Erev Rosh Hashanah

5775 / 2014

Rabbi Micah Becker-Klein

**Mistakes, Mending, & Mindfulness**

Shanah tovah. Happy new year and good evening.

*The Journey*

One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,

 though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice,

 though the whole house began to tremble

and you felt the old tug at your ankles.

"Mend my life!" each voice cried. and you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried

with its stiff fingers at the very foundations,

though their melancholy was terrible.

 It was already late enough, and a wild night,

and the road full of fallen branches and stones.

 and little by little, as you left their voices behind,

the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,

 and there was a new voice

which you slowly recognized as your own,

 that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,

determined to do the only thing you could do,

determined to save the only life you could save.

 - Mary Oliver

Falling, fixing, forgiving. Mistakes, mending, and mindfulness. Ruptures, repair, refocusing.

These are important concepts within the Jewish value of *teshuvah*, repentance or return. *Teshuvah* is itself a complex process that we aspire to complete as fully as we can at this time of year. In order to engage in *teshuvah,* we are charged with different levels of focus: self-inspection, communal inspection, and global inspection; to give deep consideration of ourselves, our community, and our world. Over these High Holy Days, each of my teachings will focus on one of these areas. It is my hope that this will create a way to walk the path of these next 10 days through Yom Kippur to hope and goodness for this next year. Tonight, I begin with the area of personal reflections and questions to begin the process of *Cheshbon Hanefesh,* a Hebrew term that expresses the idea of the accounting of our soul.

It is an unusual and effective design. To be introspective for ourselves, and to be together in a public way as solidarity with all our brothers and sisters who share in this same task and call. It is one thing to reflect on one’s self alone, and we all are lifted and supported when we can come together and join in the task.. We are together through this task, and support each other through the process. And it helps create for us a path forward, so we have the ability to reflect about us to our community and to our world in the days that follow. Tomorrow morning the focus will be on issues within the Jewish community, and in particular on anti-Semitism. On Kol Nidrey, the focus will be on family, and on Yom Kippur day, I will focus on Race Relations. In each of these, I plan to present challenges as well as a picture of a positive path into this New Year.

In this Jewish practice, the first step is the personal *cheshbon hanefesh,* which we can do first through finding forgiveness in ourselves, and using mindfulness to make room for forgiving others. Then, all of us working on forgiving ourselves and others can lead to communal repair, and many communities working to repair can lead to global forgiveness, understanding, and love.

*Cheshbon hanefesh*, when we begin with ourselves, can really affect the surrounding universe. Personal cheshbon hanefesh can actually lead to repairing the world, and we must start with ourselves. We all make mistakes, and our tradition has *teshuvah* as the mending mechanism that allows us to come face to face with ourselves, and to re-direct our paths again.

The primary challenge we must undertake is try to acknowledge the wrongs that we have done in our speech, and in our actions, or inactions. While pursuing *teshuvah* may be quite demanding, this repair is what we strive for in our lives. At this time of year, we are asked to think about relationships between ourselves and our soul, ourselves and our fellow human beings, and ourselves and our Creator. Finding our personal way to holiness or godliness may be easier than repairing the tears in our interpersonal relationships, which could take a lot more work and time. Even though the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur call on us to think primarily about our relationship with God, the real challenge, the hard part, is our relationships with ourselves and with each other. How will we mend those tears?

No matter what your year has been like from last Rosh Hashanah until now, we can all look to make repairs to forgive. The challenge is not what we are personally aware of. The deeper challenge is to be able to face the ones that we are not aware of when presented to us. The challenge before us is to approach our fellow human beings, our friends, our family, our partner, and to face them with love and openness. We are all part of the same process of mindfully mending ourselves to be whole for a new year together. No one is without their tear, their hurt, and their bruises. And everyone’s story is different.

We can begin with a communal recognition that we all make mistakes. Just a few weeks ago a young man was becoming bar mitzvah in our community. I find that there are some wonderful moments of learning from our youth, especially as expressed in b’nai mitzvah dvrey torah. During his preparations, he voiced to me his apprehension at making mistakes, a common thread for many b’nai mitzvah candidates. I assured him that mistakes are ok, and that the community is there as your net, to catch you if you stumble or fall, and I also affirmed to him that liturgical mistakes would in no way impact his status within our community. After all, I make mistakes all the time. There is a well known Jewish joke that goes something like this:

 A young child was in the synagogue looking at the memorial board that was for veterans of the armed forces. The rabbi came in, and the young child asks, “Rabbi, who are these people?” The rabbi answers, “These are the brave people who died in the services.” With a shocked look, the young child asked, “Was it Friday night or Saturday morning services?”

In his dvar torah to our congregation on that Shabbat morning, the young man thanked our congregation’s staff for helping assure that he could make mistakes and learn from them. He went on to say that since he makes a lot of mistakes each day, it was good that Temple Beth El was a community that would be supportive regardless, our congregation is a synagogue where you can make mistakes, and we have the space to forgive. It was a profound statement, and one to which we can all relate. We all make mistakes. Our ability to forgive ourselves and others for our mistakes is a great opportunity that we should not pass up. As another one of his classmates said, “life is full of scratches and dents; we just need to not let them be our only way of looking at ourselves.” I see in this a wonderful wisdom about the power of being a community of support.

I want you to make room for forgiveness in your life. To first forgive yourself, for we are often hardest on ourselves. Our expectations, our goals, our shortcomings. Forgive yourself. Create some slack for you to be human.

Take a breath, to yourself, you can say, I forgive myself.

And if you can, take a moment, a brave moment, and look next to you—find some eyes, if you can, and see the humanity in the room right next to you. We are here together. You are not alone.

Hopefully that has helped created a little bit of a lift, a little bit more space within you. Maybe now there is more space for you to forgive. Isn’t it interesting how starting to forgive actually makes it easier to forgive even more. Think about how hard it is to truly apologize to someone. Consider the way in which you have had to confront a wrong, or the ones that you could not face. And create the space for forgiveness for those around you. We are here on this world for too short a time, and we are in community to help each other walk through this world with value and meaning. And we are all human, and we are an imperfect society. So that means there will be mistakes. Creating the space for forgiveness will create the space to support each other through the challenges that we face in our world together. The challenges of disease, of illness, of war, of poverty, of loss. By mindfully creating the space within you to forgive, you may also create the capacity to have more love and more room for light and laughter.

This past year, I began a course in mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is a way of being that helps increase awareness of yourself and your world. Mindfulness is “the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment.” I studied through a meditation class a variety of approaches to mindfulness. As my practice has grown, I have been applying mindfulness to a variety of areas in my life such as sitting meditations, eating, communication, and teaching. This is based on a Buddhist concept of being present in each moment. To live in the present moment and not dwell upon the past or future, and not to judge it. Mindfulness is a way of helping train ourselves to respond and lessen reactions to the world around us. There is a Buddhist Sanskrit teaching that is in the *Kol Haneshamah* Reconstructionist prayerbook series that illustrates this point. It is one of my favorite teachings on being in the moment. Related to the themes of the High Holy Days, we will sing a prayer later called *Hayom*, today, about the importance of being present today. This prayer picks up on that theme.

Look at this **day** for it is life.

The very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and verities of existence,

the bliss of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power—

For every yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow only a vision.

But **today**, well lived,

makes every yesterday a dream of happiness

and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well therefore to this **day**.

***Hayom***. Today, This is the day. *Hayom*. This is the day that we can look to ourselves and look to our hopes and look to our best selves. To remember that in the journey of a year, there are many ups and downs, many opportunities for getting off course— so today is our reminder, our help, a way to be closest to our ideal selves. We can bring mindfulness into this practice of mending. The way in which we communicate our concerns, the ways in which we respond to concerns, these actions are in our hands to determine. To release our judgment and to grant forgiveness.

In order to mend our mistakes mindfully, we need to recognize where we have come, acknowledge our role within, and let go of the weight of the past. It is not about forgetting, it is about letting go. I believe that the way in which many people have transcended the traumatic experiences of life is the ability to let go, to forgive. Judaism has this process I mentioned earlier called *teshuvah*. It is a way to let each person find the way to forgive and move on. In our *Tanakh,* the Hebrew Bible, there are a few examples of what can happen when we do not use this approach. The first is the story of Lot’s wife, her inability to let go results in the myth of her turning into a pillar of salt. As Lot and his daughters flee, the only way for their escape to freedom is to let go of the culture they had been in and to move on. Another example from our tradition is in the story of Jonah, traditionally read on Yom Kippur afternoon as the Haftarah. Here, the prophet Jonah is incensed that God is able to forgive the people of Ninevah. God explains to Jonah that this is God’s way, God’s love is expressed through forgiveness. We only need to begin the work to recognize the hurt and the wrong, and then a practice to turn away from doing it in the future. These are simple steps, but challenging none the less. When Jonah sees that God has forgiven the people that Jonah just condemned, he cries out, “why have you done this to me?” God’s response is that God’s love is for all of creation. Jonah shows us the shortsightedness of not creating the space to forgive, or not granting the space to let God’s love into the moment.

Let us make the space to hear each other this year, to forgive the hurts, the wrongs, and to find the good within us, the good within our community, the good within our world. Let us reach out to one another, and be the hands that support each other.

Let this be the year of “Yes and…” The year where you can respond positively when approached, and make the space to forgive. To be the year when we give the benefit of the doubt to each other.

We write the stories of our lives, we write the stories of our year.

This year, let us be “Yes and…” Let us be positive and embody the values of our congregation and of Jewish life. Let’s be true to one another and be connected as a community.

Tonight marks the beginning of the Jewish year 5775. We come together in this intense way that is not part of our normal rhythm. There is room for you and room for our growth. The question is how will you write your Jewish story this year? When you write down the next year, how will it be mindful? How will it reflect the focus of now?

I love the metaphor the fabric of the universe. I think of this fabric as God’s robes. Over the course of the year, there are so many tears, rips, and stretches, that at the end of the year, we have to help mend it together. We help repair the universe when we repair ourselves. Can you find the way to make the thread of your connection be multiple strands woven into our tapestry of a year. There is room for us all in this picture. We create the weave, the pattern together.

As I said earlier, when we can start with the personal *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, for forgiving ourselves, and then using mindfulness, make room for forgiving others. All of us working on forgiving ourselves and others can lead to communal repair, to collaboration, and lots of communities working to repair can lead to global forgiveness, repair, and love.

There is so much in our world that is discomforting and disorienting, we need to be the community, the place of comfort and positivity. Let us mindfully face the mistakes of our year and mend together the torn seams in the fabric of our year. I look forward to building bridges this year, to finding new relationships and relationship patterns.

A year of space, a year of granting benefit of the doubt, a year of forgiveness, a year of mindfully being present. I look forward to meeting you on the way.

I hope that your return again “home” on these High Holy Days will help you reflect upon the story of your year, the openness to forgive, and the presence of now.

Shanah tovah.