

Teshuva and the Unfinished Business of Tahara -- Kol Nidrei 5775

Opportunities for teshuva -- the joint effort of God and human beings to return us to our original state, unstained by the transgressions of our past, prepared to choose life in the coming year -- cycle repeatedly, in microcosm and macrocosm, from the beginning of the month of Elul through the coming festival of Shemini Atzeret. The cycle reaches its apex over Yom Kippur, framing both the flow of the day and each of its services.

That being said, teshuva is a process that never ends, that requires our attention all year.

Looking at the flow of the period of teshuva, and looking backwards historically, from the Machzor toward the Bible, I want to both explore this cycle of teshuva and also discuss an underrated aspect of the process that requires our vigorous attention, continuously -- tahara, purification of our character flaws.

The first steps in the cycle of teshuva depend on us, the next steps represent God's response, and the final step represents our ongoing

commitment to God's response.

The first step in the cycle of teshuva is *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, literally "accepting the yoke of God's sovereignty," or more understandably, embracing God's authority over us as individuals and as Jews. This is the defining objective for our Rosh Hashana tefillot, as I mentioned last week. Our reach for the palace, and the relationship with God therein, begins in earnest Rosh Hashana eve, as we increasingly refer to God as our king. *Melech chafetz bachayim*, the king who desires life, *melech al kol ha'olam koolo bichvodecho*, rule over the whole world with your glory. Our reach extends with our evocation, during Shacharit, of God sitting on his royal throne, *hamelech hayoshev al kisa ram v'nisa*, and our pleas to *Aveenu Malkaynu*, Our Parent, Our King.

Entering the palace, we accept God's rule over us definitively during the three sections of the Rosh Hashana musaf service. In *malchuyot*, as human beings in great humility, we bow down on all fours to the King during *Alaynu*. *Zichronot* shifts the focus to our relationship to the King as a particular nation, the Jewish people. We appeal to God's remembrance of our ancestors and the covenant God made with our ancestors -- and with us. In *shofarot*, we invoke images of the

covenantal moment at Sinai, where God and the Jewish people awoke fully to each other and to our mutual responsibilities.

Without the step of kabbalat ol malchut shamayim on Rosh Hashana -- which baruch Hashem, we took together last week -- and our affirmative embrace of covenantal relationship with the King as human beings and as Jews, we have no basis for our appeals to God today, for forgiveness and clemency, as the king takes on his judicial function. As the palace becomes a courtroom.

The second step in the cycle of teshuva is selichot, which we initiate the Saturday night before Rosh Hashana and is central to Yom Kippur.

During selichot, as our own defense attorneys, we remind the king/judge of his credentials most favorable to forgiveness and pardon, make introductory statements to remind God of our worthiness for forgiveness and pardon, state our goals, and appeal for God's extended attention.

We begin selichot with an appeal to God's 13 central attributes, the שלש עשרה מדות, God's credentials.

ה, ה, אל רחום וחנון, ארך אפים, ורב חסד ואמת, נצר חסד לאלפים,
נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה.

"Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and graceful, patient, abounding in kindness and truth, assuring kindness for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon."

Then, modeling Moshe, we come clean with our desires.

וסלחת לעוננו ולחטאתנו ונחלתנו.

Forgive our transgressions and our sins and claim us for your own.

We then state our credentials. This is particularly evident tonight, when there are three rounds of selichot, which each focus on a human credential -- our commitment to plea for mercy, the reality of our human vulnerability, and our yearning for God.

Culminating the selichot is the *Sh'ma koleynu*, our plea for God's continued ear throughout the teshuva cycle.

Buoyed in confidence in our relationship with God, assured both by God's credentials and our own, only then do we confess our specific transgressions, in the **third step, vidui**. We proceed, and we speak,

hoping, but not certain, that the relationship can withstand the torrent of our confessions.

We plead guilty. We confess our transgressions, both our own and our community's. We do it short, *ashamnu*. We do it long, *al cheyt*.

In the paragraph after Ashamnu, we state, *וְאַתָּא צָדִיק עַל כָּל הַבָּא עֲלֵינוּ*, "you are in the right with respect to all that comes upon us," recognizing the justice of a severe decree. We are not trying to fool God concerning our actions.

Yet, despite what strict justice might demand -- a notion which I'll come back to -- after each section of the Al Cheyt, we ask God for forgiveness, pardon and acquittal.

ועל כלם, אלוה סליחות, סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו.

The first three steps of the teshuva cycle -- *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, *selichot* and *vidui*, we take, in order that God take **steps 4-6 of the cycle**. *סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו*. **Forgiveness, pardon and acquittal.**

Our words, our reflections, and our statements of intention, we hope, will bring God's forgiveness of our transgressions, pardon from sentencing, and permanent acquittal from punishment for our misdeeds.

Yet there is a 7th step, *tahara*, purifying our stained personalities, (in the thinking of Rabbi Joseph Soloveichick), which God cannot engender by executive fiat, despite the plain meaning of a key verse in tomorrow's torah reading. " כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו. "For on this day, expiation shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before Adonai."

We strive for *tahara* on Yom Kippur -- through demonstrations practical, symbolic and liturgic. We fast, so as to be reduced to our spiritual essence. We dress in simple, white garb, to imagine our personalities freed from the stain of sin. And we recreate the service of the high priest, whose preparation for Yom Kippur invokes the image of the mikveh for us and its hope of starting afresh, untainted by our past, united with God. After sacrificing one goat for *kapara*, acquittal from punishment for our sins, the High Priest then sends the scapegoat into the wilderness for *tahara*. Yet we never see the end of the scapegoat -- we are uncertain of its fate. The same goes with the process of *tahara*.

We can't be assured of long-term *tahara* unless we translate our stated intentions into actions, take the step beyond words to rectify the moral defects in our personalities, resolve the internal conflicts which stand in our way, and act consistently with our original, better selves.

So it's step 7, tahara, where the cycle of teshuva reaches its final, yet partial completion. God seals us in the Book of Life come Nei'la, we pray, with faith in us and hopes for our active and self-generated rehabilitation, yet, I also imagine, with fears for and cynicism concerning our recidivism and our commitment to return, once we leave the protected space of Yom Kippur.

This brings me back to the שלש עשרה מדות, to the notion of God's justice, and to our accountability to God's justice -- which takes a back seat to God's mercy during the liturgy of the Yamim Noraim, for good reason. We want God's mercy to overturn the bad decree that we may justly merit.

Regarding the 13 attributes, both in the Machzor and the rest of Jewish liturgy we omit from their recitation a very important section, from their first two appearances in Jewish literature, in the book of Exodus after the sin of the Golden Calf, and in the book of Numbers after the sin of the spies' mission to scout of the land of Israel. The omitted sections argue strongly for the persistence of sin, the challenge of change, and a much more equivocal approach by God to humanity in the process of teshuva, than we see in the Machzor.

ה, ה, אל רחום וחנון, ארך אפים, ורב חסד ואמת, נצר חסד לאלפים,
נשא עון ופשע וחטאה, ונקה לא ינקה, פקד עון אבות על בנים ועל בני
בנים, על שלשים ועל רבעים.

Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and graceful, patient, abounding in kindness and truth, assuring kindness for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. **Yet he does not clear all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."**

The specific words of God's delayed or vicarious retribution appear also in response to the third commandment, idol worship, in Exodus 20. They are gradually excised from the tradition, do not appear in the abbreviated version of the 13 attributes that Jonah recites in the Yom Kippur haftara, and, as I mentioned, do not appear in our liturgy, either on Yom Kippur or on the festivals, when we chant the thirteen attributes as we remove the sifrei torah from the ark.

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel reject the concept of vicarious retribution in other terms. Jeremiah declares, "In those days, they shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted.' But every one shall die for his own ..." (Jeremiah 31:29—30)

The later Biblical authors and rabbis believed in a God who punishes, albeit one committed first to mercy, but they did not believe in a God who punishes children and grandchildren for their predecessors' transgressions, so they boldly altered the list of attributes.

That being said, it's important that we remember the attributes original framings in the Torah concerning delayed punishment, because there are messages in those framings we ought not forget as we strive to cleanse ourselves of our moral defects, and to bring greater completion to our teshuva processes in the coming year.

Message number one is that, though God does not punish children for the transgressions of their parents, the residue of transgression lingers and becomes a legacy for generations to come, an unwarranted but inevitable punishment in its own right, regardless of the degree to which future generations recognize and do teshuva for the actions of their parents. Ibn Ezra, commenting on the punishment for idol worship in commandment three, acknowledges this sad reality, and points to the use of the word פקד, that God doesn't so much punish the next generations but rather remembers the sins of parents for three or four generations. The stain is there, and so is the burden of teshuva for the next generations.

Consider, in the worst case, Germany's grotesque national legacy and the horrifying, almost insurmountable obstacle to living that it places in front of contemporary Germans of conscience.

Safe to say, our transgressions leave our children with extra burdens of collective purification.

Message number two is that sin perpetuates sin. As William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote,

“So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old;
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the man.”

It is much easier and more instinctive to fall back into our own wayward paths and the wayward paths of our predecessors than to rectify them. Consider the passage of domestic and child abuse from generation to generation, for example. As Moshe David Cassuto writes in his commentary on Exodus, "since a man . . . grieves over the tribulation of his children and grandchildren not less . . . than over his own affliction, the Bible issues a warning so as to keep man far from sin." We need to keep mind that our negative behavior generate similar behavior in our kids.

Message number three is that there is such a thing as divine justice, even with our acquittal from direct punishment on Yom Kippur. We learn that best from Jonah, who makes his appearance in the middle of Yom Kippur.

Severe and unforgiving, the arch-enemy of compassion and forgiveness, Jonah, albeit unwillingly, becomes the beacon of God's mercy at a moment in the day when we can almost smell the roses and our entry through the gates. It's hard to take what Jonah stands for -- divine justice -- seriously as he becomes wrapped in a parody of what he doesn't stand for. Concerning God's compassion and forgiveness, he says, in other words, "that's why I fled from you in the first place. I knew you'd forgive the Ninveites. I'd rather die than live in such a world."

We can't ignore Jonah's justice, God's justice, on Yom Kippur. We avert direct punishment, but are not freed, in the thought of Rav Soloveichik, from our responsibility to clean those aspects of our character which are polluted -- to make tahor that which is tamei, that which is fraught with danger for ourselves and our successors.

Our stride toward the gates ought to be tempered with this recognition. Otherwise, there's little to motivate our change in the coming weeks

and months, little to stem the tide of recidivism that may bring us back to the same place each fall.

Someone once came crying to the Kotzker Rebbe saying that his tefillah was constantly disturbed by foreign thoughts. The Kotzker Rebbe said in amazement, "Foreign thoughts!? They are not foreign. They are your own!" On Yom Kippur, we ought not seek just acquittal from accountability for our transgressions. We need to go further, to own the moral imperfections of our personalities and minds, and to pledge to remedy them.

Our merciful parent, our sovereign, our judge -- our covenanted partner of the generations. We come to you humble and contrite, worthy of your mercy. Demonstrate your forgiveness, pardon and willingness to acquit -- though the list of our transgressions is long and onerous. We recognize that our transgressions imperil us, our children and beyond. How we behave sets a model for the future. Give us the strength to clean the stain of our transgressions on our personalities, to make tahor that which is tamei in our character, and to vindicate your mercy, now and in the year to come. And let the process of teshuva be ongoing between us.