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Nehar Shalom

Too Beautiful To Miss: The Messy and Redemptive Process of Making Teshuva

Shana tova.

It's an honor to stand before all of you tonight with the opportunity to share a few words of Torah. Kol nidrei is the yartzeit of my grandfather Moshe, who I am named for. My mother and grandmother are both here tonight, and I am grateful that we get to be held in this space with all of you. I would like to share these thoughts in his memory.

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At her Denver-based church, named the House of All Sinners and Saints, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber hosts Welcome brunches for new members of her congregation. I learned about this listening to an interview with Bolz-Weber on the podcast *On Being*, which I highly recommend. Over pastries and coffee, the pastor welcomes and orients congregants to the community. Part of this process, for Bolz-Weber, is giving a warning to her new congregants: "At some point I will disappoint you or the church will let you down" she tells them, "It's not a question of *if*, it's a question of *when*." For this pastor, it is crucial that her congregants know, immediately, that church is a place where people will get hurt, because church is full of human beings, and the human enterprise is inevitably a messy one. Bolz-Weber continues: "Please decide on this side of that happening, that after it happens you will still stick around. Because if you leave, you will miss the ways that God... comes in and fills the cracks of our brokenness. And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it."¹

Bolz-Weber is describing a value that the Jewish tradition has held for at least two thousand years: the belief that embedded in our human imperfection is the opportunity for redemption; that the path to forgiveness is always available, and that the work of repairing our broken relationships is the work of inviting the divine into our lives.

Our tradition obligates us to *celebrate* the turning of the new year, but to do so vulnerably, reflectively. Starting with the month of Elul, we account for our souls,

¹<http://www.onbeing.org/program/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace/5896>

doing *heshbon hanefesh*, and move through Rosh Hashana into the *aseret yamei teshuva*, the ten days of Teshuva. We seek forgiveness. We come home to ourselves, which includes looking directly at our own imperfection and holding ourselves accountable. Then we hit Yom Kippur, the day we are the most aware of our failings, our brokenness. We fast, we atone, we pray to be transformed. If we're doing it right, this is deeply humbling and rewarding work.

In my own life, I have found forgiveness to be a confusing process.

Last year, on the day before Rosh Hashana, I walked into the front door of my school, just as a teacher of mine was exiting the building. She hurried through the doorway and paused to greet me. "Hey, Mónica" she said. What I thought would be a quick and casual interaction turned into something very different.

She continued: "In these last hours before Rosh Hashana, I want to ask your forgiveness for what happened last year." My teacher was alluding to a misunderstanding we had had a few months prior, which had hurt me deeply. She had one foot already leaning toward the parking lot, her car keys in hand, clearly on her way to somewhere she needed to be.

"I already forgave you for that," I blurted out quickly. My teacher smiled, letting the words sink in. "Thank you" she said, "and shana tova." Then she was gone, on to her next appointment.

There it was. The act we call *teshuva* in the Jewish tradition. One person asks for forgiveness, and the other person forgives. Brief, succinct. It had been almost transactional: forgiveness passed from the hands of one into the hands of the other.

Or so it seemed.

As my teacher walked away, I felt a knot forming in my stomach. I hadn't actually forgiven her. Rather, I had been harboring a grudge for months and, still stewing in resentment, I had lied.

It stayed with me for weeks. Why had I been so quick to say that she was forgiven? What did it mean to have relieved my teacher of worry, but still be harboring the grudge; to have offered a disingenuous *teshuva*? What *does* full forgiveness look like anyway? Can I forgive others while I'm still working through the residual feelings of anger, hurt, and resentment? And why had this whole interaction felt so off?

Over the past eight months I have been studying Masechet Yoma, the book of the Talmud in which the ancient rabbis create the holiday of Yom Kippur as we know it

today. For as long as I have known about Yom Kippur, I have understood the act of repairing broken relationships to be at the heart of what we do during this season of return.

In the Talmud, I found an interesting twist. The pages of Masechet Yoma are full of stories of *teshuva*, but not neat or easy *teshuva*. Not a transactional forgiveness like I seemingly had with my teacher. In the Talmud, *teshuva* is complicated, full of risks, and at least as messy a process as our messy human relationships themselves.

Consider this story:

Rav, a great scholar and teacher, had a conflict with a certain butcher. The butcher did not come to see Rav in order to make amends. So on the evening of Yom Kippur, Rav said to himself: “I will go to appease the butcher.” When he arrived at the butcher’s shop, Rav found the butcher sitting and chopping the head of an animal. Rav stood over the butcher, looming, waiting. The butcher lifted his eyes, and saw Rav standing there. “You are Abba,” he said with contempt, addressing the sage by his first name. “Go away! I have no words for you.”²

Like my own story of *teshuva* that came so imperfectly, this story about Rav and the butcher is fraught with power dynamics. Perhaps I was intimidated, jumping to forgive my teacher because of her authority. In the Talmud’s story, it’s unclear exactly who has the power. There’s Rav, an esteemed scholar, who enters the butcher shop with his clout in tow. But he is also vulnerable, entering the butcher’s domain, stepping onto someone else’s turf, and there is the butcher, holding a knife. Rav stands, the butcher sits. The butcher does not rise to receive Rav, and does not stop his work to greet him. Rav looms over the butcher. The tension is palpable, and neither character seems to be acting respectfully toward the other. When the butcher says “I have no words for you,” does he mean “I don’t owe you an apology?” Maybe he means “We don’t have any problems between us.” Or maybe the opposite: “We do have a problem, but I am not going to acknowledge it.”

Teshuva is a process that occurs between people who feel hurt, betrayed, disappointed, misunderstood, regretful. It happens when we are vulnerable, it is a process laden with interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics. *Teshuva*, a process of acknowledging mistakes, is in and of itself ripe with possibilities for making more mistakes. And for as long as our tradition has thought about *teshuva*, our sages have struggled to articulate how this process occurs, filling the pages of our sacred texts with stories like that of

² Yoma 87a

Rav and the butcher, stories that reveal the complexity of *teshuva*, how hard it is to pin down forgiveness and what gets us there.

In the Talmud, the story takes a dramatic turn. Immediately after the butcher tells Rav to go away, cutting off the possibility for reconciliation, a bone slips from his hands, striking him in the neck, and he dies. This story seems to be telling us that our lives depend on making *teshuva*. On trying to, anyway.

The path to repair is messy.

Walk that messy path! our tradition says. Don't be the silent, stewing butcher. Your own life depends on it. But know that the risks are great.

On the next page³, the rabbis of the Talmud get a little hyperbolic about *teshuva*.

גדולה תשובה שמביאה רפאות לעולם

So great is *teshuva*, says Rebbe Hama bar Hanina, that it brings healing to the whole world.

I can top that, Rebbe Yonatan says.

גדולה תשובה שמקרבת את הגאולה

Teshuva is so great that it brings redemption closer.

Rebbe Shmuel Bar Nachmani weighs in:

גדולה תשובה שמארכת שנותיו של אדם

You wanna know how amazing *teshuva* is? *Teshuva* elongates the years of a person's life!

Rebbe Meir concludes:

גדולה תשובה שבשביל יחיד שעשה תשובה מוחלין לכל העולם כולו

Listen. I'll tell you what *teshuva's* capable of.

When one individual makes *teshuva*, the whole world is forgiven.

We are going to mess up. It's not a question of *if*, it's a question of *when*.

"God comes in and fills the cracks of our brokenness," the pastor tells her congregants. The very fabric of our world requires human error, the rabbis say. The act of making a mistake and then making *teshuva* actually leaves our world better than it was- imbued with healing, closer to a collective redemption.

³ Yoma 86a, 86b

Our tradition does not strive for perfection. In fact, it relies on our imperfection, and asserts that what we *do* with our imperfection has tremendous power in the outcome of the worlds within us, and the world around us.

I realize now that I was the butcher that day, standing with my teacher at the doorway of the building, on the threshold of the new year, at the gate of repentance. Though what I said was “I already forgave you,” what I meant was “I don’t want to talk about it.” Maybe because I felt hurried, sensing the rush in her step. Maybe because I felt guilt - not wanting her to feel bad any longer. But certainly I spoke from a place of non-communication. Like Rav, my teacher made some mistakes in the way she sought my forgiveness. And my defensive, pre-emptive response echoed the words of the butcher “Go away! I have no words for you!”

I *could* have said “I’m still upset. Can we make time to talk about it?” I could have taken that risk. What I missed was the chance to heal and repair our relationship through honesty. I missed the chance to invite the divine closer, to stand together in the healing glow of God’s presence, which makes us visible to one another. Visible as our broken selves, striving and reaching for *teshuva*. Like the butcher, my hands were occupied. His with his day’s work, mine gripping my own resentment too tightly to let go and reach.

We are all trying, and it’s not easy. When we stepped through the doors of the synagogue tonight, we stepped into Yom Kippur, the day we come together to admit that we are flawed, and imperfect. We step toward a recognition that our community is a human enterprise, that we make mistakes and might even make more mistakes when we seek healing. And by entering Yom Kippur together, we take the brave risk of facing our humanity, in all of its complexity, of standing together in the broken cracks, in the light of God that fills the cracks.

As we enter this sacred day, may this community serve as a place of patience and compassion. May we offer one another the courage to face ourselves and know that there is always a path toward wholeness. As the rabbis say, we stand before the opportunity for forgiveness that can lengthen our lives and redeem the world.

It’s going to be beautiful. It’s too beautiful to miss.

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