

How Do I Respond?

Kol Nidre 5769

I'd like to share two teachings with you. The first comes from the Talmud, in the name of Rabbi Hanina ben Papa. Rabbi Hanina is describing the moment of conception, and fancifully imagines an angel taking each little zygote up to God. The angel then says: "Sovereign of the Universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong person or a weak person, a wise person or a fool, a rich person or a poor person?" But, Rabbi Hanina continues, the angel does not say, "Will he or she be a righteous person or a wicked person?" for that is not in God's hands. (B.T. *Niddah* 16b)

This teaching may challenge our modern notions of free will—is it really predetermined who will be rich or poor, strong or weak, wise or foolish? While I don't fully share that view, there is a truth in this teaching that I appreciate. The reality is that there are many things in life that we don't have much control over. We come into this world with certain limits on our physical and mental abilities, as well as with certain proclivities and talents. It is sheer luck of the draw what kind of family we're born into, whether we begin life in a comfortable home in America or a shack in Bangladesh—and that random circumstance of our birth determines a huge proportion of what comes next. The truth is that while we certainly have some choices about the direction our life takes, there's quite a bit that we can't take personal credit for. And at this time of economic crisis, when events happening far outside any of our individual control may soon have, or already be having, significant influence on our lives, we can perhaps appreciate this perspective even more.

But, Rabbi Hanina says, whether we are righteous or wicked, that is entirely up to us. And that, ultimately, is what is asked of us. Not how much money we make, or what academic achievements we pile up, or the length of our resume. All of these types of accomplishments are only partially our own, and more than we care to admit are shaped by factors outside our ultimate control. But how we respond to that which life hands us—that is the realm in which our fate is in our own hands. The choices we make, for bad or for good, are truly ours.

Which brings me to the second teaching, from the Hasidic tradition, as interpreted by Martin Buber:

Each person should know and consider the fact that she, in the particular way that she is made, is unique in the world, and that no one like her has ever been. For if someone like her had already been, there would be no reason for her to be in the world. Actually, everyone is something new in this world, and here he must perfect his particular being, for because it is still imperfect, the coming of the Messiah is delayed! (*Ten Rungs*, p. 109)

I love two notions in this teaching. First, the idea that each of us unique, and has a unique purpose for being here—otherwise, we would not have been created. Each of us is something

“new,” unique, and yet also incomplete. And this notion I also love: that each of us has some particular work of repair, of *tikkun*, to do in order to bring about the Messianic age.

While it may be asking a bit much to expect each of us to “perfect our particular being,” I do believe in the notion that there is some redemptive task that is unique to each person here. In the realm of our free will, in the realm of that which we can actually control, what is it that each of us has to contribute? What is the repair that I, personally, was put on this world to complete?

This teaching also suggests a way to approach the part of life that feels beyond our control—the challenges and the successes that we did not anticipate or that came about only partially—or not at all—due to our own intentions. These life situations become the arena in which we can discover our own redemptive task. If I have been blessed with all kinds of abundance—why? What am I supposed to do with it? What is the repair that I can make with all that I’ve been given?

Or perhaps I am facing a challenge that seems daunting, and confusing—something that wasn’t in the story I had written for myself. Here, too, I am invited to look and see how I’m being asked to respond. I am unique, and the way that I respond to this challenge will bring something new into the world—hopefully, something new and positive, something that will add, just a bit, to the repair of the world. However out of control I may feel, however helpless to change the particulars of this situation, my response to the situation is within my control. It is here that I can try to bring a bit more righteousness, a bit more lovingkindness, into the world.

It’s frustrating, in a way, that we’re not handed a little slip of paper at birth with our special task written on it. There’s no Mission: Impossible suitcase that contains our instructions before self-implosion. Part of our work is not just to complete our particular redemptive task, but to figure out what it is! I don’t have any magic formula for figuring that out. But much of the meaning of life is in the act of discovery, of opening ourselves to the messages the universe is giving us. First we have to believe that we are, indeed, unique and important in this way. Then, we have to be willing to take on the challenge, to know that we are called in some special way to the work of redemption. And finally, we can cultivate a quality of flexibility, a willingness to be surprised, an openness to seeing the truth in unexpected places. And a willingness, as well, to change, to continually be open to the new—for perhaps our task changes as we grow older.

I invite you to think for a moment about what your work of “repair,” of completion, might be in this new year. It can be quite small, quite specific, something unique to you in this moment. This is the piece of redemption that is in your hands.

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