

In the U'ne Tane Tokef prayer we have the famous promise, "Teshuvah, Tefilah (Prayer) and Tzedakah (acts of generosity and kindness), ma'avirin et roa ha-gezerah - have the power to transform the decree. There are infinite ways to understand this poetic phrase, but one might be that Teshuvah **transforms the pain with which we live** - whether it is the pain that is part of the predictable cost of being human, the pain imposed upon us by the greed and tyranny our ancestors knew, or the structures of racism and economic dispossession we know have been with us for centuries and evolve to express themselves in new ways. Among the questions I have this year is, **when we are so focused on public denigration of humanity**, how do we find our way to the kind of transformative, healing teshuvah that we need, and that our tradition expects of us?

During Covid, I happened to notice a series of posts from someone I knew in college. She and her husband, both white and my age, were welcoming home an African American man about 10 years younger. His name is Gordon Davis and he had just been released from prison, which he entered 25 years ago at the age of 16. My college friend, it turns out, was Gordon's professor in the Bard Prison Initiative, from which he received his BA in Literature.

A couple of weeks ago, Gordon Davis published an essay, and it moved me deeply. In the essay, he gives us a brief glimpse of his personal life, enough to discern the outlines of his traumatic childhood. He was placed in the foster care system at 7, and only for very brief periods of time was able to live with people who loved him - his grandmother and uncle, both of whom died while he was living with them. At 16 he was sent away to prison, spending 25 years inside for, as he says, a "crime that my misguided mind helped to commit," one that may have led to a murder.

Drawing on his love of literature, he writes about identifying with the protagonist of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The protagonist is locked in a dungeon, and wants to end his life to escape the pain. But then he hears a sound - a whisper. That sound is, for the protagonist, a reminder of his humanity. He wants to know that sound, and pursuing that sound gives him a renewed reason to live.

Gordon Davis readily sees the parallel in his own life: "In the prison cell all I had was my pain - and my pain became the noise; became the thing or the element that made me want to live; the pain became the force that guided my body; the pain transformed into something totally life-saving. I lived and slept with pain."

After years, Gordon knew that there had to be a life outside that pain. He wonders, "what do we do with it? How do we contain and carry it? More importantly, how do we transform it?"

He finds that the most powerful way to transform his pain is by serving others - at first younger inmates - by being the person who can shoulder their pain for them. He sees younger inmates, how they wanted to be rid of their pain, but they couldn't - "they couldn't identify it and didn't know how to release it." So he says to them, "Give (your pains) over to me because I can bear

them. I know what it's like at the end of this road, and I'm willing to take your pains as long as you make changes...

And this is what I try to help people see - we CAN remove ourselves from the everlasting pain. I know this. I stare down pain every day, so give yours to me and be and live free. And perhaps one day, you too will shoulder the pain of another and help set them free. When we see each other's pain, we see a reflection of our own."

The depth of these words - with all of their wisdom, aspiration and complexity - is worth reflection over a lifetime of Yom Kippurs. Intuitively, I take in Gordon Davis' story as a profound example of teshuvah - of wrestling with our inner being and finding a meaningful way to change, serve others, and live free.

But having taken in his words and shared them with all of you, I feel compelled to ask, is this authentic? Is this even appropriate - to latch on to his words, his thoughts, his experience, as a template for my own?

I believe that I am **genuinely** drawn to his experience of the inner life, and I also genuinely believe his words have much to teach us about Teshuvah. But really, the task on Yom Kippur is to ask whether WE have had an encounter with the depth of **our** being, from **our own** experience.

And yet, the genuine **encounter with another** is integral to the process of teshuvah, because it makes us a **witness** to another's work of repair. And I think of modern Jewish writers who remind us that when we have such a gift, our role becomes to translate that act of bearing witness into **greater selflessness and service** to others.

When I take in Gordon Davis' reflections on the "whisper" he felt, I think of the **kol d'mah mah Dakkah** - translated as the fragile, quiet voice, also translated as the "sound of silence." It hangs over these days as **THE experience for all of us to encounter**. In the U'ne Tane Tokef prayer, in which we sing the haunting meditation on "who will live, who will die, who by fire, and who by water," we also have the expression, "The great shofar will be sounded, and the kol d'mah mah dakkah, this sound of silence, will be heard."

Even though it's **impossible** to say what this experience is, or means, we have **suggestions everywhere**. In the Bible, it is the sound of God's voice, after a thunderous wind, an earthquake, and fire pass by the prophet Elijah, giving him a shred of hope amid his deepest despair. For the Rabbis, it is the silence that ensues when we encounter grandeur in our own lives that, even in some small way, partakes of the grandeur of all creation. For the Hasidic teacher Shalom Noach Brezovsky, it is the voice of God speaking to us through our particular life experience.

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to speak with Gordon on the phone. Mainly, I wanted to ask if it was OK if I could share his ideas and probe them publicly, and to see whether I was understanding him correctly. But really, I just wanted to talk to him - to hear his voice and

get a sense of the person who came up with these insights that, through my own lens, have been so central to understanding my own life. He was as deep, reflective, and generous in conversation as he was in his writing. I don't think he sees the "whisper" the same way I do, as the "kol d'mah mah dakkah," connecting humanity and the Divine Presence, or the creative force of all existence. But perhaps that's the point - to know that there is **shared humanity** so that he shows me something I see in myself. **But also difference - to send me looking through my own experience, and not being complacent to live vicariously through his.**

Getting back to the Elijah story, before and after God shows Elijah the kol d'mah mah dakkah, God asks him an existential question, **mah l'kha po?** Why are you here? Or, for what, are you here? Gordon answered that question by saying that his role is to take away other people's pain. I find myself deeply moved by his devotion, I also find myself asking, is this what we do as Jews?

One powerful answer that I heard to this question, for the first time this year, comes from the 16th C. mystical text by R. Moshe Cordevero, The Palm Tree of Deborah, which you can find for free online. And I should also emphasize that it was only because of our own Larry Fine, who taught this text in a community conversation, that I paid attention to this text at all.

This text answers the question, "Why are we here?" by saying that we exist in relationships of **radical empathy** to each other. What is radical empathy? That in our universal humanity, we connect most deeply not over sameness, but over difference, and that by doing so, we at once make manifest the presence of God through our being as we bring healing to the world.

Cordevero builds his case in the following way: He says that we are all from the same stuff, physically and spiritually. That means my body is bound up in your body, part of my soul is in yours, and part of your soul is in mine, and everything we do affects somebody else. Being bound up with each other means not only that we should look out for the good in each other, but **that we are also part of each other's suffering.** The harm we experience from each other - the pain and the hurt - is of course central to our suffering. And when it happens, our task **especially** is to turn toward each other.

He says, "That is why we are commanded: "Love your neighbor as yourself." It is one thing to turn toward others when they are showing us appreciation and love. But it is even more of a mitzvah, he says, if we turn toward them when they are showing us anger and bitterness. Now, I am all for healthy boundaries and distancing ourselves from people who are harmful to us. But I also believe he's saying something deeply important. I believe he's saying that real teshuvah, real transformation, occurs when we face a person's bitterness and anger toward us or toward the world.

Because the most basic component of teshuvah is that we bring it about over a gulf of difference, conflict, and pain. That is the whole point. But as Rabbis tell us, that means that teshuvah holds the prospect of healing, and perhaps the particular kind of healing through which we take away each other's pain, as the author Gordon Davis revealed to me.

In such moments, perhaps we realize that our common humanity lies in the recognition that each of us, in our own way, grapples with the questions that only we know for ourselves. Under what conditions or through what experiences have we sensed the Kol D'mah mah Dakkah, that still, fragile, inner voice - or not? How have we grappled with the question, "Mah l'kha po? Why are you here?" as we try to give shape, purpose and meaning to our lives.

Perhaps, in wrestling with these essential questions, we learn of an experience that is so different from our own. And yet, across that difference, that person's life intersects with our own at a point so vulnerable that it sparks a revelation into common humanity.

May this be a year of such revelations, as we move through our lives on paths of teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah - acts of repair, holiness, kindness and justice.