgment and compassion. And these days, friends, that feels both more urgent and more *challenging* to achieve.

It is more natural right now to read the word *Ayeka* as if it were *Eicha*. Meaning...How?

⁷ Or HaChaim on Genesis 1:26

When we read the words without vowels, they are identical. And it's easy to get them confused. Especially when Eicha is the ultimate cultural referent for our time.

Eicha is one of the most tragic words in the Hebrew canon. It lends its name to Megillat Eicha, the book of Lamentations, where we lament the destruction of the Temple:

Eicha yashva badad, Ha-ir rabati am, hayta k'almana.⁸

How can it be that the city that was once so populous is now so solitary; she has become like a widow.

We read that text on Tisha b'Av as we commemorate the destruction of *both* temples in Jerusalem. When we do, the custom is to retroject every calamity that has befallen the Jewish people onto that day and that text. Crusades, pogroms, expulsions...are all, say Jewish tradition, represented by Eicha. Because Eicha is a word laden with collective strife and mourning. And for this reason, when we look out at our experience today, when we consider the moral crisis of Judaism after two years of destruction, we are consumed by so many painful questions of...how?

How can it be that the war in Gaza is still going on? How can it be that after thousands of years of suffering, our people could inflict such profound devastation upon another? How can it be that after nearly two years, the remaining hostages are still not home? How can it be that during that time, Palestinians in Gaza have endured the wholesale destruction of their society?

No matter which of those questions resonated most for you, or which ones made you want to walk out of this room...those are the questions I'm genuinely asking myself on this Yom Kippur. I will remind you that Yom Kippur is a time when we are actively *supposed* to be uncomfortable. And I pose those questions because they make *me* uncomfortable to ask *you*. But I also know that many of you approach Yom Kippur with at least some of those exasperated concerns.

Surely some of us believe that we, here in Brooklyn, are not directly responsible. Gaza is far away and we have no say in how Israel conducts its war. Others will say: we've protested our own government's acquiescence in all the ways we know how. What more is there to do? And still others might ask: what about Hamas? What about the responsibility they bear for this enormous catastrophe?

⁸ Lamentations 1

All of that is fair enough. But Yom Kippur requires that we interrogate every aspect of *our* roles in the world. Our machzor shows that clearly, insisting that all of us are responsible, in the first person plural, for every other one of us. In the words of mystic Isaac Luria, that's "because all Israel is one body and every one of Israel is a *limb* of that body."⁹ And therefore, as many of you have asked me over the past few weeks, on Yom Kippur we ask again: what would teshuva even look like, for the sins we have committed, collectively, as a people? Finding the best possible answer to that will take a long time, with a great deal of communal reflection and moral courage.

But if we *need* some semblance of an answer as we approach this holiday, I would suggest we begin by transforming eicha back into ayeka. Asking ourselves: where have we been, and where are we now? Where were we two years ago, and what has changed within us, as the death tolls have continued to rise? What have we said or not said during that time, which might have made some impact? Have we tried hard enough to encourage our own leaders to understand *their* responsibility in ending this war? Are we satisfied by saying what we think is necessary? Are we too satisfied? Looking back, is there anything we regret having done or not done, and what are we planning to do about that regret?

Those questions may only scratch the surface, but they begin to root us in the realm of *din*, accountability, that teshuva demands. And then, there is the matter of compassion.

In the pursuit of self-evaluation, Yom Kippur requires us to be as exacting as we ever could be. But at the same time, teshuva is not designed to excoriate ourselves into smallness. A measure of compassion creates the space for us to change, and to learn what more we can actually do. With mercy for ourselves, we can also rightsize the way we understand our roles in this moment. Given how impotent we feel, and let's face it, how impotent we may truly be...it is all too easy to berate ourselves...for the perceived failing of not doing enough. And from that place, there is an inclination to redirect our outrage toward loved ones who understand their role differently from how we do. But through compassion for them, we might be able to find more allies, with whom we'll one day begin to seek repair.

Friends, there is nothing that I can say that will make any of this easier. But once again the Torah literally says: *t'anu et nafshoteichem*, on Yom Kippur you should *afflict* your souls. And this year, that feels especially apropos. We are only beginning to consider how our people might engage in a genuine teshuva process in the years to come. But finding a way to pose questions to ourselves that hold us accountable, paired with a measure of compassion, is, I believe, a decent place to start.

⁹ As quoted in Days of Awe

And in so doing, we might begin to build a new relationship to this very real past. It is true that we cannot change what this war has wrought. But as we try to live in this world, with incalculable losses that remind us of Eicha, it's worth remembering that Eicha does not end with a prophecy of things just simply getting better. It ends with an exhortation.

The penultimate verse of that scroll is the familiar phrase, "Hashivenu elecha Adonai v'nashuva," Return us unto you, God, and let us return.

Even as the burning Temple lay in ruins, even as everything the Jews of antiquity held dear had fallen apart before their eyes, the prophet Jeremiah wrote of teshuva and return because he believed that renewal was possible...if the people could hold themselves accountable. The Temple was rebuilt, as we know, only to be destroyed again. But eventually the rabbis of the Talmud actually succeeded in returning, by way of changing their past. While grappling with the fixed physicality of their past in ruins, they returned in a different way.

They did not deny or negate the reality of the Temple, but they gave us a new way of relating to it, by way of the Talmud. And when we perform the rituals of Yom Kippur tonight and tomorrow, we are not only seeking teshuva, but we are quite literally embodying a new relationship to that ancient past. The survival of our tradition depends on the belief that teshuva is not a literal return to what was, so much as a creative return to *understanding* what was.

In 5786, there are some past truths we will now carry with us for the rest of our lives, as Jews, and as human beings of conscience. And what matters on Yom Kippur is what we will do with those truths.

That very same verse from Eicha ends with the maybe even more famous phrase, "chadesh yamenu k'kedem." And if I may offer one final linguistic flourish, I would point out that the standard translation of that phrase as "renew our days as of old," is kind of a misnomer. Surely, that's what the pshat is saying. But k'kedem doesn't mean "as of old," in any conventional sense. Kedem comes from the same Hebrew root as kadmonim, meaning ancestors. But it also carries with it the charge of kadimah, meaning, "forward." Kedem, therefore, refers to whatever you find *before* you – either spatially, or in time. In that spirit, may we now renew our days k'kedem.

As we seek renewal in this new year, may we recognize the very real reminders of all that we inherit from our painful past, holding ourselves accountable. And may we also

build new relationships *to* that past...and to each other...so that we may live lives of both justice and mercy.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.