

An Ancient Guide to Modern Repentance



Rachael's Intro

I wrote this piece years ago and I like to read it and reflect on the opportunity Elul affords us to ask whether we have held ourselves to account for those moments we didn't complete a task and others may have stumbled.

We often learn how Elul is the month of spiritual preparation, the month of soulful reflection and repentance. Huge concepts and intimidating processes that easily scare us, whether we are involved daily with our spirituality or whether we are mostly involved only around the High Holidays.

As challenging as it can be, we are fortunate to have a superb model for how to approach the month of Elul: Moses. According to the commentaries and the Sages, Moses climbed up and down Mount Sinai no less than three times. The first time did not involve the nation of Israel, it was a personal moment between Moses and God. The second time, Moses ascended to bring down the Ten Commandments. While he was there, the nation Israel was making the Golden Calf, and when Moses came down with the Ten Commandments, he became enraged at the sight of Israel and deliberately threw down the tablets, shattering the Ten Commandments.

After resolving the repercussions of the Golden Calf, Moses ascends on Mount Sinai for the third time. This time he must carve out the second tablets with the Ten Commandments to replace the ones he destroyed. Moses ascends to carve this second set of tablets on the first day of Elul. He will remain there for forty days and bring down the Ten Commandments on the tenth day of Tishrei -- Yom Kippur. Our High Holidays shape around this timing.

We understand that Moses must replace the tablets because he was never given permission to break them. Moses was the messenger, not the owner, and he is responsible for what he broke, he must be held to account for his actions. Similarly, when Israel is guilty of the sin of the Golden Calf, it is Moses who deals with the consequences even though God had originally planned on reacting. Moses did not want God to intervene because it was Moses' responsibility to teach Israel about God, and clearly they did not get the message. It is for Moses to respond and lead. It is the responsibility of a leader who must own those moments when the people fall short of their goals.

Elul is the month when we take the model Moses taught us and ask ourselves very specific questions about those moments when we failed ourselves and when we failed others. There should be no lack of examples if we are honest with ourselves. It is a moment of truth and tremendous humility.

The Talmud tells us that when God told Moses of the Golden Calf, He instructed Moses to 'get thee down' from Mount Sinai. The Sages tell us that this was God teaching Moses to step down from his greatness in order to assess and lead. Even the most humble among us benefits from Elul's opportunity to 'step down' and view ourselves differently, before we ascend spiritually as we enter the High Holidays.

The Blend of Rosh Hashannah



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As we all prepare for Rosh Hashannah this year, we feel the reality of living in a world where keeping each other healthy and safe means there are no black and white answers. I wrote this long before realizing the message of blending views and accepting latitudes of choice would mean so much this year.

I had an interesting conversation with someone recently about Rosh Hashannah. They explained to me that because of a long history of family troubles and unfortunate events, they find it too painful to attend a synagogue and, therefore, this year they have decided not to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. I listened carefully and questioned their conclusion that it was 'synagogue or nothing'. Somehow they had concluded that Rosh Hashanah could only happen in a formal place of ritual. It was an either/or situation, a black or white scenario. An idea that brought our thoughts right back to the Garden of Eden and the first Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is the day we believe God created humanity. On that same day, Adam and Eve were created, and sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Since that first generation, we have wondered why eating from that tree was so bad as to warrant the resulting consequences: ultimate death and banishment from Eden for all humankind.

The Zohar offers an interesting insight, which suggests that by eating from that Tree, Adam and Eve introduce the concept of 'either/or' into a world of harmony. In fact, only this tree bears a name that signifies this 'either/or' approach --the approach of oppositions. It is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. No other creation bears that distinction within its name. The other tree is named the Tree of Life - not the Tree of Life and Death. Only the Tree of Knowledge states a stark distinction between things, rather than a flow, a harmony.

By eating from this tree, Adam and Eve introduce a philosophy of oppositions. It is my way or no way, it can only be this thing or its opposite. This philosophy, that was meant to sit silently on a tree, never to be accessed, reflects a position that is contrary to nature since nature offers blends and waves and waxings and wanings. We have evening before night and we have dawn before daylight. Nature teaches us to blend our lives with everything that is around us. We must not live in the extremes nor should we approach our Judaism or each other with an 'either/or' mentality.

According to this blended view, there will be times when the atheist admits there are miracles in life we cannot explain and the person of faith admits there are questions of the Divine we cannot understand. Judaism does not tell us to have a definitive answer to things, rather we should form the questions that blur the answers. Create the grey zone.

My friend can create a positive Rosh Hashanah experience in an informal spiritual setting, it need not be 'synagogue or nothing'. At the same time it is possible to sit in a synagogue and dream of the year to come without necessarily following the prayer and not be considered negligent. The Sages brought us this idea long ago when they stated 'Torah presents with two paths, one of fire and one of snow. If you follow one path, you will die of heat; if you follow the other, you will die of cold. What should you do? Take the middle path.'

More Than A Thank You



Rachael's Intro

Often with the High Holidays we are narrowly focussed on some of our mistakes or lapses of judgment. We reflect on concepts of repentance and forgiveness and forget that there are moments of reflection that also connect to missed opportunities. Asking ourselves more than where we may have gone wrong might bring us to also ask ourselves where we might have had more impact.

We are told to always have the words of Torah ready on our lips. When Jewish people get together we speak of Torah. We share our ideas and our studies, we dispute and disagree and we weave our thoughts in and around Torah concepts. We are commanded to teach Torah to our children and the Talmud tells us that they are our greatest teachers of Torah. In this way we understand that the way of Torah is for us to be both teacher and student at all times.

The text relates to us that as Israel was offered the Torah, we responded with one voice: 'Na'aseh v'Nishma', 'we will do and we will understand'. Somehow, we knew that the way of Torah is counter-intuitive. Normally, we do not proceed with action until we have exhausted all the research and fully understand what we are doing. The way of Torah is to have our souls teach our bodies and to then reverse the process and have our bodies teach our souls. The understanding of Torah is to know that we exist in a materialistic world but that there is a spiritual world woven in as well.

Starting with Moses at Sinai, we understand that each of us owes a blessing to those who have taught us their Torah and molded us into teachers who can then share our own. It is a core Jewish value to show gratitude and a powerful Jewish strength to offer a blessing to someone. The Talmud relates a beautiful blessing that the Sages would say to Rabbi Ammi upon departing his Academy after hearing his insights of Torah.

May you see your world in your lifetime
And may you come to life in the world to come
May your hope be sustained for generations
May your heart meditate understanding,
Your mouth speak wisdom,
And your tongue be moved to song.
May your eyes look directly before you,
And shine with the light of Torah
Your face be radiant as the brightness of the firmament.
May your lips utter knowledge,
Your kidneys rejoice in uprightness,
And your feet run to hear the words of the Ancient of Days
(Brachot 17a)

There is the iconic image of giving a teacher an apple at the end of the year to express appreciation but the Talmud shows that appreciation and blessings are different expressions. Any person we meet who introduces us to a new insight or concept has reconnected us with Torah values that we then communicate to others. The Sages have suggested we go beyond the 'thank you' and offer the strength of a blessing.

Eternally Connected



Rachael's Intro

When we build relationships with those we love, Judaism tells us that we are weaving our souls together. Once woven, souls will never fully detach from each other which we sometimes glimpse when we miss a loved one who has passed away but we still feel we have moments together. The High Holidays raise crucial questions of fate and Divine decree and we may feel overwhelmed but there are spiritual moments of comfort our ancient texts offer us that help ground us.

There is a beautiful midrash that brings us to the essence of Yom Kippur. Moses is preparing for his death and has been addressing the nation with various messages. Moses' greatest fear is that, without him, Israel will turn against God, forget covenant and force a horrible outcome. Moses warns them, threatens them, pleads with them, and then records everything into written form -- the Torah.

There is a discussion among the Sages as to how many Torah scrolls Moses wrote at that time. The consensus is that he wrote 13 scrolls, one for each tribe, and then one extra. Some Sages say that the extra Torah scroll was placed in the Ark of the Covenant. The midrash says that the angel, Gabriel, picked up the 13th Torah scroll and brought it into the Upper Realms of Heaven.

The question is: why do the Upper Realms need a Torah scroll? In fact, earlier in the Torah, when Moses receives the Ten Commandments, one midrash discusses how Moses argued with the angels who didn't want Moses to bring the Torah to humanity. Moses proves to the angels that they do not need the law, but humankind does, and, therefore, it must be brought to earth. With that resolved, why would Gabriel bring the Torah scroll upward?

But it is not the angels who need the Torah. Rather, the Sages say that the Righteous Souls above continue to read, study and chant the Torah at the same times that we do. As we study Torah together here, the Righteous Souls above sing with us, speak the words we speak and inspire us with their new thoughts and insights which creates the 'aha' moment of newness we experience. In other words, the Torah becomes an everlasting meeting place for all our souls.

As Yom Kippur approaches, we are reminded that the stakes could not be higher. Modern society makes us feel that once someone has passed away, they are lost to us forever. Judaism teaches us that when souls weave together and form a true bond, they are connected eternally and will always find a way to share and inspire.

If Not Higher

Based on a Jewish legend
Translated by Gael Keren

Many years ago in a little town in Europe there lived a Rabbi. He was a very wise, kind-hearted man. He taught Torah to the townspeople – grownups and children – and gave good advice to all who came to him with their questions or problems. He helped anybody and everybody who needed help.

All the Jews who lived in that little town loved and respected him.

Every Shabbat and on all the festivals, the Rabbi prayed with the whole congregation in the synagogue. The only time that the Rabbi did not pray with everyone else was before Rosh Hashanah. On the nights before Rosh Hashanah, the whole congregation recited the special Slichot prayers. In these prayers the Jews asked for a good year and begged forgiveness for all their wrongdoings in the past year. The Rabbi did not go to the synagogue for these prayers and did not join the congregation on those nights. Nobody knew where the Rabbi disappeared to on the nights before Rosh Hashanah, but the people of the little town used to say to each other: "Obviously, when we say Slichot, the Rabbi goes up to heaven to open the gates for our prayers. Yes, he opens the gates so that our prayers will be heard and accepted in heaven."

For many years everybody believed that this was what the Rabbi did.

Now in this same little town there lived an inquisitive young man. He heard what everybody said about the Rabbi. One day he said to himself: "I do not believe that our Rabbi goes up to heaven. One night before the Slichot prayers begin in the synagogue, I shall hide in the Rabbi's house, and when he goes out, I shall follow him and see what he does."

That is what the young man said, and that is exactly what he did.

One night before Rosh Hashanah, when the Rabbi was not at home, the young man slipped into the Rabbi's house and hid under the Rabbi's bed, where he waited quietly and patiently. Even when the Rabbi came home and went to sleep, the young man did not move or make a sound. He lay under the bed and tried hard to stay awake.

At dawn, when all the townspeople got up and went to the synagogue, the young man heard the Rabbi get out of bed and leave the room. He peeped out from his hiding place and saw a very strange thing: The Rabbi did not put on his usual clothes, but instead he dressed like a peasant. He tied a rope around his waist, pulled on a pair of boots, took an axe in his hand, opened the door and left his house.

The young man said to himself: "All the townspeople believe that the Rabbi goes up to heaven when they say 'Slichot' to open up the gates for their prayers. I saw him dress like a peasant and go out with an axe in his hand. Who knows what he is planning to do with that axe!"

The young man's heart pounded with fear, but nevertheless he crept out of his hiding place and followed the Rabbi. He tried to walk quietly, staying close to the houses, so that the Rabbi would not see him as he went on his way. The Rabbi walked quickly through the deserted streets of the town, and the young man followed closely behind. The Rabbi reached the edge of the town. The young man continued to follow him. His mind was buzzing with questions, and his heart beat quickly. He asked himself: "Where was the Rabbi hurrying to? Why did he leave the town, and what was he planning to do with the axe he was carrying?"

At the edge of the town lay a huge forest. The Rabbi entered the forest with the young man following close behind. The Rabbi stopped, raised his axe and began to cut down branches from the trees. The young man hid behind the trunk of a big tree. He stared in amazement and said to himself: "Our Rabbi is cutting down trees while all the townspeople are praying Slichot! What a strange thing to do!"

The Rabbi split the branches into pieces and arranged them in a neat pile. He took the rope from around his waist and tied the sticks into one bundle. He put the bundle on his back, turned around and started off towards the town. The young man followed after him. The Rabbi walked until he came to a small house at the edge of the town. Its windows were dark, and from somewhere inside came the sound of groans and sighs. The Rabbi knocked on the door and in a thick voice – different from his normal voice – called out: "It's I, old woman. I have brought wood to light a fire in your stove."

From inside the house came a weak reply: "I do not have any money to pay you for the wood. Go away!" But the Rabbi answered: "It does not matter, old woman. Pay me when you can."

The Rabbi opened the door and went inside. The young man crept up and peered through the window. He saw a small room and an old woman lying in a bed which was pushed against the wall. The only other furniture was a stove, a table and a chair. The room seemed dark and chilly. There was no fire in the stove and no food in sight. The Rabbi said again in a thick voice: "Here is the wood, old woman." The woman sighed and in a weak voice said: "Who will light the stove for me? I am a sick woman and I do not have strength to put the wood in by myself."

"I shall do it," said the Rabbi. "I shall light the stove, and the fire will warm the room. After that I shall prepare dinner for you". The Rabbi put sticks of wood in the stove and lit the fire. While he was doing this, he quietly chanted the first part of the Slichot – the same prayers which were being said that very day in the synagogue. Then he prepared some soup and porridge. While he was doing this he quietly chanted the second part of the Slichot – the same prayers that were being said that very day in the synagogue.

When the food was ready, the Rabbi served the old woman her dinner. After she had finished eating, he washed the dishes and put more wood on the fire. He neatly piled the remaining wood near the stove so that the old woman could easily add it to the fire. While he was doing this he quietly chanted the third part of the Slichot – the same prayers that were being said that very day in the synagogue. The young man stood outside and watched everything that was happening.

The Rabbi tied the rope around his waist, took the axe in his hand and in a thick voice said goodbye to the old woman. The old woman whispered: "God will reward you for your good deeds." The Rabbi opened the door and left the house. The Rabbi walked quickly through the deserted streets of the town. The young man followed him, hiding in the shadow of the houses. The Rabbi entered his house. The young man peeked through the window and watched as the Rabbi took off the peasant clothes and boots, removed the rope from around his waist and put everything, including the axe, away in the closet. The Rabbi got into bed, pulled up the blankets and fell asleep. The young man then went home.

The next morning the young man went to the synagogue and saw the Rabbi standing and praying with the rest of the congregation. He listened to the townspeople talking to each other. They said: "Last night the Rabbi did not come to the synagogue to say the Slichot prayers. Obviously, he went up to heaven to open the gates for our prayers."

The young man smiled, knowing what a wonderful deed the Rabbi had done, and said to himself: "I know that the Rabbi did not go up to heaven, he may have gone even higher than that!"

Two Stories from Yehuda Amichai

Every year our father Abraham would take his sons to Mount Moriah the way I take my children to the Negev hills where I once had a war.

Abraham hiked around with his sons. "This is where I left the servants behind, that's where I tied the donkey to a tree at the foot of the mountain, and here, right here, Isaac my son, you asked: Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Then, up a little further, you asked for the second time."

When they reached the mountaintop, they rested a bit, ate and drank, and he showed them the thicket where the ram was caught by its horns

.After Abraham died, Isaac started taking his sons to the same place. "Here I lifted the wood, this is where I got out of breath, here I asked, and my father answered: God will see to the lamb for the offering. Over there, I already knew it was me."

And when Isaac's eyes were dim with age, his children led him to that same spot on Mount Moriah, and recounted for him all that had come to pass, all that he might have forgotten.

Akeidat Yitzchak: The Binding of Isaac

Three sons had Abraham, not just two.

Three sons had Abraham:

Yishma-El, Yitzhak and Yivkeh.

First came Yishma-El, "God will hear", next came Yitzhak, "he will laugh," and the last was Yivkeh, for he was the youngest, the son that father loved best, the son who was offered up on Mount Moriah.

Yishma-El was saved by his mother, Hagar, Yitchak was saved by the angel, but Yivkeh no one saved.

When he was just a little boy, his father would call him tenderly, Yivkeh, Yivekeleh, my sweet little Yivkie but he sacrificed him all the same. The Torah says the ram, but it was Yivkeh. Yishma-El never heard from God again, Yitzhak never laughed again, Sarah laughed only once, then laughed no more.

Three sons had Abraham, Yishma, "will hear," Yitzhak, "will laugh," Yivkeh, "will cry." Yishmah-El, Yitzhak-El, Yivkeh-El. God will hear, God will laugh, God will cry.

A Medieval Jewish Prayer

by Solomon Ibn G'virol

When all within is dark,
And former friends misprise;
From them I turn to You,
And find love in Your eyes.

When all within is dark,
And I my soul despise;
From me I turn to You,
And find love in Your eyes.

When all Your face is dark,
And Your just angers rise;
From You I turn to You,
And find love in Your eyes.