

“Questions That Can Make or Unmake a Life”: Stage Four on the Path to *Teshuvah*: Reorientation

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It begins, as do many important things in life, with gefilte fish. The great architect Frank Gehry, apparently sees gefilte fish wherever he looks. Most of his famous works, including the enormous copper fish sculpture at the Olympic Village in Barcelona, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (also in Spain), and Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, can be traced back to two famous origin stories. As legend has it, in 1983 Gehry was experimenting with a plastic laminate called ColorCore when he dropped a piece on the ground, shattering it. He noticed that the fragments resembled fish scales and decided to make a lamp in the shape of a fish, spawning (so to speak) his first in a series of such lamps, which in turn inspired his architectural designs. But why the interest in fish scales in the first place? Here's the second origin story: Gehry was born Frank Goldberg in Toronto to Polish-Jewish

parents, and he has often told the story of how he was fascinated by the carp his grandmother would keep in the bathtub right before Jewish holidays, turning it into gefilte fish. During his adolescence, his parents moved to the remote town of Timmins in Northeastern Ontario. The other kids there heard about his grandmother's distinctive culinary tradition and taunted him relentlessly ("fishhead," "fisheater," etc.). So traumatic was the experience that Gehry fled from his Jewish identity as an adult, not long after his family moved to Southern California, a choice epitomized by his decision to change his surname from Golberg to Gehry at the age of 25. Some thirty years later, however, he began speaking and reflecting openly about his Jewish background, and as odd as it may sound, this new-found interest expressed itself through creative experimentation with fish forms, which of course were rooted in childhood memories. The path from gefilte fish to the shimmering, scale-like architectural wonders of Gehry's buildings is indirect...but the dots do indeed connect; Gehry managed to realize his artistic vision by finding a way to impose the form of

those shiny scales on to the hard surfaces of steel and concrete. I don't know it to be true, but I'd like to think that at his creative peak, the great architect viewed the world through the lens of his grandmother's carp, seeing gefilte fish everywhere he looked.

What's striking to me about the "origin story" of Gehry's architectural style isn't the particulars (though I'm as fond of gefilte fish as the next person), but rather the notion that one can see the world through a particular paradigm, whether a deeply rooted memory or a great passion or concern, and use art to bring that paradigm to expression. I'd like to draw upon Gehry's "carp experience" as the inspiration for our own lives by suggesting that we too can view the world through a particular lens, in this case not one of fond or upsetting memories, but rather one we've inherited from the Jewish religious tradition for this time and this place: our paradigm is *teshuvah*. Gehry was able to transform his memories into brilliantly innovative architectural designs; I want to claim that by seeing the world through the paradigm of *teshuvah*, we can turn our lives into creative endeavors, into works of art.

I mean something very specific by *Teshuvah*. It is classically understood as a **process**, a path by which we correct relationships with others, and with God. Maimonides gives this process its most well-known formulation, which we've discussed before: acknowledge wrong-doing, offer a verbal confession, feel remorse, and resolve never to commit the transgression again. The most common English translation of this word is of course repentance, which has its origins in feelings of contrition and regret.

There is another way to translate it, though, an understanding of the word that is more faithful to the spirit of Hebrew *teshuvah*, and this is, turning or returning, *la-shuv*. Here, the best translation is to **re-orient oneself** – to re-adjust or re-align in relationship to something else in a new way. “Orient” originally meant to build a structure (or even bury a body!) toward the east, but eventually came to mean turning toward a specific point or direction, and **re-orient** meant to “reset” one’s course, again, in relationship to something else. Here, *teshuvah* is less a process than a **stance**, a position in the world, a correcting of one’s course. It’s in this sense

that I believe that the *aseret yemei teshuvah* and Yom Kippur in particular give us the chance to see the world through the lens of *teshuvah*, of reorienting ourselves in the world. And so, after exploring the three previous stages of self-transformation – homelessness, vulnerability, and relationship – we come to the fourth and final stage: re-orientation. Understood in this way, *teshuvah-as-reorientation* provides a way to experience and interpret the world (a la Gehry)...and also, as we shall see, holds out the hope of not only changing ourselves but the larger society in which we live.

My wife Judith is constitutionally incapable of watching dark, disturbing, or violent films and television shows. Even the highest quality programming, such as “The Wire,” “Breaking Bad,” or “Deadwood” really upsets her, and is therefore off limits. You might think that this would lead to low-level marital conflict over what to watch together, but the fact is that I’m on the same page as

Judith: seriously violent images really get to me; they insinuate themselves into my memory and won't let go. Even one of my favorite movies, *The Godfather*, still disturbs my sleep with images of horses and piano wire (*ha-mayvin yavin!*). So what can we watch? What brings Judith and me together in front of the computer screen (we don't own a television) is British costume dramas, those produced by Masterpiece Theater, the BBC, and so forth, the frillier the costumes, the fancier the accents, the better...we watch so many of them, and enjoy them so much, that I sometimes start to speak like a landed English aristocrat (I need to go = "I must away"; that's amazing = "I am all astonishment").

The very best costume drama ever produced by our British cousins is, in my view, the 1995 production of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," starring Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy. Over a year ago, Judith and I were watching the six-part series for the second time. As the show concluded happily with Mr. Darcy and Lizzie kissing after getting married, it hit me like a thunderbolt: it is possible to interpret the entire story as a parable about *teshuvah!*

The primary transgression of each of the main protagonists, Lizzie Bennet and Mr. Darcy, is to make an overly quick and grossly inaccurate judgment of one other. This is each character's central flaw. I'm tempted to think that Jane Austen was aware of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perakhyah's teaching in the Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers that one should judge every person favorably, that is, give them the benefit of the doubt, or Hillel's view that one shouldn't judge another unless you've stood in his or her place. Wishful thinking, I'm sure, but those lessons are nonetheless embedded in her great novel.

As the story develops, Lizzie and Darcy come to realize how wrong their pre-judgments had been, how inaccurate the stories they had told themselves about the other had been; at the end, each admits his or her respective error and forgives the other. The story is not merely a delightful tale of manners and love in early nineteenth century England, but a serious meditation on the nature of false judgment, remorse, and true forgiveness. Note that's it **not** a straightforward, rational process of recognition, confession, and

improved behavior, a la the Rambam. Instead, *Pride and Prejudice* is an enormously emotional depiction, through stops and starts and considerable resistance on the part of several main characters, of a change of course, a new way of being in the world, in sum, a complete re-orientation in which Lizzie and Mr. Darcy re-orient themselves away from suspicion and harsh prejudgment and toward self-awareness and open-heartedness. The result is reconciliation, forgiveness, and love. So one meaningful way of understanding one of the greatest of all nineteenth century novels (or at least, watching it's dramatization on t.v.!) is through the paradigm of *teshuvah-as-reorientation*. The same can be said for other novels, film, art, poetry...or our own lives, the family dramas in which we're all the main protagonists.

Most of the emphasis of these ten days of teshuvah have been on heshbon ha-nefesh, on taking account of our individual souls. Those souls might be shaped by a variety of factors, as I mentioned last night, but still...the focus is on how we can change ourselves.

From the Talmudic period on, our sages recognized that there was also a place for communal, collective teshuvah. They called this *Teshuvat Ha-Rabim* (discussion in Babylonian Talmud Rosh Ha-Shanah 16a-17b). We are held, in a real sense, responsible for the fate of the world. In the tractate on Shabbat (54a) the rabbis teach that whoever can prevent one's household from committing a transgression but does not is considered liable. The same is true of fellow residents of a town or city, and astonishingly, of the entire world. Their transgressions become our own. So what is the "world transgression" that calls for *teshuvah* in the sense of re-orientation? In my view, it is the rapid heating of the earth from the consumption of fossil fuels, because this is truly planetary question that requires nothing less than a total reimagining of how we inhabit this planet, not just in the realm of economics but also in moral, social and spiritual terms. Here, *teshuvah* is instructive not just in feeling remorse and confessing to how we individually and collectively waste resources and impose carbon imprints (though there's room for that and I for one have a lot of work to do). Rather

it goes back to that word again, to re-adjust or re-align ourselves in a fundamental way. There are a number of Jewish thinkers we could turn to who offer profound critiques of certain aspects of modernity and our slavish worship of technology and consumption at the expense of nature. But given the timeliness of his recent encyclical on the crisis of global warming, published in 2015, I offer in an ecumenical spirit the thought of Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio, otherwise known as Pope Francis. (side note: I may be the only rabbi mentioning a papal encyclical on Yom Kippur! In fact, his work deserves a serious Jewish response).

The Encyclical first describes the urgency of the warming crisis and then offers a beautiful reading of Jewish and Christian religious texts that call for a response to the problem. But the most compelling part of the essay, and the one most appropriate to the theme of *teshuvah*, is his attempt to get “underneath” human damage to the earth’s atmosphere in order to uncover and understand the heart of the problem. For Pope Francis, our behavior is rooted in a consumerist and technocratic orientation

toward the planet's resources; the Pope proposes re-orientation – he doesn't use the word itself, but it's clearly *teshuvah* in the way I've been describing it.

Here we see that in its aim of turning ourselves around, of opening a crack in the wall of reality as it is in order to refashion that reality into the world we seek, *teshuvah* pushes us past feelings of isolation and helplessness in the face of global crises toward a conviction that re-alignment, re-orientation, is not only possible but essential.

And that leads us back to where we started: gefilte fish. Okay, not to actual gefilte fish, but to the idea that just as a great architect was able to use see the world through the lens of his childhood memories, and use art to express those memories, we too can draw upon the radical reorientation that lies at the heart of Yom Kippur to understand the literature we read, the global dilemmas that confront us, or the greatest of all mysteries – the hidden recesses of our own souls. Indeed, *teshuvah-as-reorientation* can help each of us to fashion our lives into works of

art. The great Irish poet David Whyte underlines the urgency of this task, pushing us to respond to the call of re-orientation, to the call of *teshuvah*:

Sometimes

by David Whyte

Sometimes if you move carefully through the forest
breathing like the ones in the old stories
who could cross a shimmering bed of dry leaves without a sound,
you come to a place where the only task
is to trouble you with tiny but frightening requests
conceived out of nowhere but in this place beginning to lead
everywhere.

Requests to stop what you are doing right now,
and to stop what you are becoming while you do it,
questions that can make or unmake a life,
questions that have patiently waited for you,
questions that have no right to go away.

Le-Shanah Tovah Teikhateimu – may we all sealed for a good year.

