

Unlearning

I am one of those people, the being early is being on time type of people. Though this is my third year living in Austin, I am still learning the city, especially its traffic patterns. A few months ago, I decided to push my own limits. I had a 9am Zoom appointment that I needed to take from the temple, and I needed to run a quick errand before arriving at work. At that time I lived 2.3 miles from the temple and the errand was on the route. I got in the car at 8:45 seriously questioning my sanity and made my way. I did my errand and was at my desk at 8:58. No, I did not drive like a racecar driver, not my style. The truth is that through life experience living in Los Angeles, Toronto, and New York, I learned that doing an errand in 15 minutes and arriving at my destination was simply impossible. Between the traffic, the parking, and the population density a true 15-minute errand was just not feasible. I am learning that I need to unlearn what is possible on my commute in our wonderful city.

Unlearning means “to make an effort to forget your usual way of doing something so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way.”¹ “Unlearning can mean challenging everything we have come to know as ‘the way things are supposed to be’ and embracing ‘the way things are.’”² We are learning and unlearning all the time, however, we often spend so much time focusing on the new knowledge, how to use a new app, a new traffic pattern, a new morning routine at the start of the school year, than the unlearning we also do. We need to pay more attention to the unlearning.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/unlearning#>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-gen-y-psy/202004/the-power-unlearning>

In her stunning memoir, *Enchantment*, Katherine May describes her experiences of unlearning how to swim. After a difficult experience in the sea, May finds herself at the mercy of Wendy, her swimming instructor, once per week who. May writes, Wendy is:

dismantling everything I ever knew about swimming. Which, it turns out, wasn't much in the first place. I have always swum, but I've never learned to do it properly. I suppose I just worked it out for myself. It always felt good enough to me. I was a confident swimmer. But lately I've been forced to accept that perhaps this was misplaced."³

She goes on to describe that once in the pool for her first lesson, Katherine tells Wendy that she can't do the front crawl and it is for this reason that she's joined the class. Wendy asks Katherine a couple more questions. Can you do the backstroke? Yes. What do you usually swim in the pool? Breaststroke, May answers. Wendy then asks Katherine to do the front crawl she struggles just as she describes. Katherine May then describes the way that, just in that first lesson, Wendy deconstructs everything she ever thought she knew about swimming. May writes:

It is a strange business, this unlearning. I am not a beginner. I am further back than that, burdened with the work of forgetting what I thought I already knew. It is not a simple matter of thought, of replacing old facts with new. I am instead

³ May, Katherine. *Enchantment* (pp. 60-61). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

wrestling with my own muscle memory, trying to unravel my bodily notion of what it is to swim...There is one single glorious week when I swim a whole length with my legs and my arms all working together, and Wendy leans over the edge of the pool to say, “I think you’ve got it.” I go home, hopeful that I am, after all, a swimmer.⁴

Unlearning happens to us all the time, whether we want it to or not. Unlearning leads to growth, new understandings, and opportunities. Unlearning can take place in formalized learning, things like swimming or music or tennis lessons, or can be brought about by physical needs and learned in places like occupational, speech, or physical therapy, or breaking down traumas for our past in work with a mental health professional. We also unlearn when the city changes traffic patterns or HEB has the audacity to redesign their store and move things around.

We are living in a moment when the pace of learning and unlearning for ourselves, our own well-being, our organizations and businesses, even our congregation makes life exhilarating, interesting, exhausting, and overwhelming, and sometimes all of these things all at once. Since the upending of our lives in March 2020 with a global pandemic we learned and unlearned so many things. At times, our own human need for stasis, for predictability, was overrun by changes in social norms, technologies, and our access and ability to use them.

⁴ May, Katherine. *Enchantment* (p. 65-67). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

For organizations and in education there are volumes of literature about the need to learn and unlearn. Many of us describe our Judaism as part of a learning journey. The reality is that sometimes we get stuck in the knowledge we have, we resist the opportunities to expand our learning, to deepen our knowledge and to unlearn. For example, some of us remember a translation of the Shema that said, “Hear o Isarel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. With the new learning about gender expansive language for God and the publication of new prayer books, there are also folks in our sanctuary who never heard the Shema translated that way. Some of us had to unlearn a long-standing translation to ensure that our liturgy aligns with all of our values.

In our tradition we are in the midst of our individual and communal time of unlearning because this is the season of teshuvah. Teshuvah is often translated as repentance. That is actually a pretty bad definition. Teshuvah means answer, like a she’elah a question and a teshuvah, an answer. It also means turning around. Teshuvah is a process. It is a process of self-reflection that calls upon each of us to acknowledge where we missed the mark. As Rabbi Danya Rutenberg puts it: “tshuvah is about coming back to where we are supposed to be, returning to the person we know we’re capable of being—coming home, in humility and with intentionality, to behave as the person we’d like to believe we are.”⁵ Teshuvah is unlearning.

And each of us will take our own journey in unlearning habits and behaviors that block us from being our best self. When we do the work, when we acknowledge our

⁵ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance And Repair (p. 25). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.

errors, seek forgiveness and make amends, and then make different choices, then we are turning, we are doing teshuvah. Rabbi Avraham Twerski was a psychiatrist and rabbi who created pioneering treatments in addiction recovery. He tells the story of Avi, a person who graduated from Twerski's treatment center in Israel and got a job in construction. While Avi was living in transitional housing, a call came in that an elderly person wanted to donate their furniture to the home, as she was downsizing. Avi was asked to help pickup the furniture. As he was carrying the old and worn sofa up the stairs to the halfway house, an envelope fell from the cushions. Avi retrieved the envelope after getting the couch inside and found 5000 shekel, about \$1300. The Avi from two years ago would have pocketed the cash. However, Avi today was different, he did his teshuvah. And so he called the director off the program to inform them of the money and the director called the family to tell them about the money. Gratified by the honesty, the family donated the money to the program.⁶

Avi presents for us an example of a person who made complete teshuvah, who unlearned old behaviors. When Avi was confronted with the money, because of the deep, hard, intentional work to unlearn behaviors his choices and thereby his actions were different.

Avi's complete teshuvah also demonstrates the basic principles of unlearning. Unlearning, according to psychologist Mariana Plata, can lead to: creativity, imagining

⁶ Paraphrased from a story in the Kol Nidre Sermon, October 4, 2022, by Rabbi Michael Friedland

new perspectives, growth, authentic interactions, curiosity, and wounds begin to heal.⁷ Unlearning allows us to expand our potential and make room for growth. And so, on this first day of this brand new year, the first day of the *aseret yamei teshuvah*, the 10 days of turning, we can unlearn the things that held us back in 5783 and chart a new course for 5784. We can make deliberate efforts to bring more compassion, kindness, and justice into the world. We can learn and unlearn to treat other people with grace and, perhaps most of all, treat ourselves with grace and compassion. We can release ourselves from some of our disappointments and our expectations. Sometimes the only thing holding us back is ourselves. And when we do this sacred, hard work, we are improving ourselves and we are improving our relationship with the Holy One, with God.

My colleague and friend Rabbi Laura Geller teaches:

Your Book of Life doesn't begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day — by the choices you make.

The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want

⁷ Plata, Mariana. "The Power of Unlearning", *Psychology today*. Posted April 25, 2020. Accessed September 11, 2023.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-gen-y-psy/202004/the-power-unlearning>

to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. Shanah tovah means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.⁸

One of my challenges in the year ahead is to continue my unlearning, to truly understand how to get from place to place around town and how long it will really take. And as I begin my fourth year here as a rabbi at Temple Beth Shalom, together we are going to unlearn and learn and dream of this congregation's vibrant future and build it.

As we edit and write our names into the book of life, may our learning and more importantly, our unlearning continue to provide opportunities for meaning making, growth, holiness, and love.

Ken y'hi ratzon - May this be God's will.

⁸ *Mishkan haNefesh*, p. 5