

High Holidays 5778 – Wholehearted in the Middle

There's a tradition amongst the wisdom masters of the Hasidic world that any old thing that happens to them, that anything that happened – it could happen on the streets, it could happen on trains – became a teaching, a Torah itself. It didn't matter if it was a taxi cab, it didn't matter if it was a carriage, that was the locus where Torah happened for the Hasidic masters.

So in that vein, I was waiting outside of a restaurant bathroom in the hallway and there were these two teenage girls also standing there waiting. This is the extent of the little snippet of their conversation that I heard: "How stupid can she be! You make a mistake once, twice fine. But a third time – you're a fool, yeah!"

You can hear the teenage accent to this – it's a little twittery. Basically, what she was saying was: don't be stupid – just don't make the mistake over and over again.

This little Torah reminded me of something that if you've been around self-help or spiritual literature long enough you've probably run into at some point. It's a poem of sorts by Portia Nelson called an *Autobiography in Five Short Chapters* (from *There's A Hole in My Sidewalk*, 1977). The whole thing is about a page long, and deserves to be studied, but I'll share its sum pieces with you now and you'll get the point:

Chapter 1

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk

I fall in.

I am lost ... I am helpless...

Chapter 2

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I am in the same place

But, it isn't my fault....

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it is there.

I still fall in ... it's a habit...

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

So, breaking patterns involves repetition and each one of us has an element of tragedy in our lives by inevitably repeating patterns of triumph and defeat. I think there was a sigh of relief in the western world when this issue – this element of tragic repetition – was codified by Sigmund Freud in his concept of Repetition Compulsion in the early 1900's. What Freud essentially said was that those patterns that repeat over and over again, those mistakes we make over and over in our lives, are actually opportunities. They are the psyche's way of saying: here are places that need healing. Here is an opportunity to recognize a pattern, and not just to recognize it, but also to heal it.

Not repeating patterns also has a Biblical name. The way the Torah says not to repeat the same old tragic patterns is this: "Don't go back to Egypt." *Lo tosifun lashuv baderekh hazeh od* (Deut. 17:16). *Lo tosifun*, don't go back to Egypt. Egypt is that place that once you have left, the Torah tells us, don't go back. As the Torah is preparing the Israelites for entrance into the land of Israel, it says, no matter how great life will be, you could amass riches, property, prestige, just don't go back to Egypt – don't go back for horses or the military, don't go back and marry there to make political alliances, but most of all, just don't go back to Egypt, the place that enslaved you, the narrow world of Pharaoh.

Professor Michah Goodman of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, who wrote a book on Moses and then on Maimonides, points out that what's interesting is that, if you look at the end of the Hebrew Bible – not the end of all of the prophet writings and Proverbs and Psalms, but the end of the historical books of the Bible, the end of the opus of the Hebrew Bible – is that there is a wild irony. It ends with the Jews on their way out in exile to Babylonia, yes, but also to where? – Egypt. It ends with them going back to Egypt.

See, you and I can try as hard as we want and we all know this. You can listen to the Portia Nelson poem or to those two girls that I happened to listen to wisdom from, but it's very romantic. Each and every year we arrive at the High Holidays and, I don't know about you, but for me, I often think: "God, I don't totally get what happened this year, but I seem to be right back where I started." Here I am and I walk down the same street and I fall into the same hole. I leave Egypt and I hear God saying, "Don't go back, don't go back" – just 3 words, that's all you need, don't go back, and here I am.

But not only that. At the same time the Torah tells me not to go back it also tells me, don't go forward. If you go into the land of Canaan, the Torah says, make sure that you don't do like those Canaanites. Egypt behind me, Canaan in front of me, and here I am stuck in the middle.

For me personally, I only recently realized just how hard this past year has been. I have dealt with the struggle of leaving a community and finding my place in a new one. I have moved to a new city and culture – a city away from my children. I have further reckoned with the spiritual and professional consequences of the wreckage of my past. And, I knew

months and months ago that it would be hard and yet, I also knew that I would eventually be able to get through it. But that foresight did not stop me from falling into emotional holes. It reminds me of something from 12-Step parlance, there is something called a dry-drunk. In other words, “You may not be drinking alcohol, but you’re still drinking.” Get it? We can drink from the root of our spiritual brokenness: from our resentment, from self-pity, our shame, anger, and fear. And, for me, although I can’t go back, when I look at my three little girls, when I worry about whether I’m giving them enough or if my time with them is quality enough, I feel myself shifting course, drifting and being pulled back toward my Egypt. And although I know that I can’t go back, I struggle because I don’t know where I am supposed to go.

But the Torah gives us one beautiful line that I want to invite us all to reflect on over the course of the holidays, from today through Yom Kippur and even Sukkot. *Tamim tihyeh im Adonai elohechka* (Deut 18:13). *Tamim* – wholehearted. “Be wholehearted with Adonai your God.” This verse, says Maimonides, arguably the greatest Jewish genius who has ever lived – this verse is so essential to the Torah, so essential a commandment that it isn’t even a commandment. It is so meta to the understanding of Torah that it isn’t included in the listing of individual *mitzvot*. It is so crucial to the grounding of the Torah, it is like one of those top ten, like “love the Lord your God with all your heart and might.” *Tamim tiheyeh*, be wholehearted with Adonai your God.

And you would think that such a pivotal and important verse would have a clear translation. The word *Tamim*, wholehearted, was often translated, especially in Christian scripture, as “perfect.” So it reads, “Be perfect with God.” Take a minute and think about that. Can you imagine the erosion of the deeper structure of our tradition from that kind of mistranslation of *Tamim* or *temimut*? *Tamim* does not mean perfect, as the King James and others have translated. It means wholehearted. To bring all of your heart, to bring all of you.

In other words, you may not be able to go back to Egypt and you don’t know exactly where you are going, you are stuck in the middle, but even in that space, be wholehearted, bring all of you. That by the way is very definition of *teshuvah*. The idea of wholeheartedness captures the entire arc of returning, repairing, responding.

I’m not sure how many of you or if any at all, are coming in with a long laundry list of all of the waving fingers at you about the past. Many of us will be making amends for wrongdoings or seeking forgiveness within ourselves. But what we are doing every single year as this cycle comes back around – as we have our spiritual repetition compulsion or repetition impulsion of the calendar – is to ask ourselves, fundamentally, how much of myself do I bring to my day to day living? From moment to moment? How wholehearted are you, are we – are any of us? How wholehearted can we be? What are the things that keep me from inviting my heart into the present? How is it that I hold back – not going back to Egypt, but maybe going back to Egypt – that keep me from *Tamim*? Wholehearted?

The number one impediment for me – to being all of me – is the same problem as with the mistranslation of *Tamim*; it’s the confusion between wholeheartedness and perfection. I

look back and I remember so clearly how many times in my career as a rabbi that I tried to be perfect. I remember when I arrived at my first synagogue position and, not only meticulously crafting the vision and path of administrative and educational work that I would do, but also the manner in which I tried to carry myself – in meetings, in the halls, after services, in the parking lot. I imposed upon myself the notion of always having to be on and always in a hurry to get “there” as if there was a “there” to get to. And my life was essentially defined by “I have to” – everything was unbounded, undefined “have to.” That’s not even living! That’s perfectionism and perfectionism puts each of us into an impossible space where I simply cannot be me.

The wisdom of our tradition yet teaches, *Lo alekha ham'lakha ligmora, v'lo atah ben horin libatel mimenah* – You are not obligated to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it.

Egypt is everywhere and we continuously circle around our personal and collective “Egypt.” We leave and we come back. That young teenager I mentioned earlier was only partially right. It’s true that you make a mistake one, two, three times and fourth time you’re a fool, but we’re all fools. The challenge of our imperfection is that the mountain of *teshuvah* seems so high – yet it only seems that way.

There is a story of the Maggid of Mezritch who once gave an analogy of the spiritual path. He said God is like a King and brings his son and gives him a task – the kind of task of Sisyphus – and tells him: “Lift this huge mountain for me.” The son gets together with the servants trying to figure out what to do about the King’s command. They realize that, even together, they can’t lift the mountain, so they decide to chip away at it. And so stone by stone, piece by piece, rock by rock, formation by formation, they are able to move the mountain and bring it to the King. And upon looking at the pieces and shards that comprise the mountain, the king exclaims: *Yafeh*, “Beautiful.” And so the Maggid would say that, of course, it was impossible for you to bring the whole mountain. The broken stones are what you must bring, the *shever*, the broken vessels – bring your broken stones from around that mountain, one stone a day – one moment per day. Bring your whole heart – your broken heart, your imperfections – to one moment each day.

So what I want to say to us today is that we will be back for Shabbat *Teshuvah* tomorrow and the next week after that to sing the old songs and chants, but what we can do now is to throw perfection out the window. Let it all go. Perfection is not going to happen this year, it won’t happen the year after, and it won’t happen ever, but bring your whole heart and let us no longer use perfection as an excuse to not show up in a given moment.

The secret language of the heart is written by the wounds we face – each wound, each crack, each imperfection engraves a sacred letter, allowing us to speak with greater authenticity, deeper truth and more sincere compassion. And so, today, in this moment, each letter, each stone, each boulder each bit of brokenness is what we can bring.

Finally, if I were ever to see my teenage friends again, I would say, “Thank you. Thank you for reminding me, for inviting me to return again this year to the wisdom of *teshuvah*,

which is that *teshuvah* is available at any time, as long as we bring our whole hearts, brokenness and all, piece by piece by piece.

Shanah Tovah