

Fate: Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5779

On a hot, sticky summer day in 1969 four siblings, ranging in age from seven to thirteen, set out for an afternoon adventure that will ultimately change the course of their lives. The Gold children have heard about a neighbor a few blocks over on Hester Street, a woman who is rumored to predict the future and even, eerily enough, to accurately foretell the exact date upon which a person will die. This seer got it just right with the ailing grand-mother of a family down the road, her perfect forecast allowing relatives from abroad to organize their travel plans just right; since then, her reputation has been unimpeachable. Propelled by a mix of curiosity and boredom, the Gold siblings decide to make a visit. Each one, privately, is told the date of his or her death.

Such is the premise of *The Immortalists*, a recent novel by Chloe Benjamin. My first apology of this season will be to say that I'm sorry for ruining this book just a little in the spoilers that are to come, although I'll try not to give away too many. Suffice it to say, however, that the information each of these children receives that day causes them to make choices that dramatically alter the trajectory of their lives and, ironically, play a role in making the soothsayer's prophecies all come true. "If you knew the day you were going to die, how would you choose to live?" is the question on the jacket of Benjamin's book and, in many ways, at the heart of her story. But the novel is also a meditation on fate – exploring whether we're but passive recipients of the vagaries of luck, chance, and destiny or whether our own actions very much shape the circumstances of our lives.

Before we delve further into these thorny questions of determinism and how they might relate to the High Holiday season now upon us, I want to share a second story – this one from my friend, Rabbi Stuart Vogel:

In 1942, inside a Nazi concentration camp, a young boy looks past the barbed wire of his barracks to notice a pretty girl walking on the other side. Seeing him too, the girl throws a red apple over the fence in greeting; this small moment of intimacy, in a place so starved for human connection, creates a powerful bond between them. Over the next week, the two meet daily at the fence until one afternoon the boy says sadly, “Don’t bring me an apple tomorrow for I will not be here. They’re sending me to another camp.” During the many years that follow, years in which the boy will learn that his entire family has been exterminated, the face of this young woman he barely knows gives him strength and hope amidst enormous loss and despair. In many ways, the girl keeps him alive.

Fast forward to 1957 when two adults sit down awkwardly for a blind date on Coney Island in Brooklyn. “Where were you during the war?” asks the woman. “I was in a concentration camp in Germany,” the man replies. “I used to throw apples over the fence to a boy in a concentration camp,” says his date, her face clouding over in memory. Overcome by shock, the man begins to speak slowly: “And did that boy once say to you, ‘Don’t bring me an apple tomorrow for I won’t be here?’”

-“But how could you possibly know that?”

“I was that boy,” says the man. “I was separated from you then, and I don’t ever want to be without you again. Please, will you marry me?”

Herman and Roma Rosenblat appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show Valentine's Day 1996 and shared this story of their incredible love affair. *Bashert*? Fated? It's hard to hear a fairytale like this one and not believe that there's some greater force out there in the universe. But there was just one problem – the Rosenblat's tale was a lie. Yes, Herman had been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. Yes, Herman had met Roma on a blind date in Brooklyn and had now been happily married to her for many decades. But that tiny detail about the apple? Well, that piece had been embellished for the purpose of “bringing happiness to people...[and] remind[ing] them not to hate but to love...[and] to make good in this word,” admitted Herman many years later in an interview.¹ Does fate mysteriously cause our lives to turn out in a particular way? Or is fate the story we tell ourselves after the fact to explain how the various details of our experience have all come together? Do we ultimately have control over our how destiny unfolds? Or are we but victims to whatever the cosmos has in store for us? If we knew the day that we were going to die, how would we choose to live? All these are grand questions of the High Holiday season.

It might seem to some of you that I'm waxing a bit philosophical here; after all, Rosh Hashanah is about repentance and forgiveness, making amends and returning to our best selves. The holidays are about family and tradition and reflecting on the year just passed, about community and faith and our relationships with those most dear to us, about new beginnings and striving for repair and considering who we most want to be in this world. Existential questions about fate and determinism might be provocative and interesting at best, but they have little to do with the themes of this season. Rather, we should be exploring issues related to *teshuvah* (return).

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/business/media/herman-rosenblat-85-dies-made-up-holocaust-love-story.html>

And yet! At its core, the High Holidays are about making change – about believing that we are capable of controlling our actions and behaviors and by so doing altering the circumstances of our lives – our relationships, our health, our financial situation, our happiness, our connection to God, perhaps even the state of the world around us. If we believe that everything has already been decided, that the conditions of our lives are outside of our control, then it makes these efforts all for naught. Rather, we might consider whether change is really possible before we dedicate our energies so actively and enthusiastically towards pursuing it.

At Yom Kippur mincha we chant the Book of Jonah, recalling the adventures of our reluctant prophet who attempts to escape from God’s mission to Nineveh where he has been sent to proclaim judgment upon the people there for their evildoing. In many ways, this *haftarah* looks like a classic proof-text for determinism; no matter how much Jonah tries to thwart the Divine plan by exercising free will, God has other ideas – lobbing storms upon the sea which lead the frightened sailors to throw Jonah overboard, sending a big fish to swallow the prophet whole, eventually spewing Jonah out on dry land only after he’s had an epiphany about the importance of following God’s command. You might think you’re in control, the story of Jonah seems to assert, but really it’s God pulling the strings and casting the die. We are all but part of a greater Divine plan.

However, the story of Jonah does not end there! Rather, the prophet eventually makes his way to Nineveh and announces that in 40 days-time the city will be destroyed for its wickedness. And the wonder of it all? Far more miraculous than the fact that Jonah survives his three-day residence in the belly of a whale is that the people of Nineveh actually change their ways, so much so that God renounces the intended punishment seeing that it’s no longer necessary. The people of Nineveh are

role-models par excellence of *teshuvah*, the sacred return that is at the heart of this season, which is why their story is read in the waning hours of Yom Kippur. If an entire community of people so evil that they were going to be killed on account of their misdeeds can somehow transform their behavior, we should be able to do the same. The story of Jonah gives us hope, offering the possibility of new beginnings.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the UK, posits that Judaism – through our very concept of *teshuvah*- brought to the world this radical idea that human beings are capable of change. After all, he points out, this notion is not an obvious one nor did it prevail in the history of Western thought. The Greeks believed that character was destiny and something with which people were born; the word “fate” itself comes from the Latin and is derived from their word meaning “spoken” – that is something pronounced by the gods and thus immovable.² More recently, neurobiologists will tell us that personality and behavior are determined by DNA rather than by free will, a topic explored by myself and David Mogul in our Scientists and Synagogues series a few years back; psychologists will demonstrate the different ways in which so-called “free will” can be easily manipulated by priming and other kinds of interventions. *Teshuvah* is, in many respects, a completely counter-intuitive notion. It may even be a specious one.

And yet, all the reasons that make change improbable are the same reasons that make it so important – or as writer Isaac Bashevis Singer cleverly put it, “We must believe in free will; we have no choice.” Indeed, the social science literature reveals that when people believe themselves to be autonomous agents capable of decision making, they in fact act in better and more ethical ways. In one experiment

² <http://rabbisacks.org/courage-grow-message-yom-kippur/>

conducted by Dr. Kathleen Vohs and Dr. Jonathan Schooler, subjects who were primed to think about free will as an illusion (by reading a passage to this effect) were more likely to engage in immoral behavior – either cheating on a math test or stealing from an envelope of coins – than control subjects who simply read a neutral passage about free will. And such effects have been demonstrated outside of the contrived conditions of a psychology lab as well, with day laborers who believe in free will shown to be more likely to come to work on time and better rated by their supervisors than agnostic peers, belief in free will actually being a better predictor of job performance even than self-professed work ethic. As philosopher Steven Cave puts it, “It seems that when people stop believing they are free agents, they stop seeing themselves as blameworthy for their actions. Consequently, they act less responsibly and give in to their baser instincts.”³ “There’s No Such Thing as Free Will,” he titles his article. “But we’re better off believing in it anyway.”⁴

The grand message of the High Holiday season is that human beings are eminently capable of change and, even if this is actually a grand myth, it’s one worth believing for spiritual reasons as well as for psychological ones. Not only does affirming free will and its weighty counterpart, personal responsibility for our actions, ultimately lead us to live better and more ethical lives, it also provides us with a tremendous spiritual resource in the form of hope. Change is painful and arduous and difficult to achieve but it is also wildly optimistic – it means that things can sometimes be different from the way that they are now with enough energy and effort and faith in both ourselves and other people. And given the terrible state of our world today, where on earth would we be if we didn’t believe this to be so? Whether it is difficult circumstances of our personal lives – damaged relationships, unhealthy habits, behaviors we’d like to change, patterns we’d like to break – or whether it is the crushing

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/>

⁴ Ibid.

brokenness of society around us – violence, bigotry, abuse of power, inequality, environmental degradation, hatred and all the rest – it would be hard for us to endure if we didn't see at least some possibility for things to improve. "We must believe in free will, we have no choice." Without it, we would fall into deep despair.

It was on Herman Rosenblat's second appearance on Oprah, this time in 2007 on the occasion of his and Roma's 50th anniversary, that Rosenblat finally came clean and admitted his elaborate ruse for reasons that are not entirely clear. After all, he had a book contract at the time and had even sold rights to a feature film based on his "Angel at the Fence" story; neither was ever released once Rosenblat's deception became public so he took a pretty good hit for his revelation. Perhaps it was the strain of keeping a secret for so many years or unconscious guilt that he would now be profiting from a tale so patently false. The *Washington Post* seems to suggest that scholars were becoming dubious about Rosenblat's story and so perhaps he was nervous about his lie being uncovered. Whatever it was, Rosenblat finally decided to share the truth as he knew it – that far from being cosmically predestined for one another, his long marriage with Roma was simply the product of two human beings making the courageous choice to commit their lives to one another. Perhaps, in certain ways, that's even more romantic still!

And so it is for us here today, at the start of this year 5779 full of hope and new beginnings. The miracle of this season isn't that God is reuniting Holocaust survivors or swallowing prophets into the belly of a whale or determining in advance on what day we will die. The miracle of this season is that God has endowed human beings with the stunning ability to make our own decisions, chart our own paths, and –

if we so choose – change the circumstances of our lives. May we put this gift to good effect in the days to come!

Wishing you a Happy New Year full of the glorious possibility of real, true, transformative change. *Shana Tova!*