

B'rosh Hashanah yikateyvun, uv'yom tzom kippur yechateymun (sing)

On Rosh Hashanah our future is inscribed, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

A teaching from Rabbi Rachel Barenblat:

“Our futures are inscribed not on some cosmic parchment, but on our own hearts. The heart may be solid at Rosh Hashanah—indeed, it would have to be, in order for anything to be inscribed on it. But the heart must be soft like wax in order for it to be “sealed” on Yom Kippur.”¹

Similar to how we must do work – t'shuva - to soften our hearts from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we must do work throughout the year to keep our hearts soft and supple. This work consists not of making ourselves perfect or being the best person that ever was, but rather it consists of developing habits that make it easier for us to do better.

For our work this year, I suggest three “healthy heart” habits. These habits are designed to subtly, or perhaps radically, change the nature of our hearts and thereby change the behaviors that emanate from our hearts.

Take out the cereal box with HHH label on it. “Healthy Heart Habits” – worthy of daily consumption.

The first healthy heart habit is going to sound really negative, because it is Yom Kippur, after all, and there's room to focus on our shortcomings on this day.

This is a personal habit I've developed over the years, not one I've gleaned from the Jewish tradition, but I hope you'll see it has its place alongside the more positive habits our tradition suggests.

¹ <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2011/10/unexpected-joy-a-sermon-for-kol-nidre.html>

The story we usually tell about the world is that we are actually pretty good at whatever it is that we do – whether we are taking care of children or parents or being a good friend, whether we are working in an office, whether we’re just walking down the street successfully obeying the conventions of the sidewalk and smiling at strangers.

We are super great at getting through life.

We often notice, though, that many others are pretty bad at the things they’re doing, whatever those things are, and the worse mood we’re in, the worse everyone else looks.

This one spends too much time on his phone, that one was too slow to wait on us, this one didn’t even bother to listen before turning us away.

So I made up a way to deal with the problem of everybody else being terrible. This one started as a joke between me and a girlfriend. The exercise I like to engage in is called “everybody sucks at their job.” When someone is being terrible at their job in my estimation, I recite to myself, “everybody sucks at their job.”

Feels really good, actually. Everybody sucks, and that’s fine, just the way of the world. I can let it slide.

But then I go another step and flip the script – rather than focusing on the other person’s deficits, I have an opportunity to focus on our shared human experience of life being hard.

I recite to myself, “everybody sucks at their job,” and then I make the mental step to remember “I also suck at my job.” (parenthetically - I do not believe I suck at my job, I like it and think I’m good at it, but it’s worth looking in the pocket that holds that note “we are all made of dust and ashes,” at least sometimes.)

Now this exercise is totally automatic. My mind immediately moves to a state of empathy about our shared struggle. My anger or disappointment or sadness or judgment at someone else’s behavior fails to rise to the surface in most cases. I’m still allowed to have those feelings. I am allowed to feel hurt by someone else’s behavior. But I find that I rarely do these days. The server being slow, the cop pulling me over when I did nothing illegal, the stranger being rude. Everybody is just sucking at their job, and that’s okay, because so am I.

This habit moves me from separation and alienation from others to an acknowledgment of our shared human experience, our shared failures to live up to our ideal versions of ourselves.

This is a low level habit. It's pretty easy to achieve. I especially recommend it when dealing with bureaucrats.

THE OTHER two healthy HEART HABITS ARE REALLY FROM JUDAISM.

My second habit is a little harder and might require more practice. It's a good one to use on strangers, but it also works on acquaintances, best friends, and family members.

This habit is: the deep and constant belief that we are all created in the image of God. We are all made b'tselem Elohim.

So what does that mean? If you were here for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, you studied that idea in depth.

One of my favorite rabbinic teachings about this phrase is a text from the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin. The court, about to decide on a capital case, admonishes the potential witnesses that they are entering into a serious business – their testimony may sentence a person to death.

They remind the witnesses that each person was made in God's image, and each person is singularly important, that's why only one human being was created at the beginning of the world – to teach us the importance of each individual. The rabbis remark, how amazing is it that each of us was created in God's image, each of us is a descendent of Adam, the first human, and yet we are all so different! A coin maker has one mold and it spits out an infinite number of identical coins. God, with the single mold of God's own self, has managed to make an infinite variety of coins, no two looking alike. That's the rabbis' version of that teaching, here's mine:

We are all born from a long lineage of the people who came before us, and their uniqueness is imprinted on our genes at conception. Their diversity of genetics and experiences shapes the singular human we become.

We are further shaped by our experiences in utero, and then we are set on a path through lives of constant challenge and opportunity, a symphony of nature and nurture. At each moment in our lives, we are a snapshot of the Universe's workings up until this moment in time and space.

We are an accumulation of stars exploding, planets developing out of space dust, the muck of the early earth, and finally the millions of human relationships that led to our being. In that way, we are, incredibly, magically, an image of the Ineffable. Just one of the infinite images of the Divine that are possible.

The habit I like to practice is to actually look at a person who is frustrating me, or who I am angry at, or who I am failing to connect with, or who needs my help, or who I want to act lovingly toward but I'm just not getting there.

I look at them as hard as I can without being awkward about it, and then I think: You are made in the image of the Divine. When I see another human being as being made in the divine image, I know that their essence is one of light, wonder, infinite possibility, beauty, mystery, amazing coincidences and cosmic destiny.

It is hard to stay mad at all that.

But even better, it's hard not to find all of that really alluring and interesting. If I dwell on the truth of their divine-image-ness, it's hard to not be completely fascinated by that person.

I like to practice this one in line at the supermarket. The person in front of me in line, who is taking out her checkbook to pay for her groceries, who can't find her ID, who is fiddling with the pen – holy cow, that person is made in the image of God.

I'm not impatient now, I almost feel privileged to wait behind her.

If you are a parent, you might know this feeling really well from interacting with your children.

I remember seeing each of my children for the first time. It was a moment of total awe – how did this impossibly small creature come to exist at this impossible moment and how did I wind up being the parent responsible for her – a totally unbelievable task. I found out so quickly that each of them was incredibly unique. They are infinitely fascinating, infinitely worthy of attention, infinitely worthy of love.

What would happen if we looked at each person we encountered with the same intensity, the same curiosity, the same wonder? It would be exhausting to do all day, but can we find a handful of people to approach each day with that attitude?

Or maybe we could just look at someone we love each day and let ourselves be filled with awe at their existence. I bet we could do it.

So, habit number 2 – know that we are all made in the image of God.

Again, if you were with us on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, you heard about how there is a difference of opinions among the ancient rabbis of the Talmud - which is the more fundamental and important teaching of Judaism? That all human beings are created in the image of God? Or that one must love your neighbor as yourself?

For the point of our congregation's yearly theme, we're going with the image of God one. For the point of tonight's sermon, I'm going to say both.

Healthy heart habit number 3 – the hardest one – love yourself, love others.

We all probably know that the love of others is a commandment from the Torah. I am not the first to notice that the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" necessitates a love for yourself. How can I love someone "as myself" if I don't love myself?

What does it mean to love ourselves? It means having an open heart to the possibilities about what we are becoming. It means working toward actively loving the experience of being us, being in our own bodies, even accepting that those bodies may be uncomfortable or painful and limiting, it means loving the experience of being in relationship to others as ourselves.

It means delighting in what we discover about ourselves, both our successes and our failures.

It doesn't mean that there is nothing about ourselves we might want to change. Loving ourselves while we are in relationships with others means sometimes noticing the things we do that do not adequately show our delight at those relationships.

I can notice that putting the laundry on the floor next to the laundry basket instead of inside the laundry basket is an annoyance to my spouse, but I can at the same time say, that's something I can work on, but thank God I'm worth loving.

I am not the sum of the articles of laundry on the floor. I am not the sum of the number of times I lose my patience. I am not the sum of the number of times I get angry or yell. I am not the sum of the number of times I fail.

I am a human being deserving of love. I am a human being deserving of love. I am a human being deserving of love.

And if we can practice loving ourselves, it becomes much easier to turn that attention outwards, to spend time actively working on loving others. On my best days, I walk through life attempting to love each person I encounter. This includes strangers.

The cashier at the supermarket – I love you, you are worthy of love. The homeless person who asks me for money on the street – I love you, you are worthy of love. The child who is whining at me that she definitely is not hungry and will not be eating dinner - I love you, you are worthy of love.

In many ways, the acts of seeing others as made in God's image and loving others are identical, or at least interdependent. For me, though, these are actually two distinct acts that hold different kinds of power. Seeing another person as b'tzelem Elohim evokes a deep interest in them. It's an attitude of: Wow! This person is a miracle! It makes me curious about their story.

Loving someone is independent from their story. It is entirely a heart exercise. I love you no matter what your story is. My heart is broken open for you.

I am working on cultivating both awe and love for others.

Third healthy heart habit – love yourself, love others.

If we cultivate this habit of open-heartedness, it also helps to clarify the places where we are closed-off for all the right reasons. If I have an attitude of love for all as a general rule, I discover the places more profoundly where I am withholding love from someone who has hurt me. I don't have to love that person or those people.

Loving your neighbor as yourself does not mean you have to love someone who has victimized you.

But when I have an attitude of love, I can begin to identify those obstacles in such a clear way that I can practice setting them aside, they don't have to poison my open-heartedness to the world. This might take a lot of work. This takes me, personally, a lot of work.

I work really hard at choosing open-heartedness and love for others. But I'm not going to lie to you. I don't always feel I have the choice.

When I feel that I don't have the choice, I love myself anyway, because I am worthy of love.

When I don't feel I'm worthy of love, I remind myself that I am one of the infinite possible images of the Divine, how amazing.

And when I can't even feel that, it's okay, because everybody sucks at their job. And then I can start over.

G'mar chatimah tovah, may we all be sealed for good in this coming year.