

Erev Rosh Hashanah – 1 Tishrei 5779 – September 9, 2018

Ana B'choach: Clearing the Clutter and Untying the Knots

Rabbi Kim Harris

You know that one drawer in the kitchen? That one closet? You know, that closet that you dread opening for fear everything will come tumbling out in an avalanche of stuff? Or that drawer that you are afraid to open (if you can get it open) and reach into, for your hand may not come out? Yeah, that drawer. I'm sure some of us have one or both. Yes, my name is Rabbi Kim Harris and I have a junk drawer AND an out of control closet. This drawer and this closet, at least for me, result from several factors. The first? I am in a rush to get an object or objects somewhere else so I can move on to doing something else more pressing. The second? I have a cognitive, biological, whatever you want to call it, incapability to organize STUFF. Organize ideas? I can do that. Organize words? I can do that. Stuff? Not so much. I struggle with deciding where something should go, so it just goes into that drawer or that closet. There's also this short arm thing that I have. It's hard to reach up into the closet to organize things, so the object with which I am dealing just ends up either lobbed with a prayer up on top of the shelf or it goes down on the bottom. OK... Now I've revealed to you, as uncomfortable as that is, that I struggle with matters of organization. What's interesting though? Having admitted it, I now have this really strong urge to go work on that closet! Maimonides teaches in the *Mishnah Torah* to "say out loud the things you have done wrong." There is definitely something to that.

At this time of the year when these *Yamim Nora'im*, these Days of Awe arrive, we hear several words tossed around that we don't really talk about during the rest of the year: *t'shuva*, return, repentance, enter the gates, forgiveness, *s'lichot*. We come to services because we know they are important. We sing the songs that we haven't sung since last year. We beat our chests when chanting "Ashamnu, bagadnu...", and of course, we plan the sumptuous, big family meals. But what do we do with these rituals, songs, and words after the ten days? Do they get shoved into a drawer until next year? Chunked up onto the top shelf until early autumn rolls around, adding to the clutter that already packs our lives? If they are stuck away somewhere, what can they do to bless our lives. Just like all the stuff that's in the closet...if it's out of sight, out of mind, and you're not interacting with it or drawing pleasure from it, why have it around?

What ends up happening with all that extra stuff that we don't take the time to confront? In the short run, it's out of our way and we don't have to think about it, but in the long run, all that stuff that we refuse to take care of only compounds the stress of our lives, adds to our sense of feeling out of control, and multiplies our feelings of failure.

Let's make this year – 5779 – the year of clearing the clutter! After all my sermons are finished, I AM going to tackle that closet, and after the all the High Holy Days are a memory, and we've taken down the sukkah, and we've danced with the Torah, it's time for the real clearing of clutter to begin.

There is a prayer in the traditional Shabbat liturgy called *Ana B'Choach*, which like many other Shabbat prayers is in the traditional S'lichot service. Some Jews even recite it at bedtime. We gathered on S'lichot last Saturday evening to begin the process of return and repentance, and I included *Ana B'Choach* in our worship that evening. *Ana B'choach* is a liturgical poem of seven verses (*What do we know about the number seven?*) created by the mystical Kabbalists who consider it to be the most powerful and mystical prayer of all. This sequence of Hebrew letters is said to embody the very force of creation, and it is said that when we pray and meditate on this prayer, we are connecting in a very powerful way to the original force of creation and drawing healing energy and protection into our lives. Sounds worthy of an eyeroll, but I think the text can be a powerful tool for us at this time of year, as it sums up all for which we pray at the High Holy Days in seven lines. This is the essence of the text and what it means:

If You would, with the power of Your mighty hand, undo the knot that ties us up.

You who are revered, accept the prayers of Your people, raise us up, cleanse us. Almighty, if you would, please guard as the apple of Your eye, those who seek Your unity. Bless them, cleanse them, have compassion on them, always act justly toward them. Mighty, Holy One, in Your abundant goodness, guide Your people. Alone exalted, turn to the people invoking Your holiness.

Listen to our pleas, hear our cries, knowing the hidden depths within us.

My favorite line is the very first: "With your mighty hand, undo the knot that ties us up." It's basically doing yoga with our prayers. Do you feel like your life is sometimes one big knot? All of the running around, the responsibilities, the chores, worrying about our kids and our parents, transitioning to being an empty nester... our stomachs and our necks and shoulders are in knots, literally, and thus so are our spiritual lives.

The High Holy Days are fundamentally designed to help us untie all these knots and remove all the spiritual detritus that clogs up our souls. This is what *t'shuva*, true repentance and return, is all about. The 19th-century Slonimer Rebbe adds, “T’shuva should not just be a reversal of sins. It should raise you up somehow, up-end you, confront you far away from home and convince you to come back, or find you in danger and bring you to safety.” In untying our spiritual knots and removing that clutter, so will our physical lives and our enjoyment of living improve.

How to begin? If we can remember the five “R’s,” we can be well on our way to practicing *t'shuva* and improving our lives and those of others. They are these:

Recognize. **R**egret. **R**ealize. **R**epair. **R**econcile. I take a class at B’nai Havurah with Rabbi Lutman, and she shared with us these five R’s. I feel obligated and honored to share them with you.

First, we must **r**ecognize that our lives (and closets) could use some work. In High Holy Day terms, this is called performing *Cheshbon haNefesh* – taking an inventory or accounting of our souls. This must be the first step towards *t'shuva*, but, my friends, it can be the most difficult part. To look within ourselves...REALLY look within ourselves... is tough work. It can be hard to admit that there are things we are not doing well or that we have hurt someone or that our actions are causing pain to someone we love dearly.

In Judaism, this recognition of having done wrong is not acknowledging that we are sinners, *per se*, although that is often the English word used for it. In Judaism one is not born a sinner or destined to live in sin, although the inclination is certainly there. A “sin” is just “missing the mark.” Imagine a target’s bullseye for which you are aiming. Many times in life we hit the bullseye, but there are certainly times that the arrow strays away from its mark. Just recognizing that our arrow HAS missed its mark is the first step towards untying all our knots. So the first R is...**R**ecognize.

The second R of *t'shuva* is **R**egret. Regret is defined as “sorrow or remorse, especially over one’s acts or omissions.” Regret can have quite negative connotations, such as regretting to have not apologized to someone who has passed away or regretting living at the office rather than spending time with our children. The regret I refer to here is that pang that one feels after the recognition of one’s error or one’s problem. This pang, this twinge, this feeling of imbalance is necessary for true repentance.

Going through the steps of *t'shuva* without regret would be like the journey of a robot. Last week before our S'lichot service we screened a movie entitled *Keep Quiet* about the Hungarian founder of a nationalistic extremist political party in the early 2000's who called for the end of the Jews and espoused Holocaust denial. He learns that he is really Jewish through his mother's side and that for their safety and that of their children and grandchildren, the family kept their identity secret. The man's world is turned asunder, and he reaches out to the local Chabad rabbi for guidance. Over a three-year period, the man attends services, meets with the rabbi, learns Hebrew and prayer, and appears to have been transformed. A visit to Auschwitz where his grandmother was imprisoned seems to be the turning point for him, and he seems to regret his actions. Many of us felt by this point in the film that he had, indeed, had a change of heart and would live out his life as a Jew. At the end of the film, however, the man is asked if he will forsake Judaism. "It's possible," he replies. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know." Did he truly feel regret for his actions? Did he really complete the process of *t'shuva*? His rabbi was convinced that he had. *This* rabbi feels the man did not, and like Pharaoh, his heart is still hardened to the fact that he has Jewish ancestry and Jewish blood. The first R: **Recognize**. The second R: **Regret**.

The third R of *t'shuva* is **Realize**. We must work hard to realize *why* we have missed the mark. And perhaps we have a *habit* of missing that particular mark. Like **recognize** and **regret**, **realizing** the why's of our behavior can be difficult as well. Sometimes our actions are such an ingrained part of us and of our psyches that we don't think of behaving any differently. If we can realize that there are patterns to our behavior, we can seek to break the cycles of negative, hurtful actions.

Sometimes we have a deep-down, primal need that causes us to hold on to certain objects, tendencies, even people, none of which are good for our well-being. This is called our *yetzer ha-ra*. The *yetzer ha-ra* is basically our base instinct, or animalness, if you will, and it can be a powerful influence upon us. The *yetzer ha-ra* is our 2-year-old toddler self. I want, I need, me, me, me. It is our impulsivity, our selfishness, our survival instinct. Coming to terms with and understanding our *yetzer ha-ra* can help us to understand why, to *realize* why, we behave a particular way, and this can help us control our impulses. We can think twice before we give in and, thus, make our behavior change its course. The first R: **Recognize**... The second R: **Regret**... The third R: **Realize**.

The fourth R is **Repair**. Now that we have determined what it is that is causing us to behave in an unacceptable or harmful way, we have recognized where we have done wrong, and we have realized that we regret our actions, we can then strive to *repair* the damage we have done and resolve the issue once and for all, so that we do not repeat the behavior again. Just as if we have damaged someone's property and must make financial restitution, so must we seek wholeness in our relationships with others. The first R: **Recognize**... The second R: **Regret**... The third R: **Realize**. The fourth R: **Repair**.

Our final R is **Reconcile**. Miriam-Webster defines "reconcile" as "to restore to friendship or harmony," "to make consistent or congruous," or "to cause to submit to or accept something unpleasant." I think all three of these definitions suit our purposes here. We want to achieve balance and harmony in our lives and relationships, and it can certainly be an unpleasant endeavor as we are experiencing it. Now that we have reconciled ourselves to the fact that we must reconcile with our friends and family and we understand what has led to our actions and behaviors, we are ready to ask for forgiveness – of those we have wronged and certainly of ourselves. Beating myself up about my closet every time I open it doesn't solve the problem. I must stand up to my *yetzer ha-ra*, analyze why I allow this to happen, and take the steps to not only rectify the situation but to prevent it from happening again. When we find ourselves in the same situation again – getting ready to yell at our child or say cutting words to our spouse, speak passive aggressively to a co-worker, cut people off in traffic, shove the folks in line in order to make it onto the train, and yes, lob that thing up to the top shelf while getting mad when it falls back down... all those things in which we have missed the mark previously – and we change the course of our behavior, then we know we have successfully done *t'shuvah*.

So, I want us to take just a moment and consider just one thing (though there may be many), just one thing for which you need to perform *t'shuvah* this year. It may be between you and an individual, it may be between you and a negative behavior, whatever it is. ... Take a moment to mull it around. Do you **Recognize** it? ... Can you feel **Regret** about it? ... Do you **Realize** why this may have happened? ... Do you think you can figure out how to make **Repair**? ... And finally, do you feel you can **Reconcile** the situation? ...

אָנוּ, בְּכֶלֶת גִּדְלָה יְמִינֶךָ, פָּתַח אֲרוֹרָה.

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Listen to our pleas, hear our cries, knowing the hidden depths within us.

[Sing Hanna Tiferet “Ana B’choach.”]

May *t’shuva* begin with this moment, dear friends. May we all have the strength to work towards untying our knots and clearing the clutter from our souls.

L’shanah tovah ut’shuva!