

Aseret Yemei Teshuvah - Ten Days of Moral Pivoting

Take a moment and look at the hundreds of beautiful faces here with us this morning. Some have been part of the Agudas community for decades, others but a few years, and some are joining us for the first time. To each of you...welcome! We are so glad you are here!

This is a strange time...we know that. Recently, someone asked me, “How are you? Everything okay?” The question seems almost obscene. “What do you mean is everything okay!? No, everything is NOT okay!” The world is upside down! We feel broken, we feel cracked, and we are desperately trying to hold our lives together. At the same time we are also trying to make sense of these moments of pain and brokenness. We are looking to pick up the pieces and rebuild our lives. For in the midst of that which is broken, the light gets in and growth is possible.

I want to be upfront with everyone. I don't have a theory or any special insight on how COVID-19 has redefined the meaning of our lives. My personal struggle these last few months has been striving to create a life of meaning. Today is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the New Year. This new year will require all of us to make a moral pivot. Just as in basketball, we must plant one foot down and quite literally *teshuva* - turn around.

As we peer into the unknown ahead, I want to share with you my ongoing attempt, as of today, to recalibrate my moral pivot, to ask myself, “Steven, what does life demand of you right now?” What are the moral pivots you must make as an individual? What are the moral pivots we must make as a society? What are the values we must all take off the bookshelf and place within our souls? I have walked through thousands of pages of our tradition and picked six moral pivots that at this moment are most important to me. In sharing them with you, I hope, or I would like, that one or two or maybe more might be meaningful to you as well. What would be most

meaningful to me, and the real purpose of my remarks, is to model a behavior of reflection that I hope every single one of you will engage in during these *aseret yemei teshuvah* - these Ten Days of Moral Pivoting. I hope you will engage with these ideas individually, as a family, and collectively. Hopefully you will grow and find meaning in the process. And then, please God, in a number of months we will all stand here together looking back on this moment, proud of the moral pivots we made to shape the future of our community, our people, and our nation. So let's begin.

One of the core principles that has taken on a new sense of urgency is the ultimate sanctity of life. At every turn of the page on Rosh Hashanah we invoke God to remember us for life - *zokhreinu l'hayyim* - and inscribe us in the Book of Life - *kotveinu b'seifer ha-hayyim*. Our tradition teaches us that we shall live (and not die) by the words of Torah, meaning life takes precedence over all of Jewish law. I don't know what our national policies should be. What I do know is that there is something very powerful and simple when we say that the most important value, more important than anything else, more important than work, going out, and social interactions...is LIFE. The priority of life forbids leaders and individuals from saying, "You know, people will die." What do you mean people will die!?! Even my dentist said to me a few weeks ago, "I think we just have to decide as a country how many deaths we are willing to accept." This is insane! Because "people will die" doesn't mean that "people dying" is fine! NO! It is our job not to accept it and it demands a moral pivot.

Our Sages famously taught: to destroy a single life is to destroy a whole world, even as to save a single life is to save a whole world. In other words, it is not merely that life takes precedence. Life is *everything*. Life is a whole universe. When it comes to life, we don't do

mathematics. Every life, *every single life*, is worthy of fighting for. All human beings are created in the image of God. No singular life is more valuable. This is the real curve that needs to be flattened.

I want to take this principle one step further. A friend of mine recently asked me what we should do when someone doesn't take all the necessary precautions in this moment? Does such a person have the same claim on, let's say, a respirator as someone who *has* been following all the safety guidelines? Does human behavior in any way impact human value? Part of the challenge of living in a society is that we don't all have the same moral pivots or sense of responsibility. I struggled with this question until I remembered the words of our Sages. "If a man wilfully sells himself and his children...he is not to be redeemed." According to Jewish law, the community has a responsibility to redeem anyone taken captive. But if you sell yourself, all bets are off. We are only responsible for you if *you* are responsible for you. But our Sages continue: "this rule only applies if he sold himself a second and a third time." I love this line! The first and even second time you sell yourself we are going to redeem you. Why? Because every human being has a right to be an idiot. That's what it means to be human! If you make a fundamental mistake, we have your back. It's the rules of the game. Human life has infinite value and we have to have compassion. If life takes precedence over Jewish law, it also takes precedence over human stupidity. It is this principle of life that I want to place before my eyes as I look out into the world, trying to determine what our society should do. I want to be a person who understands that the value of human life requires that I transcend my particular community, that I transcend questions of race, religion, and gender, and that I transcend myself. This is my first moral pivot.

Moral Pivot #2. Jewish tradition teaches us: A person should always...bear hardship rather than...make himself a burden on the community. A job and the ability to take care of ourselves and our loved ones is a fundamental human need. This is part of who we are. But a job is not just an activity to solve an immediate financial need. We don't only need food to survive, we also need our dignity. Some of us have been in situations these last few months where we had to make tough decisions who to hire, who to fire, and who to furlough. What does it mean to not be deemed essential? Of course, many organizations and businesses had no choice, but do we collectively feel responsible, as Maimonides teaches, to help people find new employment? I am proud to say that all of our employees at Agudas have retained their positions and have been paid since this pandemic began. I know many others had to make very different decisions. I recently spoke to a dear friend of mine at the largest JCC in the country who was practically in tears over losing 72 staff members and 100s of part time employees. Sometimes there are no alternatives, but what a difference it would make if everyone in our society was also crying, caring deeply about those who no longer have a source of sustenance and a source of dignity.

The third pivot that kept emerging for me over the last several months is that while the pandemic is universal, the solutions are often very local. What is it that our leaders are saying? How are they modeling good behavior? Do our leaders wear a mask and encourage others to do the same? We may know the global statistics but the numbers that really matter are the ones in our neighborhood, our city, our state, our country. Our Sages teach us that when we help those in need, it is the poor of our own community that takes precedence. In other words, we don't start with *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), we start with *tikkun ha'ir* - repairing our city. Creating a moral universe doesn't begin with loving all humankind, it begins with loving your *neighbor*.

When you see their eyes and they see you, something fundamentally changes. Yet, our tradition does not end here. We learn that after we help lift up our local community we must expand our circle of concern. As the famous teaching from Pirkei Avot says: אם אין אני לי מי לי, וכשאני לעצמי - מה אני - if I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? Your nation...your family...those who are closest to you...they claim you first, but if they are the only ones who claim you...who are you? Change begins with this community but it cannot stop here. Our circle of concern *must* continue to expand.

The fourth pivot I have been thinking about involves the laws of tzedakah. If we want to create a moral society, how do we determine what a person needs? One of the beautiful aspects of our tradition is that we never quantify need only in terms of money. We also understand that people need dignity and not all needs are the same. How do we create policies when needs are so disparate? Perhaps we need to differentiate how we act as individuals and how we act as a society. Perhaps a society as a whole has to be able to deal with all of its citizens qua citizens without discriminating against anyone, but as individuals we can say, “wait a second, who needs something else?” I am reminded of the old story of Hillel who went to support a previously wealthy family. Since they were accustomed to having a servant, Hillel himself waited on them. I don’t know if I fully agree with Hillel, but I do know that we see lives broken and people struggling. The laws of tzedakah are not just about giving money but *how* you give it. It’s so easy when things are broken to just throw out solutions and quantify everyone the same. When you see lots of broken people who are broken in very different ways and have very different needs, how do we make room for their dignity? The first step is acknowledging the wide variety of needs along with the unique needs of *every* individual.

My fifth pivot. What does it mean to be a citizen in this society? How do we see ourselves? I was loved by my parents and raised thinking I was a gift...someone really special. Honestly, it's a nice way to be raised. If I did something wrong the response was, "Who made you do it? I know you would never do something like that." What happens when everyone enters the public sphere and thinks they are a gift? During this pandemic I have experienced very deeply that I am *not* a gift. I could infect people. I could be a source of harm and danger. Remember, if you dig a pit in the public sphere and someone falls in, you are responsible. I think about this every time I leave my house and forget my mask. [hand over mouth, gasp] I quickly run back and get one. I now keep a spare mask in my bag just in case. When I enter the public sphere it is my responsibility to create a space in which others know that they could be safe from me. In the world of Corona we must recognize that *we* can be that pit in the public sphere...simply by breathing. In order to create an environment which is safe for everyone we must understand that we can be significant sources of harm and commit to being part of the solution.

The last idea I want to share with you today is one I struggle with and try most of my life to deny. I love the myth of stability that I construct. I work so hard to be in control. "How are you?" "Fine, thank you." And then Corona comes like a slap in the face. I have *no* control. People are dying. People are hurt. People have lost their income. People have lost their dignity. Our Sages taught that the Holy One Blessed be He gave Israel three precious gifts and all of them were given through suffering. Something is fundamentally broken here. I would use other words but there might be little ears listening. This crisis challenges us to ask ourselves if the myth of stability is worth it. What is the price we pay to ourselves and those around us? *Can* we

embrace our brokenness? I don't know. This is the part of my moral pivot that I haven't yet figured out. I'm still working on this one. When there is finally a vaccine are we just going to go back to normal? Or is there something very important about maintaining this brokenness as a part of our lives? How big, how small, I'm not sure yet. But I know I am not the same. I like to joke that COVID hasn't impacted me psychologically at all, it's just that every human being who comes near me I think is my enemy. But really, everything's fine, thank you. Maybe not. Maybe not.

I stand before you today, vulnerable, a little broken, and trying to build my moral pivots. I am thinking about the many ways the last several months and the year we are embarking upon will change who I am. How will I grow from this experience? How does it reinforce the way I think or change the way I think? How do I live with all of this complexity? Our tradition teaches us that when you are in the midst of a moment of such unbelievable complexity forget trying to put it all together. Forget consistency. A moral foundation is not a coherent thesis. It's about opening your heart and having a heart of many rooms - a heart where there is room for lots of different values, ideas, and people. We are never going to get it right, nor are we supposed to. That's not what this is about. It's about trying to be a little more decent tomorrow than we are today. It's about using this profound tragedy that has altered our lives and allowing the light to enter so growth is possible.

I will admit, I could spend a lot of time blaming. It's tempting. This person started it. This is where it came from. This country didn't do what's right. This prime minister, this president...I have everyone in the world who I could blame. And the truth is, some blame is deserving. But at the end of the day, we are going to be better human beings when we don't look

for causal relationships between pain and behavior alone. We need to *see* differently. We need to see *others* differently. We need to see differently the purpose of our lives, the purpose of this sacred community, and the purpose of our nation. As human beings we will always make mistakes. It is our destiny to make mistakes. But we also have the potential to learn. Whether we as a society will learn from this crisis and grow, that's the question that haunts me. That's the question that keeps me up at night. The resolution to this question is in my hands and it's in your hands as well. Our world is depending on our answer.

Hayom Harat Olam - Today is the Birthday of the World. We are all connected. *Hayom Ya-amid ba-Mishpat* - Today all creation is called to judgment. We are all vulnerable. Everyone of us *has* suffered. Everyone of us *is* broken. As we pass before God, we can all meet another human being who is as broken as we are. Just as we are searching and hoping that we are essential, they too are hoping that they are essential. Maybe we can reach out to them and say “shalom aleichem...let’s be essential together...let’s embrace our brokenness and together let’s create some wholeness in our world.”