

Rabbi Yonatan's Sermon

First Day of Rosh Hashana 5784

Alexander Pope famously said, "[To err is human, to forgive divine](#)"--- When we realise the extent to which we have erred, we realise that just as we have erred and are far from perfect, others are have also erred; they are not perfect and, rather than continuing to judge them, we can choose to forgive, have compassion on them and on ourselves.

The season of repentance gives us an opportunity to make amends, repair what is broken in our lives and, hopefully in doing so, relieves us from some of the suffering we carry when we think of our regrets and the accompanying guilt and shame that comes with those regrets.

There is a vacillation between shame and blame is important to recognise. We begin by feeling badly about something we have done and then shift to blaming others for what they have done to us and then return to thinking about what we did wrong -this crazy 8 can go on until there is forgiveness and reconciliation. The emotions that accompany our personal regret include guilt, sadness, worthlessness, lack or loss. Our blame, our inability to be forgiving to others manifests in frustration, anger and hatred in our hearts. These feelings are a source of suffering and need to be addressed by us at this time of year.

As I was standing on the pier by St. Kilda beach, contemplating all of this, I must have looked discomposed. A stranger approached me and asked if I was alright? Drawn out of my thoughts and back into reality, I assured her that I was fine, it was just that the weight of the world's problems were on my mind. She nodded with understanding. "Have a good day," she said and walked away. At that moment, I was reminded of the true meaning of these Days of Awe. That is, that it is a time for compassion.

During these days, we strive to move from a place of judgement to a place of compassion and love. While both RH and YK are referred to as Yom Hadin, Days of Judgement, these days are also Aseret Yemei Teshuva, days of returning. Returning to what? To a place of compassion.

The following teaching from the Zohar, a seminal work of Kabbalah, sheds some light on the healing power of compassion. It eloquently explains that the power of the shofar, which is blown on Rosh Hashanah, is in fact the power of compassion to shatter the power of judgement.

Zohar Pritzker vol 6 p35

The Sitra Achra exists as a hard shell than can't be broken , except by the guidance given by the blessed Holy One..., "Blow the shofar on the new moon, over the shell/covering of for our festival day (Ps 81:4)"

תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בְּכֹסֶה לְיוֹם חַגְנוּ:

Blow the horn on the new moon,
on the full moon for our feast day.

In order to shatter that shell, by which the moon is covered and can't shine.

When [we] awaken the shofar [in our world] the sound issuing from it strikes the air, splitting firmaments until it rises to that mighty rock covering the moon... Then that sound persists and removes Judgement.

Once Compassion has been aroused below (meaning here), so too above; another, supernal shofar is awakened, emitting a sound that is Compassion; and sound meets sound, Compassion meets Compassion.”

It is the sound of the shofar that breaks through our shell of callousness, of self protection from pain. When I think of that callousness that covers the moon, I think of my thumb and of the healer who had compassion when he saw it and said, “here is a gift I made myself.” and gave me an ointment he had made. You can easily imagine the opposite, a medical doctor faced with pain and suffering every day, and as a way to cope, forms a hard shell around his or her heart, perhaps unconsciously, in order to shield them self from feeling the pain and suffering of the other by sitting in a place of judgement as though the tables couldn’t be turned.

When we normally speak of teshuva, we may just think about forgiveness. We may have been taught that, in order to accomplish complete teshuva, we need to pray to God for forgiveness. While that is true, perhaps our prayers should not be directed to some old man in the sky that we imagined as a child, but rather to the God within each one of us. We are not here to convince the God out there to forgive us, but rather trying to speak to the God within us to be compassionate; that means, to be compassionate to ourselves. In order to be forgiven, we have to be for-giving; that is, to be for-in favour–of giving– giving what? Compassion to ourselves.

When we begin this process of moving away from a place of judgement or judgmentalism, we may be thinking: I have really stuffed up, this can’t be reconciled, I am not good enough. We are at that point stuck in a very narrow space of limitation, of Din, strict judgement, but we are capable of moving to a place of greater expansiveness and possibility: that place is a place of compassion and love (to being able to look in the mirror and say “I love you” and mean it).

למה זה דומה Let me offer a metaphor for this. It is as though during these ten Days of Awe, we are moving through the inside of the shofar. How? Use your imagination – walk, run, fly or be carried through by a booming “Tekiah” - your choice.

Today, day 1 Rosh Hashanah, we enter into the narrow mouthpiece of the shofar and, by Yom Kippur, come out through the expansiveness of the much broader end. From the narrowness of judgement to the expansiveness of compassion. Remember, It is through the movement of breath, the life force, from the narrowness of the mouthpiece through the expansiveness of the horn, that a soul-touching blast is able to be sounded. By the way, blowing the shofar is very difficult – sometimes even those who blow the shofar regularly have difficulty doing so. Think about the sound produced by the shofar: it transcends our intellect, our thoughts, our excuses about why we can’t do it and who is to blame for it all. Thus, all that limits us is shattered by the blast – that blast says that everything is possible – that I am a worthy, a whole and a divine expression of God.

During these Days of Awe, imagine yourself walking with awe through the shofar of life – see yourself moving from the narrow space to the expansiveness, away from the inner critic and towards a place of compassion and love by asking for forgiveness of others and, more importantly, of yourself.

A text that I love that speaks about teshuva in the broader sense of moving from the narrowness of judgement to the wide open expansiveness of compassion and love appears in the Talmud Tractate Berachot/blessings. In a discussion about the rewards of suffering, particularly the reward of atonement for one’s suffering, the Talmud relates some fascinating stories about moving from a place of judgement to a place of compassion.

Talmud Bavli Berachot 5B

The story involves Rebbe Yochanan, whose life had been filled with loss. You see, R. Yochanan lost 10 of his children. The last one is said to have died by falling into a cauldron of boiling water. The bereft father preserved a bone from his little finger, which he exhibited to mourners in order to inspire resignation. "This is a bone from the body of my tenth son," he would say. We can see that R. Yochanan is unresolved in his grief and is challenged to understand this suffering. Though he explains suffering intellectually as a means to atonement, he eventually comes to understand something about his own spiritual struggle.

When the scene begins—Rebbe Yochanan is entering to visit a student who is ill in bed.

רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַר אֲבָא חָלַשׁ. עַל לְגַבִּיּוּהָ רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר לֵיהּ: חֲבִיבִין עֲלֶיךָ יְסוּרֵיךָ? אָמַר לֵיהּ: לֹא הֵן וְלֹא שְׂכָרָן. אָמַר לֵיהּ: הֲבִי לִי יָדְךָ. יְהִי לִי יָדִיּהּ, וְאִוְקְמִיּהּ.

Rabbi Yoḥanan's student, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Do you desire to be ill and afflicted? [remember that Rabbi Yochanan had taught the students that suffering leads to atonement, now he seems to be inquiring with his talmid about this] Rabbi Ḥiyya said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward,

Rabbi Chiya's teacher asks him if his pain is precious? Why does he ask him this? Is he trying to understand the suffering in his own life through the eyes of his student? hmmm

This scene always brings a tear to my eye. R. Yochanan enters into a place of pain and tries to intellectualise with his student about the meaning of suffering and its rewards, but the student is not comforted.

Then something amazing and beautiful happens:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yoḥanan raised him up

What just happened here? Rabbi Yochanan begins by asking a Torah question of his ill student - are your sufferings dear to you? But then Rabbi Yochanan moves from his head to his heart and from the judgement of his student (whom he believes must have sinned to be suffering) to a place of compassion for another through heartfelt empathy. He sees and feels the pain in his student's eyes, hears the suffering in his voice and is overcome by compassion - a compassion that transcends his rational inquiry. He does not need to speak a word, he just gives him his hand, holds his hand and we are told that, by doing so, raises him up (perhaps raises his spirits, perhaps he heals him or may both).

Do you remember someone ever taking your hand? I mean that either literally or figuratively. Has someone's compassion ever raised you up? Consider that this is exactly what the angel tells Hagar to do when she cannot even look upon her dying son Ishamael after their banishment into the desert.

Genesis 21:17-18

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְּגַד הַרְחֵק בְּמִטְחָנִי קָשֶׁת בְּיַד אִמְרָהּ אֶל-אֶרְצָהּ בְּמֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְּגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קֹלָהּ וַתִּבְכֶּה:

and she went and sat down at a distance, ... for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים | אֶל־הַגֵּר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִה־לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֶל־תִּירְאִי
כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם:

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her,
“What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדָךְ בּוֹ כִּי־לִגְוִי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימְנוּ:

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

One of the amazing things about the section of the Talmud cited earlier is that it then relates this same story again, but with R. Yochanan as the person who is now ill in bed.

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן חָלַשׁ. עַל לְגַבִּיּוֹ רַבִּי חֲנִינָא. אָמַר לִיה: חֲבִיבִין עֲלֶיךָ יְסוּרִין? אָמַר לִיה: לֹא הֵן וְלֹא שְׂכָרָן. אָמַר לִיה: הֵב לִי יָדְךָ.
יְהִיב לִיה יָדֵיהּ, וְאוֹקְמִיהּ.

Similarly, Rabbi Yoḥanan fell ill. Rabbi Ḥanina entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Ḥanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Ḥanina raised him up and restored him to health.

The message is clear. We may all be that suffering person at different times and we all need love and compassion, but certainly not pity. Pity comes from a person who excludes themselves from the human condition, dismissing the knowledge that he or she too will suffer one day. R. Yochanan moved from a place of judgement about his student's illness to a place of compassion and as a result he was able to see a human being, a loved one suffering (really senselessly), and so he took his hand and, through this act of compassion and love, raised him up.

Can our compassion for others arouse compassion for ourselves so that we can be forgiving FORGIVING to ourselves and others and in doing so attain the forgiveness of the Holy One within and beyond us?

The Sages taught: “One who judges another favourably is himself judged favourably” (Talmud Shabbat 127b)

May we all be judged favourably by ourselves, by others and by God.

Shana Tova