

Looking at Ourselves

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I heard a remarkable story the other day, which I must share with you. It is the kind of thing which I would expect to read about, and then I would have clipped and saved in order to use in a sermon. Instead it is, what we call a “*ma’aseh shehaya*: an actual, true story” which one is personally aware of.

I recently performed an unveiling for one of the people who was killed by the airplane which crashed into the Pentagon on September 11th. I spoke with the man’s wife about how she was getting along and managing in the aftermath of her sudden loss. She told me that her 80 year old father had moved in to help her out after the death of her husband. He stayed with her for a couple of months, and then afterwards, moved back into his own home. That may not sound all that unusual, but the amazing thing is that previously he had been residing in an assisted living home. After helping his daughter for a period of time, he had regained enough strength to be able to go back to his own home, and live on his own again.

The story was so incredible, I asked her to repeat it for me, just to be sure I did not misunderstand what she had told me.

It affirmed a message I have addressed previously, about the importance of understanding how we benefit when we give of ourselves to others, and how important it is to think not only of ourselves. But this is the first time, I could ever recall directly witnessing such a dramatic example of the therapeutic healing power of the strength a person gained from reaching out to offer support to another individual.

All too often, we do not realize how crucial this lesson is.

We have just heard this morning the custom in Biblical times to send a goat into the wilderness on Yom Kippur to absolve the people of their sins. The notion that people could cast their guilt or blame upon another is the origin of the term scapegoat. I am certain that many of us, myself included, have pondered the meaning of this passage. Perhaps one of the lessons of this strange, quaint ritual, so foreign to us, is to help us recognize the importance of taking responsibility for ourselves and our own actions.

Contrast the story I just told you with what happened a few months ago to a group of health care workers who pulled their resources to purchase a lottery ticket on a regular basis. They grew very excited when they realized they may have won an enormous cash jackpot. Their hopes and dreams for a better life had been answered. That excitement, however, soon turned into concern when the co-worker who purchased the ticket did not show up the next day. Concern quickly evolved into anxiety, which degenerated into anger, and eventually resulted in a lawsuit when they began to suspect that the man had absconded with the winnings. They appeared on national TV, on the Today show to express their frustration and to demand that he share the winnings with them. There was

only one problem. Their ticket was not the winning ticket. This is not a punchline to a joke, but something that actually happened.

What started as joy and anticipation ended up destroying friendships and relationships. They were upset not only over the money they thought they were going to receive, and which now seemed more elusive than ever. I would suggest that, the anger they felt was motivated by resentment that someone else might profit, and get ahead, especially at their own expense. And this is what brought out the very worst in these people.

This is precisely the kind of matter we should ponder on this holy day. The question for us to consider on Yom Kippur is what kind of people we will choose to be in the coming year. What are the instincts which we will allow to dominate and determine our character. In making that decision, we ultimately influence the direction of our lives and the path we choose to take. Yom Kippur forces us to look within and ask ourselves, how will we invest our energies? The essential message of this day is for us to consider the consequences of the choices we make. If only we would heed the advice of our tradition when we make our choices, and apply it and live by its teachings.

Without passing judgment on the guilt or innocence of Martha Stewart, I just read the other day that she probably made about \$55,000 by selling her shares of her ImClone stock before the bad news about the product the company was hoping to hitch its star to came out. Was it really worth the \$55,000? Her legal fees alone total considerably more than whatever she made. And look at what has happened since. She is being investigated, and will probably be indicted for insider trading. Her reputation has suffered terribly, and her own company, a company she founded and which bears her name has gone so far as to replace her as its head. Was it really worth the \$55,000?

But that is not the issue I address this morning.

One of the interesting corollaries of Martha Stewart's plight is how many people seem to take joy in her demise. One publishing executive said, "people are more than happy to see her end up as a whiffle ball for New York media to swat around." The reaction has prompted some psychologists to speculate on this phenomena. The depth of the response to her situation is not just because she is a woman, but because she is a successful individual. The researchers maintain the crux of the problem is that people have difficulty dealing with the success of others. As a result, there is a satisfaction people have when those who seemed powerful, successful, and invincible fall --- and this is the issue which I wish to address this morning.

John Portmann, author of "When Bad Things Happen to Other People" said in a recent interview, "We Americans love putting people up on pedestals and we love taking them down." To better understand what motivates people to revel in others' misfortunes, a professor of psychology conducted tests on the subject. He concluded that the key is not envy, but resentment, especially when people think someone is not deserving of their status. The premise is that people evaluate themselves not so much by objective standards, but in comparison with people around them. He speculates that when people

around us, or whom we feel we know, falter, we feel better about ourselves. There is even a term for this, “schadenfreude”, which may be, according to some experts, a part of human nature.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we must admit that we all delight and relish to a certain extent when people who appear to have it all, get taken have misfortune and are taken down a notch. We feel they are getting what we think they deserve. But when we were younger, didn't our parents try to teach us, “I don't care about everyone else, only about you.”

To help us combat this natural instinct to gloat over the missteps of others, ponder the words of the founder of the Musar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, who wrote, “every human being is endowed by His Maker with two eyes. With one, he is expected to look at his neighbor's virtues. With the other eye, he is to turn inward to see his own shortcomings, in order to correct them.”

It is possible that dealing with the success or failure of others may be even more difficult than dealing with our own achievements and misfortunes, and the more prominent one is and the greater the fall, the more pronounced our joy.

Far more preferable than this model is the attitude of the man who attended a boxing tournament and who rooted for both contestants in every match. Finally, between rounds of the main event, the guy sitting next to him, leaned over and asked, “I have been watching you all night, and every time you are cheering for both boxers. How is it you don't have a single favorite in any match?” The man responded, “Easy,” he said, “I'm the dentist.”

We can be so intent on taking others down, that we do not realize the power of mutual benefit from lifting up each other. Not everything needs to be viewed as a contest in which the success of one is dependent upon the failure of another. Since life is lived in community, and in relation to others, we need to focus our attention on what we need to do to improve ourselves to become kinder and better people, what we can do to help others, rather than on trying to take people down a notch.

Do you remember a little more than a year ago the intensity of the battle between the Ford and Firestone companies. Each pointed the finger at the other as the source of the problems with the tires on the Explorer vehicles. Firestone said it was Ford's intransigence that was to blame for the problems. As a result of the animosity between the two, an association of over 95 years came to an abrupt, nasty end. What many people may not know was the extent of the breakup and the personal dimension of the story. Ford chairman William Clay Ford is the great grandson of both Henry Ford, and also of Harvey Firestone.

Not surprisingly, business analysts likened the situation to the deterioration of a marriage. Although they commented that not all marriages are meant to last, they noted that reconciliation became impossible not just when each tried to place the blame solely at the

feet of the other. The real problem was that they failed to work on making things work. At that point, as is the case in all relationships, the damage was irreparable. In announcing the dissolution of the cooperative agreements, the head of Firestone, John Lampe said, “business relationships, like personal ones, are built upon mutual trust and respect, and the trust has been so damaged that we can’t continue working together.”

How often do we allow this kind of destructive behavior to take over in our lives.

Again, the lesson is the same. Life is not some kind of seesaw where we rise when others fall. We need to think more about changing what we need to change in ourselves than spending our time and energy trying to tear down and find fault in others. We do our best when we are in competition with ourselves, for the greatest satisfaction in life should not and does not come from getting ahead of others, but in getting ahead of ourselves.

This perspective is consistent with the teaching of our religion. Jewish theology is unique among world religions for it asserts the truth of Judaism, while recognizing that other faiths are valid paths to salvation for their adherents. The Talmud maintains that although a Jew is held accountable for one’s failure to fulfill the mitzvot, non-Jews are judged by a different standard, thus alleviating Judaism of any sense of exclusive claims to truth.

The story of the man who died and went to heaven comes to mind. As he is being taken around on a tour of the different rooms in heaven, he is shown where members of the Jewish faith reside. He peeks in and sees people having a good time, laughing and eating, while some are studying and doing all kinds of things. He continues on his tour. As he approaches the rooms where fundamentalist Christians and Moslems are found, he is warned by his guide to walk quietly, and not disturb them. The angel explains, they have to be quiet when passing these rooms, because, “These people think they are the only ones up here.”

Even the basic beliefs and tenets of our sages reinforce the message that we should be harsher on ourselves, and judge ourselves in the context of our own lives and standards, and not based upon trying to belittle others.

On one level, the discomfort experienced by the prophet Jonah, the haftarah for Yom Kippur afternoon, is precisely because he was successful when he carried God’s message to the people of Nineveh that they must repent. Unexpectedly, they heed his call, and God spares them. Jonah is miserable and tells God he wants to die.

I want to offer a new interpretation of Jonah’s discomfort. He is upset because God accepts the sincerity of the people’s repentance and spares them punishment. He experiences a reverse schadenfreude. The response to the prophet relates to the very theme I am discussing today. God tells Jonah that just because His grace is extended to the people of Nineveh does not mean that Jonah will suffer. In other words, God reassures Jonah that both Nineveh and Jonah can be recipients of God’s mercy, compassion and beneficence. They are not mutually exclusive.

This new way of looking at the story reinforces the message that we need not hope for the demise of others in order for us to enjoy our own success.

A few years ago, I was in the library doing some research for a sermon. I couldn't help but hear the librarian's response to an inquiry. Someone was looking to find the collection of biographies. The librarian answered, "biographies begin where mysteries end." Neither she nor the person she was helping had any idea how profound her words were. Over the years I have occasionally thought about the meaning of those words and what insight I could derive from just happening to overhear that day that "biographies begin where mysteries end." I think the message is that by understanding the mystery of who we are, we can begin to determine and thus begin to become who we wish to be.

I was pleasantly surprised by the overwhelmingly positive response to the message I emailed to the congregation this week. I wanted people to come to services in the proper frame of mind, and not just rush in from the parking lot, grab a seat, without giving any thought to the spiritual preparation necessary to get the most out of this day. And so I sent out something written by my teacher, Rabbi David Hartman which read in part, "The essence of teshuvah is the belief that the past need not define the future...The call to teshuvah is expressed not only in the plea to God for forgiveness and in the affirmation of God's gracious love,...but in the repeated attempts at convincing the individual to believe in the possibility of change...on the individual's ability to believe that his or her life can be different. The major obstacle to teshuvah is not whether God will forgive us, but whether we can forgive ourselves – whether we can believe in our own ability to change the direction of our lives, even minimally.

"Teshuvah is grounded in the idea of an open future, in the belief that the possibilities for human change have not been exhausted, that the final chapters of our personal narratives have not yet been written. The sense of empowerment felt on Yom Kippur reflects an underlying faith in the power of the human will to break the fixed cycles of the past and to chart new possibilities for the future."

This season, this day, and its message affirms that we have the capacity through introspection to change the direction of our lives.

Darrell Fogan was supposed to be on the American Airlines flight that hit the Pentagon, last September, but didn't board due to a last minute change in his schedule. He has become a different person, explaining, "I want to be able to put closure on everything I do." He came away from his near brush with fate with a greater sense of the importance of the need to be physically fit, to make the most of each moment, to live each moment to the fullest, and to serve others.

On Yom Kippur, we are supposed to have the same sense of coming face to face with Our Creator and with our inner conscience. We will be judged as individuals, by what we have done, or failed to do.

A famous story is told about a Rabbi Zusya who was surrounded on his death bed by his beloved students. He told his disciples he was preparing to meet his Maker. He was concerned he told them, not that God would ask him why was he not as great a leader as Moses, nor would he be asked why was he not as courageous as Abraham. Rather, he explained, he worried that he would be asked, why wasn't he Zusya. He understood that life's greatest challenge is to be ourselves, and not in comparison to others.

My colleague, Rabbi Saul Teplitz has written about this season that it "...calls to us to cast off old angers, frustrations, and hurts; to discard disappointments and failures. Only then can one be dressed in renewed love. The New Year gives one the hope that the future will be better than the past."

Let us take advantage of this wonderful opportunity afforded us by God, and seek to live in the new year a life in which we hallow it by striving to achieve success in our lives, and may we learn to appreciate the achievements of others, as well.

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