

Transformation and Change: Process Yom Kippur Day Final

Everybody experiences extreme stress at some point in their life, it doesn't matter who we are. Something happens outside of our control and it hits our life and knocks us over. It might be a health-related stress, something with your family, it could be economic, career-related, something emotional that happened, it could be an environmental situation that had nothing to do with you. It could be a pandemic. Every one of us experiences extreme stress in our life and these days because of the economy, the global health threat and many causes of uncertainty, the majority of people are experiencing some form of extreme stress, at least according to the polls.

The question is: What is the one gift that the Kadosh Baruch Hu has given us, the one power that we have right now in this moment that can change everything?

You have it, I have it, we all have it. The one gift that can change anything in our lives no matter what has happened to us. I am sure you know the answer; and the answer is “choice”. We can't always change the circumstances of our lives, but we can “choose” how we respond or react to those events. But as I discussed last night, most of us are so habituated in how we respond or react to things that we find this advice more easily said than done.

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, in speaking about reacting to this global pandemic on Rosh Hashanah, gave us some insights, inspiration and also tools such as the use of metaphor to help us navigate these seas of uncertainty. At Kol Nidre, I spoke about our ability to change and today we will focus on how this can be accomplished. I want to focus on a couple of additional tools that can help us break through some of our ingrained habits and patterns so that we can realise the kind of change and transformation we seek at this time of year. So what determines our destiny, our גורל? I mentioned in my drasha last night that our *goral*, our destiny, can seem

random like casting lots, but it is our choices that actually determine our destiny.

The three choices we make that determine our fate according to human needs psychology, the teachings of Tony Robbins, are:

We choose:

- 1) What to focus on:
- 2) What things mean:
- 3) What to do:

These three decisions control our lives. It is not the conditions of our lives that control our destiny as much as the decisions we make. Let's try something: Think to yourself about one decision that you made in your life that changed everything; if you had not made that particular decision, you would have had a totally different life. It may have been better, it may have been worse, who knows, but you can see for yourself the power of a decision. Sometimes even a small, seemingly insignificant decision changes your whole life. One year, for example, I decided to attend a meeting in Jerusalem just before Yom Kippur. It was a hard decision because I would lose a whole day of High Holy Day preparations, but I decided to drive from Beer Sheva to Jerusalem. At the meeting to my surprise was a former teacher of mine, who had really inspired me more than any other in rabbinical school. Much of my rabbinate was influenced by Melila Hellner-Eshed's teaching of the Zohar. At the meeting, she told me that she would be conducting a Bet Midrash/class in Jerusalem on Sunday nights after the Chagim. I began driving to Jerusalem every week to attend Melila's Bet Midrash and wouldn't you know it I immediately met the love of my life, my *besher* Merav, who lived in Jerusalem at the time.

Your whole life turns on the decisions / the choices we make.

Decisions=Destiny, it is not our conditions, it is our decisions that determine

our destiny. If we want a new life for ourselves, we have to make new decisions. Everything in our life changes the moment we make a decision - a real, courageous decision. But what is a decision? A decision is when you cut off any other possibility and commit to something with everything you have got and take action in that direction.

Decision #1 Focus

But big decisions start with little decisions, like what am I going to focus on. Whatever you focus on you're going to feel. If you focus on all the ways in which people have wronged you in your life, then of course you will feel bad; you will find evidence, become certain of the truth of that belief and that is how you will feel and will end up manifesting that truth. If you look for evidence that people are really good inside, that at some level we really do care about each other, you will find it. Seek and you shall find. If you focus on all of the amazing coincidences that have happened, things that may have been guided from on High you will feel immense gratitude. Perhaps because of where you were on a certain day at a certain time you missed being in an accident. Just before my Uncle Bob died, he told me that he believed in God. When I asked about it, he told me the story of my grandfather Max and how a big truck went out of control and crashed through the front window of the Sadoff pharmacy in South Minneapolis, plowing all the way to the back of the store. It turns out that My grandfather, who was always there, had stepped out only a few minutes earlier when randomly someone stopped in and asked him to be the 10th man in a shiva minyan. My Uncle reasoned that my grandfather's life was saved by personal divine providence for doing a mitzvah. If you focus on the belief that God is guiding you through every moment, that is what you will feel.

The challenge is: can we become conscious of our decision making? When we are unconscious, we get pretty terrible results usually. To get better results, we have to become more conscious in our decision making. What

we decide to focus on is what we will feel, whether it is true or not. What do we focus on in our prayer on Yom Kippur?

The prayer we focus on more than any other is the 13 Midot of God, repeated 10 times or so during the Yom Kippur services. What are we focusing on when we say these verses? What does it mean? What is the action associated with saying the 13 Midot as part of the Selichot/penitential prayers? Let's remind ourselves of the text from Shemot 34, the Torah text from where the prayer is taken.

Exodus 34:6-7

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל-פְּנֵיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֶל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת

Adonai passed before him (Moses) and (Moses) proclaimed: "Adonai! Adonai! God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness,

נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפֵימֵי נִשָּׂא עֹון וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה...

extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin...

This prayer generally appears three times during each Selichot section; it is the centerpiece of the Selichot service-it is our focus during prayer on this day. But why is it so central? That is related to the question or the decision about what this prayer means! After we decide what to focus on, [in this case the 13 attributes] we have to decide what is the meaning of this prayer?

Decision #2 Meaning

That brings us to the 2nd decision that changes our lives has to do with deciding what things mean: So, when we focus on something that someone does or says we come up with a meaning. The meaning could be: someone is trying to take advantage of me, she is lying to me, no one loves me or what a lovely gesture! You get to choose the meaning in every situation. Someone loses their job during the pandemic. They can think, this means I am going broke and everything is hopeless, another person may say, this is an opportunity to recreate my life and do something I am more passionate about!

Let's return to the 13 Midot, why do we say it anyway? What is the meaning of this prayer? In the Talmud Rosh Hashanah we find: (R. H. 17b): "After God had proclaimed the thirteen middot to Moses, He told him: 'As often as Israel shall offend, thus shall they do in My presence, and I will forgive them.' Rav Yehuda says that a covenant was made that the thirteen middot should not be without effect."

The literal meaning or understanding of the Talmud seems to be that just as Moses proclaimed the 13 Midot after the sin of the Golden Calf, we should say these attributes whenever Israel offends God; Rav Yehudah seems to be adding that this is actually an everlasting covenant that when we recite these words, they will move God to forgive us. If we understand the prayer in this way we have decided that what this means is that we are forgiven merely through the act of reciting these words over and over again. Come to Shule, say the 13 attributes multiple times, God hears and says, ok I remember now, I am compassionate and loving so...you are forgiven.

But Rabbi **Menachem Nochum Twersky** of Chernobyl (18th century, founder of the Chernobyl Hasidic dynasty and a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezritch published one of the first works of Hasidic thought: the *Meor Eynayim*. In this Torah commentary he offers a very different meaning that I find more compelling because it leads to action. We have already seen that deciding on the meaning of what we do changes everything! He says,

Meor Eynayim on Chayei Sarah:

מה הוא רחום אף אתה רחום שצריך לקבוע בו כל המדות להשתמש בהם בכל עניניו
שהיה כל הנהגותיו על ידי המדות כמו שאמרו רז"ל בזמן שישראל עושים לפני כסדר הזה
וכו' עושים דייקא שהכוונה הוא לא בלבד הקריאה בייג מדות אלא העיקר הוא העשיה)
(doing them, emulating these traits in action

According to the Meor Eynayim, calling out the 13 Midot is meaningless and has no effect in itself, we are not trying to convince God of how compassionate God should be or to “twist God’s arm into forgiving us!” We read the 13 middot in order that we should do these things: that we should emulate God and embody these attributes, that we ourselves should be compassionate, patient, kind, loving, truthful and, most of all, forgiving...it is not the ritual but the act that is important here...

Is this not the main point Isaiah is trying to make in our Haftarah portion today, when he declares, “Is this the fast I (God) desire(s)?”

הֲלוֹא פָּרַס לְרַעֲב לַחֲמֶךָ וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בֵּית כִּי־תִרְאֶה עָרִם - וְכִסִּיתוּ, וּמְבֹשָׁרֶךָ
לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

No...It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

The very decision of what this prayer means, what Yom Kippur means to us, changes everything...again, according to the *Me'or Eynayim*, the meaning of the 13 midot is not the calling out of God's (attributes), but rather to emulate them--to do them, to be them. The act of saying them has an important function and that is to help us undo our very entrenched patterns. When we repeat this information over and over it is uploaded to our minds, brings them into our consciousness and more importantly our subconscious mind to help us begin to make new connections, shift to a different perspective. Now this takes practice, which is simply repetition...repetition is the mother of skill...the more we repeat them, the more we become them. The idea is that the more we repeat these attributes, the more they will get into our consciousness, remind us who we really are and we will embody these attributes in our daily lives.

3rd Decision: Act: What to Do?

3rd decision: Act-what are we going to do?

Do we decide to quit?

Do we decide to find our inner strength and focus?

Do we decide to turn it around?

Do we decide to wait and see?

In terms of the 13 midot, saying this prayer isn't about begging God to forgive us, but for us to become forgiving on this day--this is an example of a significant shift in perspective-in meaning which we then turn into action. The action is more than praying the 13 midot or any of the other YK prayers, rather it is going out to ask people for forgiveness, actively offering forgiveness to those against whom we are holding a grudge, and

do acts of compassion and lovingkindness for others. We do this so that we can be our best, holiest selves and begin to determine our true destiny on this sacred day. Remember whatever we decide to do, what action to take, we must be absolutely committed and take that action immediately, we can't wait.

Ultimately, our destiny is determined by what we decide! What we decide to focus on, decide things mean, and most importantly what we decide to do, which action to take. Our firm decision to change is the key, we need to make new decisions about these three things and our lives will be transformed. And of course our patterns and habits are hard to break, so we need a daily practice to accomplish this. A daily practice involves repetition, like saying the 13 midot 10 times in one day. Just think what would happen if we practiced in this way every single day of the year! For the next month try spending the first 5 minutes every morning repeating a consolidated list of the 13 attributes, focusing intention on practicing them throughout the day. " I am compassionate, I am gracious, I am patient, I am loving, I am kind, I am truthful, I am forgiving, I am an extension of the divine." Try that for 30 days and see if it doesn't change your focus, your meaning and what you decide to do? It might change your LIFE?

Shana Tova and Gmar Chatima Tova