

Yom Kippur Day 5776: *Hesed*, *Gevurah* and the Gloucester initiative

I love it when Jewish mysticism shows up appropriately in popular culture. Here's one of my favorite Bruce Springsteen lyrics. It's a ballad called "Cautious Man" about a man named Bill Horton and the lyric is:

On his right hand Billy'd tattooed the word *love*
and on his left hand was the word *fear*,
and in which hand he held his fate was never clear.¹

What Rabbi Springsteen is referring to is the idea from our mystical tradition: first, that there are different aspects (so to speak) of God's personality, and second, that these divine aspects flow into the world in a specific pattern. The first and second manifestation of divine qualities in the world are first: Love- kindness-compassion, called *Hesed* or *Rachamim* (which is associated with the right side, which is why it's tattooed on Billy's right hand) and the second is Power-discipline-stern justice, causing fear and awe, which is called *Gevurah* or *Din* and is associated with the left side.

While the mystical cosmology is abstract, this balancing of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* is very immediate and practical since we are always making decisions about the proper balance of kindness and compassion on the one hand (the right hand) or judgment and discipline on the other (left hand). We are making decisions about the proper balance of kindness and judgment both in how we relate to ourselves and to others.

These are the first two (of seven) manifest aspects of God's personality. These aspects are, from the perspective of the mystical tradition, realities in the fabric of creation that are therefore also manifest in us since we are a part of creation. As manifestations of the Divine, they shape how the world operates. As aspects of the human personality, they are also modes of behavior.

I want to describe this a bit further and then apply this model of the tension between *Hesed* and *Din* to a dramatic shift in public policy that's happening in Gloucester right now.

Starting on the right, *Hesed* is also called *Rachamim*. As I said on *Rosh haShanah* day, the Hebrew root of the word: *Rachamim* is *rechem* (womb). *Rachamim* is the first of the thirteen aspects of God's mercy we invoke throughout the liturgy: "*El Rachum v'Hanun*"

¹ Tunnel of Love, 1987

(God, merciful and gracious). *Rachamim*, compassion therefore is womb-like in being natural, universal and literally where we all begin.

On the *Divine* level this is all the beauty of the creation, our positive capacities and the blessing of being alive.

On the *human* level this is the kindness and compassion we can show each other. That's why the group in this community specifically devoted to making sure we are attending to people who need meals or rides to doctor's appointments and lots of other things is called the *Hesed* Committee. This is something we naturally do in the world, particularly with family and friends, particularly when we feel a sense of abundance. Note that offering kindness and compassion and generosity is easy with people who we love and find deserving, or who have been kind to *us*. *Hesed* is a challenge when we feel the demands of compassion for a person who we do not love, find compassionate or deserving. It is also a challenge when we feel depleted or needy.

That brings us to the left side: *Gevurah* "strength", also called *Din* "judgment."

On the divine level, this is all that happens in the world that might feel like divine punishment. This is coming from a traditional mindset where God is an engaged, omnipresent, all-powerful, fair, but *extremely* stern judge. Therefore, anything that happens in the world, no matter how seemingly terrible, is a manifestation of Divine will. Death, illness, destruction – these are the realm of *Din*. When we hear of a death, the tradition has provided the first thing to say: *Baruch Dayan haEmet* – "Blessed is the true Judge." This is based on the same idea, that *whatever* happens is God's judgment. The human response to this judgment is fear and awe.

On a human level, *Gevurah* means behaving with discipline, it means saying "no" and having the capacity to make stern judgments when appropriate. As I indicated earlier, *Gevurah* comes second, *Hesed* first. Discipline and strict boundaries are supposed to sustain and preserve *Hesed*.

As I shared in our discussion on the second day of *Rosh haShanah*, one metaphor that is helpful is that *Hesed* is like water: miraculous, life-giving and flowing, but, uncontained, it slips away. The container is *Gevurah* that can hold the *Hesed* and allow it to be directed and used. If you are going to use water, for example to irrigate a field, you need reliable pipes that do not leak in order to get the water to where it should go. *Gevurah* is necessary because there is a limit to anyone's ability to be kind and generous and giving of oneself. *Gevurah* is what helps a person sustain themselves so they do not go beyond their limit.

It requires discipline to maintain a life of kindness. It requires discipline to maintain a strong *Hesed* Committee.

I explain all this to help describe something very interesting that began with an extraordinary hopeful, moment. It was one of those powerful optimistic moments when it seemed that the world could be so much better, and it was happening right now and right here. And in fact, it did happen right here. It was at a meeting downstairs in one of the classrooms in July with a group of clergy representing eight different local faith communities and Gloucester Police Chief Leonard Campanello, who had come to talk to us about the Gloucester Initiative.

Briefly, the Gloucester Initiative, which began on June 1st of this year, is a new approach to try to deal more effectively with the massive problem of heroin addiction and overdose deaths. The new approach is that anyone who comes to the Gloucester Police and does not have an outstanding warrant can turn in their drugs without being arrested, and be placed into a drug detox and treatment program. (There is much more to say than that and a lot has happened since July. You can look it up after *Yom Kippur*, if you are curious. What is interesting to me is the profound shift that is going on.)

When Chief Campanello spoke to us, what was most extraordinary was hearing the way he understands those who are addicted and seeking help. At that point, in July, 40 days into the program, 35 people had been placed in treatment - three in the middle of the night before our meeting. His perspective was that he was dealing with people who were caught in a cycle of criminality because they were suffering from the disease of addiction. In other words, the approach came from the perspective of *Hesed* and compassion, not from the perspective of *Din* and judgment.

The context for this, of course, is our country's policy on illegal drugs that since 1970, has been called a "War." That characterization is important.

On the positive side, "war" captures the seriousness of a life-and-death struggle. But ultimately, it is misleading, like the icon on my computer for saving a document – it's a graphic of a three-and-a-half inch floppy disc. It's relying on what it *used* to look like to save a document.

The "war" that the name "War on Drugs" is trying to conjure is a war of two armies arrayed on a battlefield. Each army is wearing a distinctively colored uniform, and one army, based

on superior tactics and/or force, either wipes out the other enemy entirely, or imposes enough suffering and hopelessness on the enemy that the enemy stops fighting. War has changed, but the metaphor continues.

In my vicarious experience, wars don't have clear battlefields or distinctly colored uniforms. Most importantly, often the enemy is *made more tenacious* by suffering and hopelessness. This is certainly the case with drug use. How do you defeat an enemy that is strengthened by suffering and hopelessness?

I am not saying that any of this is easy and obvious. I am saying we have been using the wrong tool. We have been too heavy on the *Gevurah* on the side of harsh judgment and imposing strict boundaries.

In the Jewish mystical system it is the imbalance of *Gevurah* taking over and blotting out *Hesed* that is the source of evil in the world. As the kabbalah is explained by my teacher Rabbi Art Green:

Rather than doing its job of permitting love to flow in measured ways, *gevurah* seeks out a cosmic moment to rule alone, to hold back the flow of love. In this moment, divine power turns to rage or fury; out of that, all the forces of evil are born, darkness emerges from the light of God, a shadow of the divine universe that is also manifest in each of us as our ability to do evil.²

I was thinking about this last week as I was doing an errand as I was rushing to work and there was someone pulling out sssllowwwlllllyyyy looking back and forth, clearly nervous and uncomfortable. I'm irritated because this is taking way too long and I'm in a hurry. I'm getting more and more frustrated watching this fearful tentative driver. The only tool I have to communicate is a horn. Will the horn communicate my frustration? Yes, extremely well. Will it solve the problem? No, it will make the problem worse. The challenge is: can we restrain ourselves from using the tool we have easily at hand, the tool that will express our frustration at the situation but make the problem worse? When we're driving we have one tool for communication, the horn. We don't have a button we can push that says, "You're doing fine! You've got plenty of room!"

The police are our frontline *Gevurah* Team responsible for enforcing boundaries and justice. That is not to say that they do not display many acts of compassion in doing their

² Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow p. 49

jobs, but their jobs are to enforce the law. And of course, judges and the courts are also on the *Gevurah* Team. One of the strategies of the War on Drugs has been mandatory sentencing for drug offenders, meaning: no *Hesed* allowed. We don't allow a judge to be compassionate because that will undermine the strict boundaries we want to impose.

Harsher laws, harsher penalties has been the overall pattern until very recently. Unlike the problem that I don't have a *hesed*-horn in my car, the addiction problem is extremely serious. Starting with the premise of addiction-as-disease may be a very productive step forward, but does not answer the problem that we face of extremely dangerous, destructive and threatening behaviors.

From the Jewish perspective, how do we think about those who behave badly and how they should be punished? On the one hand, there are many examples of calling for punishment and destruction of sinners.³ One of the classic texts of this challenge we read earlier today: R. Meir is praying that some sinners who are causing him trouble should die, and his wife, Bruria, castigates him and corrects him that he should instead be praying for them to stop sinning.⁴ In other words, we want the behavior to disappear, not the person.

One of the most dramatic examples of this compassionate approach is the *Aleinu* prayer that is emphasized on *Rosh haShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. In the second paragraph, which talks about redemption, it says "And all humanity (literally *bnei basar* "children of flesh" a very expansive way to say "everyone!") (all humanity) will call out in your name, to turn toward you all the wicked of the earth". Now, I don't want to overstate this - we also have both alternatives in our tradition - but the weight is on the side of *Hesed*. We are trying to bring people back into relationship with community and God.

Something fascinating is happening in Gloucester where the front-line *Gevurah* enforcers realized that people were dying needlessly because fear and strict justice were not working. On this issue, the police, based on a tremendous amount of community work over many years, have dramatically shifted the story of the drug crisis from being about finding and punishing criminals to combating a nasty disease that is causing a public health crisis. They have switched teams and become agents of *Hesed*. That is an extraordinary development that I pray will be successful and continue to inspire others to take the risk of moving toward greater kindness and compassion.

³ In *Ashrei* [Psalm 145] so beloved of the rabbis, it says "The Lord guards all who love God and all the wicked God destroys."

⁴ Talmud Bavli Brachot 10a. Presented in Machzor Lev Shalem p. 215,

Here's a quote describing this shift From Chief Campanello:⁵

We continue to encourage persons with addiction to come in and get help... We tell each of our program intakes that whatever they do after they walk into the police station, we will be there. Whether they are able to succeed or whether they relapse, we will be there. We will help again and again and again until they no longer want help. Thus, they step through our doors and are in recovery for the rest of their lives. No matter what happens. We know there will be setbacks for people. We don't care. Come back. You're still in recovery. We know some people will relapse. We will not judge you. Come back. You are still in recovery. Just as a disease can go into remission only to appear later, we know addiction is hard to beat. No matter the stage the person is at, if you want help, you are in recovery with us. Sixty police officers... and an entire community will have your back. You must do your part, but we will refuse to abandon you, forget you, or ignore you. You will always have a place to go as long as this police department stands. You will receive the respect and dignity you deserve here, without judgment, without coercion, without charges. Your life has meaning.

Can they sustain that level of *Hesed*? Will it work? I hope so! I hope they will find a better balance, that starts with compassion, and create a model that spreads across the country. Or course, they're still the police so "*We will not judge you*" does not mean we won't arrest you if you commit a crime.

This shift is exactly what we are praying for at this moment of the year. A midrash says:

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" ⁶

Over the last ten days we pray for a cosmic shift from stern justice to compassion. Through prayer, (*Tefillah*) and helping others (*Tzedakah*) and repairing relationships and returning to our best selves (*Teshuvah*), we are trying to make that shift from *Din* to *Hesed* within ourselves as well.

⁵ slightly amended

⁶ Lev. Rabbah 29,3 & 4

I hope in the coming year we will try to use discipline and strict justice not to punish or gain power, but to allow kindness and compassion to flow. May we work to make this part of our own inner lives, and encourage it in others, in our communities, our nation and the world.

Gmar khatimah tova u'mitkuah!

May you be assured a good and sweet new year.