Rosh Hashanah 2020 - Becoming an Anti Racist

My name is Shira. I am a school teacher and I’m an alcoholic. My name is Aaron. I am a doctor and I’m a sex addict. My name is Mendel. I am a realtor and I’m addicted to heroin and pills.

The declarations may be simple, but the journey to be able to say these words out loud is grueling. Being able to face a painful and uncomfortable truth about something inside that’s a piece of us. In many cases, others have tried to tell addicts that there’s a problem -- more than once -- but until an addict themselves acknowledges the issue -- no healing can begin.

Not all of us are addicts here, but we all come to the High Holidays with some internal struggle. Some truth we’re trying to face and reconcile in how we see ourselves.

We are here having saved up our spiritual angst to process over these next ten days. But there’s a gap in what our tradition offers for this spiritual work. Judaism offers a very clear point a. And a very clear point b. But there’s not a whole lot in between.

Point A -- is the moment when we receive tochechah -- rebuke. Judaism has so much to say about how to rebuke someone else. How we are not supposed to let our anger and resentment fester inside. How we give our feedback out of love. How we offer rebuke not just for our own benefit but to change behavior and patterns that will better our family, our communities, and our society.

We are taught in Leviticus, “Do not hate your kin in your heart, you shall surely rebuke your neighbor.” Lev 19:17  It is counterintuitive that the Torah would command one to rebuke. In today’s society, it may be trendy online, but it’s not acceptable in
polite company to call out others. Yet our tradition commands us to rebuke, and it is looked upon as a positive character trait for people to have the ability and skill to execute without shaming.

If point A is *tochechah*, point B is the moment when we begin *teshuvah*. When we start our process of repentance to repair the wrongs we have committed. How the steps are laid out to first apologize then change our behavior so as not to fall into the same patterns of harm.

But for all our tradition offers on tochechah and *teshuvah* -- how to offer rebuke and begin repentance, it has little to say on the most difficult action in between -- hearing and internalizing the rebuke in order to get ourselves to the point where we are ready to repent.

Hearing rebuke is hard. Our most natural reaction is defensiveness. To explain all of the reasons why the critique does not apply to us or that the accuser misunderstands our motives or that they don’t know all of the circumstances that led to our actions.

We have countless stories in our tradition of such defensiveness upon hearing rebuke. Eve blaming the serpent for why *she* ate from the tree of knowledge. Pharaoh whose heart hardens when Moses confronts him to let the Israelites go. The stiffnecked Israelites who refuse to heed prophets’ warnings time and time again.

But then there is King David.

He steals the wife of a soldier and plots to have the soldier killed. When the prophet Nathan confronts David with the accusation, he does so timidly in the face of the king’s awesome power -- Nathan uses the metaphor of how a rich man steals the
only sheep of a poor shepherd -- goading David’s outrage at the injustice suffered by the poor shepherd before Nathan reveals “atah ha-ish” “you are that man.” And David -- has only one word to say. “Chatati.” “I have sinned.”

It is rare for a person to hear rebuke and immediately begin teshuvah, like King David.

Because let’s be honest, it’s easy enough to dole out rebuke. And once you’ve acknowledged that you’ve done wrong, the clear process laid out for teshuvah in our tradition makes that spiritual work possible. But the part in the process that’s missing is actually the most difficult -- owning that we’ve messed up.

My rabbi friend Sarah shared a story with me that I want to share with you today.

A couple of years ago, Sarah’s friend Amir invited her to see an early version of a play that he created to get her feedback. The play -- Pray to Ball -- played with themes of Muslim identity and growing up Black and poor. The play was extraordinary. But she did have one critique to offer. In Sarah’s opinion, the Muslim identity aspects of the play came off as over-explained -- clearly intended for an audience that was not familiar with Islam. The aspects of Black urban culture were more organic, more familiar. “Make the Muslim narrative more like the Black narrative -- don’t overexplain the Muslim stuff.” she suggested.

The next time they got together for coffee, Amir tried to gently offer her tochechah. That Sarah’s feedback had conflated poverty with Blackness.

“Oh no. Amir. That’s not what I meant…..” she said.
At this moment, she failed. She tried to contextualize her response. Make him understand her intentions and her motives. Explain what HE didn’t get.

She got defensive. Here her friend tried to offer the most loving and gentle rebuke. And she could not hear it.

It literally took her years to be able to hear and internalize the feedback.

Robin Diangelo, author of *White Fragility*, was speaking directly to my friend Sarah when she said, “Perhaps you told a problematic joke or made a prejudiced assumption and someone brought it to your attention -- it is common to feel defensive. If you believe that you are being told that you are a bad person, all your energy is likely to go toward denying this possibility and invalidating the messenger rather than trying to understand why what you’ve said or done is hurtful.”

Sarah got defensive when Amir confronted her because she experienced the encounter as him calling her a bad person. How could she not? When we think of racism -- we think of segregation and fire hoses -- indisputable evil. She is not evil. Therefore she could not do something racist.

Layla Saad in *Me and White Supremacy* carries the logic forward. “Your desire to be seen as good can actually prevent you from doing good because if you do not see yourself as part of the problem, you cannot be part of the solution.”

Every year when we reach the confessions in our High Holidays -- we make a big deal of the fact that the Ashamnu- “the alphabet of woes” is communal -- that we apologize for sins that are not
ours. None of us has to stand alone. But I fear that sometimes we are too quick to dismiss sins that we think don’t belong to us -- bigotry, racism, xenophobia -- in a time before COVID, we assumed we were repenting for the person five seats down or two rows behind -- but not for ourselves.

It’s time for the white members of our community to reexamine that assumption.

If you are like me and you are racking your brain for a story like Sarah’s where racist assumptions were at play, perhaps there’s another question to ask yourself.

When racism isn’t in the news -- when there isn’t a George Floyd or Treyvon Martin or Breonna Taylor or there aren’t protests, do you have to think about race as part of your daily life? Do you have regular interactions with people of color that don’t come in the form of service work? That in itself is worthy of reflection -- what racial assumptions we tolerate as woven into our social fabric.

Every few decades -- there is social unrest that forces the entire country to face the fact that racism hasn’t disappeared. We have so many issues to face -- anti-Semitism and misogyny among them. But when we seek to establish a hierarchy of hatred rather than understand the interdependence of one form of discrimination with another, we undermine our ability to take on any of it.

So how do white people dismantle defensiveness to hear that rebuke and actually begin the process of teshuvah? How do we tap into the spiritual insight of David when he was able to react with “Chatati” -- “I have sinned.”
What made David able to internalize the rebuke was the fact that he had to understand it separately from himself first. He had to understand that the problem exists in the first place -- then understand how he fit into the picture.

For those of us who are white, in order to hear the society-wide call of rebuke, we can start by seeking out experiences of people of color in our society so that we can understand how we fit into the picture.

Let me be clear -- this is not a burden that should fall on people of color to explain to white people what the problem is, even though it often does. I have heard from black friends and thought leaders that while this moment is exciting, it is also exhausting -- because they’re having different versions of the same conversation over and over and over with white friends and colleagues.

White folks have our own work to do around racism without placing the burden on the people of color in our lives to explain, define or defend their experiences. So where do we begin?

White folks have our own work to do around racism. So where do we begin?

First, we have to recognize what is and isn’t possible.

Colorblindness is beyond our reach -- as individuals raised in a society so imbued with a history of racial hierarchy, we do ourselves a disservice to imagine that we can rise above its impact on us. Race functions for us all -- but for those of us who are white -- we just aren’t forced to think about it as much because whiteness is the societal default.

But if colorblindness is not possible, self-compassion is. We are all going to mess this up. As Nikki Giovanni, a renowned African
American poet tapping into something familiar in our Jewish tradition offers, “Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to error that counts”.

Second, there are active steps to help us as individuals get from tochecha to teshuvah. Expanding a worldview beyond a default of whiteness takes intention. Take stock of the news and entertainment you consume. Get curious not just about racism, but about the experience and history of people of color. Make sure that your media diet integrates perspectives from thought leaders of color.

It may seem like an insignificant step -- but think about how deeply our tradition emphasizes the importance of studying and learning Torah. *Talmud torah keneged kulam* -- that learning encompasses all other mitzvot because it leads to their fulfillment. That the act of expanding knowledge provides the basis for action.

The consistent and intentional integration of diverse perspectives will help us lay the groundwork to see our own role in the story of racism. You’ll be tempted to cherry pick thinkers that you already agree with. But if white liberals only seek out Ibram Kendi or Ava Duverney and white conservatives only tune in to Candice Owens-- we’re not actually creating the space for the spiritual work we need to do.

It is also important for white individuals to build our comfort in talking about race. Avoiding race talk is not the same thing as avoiding racism. For those of us not practiced in these conversations, they will feel clumsy and anxiety-provoking. But we cannot get better without practice.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue says
“Silence and inaction only serve to perpetuate the status quo of race relations... Will we, as a nation, choose the path that we have always traveled, a journey of silence that has benefited only a select group and oppressed others, or will we show courage and choose the road less traveled, a journey of racial reality that may be full of discomfort and pain, but offers benefits to all groups in our society?”

Hopefully, for those of us who are white, as we actively engage in honest conversations about race and racism, we will reach moments of introspection for actions past and present. We will be able to own our part and simply say... “chatati.”

When we do this grueling work as individuals, and this work can only be done for ourselves and by ourselves. Sitting in services today, in bed at night, on a long reflective walk, when we look inward we can allow our transgressions and our learning to fuel us toward anti-racism. Then we can become active partners in tackling racism not just as individuals but as a society.

To take an active role in fixing the racism built into society, we first have to create the space for honesty in ourselves about how race and racism shape the way we approach the world. Then -- we can help fill in the gap between tochechah to teshuvah from rebuke to repentance.

My name is Stephanie, I am a rabbi and I am struggling to become an anti-racist.

Co-written with Rabbi Sarah Bassin