

Yom Kippur Afternoon
D'var Torah 5784
Rabbi Elyse Pincus Abrahams
September 25, 2023

The Hard Work of Starting

This Yom Kippur I want to share with you all a story from one of our ancient texts, the Talmud. This story caught my eye as it opens with a question. In the story, Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi notices a contradiction between two verses in the creation story. It is written in Genesis 1:16, “And God made the two great lights.” However, it is also written in the same verse, “The greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” If one was a greater light and the other was a lesser light, how does the text also say that God created two great lights? The story posits an explanation.

When God first created the sun and the moon, they were created equally bright. Then, the moon said before God, “Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? Surely, one must be subservient to the other.”

God, therefore, said to her, “If so, go and diminish yourself.”

The moon said to God, “Master of the Universe, since I said a correct observation before You, why must I diminish myself?”

God said to her, “As compensation, go and rule both during the day along with the sun *and* during the night.”

She asked God, “What is the greatness of shining alongside the sun? What use is a candle in the middle of the day?”

God said to the moon, “Go, let the Jewish people count the days and years with you, and this will be your greatness.”

The moon said to God, “But the Jewish people will count with the sun as well, as it is impossible that they will not count seasons with it.”

God said to her, “Go, let the righteous men be named after you. Just as you are called the lesser light, *ha’katan*, there will be a *Ya’akov HaKatan* and a *David HaKatan*.

God saw that the moon was not comforted and said, “Bring an atonement offering for me since I diminished the moon.”¹

I find this exchange striking in a few ways. First, I was struck by the moon's bravery. The moon, a personified female character, has a full-on conversation with God. In this conversation, she stands up for herself, never backing down from what she believes in and continuing to push God to admit a fault. As they go through this exchange I found myself awestruck a second time when God admits that God was wrong. Even going so far as to seek forgiveness from the moon through an atonement sacrifice - the greatest admission of wrongness that a person can perform. On this Yom Kippur afternoon, as the sun moves ever closer to sundown, I want to focus on God's role in this narrative and the immense courage it takes to admit “I was wrong.”

As much as we might want it, *teshuvah*, or repentance, does not come easily. True *teshuvah* is hard. Our tradition teaches that there are five stages of repentance.

One: recognizing what you did wrong

Two: feeling genuine remorse

Three: refraining from sin and resolving not to repeat the transgression

Four: restitution where possible; undoing any damage done

And five: confession and obtaining forgiveness from the person who was wronged

Alone, each one of these aspects of *teshuvah* is not enough. For repentance to occur, all aspects of *teshuvah* need to occur together, and it is not an easy thing to do. Honestly, the most challenging part of *teshuvah* is admitting wrongdoing and being able to say, “I was wrong.” These three little words do not always come out of our mouths easily and cannot be said without

¹ Talmud Bavli Chullin 60b

heart. In order to ask for forgiveness, these words must be said with meaning and integrity.

Years ago, I had a roommate who was an avid runner. She always told me how amazing running is, and especially about the mythical runner's high. I believed her that there is such a thing as a runner's high. Well, I never found it, and I still have no idea what it feels like. Maybe some of you know what it is and after services you can tell me more about it. Running wasn't something I held on to, but something my friend told me has stuck with me to this day. She said the most challenging part of running is putting on your shoes. Or translated into non-running terms, the hardest part of starting something difficult is taking those first steps. Admitting we have done wrong is difficult, but it is essential to the process of *teshuvah*.

In the story, God is our role model for admitting wrongdoing and starting the process of repentance. However, God also role models how hard it can be to admit you are wrong. In the story, the moon rebukes God's suggestions *three* times before God admits to the moon God's wrongdoing. *Three times*, God tries to fix the situation and devise a solution instead of saying what I imagine the moon wants to hear: that she was wronged. Admitting wrongdoing is hard work.

Psychologist Dr. Mark Brooks explains why saying "I was wrong" can be challenging. He writes, "Admitting we are wrong is difficult because we attach our sense of self to an idea, cause, or group. When we feel that idea about the self, our identity, is threatened, our evolutionarily-linked fight, flight, or freeze survival mechanism becomes activated. We defend against being wrong and fight to be right."

Often, saying those three little words, "I am wrong," can feel like we are actually saying, "I am a bad person." Admitting we are wrong brings up feelings of self-worth and worthiness. However, thinking about the alternative and looking at the other side, the one who was wronged, puts things in perspective.

Another story says, “When God rebuked the moon, and she fell, some sparks fell from it into the sky, and these are the stars.” With this additional reading, the bright shining stars we see every night symbolize pain that the moon was not listened to and that God did not admit God was wrong right away.

Psychologist Dr. Brooks continues, “We must be flexible to learn and grow, and this necessitates that we recognize when we are wrong. We are in disharmony with the change that is inherent in this universe when we stubbornly, inflexibly refuse to accept when we are wrong. In turn, this disharmony, this fundamental incongruency, creates suffering for us and those around us. There is great, untapped power in the flexibility inherent within the admission: “I am wrong.”

His ideas are at the heart of *teshuvah*. It is difficult, but admitting we are wrong takes courage, flexibility, and trust in others. And if we can’t do that, we can cause others pain.

To do the hard work of saying, “I am wrong,” means we must do the hard work of being vulnerable, of opening ourselves up to the thought that even though we may have done something wrong, saying those words doesn’t make us bad people. In fact, it does the opposite. When we lean into the discomfort and open our hearts, we begin the process of *teshuvah*.

Professor Brene Brown explains, “Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren’t always comfortable, but they’re never weakness. I believe that you have to walk through vulnerability to get to courage, therefore...embrace the suck.” Repentance and vulnerability are hard, that’s why we have a whole holiday dedicated to this work! This work is hard but not impossible, and our sages, old and new, give us tools to help us along the way. The first step in *teshuvah* is starting.

As we are nearing the end of the High Holy days, it might seem late to be talking about *teshuvah*. Though the holiday is almost over, it doesn’t mean that the work of *teshuvah* is finished. Throughout the month of Elul, we took stock of our lives, where we are, and where we want to go. On Rosh

Hashanah, the gates open, and we prayed that we will be written in the Book of Life. Within the ten days that just passed between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have cast away our sins through *tashlich*. After that we focused on *teshuvah*, so that at the end of Yom Kippur, in a few hours, when the gates of repentance close, we start fresh in this year. But, just because Yom Kippur is nearing the end, doesn't mean that the work of *teshuvah* stops. There is a beautiful midrash that says:

Prayer is likened to a mikveh, and teshuvah (return/repentance) is likened to the sea. Just like a mikveh is sometimes open and other times closed, so too the gates of prayer are sometimes open and other times closed, but the sea is always open, so too with the gates of teshuvah, they are always open. (Eikhah Rabbah 3:15)

The internal work continues. Every day, we have an opportunity to practice saying, "I am wrong," and begin the teshuvah process. And hopefully, the more we practice, and the more we courageously open ourselves up to be vulnerable, the easier it will become. And if you need any guidance, go outside and look to the moon. She will always be there as a reminder.

Shanah Tova and Gmar Chatimah Tovah!