

Judgment and Mercy

My favorite moment in this year's Olympics was *the final second* of our new local Jewish hero, Aly Raisman's, team Gold-Metal-winning floor exercise to the tune of Havah Nagillah.

After an amazing final tumble where she is flying and spinning and twisting through the air and lands perfectly, she pops back up in a little hop, striking a final pose suspended in the air. At that moment, still in the air, she knows that her performance is good enough to win the gold metal. You can see her start to cry. Still in the air all the emotion of the culmination of her extraordinary hard work and success overtakes her.

This was such an intense moment of precision and preparation and dedication. - A great moment of 5772.

I had the occasion to watch a lot of Olympic gymnastics this summer and I learned about the very particular scoring for gymnastics. Here's how it works: Each routine has a pre-assigned highest score they can achieve if they are flawless. During the routine, deductions are taken for every deviation from perfection- in increments of a tenth of a point - a tenth of a point here, two tenths there, it adds up. There's no possibility of restoring points or doing something unexpected and winning favor with the judges. In scoring gymnastics the only tool is *subtraction*. In the language of our tradition, it is all judgment and no mercy.

The rigidity of this system was most stark in the balance beam competition. Perhaps because while what the athletes are doing seems impossible, we can all identify with losing our balance. There is this terrible moment when someone falls off the balance beam. The illusion of firm footing, the illusion of effortlessness at doing blind back-flips and spins on a 3.9 inch wide beam is shattered. These incredible graceful athlete-dancers flail as they lose their balance, try to regain it and ultimately fall. The crowd gasps and it gets very quiet. And then the athlete has to get back up on the bar and finish her routine. Putting aside the devastating disappointment, sometimes of losing a lifelong dream that was in her grasp - because falling off the bar is the biggest deduction, a whole point and they can never get it back. There are no extra points for the incredible courage of getting back on the bar and finishing the routine - even though you can see in her eyes how much harder it is to continue after she has fallen - but the points don't come back. All judgment, no mercy.

Rosh Hashanah has many names. One of these, prominent in our liturgy and the midrash is "*Yom Din*," Day of Judgment. You will find throughout the liturgy today references to Judgment and courtroom images - in the *Unetane tokef* prayer near the beginning of the Musaf repetition, we refer to God as the judge, prosecutor and witness who judges all living creatures on this day. It also includes the familiar refrain "on Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed..."

This is the Day of Judgment when we imagine all our deeds systematically accounted and balanced the good against the bad. We usually judge ourselves much more randomly.

Sometimes very harshly, sometimes not so harshly, sometimes we give ourselves a pass without even being aware of it. We are doing harm we can't, or are unwilling to recognize, we are neglecting to make a positive contribution where we should. We are captive to the belief that we are right and God is on our side.

The High Holidays are a chance to try to bring a different metric, to step back and be a bit more precise on the side of *Din*. That means being a bit more exacting with ourselves in thinking about the ways we relate to other people – those closest to us, those most in need - - how we relate to the environment and the needs of the rest of creation upon which humanity relies.

The traditional name for this kind of self evaluation is *Heshbon Nefesh* “an accounting of the soul”. To do it, -- we need let go of some of the distracting mundane judgments that might dominate the rest of the year: Am I winning? What do those people think about me? How does my hair look?, etc. On Yom Din, God is as exacting as an Olympic judge and so we go through a similar accounting, understanding our lives, as best we can, from God's rigorous perspective.

Because this level of judgment is so overwhelming, we also find in our liturgy many appeals for God's Mercy – *Rachamim*. This aspect of God is also called *Hesed* – Loving kindness. The word *Rachamim*, Mercy is from the root “*ReCHeM*” meaning womb. Perhaps because the womb is a place of unconditional love and comfort. These two fundamental aspects of God – *Din*, and *Rachamim*, Judgment and Mercy - are always in the balance.

A midrash on the creation of the world¹ (Gen. 2:4) likens God to a King who wants to fill vessels that would be damaged by liquid that is too hot or too cold, so the king mixes the hot and cold before filling the vessels. The midrash imagines God's reasoning: “If I create the world on the basis on MERCY alone, its sin will be too great. But, if I create the world on the basis of judgment alone the world could not exist. I will create the world on the basis of Judgment *and* Mercy so that it may survive.” As the name *Yom Din* indicates however, the balance of *Din* and *Rachamim*, in our lives and at different times of the year, is not always equal.

The Medieval commentator Nachmanides, writing on the verse in the Torah describing this festival day (Leviticus 23:24), notes that the month of *Tishrei* (today is the first day of the month of *Tishrei*) is the astrological sign of Libra and the symbol for Libra is the scale of justice. He continues: “On Rosh Hashanah God focuses completely on operating the world though the aspect of judgment, while on the Day of Atonement, God focuses on the aspect of Mercy. Rosh Hashanah is a day of *Din*, tempered with *Rachamim*, judgment tempered with mercy, and Yom Kippur is a day of *Rachamim* tempered with *Din*, mercy tempered with judgment.

These two aspects of God are symbolized in the liturgy by the very physical image of God sitting on a throne of Judgment or a throne of Mercy. In our audacious tradition we have

¹ on the first use of YHVH (the name of God associated with Mercy)

an active role in moving God from one orientation to another. In the midrash and then picked up in the Medieval mystical tradition², the Shofar blasts are instrumental in causing this shift.

This is a midrash based on the verse in Psalm 89 “Happy is the people that know the sound of the horn blast.” In context this verse clearly refers to the People of Israel, but the verse just says “People” so could mean any people. This is a puzzle for Rabbi Joshiah who observes :

All the people of the world know the sound of horn blasts! – Have you seen all the horns and trumpets they have! Of course they know what they sound like! Therefore the verse: “Happy is the people who know the sound of the horn blast” referring just to Israel can only mean: Happy are the people who know how to win over their Creator with the shofar blast so that God rises from the Throne of Judgment and goes to the Throne of Mercy. From there, God is filled with compassion for the People of Israel and changes for them the Attribute of Judgment to the Attribute of Mercy. (Lev. Rabbah 29,3 & 4)

That’s a lot of chutzpah; our shofar blasts move God!

In this reading, the call of the shofar is not to wake *us* up spiritually; rather it is to allow God to shift from Judgment to Mercy. So you can see why, from this perspective, it is imperative that the shofar calls are done just right. Indeed, in the mystical tradition, there are complex sequences of meditations and intentions one makes when blowing the shofar and announcing the calls. These meditations are called *kavanot*. That’s an important detail to know in order to understand another story about a high stakes performance and the challenge of getting those shofar calls just right.

R. Wolf Kitzes was a student of R. Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov the father of the great European Jewish spiritual revival know as Hassidism. One Rosh Hashanah, The Baal Shem Tov appointed Wolf Kitzes to be the shofar blower for the community. The Baal Shem taught him all of the secret mystical *kavanot* that accompany each blast of the shofar and showed him how it is possible, with the proper *kavanah*, to unlock the gates of heaven.

² *Soncino Zohar, Vayikra, Section 3, Page 100b* Thus when Israel produce the blasts of the shofar with proper devotion, the supernal Shofar returns and crowns Jacob so that all is properly arranged. Another throne is set up and joy is universally diffused and God has mercy on the world. Happy are Israel who know how to divert their Master from justice to mercy and to be the instruments for establishing all worlds. Corresponding to the three series of blasts three books are opened above on this day, and just as mercy is awakened and punishments are restrained and put back in their place above, so below in the same way harsh punishments are kept back and removed from the world. And what are these? These are the irremediably wicked who are inscribed at once for death.’ Said R. Abba: ‘Assuredly this is the true explanation of the matter. Blessed be God that I asked for and obtained this instruction.’ R. Judah said: ‘It is written, A MEMORIAL OF BLOWING OF TRUMPETS. We make a memorial by the concentration of our mind and thought. Israel make a memorial below by an appropriate ceremony, so as to arouse a corresponding reaction above.’

The mekubalim teach that the shofar has the ability to create a sound called the ‘Voice of Yaaqov’. This is the sound that causes HaShem to move to the mercy seat.

Wolf Kitzes practiced and practiced and wrote down notes and reminders of all of the *kavanot* on little slips of paper so he wouldn't forget. On Rosh Hashanah day, he came before the community to blow the shofar. Nervous and trembling, he felt in his pockets for the slips of paper so that he could look at the *kavanot* one last time. His pockets were empty! A sense of dread came over him that without his notes he couldn't do it. His mind went blank and he began to cry. All he could do was try to hold back his tears enough to just get the correct sounds out of the shofar – with none of the intricate meditations he had so carefully prepared.

After the prayers Wolf Kitzes was mortified. The Baal Shem Tov came up to him with a smile and said, "In the King's palace there are a thousand doors – each one with its own special key. The *kavanot* I taught you were delicate keys to allow you to open each of these doors. But a broken heart is an axe that opens them all! No door can withstand its power"

See what the story does. It begins with the premise that a flawless performance of the shofar will open God to be merciful and then subverts that idea and says instead that it is us, our own opening up, not the shofar that will bring *Hesed* and *Rachamim* into the world.

This time of year requires that we stop trying for a winning performance like Aly Raisman's and hope that we can be like Wolf Kitzis. That where we've failed and fallen and disappointed, that it can break our hearts - that we can be humbled and desire to do better for ourselves and for those who depend on us.

This is the time of the year when we hold up not our accomplishments but our brokenness and failing and disappointments. Perhaps we haven't worked hard enough, or aren't talented enough, or gave into our worst impulses - whatever it is: at some place we are like Wolf Kitzis and stand confused and heartbroken. And from that place of humility we can truly ask forgiveness, and are more deeply ready to offer forgiveness to others.

The way to awaken Divine Mercy and to move God, so to speak, from the seat of Judgment to the seat of mercy is for us to move ourselves to a place of compassion. The object of that compassion may be sitting next to you or they may be long dead but in either case we have the spiritual imperative to shift from judgment to compassion and so bring the kindness and healing we seek for ourselves into the world.