

Husah al Amalakh:

Stage Three in the Journey to Repentance -- Relationship

Yom Kippur 5778 – Beth Tikvah Congregation

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I wish I could really sing, because if I could, I'd sing the opening lines of the brilliant Israeli artist Yonatan Razel's brand new song, Poteach Lev, "Opening the Heart." Instead, I'll just say some the words. *Tov, ani mayveen, ani nikhna, ani rotzeh akheret. Ani poteakh lev le-shinui /So I understand, I surrender, I want things to be different, I'm opening my heart to change /ki im mayim yekholim leshanot et ha-even, az ha-lev yeepatakh ve-yitrapeh/if water can change the stone, then the heart can open and heal.*

How do we change ourselves? Is it even possible to change ourselves, really, on a fundamental level? Put another way, is Razel correct that our hearts can indeed open and heal? While insisting that they can, he acknowledges the difficulty – it can be done, but is like water altering a stone! Sure, there are a few biblical verses to rely

on...*avanim shakhaku mayim*/the waters wear away the stones, says Job...but that kind of erosion takes a long, long time!

On Rosh Ha-Shanah I explored the first two stages of what I believe are four essential paths to self-transformation. In order to change ourselves, we must first cultivate a sense of homelessness or exile, achieved by physically changing our location (*shinui makom*), but more reasonably, from confronting how we are in exile from our deepest, most authentic and sacred inner selves. We then need to nurture a sense of vulnerability, of being exposed and abandoned, before we can repair our relationships with others and with God. Tonight, on Yom Kippur 5778, I want to explore the **third** stage on the path to change: opening our hearts to the healing possibility of relationships. *Teshuvah*, repentance and repair, is not achieved alone, in isolation from others, but by building bonds of connection to our fellow human beings, and to the Divine. In other words, real self-transformation is a social process, achieved in relationship to others, and to The Other.

There are worse places to begin an exploration of this idea than in the American West...or rather, Hollywood's version of the American West (remember, I'm from Hollywood!) At their best, the movies have used the vast landscapes of the West to reflect on certain elemental human tensions: the rugged, gun-slinging individual struggling against a harsh natural world, or rebelling against the constraints and conventions of settled, urban civilization; the open prairies and plentiful resources as a new, Eden-like paradise vs. the guilty conscience of plunder, environmental degradation, and the genocide of indigenous native Americans.

Guilty conscience? The individual rebelling against social norms and conventions? A desire to return to an Eden of open horizons and fresh starts in life? Sounds like Yom Kippur to me! I'm being facetious, of course, but only slightly, because I'd like to use a Hollywood Western to enter into a reflection on what it means to change ourselves through relationships. With a title perversely appropriate for this holiday, "Unforgiven" was directed by Clint Eastwood and released in 1992 to

great acclaim and many honors, including an Academy Award for best picture. Considered by a number of critics to be the finest film of the last decade of the twentieth century (and by some to be one of the greatest Westerns ever made), “Unforgiven” is an extended cinematic reflection on *teshuvah*, on the attempt (emphasis on attempt) to turn away from wretched behavior in the past and remake oneself into a good and decent person. For those who haven’t seen it, here’s a quick plot summary:

In the town of Big Whisky, Wyoming (for some reason bad things seem to always happen in Wyoming) a brutal Sheriff called 'Little Bill' (played by Gene Hackman) attempts to keep order, which he manages to do in a thuggish, heavy-handed way. As the movie begins, a prostitute named Delilah complains bitterly to Little Bill that she had been humiliated and seriously injured by two local cowboys who cut up her face, scarring her physically and endangering her ability to make a living. Little Bill attempts to make things right, but dissatisfied with his form of justice and outraged by Delilah’s fate, her fellow prostitutes come together to raise funds in order to put a bounty on the heads of the

two cowboys, and this bounty attracts an aging killer named William Munny (played by Eastwood himself). Munny had been a vicious gunfighter many years before, but managed to completely transform himself, changing for the sake of his young wife, who forgave him for the many sins he had committed in his past. He became a respectable and stable hog farmer and raised two young children with his wife. However, his wife dies, leaving him with the children and a struggling little farm. To make matters worse, he's a pretty bad hog farmer, and barely manages to eke out a living. When he hears about the bounty placed on the lives of the two young cowboys, he hesitates to go after them because he knows that his departed wife would have been utterly opposed to it. But faced with his failing farm, his children's needs, and the call of his former murderous self, he rides off to kill one more time.

That's pretty much it – the entire movie traces William Munney's losing struggle with repentance as he backslides, succumbing to the violent ways of his previous self. Part of what makes the movie powerful is its anti-heroic plot line – Delilah herself had actually been satisfied

with Little Bill's attempt to right the wrong done to her, and is horrified by the prospect of the two cowboys being murdered on her behalf. The two of them are depicted as immature and irresponsible fools, but not as brutal thugs; they deserve to be brought to justice and punished, but certainly not to be killed. And the culminating act of vengeance is depicted as horrible, soul-destroying violence rather than as cathartic revenge. William Munney's character ends up where he had started before marrying and raising a family... a violent killer, "unforgiven."

This film has something important to teach us about how difficult it is to really transform who we are; Munney had been bound to a world of moral conduct by his wife's forgiveness and loving presence; after her death, the bonds of ethical responsibility dissolved and he quickly reverted to his previous self. In this view, authentic and lasting change depends on the context in which we find ourselves, on the influence of our family, friends and community.

Is this true? If we want we want to overcome damaging habits and behaviors that hurt others, or even if we simply seek to become kinder or

more patient people, can't we just resolve to change? Isn't it a question of individual decision making, of free will?

There is indeed an important strand of Jewish religious thought that insists that the individual is not only capable of self-transformation, but obligated to do so. It should come as no surprise that the great medieval rationalist philosopher Maimonides (Rambam) is our tradition's most important advocate of this belief. His "Laws of Repentance"/*Hilkhot Teshuvah*, have become the standard, widely accepted framework for understanding the process of repentance. He writes: "What constitutes teshuvah? A sinner should abandon her sins and remove them from her thoughts, resolving (*ve-yigmor be-libo*) never to commit them again...he must verbally confess and state these matters which he has resolved in his heart." (Chapter 2, *Halakhah* 2). For Rambam, changing ourselves is fairly straightforward (which is not to say it's easy!): We make a decision as individuals, and act upon it. The test is if we find ourselves in the same situation again and pass the test. To be clear: Rambam is not just talking about tweaking annoying habits

or working on less-than-admirable personality quirks; he insists that the total transformation of the self is possible, as a conscious, freely made choice. Rambam insists that each human being is capable of proclaiming (in his words): “I am a different person, and not the same one who sinned/*ani akheyr ve-eyni oto ha-ish she-asah otan ha-ma’asim.*” I think that’s why, in his Laws of Repentance, he digresses from the process of *teshuvah* into the seemingly abstract question of free will, asserting: “Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn herself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is hers. If he desires to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his.” (Chapter 5, *Halakhah* 1). However, this is no digression – it’s the foundation of Maimonides’ entire world view! Each of us is capable of choosing who we want to become, and are held accountable by God for those choices. Full stop (or as they say in Hebrew, *sof pasuk*).

Now I have to say, as an American, immersed in a culture of non-apology apologies (“I’m sorry if anyone was offended”...as if it’s the fault of the person who took offense!) and seemingly endless evasions of

responsibility or accountability (“I’m stepping down from this position in order to spend more time with my family.” ...right.), as a citizen of a country in which bankers who almost destroyed the world economy not only evade jail sentences but are richer than ever ...Rambam’s position of individual free will and radical accountability for our choices is incredibly refreshing, bracing even. I should add that for those of us who are struggling with some of our personal demons and bad habits, it’s also very compelling because it offers a hopeful vision of what’s possible if only our resolve is strong enough; with hard work, we are capable of reshaping ourselves into new people.

There’s only one problem: I’m not sure Rambam is right. I really am not sure he’s right! Are we really creatures of our design, subject to our own free will? In many ways, the answer may be yes. But given what we know about the myriad forces and influences that shape us as people, there is reason for skepticism. Think about the imprint that our parents, siblings, various peer groups, the popular culture in which we’re immersed, our socio-economic class, and the hard-wiring in our brains

that we inherited, all of this, has had on our characters, our personalities. Think about how difficult it is for someone who grew up with abusive parents to escape from that shadow and transcend the horror of a violent upbringing. Or what about a soldier suffering from terrible post-traumatic stress disorder, struggling just to get through each day? In these cases and many others, radical self-transformation is not merely a question of will, of resolve. We are vastly complex creatures, the products of countless influences, some conscious and knowable, others unconscious and mysterious.

I hasten to say that this does not mean that when a person accused of crime faces a jury, he or she need simply proclaim, “What can I say? I had a terrible upbringing, and that’s why I did it!” To acknowledge that I am not the sole fashioner of my own character does not mean that I’m therefore absolved of responsibility for my actions. But it does mean that those actions may take on a measure of nuance, even pathos...and on occasion arouse compassion.

Still, there is another view of repentance in that tradition that serves as kind of “counter-narrative” to Rambam’s and that, I believe, offers a more balanced and realistic path toward genuine *teshuvah*, turning to our better selves. This alternative voice insists that we are who we are because of our relationship with God, and with other people. It appears repeatedly in the liturgy of Yom Kippur contained in the Makhzor. For example, God shapes us “like clay in the hand of the potter, iron in the hand of a blacksmith, silver in the hand of a smelter.” God shapes us. And then there’s the religious poem *Ha-Neshama Lakh* (p. 225), which describes human beings as God’s handiwork -- our soul and body are fashioned by the Holy One. And then the poet demands...*Khusah al amalakh*, God, have compassion on the souls and bodies **you’ve created!**

I want to suggest that the “spiritual energy” behind these prayers is about acknowledging that we aren’t alone in the *heshbon ha-nefesh*/spiritual self-accounting we’re engaged in today; Master of the Universe plays a role in who we are and who we’ve become, and

therefore bears some of the responsibility for our actions. The prophet Ezekiel famously declares: “I, God, will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh.” As if to say...it’s not all our fault! We are not exclusively to blame for our shortcomings and may need help in reshaping my heart of stone into a heart of flesh. *Khusah al amalakh*: have compassion, God, on your handiwork – because **you** made me, and have a role in all of this!

Now, even if you don’t happen to believe in a God who shapes us, I’m convinced that the point is the same: We are finite, limited creatures, bound by a million connections, influences and external forces into a web we call “the self.” Who we are is as much a result of those social forces as of our own will. For believers, God plays an important role in shaping us, but not the only one. That’s why we’re taught in Pirkei Avot: “*harkhek mi-shakhen ra, ve-al titkhaber la-rashah*/keep far from a bad neighbor, do not associate with a bad person,” and the same teaching is repeated every morning in *Birkhot Ha-Shakhar*, the early morning blessings. The environment in which we were brought up and in which

we now surround ourselves is as important in shaping our character and behavior as our resolve, our rational decision-making.

If that's the case, I want to return to the question with which I began: How do we change ourselves? Is it even possible to change ourselves, really, on a fundamental level? To answer those questions, I will end with a film, just as I began with one. Remember, in "Unforgiven," William Munney's struggle to remake himself, to do *teshuvah*, as we might put it, fails after he loses the most powerful positive influence in his life, his wife. There's another movie I love, whose setting couldn't be more far removed from the cowboys of the Old West. It's called "Paris, j'taime"/I love you, Paris." Released in 2006, it consists of 20 five-minute films, each created by a different director and each commenting on some aspect of contemporary Paris. The one I'd like to share with you is called "Bastille" by Isabel Coixet. A unnamed man in his early fifties is sitting in a restaurant, waiting for his wife of many years. As he waits, we hear a voice-over; it his him, telling us that between the entre and dessert, he will tell her that he no

longer loves her and is leaving her for another woman, ending the marriage. He shares with the audience certain aspects of their life together that had grown tiresome or annoying, and then his wife walks into the restaurant. No sooner does she sit down then she begins to weep. The man thinks his wife knows what's coming, but he quickly discovers that he's wrong – she has just come from her doctor's office, where she's been diagnosed with terminal leukemia. She tells him that she only has a few months to live. He immediately decides to devote himself to her care, and he is true to his word. He reads to her, brings her her favorite foods, and so forth...and through these small acts of devotion, he falls in love with her again. As the narrator puts it, "By acting like a man in love, I became a man in love again." We're told that when she died in his arms, he never recovered.

There are a number of lessons to be drawn from this beautiful little film, but what I learn from is that yes, we can change ourselves, it is indeed possible to undergo profound transformation through *teshuvah*. The husband in the film is indeed transformed, but it's not an isolated

act of will or resolve. It emerges gradually, in relationship with another, through small acts of caring and compassion. To paraphrase, by acting like a better person, he became a better person. But he was only able to do so in relationship with another. The thin, delicate webs of interaction with his wife bound him to her again in bonds of love, and sustained his entry into a moral, albeit sorrowful, life. His heart of stone was replaced by a heart of flesh.

This understanding of teshuvah offers us both comfort and consolation, as well as ambiguity and uncertainty. Once we acknowledge that we don't simply remake ourselves as an exercise of free will, we are able to have compassion on ourselves and perhaps even a measure of self-acceptance as we struggle to improve. On the other hand, if who we are depends on forces beyond our control, including other people, we are forced to admit that, well, some things are beyond our control! William Munney's *teshuvah* depended on a relationship – when it ended, he reverted to his old self. The husband's *teshuvah* in the short French film also depended on a relationship – but in this case, his

wife's death doesn't mark the end of transformation into a better person, but the beginning. We can't know for certain if our own efforts to replace our heart of stone with heart of flesh will succeed. And that is why we plead: *Khusah al amalakh*: have compassion, God, on your handiwork.

G'mar hatimah tovah!