

Netzach & Hod, Pushing and Yielding

The courage to accept what we can't change and change what we can.

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Yom Kippur 5781

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
the courage to change the things we can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

You may recognize these words -- this is the Serenity prayer.

It is attributed to the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and it has become a fundamental prayer in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. These words hold essential truths for us - in this time, in this year, and in every moment of our lives.

During the last six months, our lives changed from one day to the next in ways that we didn't even know they could. We have had to learn new ways of being, new ways of connecting, new ways of living.

Six months ago, I remember sitting with Susan Diller, our executive director, and with TBZ president Sara Smolover, trying to decide **IF** we should close our doors to in-person programs. We imagined it would last for only a few weeks and certainly by summer we would be open. We wondered could we offer anything online, and how could we do it? And yet, here we are, six months later...

I remember being told that my children's schools were closing. Again, we thought it would only be for a few weeks. And then came the announcement that their schools would stay closed for the entire spring, through the end of the school year. I went home and looked at my spouse and cried, "I don't know if I can do this for 2 more months." But we did. And here we are six months later.

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We all did whatever we had to do. We have found ways to do the things that made us cry out that we can't do it. At times, maybe we *couldn't* find a way. At times we were truly stuck and needed to be gentle with ourselves -- and gentle with each other. Those hard moments come and pass, even when they feel long and miserable.

Six months have passed and we are here, six months have passed and we have found ways through pain and hurt and darkness. We have been resilient. You have been resilient.

These six months, for me, have meant new learnings. I am by nature someone who likes to be in control. I have had to grow and use new emotional muscles -- I have had to foster my courage and embrace acceptance. There was, and is, nothing I can do about things beyond my control.

When will this pandemic end? When will we be able to take off these masks and embrace again? When will this sanctuary be full with your beautiful faces? I do not know the answers and I cannot control them. I can only accept what I can't change.

Yet at the same time I must have the wisdom and the courage to change the things I can. I know more than ever that I have the obligation to work to heal our world. I have the tools, and the capacity and the privilege to bring change to this broken world. I do not have the luxury or the right to live in passive acceptance of what is.

Growing up in Chile, I lived under the Pinochet dictatorship. Until I was fifteen, I knew that if I didn't follow the rules -- if I did not accept the current reality -- I could be at risk, real risk. I could be killed. Disagreement was not acceptable. Dissent was dangerous. Standing up in protest meant putting your life in jeopardy. Many people who had dared to speak out against the Pinochet regime had been forcibly “disappeared” as it was called then.

But the day when Chilean people voted Pinochet out - October 5, 1988 - was a day of celebration. It was a day of recognition that all humans had worth and value. It was a day when I truly understood that we have the capacity to change the world around us. For the first time in my life, I experienced democracy. We went out into the streets, singing, and celebrating, without fearing for our lives. In October 1988, I saw how people could muster the courage to seek change.

We all have the power to choose how we show up in our lives, how we show up for each other, and how we show up for the world.

Jewish tradition gives us tools for doing this with intention and grace. Our two faith quilts, hanging here and perhaps in your homes from the *mikdash me'at* kits you received are beautiful and awesome. Their beauty, crafted by many of you, highlight two sefirot or midot, guiding principles from the kabbalistic and hassidic tradition - Hesed - Loving Kindness and Gevurah - Strength or Boundaries.

Today, I want to invite you to grapple with two new kabbalistic principles that are derived from Hesed and Gevurah - Hod and Netzach.

Hod, can be understood as Surrender, Humility, Gratitude, Acceptance. On the opposite side of Hod, we find Netzach - understood as Overcoming, Victory, Endurance, Grit, Tenacity, Effort.

A story about Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshische, a great Polish Hasidic master at the turn of the 19th century can help us understand these two opposite branches of the kabbalistic tree:

It is told that he taught that everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into one or the other.

When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: **Bishvili nivra ha-olam** "The world was

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created for me." But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: **V'anochi afar v'efer** "I am but dust and ashes."¹ **Anochi afar v'efer** "I am but dust and ashes." is an expression of Hod, of acceptance and recognition that things are as what they are. What is, is. And I am but one small part of it.

Bishvili nivra ha-olam "The world was created for me." is an expression of Netzach. I have the power and the responsibility to change, to do, to win, to move mountains.

Accepting the things we can not change is **Hod**.

Courage to change the things we can change, is **Netzach**.

The wisdom to know the difference is perhaps the most challenging part.

Rabbi Art Green writes:

"**Netzach** seeks to remake the world, to render everything perfect. It is a great force for goodness, that which inspires us to go forth and right the world's wrongs, to reform the social order, to fulfill the dream of perfection.

Hod is the admission that we cannot do it all, the acknowledgment that we have to accept ourselves as we are and be grateful for life as it has been given to us. Beauty lies in that which is, if only we open our inner eye to behold it.

Netzach strives for transformation; it is the impatient force within us that believes we can accomplish anything, that reality should be subject to our wise reshaping power.

Hod is the other side of wisdom, the self that bows before the mystery of what is as it is, the self who submits to reality and rejoices in doing so".²

Holding Hod and Netzach and finding balance is not an easy task. It is a very hard task and also a risky one. How do we know when to let things be what they are, and as they are, and when not to accept the way things are and must strive for change?

¹Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters. page 249

²Art Green, EHYEH, A Kabbalah for Tomorrow, page 53

Cantor Elizabeth Shammash, one of my yoga teachers at the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, quoted a teaching by well-known LA Yoga teacher Eric Schiffman who says: “Every Yoga posture involves a “push” and a “yield”. Pushing is an active force that moves the body further and deeper into the posture, gently exploring areas of tightness. Yielding is a passive force with which you wait and listen to the moment-to-moment feedback from your body. It’s a letting go of resistance that allows the active force to be successful without being aggressive. The pushing and yielding elements occur simultaneously, as in a dance. Done properly, therefore yoga is a matter of pushing and yielding, of “doing” and “not doing” at the same time”³

What a powerful image. To do and not to do. To push and to yield. To do both at the same time.

I know many of us fear the year to come. Not knowing how things will unfold can paralyze us. I know that when I am afraid, my capacity to differentiate between Hod and Netzach, between the right times to push and yield, between the need for action and acceptance is diminished. Fear is real but we must overcome the challenge of letting fear define the way we live our lives.

Today, we yield, we accept that this year won’t be as we imagined. Six months ago we never imagined that Yom Kippur would look like this. That we would be holding shiva minyans on zoom, that our children would learn remotely, that our adult children could not be with us for Passover, and now Yom Kippur, that we would be unable to share dinners with friends, or hug grandparents, or go to the movies, or celebrate graduations, birthdays, anniversaries with kisses and parties, that we will not be able to break our fast together in person. That we would be afraid to walk out of our homes without masks. We never imagined that we would be secluded, alone, and apart.

There are things we must accept, to which we must yield.

³Eric Shiffman, Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness, page 48

But passive acceptance, acceptance without thought, without consideration, can be dangerous and so we must also push. That is why Netzach is so important, why we must balance Yield with Push. And there are things...things like fighting for justice that we must push for.

The guiding principle of this holiday is *Teshuva*. *Teshuva* means Repentance, return, the knowledge that change is possible, that there is no such thing as, “it is what it is.” *Teshuva* is the knowledge and the belief that we can change, that others can change, and that we actually have the power to facilitate such change.

Teshuvah begins with an internal process of acknowledging what we've done wrong, regretting our actions and resolving to change our behavior. The next step is confession, a verbal acknowledgment of our wrongs. So during the services in the next 25 hours we will recite the *Vidui*, *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet*, we will list our transgressions and we will do that as an act of Netzach, an expression of our commitment that change is possible. *Teshuva* is the knowledge that change is possible. *Teshuva* is the power and the belief that we can change, and with that change, we can bring about change in our world.

Let us remember that power in November. We have the power to change our despair into hope. We do not need to accept “it is what it is.”

This week we heard from the holder of the highest office in this country that he would not commit to respecting the outcome of the upcoming elections. These are critical times. For me, this news took me back to the Chile I grew up in. I was not alive yet on September, 11, 1973 the day of the coup d'etat when Pinochet took power from a democratically elected president in Chile, and took his life. That day was followed by seventeen years of killing, of people's disappearing, and injustice. That day was the beginning of a very dark time in Chile. That darkness was lifted when the people, together, recognized they could take control, that they had power, that they could make change.

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Voting is an act of *teshuva* -- of change. Alongside everything that we can't control, we can still bring about change. And we can do this when all of our hands, minds, and hearts are set to this work.

Together, through Hod and Netzach, Push and Yield, Acceptance and Courage, we can, we must, and we will, repent, repair, and rebuild.

The American Jewish poet, Adrienne Rich - *zichrona l'vracha* - wrote the following words in her poem, "Dreams Before Waking" -

"What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope?
You yourself must change it.

What would it feel like to know
your country was changing?
You yourself must change it.

Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange,
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?"

You are not alone. We are not alone. We are in this together.

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
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G'mar Chatima Tova,

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