

Being Human

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

I begin tonight with a story, an ancient tale, recorded in the Talmud some 2,000 years ago. The rabbis who first told this story lived in a very challenging time for the Jews. They had revolted against Roman rule twice, in 70 & in 135ACE, and been crushed both times. The great Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, thousands had been killed, enslaved or exiled. Yet, in the midst of all this chaos and pain the Rabbis, the ancient sages who pioneered the Judaism we know today, persisted in their work; they studied Torah, created new Torah and served their communities, passing the Tradition from one generation to the next. They were amazing men, with incredible minds. This story comes from that place of suffering, endurance and hopeful imagination.

One day, the time will come when God will bring the nations of the world to account for their sins. When that day comes — may it come soon! — all the great powers of the world (Romans, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, etc. All the persecutors of the Jews) will be brought before the Heavenly Throne and asked one question: did you follow the Torah of the Jews?

What an ironic question.

Each nation is brought before the Heavenly Throne, asked the question, ‘Did you obey the Torah of the Jews?’

Each great power from the past tries to find a way to answer ‘yes’. Their excuses are many but in the end, of course, none of them can honestly say they ‘followed the Torah of the Jews.’ They quake in fear for what is about to happen to them...

Then God says something like: “I’ll make you a deal. do one simple mitzvah, and I’ll let you off the hook, the mitzvah of dwelling in a sukkah.”

Immediately, millions of sukkot go up, and all the nations of the world pile in... One problem... God sends a hamsin, a hot wind and they start to shvitiz...

It gets to be too much for them and all at once, like a heard of wildebeests, all the people sitting in their sukkot stampede out from under them, destroying everything in their path, trampling their sukkot into dust...

They fail the test, so it seems, and God prepares to judge them accordingly but there is a question (this is always the way of the Talmud).

We are taught to rejoice in the Sukkah, not to suffer in it! Therefore, Rabba, a famous rabbi from the Talmud, points out that the nations of the world really did fulfill the mitzvah!

“Ah”, God replies, “You would be right but for one thing — they didn’t just leave their sukkot, they stampeded out of them, with no regard for the mitzvah or for their own loss” (Talmud, Avodah Zerah: 3 a-b, as taught to me by Rabbi David Hartman).

That’s the story, a bit strange and hard to grasp, but profound all the same. The eekar, the essence is this — it’s not that we fail, it’s not that we make mistakes. We are human, failure is built into our imperfect nature. We are going to fail; that is a given.

It’s not that we fail but how we handle our failures that matters. Do we run away from our inadequacies, trampling over the remains of what we left undone, unconscious and without a care? Or, is there regret, remorse, some sense of loss and a desire to change? That’s the eekar, the essence of the story, and of this Holy of Holy times: Yom Kippur.

You see, ultimately this ancient tale is being played out right now. The so called “nations of the world,” are us! And here we are, standing before God, at least metaphorically, on this Holy of Holy days, being judged and seeking atonement. We like them, have failed to live up to the Torah, in any form; that’s a given. The question is, are we prepared to do teshuvah? Do we care? Are we willing to look honestly at who we really are? Are we willing to try and do better next year?

In truth teshuvah, in the full sense of the word, is hard, really hard to do. It is always easier to run away from our failings than to face them, let alone make a change. On the other hand, realizing that failure is part of the human condition, that we are expected to fail, and that is ok, can be a great relief. In fact, according to the Talmud, God doesn’t even expect full teshuvah. God recognizes how hard change really is (certainly Judaism recognizes this fact; why else would we be here, year after year!) The demand is this — an acknowledgement of where we’ve faltered, and a desire to be a better person in the year ahead.

That’s enough, and that’s what I want to explore with you now, via the traditional axis of relationships; ben adam l’havero, between a person and another, (the horizontal), and ben adam l’makon, (between a person and God), the vertical. We’ll also add another axis I invented this year, ben adam l’olam, “between a person and the world.” Let’s start with the horizontal.

Many of us here tonight are parents. Some, like Laura and I have relatively small kids, others are “blessed” with teens, some folks’ kids are long grown out of the house. Some here have lost their children. Parenting means different things to different people over time, but one thing that is universal about parenting is the sense of inadequacy we all feel. It starts during pregnancy — is the baby (in utero!) getting what it needs? — and goes on, as far as I can tell for ever, or at least for a long time. To be a parent is to feel inadequate, to live with a sense of failure on some level.

Sure, there is lots of nakhush... Nevertheless, rare is the parent who is free from worry, free from a sense of “I should have...” “I wish I had...”, “If I only had...” A therapist friend once said to me half-joking: “Don’t worry George, what they don’t get from you now they can recover in therapy.”

Lets face it, in the past year, those of us who are parents well, we blew it sometimes. Perhaps we were sharp with our kids, quick to anger, short tempered, even harsh. Maybe we were rushed and distracted by other things. There were also times when we just didn't take the time to figure out what they needed — reacting instead of really listening. In other words, like any parent, there were times in the last year when we failed our kids. If we didn't care, if we weren't concerned, if we didn't want to be better parents, there would be reason to worry. The good news is, we do care, we do want to be better parents, and because of that — Yom Kippur atones.

That's the point of the story, it's not that we fail, we all do; it's how we respond to our failures. One more thing – did you ask your children for forgiveness? I hadn't thought about this until I heard a story from Rabbi David Hartman. He told me with tears in his own eyes about how his father would always approach him during the yamim noraim and ask for forgiveness...

If you don't have kids, please don't feel left out. I just used parenting as one example of the challenges of relationships ben adam lhavero. Whether you have children of your own or not, the dynamics are similar for all human relationships.

I don't know for sure, but I bet some folks here tonight would give their right arm to have a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a friend say, "I'm sorry." I bet just knowing they felt remorse would be worth a finger or two. I am sure there are parents here that feel the same way about their kids — they are hurting and deserve the salve of acknowledgment and yes, an apology. And of course, the same is true for any of our close relationships with other people. Feeling remorse, saying you're sorry goes such a long way.

I have the pleasure and the honor of working with lots of couples on their weddings. Traditionally, weddings are seen as a taste of the messianic future, and in wine country you really feel it! It is breathtakingly beautiful — a glorious blue sky, a radiant bride and groom standing under the huppa, vineyards and mountains as a picture postcard back drop. When I am standing there with the couple I often say, half-jokingly to the groom that the 3 most important things he needs to know how to say are:

"You look great," (that one is hard to pull off, because no matter how you say it, it never comes out right!);

"I love you,";

"I am sorry." The truth is, it's not a joke, and it applies to all of us when it comes to our relationships ben adam l'havero... especially the words "I am sorry."

How about ben adam l'makom, between us and God? How do we fair there? If our approach to Judaism is any judge, let's just say, 'we have room for growth.' Why? I can't count how many times I have heard someone say about Jewish practice — prayer, kashrut, rituals of various kinds — "Oh we don't do any of that, we're Reform Jews!" It is as if Reform Judaism is defined by what we don't do, not by any affirmation of what we do take on as our own, what we do affirm as our mission in the world.

As a Reform rabbi it is not my job to tell you what you should do religiously. It is my place however, to lead the way toward informed choice. Informed choice, not the lowest common denominator is the standard of Liberal, Progressive, Reform Judaism. The ideal is not ignorance

and a disdain for Jewish Tradition, the ideal is that we study, learn, question, struggle, try on, experiment and then decide.

Often, our knee-jerk responses to Jewish Tradition remind me of a child's response to new foods: "Yuk! I won't eat that!" "But you haven't even tried it!" We respond. "I don't care, I know already that I'll just hate it!" We struggle with our kids around issues like this, but do we struggle with ourselves? To sluff-off much of Jewish life without knowledge or experience and often with disdain is, from the stand point of our Talmud teaching tonight, to trample over the sukkah, to fail and simply not give a damn!

That we don't know enough, that we fail to live as full a Jewish life as we'd like; that's a given (I myself am constantly reminded how little I know about Judaism). What counts is our attitude, which I think needs an "adjustment." Franz Rosensweig, the famous 20th century German Jewish philosopher put it well when he said that he was a "not yet" Jew. What he meant by that was simply that he saw no reason to reject what he did not know. "Not yet" leaves the door open to change and growth. "Not yet", shows humility and an openness to what our tradition has to offer. "Not yet" also gives us the choice to say "no" or to find a new way, not yet known to the Tradition or even to ourselves. Franz Rosensweig came to his philosophy through personal experience;

About to convert to Christianity

Decides he should at least check out what he is about to leave behind

Shows up on Kol Nidre evening... overwhelmed by what he encounters

Makes an "informed choice" to realize his Judaism!

Let's stop trampling the sukkah, the sheltering presence of Jewish life and tradition. It's time we move from ignorance and disdain to a place of informed choice. It's time we consider the words "not yet" rather than "no way", it's time we seek to learn and to teach rather than to trample what we don't know.

We've touched on the two traditional axis... Now lets apply this concept, this way of judging life beyond ourselves out into the world — ben adam l'olam. I am generally not a bumper sticker politician but there is one message pretty common on the old Volvos and VW buses of Sonoma County that sums up the situation. It goes like this: "If you're not outraged, you should be!" We live in a glorious bubble here in Sonoma County. It's like gan eden, a little paradise, a Shangrila, hidden away from the harsh realities of the world all around us. Occasionally we are reminded that there is a scary world out there. It crashes through our TV screens or it comes through our car radio like a message from outer space and we end up staying in our cars long after we arrived at our destinations to take in the complete story. NPR calls these experiences, "driveway moments."

It's pretty jarring when the broken world out there burst our bubble. The truth is it's often overwhelming. How does one imagine a school in Chechnya with 1,200 children in it blown up by terrorists, or the murder of tens of thousands of Sudanese civilians and the displacement of almost 2 million people? How about the daily casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the "collateral damage..."

I haven't even mentioned Israel, an on going tragedy more personal for many of us. And, as if that was not enough there is the environmental crisis which hangs over all of us like a mushroom cloud, yet most of us are barely able to acknowledge it exists.

Are you feeling overwhelmed and a bit beat up? That is often what happens when we leave our paradise here, and venture out into the rest of the world. The truth is you don't even need to leave Sonoma County to encounter a very broken reality. Just cross the tracks, and check out the other side of our town that is less white and much poorer and that other harsh reality will start to seep in.

So, what do we do? We can't "heal" the whole world! We're not, as far as we know the mashiakh. We do have an action hero for a governor — the governor — but even Arnold can't handle the list I just brought out. So why even go there? Why, because as our story teaches, the issue is not failure but attitude. The fact that we can't imagine the tikkunim, the repairs necessary to heal our broken world does not relinquish us from the responsibility of trying! In other words, to look the other way is to "trample the sukkah" in our tale from the Talmud.

The Talmud reminds me of a story I first heard Rev. Coffee, the long-time pastor of Community Baptist Church, tell here in Santa Rosa. It goes like this...

1,000's of star fish

a boy is throwing them back in the sea, one at a time

when confronted by a man who says, "Why waste your time, there are way too many for you to save?"

the boy responds, "made a difference to that one..."

Making a difference one at a time is what it's all about, and all we're expected to do.

Let's return back to where we started with that strange story from the Talmud and what it's really all about — being human.

Being human means we are destined to make mistakes, to fail, to khet, to miss the mark. It's true in our relationship with our children, our spouses, our friends. It's for sure a reality of our spiritual or religious life, how ever we define them. And, out in the world, our sense of inadequacy can only be magnified.

I suppose if I wanted to send us all home depressed, I'd stop right here. But that is not the point of the story or the summation of what it means to be human, because, along with our imperfections we have the capacity, unlike the rest of creation, to be reflective. We are, b'nai adam, b'tzelem elohim, "children of the earth", yet wrought in the image of God. Our godliness is in part the ability to be conscious, to recognize in our strivings both our failings and a better way, in every aspect of our lives.

We take consciousness for granted but it is actually an essential aspect of our humanity, perhaps the single most important characteristic when it comes to our moral development. We don't have to make the same mistakes over and over again. We have built in us the ability to change our behavior.

I have a dog named Sarah. She is a large, loving 95 lb. lab mix. She loves to go for walks and often, especially in the summer, we go for strolls around the neighborhood after services on Shabbat evenings. There is only one problem — cats! Cats seem to love to stretch themselves out on the still warm pavement, even late into the evening. Sarah is a sweet dog, as sweet as they come. But, when it comes to cats... Well you get the picture and the point is this: she's driven by instinct. She has no control... She doesn't spend a moment contemplating the moral implications of chasing cats. She just does... I love my dog, but I thank God I'm a human being that can think, that can, ponder, that can experience remorse, that can at least try to change my behavior.

Without self awareness, without the ability to reflect on our behavior there is no space, no hope, no place for teshuvah.

The philosopher Israel Knox puts it well when he writes:

“Teshuvah” or repentance, is a realization of our failure to span the gap between conscience and conduct. This gap between believing and living may or may not be surmountable, but the refusal to try and span it is a sin, and the will to bridge it is atonement.”

(Jewish Spectator, 1963, pp. 7-9)

As we enter the New Year together may we have the will, the strength, and the courage to continue to bridge the gap between who we are and who we can be.