

Letting Go- Releasing to the Eyn Sof

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*Good Yuntif.* Today I will be talking about Letting Go and Releasing to the *Eyn Sof* (one of the names for God).

Many of us are suffering in the world. Sometimes we get so stuck in our own pain and anger and disappointment that we lose sight of the happiness and chain ourselves to our own internalized taskmaster. The theme of this sermon is letting go. Letting go of anger, letting go of disappointment, letting go of expectations. I imagine that some of you in the congregation have the song from **Frozen** in your head. I promise you this is not about that Disney film. In past High Holy Days I have touched upon external subjects -- the environment, social action, and human rights. Today I focus more internally, on each of us; on me and you. Making the world a better place or repairing the world can sound like an impossible task. Today we start small and with small steps bring about larger changes. Today each of us is asked to give a little to gain a lot. By letting go we release ourselves. By working on ourselves we can ultimately impact others and the world. But, today, let's start with ourselves. There are **two spiritual practices** that I believe can help illuminate this topic for us today. That is **Mindfulness Practice** and **Mussar**.

Happiness in life comes from within. All real change comes from within. It is one of those eternal truths. It is also the place that we must begin if we are to change ourselves.

Sometimes a good joke can reveal a deep truth, and this is one that I have been known to tell once or twice:.

A buddhist monk goes to a popcorn vendor to buy a snack. He hands the vendor \$5 for a \$2 bag. The monk looks at the vendor and asks, “What about my change?” The vendor replies, “I thought you knew. Change comes from within.”

Some may believe, or our society may promote, financial wealth or power as the key to happiness. Two thousand years ago, one of our sages, Ben Zoma taught one of the enduring definitions of happiness. In chapter 4:1 of Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors, it says, “Ben Zoma taught. Who is rich? One who is happy with what one has in life.” True happiness comes when we are free. In this instance, freedom does not refer to political freedom or human rights, but the **mental emotional freedom from anger, despair, disappointment, jealousy, and delusion.** And it is no one else’s job to make that repair than yourself. If we can each bring ourselves to take basic steps to healing within, then perhaps we can provide the space for others to do the same. The wellbeing of our souls, our *neshamot*, is ours to do.

We live in a world that can be tough or harsh. We all endure emotional bruises and scars that are left when we have been hurt or angered by someone’s words or deeds. By letting go of our anger and disappointments, we can allow ourselves to be removed from the pain and carrying the hurt with us. Carrying anger or pain does not help human beings to heal or grow. Yet that is what most of us do, we hold onto our anger and

resentment. These emotions are based on fear, jealousy, despair, disappointment. When we can release ourselves from fear, then we can begin to move away from anger, disappointment, delusion. Understanding our fears can help us understand our reactions.

These negative mental are like flowers. Each of emotion of attributes begins as a seed that we water and tend. Until we can identify it, it grows wild. Compassion, happiness, empathy, love— they, too, are seeds, perhaps flowers that take some more time to mature. Sometimes we can overwater our plants, as much as our emotions. Our emotions are important and important to maintain in a healthy balance. The anger flower is still there, but we can prune it, tend it, and keep it in balance. Once we can develop the awareness, then we can water the seeds of goodness and positivity and then perhaps to train ourselves to only water and feed the seeds we want to grow.

One way to be free from anger, pain, or disappointment, is to cultivate a practice of mindfulness. It won't happen on its own. We do pray to awaken within us love, compassion, understanding. In all the prayers we offer throughout these High Holy Days, we pray for strength. The strength to open up to ourselves. Not to God, not to Moses, Miriam, or King David— nothing but ourselves can transform the anger and pain within us except addressing the root, caring for ourselves, and developing a personal practice to recognize and evolve our own patterns.

Developing a mindfulness practice, can help us begin to develop a new response. During this season the next ten days between Rosh Hashanah

and Yom Kippur we can mindfully begin the journey. Today is different. Today you have the chance to do something new; to take a risk for positive change. We also have the chance to walk together. You are not alone. That is one of the amazing things about the Jewish practice at this time of year. While we bare our souls and confess our shortcomings, we do this together, not in isolation. Each and every one of us. No one is without a blemish or a mistake. Not you, not me. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the days of Mindfulness in Jewish Life. Today we pray mindfully, dress mindfully. Not in isolation; in community, with solidarity and support for one another.

The great Zen Buddhist Master **Thich Nhat Hanh** is a global spiritual leader, poet and peace activist, who is revered around the world for his powerful teachings. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called him “an apostle to peace and nonviolence.” On mindfulness meditation, he says that disappointment, anger, delusion and resentment are part of each and every human, and something from which we can and should liberate ourselves. The basic steps he proposes are ones to help diffuse negative mental formations. These are not easy or automatic response, rather we must cultivate and develop these skills, which can take time to fully emerge. Here are a few of the steps in a simplified manner:

First, **recognize your own anger, your own suffering**, and find a teacher to help guide your journey.

Second, develop the skills to **listen compassionately**. This kind of deep listening does not mean responding or judging, but only listening. Listening can be a healing in and of itself. Communication breakdown is often the

source of many problems. In order to help the one with whom you are facing the challenge, listening to them explain their suffering can help you open to understand the suffering of others around and within you.

Third, **disperse the emotion** with compassionate listening and loving speech. This is the place where we need our own foundation of stability. You need to be in your own positive state first in order to approach another person and repair the breach. Your mindfulness practice and sense of awareness should be well developed. In order to create the opening, you need to say something like, “I know I am greatly responsible for your suffering. Not only have I not been able to help you suffer less, I have made things worse. I don’t want it to continue, so please I need your help to understand.” And you need to be open to the response. If you have yourself in the best mental condition, your response will be mindful. With all the knowledge, training, and schooling we experience in our current world, we do not learn enough of compassionate, non-judgemental listening.

Fourth, **make your own happiness possible**. Do not let anyone else determine your happiness. We live in a world of instant communication and yet true face to face conversation are less and less. In the end, you determine your own happiness. No one else controls that aspect of your freedom.

In order for us to be whole, to be true, we as individuals need to find the way to let go of hurt and anger. We need guidance and we need to develop our own practice. It is one of those challenges in life where what we need most is what we push away the strongest. When you experience anger or

jealousy it is your own personal suffering. We all know in our rational minds that holding onto old hurts or pains does us no good directly. But our instinct takes over, our underdeveloped selves can get the better of us.

Today we can begin the healing process within our own lives. I believe that developing a Mindfulness Meditation practice can provide an avenue to overcoming our instinctual reactions and can help us develop a deeper way of being. The act of slowing down our responses and moving ourselves from reaction to response is the goal of Mindfulness. This kind of paradigm change for some may come quickly and for others it may take time and practice. Not every mental meditation exercise works for every person. Just as with physical exercise, there are some that may work better than others for you.

Once you recognize your energy, practice some form of meditation, and become mindful of the way your body reacts to emotions, then you have the opportunity to extend your practice to others. Someone with whom you have a deep connection but with whom you also have suffered. Create a mindful peace talk. We all know the people with whom we suffer individually. Consider how you can address the situation directly. By saying yourself, “I have hurt you. I have caused pain. But I want to change and I want us to be better. I need your help. I need your support and collaboration. And I cannot do it without you. I want us to have peace” you may bring the opening needed to make that shift.

It is not a perfect solution. When we can train ourselves to be mindful, when emotional moments of frustration or anger arise, then we can

recognize it for what it is, understand the motivation and even our own patterns. With time, one can begin to recognize these emotions and acknowledge their presence. You can say to yourself, “I know you, anger. I know you despair. And I know how to care for you and assure you. Do not be afraid.”

In Jewish life, there is an area of thought called ***Mussar***. This term literally means correction or instruction. I think of **mussar as Jewish Mindfulness**. *Mussar* is a spiritual practice that provides steps for refining our character traits, transforming ourselves, and realizing the full potential of life. It is aimed at behavior modification through a process of study and practice. It touches upon the gap that naturally evolves in a person between one’s knowledge of the ideal good, and the failure to cultivate a practice of awareness as we live our everyday lives.

The main premise of this system was developed by Rabbi Israel Salanter who lived from 1810-1883 primarily in Lithuania. His integration of a variety of Jewish practices from 10th and 11th century Jewish writings and his own teachers formed the foundation of mussar process. *Mussar*, according to Salanter, was to help “find meaning in suffering as a way to spiritual satisfaction.” Since we can experience connection to holiness through our interpersonal relations, then to refine our attributes was a way of aiding not only ourselves, but others to be connected to holiness, as well. It was a mitzvah, a positive act for the world. *Mussar* was also part of an internal ongoing process, just as Judaism values lifelong education, each of us remains a lifelong student. *Mussar* study fulfills that mitzvah as it leads us mindful living.

*Mussar* begins with the premise that each person is holy. Therefore, each of us has many attributes in reflection of both godliness and everyone else on earth. No one is completely one attribute, so for example, in *Mussar*, a person who has strong impulses can also be restrained; one who has anger also has compassion. By recognizing, identifying, naming our own attributes, through introspection, we can begin the process of transformation. The purpose of *mussar* practice is to train or sculpt that attribute within us.

Mussar is practiced from a skilled teacher to a student. Someone who has trust and experience at these issues and appreciates the varied nature of human beings. It begins with the first step of discovering our essence. Then through a refined mindful practice of meditation or *hitbodedut*, text study, journaling, and spiritual direction or coaching, we can begin to change or refine our attributes. It can happen. It happens slowly. I know. I have my work to do. With patience we can open ourselves to new possibilities. Each of us. All of us.

Friends, I believe in you. I believe in me. In the Amidah prayer there is a phrase “*atah kadosh*” or “You, God, are holy.” One of my teachers, Rabbi Sheila Weinberg teaches a mindful mantra on this in the following way. “You are Holy. Your name is Holy, and we are all Holy beings.” Perhaps that is at the heart of the message today. To find the holiness within yourself and within those around you. And if **you** need a reminder, then try the mantra, “You are Holy, Your Name is Holy. And we are Holy beings.” (repeat). Perhaps this simple repeated phrase can be a first step in



developing your mindfulness practice. “You are Holy. Your Name is Holy. And we are Holy beings.”

I believe that each of us has the power to transform ourselves. My prayer for each of us is that you find the way to mindfulness and relief. That each of us find the way to mindfully recognize and acknowledge the negative emotions and elevate the best positive attributes. To be non-judgmental when listening to others and to speak lovingly to one another as each of us has a story of hurt, bruising and suffering. Let our mission, our community, the Temple Beth El synagogue be the place where we lovingly listen to and lift up those around us. Perhaps this is the time when you can begin to explore the mindful practices that can lead to deeper insight and inner peace.

May we do so with *kavannah*, conviction. May we do so with the readiness that the king in the opening story had to meet his child, regardless of how far he could journey. Let us be ready to be present for each other along the way. I look forward to the growth of our gardens of goodness together. Shanah Tovah and gut yontif.