

Yom Kippur D'var 5765

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By *Shevach Lambert*

There's a famous story of a simple *hasid*, a pious Jew, who asked his teacher what was the difference between an ordinary *hasid* and a rebbe, a *tzaddik*. "Rebbe," he said, "I keep the commandments. I keep kosher. I am *shomer shabbos*. What makes you different from me? Aren't we all equal in the eyes of G-d?" In reply, the rebbe gave him an apple to eat. Puzzled, the *hasid* recited the blessing over the fruit and began to eat. The rebbe stopped him. "Why," he asked, "did you just recite that blessing?" What a question! thought the *hasid*. "Well, rebbe, I recited the blessing in order to eat the apple." "And that," said the rebbe, "is the difference between a *hasid* and a rebbe. You said the blessing in order to eat the apple. I would have eaten the apple in order to say the blessing. "

This story offers a simple, yet fundamental insight into what this season of teshuvah, of returning, is really all about. We often think of a blessing or a prayer as a means to an end: we say a prayer to ease us through a hard time, or connect our earthly aspirations with the hopes of heaven. We say the blessing in order to eat the apple. Our prayers are tied up with our wants. But when we focus on the greater meaning of teshuvah, we may find that our prayers have a purpose all their own; these means to an end can become ends in themselves. This is a day of reconnection and renewal. The Day of At-One-Ment is more than a time to seek forgiveness for our past transgressions. It offers us an opportunity to reconnect with our spiritual roots, to restore the wholeness of our existence through the holiness of the day. This is the day when we let go of the fundamentals of physical life, of eating and drinking, in order to focus on the fundamentals of our spiritual life. Today we concentrate on the purpose for which we have been granted this physical existence. We need this day. We need a way of changing our perspective. Too much of ordinary living is fragmented into a series of disconnected moments, devoid of any sense of meaning. We customize our lives to accommodate the market-place. We measure time like money; we have wasted, we have spent, we have lost, we have saved. We treat space as property, and are concerned with how much we own, rather than with how well we connect with what is simply given to us. Without some connection to a sense of higher purpose, it's easy to lapse into a disconnection from any sense of purpose. We need more than ever a perspective that transcends the immediacy of existence; we need to infuse our lives with a sense of the holy.

So: what is holy? Simply put, the holy is that which makes us whole. To be holy is not to ascend into some transcendental state, but it means instead to unite the earthly, disparate elements of our lives into a singularity, into a sense of purpose. We are created *b'tzelleM HaShem*, in the image of G-d, a mirror of the Creator, and all the Torah asks is that we live up to our potential, we recognize our purpose.

As Jews, we have been given a way of rising to this potential, of realizing this purpose. We have the mitzvot, the commandments. These are the maps we are given in our journey toward holiness, these are the tools with which we build our ladder to heaven. The Torah portion read this afternoon contains a catalogue of commandments, ranging from the injunction to revere one's parents to not cutting the edges of one's beard. These mitzvot touch on almost every aspect of our lives, from the highest spiritual aspiration to the lowest physical appreciation, for it is within the context of our everyday lives that holiness is achieved.

Perhaps you've seen that bumper sticker that urges us to "commit senseless acts of beauty and practice random kindness." A sweet sentiment; but for us Jews acts of beauty and kindness are incomplete unless motivated by holy intention. What is otherwise random and senseless becomes focused and conscious when performed as a mitzvah. Beauty and kindness assume a new dimension when G-d is at the center. Perhaps this is why we find so many of the commandments listed in this afternoon's Torah portion are accompanied by the refrain "*Ani HaShem*" – "I am the Eternal". It serves to remind us that G-d is the foundation of all meaning. Our actions, to be truly meaningful in the fullest sense of the term, must be grounded in the intention to fulfill G-d's purpose, rather than gratify our transitory sense of self-satisfaction.

At the heart of Torah, and at the heart of Jewish teaching, is the realization that reality is grounded in the spiritual. It is the spirit that gives meaning to and actualizes the physical. This is what makes a mitzvah a mitzvah, rather than just a meaningless act: with it we connect the realm of the physical with the spiritual. We are enabled to use G-d's gifts to gift the world with a G-d centered consciousness. We can eat the apple to satisfy physical hunger, and at the same time pronounce the blessing to achieve spiritual potential. Our mystical tradition teaches that within every action there is a divine spark, awaiting liberation. The conscious intention, or *kavannah*, with which we perform an act is the means by which we join that spark to the Holy Fire that powers reality. *Kavannah* converts a random act of senseless kindness into holy purpose, or an act of physical sustenance into one of spiritual significance. The mitzvah allows us to combine the routine activities of our lives with holy purpose, and in so doing we can create a new reality. Our very consciousness determines what is truly, and most meaningfully, 'real'.

This idea runs counter to our preconceived notions about the world. We normally assume that what is real is 'out there', and that consciousness is only the medium with which we encounter this reality. To speak of consciousness as actually defining reality sounds backward. Yet this is the fundamental cornerstone of Jewish thought, and it is being affirmed today in the world of modern scientific understanding.

Research into the behavior of sub-atomic particles suggests that all entities in the universe have a dual nature: one material and localized, or particle-like; and another non-material and non-localized, or wave-like. The universe, and every subsystem within it, is fully capable of being in these two mutually contradictory states simultaneously. The only means by which reality assumes one characteristic or the other is by taking a measurement of it. It appears that it is this act of measurement that actualizes the potential reality of a given situation. The thing itself is nothing until it is measured. This measurement, our definition, forces the universe to assume one definite state from among all the possible states it could be in prior to the act of measurement.

It is consciousness that makes it all real. Only free conscious observation can act to collapse the wave function of potentiality into the particular state that the universe assumes at any given moment. In the words of physicist John Wheeler, "observership, or acts of conscious perception, is the electricity that powers the genesis of reality."

Okay, I admit this over-simplifies some very complex theories, nor can one easily draw conclusions about the macrocosmic from the microcosmic. The point I want to make is that just as in quantum physics the act of conscious measurement determines the nature of reality in a given instant, so too does *kavannah*, or G-d centered conscious intention, infuse a given act of random kindness with the fullness of divine reality.

In Hebrew, we can define this reality by the word *olam*. *Olam* can refer to either space or time; it can mean 'world', or 'forever'; it can mean both. It's an ideal word to describe the Einsteinian view of reality as a space/time continuum. *Olam* is spelled *ayin, lamed, vav, mem*. Some Jewish mystics have seen in each letter an allusion to the foundation of reality. *Ayin*, which literally means 'eye', alludes to the Divine Vision from which the wholeness of existence issues forth; "And G-d saw all that G-d made; and see, it was very good."

The next letter in *olam* is *lamed*, which denotes direction, goal, or purpose; so we say *l shanah tovah*; toward a good year. The *lamed* suggests that what happens in the universe is not the result of random chance or accident, but is instead the result of purposeful direction. We may not understand the purpose, any more than our friends in Florida can currently understand the long term ecological benefits of a hurricane, but the purpose is there.

The next letter in *olam* is *vav*, which is also the third letter of the Divine Name. It is the letter of connection, the conduit by which the vision – the *ayin*, and the purpose – *lamed*, of Creation are channeled into the final letter, the *mem*. *Mem* begins and ends both *meyyim* – water, and *makom* – place. Life begins in the primordial waters, the *meyyim*, and grows in intention and purpose, culminating in the *Makom*, the Place where G-d's vision for reality is reflected back to the Creator, in the form of human consciousness.

The four Hebrew letters that make up the word *olam* can thus allude to the holy ground of being, the real nature of reality. Yet if we were to remove one of these letters -the letter *vav*, the letter of connection, and the one letter also included in the Divine Name, we are left with the word *olum*, which in Biblical Hebrew means hidden. Without this connection to Divine vision and purpose, reality is hidden; it is only a potential, not an actual state of being. It is up to us to provide the *vav*, the connecting letter. Human consciousness is the means by which we make this connection; it is the way we have of bringing the world's potential into actual realization. And that which is most real is that which is holy. Holiness occurs when reality is aligned with 'G-d's vision and purpose. Thus we as Jews are given the mitzvot -the commandments, the connections with which we actualize the hidden holiness of reality.

To understand this better, I like to use by way of analogy the sefer Torah itself. You know that when our beautiful b'nai mitzvah students chant from this scroll, all they are reading are the consonants -the black letters on white parchment. The vowels, the breathed sounds which make words out of the consonants, are not part of the parchment. They must be added by the reader. Without the added breath of the reader, without our *neshimah*, or soul-breath, the consonants remain but lifeless black marks on the page. Only when we add the vowels, our vocalized breath, does the Torah itself come alive. And each individual reader, no matter how faithfully they adhere to the proper trope, reads the Torah in a unique manner, because each voice is unique. To be understood, to teach, indeed, to be wholly real, the Torah requires our participation. We must add the connection.

In this sense, chanting from the sefer Torah is the essence of a mitzvah -just as we add our breath to the black marks on parchment to enliven a holy message, so do we add our kavannah, our conscious intention, to an ordinary act of eating, speaking, or involvement with the world in order to create an act of holiness.

The very word mitzvah itself alludes to this. *Mitzvah* is spelled *mem, tzade, vav, heh*. The first letter, *mem*, as we just learned, stands for water/place -the physical ground of existence. The last letter is *heh*,

a letter used twice in the Divine Name – it is the spiritual ground of existence. The two middle letters, *tzade* and *vav*, are letters of connection: *tzade* means fishhook, a physical connection. *Vav*, again, is the Divine letter, the spiritual connection. Together these two middle letters unite the *mem* with the *heh* – the letter of the Divine. *Mitzvah* then alludes to the means we have of uniting the physical ground of existence with its spiritual purpose.

Today we enact the one mitzvah which serves as a paradigm of all the *mitzvot*. This is *teshuvah*, repentance, or returning. *Teshuvah* exemplifies the union of the spiritual with the physical, for with it we have the opportunity to transform our most precious possession – our lives – into alignment with G-d's purpose for that life.

True repentance involves more than feeling sorry for what we have done, or failed to do. It requires us to really look at the inner drives and motives that lead us to act the way we do. To do true *teshuvah* means that we must look at our lives not as a random series of disconnected events, but as a process fulfilling a purpose. *Teshuvah* asks us to examine our lives in light of our purpose, to see how far from the center of the world we have wandered, and allows us to reconnect with the ground of our being.

Our sages taught that *teshuvah* was created prior to Creation itself. Now what is meant by that? Perhaps our science lesson applies. Modern physics suggests that only free conscious measurement actually determines reality. Now a free-willed decision, in order to be truly free, must be unconstrained by the laws of nature or of physics. If the universe does contain a free will, then this free will must operate outside the determinism of classical physics and outside the randomness of quantum physics. Free will is a unique entity in the universe.

Now we can perhaps understand why our sages placed *teshuvah* outside the realm of Creation, and also understand what was meant when they said "all is in heaven, except the fear of Heaven." For *teshuvah*, or repentance, to be wholly real, it must be the result of free conscious decision to turn from the path we are on and to remake our lives anew. Just as a forced confession has no validity in a court of law, insincere repentance has no standing before the heavenly court.

Teshuvah as defined by the Rambam, Maimonides, requires three basic steps, which Rabbi Yitz Greenberg calls the 3 R's of Repentance: regret, rejection, and resolution. When we regret, we identify and articulate the harmful behavior patterns that have led us astray from the path of holiness and wholeness. The second step is rejection, where we actively let go of the emotional, physical, or spiritual baggage that has hampered our progress. Third is resolution, in which we seek to recondition these past patterns into a new behavior for the future.

In Rabbi Greenberg's words, "regret deals with the past, nullifying conditioning by repelling it. Rejection deals with the present, not doing the sin keeps the present free and clear. Resolution deals with the future, preventing sin from coming into life again. Only when all three dimensions are in place will the full process of repentance occur."

The Talmud says that when a sinner repents out of a loving desire to do the will of her Creator, all of her or his past sins are accounted as virtues. This is not to say that the past is forgotten, or that the pain and hurt of the sin are wiped away, but it does say that the context in which the reality of the sin is understood has changed. Before, your sins placed you at a distance from G-d; with the power of true repentance, those same sins now compel you to seek G-d's presence. The measurement has changed; consciousness has intervened, reality is reborn.

I'm not talking earthquakes here. True *teshuvah* can be, but doesn't have to be, a soul-shaking event. *Teshuvah* means to recognize the true value of your existence, as it is seen by G-d. It involves the realization that your life has cosmic repercussions, and that no single action you undertake is devoid of meaning. It's what's behind all those "ah ha!" moments we've all had, when suddenly what has seemed random or purposeless acquires new meaning and significance. The context has changed, the measurement is new. It all somehow fits together. We become vaguely aware of a higher reality, of a deeper meaning behind all that is. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has suggested that such aha! moments even have their own theme song: (Twilight Zone).

True *teshuvah* allows us to invest the world with meaning. The world need no longer seem alien, strange, or indifferent to our existence. It is rather alive, involved, part of us. *Teshuvah* requires a fundamental transformation of consciousness.

It is this transformation of consciousness is what I think is the point of one of the central prayers of these Days of Awe, the *U'Netanah Tokef*. This prayer is largely a listing of all the circumstances of life that are seemingly beyond our control. We ask *mi yih yeh, u-mi yamut*, who will live and who will die, *mi v'kitzo u-mi lo v'kitzo*, who in their time and who before their time, who will perish in fire, floods, or earthquakes? It seems that in this prayer all the arbitrariness and indifference of the world is portrayed before us. Yet we climax this prayer with the proclamation that *u-Teshuvah, u-Tefillah, u-Tzedakah ma averim et ro 'ah ha 'gezarah*: repentance, prayer, and acts of righteousness avert the severity of the decree. What I think this means is that through repentance, prayer, and righteousness we do not change the world as it is; we transform our relationship to it. We create a new measurement. As Rabbi Deborah Lipstadt writes, "How we live our lives, relate to one another, function as part of the community ... and practice *teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah* ... helps determine how we handle that which is out of our control." *Teshuvah* represents a kind of knowledge that allows us control, not over the world, but control over our responsiveness to that world. And let's face it: despite all the sound and fury, the only real control we ever have is over ourselves.

So how can we achieve a true sense of *Teshuvah*? How can we elevate our consciousness to partake of the Divine, to make the connection, to add the *vav*? Can it be done in a single day like today, or even in a single season? How can we elevate mere regret for past actions into a true act of turning, of renewal?

Perhaps the map that is the Jewish calendar can provide some direction. We begin our festival year with Passover, which celebrates our birth as a people beholden to G-d. We conclude the festival year with Purim, which celebrates our ability to control our own destiny. The Haggadah, the Passover narrative of our turning from slavery into freedom, does not mention the name of the chief human actor in this drama, Moses. By the end of the year, the Megillah, which depicts the events of Purim, does not mention the name of G-d. It is as if over the course of a year's turning we have assumed G-d's role. We have grown up. It is not that G-d has been displaced, but rather that we have grown into our rightful role as *b'tzellel HaShem*, the image of G-d in the realm of material existence. We have made a full turning, a complete *teshuvah*.

Across the span of a year we have many opportunities to affect this turning. Every Friday evening we can invest both space and time with the spirit of sanctity by ushering the Shabbos; not just as a day off from the work week but as a day devoted to cultivating the sense of the sacred. Every Shabbos is a sort of Day of At-One-Ment.

As we journey through the year, from liberation at Pesach through revelation on Shavuot to redemption on Sukkot, we have the opportunity to complete a bit more of our turning, of completing our *teshuvah*. Let us not treat these sacred times as meaningless seasonal signposts, but as guideposts leading us toward an ever-deepening sense of ourselves as holy, as *vav* connectors, realizing the hidden potential of space and time to be vehicles of holiness. This is really what *teshuvah* is all about; that we take ourselves and our Jewishness seriously. We are asked to reach beyond the fragments of existence and connect to the whole of reality by means of the holy. *Teshuvah* offers us a new consciousness with which to measure, and thus determine, reality.

Yet ultimately, I think, it is primarily only through means of each other can we fully realize the potential of holiness. Only in our everyday encounters with a fellow human being have we the opportunity to measure our progress to our fullest potential. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that no encounter with another person lacks significance. To paraphrase Martin Buber, "The people we live with or meet with ... the materials we shape, the tools we use, they all contain a mysterious spiritual substance which depends on us and on our full conscious intention for helping it toward its pure form, its perfection" – its proper place within the whole of holiness. If we ignore this potential for connection that is given to us in our everyday encounters with each other, if we focus only on what's in it for ourselves, we diminish our ability to lead a fully realized existence. We say the blessing in order to eat the apple.

This is why we gather in community to effect atonement, for *teshuvah* cannot be carried out in isolation. Our prayers are phrased in the plural, because our repentance is realized in the communal. How we treat each other is the ultimate test of how we have changed our reality. It tells us whether or not we have learned to eat the apple in order to say the blessing.

And so we concluded our morning's Torah reading with a haftarah from Isaiah, which sets the standards by which G-d measures our new born sense of reality. With these words can we too measure how far we have come, how effective a *vav* connector we are, and how far we must yet go, to make our lives vehicles of wholeness, of holiness:

Is this not the fast I have chosen?
To loose the fetters of wickedness,
To undo the bonds of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free?
Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry,
And that you bring the poor that are cast out into your house?
And that you not hide yourself from your own flesh.
Then shall your light break forth as morning,
And your healing shall speedily spring forth,
And your righteousness shall go before you.

G'mar hativah tovah tikteivu -may we all be sealed in the book of righteousness this year.