

On Teshuvah

Broken Hearted Shofar Hasidic Tale (18th Century, Poland)

Every year before the Days of Awe, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, held a competition to see who would blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. If you wanted to blow the shofar for the Baal Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of *kavanot*- secret prayers that were recited just before you blew the shofar to direct the shofar blasts to the right places and proper effect in the heavenly realms.

All the prospective shofar blowers practised these *kavanot* for months. They were difficult and complex. There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar so badly that he had been practising these *kavanot* for years. But when his time came to stand before the Baal Shem Tov,, he realised that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience and he choked.

He couldn't remember one of the *kavanot* he had practised for all those years. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Baal Shem Tov in complete silence, and then when we realised how egregiously- how utterly- he had failed his great test, his heart just broke in two and he began to weep sobbing loudly his soldiers heaving and his whole body wracking as he wept.

"All right, you're hired." said the great rabbi.

"But I don't understand," the man said. "I failed the test completely. I couldn't remember a single one of the *kavanot*!"

The Baal Shem Tov began a parable. In the palace of the King, there are many secret chambers, and there are secret keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all, and that key is the axe. The King is God, the palace is the house of God. The secret chambers are the ascending spiritual realms that bring us closer and closer to God when we perform the mitzvot, such as blowing the shofar with the proper intention. The secret keys are the *kavanot*.

And what is the axe? What is the key that opens every chamber and brings you directly into the presence of God wherever that may be? The axe is the broken heart. For as the psalmist says "God is close to the brokenhearted."

"The Place Where We Are Right"

Yehudah Amichai (1924 - 2000, Germany, Israel) translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard.

But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place Where the ruined house once stood.

Preparing Your Hearts for the High Holidays

Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky and Rabbi Rachel Sabbath Beit-Halachmi (21st Century, United States of America)

Sometimes we think, "T'shuvah can't work if I am the only one doing it. It's lonely work. And anyhow, how can I ever let my guard down? Can I really change when there are those who are out to do me harm? Whether they are competitors in business or colleagues at work or school just striving to get ahead, they want to see me stumble and fall. Perhaps they are unwilling to admit it, but they'll be first in line to take my place." We might think that's how the world is supposed to work, but it need not be.

T'shuvah provides us with a prism through which to view the world. By working on ourselves rather than attempting to change others, we may find that those whom we thought were enemies are in fact people just like ourselves. We can change them only by changing ourselves. Those who think otherwise eventually will stumble and fall as they race to get ahead at our expense.

Each of us has the potential to change, no matter how far we have strayed from the path of the good life. Waiting for others to change first, however, won't help us change. The Baal Shem Tov said "Sinners are mirrors. When we see faults in them we should realize that they only reflect the evil in ourselves." T'shuvah is possibly only through changing ourselves... We can do it, because God will help us. We will not stumble or fall, because God is at our side.

Repentance Inside

Alden Solovy (1957, Jerusalem, Israel)

Repentance Inside

This I confess:

I have taken my transgressions with me,
Carrying them year-by-year into my hours and days,
My lapses of conscience
And indiscretion with words,
My petty judgments
And my vanity,
Clinging to grief and fear, anger and shame,
Clinging to excuses and to old habits.
I've felt the light of heaven,
Signs and wonders in my own life,
And still will not surrender to holiness and light.
G-d of redemption,
With Your loving and guiding hand
Repentance in prayer is easy.
Repentance inside,
Leaving my faults and offenses behind,
Is a struggle.
In Your wisdom You have given me this choice:
To live today as I lived yesterday,

Or to set my life free to love You,
To love Your people,
And to love myself.
G-d of forgiveness, help me to leave my transgressions behind,
To hear Your voice,
To accept Your guidance,
And to see the miracles in each new day.
Blessed are You,
G-d of justice and mercy,
You set Your people on the road to t'shuva.

Gratitude, Regret, Restoration
Rabbi David Wolpe (1958, Los Angeles, CA)

Why does Rosh HaShanah precede Yom Kippur? No sooner do we mark the New Year than we begin repenting for our sins. Surely the logical sequence would be the reverse: we should repent and then usher in the New Year with a clean slate.

Rosh HaShanah is a day we celebrate the world. We appreciate the beauty, the wonder, and the miraculousness of life. That appreciation is critical; for only when we understand how splendid yet fragile God's world is can we begin to repent for having damaged or neglected it. All *tikkun*, all reparation, begins in appreciation. We heal relationships because we understand their value. We seek to restore the imbalances in the natural world because its native pageantry dazzles our eyes. Yom Kippur is the outcome of our Rosh HaShanah vision: surrounded by possibility, we need to heal what we have hurt, or nurture the untended patches of God's garden. Seeing the cracks in creation, we acknowledge our obligation to fill them. First comes gratitude, then regret, then restoration.

This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared
Rabbi Alan Lew (1943-2009, San Francisco, CA)

And it is real whether you believe in God or not. Perhaps God made it real and perhaps God did not. Perhaps God created this pageant of judgement and choice, of transformation, of life and of death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and the Book of Death, *teshuvah*, and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture.

It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case. The weeks and the months and the years are also inventions of human culture. Time and biology are inventions of human culture. Language and stories, love and tragedy, are inventions of human culture. But they are all matters of life and death, all real and all inescapable. Even though we invented the idea of weeks, we die when our allotted number of weeks has gone by. So if this event is merely the product of human culture, it is the product of an exceedingly rich culture, one that has been accumulating focus and force for three thousand years...

What makes a difference is that it's real and it is happening right now and it is happening to us, and it is utterly inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us as is the possibility of our transformation.

This year some of us will die, and some of us will live, and all of us will change.

On God and the Soul

For 10 Days

Rabbi Rachael Miller and Rabbi Samuel Kaye (21st Century, Atlanta, GA)

The God I believe in isn't *Aveinu Malkeinu*, God the King or God the Father... at least not for 355 days of the year. For 355 days of the year I hold a complicated and complex theology! My God is imminent and infinite! My god is loving and non-judgemental, close and supportive, cosmically competent but not responsible for the faults of human beings nor the mistakes of the world.

But for 10 days of the year I recall the God of my ancestors. And that God becomes my God again. Because for 10 days, on the High Holidays, I do need *Avinu Malkeinu*. I do need a parent. I do need a judge. I may even need a king. Because I need someone to confess to. I need someone to hold me accountable. I need someone to hold the world.

And God is big enough for that. God is the only thing perhaps big enough for that. To be exactly what I need when it's time to come home and do the hard work. To be ancient and modern, simple and complex, entirely my own- and something I share with all of you. To hold that space for me and then, before I even realise that I've slipped away, to be exactly what I need all over again.

Your Word is Fire

Rabbi Arthur Green (1941, Boston, MA)

"Pour out your heart like water
in the Presence of the Lord"

On the second day of creation,
God separated the upper and lower waters.
At the moment of their separation, we are told,
The lower waters cried out:
"We too long to be near our Creator!"

So it is with the soul:
It too once dwelt in the upper realms,
Near to God,
And has fallen to the lowest depths.
Like the lower waters of Creation,
It cries out to return to God.

"Pour out your heart like the waters,"
Says the psalmist,
Longing again to be
"in the presence of the Lord."

The Spiritual Self

Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. (1930-2021, Jerusalem, Israel)

What is one divided by zero? Infinity. What is .00001 divided by zero? Infinity. What is 1,000,000,000,000 divided by zero? Infinity. Infinity is without dimension and limitation, hence, *relative to infinity* large and small are equal in magnitude.

Relative to God, who is infinite, the greatest of galaxies and the most prominent of the heavenly hosts and the smallest of humans are all equally *significant or insignificant*. God is either interested in *everything* or *nothing*. It, therefore, presents little difficulty to believe that God is interested in the universe God created and in the lives and actions of an individual human being as well.

We most often assume that a major hindrance in spirituality is the lack of a strong belief in God. The fact is that more often the problem is a lack of belief in oneself. Some people fall into a rut of despair and self-deprecation. What difference does it make whether I am drunk or sober, using or clean? No one really cares. I don't have the strength or willpower to resist the addiction. Why should God take an interest in whether I stay clear or sober or not?

Belief that God is in charge of the world means that God is in charge of my very being. If God did not want my existence, I would not be existing...there must be something I can accomplish with my life...Self-awareness and self-appreciation of what we are is neither vanity nor egocentricity. These are crucial to spirituality, because they give us a sense of duty and responsibility.

The Obligated Self

Mara Benjamin PhD (21st Century, Mount Holyoke College, MA)

In the rich repository of traditional Jewish legal and narrative texts, to be a Jewish self means to have entered a social world already bound and encumbered with tasks, duties and relationships...

In the early days of months of first having a baby, the raw and immediate assault on my freedom- a freedom I had not even known I had previously enjoyed- struck me with overwhelming force. No sooner had this baby, this stranger, appeared than she held a claim on me. I was now responsible for addressing her needs and wishes, for seeking out the meaning of her family body and its often cryptic language...I found it unthinkable that I would refuse the role into which my new child had, by the fact of her existence, suddenly put me. She exerted a gravitational pull, and my role was now to orbit her.

To be an obligated self was to be subject to the law of another: the Law of the Baby. The law could not be fulfilled in the abstract but only in the active, embodied, material actions: soothing, feeding, cleaning, comforting, distracting, smiling, and wiping...

"Torah" is not to be understood as the limited, particular bequest given to a limited, particular people, but rather as a stand-in for the sensible substructure of the universe. Torah, like gravity, allows free movement on the planet. Humans are creatures who come to existence in a world of constraint as constrained beings. We are responsible to others and to a world we did not choose.

Freedom consists not in casting off all that binds us, but rather in recognizing that our boundedness and our agency are each part of a greater whole.

On Prayer and Hope

Studying Talmud

Rabbi Alan Lew (1943-2009, San Francisco, CA)

I loved studying Talmud, but not because it taught me great spiritual truths. It didn't; the content was completely mundane. For example, we studied the history of the laws about how to *kasher*- to make kosher- a knife that you had bought from a gentile. There were many variables to consider; for instance had it been used for hot, cold or pungent food? Should you bury it in the ground? Boil it in water? Bring it to the point of white heat?

There were dozens of treatises on this subject written over hundreds of years, and reading them was like listening to a conversation that took place in some timeless realm. But each of the commentators came to a completely different conclusion about how to kasher this knife, and this threw me into a crisis. If the rules of kashrut really reflected the will of God, how could it be that there were so many different answers to this question?

This crisis was resolved when it finally dawned on me that what was important was not any particular result in itself, but rather the sincere effort to determine the will of God and to live by it; it was the process of trying to figure out how this could be done that was sacred... thinking is a spiritual activity. It does bring you closer to God.

Tzava'at Harivash

Dov Ber Mezereitch (??-1772, Hannopili, Ukraine)

How much more pleasing to God is prayer in joy than that which is said in sadness and tears! A poor man begs and weeps as he comes before the king; he can be dismissed with but a trifle.

But when a noble prince steps forward, the king's praises joyfully on his lips, and then asks some favour, he cannot be treated so lightly. To him the king grants his greatest gifts- a prince must receive a princely portion.

A Parable of Prayer

Rabbi Shmuel Weinberg (1850-1916, Slonim, Belarus)

A father and his son, travelling together in a wagon, came to the edge of a forest. Some bushes, thick with berries, caught the child's eye. "Father," he asked, "may we stop for a while so that I can pick some berries?" The father was anxious to complete his journey, but he did not have it in his heart to refuse the boy's request. The wagon was called to a halt, and the son alighted to pick the berries.

After a while, the father wanted to continue on his way. But his son had become so engrossed in berry-picking that he could not bring himself to leave the forest. "Son!" cried the father, "we cannot stay here all day! We must continue the journey!"

Even his father's pleas were not enough to lure the boy away. What could the father do? Surely he loved his son no less for acting so childish. He would not think of leaving him behind- but he really did have to get going on his journey.

Finally he called out: "You may pick your berries for a while, but be sure that you are still able to find me, for I shall start moving slowly along the road. As you work, call out 'Father! Father!' every few minutes, and I shall answer you. As long as you can hear my voice, know that I am still nearby. But as soon as you can no longer hear my answer, know that you are lost, and then run with all your strength to find me!"

We can get lost in the forest, a forest that can represent both life and the mystery of prayer. We are taught to call out to our Heavenly parent, in the hopes that they will hear us even as we dally behind. And when we fear that they cannot, it becomes time to leave the forest and run to catch them- for they are certainly waiting just a few steps away.

We Are Music

Alden Solovy (1957, Jerusalem, Israel)

We Are Music

Quiet now.

Listen.

Breathe.

And listen.

You are music.

Your breath and hands,

Your smile and tears,

Your eyes and pulse,

Are notes that dance

In the space between us.

We are music.

A symphony conducted

By the rhythm of life,

By God's hand,

By our choices, day-by-day.

Our notes play on,

Separately, together,

The sacred sound of living.

Our music waltzes,

Making melodies fresh and new,

Never heard again,

Bass lines that pulse from our hearts

To the Soul of the Universe.

Joy bends sorrow.

Sorrow bends hope.

Hope bends grief.
Grief bends love.
Love bends joy.
Quiet now.
Listen.
Breathe.
And listen.
The silence is your longing.
The silence is your yearning for a different song.
The music of your own will
Blocks your heart to the harmonies
Already dancing around you,
To the chorus already singing around you.
Oh, you hidden delight of heaven.
Oh, you secret gift of God.
We are music.
We are music.
The music plays
Through us.

Standing Before God

Rabbi Aaron Panken (1964-2018, New York, NY)

Our actions help us live in such a way that when we suffer life's darkest deprivations, we will always have ways of coping with them. Our actions may not change the ultimate outcome one iota, but they alter our attitude, bolster our ability to withstand challenges, help us handle unavoidable misfortunes better, and see life's value amid chaos and dismay.

On Homecoming and New Beginnings

Avot D' Rabbi Natan Chapter 6 (Likely compiled in Babylon between 700-900 CE)

What were the origins of Rabbi Akiva?

They say that he was forty years old and had still not learned anything. Once, he was standing at the mouth of a well and he said: Who carved a hole in this stone? They said to him: It is from the water, which constantly falls on it, day after day. They asked: Akiva, don't you know this from the verse (Job 14:19), "Water erodes stones"?

Rabbi Akiva immediately applied this, all the more so, to himself. He said: If something soft can carve something hard... then all the more so, the words of Torah, which are like steel, can engrave themselves on my heart, which is but flesh and blood! He immediately went to start studying Torah.

He went with his son and they sat down by the school teachers. Akiva said to one: Rabbi, teach me Torah! Akiva then took hold of one end of a tablet, and his son took hold of the other end. The teacher wrote down aleph and beit for him, and he learned them. Then he learned from aleph to tav; then the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. And he went on studying until he learned the whole Torah.

He went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. "My masters, he said, open up the sense of the Mishnah to me. When they told him one law, he went off and sat down to work it out for himself.

"This aleph – what was it written for? That beit – what was it written for?"

Why was this thing said? He kept coming back, and kept asking them, until he reduced his teachers to silence.

"The Chief Rabbis Haggadah"

The Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020, London, England)

In the summer of 2000 I was invited to deliver a lecture in the presence of Prince Philip in Windsor Castle, the oldest continuously inhabited royal residence in the world, going back almost 1000 years to William the Conqueror.

It's hard to describe my emotions at the time as I thought of the painful early history of Jews in England: the first blood libel in Norwich in 1144, the massacre in York in 1190, and the expulsion of the Jews by Edward I in 1290. I wanted to honour the memory of those Jews of an earlier age, to tell of their courage and tenacity and say something of what it means and still means to be a Jew.

I began by trying to imagine what it would be like to inherit Windsor Castle, the oldest inhabited castle in the world. I expect that I would be eager to learn about the history of the castle, which was built by William the Conqueror on the legendary site of King Arthur's Round Table. I would want to know about the monarchs who had preserved the castle over

the centuries. I would realize that I, too, had a responsibility to enhance and protect the castle.

In the course of my remarks I said: "Jews don't own buildings like Windsor Castle. We are not that kind of people. But we own something that is, in its own way, no less majestic and even more consecrated by time. The Jewish castle is built not of bricks or stone, but of words. But it too has been preserved across the centuries, handed on by one generation to the next, added to and enhanced in age after age, lovingly cherished and sustained. As a child I inherited it from my parents, as they had inherited it from theirs. It is not a building but it is nonetheless, a home, a place in which to live. More than it belongs to us, we belong to it; and it too is part of the heritage of mankind."

I Know

Father James Conlon, PhD (1936, United States of America)

I Know

That poverty must cease.
I know this through the brokenness
And conflict in my heart.
I know
That protest is my most prophetic act
And that the world is longing
For a new soul, a new healing moment.
I know
That when we awaken to our origins
And become truly human
We bring hope to the children
And to the earth.
I feel called today
To bring the people together to break the bread
And tell the story.
I feel called today
To be a mystic in action,
Aligned to the dynamics of the universe.
I feel called today
To give my gift,
To listen to the heartbeat of the broken world;
To heal the fragmentation of people and the planet.
I feel called today
To celebrate the wonder of creation
And respond to sacredness and the
Challenges of life.
I feel called today
To participate in the work of my time,
To fall in love,
To feel at home.
I feel called today
To be inflamed with enduring hope,

To be at one with the universe,
To be touched by God.
I feel called today
To compose a new paragraph for life.

Acts of Mystery

Rabbi Zalman Shachter Shalomi (1924-2014, Boulder, CO)

“It was 1940; I was just sixteen years old. My family, having fled from Austria after its annexation by Nazi Germany, were considered enemy aliens by the French, and we were placed in a detention camp in southern France. We had been able to communicate with the American consulate in Marseilles and were waiting anxiously for visas to emigrate to the States.

We had been in southern France about three or four weeks, Rosh ha-Shanah was approaching, but we had no *sefer Torah*, we had *nothing*. I'd heard there was a butcher in town and thought maybe I could get a ram's horn from him, so one morning I snuck out of the camp at around five in the morning and went to find him. He was killing goats and thought I wanted some meat. I told him no, I wanted a horn. He gave me two, with the skull bones still attached, which I took back to the camp. I got some charcoal from leftover fires that people built to cook with, put the horns with the bones in a can full of water, and boiled them until I could pull the bones out. By this time I had sharpened a wire hanger by rubbing it on a rock, and I pushed it and twisted it. It took a long time, but finally, just before Rosh ha-Shanah, I managed to drill through one of the horns.

Everyone gathered around, and I raised the shofar to my lips and blew. The commandant came in with his whip and an automatic and asked what all the noise was. “*C'est le cornet de notre libération, monsieur le commandant,*” I said. It's the triumph of our liberation.

“*Notre libération?*” he said. “*Quelle chance,*” what a coincidence- and he told me to tootle it again. I gave another blow, whereupon he pulled out a letter and read the names of the people whose visas were waiting for them at the American embassy in Marseilles. Our family was among them.”