Imagining a world of care and accountability: exploring teshuva and abolition
Rabbi Leora Abelson, Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue
Yom Kippur 5781

In February, I was on a hike in the woods with my friend Ellis, who is four years old. We were playing around, absorbed in some imaginative storyline, and I said, "uh oh! Are the bad guys gonna get us?" and Ellis stopped in his tracks, looked me in the eye, and said, "there are no bad guys. There are only people who make mistakes."

That stopped me in *my* tracks. At first I thought Ellis was repeating a simple reassurance his parents had offered him, that he didn't need to be afraid of made-up "bad guys." Then I realized he was sharing a much deeper truth, a powerful value his parents are instilling in him even at age 4.

None of us are all-the-way bad.

It's a value at the core of a Jewish understanding of teshuvah. Each of us has a Divine spark within, a core of goodness in our soul. It can become thickly obscured, leading us to do terrible things. But Judaism teaches the ongoing possibility of *teshuva*, of returning to that core spark of goodness - through behavior change and material reparation as well as reflection and remorse. Up until the day we die, we have the opportunity to do the material and spiritual work of repentance and repair, and to trust in the process of transformation.

I've been thinking a lot about teshuva this summer, as Black organizers and healers have brought the issues of police murder and systemic racism into center stage in our national conversation; have refused to let politicians, organizations, communities, and individuals continue to ignore these issues, which are hundreds of years old; and have reignited a movement to transform this country. I have been thinking about teshuva for two reasons: one, because the uprising has focused so much on our systems of policing and prisons - systems from which, in this country, teshuvah values are strikingly and violently absent. And two, because I have been moved by the way some individuals and

organizations have really taken their own reckoning with racism and white supremacy to a new level, engaging in what I would call teshuvah.

The Jewish idea that forgiveness and repair must be preceded by action - that when harm is done a person must take action to repair the damage and demonstrate that they have changed - is rooted in our Biblical text.

Early on in the book of Vayikra, we are given the system of sacrifices known as guilt offerings, or offerings one was to make after committing some kind of transgression. The message is clear: *when a transgression takes place - when some kind of rupture or harm is done - real concrete action is needed in order to recover*. The model is our relationship with God: when we do something offensive to God, we must respond by giving a sacrifice, which entails two things: giving something materially significant, and engaging in demanding spiritual work, with the intention of transformation.

Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem where all of those sacrifices took place, the diasporic rabbinic tradition around repentance began to develop. The messy work of repair had to become more localized, and thankfully for us, came to involve less blood and guts, but just as much spiritually demanding work.

The Mishnah states (Yoma 8:9):

> עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַחֲבֵרוֹ, אֵין יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיְּרַצֶּה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ.

For transgressions between a person and HaMakom, the Divine, Yom Kippur effects atonement, but for transgressions between a person and her neighbor, Yom Kippur does not effect atonement, until she has appeased her neighbor.

We can do our work *today* to repair our relationship with the Divine, but to repair our relationships with other human beings, there is real concrete work that must happen, outside of liturgy and prayer, in relationship with those whom we have harmed.

So what about when the harm isn't perpetrated by one individual against another, but by a system? By many individuals, yes, who make up that system, but what about when the harm far exceeds the actions of any individual? When the harm is built into the very structure of our institutions?

While much of the rabbinic literature addressing teshuva focuses on interpersonal harms, the rabbis do explore structural problems - that is, *literally* structural, as in the structure of a building. Rabbi Sharon Brous drew on one of these discussions to talk about structural racism in the United States and how we might be called to make teshuvah for slavery and its aftermath.[1] In Massechet Gittin (55a), the rabbis explore this question: what if a thief steals a beam and builds a house around it? Torah law is clear: if a stolen object is found, the object itself must be returned to the person from whom it was stolen. The thief, then, should be required to tear down the house and return the beam to its owner. Beit Shammai, a school of thought known to be more absolutist, agrees: The whole structure must be dismantled and the beam returned to its owner: מקעקע כל הבירה כולה ומחזיר מריש לבעליו

But *beit Hillel* disagrees: rather than dismantling the whole house, the thief must only *pay* the owner of the beam its *value*.

Rabbi Brous brought beit Hillel's solution as a call for reparations for slavery, a kind of systemic teshuva. Our country is a house built on a stolen beam, she declared. We need not dismantle the whole house, but it cannot stand on a foundation of dishonesty. There is harm at the center of the structure, and it must be addressed. She wrote, "Reparations would not suddenly ensure economic equality, nor would they erase generations of trauma. But they would offer some financial redress. And most significantly, they would signal a reckoning that our nation desperately needs." Her drasha was in conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates, a contemporary prophet of reparations, who wrote, "I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not

[1] https://ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/RH2-RBrous-Sermon-OUR-COUNTRY-WAS-BUILT-ON-A-STOLEN-BEAM.pdf

just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future."[2]

I find Rabbi Brous' use of this Talmudic conversation compelling, especially for the way she highlights both the material and the spiritual work of repair. I also wonder: what if all the beams in the house were stolen? What if the stealing happened violently? Is there ever a moment when the whole house *does* need to come down?

After George Floyd was murdered, the most powerful protest sign I saw was carried by a young Black person and it said, "my skin is not a threat. I want to live." That sign spoke directly to the absence of the value of *tselem elokim*, that all people are created in the Divine image, that all people are inherently worthy of love, dignity, and freedom - the value that my friend Ellis has already internalized at age four. That sign captured the essence of our country's crisis: that the dehumanization and criminalization of Black people are in the very foundations of our systems - our systems of health care and education, and our systems of policing and punishment. It's not only that the beam was stolen; the beam is rotten, and can never support a thriving structure.

Tselem elokim can be a powerful orienting value to help us see clearly the need for radical transformation. The need, I believe, to take down the whole structure: to abolish prisons, jails, detention, and policing, and to dream up something new. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a scholar and activist who has been advocating for the abolition of prisons for many years, is known for saying "where life is precious, life is precious." A system which cannot recognize the preciousness of all life is not a system that can be reformed, it's a system that needs to be entirely reimagined.

It may feel incredibly difficult to imagine taking down a whole structure and building something very different in its place. Mariame Kaba, another abolitionist activist and scholar, says this:

"When people, especially white people, consider a world without the police, they envision a society as violent as our current one, merely without law enforcement — and

[2] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/

they shudder. As a society, we have been so indoctrinated with the idea that we solve problems by policing and caging people that many cannot imagine anything other than prisons and the police as solutions to violence and harm."

She goes on,

"People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? This change in society wouldn't happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice."[3]

Patrisse Cullors, a leader in the Movement for Black Lives, writes, "Abolition seeks out restorative practices for all, even when that implies working with the perpetrator of… violence. Abolition finds new ways to operate within a society that considers its members disposable… Abolition authentically serves and protects our loved ones. Abolition fights to ensure that all families have access to adequate and quality health services… Abolition centers families, communities, and healing. Abolition asks the hard questions. Abolition looks for solutions.[4]

Abolition is not just about dismantling oppressive institutions. It's also about imagining, and then building, a different society, a society where we cultivate the conditions for care *and* accountability, and that is why it feels so powerfully aligned with the principles of teshuvah as I understand them. Back in the rabbi's conversation about the stolen beam, when beit Hillel offers financial restitution, rather than dismantling the whole house, as the solution to *marish hagazul,* the stolen beam, the Gemara adds an explanation for this solution: *mishum takanat hashavin*. For the sake of the repenters, the teshuva-doers. The rabbis enacted this decision, which goes against Torah law, in order to encourage people to make teshuva, to repent. They were trying to create conditions which would facilitate care and accountability. And they push us to consider

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html#after-story-ad-4
[4]https://harvardlawreview.org/2019/04/abolition-and-reparations-histories-of-resistance-transformative-justice-and-accountability/

our own contexts: are we creating conditions that enable and support people to do teshuva?

I invite you to think, for a moment, about your experience following the police murder of George Floyd and the uprisings that came in its wake. Of the communities and institutions you are a part of, did you find a cultural context in which teshuvah felt possible, encouraged, facilitated? Here are some of the steps of teshuvah as outlined by Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah): acknowledgement of wrongdoing or harm done (1:1); commitment to behavior change (2:2); confessing and committing to change and really meaning it - not simply performing it (2:3); making material restitution; and asking for forgiveness from the person harmed (2:9).

In the collectives of which you are a part - workplaces, cultural communities, even families - were the voices of Black people and non-Black people of color centered in such a way that it was safe and effective for them to speak openly about experiences of racism? Did the organization take steps to understand how racism and white supremacy are built into its policies and culture? Especially if the leadership is predominantly white, did leaders model humility and speak about their own complicity in racism? Were concrete actions taken, both to change the system and to offer reparation for harms already done?

And if some of this courageous work took place, did it happen in a way that honored everyone's inherent dignity? Was there support in place to hold the anger, impatience, fear, and shame that inevitably arise in the process of confronting racism? Were there reminders that we all have the capacity to reflect, repair, and transform?

These are the kinds of questions I'm thinking about, inspired by both abolition and teshuvah, as they apply to Nehar Shalom, to Jamaica Plain, and to the other organizations and communities of which I am a part. They are the questions I'm looking forward to wrestling with with all of you. I hope you will hear this drasha as an invitation - whether you agree with me or not - to bring your questions, your imagination, your vision to the table. I have so much more to learn, and I hope to do some of that together, with this community, this year.

Mumia Abu Jamal once said that abolitionists, simply put, are beings who look out upon their time and say “no.” It’s so powerful to say no to policies, institutions, and systems that don’t honor the essential goodness and worth of every human being. But I have learned that abolitionists are also beings who say yes: yes to life, yes to care, yes to accountability, yes to transformation, yes to justice and freedom. Yes to teshuvah, and to the conditions that make it possible. Yes to teaching our four-year-olds that everyone has a core of goodness within, and that accountability and repair are available to all of us.

May this be a year of powerful teshuvah: each of us finding our own essential goodness; seeing the Divine image in one another; engaging in the honest work of accountability and repair; and transforming our communities, our systems, and our world. Keyn yehi ratzon!