

We are the *Avaryanim* — Transgressors, Teshuvah-Makers
Kol Nidre 5783

There's a teaching that whenever we perform a mitzvah — fulfill a sacred obligation or do an act that fosters connection — there is an angel who calls us out by name: "So-and-so has just done a mitzvah!" I remember one Yom Kippur when my rabbi, Irwin Kula, expanded on this (and I haven't seen this elsewhere so I think it was his innovation) by imagining that when one of us does an *averah*, a wrong-doing, an angel calls out: "So-and-so has found a new path to teshuvah!"

On some level it's a sweet teaching. We learn from our mistakes, right? But there's something that really hits me about the image of all these new paths of teshuvah. Like trails through a forest. Leading us on new understandings and growth. And let me not romanticize — these paths are not short and they're not easy. They don't always lead where we think they will. And if we really commit to them, they're vulnerable, and stretch us beyond ourselves. In that way they're liberating, but demanding. And sometimes, often maybe, we choose not take them. But I've carried this teaching with me for decades, and as we enter into this year with our theme of teshuvah — and into this day, the Holy of Holies of this season; and into this moment in our civilization's lifecycle, when this theme feels so necessary — it has called to me as a reminder, as a wake-up bell, for what is possible. This is not about sugar-coating our errors or simply looking on the bright side. It's about apprehending the reality, the opportunity, that the path of teshuvah is a life — and lifelong — practice. And we are all on it. Even when we think we aren't, if we embrace who we are and where we are right now, we get that we are already moving down a path that can bring us closer to who we want to be.

The Talmud names teshuvah as one of several things that existed before creation. In other words, in the rabbinic imagination teshuvah is woven into the fabric of the universe. That is to say that, a) we are not designed to be flawless, and b) we are born with mechanisms to respond when we need to repair. So when we must do work of repair, it doesn't mean that we're doing something wrong. It means we're doing something right. Rather than being something for us to avoid, to get past so we can really live life, teshuvah *is* life. I said on Rosh Hashanah that "returning is becoming." I mean that this whole journey of teshuvah is the path of how we most become who we are, how we most fully embody our potential.

Sounds great right? So why do we so often resist it? Prentis Hemphill, embodied healer and facilitator, very wisely names a piece of this. They write:

Having facilitated conflict and transformative justice processes I can feel how programmed we are to grasp for innocence. Innocence offers safety, while guilt leaves you at risk for expulsion and isolation. Neither are fixed states, identity traits, but we treat them that way. And so many times in supporting people to wade through hard feelings, hurt feelings, harm, I've found that so many of us want innocence separate from accountability. We want an independent party to deem us innocent so we don't have to look further, feel more, or understand ourselves. On the so called other side, we do everything we can to avoid guilt - we stretch truths, obscure intentions, omit information, build alliances to prevent ourselves from being seen as culpable.

I want to pause for a moment for us to consider this. Whether it feels at all familiar. How often do I do this? When I realize some way in which I've made a mistake or said something careless, or hurtful, how often is my first instinct to see how I can save

face. And these things that Prentis names at the end — stretching truths, omitting information, they might be very subtle in the ways we practice them. But as they put it: “Often that determination [of innocence] becomes the focal point of our efforts instead of tending to the pain, instead of protecting who and what needs protection, instead of all and any parties having space to learn and transform.” (If this is hitting you as true — ok, you’re finding a new path to teshuvah.) We are often more concerned with our own image and feelings than we are with the experience and needs of the person or people we’ve hurt.

I want to link back to the notion of the isolated self that I spoke about on Erev Rosh Hashanah. I said that on a moral level this attachment to the separate self often manifests as shame and blame, in which our actions and others’ become defining statements of who we and they *are* rather than particular examples of what we each *did*. So it’s no surprise that we have a hard time directly engaging with how we’ve caused harm. If we’re either innocent or guilty, righteous or unrighteous, then it is clear which we’re going to choose. If we are so concerned with our personal image, with proving our own goodness, and with what others might say about us, then we will be much less able to get close enough to do the work we need to do in order to be the people we want to be.

This plays out in intimate relationships as well as in learning and accountability with much broader ramifications. In the first session of his Somatic Abolitionism training that I’ve been participating in, Resmaa Menakem said right off the bat, to a zoom room of hundreds of white-bodied people, something along the lines of: We’re not interested in you showing that you’re a “good white person.” While for some that might feel like a harsh message, I took it to heart and it’s stayed with me as a beacon. It comes back around to me regularly as a challenge, helping me examine my motivations and

investment. To push me to actually be doing the work I intend to be doing. If I'm truly invested in antiracist practice and living, then my efforts aren't about proving anything or checking off any boxes. The question isn't whether I am showing myself to be a "good ally" or not. It's whether I am perceiving clearly the ways in which I perpetuate racist culture and am working actively to address that and dismantle it however I can.

The same is true of teshuvah on any level. Am I taking responsibility for the harm I've caused, and working sincerely to make amends and change my behavior? Or am I simply wanting to say or do the things that will lead to someone saying I'm ok? Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, in her brilliant new book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, emphasizes that the Medieval rabbi Maimonides places apology in the latter part of his sequence for doing teshuvah, not as an initial step. "He doesn't spell out his thinking explicitly," she writes, "but I think he was trying to tell us that apologies, and even amends and reparations, don't truly have the needed effect if the work to become different isn't already underway." Apology, and an acceptance of our apology, is a moment in which we get back a sense of resolution or reconciliation. And that is often — often, but not always — an important part of the teshuvah process. But it's not necessarily the heart of it, and it's certainly not — especially in cases where real harm has been done — anything we can jump to and get done quickly. The more we grasp at innocence, as Prentis Hemphill suggests, the more we truncate the process and don't do the internal or interpersonal work needed to learn, to hold ourselves accountable, and to make actual change in our lives.

Tonight, right before the Kol Nidre prayer, we heard the words, *anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha-avaryanim* — We grant permission for transgressors to pray with us. Or as our mahzor translates it: "...whoever seeks to pray / Whether righteous or

unrighteous.” As we’ve acknowledged in the past, and to state something that at this point feels totally obvious to me: we are the *avaryanim*. Each of us, both righteous and unrighteous.

The word *avaryanim*, in fact, carries a lot with it. It does mean “those who transgress,” coming from the word to traverse, in this case to cross over boundaries of ethical or appropriate behavior. It actually shares a root with *Ivri*, Hebrew. That most ancient of our names, Hebrews, which many connect to Abraham’s traversing from the East to the land of Canaan. Abraham was a boundary crosser spiritually, though, as well as physically. I love the lineage of us as *Ivrim* — boundary crossers, rebels, challengers of existing power structures. And I embrace our identity as *avaryanim* — transgressors, teshuvah-makers. And the two do not feel wholly separate. To be *avaryanim* means we don’t perceive the world as fixed. We are not static. We are always in motion, crossing from righteous to unrighteous and back. And we have agency. We can always do the work of turning toward what is needed and returning toward who we wish to be. To me, this is what the tradition means when it says, “The gates of teshuvah are always open.”

In 2020 adrienne maree brown wrote a short but powerful book called, *We Will not Cancel Us*. The central theme she explores is the practice of calling out, or canceling, people when they do wrong. She is clear that call-outs have their place. They are often an effective way of challenging people in power who refuse to take accountability. Danya Ruttenberg, on this topic, quotes Black feminist activist Loretta Ross, who says: “Callouts are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach. Effectively criticizing such people is an important tactic for achieving justice. But most public shaming is horizontal and done by those

who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses. They become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.”

I imagine we all recognize this, all have a sense for how even within common ideological circles we have a tendency to tear others down. Way beyond their application as challenging abuses of power, call-outs get employed for a whole range of things. So in responding to wrongdoing and in engaging in conflict, adrienne maree brown stresses how important it is to make clear distinctions between categories, to delineate, for instance, between mistake, misunderstanding, conflict, harm, and abuse, and to respond accordingly. She writes, Part of my critique of the way call-outs are being used is that not liking someone, social media offenses, power misuse in work settings, movement conflict, and sexual assault are all getting the same level of public response.”

I so appreciate what she’s naming, because it gets at the *practice* of teshuvah. Distinguishing, for instance, between conflict and harm, is so important. And, it can be tricky. I have certainly witnessed conflicts between people in which one party sees themselves as a clear victim of harm by the other, while those witnessing see it as much more nuanced and complex than that, a conflict in which each person has their own work to do. I want to clearly state again: we need to be mindful of power dynamics and social location as we discern these dynamics. Those of us who hold more privileged identities need to learn to be ok with being called out, and have grace and resilience when the call out is not expressed in the easiest way for us to receive. For me the loosening of identification with the separate self is vital here. The call out is not a statement on me as a person. It’s a challenge for me to attend to how I can grow and become more of the person I aspire and long to be.

Mia Mingus, a trainer for transformative justice and disability justice, writes this about accountability, which she calls “generative, not punitive”: “True accountability, by its very nature, should push us to grow and change, to transform. Transformation is not to be romanticized or taken lightly. If we really want to do teshuvah, we have to be willing to let go of parts of who we are, parts that repeatedly create conditions in which we hurt others.

I’ve been reflecting on this word, “transformation.” A BIPOC member of our community recently helped me examine the use of that word in the context of antiracism work. “Transformation for who?” they asked. What they were getting at was that if I’m focused on personal transformation and stop there, I may feel great about the transformation I’ve undergone, but I need to also be asking: How will my growth and transformation benefit those most harmed? In what ways will it help create tangible change in the lives of people of color?

Which brings us back to Prentis Hemphill and our grasping for innocence. As a Black leader, working on behalf of the Black community, they write: “innocence was not created as a concept for our safety, but to safeguard against us. White people in the U.S. have historically (and at times legally) been innocent of crimes against Black bodies. Black people aren’t offered the same innocence or even compassion. Innocence is a concept that protects some people from becoming the banished and perpetually guilty...At its worst, the insistence on innocence becomes the barrier to true humanity itself and to real reflection, growth and maturity.”

So when I cling to innocence, avoid the real honest *heshbon ha-nefesh*, “soul-accounting,” that is mine to do, I am perpetuating a world in which people with more privilege, access, and power continue to get let off the hook, to the detriment and harm

of those who are more marginalized and oppressed. This is what is at stake. And the uprooting, dismantling, overturning of this is what is possible when we practice teshuvah, when we co-create a culture dedicated to honest self-examination and earnest work toward repair.

We can do this work. We really can honestly examine ourselves and grow. We really can get excellent at this. We need to be willing to wade into the nuance and complexity. We need to loosen our investment in ourselves and increase our investment in dismantling habits and systems that cause harm, so that more of us — eventually all of us — can be live in safety, and freedom, and with dignity.

The sages say: “In the place where the penitent — those who practice teshuvah — abide, not even the wholly righteous can abide.” You know why? Because there is no such thing as a wholly righteous person. So to live under the illusion that we can be that is fundamentally to not abide in this world. So let’s live here, friends. In *this* world. With *these* shortcomings, with *this* work to do, on *these* paths of teshuvah.

G'mar ḥatimah tovah